

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of January 2019*

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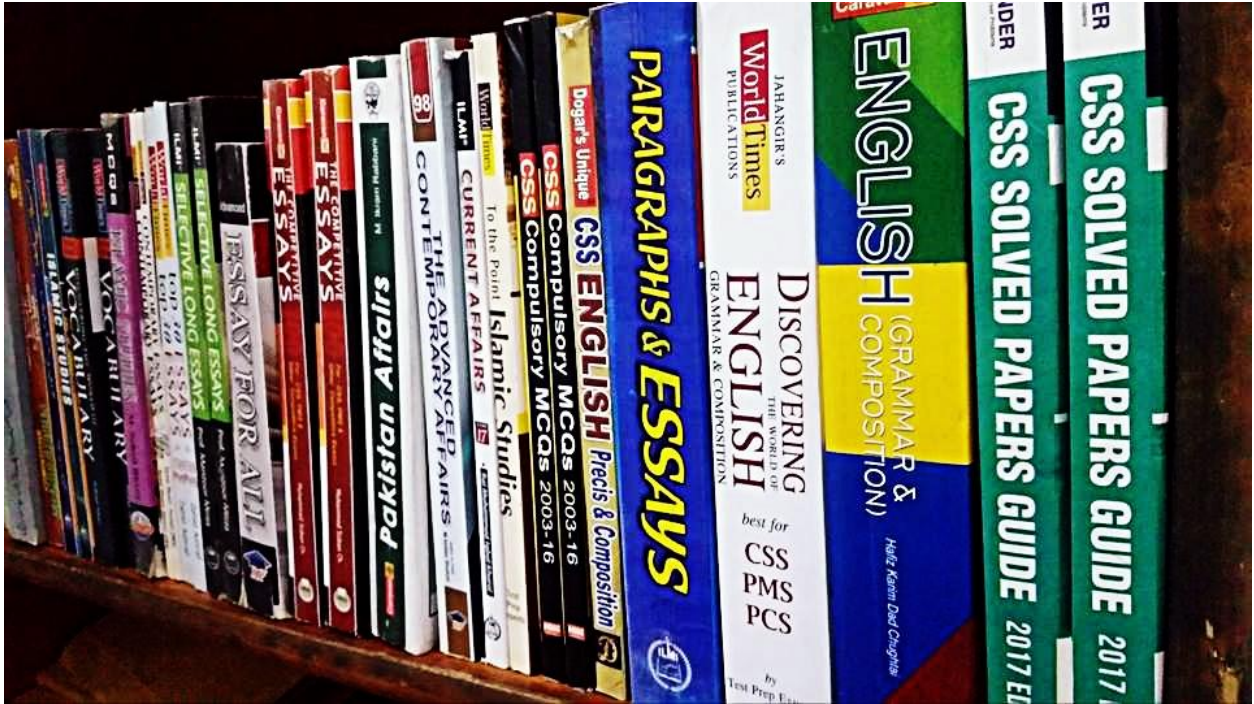
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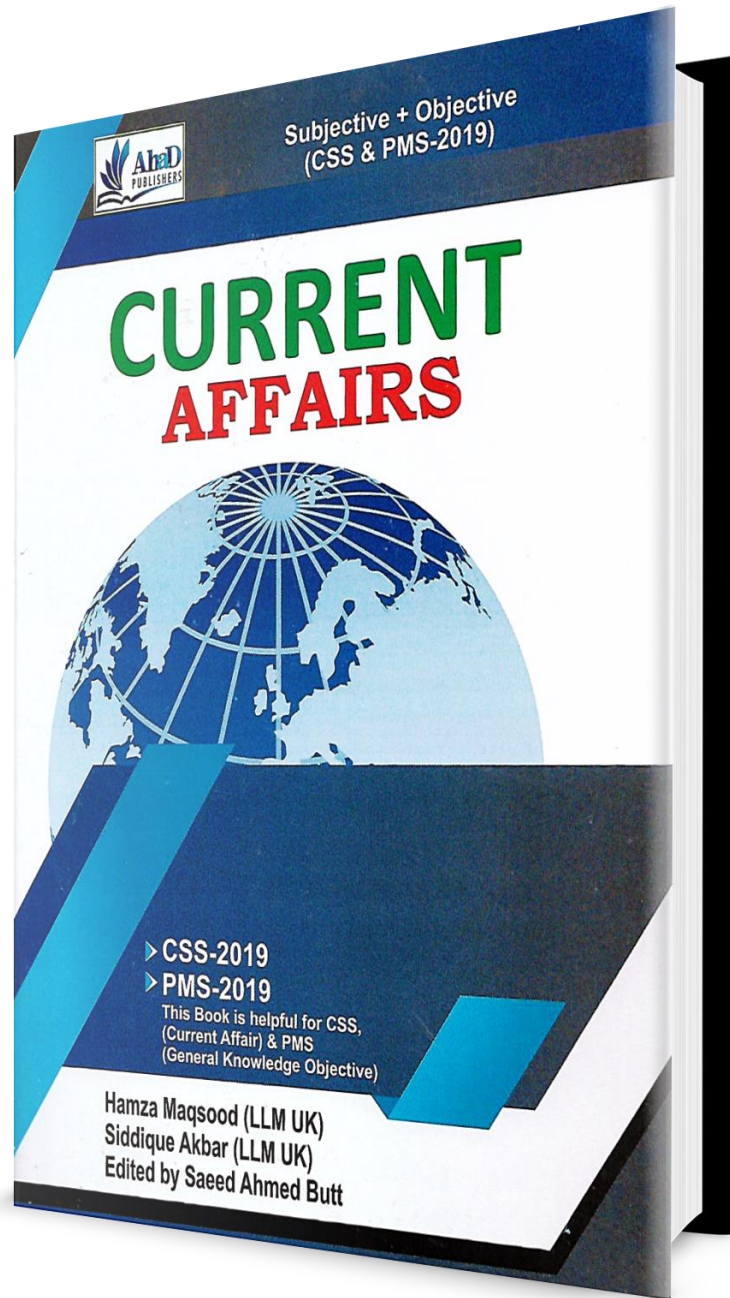
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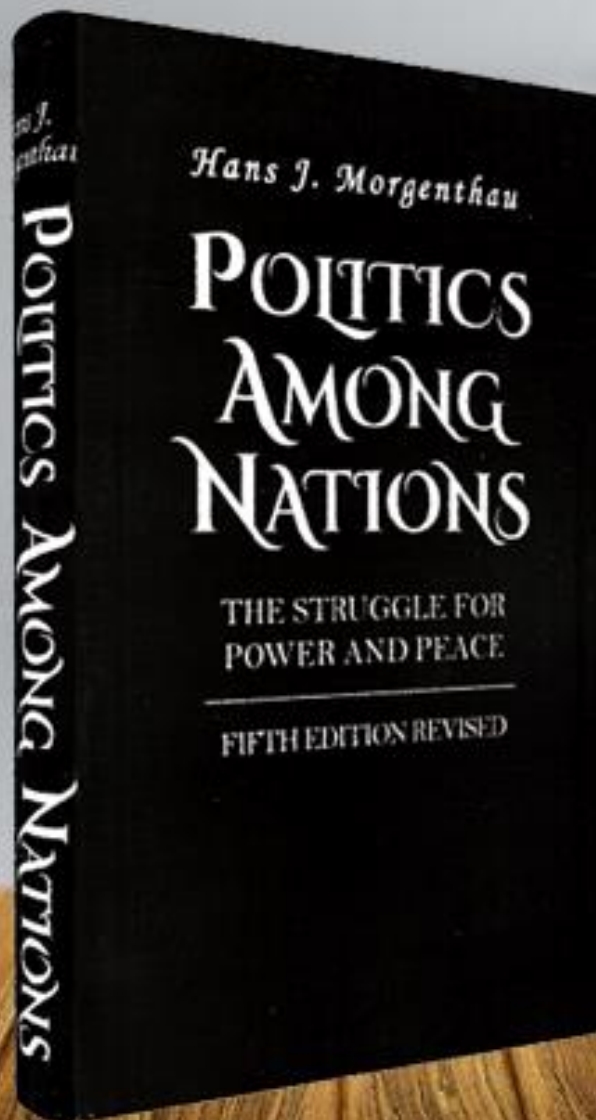


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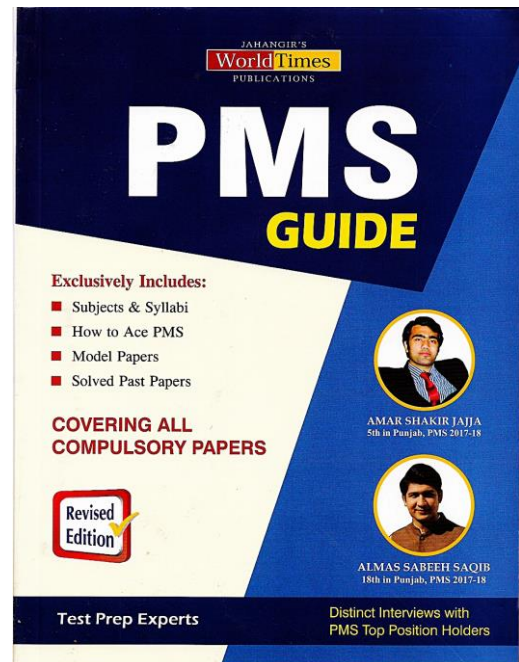
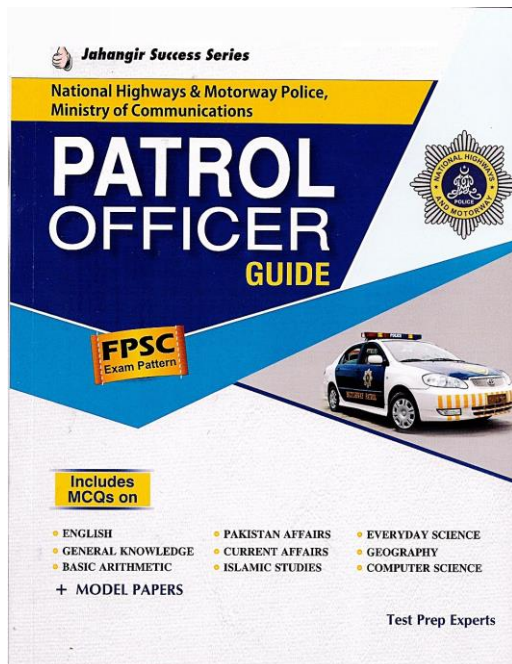
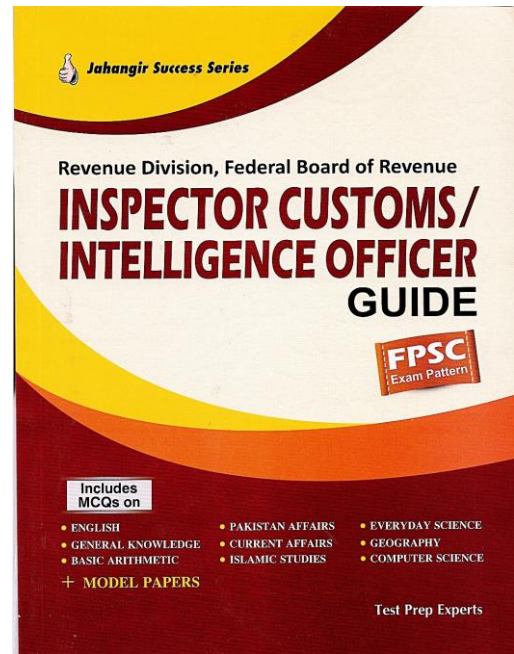
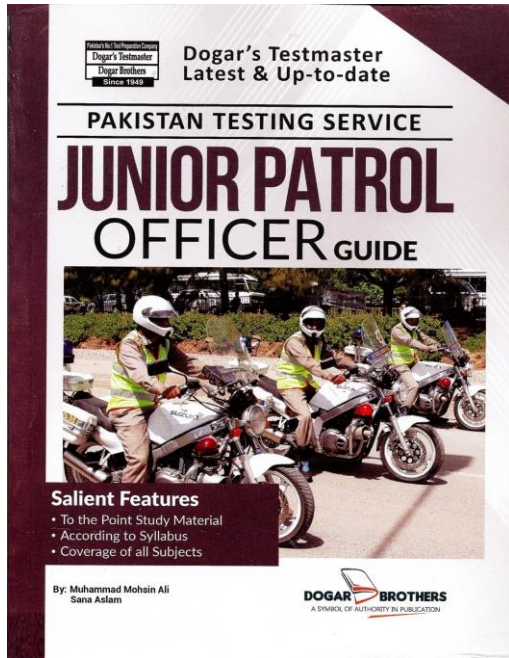


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# Challenges in 2019

THE new year begins on a note that is somewhere between hope and apprehension.

Nearly six months into its tenure, the PTI federal government is now surely as well prepared as it will be for the enormous governance challenges ahead.

The PTI's stuttering start may have been undesirable, but worse would be to continue the policy indecision that has characterised much of the government's term so far, especially in the economic arena.

The new year is on track to be one of the toughest economically and financially that the country has witnessed in recent times.

While politically, the PTI, PML-N and PPP can argue over their respective performances in office, what is undeniable is that the PTI now has full stewardship of the economy.

The decisions Prime Minister Imran Khan's finance team led by Asad Umar makes will be enormously consequential — the margins between survival and disaster are small for great swathes of the population.

Decades of economic mismanagement should not obscure the fact that the PTI government has an enormous responsibility to the people of Pakistan.

Read more: 2018 in review: Biggest corruption scandals of the outgoing year

On the accountability front, the PTI will to a greater degree be master of its own fate. With PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif in prison, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif in the custody of NAB and PPP boss Asif Zardari set to face intense scrutiny, the ongoing accountability drive seems likely to perpetuate political uncertainty.

But much of that uncertainty stems from a perception that the accountability exercise is selective and politically motivated.

Explore: Editorial: Are PTI and PPP obstructing accountability process by politicising the fake accounts case?

In the new year, the PTI will have an opportunity to demonstrate that not only is accountability across the board but that the political opposition to the PTI is afforded a fair and transparent process.

If the PTI fails to deliver a more balanced accountability process, political turmoil will likely intensify.

Certainly, the allegations against Mr Zardari are serious and he will need to provide adequate explanations.

Read more: Editorial: Zardari must take notice of the elephant in PPP's room

Similarly, the legal process against the Sharif brothers must continue as per the requirements of justice and due process. There ought to be no turning back from the exercise — but accountability for all and fair accountability ought to be ensured.

Finally, while much has been made of the PTI government and state institutions having managed to avoid the familiar civil-military and inter-institutional friction that has blighted the terms of previous governments, if all national institutions are to be on the same page that page must be a lawful, constitutional one.

Read more: Editorial: Nawaz back to prison, Zardari a step closer to disqualification

With civil liberties under attack, a free media imperilled and the space for constitutionally protected and legitimate dissent eroded, there is a risk that the same-page mantra may lead to the destruction of democratic norms and a return to authoritarian tendencies in the state.

Pakistan must remain a constitutional democracy with the highest protection afforded to the fundamental rights of its people.

## **Bangladesh poll sweep**

THOSE who have been following general elections in the subcontinent may be excused for receiving the news from Bangladesh with trepidation. The Awami League of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed has swept the polls with a margin that will surprise even those who were predicting a massive win for the party. With 288 seats, AL has bulldozed the opposition alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The election on Saturday was held for 300 slots in parliament. Another 50 seats are reserved for women. Sheikh Hasina was contesting on the back of the huge economic leaps the country has made under her leadership, mainly due to Bangladesh's emergence as the second-largest garment exporter in the world behind mighty China. Whereas the opposition and some independent analysts complain of exploitation and of concentration of money in a few hands, these issues have been overlooked because of the general sense of prosperity that has come to prevail in the country. However, even a casual glance will show that more than an 'economic turnaround' has gone into securing this stupendous election result for AL.

The prime minister has been on the warpath, as seen in the acrimonious, deeply divisive politics of her country — rivalling that of other states in South Asia. There has been widespread persecution of members of the opposition, leading to severe sentences for charges as serious as treason. A new chapter has been added to her long-running engagement with BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia. Begum Zia had boycotted the previous polls held four years ago and only stood in this latest one under the shadow of a law that threatened her party with extinction in the event of not taking part. If this were not enough, there were other steps that led to allegations of the use of unfair means by the government of Sheikh Hasina in the run-up to the voting. A large number of opposition activists were arrested and restrictions placed on the use of internet in the name of curbing propaganda. All this was seen with concern by those who know from history what the quest for absolute power, aided by a controlled, oppressive model of democracy, can lead to. It can culminate in intense confrontational politics at great cost to the people. But even as the statistics of the general election point to a dangerous divide, let's hope Bangladesh manages to avoid a clash that could undermine its progress.

# The missing girls

A REPORT in this paper shed light on attitudes that still exist towards the female child through interviews with would-be mothers who had to abort their daughters upon family pressure, health practitioners who are apprehensive about revealing the gender of the child, and welfare workers who take in abandoned children — mostly girls.

It presented a gloomy picture of prevalent attitudes that continue to devalue girls, seeing them as a burden on the family, or just another mouth to feed. In the report, Edhi Foundation stated that 90pc of the children who are left at their homes are girls.

The majority of abortions that take place are to prevent daughters from coming to life, and there is a disturbing trend of coming across female foetuses in dumpsters and garbage heaps.

It is difficult to find accurate statistics due to the silence around the topic, but these are some numbers for previous years: in 2008, 890 newborn girls were killed; in 2009, there were 1,000 cases reported in big cities; in 2010, there were 1,210 cases of female foeticide reported.

The high occurrence of female foeticide is Pakistan's hidden shame, rarely spoken about. While it is widely believed the population of women outstripped that of men, large-scale female infanticide in countries with a high population have led some to say the trend may have reversed in recent years.

Pakistan's female population has consistently remained lower than its male population — at 49pc. The social desire for the male child is prevalent, and the boy's education, health and other needs are given more value than his female counterpart's.

While Pakistan can continue to take pride in its female population that often outperforms men in academia, politics or sports, we cannot get defensive each time the ugly reality of misogyny is exposed. It cannot be swept under the rug. For too long, women have been treated as the secondary gender.

## **PTI's plan in Sindh**

THE potential for a perceived partisan accountability process to escalate into a full-blown national political crisis has been vividly highlighted by competing statements from the PTI and PPP camps.

Seizing on the Supreme Court-ordered JIT report on the so-called fake accounts case and the inclusion of Sindh Chief Minister Murad Shah in the list of suspects in that case, the PTI federal government appeared enthusiastic to test the political waters in Sindh and perhaps try and dislodge the PPP provincial government.

The JIT report is incriminating but as the Supreme Court itself has clarified it is only a report at this stage — a long legal process lies ahead before the guilt or innocence of individuals implicated in the fake-accounts racket can be established.

An overenthusiastic and perhaps naïve PTI leadership appears to have mistakenly believed that political upheaval in Sindh was imminent.

To the PTI's misbegotten abortive plan, the PPP has added its own attempt at muddying the political waters. Speaking to the media, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has claimed that if Asif Zardari signalled the willingness to do so, the PPP could oust the fragile PTI-led coalition at the centre.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari's comments may be more bombast than a genuine threat, but they are an indication of the precariousness of the political landscape at the moment.

As the governing party at the centre and in two provinces with a share of government in a third province, the PTI must surely give greater consideration to the constitutional and political responsibilities that it now shoulders.

The willingness of the PTI to consider and put into motion a plan to oust a provincial government run by the third-largest political party in the country threatens to drag Pakistan politically backwards. The making and breaking of governments, potentially with the help of anti-democratic forces in the country, is a dangerous phenomenon that should have been left behind.

The PTI leadership may be in a hurry to deliver on Prime Minister Imran Khan's promise to make the fight against corruption the core of his governance strategy, but meaningful and durable accountability are premised on fairness and due process.

Only recently, Mr Khan finally agreed to abide by the parliamentary norm of installing the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

Shahbaz Sharif remains in NAB custody. So why must Chief Minister Shah resign or risk being pushed out by the PTI simply on the basis of a JIT report that has not been scrutinised by the courts or the accused?

The PTI has been unable to justify its stance either politically or legally. Where the PTI has erred, the PPP should avoid following suit.

Threatening to work to overthrow the federal government only lends credence to a perception that the PPP is opposed to any form of accountability.

## **NFC reconstitution**

THE move towards the reconstitution of the National Finance Commission is an important step forward, though the real test will be in getting the provinces to agree to a new revenue-sharing formula. The seventh NFC award from 2009 is the last consensual award, and stands out as a rare moment when the federal and provincial governments were able to agree on a new revenue-sharing formula. The commission set up under Pervez Musharraf failed to reach a consensus, as did the one installed during the rule of the PML-N. Successfully navigating the politics of the finance commission is a test of political maturity, and the ninth commission, for which the government has sent a reference to the president, comes at a time when political maturity is needed more than ever.

Beyond the politics, the economics of the National Finance Commission will also present a unique challenge. The revenue-sharing formula that has held the field since 2009 awards 57.5pc of the federal divisible pool to the provinces, and since 2011 Balochistan has received further assurance that its share will be disbursed on the basis of revenue projections, not actual collections. The spirit of the 2009



NFC award was a belated acknowledgement of the federal structure of the state, and the important role of the provinces in the overall governance framework. The latest commission that is about to be constituted must not roll back these gains made by the provinces, nor should it seek a disingenuous path to cut provincial shares through other means. The Constitution prohibits rolling back provincial shares in national resources, and its letter and spirit must be respected as the commission prepares to meet. It is true that the devolution of these resources to the provinces has sharply narrowed the fiscal space available to the centre, but it would be better to address that issue through tax reform and strong efforts at documentation of the economy. One matter that the commission can discuss is how to incentivise the provincial governments to strengthen their own revenue-collection efforts, and particularly to do more in generating agriculture income tax, which lies squarely in the provincial domain. At the moment, the provincial government revenues have grown on the back of low-hanging fruit such as taxes on services. The finance commission would have the opportunity to craft a consensus around revenue mobilisation and sharing, and the opportunity must not go to waste.

## **Reducing food waste**

THIS week, Britain appointed its first food waste chief in its effort to decrease the tons of food that restaurants, supermarkets and manufacturers dispose of each year, and which is worth nearly £20bn. Seventy large-scale multinationals including Tesco, Nestlé and Coca-Cola have also signed on to a government-backed strategy to reduce wastage. In previous years, Italy legislated measures to decrease food waste, while its highest court ruled that stealing small portions of food was not to be criminalised anymore. France also passed a law which made it mandatory for supermarkets to donate unsold products to various food banks. According to FAO, 1.3bn tons of food produced globally each year — or one-third of all food produced — is either lost or wasted. This is a staggering figure in a world where 815m people — just over 10pc of the total human population — are suffering from chronic undernourishment, mainly in the developing world including Pakistan, and it exacerbates existing inequalities. It is said that consumers in developed countries waste almost as much food as the entire net food production of sub-Saharan Africa each year.

Food wastage is created by the twin sins of greed and gluttony, and worsened by hedonistic indifference. FAO has pointed out the inexcusable amounts of resources — land, water, energy, etc — that are used up in the production and manufacturing of excess food. There is also the problem of rising greenhouse gas emissions by food manufacturing and agricultural industries that lead to climate change, which again disproportionately affects the poor. The cost of a few hours of pleasure cannot be justified by the misery it causes to others. But clear policymaking and implementation can lead to more equitable distribution. An unequal world, particularly when it comes to basic needs, will only lead to more protests, anger and instability in the world that we are already witnessing. In the words of a famous Palestinian poet, “Beware/ Beware/ Of my hunger/ And my anger!”

## **Kashmir in 2018**

THE Indian strategy of trying to ‘solve’ the Kashmir issue through violent means is not having the desired effect. The year 2018 was the bloodiest period in recent memory, after the occupying forces decided, apparently in a moment of dire frustration, that the only way they could survive was by exterminating as many Kashmiri fighters as they could set their eyes on. As in previous years, the upsurge in violence in held Kashmir in 2018 also resulted in several civilian casualties (ie those who were not active participants in the conflict). In fact, the occupied valley witnessed even more intense battles and greater chaos than it did in the aftermath of young Burhan Wani’s killing in July 2016.

The Kashmiris reacted as was expected — by standing up to the challenge with a resolve that matched their sentiment during previous episodes when the confrontation with India was at its peak. A grim record was set by the end of the year, with a death toll of 375 Kashmiris, according to the Kashmir Media Service. The list, it asserts, has the names of at least 35 minors and 10 women. To get an idea of the prevailing madness, during the year some 600 houses were burnt and there were around 300 search operations. Some 21 Kashmiris were killed in custody. Corroborating one of the most frequently flashed images in recent times, some 1,300 people were said to have been blinded by Indian forces during the year.

This was all part of the system imposed by a desperate Delhi government to have a firmer grip on Kashmir — and this was well in sync with the loud declarations of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP. If the BJP has always come across as a party with a preference for immediately flexing its muscle on encountering any kind of opposition, Kashmir in 2018 was evidence of it. There is a debate about whether the situation could have been better handled had the BJP-led coalition in Kashmir not collapsed midway through the year. In all probability, the Indian security forces would have followed the same course even if the coalition had been there, since the justification for brutal action forms the very basis of the BJP's ideals. The intensification of the Kashmir operations and the BJP's oppressive politics inside the valley in recent months paints a bleak scenario. As an entity that has little common sense, let alone a sense of doing right, the BJP setup might be considering upping the ante in Kashmir amid threats of employing the same formula in territories beyond the held area. On that side, there appears little realisation of the old truth that an oppressive regime's attempts to quell the genuine and valid aspirations of the people will only further embolden and empower those demanding freedom.

## **Eden Housing scam**

THE housing market in the country is rife with exploitation and scams, a situation that is encouraged by a dire shortage of housing units across the economic spectrum. Yet even within the (at times) unscrupulous world of property developers in the country, the Eden Garden Housing Scheme scam stands out for brazenness and scale. The ill-conceived partnership with the Defence Housing Authority — whereby EGHS used the DHA brand name and gave it a share in the project — resulted in the EGHS management fleeing abroad after taking billions of rupees as deposits from thousands of prospective buyers. With the Supreme Court having waded into the matter using its suo motu powers, there is a possibility that the victims of the scam will have redress. But it is the comments of Chief Justice Saqib Nisar on Tuesday that caused a ripple and ought to be seriously considered. Criticising DHA for its extensive projects across the country, he queried whether the military ought to be involved in property development at all. To the extent that the military seeks to provide reasonable housing to its personnel, a role in the property market could perhaps be justified. But what the chief justice pointed out is that DHA has grown into a property colossus far beyond any rational needs of a state institution and that scams such

as the EGHS are harming the reputation of the military as its commercial empire grows unchecked.

The chief justice's observations will surely resonate with a great deal of the population. If DHA projects were essential, a large majority of houses in these projects would be occupied by retired military personnel. But a great number of DHA houses are either sold or rented to civilians, suggesting that retired military personnel either cannot afford to live in DHA or regard the plots they obtain at subsidised rates as a retirement fund of sorts. Moreover, DHA projects receive special legislative cover, which arguably draws resources away from other sectors of the housing market and has helped create a distorted urban landscape by concentrating wealth in relatively small enclaves. The housing market in any country is a complex arena and laden with the challenges of fairness and living standards. What Chief Justice Nisar appeared to be pointing out is that the DHA commercial empire needs to be fundamentally rethought and that the military leadership ought to consider the long-term deleterious effects of presiding over such an empire.

## **Polio: down, but not out**

FROM Dec 10 to Dec 13, the final door-to-door anti-polio vaccination campaign took place. Around 260,000 workers across the country set out to administer vaccination drops to 38.72m children under the age of five. This included 19.2m children in Punjab; 8.9m in Sindh; 6.8m in KP; 2.53m in Balochistan; 0.347m in Islamabad; 0.237m in GB; and 0.7m in AJK. The campaign took place in coordination with a similar one in Afghanistan, to ensure that children on the move between the borders were also administered drops. An effort of this size and scale is bound to come across some problems, and so it was this time around as well. First, there was news of a 10-member polio team found to be forging names of children vaccinated and flushing vaccines in Islamabad in November. Although the team was immediately sacked, it did raise concerns over how frequently this might be happening. However, polio eradication teams maintained that they follow strict monitoring mechanisms that allow such malpractices to be quickly caught. Then, owing to widely shared misinformation of an infant passing away (after purportedly being administered polio drops), there was a reported 25pc increase in vaccine refusals in Islamabad alone. And, most recently, a third-party auditing team noted discrepancies between claims

made by district administrations about the number of children vaccinated, and those they observed without marked fingers, finding a 10pc difference.

These setbacks are no reason to lose hope that the country will one day be polio-free. When looking at the larger picture, there has, indeed, been a steady decline in the number of cases reported over the years, particularly since the formation of the National Emergency Operations Centre for Polio Eradication in 2014. In the 1990s, there were there nearly 20,000 cases reported each year. In 2018, that figure had dropped to eight. And an extensive surveillance system exists. But the greatest tragedy remains the number of lives lost in these efforts. Anti-polio vaccinators are the unsung heroes of our time.

## **Rising circular debt**

QUIETLY, behind the noise and fury of the headlines, the circular debt continues its march. If one only looks at the figures being given publically for the total size of the monster, it is alarming to note the steep increase. The power division officials just told the Public Accounts Committee that the figure has now crossed about Rs1.4tr. In August 2018, while testifying before a Senate panel, the same officials had given the figure of Rs1.14tr. This would mean that the circular debt has climbed by more than Rs200bn in the 137 days in between these two dates. For perspective, consider that the same figure stood at Rs922bn at the end of November 2017, meaning that the size of the debt increased faster from August till today than it did in the preceding ten months. This sharp uptick needs focus, and parliamentary bodies have good reason to summon power division officials and ask more detailed questions about where exactly the acceleration in the circular debt is coming from.

There are a number of different components of the circular debt, and the power division officialdom is becoming quite adept at presenting the numbers in a way to downplay the problem. For example, one method is to omit the amount held by the Power Holding Pvt Ltd, a special-purpose vehicle created specifically for the purpose of financing the circular debt for the power sector, and which pays its financial costs via surcharges built into the consumer tariff. Creating confusion around the numbers is a common tactic for officialdom to avoid scrutiny, and in the power sector they are free to indulge in this habit to their full satisfaction. In the same time period, from August 2018 till today, the recommendations of the

Special Committee on Circular Debt formed by the Senate have been silently awaiting action. These recommendations include the establishment of a high-level monitoring committee, as well as a slew of deep-rooted reforms.

Left to its own devices, with the government working in one corner and the bureaucracy in another, this state of affairs will not abate. The increase in the rate of accumulation is alarming because the circular debt can ultimately shut down the power system and impose nearly crippling costs on the fiscal framework. To get a handle on the situation, the minister needs to develop a standard reporting template for all power sector data, both operational and financial, through which progress can be monitored effectively to control recoveries and keep power sector debt from climbing to unmanageable levels. At Rs1.4tr, we might already be approaching that stage. At the moment, increasing quantities of power sector inefficiencies are being passed onto the consumer through miscellaneous surcharges and an elevated target for losses allowed by Nepra. The power sector is crying out for proper leadership, and the costs of inaction are rising by the day.

## **Conflict of interest**

THERE is no escaping the impression that a powerful conflict of interest is at play when a government contract is awarded to a company in which a sitting cabinet member and his family have ownership stakes.

Abdul Razak Dawood may not be a federal minister — technically speaking, he holds the portfolio of adviser to the prime minister on commerce — but the fact that he has close proximity to the prime minister, sits in cabinet meetings, and wields ministerial authority cannot be missed.

It may also be the case that, before entering into this position, he ‘resigned’ from all offices he held in Descon, the company that has just been awarded the mega contract for Mohmand dam, and, as his own office has tried to clarify, “totally distanced himself” from his business interests.

But the point at issue is his ownership stakes in the company, as well as stakes owned by his family members.

Until that point is robustly addressed, the impression of a deep conflict of interest and inappropriate award of contract will continue to hold the field, no matter how many denials come from all quarters of government.

There is no doubt, however, that Descon is a company uniquely suited to execute such a contract. It has deep experience in the work of dams and heavy engineering.

But acknowledgement of this fact does not negate the impression that a conflict of interest has arisen. Descon might be an accomplished company, but it is a commercial enterprise.

The clarification issued by the adviser's office did little to answer the questions about his ownership of the company. Pointing out that Mr Dawood had 'disclosed' his ownership of the company to the prime minister, as well as the fact that it was in the bidding for this contract prior to his appointment, does not make everything alright.

The statement gives the impression that the prime minister has now become party to a conflict of interest, especially since the clarification goes on to say that the prime minister, after knowing all the facts, "made a strong plea for the services" of Mr Dawood.

If this is true, it runs contrary to promises made repeatedly by the prime minister that conflicts of interest would be scrupulously avoided under his leadership.

Scruples and ethics are the cornerstone of this government's claim to legitimacy. It should not be seen to be cutting corners here.

## **A legendary teacher**

BY all accounts, Major Geoffrey Douglas Langlands led a remarkable life, spent (at the risk of boastfulness) in a remarkable land, in remarkable times. Having arrived in the subcontinent as a British officer prior to the departure of the Raj, the Major — as he was affectionately known — chose to stay in and serve Pakistan upon its Independence. This inseparable bond is manifest in the homage being paid to him now, for the unparalleled service of this giant of a man was, in itself, a tribute extended to the people of this country, who reciprocated his warmth with an open, generous embrace of their own. As he departs from this

world at the age of 101, the question that is inevitably going to be asked is: Do we have it in us today to deserve another like him?

The story of Geoffrey Langlands is one of human perseverance and dedication. He must have been blessed with a golden heart to have travelled the distance that he did, mind rooted in the finest traditions of his age, to influence countless lives along the way. The revered Major nurtured generations of Aitchison College students, many of them destined to lead in their own right. After leaving the proud and tranquil school in Lahore, he still had enough left in him to take an assignment at Razmak Cadet College in North Waziristan. He then rounded it off with a long, deeply meaningful stint at a public school in Chitral, which was later named — fittingly — after him. His was a breathtaking journey that brought him in contact with students — and, through them, with their communities — from various, even contrasting, backgrounds. He had lessons for all, including those who had the pluck and gumption to kidnap him and hold him hostage for a few days. He reportedly taught them how best to negotiate the steep climb while walking through the mountains. The Major was an incorrigible guide, who truly earned his rise and his salutes.

## Water for Balochistan

AN interesting proposal has been floated by a group of senators that the money collected under the so-called dam fund can be used to build small dams in Balochistan. Their argument is that the amount that has been collected — Rs9bn — will make a far more meaningful contribution if used for building small dams rather than mega ones like Diamer Basha, or even the Rs300bn behemoth that is the planned Mohmand dam. Some might argue that collection is still under way, but it is worth taking into account that at the present rate of accumulation, the funds will not amount to any meaningful contribution for large dams for many more years. Moreover, since the Supreme Court has already mandated that the funds be used only for the actual building of the dam, and not for any of the other work leading up to the construction, such as the hiring of consultants, land acquisition or compensation to displaced people, it is clear that the money will sit in the respective accounts for almost a decade. It is worth wondering whether any sort of plan has been put in place to invest the amount safely in the meantime so that its value does not diminish in the years ahead.



The idea to utilise the funds for the construction of small dams in Balochistan has merit because for this purpose the funds are sufficient to pay for a couple of dozen such projects, from which many thousands of people can draw lasting benefit. Since the funds will be used directly for dam construction, no major reprogramming of the purpose of the fund would be required, other than to change the name of the project. Moreover, the original purpose of the contributions — to help with development of water resources in the country — would be perfectly fulfilled in a targeted manner. The small dams would directly help increase access to drinking and irrigation water for those segments of the population that most need it.

Out of all the provinces, Balochistan is facing the bleakest prospects when it comes to water security. The people of the province are forced to resort to the unregulated extraction of groundwater from tube wells. The state has played a role in incentivising this by providing a subsidy on power used to run tube wells in Balochistan. The sheer dearth of surface storage in the province means people have been pushed into reducing their future water reservoirs. Quetta, for example, is on its way to becoming a desert with its rapidly falling ground water table, which has dropped by up to 30m since 1989, according to one study. Beyond Quetta, the province's water needs rank near the top of its development priorities, so the senators have done the right thing by flagging it as a worthy recipient for the dam fund contributions. The Supreme Court should consider the proposal.

## **NSS returns**

ONE piece of heartening news is the substantial revision of returns on National Savings Schemes. Pensioners and elderly people will now receive a return of around 14pc where the key policy discount rate, on which all other rates are pegged, is at 10.5pc. The NSS directorate has done the right thing since at least June in regularly revising the rates upward as interest rates have climbed all year. Special care must be taken to ensure that the incomes of pensioners, retired men and women, and widows are not being eroded through inflation or currency devaluations since they have no way of increasing their incomes, nor do they have much of a voice in the policy community to be able to air their grievances. Being vulnerable in this way means the responsibility for ensuring their welfare falls upon the shoulders of those serving in the policy community.

To further this mission, the NSS directorate should also take steps to improve conditions in their collection centres, and encourage a culture of electronic payments to add to the convenience of their service. Many of the elderly will need special encouragement, such as training time dedicated by the staff, as they grow accustomed to receiving electronic payments — but such an investment in time and effort would be undoubtedly a worthwhile one.

Beyond the pensioners, there is a need to encourage a culture of savings in this country. Consumption already plays too large a role in the economy, and far too much of our investment is being financed through foreign savings, ie external borrowing. There are a number of impediments in promoting this culture, of which the grossly inadequate returns to savings is a major, though not the only, obstacle. At the moment, savings are discouraged due to widespread rackets in the country, and the overall attitude of neglect towards this vital practice in economic life. Banks and brokerages, for example, hardly devote much of their resource to developing the right mix of savings products for their customers. The last (successful) innovation in savings products was perhaps the principal protected funds being offered by asset management companies, and the fact that they have done well perhaps speaks to the extreme risk aversion that has taken root as racketeering has taken over the economy. Returns to pensioners and the elderly is the least that we can ensure in such an environment.

## **Dark side of the moon**

FOR decades, the ‘dark side’ of the moon has been a phrase in pop culture, and a reference to the vast unexplored spaces of the celestial body.

But now, on Thursday, a Chinese lunar rover landed on the ‘dark’ or ‘far’ side — a global first that boosts Beijing’s ambition to become a space superpower. The Chang’e-4 sent a photograph of the ‘dark side’ to the Queqiao satellite, also operated by China.

A series of experiments has also been planned for the rover, including carrying out low-frequency radio astronomical tests, aiming to take advantage of the lack of interference on the moon’s far side.

China’s success in this regard is no mean feat: the dark side of the moon — unlike the near side — is extremely rugged, and this had earlier made landing

difficult. This is not China's first moon landing — it is the country's second such probe, following the Yutu rover mission in 2013.

Going forward, China plans to send a lunar lander, the Chang'e 5, later this year. In fact, amongst its plans is to build a super-powerful rocket that is heavier than those developed by Nasa and private firm SpaceX, as well as a permanently crewed space station.

These developments are considered fascinating by many around the world, showing as they do the potential of science and technology.

The exploration of space and the planets in our solar system had for decades been referred to as the final frontier. And China's rover has brought us one step closer to retrieving information that could not previously be obtained.

With the Mars landing that Nasa achieved recently, and private firm SpaceX planning a tourism journey around the moon and a human mission to Mars, there is ample reason for faith in science.

This week also saw Nasa release images of Ultima Thule, the farthest object to be explored by a spacecraft, and potentially holding valuable clues to the origins of the universe.

The 'final frontier', it appears, is constantly on the move.

## **Tribal districts' integration**

THE legal limbo and financial vacuum in the settled tribal districts, the region formerly known as Fata, has finally received much-needed attention from the relevant government quarters. A high-level meeting convened to address administrative, financial and legal issues in the settled tribal districts achieved a significant breakthrough when it was decided that the centre, Punjab and KP would contribute up to 3pc of their shares from the federal divisible pool for the immediate needs of the districts. While it remains to be seen how soon funds will start to flow to the districts, the decision ought to pave the way for a meaningful implementation of mainstreaming projects in the Fata region. Indeed, the fundamental constitutional, financial and administrative aspects have received insufficient attention by the state and the media, and there is a risk that the unresolved problems could lead to simmering discontent and alienation in a

region that is still struggling to recover from the ravages of the decade-long militancy that was once rampant there.

Welcome as the contribution of Punjab is — and important as the efforts of the KP and federal governments are — the difficulties in upgrading a region that was ruled under anachronistic legal provisions and had some of the poorest socioeconomic indicators in the country can be attributed to two persistent problems in governance: the absence of sufficient resources, and a lack of careful planning. As with the vital 18th Amendment, the transition phase after the abolition of Fata was not adequately planned. The legal limbo in the region is also one step closer to resolution following a Supreme Court order last week that a six-month period be given for the introduction of a mainstream justice system in the districts, but that crisis too erupted because the interim governance ordinance for Fata was seemingly drafted in haste and without consulting constitutional experts. While the opposition of PML-N allies in the last parliament prevented the issue of reforms and mainstreaming to be taken up until the last days of the government, it was long known that a so-called mainstreaming project in Fata was imminent, even if the final status of Fata as a separate province or merged with KP was undecided. The Fata reforms commission recognised the importance of an orderly transition, but that realisation did not extend to those actually in charge of the transition.

Second, the problem of inadequate resources to address various projects of national importance will not go away until the state tackles the inadequacies in its revenue and tax strategies. Surely, no reasonable observer would argue that the settled tribal districts not receive a generous share of national resources, but then the state has to have a sustainable strategy of financing those needs. Otherwise, ad hoc desperate strategies will prevail.

## **Political alarm bells**

THE latest roundup of Pakistan's short-term political risk produced by Fitch Solutions might make for familiar reading for those who are following national politics at home. But it is also worth noting that foreign investors and credit-rating agencies too are keeping a close eye on the growing political confrontation in the country. And they are telling themselves more or less the same thing that domestic investors and creditors are: a confrontation is brewing, and runs the risk

of bogging down the wheels of policy in a political stalemate. Some elements (while egging on this confrontation) have their own bag of tricks with which to brush such concerns aside. They will ask questions such as ‘should the government take no action against corruption out of fear of a political fallout’? But such casting of the situation does not negate the fact that the government appears to have embarked on a course of action for which it lacks the strength. The way Fitch Solutions puts it: the PTI “remains in pole position” in terms of its popularity, but it is “losing momentum” as the opposition is making gains, while the ruling party lacks even a simple majority in the National Assembly.

The prognosis — of a ruling party that is overextended in a ruinous confrontation — is not new. In the days to come, the government will lose further momentum as the economy continues to lose steam and people feel the impact of this in their day-to-day lives. Few things can eat away a government’s popularity more than the perception that the rulers are busy with vindictive politics while the country is descending into a crisis. In order to avoid falling into this trap, from which rescue is next to impossible, the government will have to ensure economic improvement, which is difficult in the midst of a tricky political situation. At this stage, it is too early to make big promises and keep moving ahead with faith that the steps taken thus far will have the needed effect of turning the economy around. This would be underestimating the magnitude of the challenge that stands before the government. The leaders of the ruling party need to carefully consider the choice before them. They can indulge in a political confrontation or ensure an economic turnaround, but they cannot have both at the same time. Let us hope that they choose wisely.

## **Smog in Lahore**

LIFE is hard in Lahore these days — perhaps tougher than it has been at any time during the last 12 months. The winter has brought challenges that the authorities are unable to find solutions to. Not least among them is the smog — much of it our own creation. Each winter around November, a smog starts to descend on the city, gaining in density as the weather cools. This is pollution caused by a variety of sources, among them the smoke released into the air by peasants, both here and across the border, burning unwanted bushes and grass left over after the harvest to clear the fields for the next sowing season. But surely, there are other causes that contribute to the blinding blanket wrapped

around Lahore that, at the other end of the season, has to contend with extremely hot weather. The largely unmonitored industrial activity and the unbridled vehicular traffic on the roads are also factors that lead to this annual affair that has been infamously called the 'fifth season' in Pakistan's second largest city, which has often been mocked for enjoying a privileged status during the long reign of the PML-N in Punjab. This smog's debilitating effects on the city are increasing with each passing year.

The smog sets off its own annual rituals. It is lamented how Lahore's inhabitants breathe in the most polluted air anywhere in the world. There are also complaints about the lack of proper equipment to measure the extent of toxicity that the people in the city are subjected to. And then there is the standard public flogging of all those who allowed Lahore to get stuck in a place where all it can do is to curse the smog, without a clue as to the solution. After years of following this regime of condemnation, there is as yet little on the horizon by way of debate and resolution. This is obviously not disaster enough for those amongst us who happen to be in positions of authority.

## **Balancing ties**

IT is welcome that Prime Minister Imran Khan reconsidered his pledge to not travel abroad during the first months of his term in order to focus on domestic priorities.

As economic and fiscal realities became clear and regional security issues assumed a fresh urgency, it would have been troubling if the prime minister had remained disengaged and entrusted the handling of such matters to subordinates and other institutions.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed was recently in Pakistan, where he met the prime minister.

Mr Khan has already visited the UAE twice as prime minister and the visit by the crown prince signals a re-warming of ties after a noticeably cool period in which Pakistan was considered to be insufficiently close to the Saudi Arabia-UAE axis that has arisen against Iran.

Two points ought to be made here.

A careful balancing of ties is necessary in the fraught world of Middle East politics. Last week, Prime Minister Khan travelled to Turkey to meet President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is vying for influence in the greater Muslim world with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Pakistan has vital energy trade relations with Qatar, which is blockaded by a group of countries led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The first foreign leader Mr Khan met after being elected prime minister was Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

Now, US President Donald Trump has suggested he will meet with the Pakistani leadership and Mr Trump's extreme position against Iran is well known.

Amidst that bewildering array of cross-cutting international tensions, Pakistan must protect and advance its own core economic, diplomatic and security interests. Therefore, in his interactions with foreign leaders, Mr Khan should consistently reiterate Pakistan's determination to have peaceful relations with regional and international powers.

Where there are trade opportunities, they should be pursued; where the possibility for mediation exists, it should be diplomatically advanced.

Second, the economy that Mr Khan inherited and his own government's indecision have combined to create a need for international financial support.

Friendly countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and China have offered financial assistance to Pakistan. But hard as Mr Khan has lobbied for money to help stabilise the state's finances, he and his government have not been forthcoming when it comes to sharing the terms and conditions on which financial assistance has been extended bilaterally.

Mr Khan ought to recognise that transparency alone will help dispel suspicions of inappropriate commitments having been made by his government.

## **Sexual harassment**

AFTER much delay, the KP government has finally approved the appointment of its first provincial anti-harassment ombudsperson. Sindh and Punjab had already appointed their respective ombudsperson since the passing of the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act in 2010, along with amendments under the Federal Ombudsmen Institutional Reforms Act in 2013.

Balochistan is yet to implement it. Still to be sworn in, KP's ombudsperson, Rukshanda Naz, has over 25 years of activism under her belt, and is undoubtedly well acquainted with the difficulties women face within and outside of the workplace. Her new role will see her working closely with relevant institutions of the state machinery, processing sexual harassment complaints, setting up inquiries, upholding public conduct for deterrence and awareness purposes, making sure committees are in place in both private and public workplaces, etc. Any sexual harassment outside the workforce comes under the Pakistan Penal Code. There are already around 30 reported cases of sexual harassment pending in KP. Upon pressure from an NGO, the Peshawar High Court had ordered an appointment to the position back in September 2017, but there was resistance to it from certain quarters. Opponents cited financial constraints or outright denied the occurrence of sexual harassment.

But the pervasive reality of sexual harassment in its varying degrees cannot be swept under the carpet. More than being just a 'nuisance' or affecting workplace performance and attendance, the fear of harassment or potential harassment alone effectively keeps women from entering the workforce, particularly in conservative, 'honour'-based societies such as ours. But we know that the increased participation of women positively correlates with economic growth and welfare. And on an individual level, to a degree, financial independence often protects women from being at a socially vulnerable position, and gives them more say in their homes and communities. While commentators have pointed out flaws in the anti-harassment law — the relatively ambiguous wording, for instance — its existence has meant some relief for women working in the formal private and public sectors. Moreover, it shows that legislators in parliament take sexual harassment seriously. The role of the ombudsperson cannot be understated in providing the brave women who come forth and raise their voice a sense of security. Then there is the issue of the informal workforce, a large percentage of which is made up of women. Who represents them? What rights do they have? This is something that legislators must consider as well.



## **Reminders of conflict**

EVEN with a substantial decrease in incidents of terrorism and conflict in the country, there are constant, perilous reminders of the months and years of bloodshed that Pakistan has suffered. One of the latest of such reminders was the death of three children on Friday in Killi Behram town of Balochistan's Washuk district. According to a statement issued by the Levies force, the children — two boys and a girl, aged from seven to 10 years — found a live grenade and were playing with it when it exploded, an occurrence that is not uncommon in some parts of the country. A fourth child was injured, and is being treated at the CMH in Khuzdar district.

In any country with a long history of violence, it behoves the state to educate the population of the dangers that exist, and to take steps to prevent tragedies such as this. There have been several incidents in conflict zones where the lives of children and adults alike have been snuffed out by explosive material. In fact, the inability of the state to check the proliferation of arms across the country has resulted in several tragedies. There have been a number of cases where children have come across and 'experimented' with 'gadgets' they ought to have no truck with; and others where guns in the hands of security guards, for example, have gone off accidentally. What is urgently needed now are measures to prevent needless tragedies, for which spreading awareness among citizens about the dangers of items such as IEDs is essential, so that they are better able to protect themselves and their families. Liaising with local people in areas that have seen (or are still vulnerable to) conflict, and teaching them to recognise harmful explosives is as necessary as the authorities identifying the places that pose the most risk. It is time the government took note of these lethal remnants of war, and evolved a plan for their removal, while delivering mine risk education to the population.

# **Terrorism threat**

UNQUESTIONABLY, Pakistan is more stable and secure than it was at the turn of the decade.

The gains in the long fight against militancy have been significant and ought to prove durable. Yet, an analysis of terrorism data suggests that the threat of militancy and terrorism is far from over, and, indeed, may be morphing into a new and possibly more prolonged phase of violence.

The Pakistan Security Report 2018, compiled by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, is a useful aggregator of terrorism data in the country.

The latest report reveals that while violence, as measured in the number of suicide attacks (though not numbers killed or injured in such attacks) was lower in 2018 as compared to 2017, there has been persistent terrorist violence in the country in recent years.

According to the report, there were 26 suicide attacks in 2014 and 19 in 2018 and a similar number of suicide attacks in the intervening years. The number of suicide attacks is admittedly a single metric, but it is a significant one in terms of how peaceful a country is perceived to be.

The PIPS report also suggests that while the core TTP may have been decimated, splinter groups (including local affiliates of IS) continue to pose a significant problem. The Pakistani state appears to be aware of the problem, but it stresses the role of Afghanistan in the continued existence of anti-Pakistan militant groups.

To protect Pakistan against attacks organised or launched from across the border in Afghanistan, the Pakistani state has demanded that the Afghan government take measures to shut down militant sanctuaries along the border with Pakistan, and has also taken up border fencing and border management issues.

While such measures may be important, militancy has survived and morphed inside Pakistan because of local facilitation and recruitment networks. On those issues, the Pakistani state has not said much publicly. While counterterrorism operations certainly appear to be continuing, the more wide-ranging National

Action Plan is still seemingly of secondary interest to the civil and military leaderships.

Unhappily, the public discourse on terrorism in Pakistan is superficial and polarising.

The undeniable successes and the enormous sacrifices of civil and military security personnel are rightly acknowledged and praised. Pakistan owes them a great debt of gratitude. But successes and sacrifices ought not to become a shield against greater public insight and informed critiques.

The country must never be allowed to return to its darkest years at the turn of the decade. Too much was lost and too many citizens suffered in part because of policy mistakes and miscalculations.

The evolving threat of militancy and terrorism in Pakistan and the region must be carefully analysed, and a response methodically crafted. If institutions work together in a true spirit of cooperation, further successes are surely well within reach.

## **Lest we forget**

IT was in January last year that the case of little Zainab in Kasur sparked protests across Pakistan, gripping the public's consciousness for months, following her brutal rape and murder. Society and state went into overdrive promising to deliver justice. And though the intense public outrage and scrutiny did ultimately help in identifying and prosecuting her killer, what ought to have been a watershed moment for ensuring the rights and protection of Pakistan's children was, to a certain extent, derailed by base motivations.

The media, which played a pivotal role in spotlighting Zainab's case and the broader issue of rampant child sexual abuse, often succumbed to sensationalist reportage, including lurid politicised claims.

Justice for Zainab: Timeline of the Kasur rape, murder case that gripped the nation

Exposed not just for being asleep at the wheel in the face of overwhelming evidence of a serial predator in Kasur's midst, but for having earlier killed an

innocent man in a staged encounter for the latter's crimes, the police seemed more concerned with appearing proactive rather than establishing methodical investigative norms.

Announcing her killer's arrest, Punjab's then chief minister struck a rather distastefully triumphant note, while a disturbingly large section of Pakistanis demanded the medieval practice of public executions. In our national distress, when fortitude and wisdom were called for, we may have not always appealed to our better nature.

Have we learnt any lessons since last year? Much of this gaucheness might be forgiven if it led to a sustained drive for social and institutional reforms. Indeed, behind the scenes, there are those who are working diligently to raise awareness and provide children and families with the necessary tools to prevent, report and heal from the physical and emotional wounds of sexual assault. But, daily reports of children being sexually abused and murdered continue to surface.

One report, tracking data on child abuse cases reported in newspapers across Pakistan, recorded 3,445 cases in 2017, and 2,322 in the first six months of 2018 alone — demonstrating a significant uptick. It is clearly only the tip of the iceberg, but does the rise actually signify an increase in the incidence rate, or does it reflect that increased awareness has reduced stigma and improved mechanisms for reporting such crimes?

The Senate committee inquiring into child abuse has lamented the lack of credible data to formulate any meaningful strategy to combat this scourge. We owe Zainab — and the countless nameless, faceless child victims like her — to do better.

## **Chinese 'education' camps**

MANY questions surround the fate of Chinese Uighur Muslims sent to 'education' camps run by Beijing, apparently to deradicalise Xinjiang's majority Turkic ethnic group. Among them are Chinese Muslim women married to Pakistani men, who have been separated from their families. There has been considerable criticism of Beijing's treatment of its Uighur population, with claims that the People's Republic is trying to change the demographics of the region by settling Han Chinese. China insists it is countering 'radicalisation' in Xinjiang. The UN has

criticised China for running a “massive internment camp” for Uighur citizens, and Uighur activists say ‘deradicalisation’ is being used as an excuse to make them forsake their religion and culture, and to embrace the Chinese ‘mainstream’. Over 1m Uighurs are said to be interned in the camps, a figure Chinese officials have contested. In response to the criticism, China has recently opened the ‘education’ centres to foreign diplomats and journalists. Government officials say the camps will not be closed down, but the number of people being put through the re-education programme will be reduced.

While Beijing may have a genuine problem with extremism — Xinjiang has been restive for years — holding people in such camps and ‘guiding’ them towards renouncing their faith and culture is not the way to address it. China needs to be more transparent about the treatment of its native Uighur population, as such anti-extremism measures may only backfire and further alienate Xinjiang’s Muslims. Moreover, considering the close ties between Islamabad and Beijing, Pakistan needs to work with China through diplomatic channels to resolve the issue of Chinese spouses of Pakistani citizens. Splitting up families is unacceptable, and there are reports that at least 200 spouses of Pakistani men are missing, and are most likely in the re-education centres. The government must make greater efforts to reunite the women with their families, while the Chinese state should rethink its approach to the Xinjiang issue in a manner that does not violate fundamental rights.

## **JIT deletion**

THE Joint Investigation Team model of accountability appears to have suffered a fresh setback and a thorough reassessment of the model is necessary.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court intervened to order the removal of the names of Chief Minister Sindh Murad Shah and PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari from the JIT report on the so-called fake bank accounts case. The Supreme Court has also directed the federal government to remove the names of the two PPP leaders from the Exit Control List.

The apex court’s intervention may help cool the frenzy of speculation that erupted after the court-ordered JIT report was made public. Substantially adding to the confusion was the PTI’s apparent willingness to force immediate political

change in Sindh. Perhaps all sides ought to consider their role in further muddying the accountability waters in the country.

To begin with, serious as the allegations in the JIT report are, a JIT report is not a conclusive finding of fact by a court of law.

Indeed, the intervention of the superior judiciary using its suo motu powers effectively circumvents the regular investigation and judicial processes, and can create distortions that can be difficult to justify. In the present instance, it was the Supreme Court that ordered the creation of a JIT to probe the so-called fake accounts case and present its findings to the court.

If the JIT is assumed to have acted in good faith, then its findings ought to be assessed fairly and transparently. But in ordering that the names of certain individuals be deleted from the JIT report, the Supreme Court has exercised its discretionary power to effectively overrule the JIT report without there being a clear legal reason for doing so.

Certainly, the Supreme Court's apparent desire to extend respect and dignity to constitutional office holders and leaders of major political parties is laudable under the circumstances, but if JIT findings can be summarily modified, overturned or erased, then what is the true value of the JIT report in the first place?

The accountability process in the country is undeniably flawed, but a better accountability process does not lie in ad hoc solutions such as JITs and arbitrary arrests. If accountability is to be fair and transparent, and convictions are to be sustained on appeal, the regular processes and institutions of investigation, prosecution and adjudication ought to be strengthened.

The PTI government is clearly committed to ramping up accountability; can the federal government not empower the institutions that have the expertise and lawful authority to investigate and prosecute corruption?

The JIT fiasco could allow the PPP leadership to avoid answering in the court of public opinion the very serious corruption allegations that have been made public. Circumventing normal systems does not necessarily lead to extraordinary results — more often than not it leads to no results whatsoever.

## **Boom and bust**

AS the exercise to finalise the 12th five-year plan enters high gear, perhaps the planners can take a moment to reflect on how the story of the previous plan worked out.

Pakistan's economy keeps going round in the same vicious cycle of boom and bust, something that is evident in the growth targets that are being set in the 12th plan. Average growth is being targeted for 5.8pc over the plan period, as per reports from within the consultative process.

Considering that, this year, GDP growth was supposed to come in at 6.2pc in the ongoing fiscal year, Pakistan will be lucky if it touches the revised target of 4pc, given the rapid slowdown in the pace of economic activity that is still continuing.

This is the cycle that the 12th plan must aim to break, where growth rates climb for a few years, only to come crashing down rapidly, sending disruptive shocks reverberating through the economy. The framers of the 11th plan were aware of this.

"Most episodes of the GDP growth have come to an abrupt halt because of deteriorating balance of payments," they said in the plan document, pointing to inelastic exports with imports that are highly elastic to growth. "The plan aims to maintain a sustained BoP position for ensuring macroeconomic stability," they claimed.

But that was five years ago. Today, that plan document reads like an antiquated scroll, littered with tales of disasters past and prophecies of a shining future.

"The capital and financial account will be strengthened by diversifying sources of financing," the planners promised, "with greater recourse to non-debt-creating sources of financing." Yet as the years progressed, they partook of external debt, creating inflows with a heady and reckless abandon.

They had no other choice, since very little had been done to promote a diversification of the export base or to address other underlying rigidities. They sought "to put Pakistan's economy on a robust growth trajectory" and "ensure a stable macroeconomic environment with low inflation and sound internal and external balances" at the plan end.

Yet here we are, drawing up another plan to once again jumpstart a moribund growth process. Will the drafters of the 12th plan be writing yet another antiquated scroll? Or do they have genuinely new ideas about how to break this cycle of boom and bust? We will soon find out.

## **Injured schoolchildren**

TRANSPORT in many of Pakistan's cities has become a serious public safety issue, endangering countless lives each day. From rickety, over-loaded busses to hard-pressed wagons and vans, the lack of decent public transport is an increasingly urgent issue — given that, without it, people are left to fend for themselves in private vehicles that are neither inspected for safety, nor for the competence of their drivers.

The latest reminder of this came on Saturday, when in Karachi's Orangi Town a school van carrying children caught fire, reportedly because of faulty wiring. It appears that the van was stuck in gravel and, as the driver gunned the engine to escape the trap, the vehicle may have overheated. Four children were injured. While it is believable that, as he maintains, the driver helped the children present in his carriage, it is also true that the lack of reliable and safe public transport is the reason such sad incidents occur. The following day, the police booked the driver of this particular van, with the relevant station house officer confirming that a case has been registered under sections of the Pakistan Penal Code relating to causing hurt by mistake, and causing damage. Certainly, a thorough investigation is needed to ascertain where exactly the blame lies — a malfunctioning vehicle, a gravel pit that ought not to have been there in the first place, or driving incapacity. But beyond that lies the fact that the children in the van, particularly those injured, are faced with the challenge of recovering from such a traumatic experience. This is far from the first time that children have been put at grave risk by irresponsible private-vehicle owners; there have been all too many school van tragedies caused by CNG-cylinder blasts and terrifying accidents. The only solution lies in the state — or each province — finding within itself the capacity to set up reliable public transport systems that are operated under inspection and supervision mechanisms. Without that, citizens old and young will always be at risk.



## **Extending military courts, again?**

AMONG the many distortions introduced in the Constitution, a number of which have been reversed and corrected over the decades, the two amendments to introduce and extend the life of military courts for civilians accused of terrorism by the state must surely rank as some of the most consequential.

Approved by a democratically elected parliament and supported by the two largest political parties in the country, the 21st and 23rd amendments to the Constitution have, in fact, disturbed the democratic order, with the fundamental rights of the people of Pakistan eroded by the very representatives of the people. That institutions of the state may have demanded and sanctified military courts underlined the extent of the state's drift from a rights-based and freedom-maximising interpretation of the Constitution. Resistance was needed, but none was evident.

Now, a second consecutive parliament is on the verge of taking up the issue of military courts — once again to extend the life of these courts, rather than to disband them and take up the matter of urgent judicial reform.

What is perplexing is that the PTI — which has signalled that it will consult with the opposition to reach the necessary numbers in parliament to approve another constitutional amendment to extend the life of military courts — has an explicit reforms-based governance and legislative agenda.

The incoming chief justice of the Supreme Court is highly regarded as one of the best criminal law justices in the country. Surely, then, now is the time for parliament along with the judicial institution and other relevant bodies to take up the matter of criminal law reform in the country.

Military-court trials for civilians accused of terrorism were justified on the basis of a national emergency and a need to have an instrument to punish the very worst terrorists captured by the state. But the Army Public School attack, in the wake of which military courts were activated, occurred more than four years ago. Unquestionably, the security situation in the country today is much improved.

More relevantly, a recent Peshawar High Court judgment that set aside the convictions of more than 70 individuals tried in military courts has exposed the

intrinsic and very serious problems of fairness, due process and justice itself in the operation of such courts.

The PHC judgment has been suspended on appeal in the Supreme Court, but it has laid bare enough troubling problems with the operation of military courts that an extension to the life of these courts ought not to be considered at this moment. Instead of perpetuating injustice, the PTI-led government must turn its attention to addressing continuing problems such as missing persons.

The fight against militancy, terrorism and violent extremism will of necessity be long. But the country must not lose its constitutional, democratic and fundamental-rights moorings in the process.

## **Smuggling lives**

HUMAN trafficking remains one of the most pressing, cross-border issues of contemporary times. And its victims are on the rise, warns a recent UN Office on Drugs and Crimes report. More victims were reported in 2016 than in any other time in the past 13 years. The anti-immigration policies of some countries, along with the reality of repressive regimes, war, poverty and climate change have led to higher numbers of people escaping their homes and risking their lives in search of greener pastures. And criminal syndicates are more than willing to profit off of human misery and desperation. Terrorist groups are also involved in or profit from this multi-billion dollar criminal industry. In Pakistan, it is estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 citizens attempt to illegally cross into Europe, the Middle East, Turkey and Russia each year. Many are from the small towns and villages of Punjab. They are promised prospects of freedom, adventure and opportunity. But the journey is dangerous, and many do not make it to their promised lands. Some end up in detention centres. Others have to contend with cultural and language barriers in their new 'homes'. They face difficulty finding employment, and some are forced into sex work and a life of petty crime to make ends meet.

Authorities cite low conviction rates among the hundreds of traffickers who sell false hopes and dreams to vulnerable citizens as the reason why the business of human smuggling continues to thrive — despite two new laws passed by the government in 2018. In October 2018, police in Balochistan claimed to have caught around 100 boys — nine aged 13 and under — being smuggled out of the country. The UN report has noted a global increase in the number of children

being trafficked, while adult women made up nearly half of the victims in 2016. One of the grimmest revelations include the fact that, over the past 15 years, women and girls represented more than 70pc of detected victims — and the sex trade continues to be the predominant reason for trafficking, accounting for some 59pc of all cases. There is limited information available from Pakistan regarding the involvement of its citizens in sex trafficking, but the probability cannot be ruled out. International and regional cooperation is imperative in order to counter transnational crimes. Additionally, governments, law enforcement authorities and civil society must address the social issues that make citizens vulnerable to exploitation from traffickers in the first place.

## **Cricket woes**

PACE and bounce, Pakistani batsmen's Achilles heel on tours abroad for decades now, have come back to haunt them in the recent Test series against South Africa, which they conceded quite timidly, to the utter dismay of this cricket-crazy nation.

Sarfraz Ahmed's men appeared clueless in tackling the hostile Proteas pacers, spearheaded by Dale Steyn, who brilliantly exploited the seam-friendly conditions at home to quell any challenge whatsoever from Pakistan.

Almost all of the visitors' top- and middle-order batsmen struggled and fell prey to their fierce short deliveries. Nonetheless, the fate of the national squad in South Africa might have already been sealed, given the lack of planning that has marred the tour from its inception.

With just one practice match in the team's itinerary leading up to this challenging series, it smacks of an absence of any forethought from either the Pakistan Cricket Board or the team's management.

A series of practice games on tours abroad ought to be a given to help visiting batsmen acclimatise themselves better to the playing conditions of an unfamiliar pitch.

The team composition for the series also left a lot to be desired, since Pakistan insisted on carrying a few injured players on the tour, which stymied the team's plans of taking the field at full strength in Tests.

The injudicious inclusion of spinner Yasir Shah in the two Tests also deprived Pakistan of a fourth seamer like Fahim Ashraf, who could have been a handful for the opposition on the bouncy tracks. The flurry of defeats have suddenly brought Pakistan cricket at a crossroads.

Obviously disappointed at the losses and the manner in which senior players like Azhar Ali, Asad Shafiq and Fakhar Zaman were dismissed, fans and critics alike have raised doubts about Sarfraz's ability to inspire the team and called for axing batting coach Grant Flower.

With the Johannesburg Test starting on Friday, Pakistan will have to quickly regroup and take the fight to the hosts to avoid a 3-0 whitewash.

## **Firing the gas MDs**

HOW do we make sense of the prime minister's decision to order the firing of the managing directors of the two gas distribution companies? On the face of it, assigning blame to the MDs of the gas distribution companies appears odd, given that they are not responsible for the production of gas or for its import.

Besides, they neither draw up the merit order list nor do they decide how the pace of the expansion of gas demand is to be regulated. Their role is simply to run the gas distribution system.

If there is a shortage of gas in the system, or if there is a technical outage at some point that is going to constrict the supply of gas, this information is available to authorities in the federal government in real time.

At least four officials in Islamabad, with offices very close to each other — the secretaries for power and petroleum as well as the ministers of these respective divisions — have in their offices screens displaying real-time data on how much gas is in the system, how the fields are functioning, how the distribution system is operating, and so on.

With all this readily available information, it difficult to comprehend how blame was assigned to the very last link in the gas supply chain: the heads of the two distribution companies.

Ever since the country's gas shortages began to bite with the onset of winter, the government ordered an inquiry first by the sector regulator, Ogra, followed by another by the secretary petroleum. The reason for the two inquiries was that the assessment of the first revealed that there was no blame to be assigned, since the situation was as to be expected given the supply and demand gap.

Dissatisfied with this, the government ordered a second inquiry, which also came back inconclusive regarding the question of censure. This was followed by the rather sudden news that two individuals, the least likely culprits by all assessments, have had the blame pinned upon them.

What may have been intended as a sign of strong leadership is, in fact, quite the contrary. It instead signals that the petroleum division has been left to its own devices, and that when things go wrong — as they inevitably will without top-level coordination — a game begins to make a scapegoat of the most readily available party.

This is a recipe for demoralisation. Strong leadership requires creating and strengthening the systems that enable accurate forecasting of gas demand, particularly in the winter months, and smooth arrangements for supply, including placing advance orders for LNG vessels in the correct quantity. The work is complex, and it requires the petroleum division to work with the power division (where a significant bulk of gas demand originates). System building is the need of the hour, not a blame game.

## **Pemra's diktats**

THE culture wars appear to be heating up once again as regulators and the superior judiciary wade awkwardly into the realm of media content monitoring and censorship.

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority has issued a flurry of advisories and warnings to TV channels recently that have focused on the alleged erosion of traditional values and Pakistani culture caused by the broadcasting of so-called inappropriate and culturally insensitive entertainment content. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has asserted that Indian content on Pakistani TV channels undermines Pakistani culture and therefore should not be allowed to air locally.

The interventions by Pemra and the superior judiciary have once again put a spotlight on a complex set of issues: the rights of media creators and distributors versus the sentiments of some media consumers; the imposition of a monolithic state-approved culture in a reasonably diverse society; and moral policing versus upholding the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights of the people.

At the outset, what is troubling about Pemra's interventions is that they appear to be arbitrary and subject to the whims of the regulator rather than a consistent enforcement of rules and norms that have been rigorously and transparently evaluated.

Explore: Who defines obscenity?

Pemra has a viewer feedback and complaint management system on its website. For the month of December 2018, complaints against 41 satellite TV channels are listed: nearly half the channels have a single complaint lodged against them, while the highest number of complaints registered against a single channel is 22.

While Pemra may not have to wait for viewer complaints, it is striking that censorship measures are being taken in the name of viewers while there is little evidence of mass grievances on its own online system. Moreover, the mere registration of a complaint is not automatically an indication of a legitimate objection.

Pemra's recent guidelines suggest an interest in moral policing rather than promoting a vibrant, popular and commercially successful local broadcast entertainment industry.

It is also unclear how this country's TV channels, owned, managed and consumed by Pakistanis, could be undermining its culture — are Pemra's anonymous bureaucrats and technocrats really the arbiters and custodians of local culture?

Perhaps most striking is that Pemra appears to believe it is operating in a vacuum. In an age where Pakistanis are rushing online and where Indian movies dominate the cinema experience, is Pemra protecting consumers more than it is hurting freedom of choice and commercial creators?

# Cyber harassment

DEFAMATION, blackmail, non-consensual use of images, unsolicited contact — these are just a few of the most frequent problems complainants reached out to Digital Rights Foundation's cyber harassment helpline for. The advocacy NGO recently published a detailed 33-page report on online harassment, breaking down the 2,781 phone calls and 134 email messages it received between December 2016 and November 2018. In these two years, DRF's helpline received 660 Facebook-related complaints, and 220 complaints related to WhatsApp. Women constituted the majority (59pc) of callers, while several of the remaining male callers were registering complaints on behalf of women they knew. Most were young, between the ages of 21 and 25. And few were aware of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, and their digital rights and responsibilities — a startling fact considering that almost one fifth of Pakistan's population now uses the internet.

Greater access to communication technologies is viewed as a marker of progress. The internet — often touted as a tool owned by 'nobody' and therefore for 'everybody' — allows for the sharing of knowledge and information. But there's a dark side to this freedom, and a host of unprecedented challenges to grapple with: financial fraud and scamming, identity theft and impersonation, stalking, doxxing, bullying and gender-based harassment that quickly takes on a sexual nature, etc. Cloaked in anonymity, malicious users indulge in antisocial behaviour and hate speech that are less likely to be accepted in the 'real world'. For women in particular, the internet experience can be highly stressful and, in some cases, even dangerous. And, like other marginalised groups, this is not even accounting for the myriad barriers they encounter prior to accessing online spaces. Harassment — whether in the physical or virtual realm — is a tactic of exerting dominance and control, which pushes women and marginalised groups out of spaces they have every right to occupy. At the very least, policymakers should take necessary steps to ensure that those who navigate this space can do so in safety.

## **FATF progress**

THE latest consultations between the Financial Action Task Force and Pakistani officials have, according to claims made by the Pakistani side as reported in the media, resulted in reasonable progress towards the country being removed from the FATF grey list later this year. If that is true, if the FATF does pronounce Pakistan's efforts against money laundering and terrorist financing to be adequate, and therefore deserving of removal from its grey list, the current PTI-led government would have achieved a notable success. The months of February, May and September will be crucial for Pakistan quickly re-exiting the FATF grey list, where it was previously placed between 2012 and 2015. The concern has been that because Pakistan was put on the grey list again relatively soon after last being removed from it, FATF could take a harder line against Pakistan and perhaps even nudge the country towards the black list.

A report prepared by the Pakistani side ahead of the consultations with FATF in Australia this week have indicated the complexity of the task involved in meeting FATF criteria. Particularly emphasis was put on measures along the Pak-Afghan and Pak-Iran borders to curb money laundering and terrorism financing. In addition, nearly 1,200 transactions were identified in 2018 relating to terror financing and money laundering — that may appear to be a large number, but it is minuscule compared to the overall financial transactions in the country in any given year. Akin to finding a needle in a haystack unless sophisticated systems are put in place, the identification of suspect financial transactions requires the commitment of adequate resources, the building of institutional capacities, and vigilance and coordination. Similarly, Pakistan's extensive borders with Iran and Afghanistan have historically been minimally governed spaces, a reality that has changed somewhat for the better in recent times — but what the state is combating along its borders with Afghanistan and Iran are entrenched smuggling, criminal and militant networks.

It is clear that the FATF demands in terms of combating money laundering and terrorist financing are significant. It is hoped that the organisation will evaluate Pakistan fairly and consistent with its approach to other countries. What is somewhat reassuring at this stage is that the Pakistani side appears to have finally grasped the gravity of the situation and is assembling a professional response. FATF demands require Pakistan to coordinate its action against a



range of federal and provincial agencies and bodies. That onerous task has been potentially complicated by the arrival of a first-time federal governing party that is mired in political fights with the opposition. However, if the most recent consultations are an indication, the Pakistani side appears to have a greater grasp of the issues than before. Smart policy and continuity could help Pakistan achieve a quick turnaround with FATF.

## **Not so sunny**

WITH some foreign exchange inflows lined up from 'friendly countries' and the first favourable data on the trade deficit in the month of December, the government has undoubtedly earned itself a moment of respite from the economic pressures it inherited. But it would be a mistake to see this as anything more than a momentary lull in the powerful headwinds that the economy has been facing. The prime minister is reported to have expressed deep relief upon hearing the latest trade deficit figures, and remarked that "we are moving in the right direction". The finance ministry has also taken the unusual step of issuing a statement on the day the data came out showing a sharp fall in the trade deficit last month, claiming that the measures taken in their mini budget in September "have firmly taken hold and are now effectively curtailing imports as per policy regime of the government". On the same day that the data was released, Finance Minister Asad Umar met a group of broadcast journalists and told them that recourse to the IMF may not be required since the external sector has been strengthened through bilateral inflows, and the government may work on a 'home-grown' strategy of adjustment instead.

These words suggest complacency. The fall in trade numbers is not as sunny as the government would like to present, considering export growth has remained sluggish. Moreover, import compression achieved through regulatory duties is hardly the 'right direction' when it comes to policy. It is at best a holding pattern while a policy direction is set. And finally, falling imports could be the result of the government's 'policy regime', as the finance ministry statement tries to claim, and equally the consequence of collapsing economic growth. We can say that government measures have 'firmly taken hold' only when the trade deficit improves in the context of a rebound in exports and a revival of growth within the economy. If the rulers continue to appear complacent in its battle to stabilise the economy, we will know that the idea of a quick fix appeals just as much to this

government as it did to past dispensations. The bilateral inflows and falling trade deficit may end up shoring up reserves in the very short term, or at least slowing the pace of declines. But nothing is achieved beyond a little more time. The real work is yet to begin.

## **Tobacco revenues**

IT is sad to note that while focusing on the travails of the local tobacco industry, there is little by way of raising the ethical aspects of the use of tobacco products. The other day a Senate committee lamented how Pakistan's tobacco exports had been badly affected by a system where growers are compelled to sell their produce to locally stationed traders, as the imposition of a hefty duty means that it is difficult for them to compete internationally. The world over, the trend is to make smoking a prohibitively expensive habit, to discourage smokers while also raising revenues for the state. This strategy, however, is not fully realised in Pakistan, where losses incurred on illicit and smuggled cigarettes are said to run into the billions. Indeed, there is recognition of the fact — including by manufacturers themselves, who presumably stay quiet in the interests of Big Tobacco — that the market is flooded with cigarettes on which duty has not been paid, while the FBR has conducted drives to crack down on the illegal sale of these and other tobacco products. But such action is generally of symbolic value amid pressure on the government to stay abreast of the international effort to stub out cigarettes.

It is this aspect of the tobacco industry that is not receiving the attention it deserves in Pakistan, ie the hazards of smoking and regulating the sale of the product. True, there have been welcome proposals, such as the imposition of a sin tax on cigarettes. But there is much that can be done apart from this measure, starting with implementing the ban on the sale of loose cigarettes, especially to children, and raising awareness that health costs would be substantially reduced if individuals refrained from lighting up. The message is that there will be little progress so long as lawmakers view the tobacco industry purely in terms of revenue generation, instead of taking a more holistic view of the problem.

# **Mr President, halt Khizar's execution**

THE urgency could not be more acute. With Khizar Hayat's execution still under debate following the issuance of his death warrant — and the suspension till further orders on Saturday of his sentence by the chief justice — the fate of not just one man but of the country's criminal justice system and its moral conscience lies in the balance. As this paper maintains, capital punishment is unjustifiable under any circumstances. Besides the ethical question of its place in a humane and just society, it serves no utilitarian purpose in the prevention of crime, discriminatorily targets the poor and other vulnerable groups, and is often imposed after unfair trials in which due process is violated. For such a penalty to be imposed on someone suffering from severe mental illness would not only be an irreversible but also perverse miscarriage of justice.

Beyond sense or reason — this is how the chief justice of Pakistan described giving judicial sanction to the execution of people with mental illness or disabilities in April last year, an issue now up for determination before a Supreme Court bench constituted following a review of death sentences handed to Kaniz Fatima and Imdad Ali, two other death-row convicts with acute psychiatric conditions. Khizar Hayat's death warrant, signed off on by a districts and sessions court on Friday, is in blatant violation of the National Commission for Human Rights' orders last month barring authorities from handing him a date of execution prior to the broader issue's adjudication in the apex court. In terms of international law, moreover, the matter is clear: as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Pakistan is obligated to not execute prisoners with serious psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. To contravene this legal and moral point would only further eat away at the scaffolding upon which our fundamental rights are affirmed and erode the social contract between the state and its people.

Is this why the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted, to sentence people who lack mens rea to death? Diagnosed in 2008 with treatment-resistant paranoid schizophrenia and unanimously confirmed by court-ordered and independent evaluations since, Khizar has no awareness of his surroundings or situation. He is vulnerable and has faced near-fatal attacks by fellow inmates in the past. For him to be sent to the gallows instead of a psychiatric facility is inhumane and unjust. Right now, there is one person with the constitutional

authority to immediately determine his fate and, by extension, the course of this country's moral arc — and bend it towards justice. Before President Arif Alvi lies pending Khizar's petition for clemency and, with it, the first true test of the might and mercy of his fledgling presidency. Mr President, put an end to this injudicious travesty and spare Khizar's life once and for all. Sign his mercy plea.

## **Regional cooperation**

Revive Saarc: the message is clear, sensible and ought to be heeded.

The foreign minister of Nepal, Pradip Gyawali, has called on India to revive the Saarc heads of state summit, the last round of which was to be hosted by Pakistan in 2016 but was cancelled after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi refused to travel to Pakistan and New Delhi leaned on other Saarc members to boycott the summit.

Meanwhile, former Afghan president Hamid Karzai has also added his voice to calls for the revival of Saarc and has spoken of the need for India and Pakistan to work together to reactivate the moribund organisation.

Mr Gyawali and Mr Karzai are right: Saarc needs to be revived and the multilateral forum should not be held hostage to bilateral tensions.

Indeed, Saarc could be a platform to address the very problems that India has wanted addressed by Pakistan, and Pakistan wants India to address.

It is striking that the smaller countries in Saarc are now openly recognising what has long been apparent: it is the countries of the region collectively that lose when dialogue and cooperation is suspended.

With a general election in India scheduled for later this year, there is a small window of opportunity before the Indian government goes into election mode and policy decisions are suspended.

There is no indication that Mr Modi and his government are seeking to reassess their approach to Pakistan ahead of a general election that could be closer than was expected until relatively recently.

But in seeking a second consecutive general election victory, Mr Modi and his team ought to recognise that the cycles of domestic politics and international relations are different and ought to be addressed separately.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military leadership in Pakistan have continued to express a desire for dialogue with India on mutually acceptable terms.

A generational shift may be imminent in Afghanistan and Pakistan and India could have pragmatic talks with Afghanistan on helping craft a stable and peaceful region.

India's Kashmir policy has been disastrous and dialogue remains the only sensible path ahead.

Instead of blocking all avenues for dialogue, India should pay heed to what its regional friends and allies are telling it.

Revive Saarc, engage Pakistan, address regional security and economic issues, and move towards a more prosperous and peaceful region for all.

## **PWDs' challenge**

A VISUALLY-IMPAIRED young woman aspiring to enrol herself in a Master's programme for clinical psychology has moved the Lahore High Court against the University of Punjab for not allowing her to take the admission test. This reconfirms the odds that persons with disabilities are routinely up against in Pakistan. The country ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011 but this has led to little in terms of relief for PWDs. And whereas examples exist of common-sense allowance given to PWDs, there are, on the other hand, instances that bring out the general unreasonable, even callous, attitudes in society towards people with special needs. The fact that the latest snub to a person with disability has come from the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities in Pakistan is preposterous.

The case filed by Kinza Javed, said to be an outstanding student, will be fixed for hearing in the coming days. It has once again highlighted how the overall prevailing negativity can drag the most knowledgeable and the wisest amongst us into unnecessary controversy. While there may be many aspects waiting to

unfold as the hearing of the petition gets under way, media reports say that the student, suffering primarily from a cataract problem, had asked for an examination paper with an enlarged font size. Was that all? If yes, then this was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a huge request — unless the concerned PU department in its defence is able to highlight dimensions that may have escaped others. There are some who have been allowed the facility, and there is no apparent reason why it should not be available to all who those who seek it. This is what common sense demands; however, there is merit in taking the matter to the superior judiciary, as it brings into focus the prejudices that are rampant in society and the need to discuss reforms that would benefit PWDs.

## **JIT or institutional reform?**

A JIT CULTURE that appears to have developed in the country — institutions and political parties seeking ad hoc, intelligence agencies-driven Joint Investigation Teams to probe all manner of public malfeasance and corruption — has been carried to a mirthful new level. Criticising the electricity and gas shortages in the country, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi on Saturday demanded the formation of a JIT to probe who is responsible for the ongoing energy crisis. Perhaps Mr Abbasi was speaking in a lighter vein, but other political leaders do not appear to share Mr Abbasi's humour. Revelations last week that a sister of Prime Minister Imran Khan has more previously undisclosed properties abroad resulted in some opposition leaders immediately demanding that a JIT be formed and Mr Khan's sister be placed on the ECL. It appears that the leading opposition parties, the PML-N and the PPP, believe that since their leaders have been subjected to unfair JIT processes, the PTI must suffer similarly.

The opposition is wrong. The emergence of JITs is a trend that ought to be discouraged, not encouraged. While in certain cases a JIT may be merited, its extensive and unrestrained use undermines normal institutional processes. Moreover, the intelligence component which gives JITs a perceived weight in certain quarters acts to further muddy institutional waters, renders murky the separation of powers and adds to a perception of civil-military tensions in the country. As the Supreme Court itself has reiterated in recent days in the wake of the controversy over the JIT report on the so-called fake banks account case, a JIT report is not a conclusive finding of fact. At most, a JIT report can be a

starting point for the investigation and prosecution aides of the legal process. And it is in those areas — investigation and prosecution — that the state should concentrate its reform efforts. An effective accountability process is one whose foundations are strong institutions as opposed to ad hoc attempted solutions.

At a time when parliament may take up the issue of again extending the life of military courts for civilians accused of terrorism by the state, would it not further the democratic project by debating and implementing meaningful investigation, prosecution and judicial reforms? At the moment, the politicisation of JITs virtually ensures that their findings and recommendations are immediately denounced as partisan. The politicisation also helps the political class avoid providing adequate explanations in the court of public opinion — politicians have spent more time attacking the formation and composition of JITs than answering the allegations set out in JIT reports. If accountability is to be fair, transparent and across the board the process of accountability must be through a stronger institutional framework. Surely if the PTI, PML-N or PPP proposes a strong but transparent accountability process, the other parties will need to seriously consider them. Instead of demanding JITs for all manner of issues, the political class should debate institutional reforms.

## **Child brides**

CHILD marriages are a regressive practice that deeply harms the girl child — typically made the victim of such a tradition. It is a fundamental human rights violation, and yet continues to be practised in many parts of the world. Recently, a report published by a wire agency shed light on the lax attitudes towards the practice in the US. It was revealed that nearly 5,000 requests to ‘import’ children to the US and nearly 3,000 instances of children seeking to bring in older spouses or fiancés to the country were approved by immigration authorities there. After Mexico, Pakistan was the country where the most requests came from. Since the Immigration and Nationality Act does not set minimum age requirements, all such acts were within the jurisdiction of the law. It is shocking that a country belonging to the ‘developed north’ and holding aloft the banner of human rights continues to show such indifference to the suffering of girls and women in this day and age. Furthermore, despite 18 being the legal age of consent, 48 states still allow the marriage of 16- and 17-year-old adolescents

under 'certain circumstances'. And 18 states allow children of any age to marry, granted they have their parents' or a court's approval, or in case of pregnancy.

In light of this report, it is important to remind readers that the UN SDGS — that both the US and Pakistan are signatories to — set 2030 as the target for ending all child marriage. Pakistan, too, has its share of contradictory laws, which, unlike the US, are applied more sloppily or not implemented. Since the passing of the 18th Amendment, only Sindh has increased the minimum age of marriage to 18 (from 16) for girls, while Punjab introduced amendments to the existing colonial-era law. Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are yet to act. In our part of the world, the continued practice of child marriage is linked to both desperate poverty and misogyny that view girls as a burden, another mouth to feed, or property to be exchanged. Early marriages are also connected with the cycle of poverty and health complications, and they rob the child of another fundamental right: education. In this new year, legislators must pledge to make child marriage a thing of the past. This must apply to all countries where the abhorrent practice continues.

## Typhoid crisis

IT has been at least a couple of years, now, that medical association

I have been pointing out the outbreak of a drug-resistant strain of typhoid fever in the country. Last year, a study by the Aga Khan University discovered over 800 cases of multidrug-resistant cases in Hyderabad between 2016 and 2017 — as compared to the period between 2009 and 2014 when a mere six cases of the illness were reported. With possibly another public health crisis on its hands, the Sindh health department, in tandem with the Aga Khan University and international donor assistance, chalked out a four-month vaccination campaign that aimed to inoculate some 250,000 children in Hyderabad's worst-hit areas.

How far that campaign got is difficult to ascertain, but the latest reminder that the emergency has not yet been ridden out comes from the Centre for Disease Control in the US. The organisation recently released its Morbidity and Mortality report, which notes that there is an outbreak of extensively multidrug-resistant *Salmonella Typhi* in this country, with 5,372 cases being reported between 2016 and 2018. Most of the cases were reported from Hyderabad and Karachi; it further points out that of 29 patients diagnosed with multidrug-resistant typhoid



fever in the US, all had travelled to or from Pakistan in the period between 2016 and 2018. These are alarming realities that Pakistan can simply not afford to ignore. It may be time to consider making the typhoid vaccine part of the national immunisation programme, particularly given the fact that it is available and affordable. But more than that, the authorities — especially the Sindh government where the typhoid crisis is looming — must focus on issues such as the lack of the availability of potable water, the unsanitary conditions that prevail in many neighbourhoods (including the disposal of wastewater), and the poor understanding of many citizens of the principles of adequate hygiene. Without such measures, the country cannot dig itself out of the hole it finds itself in.

## **Economic transparency**

AS things move along, the need for greater transparency and disclosure on what exactly the government is signing onto is growing.

The eighth Joint Cooperation Committee meeting on CPEC between Pakistani and Chinese government delegations was held in December, but to this day, there is very little known about the details of what the government of Pakistan has consented to do.

Read more: What do Pakistan and China want from CPEC going forward?

In addition, we have seen \$2bn land in the State Bank as a 'deposit', following a visit to Saudi Arabia by the prime minister accompanied by a high-powered ministerial entourage, with promises of another billion to come soon, and a 'deferred payment' facility to underwrite a portion of the country's oil imports.

Yet, not a word has been uttered about what has been promised in return. Likewise, we are now hearing of another \$3bn worth of 'deposits' to be made by the UAE, but once again, there is not a word about what is expected in return. No details have even been released about the terms on which these 'deposits' have come, whether on their tenure or return.

Now we are hearing of a massive investment from Saudi Arabia to be made in an 'oil city' in Gwadar. What exactly is going on here, many wish to ask.

Foreign investment is welcome in Pakistan, but in most cases it comes under a policy framework that is transparently known, has been debated in cabinet at

least, and with the terms available to all. Some sort of a bilateral framework between two countries exclusively is also fine, but it should be known to all what exactly is being built, what concessions are being granted, how Pakistan's long-term economic interests are being served, and so on.

Foreign investment that creates jobs, transfers skills and imparts dynamism to Pakistan's economy and spurs its markets is welcome. But investment that seeks to create a transshipment enclave, or provides exclusive access rights and privileges to one group of investors only is of debatable merit.

When government ministers are asked for details, they refuse to entertain the request on the grounds that the other party — whether China or Saudi Arabia — prefers discretion in this matter.

Discretion is fine and has its place in deal-making of the sort that is under way between the states, but since sprawling Pakistani interests are involved, transparency and disclosure requirements must not be jettisoned.

The feeling right now appears to be that the government, in its desperation to avoid the stringent terms of an IMF programme, is signing every dotted line that is placed before it by foreign powers such as China and Saudi Arabia, in return for a bailout that will last a few months at best.

This is not the kind of policymaking that the PTI promised the country in the run-up to the election.

## **Evicted traders**

THE anti-encroachment drive launched by the KMC late last year upon court orders has elicited a variety of opinions, as hundreds of shops in Karachi's commercial heart have been demolished and turned to rubble. One body of opinion has welcomed the drive, saying it will open up much-needed space in the city, as encroachments have spread in a haphazard manner and added to the urban sprawl. However, as civil society activists pointed out at a protest outside the Karachi Press Club on Sunday, the drive has also "snatched people's livelihoods" and affected the working classes disproportionately, particularly daily wagers. Moreover, there is the relevant point that if many of these shopkeepers were paying the KMC rent for decades, how could their establishments be considered 'encroachments'? To be sure, encroachments cannot be disregarded,

particularly the illegal occupation of land, which is a rampant menace across the country. But with the livelihoods of thousands of people on the line, the civic authorities should have carried out the drive in a better planned, gradual manner.

Firstly, the shopkeepers ought to have been given more time before the drive began. Secondly, if the KMC had decided to demolish decades-old markets, including commercial concerns in and around the iconic Empress Market, it should have provided alternative commercial space for traders to relocate their businesses. While some shopkeepers have been offered alternative locations, this is not true for the majority of the affected traders. Cities all over the world have designated spaces for small traders, such as hawker markets and spots for pushcart vendors. The civic authorities need to chalk out a plan that allows small traders and vendors designated areas where they can do business without having to pay excessive rents, and without clogging streets. Indeed, pushcarts on the roads are one of the key reasons behind traffic jams, especially in the business district. But it is also true that these traders and other 'encroachers' operate by greasing the palms of the police and city government. The Karachi mayor, in consultation with other stakeholders, needs to provide a workable rehabilitation plan that can allow the affected traders to resume their businesses and daily wagers to continue to make a living. It must also be said that while the authorities are quick to move in when the working and middle classes 'encroach', well-connected land grabbers are often left alone or 'regularised'. This duplicity must end.

## **Australia cricket tour**

THE recent decision of the Australian cricket administrators to not send their cricket team to tour Pakistan for a couple of ODIs in March-April this year is not just a disappointment for players and fans, but also a lost opportunity for the international cricket community. Last month, Pakistan, which is scheduled to host Australia for a five-match ODI series in the UAE, had asked Cricket Australia to allow their team to play at least two of the matches in Pakistan. The PCB also suggested that as part of standard protocol for a bilateral series, Australia could send their reconnaissance team to Pakistan to review the security arrangements before deciding on whether or not to play here. However, according to reports, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade advised reconsidering tour plans to Pakistan where "some regions are complete no-go zones". Though,

apart from a couple of instances, foreign teams have shunned cricket tours to Pakistan since the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in 2009, the Australians do not have a convincing argument now since the security situation has improved considerably.

Indeed, it is a questionable decision, and, in light of the fact that all possible security precautions have been pledged by the host country, it is one which militant groups would see as a victory for themselves. The recent statements from key Australian players, including Aaron Finch, middle-order batsman Usman Khawaja and a few others, that they would be excited about playing here if Cricket Australia gave the team the go-ahead, indicates that they had no qualms about touring Pakistan. In 2015, when the Aussies called off their Bangladesh tour, former Australian captain Ian Chappell asked, "If the same situation was occurring on a tour to India, what would happen then?" It would not have been easy to say no, he said. The PCB has stressed that discussions with CA are ongoing. It is hoped that the Australians will reconsider their decision.

## **A crime unpunished**

A YEAR ago, the murder of Nageebullah Mehsud in Karachi sparked public outrage of an intensity that seemed impossible for the state to ignore.

Staged police encounters both in Sindh and elsewhere, especially Punjab, have gone virtually unchallenged over decades, claiming the lives of untold numbers of innocents, or at least of those not yet proven guilty. But this one caught the imagination of civil society. Perhaps it was because the story of the young man — no terrorist as alleged by the cops but an aspiring model — found its way on to social media where it echoed for weeks. Or maybe it was simply the straw that broke the camel's back — one murder too many even in a country inured to state brutality, that too allegedly at the hands of 'encounter specialist' SSP Rao Anwar.

Dawn Investigation: Rao Anwar and the killing fields of Karachi

The event also proved a catalyst for festering resentments among a large segment of the population to coalesce into a movement for human rights. Nevertheless, one year on, the trial court has yet to indict the senior police official, who has since retired, or the other 25 suspects.

The facts of the case were, sadly, unexceptional. Four men, Naqeebullah among them, were abducted by cops in Karachi's Malir district, taken to an abandoned farmhouse in the area and shot dead on Jan 13, 2018.

Take a look: Waiting for the next Naqeebullah

None of the victims, it subsequently emerged, even had a criminal record. A police inquiry committee found circumstantial evidence of Rao Anwar's presence at the scene of the killings; a supplementary charge-sheet accused him and his subordinate cops of registering fake criminal cases, kidnapping, murder, and destroying evidence.

Also read: 'Naqeebullah Mehsud was innocent, was killed in a fake encounter,' says inquiry team

The case against the top police official could have been a turning point in the bloody saga of police brutality and extra-judicial killings that has long afflicted this country. However, what has transpired since makes a mockery of the criminal justice system; indeed, it displays a wicked disregard for the possibility of transitioning into a well-ordered society.

Rao Anwar's demeanour in court, where he would arrive with full protocol and without handcuffs, was unmistakably that of a man secure in the knowledge that he was above the law — indeed, as unaccountable as those whose backing he allegedly enjoys.

The former SSP was confined for a few months to the comfort of his own home, conveniently declared a sub-jail on flimsy pretexts. Even that restriction was lifted last July when he was granted bail by an anti-terrorism court.

Selective application of 'justice', an absence of due process, and the perversion of law enforcement into a vehicle of terror corrodes the very foundations of society, ensuring an unending cycle of violence.

The message that the lack of a trial thus far in the Naqeebullah case and the shocking indulgence shown to the prime suspect is that the police need fear no consequences for their actions against a hostage citizenry.

# Diplomatic spats

WITH Pakistan-India ties seemingly in a deep freeze, diplomats and consular staff of the two countries once again appear to have become victims of harassment and intimidation.

A 1992 agreement, a code of conduct that both countries agreed to for the treatment of diplomatic and consular personnel in India and Pakistan, is being tested after Pakistan protested the police detention of a Pakistani High Commission official in New Delhi, and India has countered with allegations of rough behaviour by Pakistani security personnel against senior Indian diplomats in Islamabad.

The latest accusations come less than a year since India and Pakistan once again decided to abide by the 1992 code of conduct, a re-commitment that became necessary after a spate of unsavoury incidents in New Delhi and Islamabad.

The fresh incidents should be dealt with quickly and appropriately in both New Delhi and Islamabad — whatever the difficulties in ties between the two states, diplomats must be allowed to continue with their work of representing their country and should not face intimidation and harassment.

Unhappily, some elements in both countries view normal diplomatic work with a great deal of suspicion and perhaps do not comprehend the risks of a diplomatic rupture between the two states.

The disruption to the lives of diplomats is just the latest indicator that a serious rethink of the state of Pakistan-India ties is needed in both countries.

The Pakistani leadership — both the civilian and military — has repeatedly stated its interest in dialogue on all issues with India, including terrorism, but the stubbornness of the Indian leadership has not made possible even preliminary talks about eventual dialogue.

Perhaps the Pakistani leadership can look towards specific offers and innovative ideas to draw the Indian leadership into a dialogue process.

Of course, if Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government only see Pakistan as a useful rhetorical and political foil in the upcoming Indian general

election, there may be nothing that the Pakistanis can do to try and break the impasse in bilateral relations.

Whatever the case, the tendency to target diplomats in India and Pakistan is an unwelcome practice that must immediately cease. The 1992 bilateral code of conduct has survived many ups and downs and acute tensions. It is a sensible agreement that ought to be upheld by India and Pakistan both in letter and spirit.

## **‘All you need is love’**

IT has all the appearance of a well-intentioned attempt to square the circle between the youth's need to find an occasion to express affection and joy (hardly an unseemly impulse) and the religious right's calls to ban anything it deems in opposition to our culture and values (an ever-widening basket of 'offences').

And it may well be were it not for the fact that, beneath its benign surface, the alternative it offers betrays the selfsame posture of moral policing as its more strident diktats.

The announcement by a varsity in Faisalabad that it would observe Feb 14 as 'Sisters' Day' might seem like a frivolous attempt at rebranding Valentine's Day to give it a patina of 'respectability' (the vice chancellor's stated rationale was to turn a 'threat' into an opportunity).

Read more: Valentine's Day now Sisters' Day: Faisalabad varsity to 'promote Islamic traditions' on Feb 14

Yet the VC also said that the university was mulling plans to distribute scarves, shawls and gowns to its female students. Implicit in this is the suggestion that what Pakistan's sisters truly need is not gender parity (or even so much as a token gesture of genuine esteem) — but to cover themselves up.

The Pakistani sisterhood might look at such a backhanded proposal with bemusement, and wonder at the neglect of the nation's brothers for the lack of public interest in their behaviour and attire.

Objectifying women's bodies to counter purportedly Western perversions is surely an irony lost on our self-appointed gatekeepers of public decency.

Read more: The heart's filthy lesson

But it also speaks to a broader phenomenon in which, every year, state and private institutions alike descend into paroxysms of panic at the advent of Valentine's Day. Legal, official or societal interventions to browbeat the public into abstaining from cheer demonstrate lack of restraint and respect for people's right to choose.

And it is particularly sanctimonious juxtaposed with genuine, year-round social ills such as misogyny and gender-based violence (the antidote to which is not further maladjustment) conveniently ignored by those who would seek to proscribe all inter-gender interactions. Hopefully, this February, better sense will prevail.

## **Bad for democracy**

THE combined opposition and Prime Minister Imran Khan have awakened to the need for a stronger parliament, but those welcome realisations do not appear to have occurred for necessarily welcome reasons. First, the parliamentary opposition's decision to combine forces. Primarily consisting of the PML-N and the PPP, the second- and third-largest parties in parliament, the combined opposition appears to be interested in putting up a united front against the PTI-led federal government on a number of issues. A tentative alliance, its purpose and scope have yet to be made clear, but it has immediately been interpreted by the PTI-led federal government as an attempt by the parties to get a so-called NRO; a move to derail the PTI's governance, legislative and reforms agendas; or perhaps both. While figures within the PPP and the PML-N have alluded to the need for a new Charter of Democracy and sundry measures to strengthen the democratic order in the country, the timing of the combined opposition's resurrection certainly raises a number of questions. Indeed, with the top PML-N leadership already under detention and the PPP struggling to fend off serious allegations of corruption against the party's leadership, is the combined opposition meant to build legitimate political pressure on the PTI or seek legal and political relief for opposition leaders?

Perhaps, however, Prime Minister Khan's strategy to try and defend the honour and sanctity of parliament needs reconsidering too. In a blistering pair of tweets on Tuesday, the prime minister denounced the opposition for staging frequent walkouts in parliament, which tends to trigger a quorum count and a suspension



of the parliamentary session. Mr Khan is partially right — the opposition's enthusiasm for the walkout option has frequently disrupted the current parliament's proceedings. But the prime minister was mostly wrong. To begin with, there is the irony of the prime minister tweeting about parliament from presumably the Prime Minister's Office or residence, a stone's throw away — could Mr Khan not make the short journey to parliament to make his point? Perhaps Mr Khan does not want to give the opposition an opportunity to heckle him and create rowdy scenes in parliament; however, he does appear to have forgotten his pledge to regularly attend the Assembly sessions and hold twice monthly, UK-style Prime Minister's Questions. Also overlooked by the prime minister is the PTI's own role in the parliamentary impasse: PTI MNAs and ministers themselves often appear uninterested in the functioning of parliament.

Between the opposition's self-interested strategising and Mr Khan's lacerating comments, there is the very real possibility of the public at large losing faith in the democratic project in the country. When politicians do not seem able or willing to look beyond personal and party interests, democracy can quickly erode. It is hoped that the opposition and government will reconsider their respective approaches.

## **Bahria's 'offer'**

TWO hundred and fifty billion rupees. That is the colossal amount that Bahria Town on Tuesday in the Supreme Court offered to deposit in return for legal proceedings against it being dropped.

The proverbial tip of the iceberg, the figure indicates the scale of the real estate developer's land grab in various parts of the country and the eye-watering profits that have flowed from it to the firm's principals and their mega-influential backers.

Bahria's offer, which was rejected, came during an apex court hearing before the bench tasked with implementing the Supreme Court's May 4 verdict about Bahria Town Karachi.

The damning judgement found Bahria guilty of having illegally acquired thousands of acres for the mammoth project in Malir district in connivance with government officials. The transfer of state land by the Malir Development

Authority — whose schemes by law must further the socioeconomic upliftment of local residents — to a private developer was held to be void ab initio.

The May 4 verdict contained observations that are particularly relevant in the current context.

For instance, taking into account only 7,068 acres in the Karachi project, it estimated that Bahria stood to make a net gain of around Rs225bn from the marketable land alone, ie not counting potential profits from built-up houses, apartments, etc.

Today, Bahria Town Karachi sprawls over at least 30,000 acres, making it the largest housing project in the country.

The entire saga smacks of a corrupt-to-the-core system where Bahria's skulduggery has been enabled, abetted and wilfully obscured by various state functionaries and organisations.

NAB, which moves with such alacrity against other alleged instances of corruption, has displayed a curious inertia vis-à-vis the colossal scam unfolding since years on the outskirts of Karachi. And this was despite a number of legal challenges, including by local residents directly affected by the wholesale plunder of their ancestral communal land.

However, the apex court has been repeatedly thwarted in its efforts to uncover the truth while Bahria has time and again flouted court orders.

Machinations designed to minimise the impact of the damning May 4 verdict are now clearly afoot.

Even as recently as last November, the implementation bench found itself at a loss to gauge the size of Bahria Town Karachi because of a lack of cooperation by relevant authorities. The credibility of accountability mechanisms in the Bahria Town case lies in shreds, and only the Supreme Court can restore it.

## **Ban on ‘Manto’**

IN our corner of the world, prejudice and intolerance can sometimes follow a person well beyond his or her lifetime. The latest reminder comes in the form of the ban the state has placed on the screening of Indian director Nandita Das’s biopic on subcontinental writer Saadat Hasan Manto, the title taken from his last name. Released in September, the film has played on cinema screens across the world, and earned accolades for the quality of its scripting, production, and other cinematic dimensions; in Bangladesh, it has won an award already, and there is a strong likelihood that it will win more at film festivals and award ceremonies in the future. But it will not be screened in Pakistan — apparently because of its ‘controversial’ content.

Controversy has dogged Manto and his work all through his life and beyond, especially in his own country that refuses to own one of the finest and most searing writers of the Urdu language. Regarding the ban on the film Manto, then, it is encouraging that on Monday, writers, journalists and civil society activists gathered outside the Lahore Press Club to protest, and point out the futility of the move. The ill treatment meted out to him in Pakistan during his lifetime was highlighted, including the fact that his work was censored, he was hounded by the state authorities, and even his entry into the building of Radio Pakistan — which was the iconic purveyor of cultural fare in an era when TV had yet to make its debut in the country — was disallowed. Decades have gone by but it is evident that the prejudice against Manto remains. The ban on the film must immediately be lifted, and, indeed, its screening across the country ought to be promoted so that younger generations are made aware of the life and work of this extraordinary writer. After all, the 2015 film Manto by Pakistani director Sarmad Khoosat was screened across cinemas here. There is no reason why the Indian version should not be.

## **CJP Nisar's legacy**

THE Supreme Court today has a new chief justice and there is a fresh opportunity to turn the page on hyper judicial activism.

For the legacy of retired chief justice Saqib Nisar, who doffed his robes yesterday, can be encapsulated in one phrase: judicial overreach. And like many would-be saviours before him, his tenure has left institutions considerably weaker than they were when he arrived on the scene.

Populist grandstanding is inimical to systemic reform. In fact, Mr Nisar's high-visibility forays into hospitals, filtration plants, prisons, etc, as a one-man vigilante squad and his public humiliation of elected officials and bureaucrats have injected a certain paralysis into public-sector functioning.

If anything, his interventions may have exacerbated institutional decay. Some of his actions bordered on the bizarre, eg ordering PIA not to change its livery or embarking on a fund-raising drive for the construction of the Diamer-Basha dam — even suggesting that due process could be avoided by litigants if they contributed to the dam fund.

One can concede that the former chief justice gave voice to public disillusionment with the state of governance by elected representatives, and raised the profile of some issues that deserve urgent attention, such as water scarcity and population control.

Read more: Judicial independence is vital for democracy but judicial activism can be counterproductive

However, in so doing, he recast his constitutional role to an unprecedented degree; an unelected individual wading into the political realm and intruding in the executive domain on the pretext of enforcing fundamental rights.

Meanwhile, he squandered the opportunity to overhaul a shambolic judicial system in which nearly 2m cases are currently pending. That would have done far more in the long run to ensure people's rights than did his scattershot approach, exemplified by an unbridled use of suo motu powers by the apex court during the retired chief justice's tenure.

A constitutionally mandated intervention reserved for the Supreme Court, which is indicative of its exceptional nature, Article 184(3) has certainly corrected some flagrant human rights abuses in the past.

In Mr Nisar's hands, however, it introduced unpredictability and an unseemly ad hoc-ism into the judicial system. Consistency and the perception of the court as a neutral arbiter of the law enhance the perceived quality of justice, even as controversy degrades it.

But the winds may be shifting. Only a few days before Mr Nisar's retirement, Supreme Court Justice Mansoor Ali Shah declared void the former chief justice's order reconstituting a bench of the Peshawar judiciary in the middle of a hearing.

Yesterday, at the full court reference in honour of the outgoing judge, his successor, Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, who will be sworn in as chief justice today, said that suo motu notices would be taken "sparingly" and that he would like to "retire the debt of pending cases".

One would certainly welcome a return to judicial restraint, and a start to the hard work — done quietly and determinedly — towards comprehensive judicial reform.

## **Basant revival**

HAD there been a genuine attempt at reviving the kite-flying festival, by this time, in the run-up to Basant, Lahore would have been awash with colours. As it turns out, the PTI has tried to move forward on its objective — without possessing, much less submitting, a roadmap. In the first phase, a minister in Punjab declared that Basant would return to Lahore in February. In the second phase, a committee was set up to come up with a 'safe Basant' blueprint, adding to similar but unsuccessful get-togethers of culturally-inclined personalities in the past. Now in the third phase, there are concerns that the committee will turn out to be ineffective. More seriously for the party in power, the popular jury could well rule against the PTI government in Punjab for being unprepared, despite suggesting that it knew how to resurrect the Basant festival. Before raising the public's hopes, it should have understood and actively sought to overcome the hurdles in the way of holding the spring celebration, tackling both safety concerns and conservative sentiments.

Now, the developments — or rather the lack of them — suggest that the reasons behind the PTI's announcement of bringing back Basant this spring were hardly laudatory: it had wanted to prove itself as more sympathetic to the public than the previous PML-N administration, which was heavily criticised for depriving the people of a festival that was an integral part of Lahore and its residents. At the same time, the proposed revival was bound to be challenged legally, and this is exactly what happened. The Lahore High Court has since taken up cases in which Basant has been opposed on the grounds that kite-flying, with its accompanying dangers, is against the rights of the citizens. There is little that the Punjab government has done to indicate during the hearing of these cases that it will show the necessary urgency to resolve the issue and to ensure that the festivities resume. On Tuesday last, the government told the court that the revival committee was working on a proposal and was likely to submit recommendations in a fortnight — whereas according to the PTI's original plan, Basant would be celebrated on the second Sunday of February. Time is fast running out, and given the complexity of the topic, the debate may continue into the next season, and the next. Clearly, the PTI's Basant entry has not been very convincing.

## **Paternity leave**

CONSIDERING Pakistan's deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions, it was encouraging to note that the cabinet reportedly approved the extension of paternity leave to 10 days for employees of the National Commission on the Status of Women. Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari said that efforts were under way to see how this could be "expand[ed] ... across the board". True, the period of leave granted to fathers of newborns is a drop in the ocean, but at least it is a start. In a male-oriented country such as this, infants and children are generally thought of as the responsibility of women. In short, men feel themselves entirely absolved of the responsibility of childcare, beyond attending to their financial needs. But the world has changed, and even here, familial patterns are changing as increasingly — especially in urban areas — joint family systems are being replaced by the nuclear.

The experience of many Western countries has established the importance and effectiveness of providing not just the facility of paternity leave, but holistic human resource policies geared towards supporting families with working parents. Workplace practices such as leave policies for both parents, flexible

work schedules and the ability to work remotely for desk jobs, and healthcare and childcare benefits demonstrably lead to better employee engagement and retention rates. This is especially needed for the working classes, for whom economic vulnerability and the lack of social safety nets are ever present, threatening to plunge them into poverty. All Pakistani government institutions as well as private companies and employers should give it serious consideration. In tandem, though, there needs to be a sustained campaign to change not just workplace practices but also societal mindsets. As paternity leave is being incorporated in the NCSW rules and under consideration elsewhere, it is important for men to be taught that if they avail of it, it is certainly not free time off. A newborn and his or her mother need care and attention, and it is that for which paternity leave is designed.

## **Devolution & hospitals**

NEARLY nine years after its passage, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, and the devolution of powers it oversaw from the centre to the provinces, is still throwing up jurisprudential and legislative questions. Suffice it to say, this should not be the case close to a decade after the passage of the landmark law, as the country's Constitution is clear on the issue of devolution.

There has of recent been talk — emanating from the ruling party — of the need for a 'uniform' education system in the country, even though education is a devolved subject and such a matter needs debate and consensus.

The latest controversy focuses on the status of health, also a provincial subject. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court rejected appeals regarding the ownership of three major Karachi hospitals and ruled that Islamabad would continue to administer the JPMC, the NICVD and the NICH.

The PPP, that rules Sindh, has reacted strongly to the apex court's decision. Party chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari told parliament on Thursday that the decision was an "attack" on the 18th Amendment while within the judiciary, Justice Maqbool Baqar, who was on the bench that was hearing the hospitals' case, wrote a dissenting note. The judge wrote that throughout the country's legislative history public health "remained exclusively with the provinces". This interpretation has especially been strengthened after the passage of the 18th Amendment.

It should also be mentioned that the provincial government was doing a fairly decent job administering the hospitals in question, particularly the NICVD.

The principle of devolution needs to be respected, considering that all federating units and political forces supported the move to devolve powers. Efforts by Islamabad to micromanage subjects clearly resting with the provinces should be avoided.

While the federal government should by all means help the provinces improve their handling of areas such as health and education, there must by no means be an effort to 'roll back' the powers, especially through the back door.

Having said that, there remain major provincial capacity issues. Take the case of Sindh: while the tertiary hospitals mentioned above may be showing improvement, the public health infrastructure in the province is in terrible shape and needs a major revamp.

This is especially true if one is to look at the appalling condition of health centres in the rural parts of Sindh. Education is not doing any better, if independent assessments of learning outcomes are anything to go by.

So while the provinces have every right to stake their claim to hard-won subjects, these claims should be accompanied by intentions and efforts to improve the situation. Simply claiming that all is well is not enough. Sindh and the other federating units must show, through demonstrable and visible results in the health, education and social sectors, that they are serious about their constitutional duties.

## **Raiding 'benamidars'**

THE recent raid by the tax authorities on an auto showroom business in Karachi might sound like an interesting development on the face of it, but such tactics will be insufficient given the scale of the matter the authorities are trying to address. The issue in this case was the practice of having benami accounts, or conducting official business through bank accounts opened in the name of low-ranking employees. The practice is ubiquitous and one would be hard-pressed to find an example from the business community where such practices are not being employed. Their primary purpose is to conceal a large portion of the business from the tax authorities, so that the official accounts opened in the name of the



business are shared with the FBR while the cash part of the transactions is carried out through these benami accounts. Some anecdotal evidence indicates that businesses can adopt this unethical practice to conceal up to half of their turnover in some cases.

There can be no doubt that the practice needs to be stamped out. Apart from the massive cheating and tax losses that it enables, benami accounts also open the door to severe misuse of the financial system and make the task of policing ill-gotten gains and terror financing that much more difficult. Stamping out benami accounts is an important part of the commitments the government has to give to the Financial Action Task Force as well. So it is crucial that the effort to address the challenge go beyond simple raids designed to show a few results more than anything else. Taking on the elaborate architecture of tax evasion that is, unfortunately, such an integral part of the culture of doing business in Pakistan is serious business, and if the government indeed wants to achieve its purpose, then it must follow up the raids with concrete policy actions. These policy steps should be designed to create incentives for businesses to abandon the practice of doing benami transactions, while attaching sharp disincentives to continuing with it. Raids and other high-visibility actions are fine, but only when they are pursued in the context of a larger policy framework. Until we see that happening, it will be difficult to look upon this or some other raid as anything more than a cosmetic action, designed to produce a temporary effect to satisfy an immediate requirement. Let us hope that the government sees the challenge in holistic terms.

## **Saving Islamabad**

IT is unfortunate that proper city planning in Pakistan is virtually nonexistent. With very high rates of urbanisation and city expansion, the problems range from informal or illegal settlements to clogged roads, the inefficient division of space, and encroachments on what ought to have been green areas. Part of the trouble is that many of our cities constitute centuries-old settlements, such as Lahore, and their façade has changed in a manner that, some would argue, would be challenging to control. In stark contrast, though, is Islamabad, a city built where none existed. There, at least, lay some hope that a master plan would be designed, and adhered to. The reality is, of course, a little different. A master plan for the city was indeed created in 1959-60 by the Greek architect and town

planner Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis, and it was recommended that the blueprint be revised every 20 years. But that exercise was never undertaken, so that now the capital is virtually no different from any other of Pakistan's cities, featuring as it does unplanned settlements, severe traffic management issues, and other challenges such as water and sanitation.

It is encouraging, then, that on Thursday, a commission formed by the federal government met to discuss the first-ever revision of the city's master plan. It was decided that 10 studies would be commissioned to effect changes between 2020 and 2040, involving the engagement of a consultant as well as sounding out stakeholders. The effort will be to explore challenges such as traffic flow, water supply, sanitation and solid waste management, etc. Held at the Capital Development Authority headquarters, the meeting was attended by representatives of environmental, habitat, architectural and urban planning organisations. A second meeting is scheduled next week in which progress on decisions taken at the first are to be discussed. This is the way forward, and it is to be hoped that the exercise does not lose steam. Islamabad can still be saved — but only with due diligence.

on itself. Sadly, that is a lesson we have yet to learn, either from our past or our present.

But learn it we must if we are to attain our potential as a peaceful and progressive nation. Towards the end of his address, Justice Khosa's appealed for a candid appraisal by state institutions of their actions through the years. His proposal of an inter-institutional dialogue is not an original idea — several political leaders have proposed the same at various times — yet it is an eminently practical one.

Escalating tensions between state institutions have contributed enormously to political instability. And the judiciary has a critical role to play in re-establishing the separation of powers — above all, in ensuring that accountability is a concept that is applied fairly and consistently rather than in the service of political witch-hunts.

## CJP Khosa's words

A DAY before his swearing in as head of the Supreme Court, Justice Asif Saeed Khosa gave a robust indication of the direction in which he seeks to steer the judicial system during his tenure.

At the full court reference for Justice Saqib Nisar, who retired on Thursday, the chief justice-designate emphasised the importance of repairing our broken justice system.

Using the analogy of issues dear to his predecessor's heart, he spelled out the problems he is determined to address in this sphere. "I would also like to build some dams, a dam against undue and unnecessary delays in judicial determination of cases, a dam against frivolous litigation and a dam against fake witnesses and false testimonies and would also try to retire a debt, the debt of pending cases...." he said.

If these fine words, uttered before in vain by other chief justices, are translated into action with Justice Khosa at the helm, it would be a laudable achievement.

The bedrock of a well-ordered society is a well-functioning judicial system. Achieving even a reasonable semblance of one would also preclude the 'need' for military courts which were described by the judge himself on Thursday as "an aberration propelled by necessity and expediency".

Perhaps in this is an implied recognition of the perils inherent in a blurring of institutional boundaries. One would certainly hope so.

For most of Pakistan's history, the superior judiciary has unfortunately wielded its power not to strengthen democracy, but to undermine and discredit it.

Today, despite the appearance of a constitutional democracy, there is in the country an unmistakable drift towards a more authoritarian ethos. In this climate, to stray from a narrowly defined nationalism means to forgo the protection of the state — in fact, it is tantamount to inviting harsh extrajudicial sanctions.

However, as Justice Khosa rightly said at the full court reference, "national security cannot be pursued by employing methods which are offensive to the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights to life and liberty".

Indeed, in his view, such an approach can damage national cohesion itself. Sadly, that is a lesson we have yet to learn, either from our past or our present.

But learn it we must if we are to attain our potential as a peaceful and progressive nation. Towards the end of his address, Justice Khosa's appealed for a candid appraisal by state institutions of their actions through the years. His proposal of an inter-institutional dialogue is not an original idea — several political leaders have proposed the same at various times — yet it is an eminently practical one.

Escalating tensions between state institutions have contributed enormously to political instability. And the judiciary has a critical role to play in re-establishing the separation of powers — above all, in ensuring that accountability is a concept that is applied fairly and consistently rather than in the service of political witch-hunts.

## **Afghan peace moves**

PERHAPS fuelled by a feeling of combat fatigue and war weariness on all sides, there has been a flurry of activity recently to bring the long-running Afghan conflict to a negotiated end. America's special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was in Pakistan and met the country's senior leadership, including the prime minister and the army chief, in order to speed up the peace process and help bring the Afghan Taliban to the table. However, a Taliban spokesman quickly rejected the impression that members of the militia had met the Americans in Islamabad. While one or two visits and positive statements may not break the ice, these efforts can surely build the groundwork for dialogue and help bring this bloody conflict to a peaceful close. But while Pakistan, regional states and international powers can help provide a conducive atmosphere for talks, the peace process itself must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

After over four decades of war, the Afghan people need to be given a fair chance to rebuild their shattered country, free from external meddling and internal strife. This can only happen if there is a genuine desire for peace amongst all Afghan stakeholders; while the US-backed government in Kabul has made repeated offers of peace, the Taliban have adopted a hard-line position, although even they have sent signals that they are ready to talk to the Americans, if not the Ashraf Ghani government. The Taliban should take advantage of the situation

and talk to the Americans, facilitated by Pakistan and regional states; they must also shed their rigidity and talk to Kabul. Moreover, the Taliban need to put an end to violent attacks within Afghanistan; though they may be targeting the Afghan government, far too many innocent civilians have died in the attacks. Regional states need to put aside their rivalries and help all Afghan factions negotiate a settlement; decades-old cloak-and-dagger games played out in Afghanistan between world and regional powers, along with the internecine power struggles between Afghan factions, have been major obstacles in the evolution of Afghanistan as a modern state. The Taliban and all other Afghan and foreign players should realise that if the conflict continues, the militant Islamic State group will gain further ground in Afghanistan's ungoverned spaces and pose a new challenge to all. It is hoped peace efforts will bear fruit and can soon pave the way for a tranquil, democratic Afghanistan.

## **Police weaponry**

THE debate on the kind of weapons that police personnel should use is back. A special committee set up by the Supreme Court to probe the death of 10-year-old Amal Umer, who was killed by police fire during a mugging attempt in Karachi last August, has come up with its findings. The committee has recommended that police personnel engaged in patrolling the streets must not be armed with heavy weapons such as submachine guns. The police have been told that they should have on them pistols or handguns instead. There is, of course, the argument that a force that is armed lightly in comparison to criminals who carry sophisticated weapons cannot be expected to deliver and may suffer from a sense of ineptness. But should this apply across the board? Should the police be turned into a militarised force? Would it not be better for the law enforcers and intelligence agencies to clamp down on the source of supply of these illegal weapons? True, there are urban areas, eg parts of Lyari in Karachi, where running battles between the law enforcers and violent criminal gangs have not been uncommon. But the policing tactics applied there should not extend to street crimes, especially when there is a high risk to civilians. Hence, stringent measures are needed to rule out a repeat of what happened in the city last August, which was initially presented as 'collateral damage'.

The discussion on police reforms is not a new one — and certainly this is as good a time as any for a major cleanup of the policing system. Stressing the

need for a highly trained police force, the report pointed out that officers do not avail of refresher courses, surely one of the reasons why they lack effective marksmanship and are often described as trigger-happy. Above all, there has to be some rationalisation about what weapon is entrusted in whose hands and under what circumstances. Otherwise, there will be no end to tragedies like the one that claimed little Amal's life.

## **End the dam fund**

WITH the Supreme Court under a new chief justice, one hopes that the utility of the so-called dam fund will be reassessed.

When the initiative was first launched in July last year, there was a sense that it fell outside the normal boundaries of jurisprudence, and there were questions regarding whether the then chief justice of the apex court should oversee a donation campaign to raise funds for a mega dam.

Read more: Building dams not judges' job, says CJP

Still, it appeared a harmless enough endeavour; after all, donations were being solicited and people were not being forced to contribute.

But then, the salaries of government servants and army personnel were subjected to deductions for the dam fund, contributions that could be described as involuntary. In some instances, the donations were also criticised for being linked to the outcome of legal proceedings.

Apart from this, we saw a massive media campaign advertise donations in language that invoked the future of our children as well as salvation in the hereafter — depending on whether contributing towards the dam figured on our list of priorities.

Read more: Pemra 'advises' channels to allocate ad spots, hold fundraising telethons for dams

The attorney general told the court that the media, at the goading of Pemra, had given Rs13bn worth of free airtime to the fund — for which the total contribution has come to around Rs9bn.

The public also witnessed the former chief justice appear in televised marathons asking for money, with the prime minister putting his weight behind the effort — meanwhile, there were also strong suggestions that any criticism of the dam or the fund could be construed as treason.

In fact, many of the questions asked by the public went unanswered. For instance, which authority would be responsible for monitoring the people's donations?

The list of all that has happened — including the effort put into cajoling and coercing the people to give money — in the name of the dam fund is astonishing.

Only days before his retirement, the former chief justice gave a TV interview in which he said that the poor, the pensioners, and the infirm had also contributed to the fund. "Sick people cut back on their medicines to be able to contribute," he said, in an apparent salute to the valour of those who gave their money. Efforts were also made to reach out to expat Pakistanis.

But at the end of the day, the amount collected has been dismal: there are only Rs9bn in the dam coffers, less than 1pc of the project cost — the amount is too large to leave lying around, and yet it is nowhere near substantial to even help the project along.

This is hardly surprising, considering the initiative, rather than being based on a sound plan, was driven more by emotions.

Crowd-sourcing has not worked, and the whole affair has reached absurd proportions. The new chief justice should now bring it all to a dignified end.

## **Women cycle rally**

WHAT would have been Peshawar's first women bicycle rally, slated for Saturday, was indefinitely postponed by its organisers — who had billed it as a "progressive and peaceful" event — following threats of protest by local religious groups and the JUI-F and JI, who claimed it would promote "vulgarity and obscenity".

To add insult to injury, according to media reports, despite the organisers having obtained permission from the district administration, the police claimed ignorance

of the event — with one JUI-F spokesperson stating that the authorities had, in fact, endorsed their views.

The KP directorate general of sports, moreover, inserted itself into the administrative imbroglio to offer its own clarification — not in support of the women-led sports event but to distance itself from it.

That the PTI-led KP government would capitulate to such pressure is particularly galling given the fact that a notable feature of the party's rallies and sit-ins in opposition was its high female turnout, a presence the PTI defended against incidents of harassment and misogynistic remarks by its opponents.

Read more: [Blame game follows cancellation of women's cycle rally](#)

Pakistani women, having borne the brunt of marginalisation under Ziaul Haq's Islamisation drive, have made many strides to reclaim their right to city spaces. There have been multiple women-organised events in recent years to demonstrate the possibilities of an inclusive urban experience in which women (including transgender women) can access public spaces free of the fear of harassment and violence.

Read more: [Why the Aurat March is a revolutionary feat for Pakistan](#)

Besides meetings and marches, a much-needed feature in our urban centres has been that of women-led sporting events such as bicycle rallies.

The last Punjab government, too, supported this drive for increased women's visibility — a staple of female empowerment — through an initiative to get women driving motorcycles and scooters.

Explore: [WoW: Women On Wheels hit the road in Lahore](#)

This was a far cry from 2005, when activists (including the late Asma Jahangir) were baton charged and taken into custody by police in Lahore for attempting to stage a mini-marathon to highlight arbitrary curbs of women's rights by religious parties — a charge proved true by their strong-arm tactics against similar marathons at the time.



The positive image of women, in small but increasing numbers, being able to navigate and celebrate in public spaces — of a country that rejects and defies regressive forces — cannot be underestimated.

Simply put, the KP government should have shown, if not outright alliance with their female constituents, then at least some spine. Local authorities can still rectify this, provided that they emphatically throw their weight behind the women bicycle rally.

## **Meat of the matter**

CHANGING the world could start with changing what's on your plate. Recently, in the medical journal *Lancet*, scientists have called on the world to transform its diet by reducing its sugar and red meat intake, while doubling the amount of vegetables, fruit and nuts consumed. In a grossly unequal world, where 815m people are suffering from chronic undernourishment, “nothing short of an agricultural revolution” will fight the effects of climate change. Consumers, particularly from wealthy nations, need to adopt healthy diets, reduce food, and invest in technologies that reduce impact on the environment. This means keeping beef and dairy off our plates. While this might be complicated in traditionally meat-eating countries such as Pakistan, it is necessary for the future sustenance of the planet.

Pakistan's per capita intake of meat is understandably much less than those in developed nations, but meat is now believed to have replaced lentils as the main source of protein. According to the Korean Journal of Food Science of Animal Resources, the per capita meat consumption increased from 11.7kg in 2000 to 32kg in 2016. By 2020, that figure is expected to rise to 47kg due to higher purchasing power and the lifestyle changes that come with increasing urbanisation. But it is no secret that the meat and dairy industry are some of the highest contributors to global greenhouse emissions. Agriculture also uses up about 70pc of the global freshwater supply. Additionally, a large amount of forest cover is cut down each year to make room for livestock, leading to the rampant loss of biodiversity and trees that absorb carbon. According to an extensive study published last year, global farmland use could be reduced by more than 75pc — and still manage to feed the world. There are also issues of unethical farming,

and most consumers are unaware of what they are putting into their bodies or the practices on farms and in factories. Really, we could all live on less.

## **Fake encounter in Sahiwal**

IT was only a matter of time before yet another account emerged of innocents losing their lives at the hands of an out of control police. And so it turned out on Saturday, when a couple along with their daughter and a friend were shot dead by law enforcement officials near Sahiwal.

Of the couple's other minor children on the scene, the son escaped with a bullet injury while two daughters remained unhurt.

The police (particularly in Sindh and Punjab) have become accustomed to glibly using the pretext of fighting terrorism to cover up egregious abuses of power.

Explore: A licence to kill

After initially floating a story depicting the incident as a daring rescue of kidnapped children, it produced a formulaic response.

According to the Punjab CTD, after 'terrorists' fired on police personnel trying to stop the vehicles in which they were travelling, a shootout ensued and four people were killed, "reportedly as a result of firing by their own accomplices". The brazen fabrication was soon exposed by eyewitness accounts, including that of the slain couple's son.

Yet on Sunday, there was the astoundingly tone-deaf spectacle of Punjab Law Minister Raja Basharat describing the deaths as 'collateral damage' — a more dehumanising term can scarcely be imagined — caused in an attempt by security personnel to prevent an even bigger carnage by terrorists.

This is similar to the end justifies the means argument advanced several years ago by supporters of drone attacks in the northern region — an argument vociferously condemned by PTI chairman Imran Khan at the time. Meanwhile, the PPP and PML-N, so full-throated in their denunciation of the Sahiwal incident, are using the issue for political point-scoring.

Sindh's 'encounter specialist' Rao Anwar — prime suspect in Naqeebullah Mehsud's murder, but yet to go on trial for it — operated with impunity in Karachi, as did SP Chaudhry Aslam until his assassination in 2014.

Dawn Investigation: Rao Anwar and the killing fields of Karachi

Punjab under the PML-N had also long been a theatre for staged shootouts, with far-fetched accounts of purported face-offs against vicious criminals (with rarely even an injury incurred by the cops) going unchallenged.

Explore Herald: Punjab's 'encounters' with sectarianism

No doubt, there are brave, upstanding police officials whose work is a credit to their profession. However, they are eclipsed in a culture of policing where the lack of accountability is growing in tandem with the militarisation of law enforcement. In such an environment, police departments see themselves less as public servants upholding the law and more as an army fighting an elusive enemy.

And everywhere is a battlefield. Instead of condoning the police's worst impulses, as the law minister seemed to be doing on Sunday, Punjab's PTI-led government must demonstrate it will no longer tolerate trigger-happy law enforcement personnel.

Find out more: Reforming Pakistan's criminal justice system

Provincial legislatures need to urgently address the shortcomings in the criminal justice system, of which the police are a critical pillar. People should not have to fear being killed, either in crossfire or as a result of 'mistaken identity'.

## **Used car restrictions**

THE government has done the right thing by reviving the restrictions it had placed on the used car import business. And unlike previously, it needs to continue with the initiative rather than fold it up under pressure. In fact, what the used car importers are calling 'curbs' are actually measures designed to ensure that the import of a used car under the gift or baggage scheme is not being misused for commercial purposes. The law allows all Pakistanis to import a used car if they are returning from employment abroad or receiving it as a gift from a

relative who lives outside the country. But importers have greatly misused this facility to commercially import used cars for onward sale instead. Almost all used cars being imported into the country are brought under these schemes.

All that the government has done through a recent order issued by the commerce ministry is to require that the funds remitted to pay for the reduced import duties applicable under the gift and baggage scheme be made via an account that is opened in the name of the person bringing the vehicle, or a family member. If used car importers are complaining about this, it only shows that they have been using the schemes in question for commercial purposes. If they want the right to import used cars on reduced duty for commercial purposes, they should lobby the government specifically for this rather than demand that they be allowed to continue to take advantage of a facility meant for overseas Pakistanis. The used car racket needs to be stopped. In the name of their commercial interests, these racketeers are not only misusing a customs scheme, but also remitting their payments abroad through illegal hundi and hawala channels, and thereby draining the country's foreign exchange reserves. There are also no real quality checks on the vehicles being imported by them, which in many cases are automobiles picked up from junkyards in the country where they are procured from. All along the chain, this racket does damage to Pakistan's economy. It deceives the consumers into thinking that they are buying a 'reconditioned' vehicle; it strengthens illegal hundi and hawala networks; it warps and misuses the regime of customs duties meant for others; and it deprives the exchequer of its revenue and drains foreign exchange from the economy. It is high time the racketeers were made to adhere to the law.

## **Gilgit-Baltistan's status**

AS Gilgit-Baltistan's constitutional status has been tied to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, the region has been bereft of many of the rights that Pakistanis enjoy. The state may have taken a principled stand meant to protect its position on the Kashmir question, but it has failed to formulate a modus vivendi to resolve GB's issues until a permanent solution is achieved. While steps have been taken by the centre to address the issue — eg the self-governance orders of 2009 and 2018 — these moves have fallen short of the GB people's expectations, particularly the 2018 order. This legal lacuna has bred alienation. On Sunday, demonstrations were held within and outside GB to push for a permanent

settlement of the region's status. The demonstrators called for starting a protest movement unless a permanent solution was achieved.

The federal government must employ tact and understanding, keeping the demands of GB's people in view while formulating policy. There are various demands which the state can meet to contain the situation such as empowering the GB Assembly and allowing freedom for political activists to operate freely. A heavy-handed approach may risk inflaming matters — eg a youth leader was picked up recently in Skardu for 'creating hatred'. Instead, the state needs to offer the people a genuine arrangement that protects their rights until a final solution to the Kashmir issue is reached. Perhaps something along the lines of the Azad Kashmir model can be set up. The best way to proceed would be to take the local people on board and listen to GB's elected representatives and civil society. Imposing solutions from the top is unlikely to address the locals' disaffection. The question of GB's place within Pakistan has been left to linger for over seven decades. It is time a democratic answer was provided to protect the state's concerns, while guaranteeing GB's fundamental rights.

## **Prison reform**

ON Monday, the Sindh cabinet approved the draft Sindh Prisons and Correction Act, 2019, to replace the outdated Prison Act of 1894. Unlike the latter, which was considered retributive or punitive in nature, the proposed law is reformatory, keeping prisoners' safety and rights in mind, while working to rehabilitate them so they can return to society as law-abiding citizens. This is a welcome move by the provincial government. In the words of a lawyer working for prisoner rights, the criminal justice system in Pakistan has for too long been "rife with corruption, mired in red tape and beholden to power". Outdated laws along with no oversight from the home department and the lack of computerised record-keeping have ensured justice is not delivered. Opportunities for reform are overlooked by both state and society due to stigma and apathy towards these societal 'rejects'. It doesn't have to be this way. Many of history's great figures have spent part of their lives in prison: the time and space they received to read and reflect would evolve their vision. Additionally, there has been little effort in putting in place alternatives for minor crimes, such as fines, community service, and mental health treatment.

In Pakistan, the overwhelming majority of the prison population is either anticipating or in the midst of a trial. Perhaps the previous chief justice should have focused his attention here. Due to extended detentions without trial, the prisons are filled beyond their capacity. In May 2018, there were a total of 83,718 prisoners languishing in various overcrowded, underfunded and poorly managed jails across Pakistan — 51,535 prisoners in Punjab alone. The capacity of the Karachi Central Jail is 2,400, but the inmate population last year stood at 4,846. Just as prison legislation was overlooked for over a century, so too were the conditions in jails, with their outdated architecture, often lacking basic amenities or access to health facilities and balanced diets.

Prisons are resultantly brimming with disease and illness, both physical and psychological. Inmates face difficulties receiving visits from friends and family. In these overcrowded spaces — evidently a challenge to manage — hardened criminals and terrorists are lumped together with juvenile delinquents, first-time offenders and petty criminals. Research suggests that jails are breeding grounds for militancy and crime. Poor accountability systems and nepotism in the hiring and transfer of superintendents results in incompetency and the unchecked abuse of power on the job: torture, ill treatment and discrimination are widespread. The new prison law includes many humane provisions such as a minimum of one visit for one hour each month, education, vocational training, health facilities and social and psychological services, prisoners oversight committee visits, inspections, testing of food and inquiries into complaints. A few years ago, IG Prisons Sindh had also started a literacy programme and art therapy in Karachi Central Jail. Such initiatives will modernise an anachronistic prison system.

## **Bus tragedy**

Even for a country inured to a quotidian degree of hardship and calamity, the scenes from the site of a crash between a bus carrying about 40 people, and a truck in Lasbela on Monday were horrifying all the same. They were made more so by the fact that such tragedies are largely avoidable if not for a series of personal and systemic failures. Hundreds of people lose their lives every year in traffic accidents across Pakistan owing to reckless driving, and vehicles that would fail to pass even the most basic fitness and safety standards plying across poorly designed, constructed and maintained road systems. Casualty rates are

further exacerbated by a dearth of emergency services such as fire engines, lifesaving ambulances and hospitals with the human and physical resources to provide treatment for major traumatic injuries. The awful collision between the bus and truck is a convergence of most, if not all, of these factors. While it is too early, pending investigation, to establish culpability for the fatal crash, statements suggesting that the truck was carrying smuggled fuel might be true given how rapidly the fire spread through both vehicles, while claims that the bus had only one door from which to exit might have turned the carriage into a death trap with little chance of escape. In all, the inferno has claimed the lives of over two dozen people, including women and children, with several of the remaining survivors in critical condition.

Could more lives have been saved? Reports from the area betrayed local authorities' inability to adequately respond to mass casualty events of this kind, particularly on the long stretches between major cities and towns. With only one fire brigade tender in the nearest town, for example, firefighting trucks had to be called in from Hub and Uthal. Treatment for the survivors suffered setbacks as shifting the patients from the local hospital — which did not have the facilities to treat their injuries — to Karachi was delayed due to a lack of ambulances onsite. Though it is typical of our elected representatives and public servants to provide assurances that the afflicted will be taken care of and those responsible taken to task, for how much longer are people expected to tolerate this bare minimum response? The practice of dealing with crises as they arise must someday be set aside in favour of planning strategically to avoid them.

## **Petition dismissed**

DURING the past couple of years, there have been a number of high-profile cases and landmark judgements that have set important precedents redefining the meaning of moral probity in public life.

On Monday, the Islamabad High Court did the same, not through a verdict but by dismissing a petition asking that Prime Minister Imran Khan be disqualified for concealing his alleged parentage of a child born out of wedlock.

The two-judge division bench admonished the petitioner, a habitual litigant who happens to be the spokesman of the Lal Masjid-affiliated Shuhada Foundation, for neither understanding the law nor Islamic teachings about respecting privacy.

IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah also warned him that he would be fined if he continued to file frivolous litigation that wasted the resources of an already overburdened judiciary.

It is high time that a line was drawn under this matter.

Read more: Pakistan is yet to differentiate between sin and crime

Over the years, it has repeatedly been dredged up by those seeking to embarrass and malign Mr Khan, and has probably also caused distress to the young lady in question.

No doubt, the current premier sometimes adopts gratingly sanctimonious airs, but those who take issue with his politics must counterattack on those grounds alone.

Whether the allegation in the petition is true or not is immaterial. Everyone has the right to a private existence and a reasonable expectation that information of a personal nature will not be politicised to score cheap points.

There is in conservative societies a strong tendency to stand in moral judgement on others, and politicians are after all a reflection of the society to which they belong.

The court has rightly drawn a distinction between public and private life. Many a skeleton undoubtedly rattles in the cupboards of our public functionaries.

However, as long as this baggage does not violate the public trust, or impinge on the individuals' ability to carry out their responsibilities, or contribute to a hostile work environment for colleagues, the public should look the other way.

## **A not so mini budget**

THE government has announced a set of incentives for business that are aimed at getting the wheels of the economy moving. Whether or not these steps help in achieving that objective is now the big question.

The speech by finance minister Asad Umar focused on the politics his party faces, as well as the incentives the government is offering to the business



community in the hope that with more money placed at their disposal, investment will receive a boost.

The minister was correct to point out that Pakistan's saving rate is far too low to support elevated investment, and growth in the face of a low savings rate is likely to prove self defeating.

It seems the measures tabled in the supplementary finance bill are trying to encourage investment and discourage the import of luxury items.

All bets, it seems, are now on getting growth started. The speech gave nothing away on how it will be paid for, so either there are tax bombshells hiding in the taxation details to be revealed later, or there is an ardent hope that revival in business activity alone will lead to higher revenues.

Read more: Advance taxes give artificial boost to revenue collection: SAI

The minister gave no indication of the revenue impact of all the incentives he announced, but given their sprawling scale — from customs duties to sales tax to income tax — it is likely to be substantial.

Also, in some cases like reduction in tax on inter-corporate dividends or elimination of the super tax on non-banking corporates after July 1, it is difficult to see why these merited such urgent treatment at this time.

One thinks of a mid-year mini budget as a course correction in response to immediate pressures. Large agenda-setting changes, particularly if they are to be made effective from July 1, did not need to be accommodated in a mid-year supplementary bill.

It appears that the measures and the bill have been designed to put a smile on the face of the business community. Such an exercise carries great costs in terms of revenue foregone. Whether or not it spurs economic growth is entirely another matter.

If there are indeed measures designed to offset the revenue impact of all the incentives, then we can be certain that big surprises lurk in the details. But if there are no surprises, and everything has been revealed, then the government has placed an outside bet that stirring business sentiments will lead to a revival of growth.

And once the dust from this mini-budget session settles, the larger questions facing the government about structural reform and plugging the growing revenue shortfall will still be there. In that sense, it is now an open bet as to which will speak louder with the passage of time: the words of the finance minister or the silent gaps in the speech?

## **Kartarpur politics**

THE Pakistani offer to open a corridor to enable Indian Sikhs to pay their respects at the Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib in Narowal was seen by proponents of peace in South Asia as a positive step towards fostering an atmosphere of harmony in the region. However, the usual politicking — particularly from the Indian side — is creating obstacles in realising a plan that would allow Sikh devotees to visit one of their most revered shrines on this side of the border without a visa.

While Pakistan had on Monday shared a draft agreement on the Kartarpur corridor and invited the Indian side to begin negotiations, New Delhi apparently parried the offer by issuing a counter-invitation to Pakistani officials on Tuesday. The Pakistani side was invited to visit India in February or March “to discuss and finalise the modalities” of the corridor. Instead of responding to the Pakistani offer in good faith, India’s approach reflects an evasive, non-serious approach. Since the gurdwara is in Pakistan and this country had extended the invitation, India should have responded positively to the offer.

Indeed, throughout Narendra Modi’s time in power, Pakistan-India relations have been in a deep freeze, with bilateral dialogue suspended as India continues to harp on about ‘terrorism’ yet refuses to talk to Pakistan. With general elections in India only a few months away, the BJP-led government is likely shoring up its anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim credentials by avoiding any positive contact with Pakistan.

However, the Kartarpur corridor is a golden opportunity to restart talks on a ‘soft’, people-to-people subject: religious tourism.

Suffice it to say, both sides should avoid playing politics over religious places; India should respond positively to Pakistan’s invitation and begin the process for building the corridor. If this experiment succeeds, the process can be taken

further; hopefully, similar arrangements can be made for Pakistani pilgrims wishing to visit the revered Sufi dargahs in India, such as Khawaja Moinuddin Chishty's tomb in Ajmer and Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah in Delhi, among others.

At present, the visa process is arduous and deters potential visitors from applying. This needs to change because when people from the 'other side' interact with their neighbours, hatred and propaganda will give way to understanding and harmony. Powerful, hateful lobbies on both sides must be ignored and the path to peace must not be forsaken.

India needs to respond to Pakistan's offer so that work on the corridor can begin in earnest.

## **Genuine engagement**

THE Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, though its roots go further back, is now a year old.

Sparked by the extrajudicial killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud, since it began its long march to Islamabad last January, it has consistently held the same set of demands. Besides calling for the demining of the former tribal areas and greater freedom of movement in the latter, the rights-based alliance has insisted on an end to the practices of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and unlawful detentions, and for its practitioners to be held to account within a truth and reconciliation framework.

While there have been criticisms about some of their more provocative rallying cries, none can dispute the fact that their agenda is constitutional and their protest nonviolent. The PTM's message has resonated among many — not only Pakhtun — citizens across the country, particularly the youth who desire a more equitable relationship between society and the state. And within just a few months of its emergence, two PTM-affiliated candidates from Waziristan were elected to the National Assembly in last year's general election. Its presence and impact on the national stage cannot be ignored.

Read: Talks with PTM

For all these reasons, therefore, it is regrettable that, barring some initial steps to address their concerns, the response to the PTM by the state apparatus and

mainstream political classes at both federal and provincial levels has largely been paranoid and counterproductive. Indicative of this were the blanket arrests on terrorism charges of scores of PTM leaders and supporters in Karachi on Monday following a peaceful gathering in Sohrab Goth the day before.

Such heavy-handedness towards the movement can only lead to what is most feared — the hardening of their disaffection and the potential for violent factions to emerge. Pakistan can only benefit from the diversity and plurality of public discourse — even dissenting — but it cannot from further bouts of violence. Instead of attempting to discredit and suppress the PTM, it must be brought into the mainstream through an honest and sincere engagement on issues that require systemic reform.

## **Illegal blacklist**

EXTRALEGAL measures to curtail citizens' freedom of movement are an instrument of state oppression, employed in countries where the right to due process holds no meaning.

The recently discovered blacklist used by the FIA to place people under a temporary 30-day travel ban, clearly falls in this category.

During a parliamentary committee meeting on Tuesday, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari rightly assailed the measure as illegal and one that “has no place in a democratic regime”.

Other legislators voiced similar objections, contending it was being employed as a tool to pressure and/ or silence certain politicians and rights activists.

The existence of this opaque repository of individuals — a so-called provisional national identification list — came to light just prior to the 2018 elections.

On July 11, Zulfiqar Bukhari, now special assistant to the prime minister for overseas Pakistanis, was briefly prevented from proceeding to Saudi Arabia to perform umra along with PTI chairman Imran Khan. (It is another matter that a phone call to the right quarters magically cleared the way for Mr Bukhari to board his flight.)

More recently, MNAs Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar — both vocal proponents of the PTM — found themselves off-loaded from a Dubai-bound flight for the same reason.

The FIA has defended the blacklist on the grounds that it enables them to promptly prevent suspicious individuals from leaving the country rather than wait for the lengthy procedure of placing names on the Exit Control List to be completed.

That argument has no merit. How can the FIA, which functions under the interior ministry, undertake actions without legal authority, and circumvent the rules formulated to implement an act of law? The correct course of action is for the relevant law itself to be amended and streamlined.

However, *modus operandi* is not the only problem. The ECL itself is a much-abused instrument. Although the primary objective of the Exit from Pakistan (Control) Ordinance, 1981 — promulgated by Gen Zia — is to prevent the flight of those having allegedly committed major financial fraud, it is often used indiscriminately to harass political opponents, dissidents and even journalists, or to settle personal vendettas.

In 2015, then interior minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan revealed there were over 8,000 names on the ECL, many dating back to 1985 and, to his credit, oversaw the deletion of nearly 5,000 of these.

Of late, there has been an increased recourse to this mechanism: among those who have recently found themselves placed on the ECL is Pakhtun rights activist Gulalai Ismail, whose views run counter to those that are currently in favour.

There must be greater transparency in the application of this law. Senator Raza Rabbani last year proposed an amendment that would bind the government to convey within 24 hours to the individual concerned its reasons for placing his or her name on the ECL.

## **Disability discourse**

THIS week, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari stated her department's commitment to ensuring that citizens with disabilities receive their due rights. Following WHO's efforts to convince the government to introduce legislation at

the federal level, and in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a bill for the protection of the rights of PWD has been submitted to a National Assembly standing committee. The CRPD identifies ‘disability’ as “long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder ... full and effective participation in society”. If passed — and implemented — the bill could usher in a new era for PWD. The bill makes it compulsory for the government to ensure jobs for PWD at the federal, provincial and district levels; provide concessions in admission fees in government education institutes; hand out special national identity card services at home; guarantee free medical treatment in government hospitals, along with a 60pc concession in private hospitals; and give permanent jobs to contractual employees in government offices. Pakistan has already passed laws and approved plans to improve the welfare of and employment opportunities for the differently abled: the Disabled Persons’ Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance (1981), the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002); the National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Special Citizens Act (2008). Unfortunately, there has been little implementation on ground. The 1981 ordinance necessitated strict enforcement of a quota for PWD in government jobs — yet many spots remain vacant.

Ms Mazari has requested the provinces to share updated statistics, so the government could formulate policies and distribute funds in accordance with the figures provided. However, accurate data has been the biggest challenge for PWD in Pakistan. Despite a UN Experts Group on Disability discovering that more than 15pc of the world’s population is living with disabilities, and about 80pc of the disabled reside in developing countries, the figure in Pakistan’s 1998 census stood at 2.4pc. During the 2017 census, the figure grew even smaller — a mere 0.48pc of the population. People continue to not identify with disability due to disagreement over its terminology, as well as prevailing stigmas. Importantly, the new bill proposes a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy towards individuals who discriminate against PWD. Social exclusion and prejudice, sometimes masked as concern, have long held back the community. Until the stigma goes and PWD are included in policy related to them, it is unlikely real change will occur.

## Wrong line, Sarfraz

SARFRAZ Ahmed is known for giving voice to his emotions during a cricket game, often when things are not going his way — which, unfortunately, has been the case in recent days.

The ICC must now be debating how to penalise him for the racist remarks he passed during the second ODI between South Africa and Pakistan on Tuesday.

His comments came when after an early promise of triumph, the Pakistan side was unable to break a partnership between two Proteas batsmen that eventually clinched the game for the hosts. The incident was all the more regrettable since it took place in South Africa — in Durban of all places — which has been at the forefront of the war against racism right from the apartheid days.

All along cricket was central to the discussion during the years when South Africa faced international isolation for its discriminatory policies. Even today, the country moves on the subject with the greatest of caution.

It is distressing that Sarfraz can be indiscreet — at a cost to his own stature and that of his team and country.

In this case, he may have been pulled up when, on the face of it, he was not addressing the player in question directly. Perhaps, the show of anger that is often associated with our national team skipper towards the end of a game that Pakistan is losing was also absent.

Yet, the statement was bad enough: it was clear what he said and who the derogatory term was aimed at. It was quite enough to worry the ICC which is becoming increasingly strict regarding any racist words spoken or rude gestures employed during cricket matches. It will not brook, and justifiably so, any expression that may appear to insult or offend on the basis of “race, religion, culture, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin”.

## **PMRA: senseless and dangerous**

AGAINST sane advice, the PTI government has moved ahead with its agenda to tighten its control over the media. On Thursday, the federal cabinet approved the creation of the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority that will enable the government to 'regulate' all media in the country from one platform.

The step has come in the face of strong resistance from media organisations and journalists amid severe criticism of the PTI setup's overall handling of the conventional fourth pillar of the state. The government's move is especially senseless when it is considered that print and electronic media are separate entities, each with its own defining features.

Pakistani media increasingly resorting to self-censorship: report

Indeed, democratic societies, while they may see the necessity to have regulations for the 24/7 electronic media, allow news publications to check their own content through a code of ethics — in keeping with the principle of freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, the PTI's move to bring all media under state control, smacks of an authoritarian streak that should have no place in a democratically elected setup. Remarks such as those uttered by Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry on Thursday that all bodies representing journalist bodies would be taken 'on board' in formulating rules for the PMRA gloss over the fact that these very bodies i.e., CPNE, the Press Council, APNS and PFUJ, had already opposed the creation of the new regulator.

It is no secret that the PTI government has an adversarial relationship with the media. Much of this is the rulers' own fault. They have unwisely created an atmosphere where any criticism of the government is seen as an ulterior motive, leaving little room for an exchange of views which is central to a nation's progress. On too many occasions, PTI cadres have denigrated the press and hurled invectives at those who have raised questions about the government's performance.

This is a short-sighted approach, especially when the PTI itself has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of media freedom in Pakistan. It makes little sense for it to try and destroy the very vehicle which has helped it reach the seat of power.



Crucially, by its actions, it has also shown contempt for the long, difficult journey taken by Pakistan's press. Over the course of the years, journalists have been imprisoned, tortured and killed in the line of duty. Their hard-won gains must be defended, in fact, built upon, not snatched away by a setup that seeks dictatorial 'solutions' through the creation of a new regulatory body —without realising that it is setting a trap the government itself could fall into.

With the rulers in full war regalia, it seems that it is now up to the media itself to protect its freedoms, and unite in the face of any attempt to shake the foundations of an independent press.

## Labour abuse

THROUGH interviews with 118 garment workers from 25 factories, union heads, labour rights activists and government spokespersons, a recent report by Human Rights Watch highlighted rampant abuse in the garment industry. Pakistan's highly competitive textile industry is a major source of foreign exchange earnings, as well as a beneficiary of government concessions and tax cuts, and yet it perpetuates some of the worst forms of exploitation. Workers in the sector remain invisible in the national discourse. Meanwhile, the government continues to turn a blind eye to unfair labour practices, as do international brands that outsource labour to developing countries like ours. The garment industry is one of the largest employment sectors, with a workforce of an estimated 15m people. Workers complain of being paid less than the minimum wage, forced to work overtime, and denied pension, maternity leave and breaks. They are not allowed to form independent unions; they face intimidation and threats and arbitrary dismissal when they try to organise for their rights. There is also evidence of minors being hired in the industry.

Evidence of exploitation often gets muted in much of the mainstream media due to conflict of interest and pressure from powerful factory owners. Workers complained of arbitrary dismissal, unsanitary working conditions, long working hours, and being paid less than the minimum wage. In a rare example, protests by the employees of a clothing manufacturer drew attention to the plight of its workers in 2017. But their difficulties were quickly buried and forgotten, as much as abuse and human rights violations in this country are. Even one year on, there are claims that those workers are being denied their rights mandated by law. It

seems as if nobody cares until there is a tragedy one cannot look away from — when it is too late — which is exactly what happened five years ago, when 255 workers perished after a fire erupted at Ali Enterprises at Baldia Town. There were no emergency exits or safety mechanisms in place. The HRW report is correct to point out that the primary responsibility for protecting the rights of workers rests with the government, and then with domestic and international companies that are bound by domestic and international labour laws. All stakeholders must remember that all too often workplace ‘accidents’ turn out to be cases of criminal negligence.

## **Basant U-turn**

THE fickleness of the rulers knows no bounds. The latest reminder of this is the Punjab government’s decision not to celebrate Basant, the spring festival featuring kite-flying contests, that is a defining feature of the cultural identity of the province, especially Lahore in the month of February. The problem arose with the manufacture and widespread sale of glass-coated kite string, a wiry twine that proved a danger to human life — several motorcyclists were, for example, killed as the string slit their throats, while urban infrastructure, primarily power transformers, was damaged. The previous administration, apparently unable to curb the production of the glass-coated kite string, decided to ban Basant celebrations altogether.

Recently, Punjab announced it would allow the celebration of Basant again, only to backtrack on Wednesday while acknowledging that it was not fully prepared to ensure that the event would be a ‘safe activity’. It plans to table legislation to check violations to both lives and property, after which it may allow the people to celebrate the event next year. An eight-member committee was commissioned to look into the matter; it decided that the Lahore city administration was unprepared to deal with the challenges posed by the festival. It is a pity indeed that such a turn has been reached; in fact, it is quite unbelievable that the provincial government is not capable of clamping down on the main offenders ie the manufacturers of dangerous glass-coated kite string. Some wonder if the problem is that Basant has come to be frowned upon by conservative elements that refuse to see the festival as an opportunity to bring pleasure to citizens and to generate revenue. True, safety issues come first and these must be addressed satisfactorily, but hidebound views should not stand in the way of celebrating the

advent of spring. Meanwhile, sections of the media that have supported the Basant ban either because of the safety factor of the concerns of conservative elements would do well to review their approach.

## **Noisy parliament**

THERE are often moments when the government and the opposition appear to be partners in the conspiracy to ignore parliament's role as the country's most efficient search engine for solutions to the people's problems. Such a moment is once more upon us.

On Friday, the National Assembly was prorogued without a debate on the 'mini budget' presented by the treasury a couple of days earlier. The Assembly had seen plenty of action since that presentation, none of which was of any use to the people of Pakistan.

A controversy erupted after the government benches reacted angrily to a provocation by the opposition — indeed, a trademarked PTI response. The issue was the Sahiwal shootout, and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif did not let up the opportunity to take to task Prime Minister Imran Khan, who happened to attend the session, and his permanently edgy lieutenants.

Mr Khan could have stood up and enlightened his own camp on the merits of restraint in the interest of order, but perhaps it was too much to expect from the leader of a fiercely combative force that has been confronting the opposition in parliament.

Instead, the battle intensified when a member of the prime minister's inner circle, Naeemul Haque, bombarded Mr Sharif with a series of aggressive tweets. Mr Haque appeared to suggest that he was capable of combining simultaneously in his person the authorities vested in NAB and the speaker of the National Assembly to summarily punish the errant opposition leader who was in the House, taking a short break from his lockup in Lahore. He warned Mr Sharif that his appearances in parliament could be cut short if he continued with his wayward ways — in other words if he did not change his tone when addressing the honourable prime minister. The opposition rounded it off nicely by

proclaiming that it possessed some hidden powers to block the prime minister's entry in the Assembly.

True, no opposition is in parliament to make things comfortable for the government benches — in fact, no opposition is worth its salt unless it holds the government accountable for its actions. But does that responsibility always have to be expressed in a way that disturbs the functioning of parliament?

For instance, there are many voices, both inside and outside parliament, that have criticised the government's mini budget presented on Jan 23. Instead of creating enough noise to prevent a debate on the exercise altogether, the opposition could have played a more positive role by coming up with robust arguments on why the budget was flawed. But such maturity seems to elude our lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. It is all about personalised politics, and parliament has sadly become an arena for all manner of blame game and mudslinging — a great disservice to those who voted with such high hopes.

## Venezuela turmoil

FOR the past several days, political turmoil has gripped the South American country of Venezuela, as opposition politician Juan Guaido has declared himself president, posing a direct challenge to incumbent Nicolas Maduro. Mr Maduro is, of course, the successor of the country's late leftist president Hugo Chavez. However, this internal power struggle has been making headlines globally as the US has waded in, backing Mr Guaido and calling for regime change in Caracas. On Saturday, Washington and Moscow sparred over the Venezuela crisis in the UNSC; US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned what he termed as the "mafia state" of President Maduro while backing the toppling of his regime. Russia's representative shot back, saying that the US was trying to engineer a coup in the Latin American state. Unfortunately, considering America's history of backing dictators and undemocratic regimes across the world, the US should have adopted a more tactful approach, instead of meddling in a sovereign country's affairs. While democratic forces should be supported everywhere, when a country has so much historical baggage as the US does, it is best to play a more diplomatic role and let independent nations solve their own problems. But

as we have seen thus far, Team Trump is not a big believer in subtle diplomacy and statesmanship.

A brief overview of the international politics of the last century or so shows that more often than not, the US — which ironically has complained of Russian ‘meddling’ in its own polls — has sided with decidedly unseemly (and downright brutal) strongmen the world over. In Latin America, it long supported the Batista dictatorship in Cuba before Fidel Castro and his comrades sent it packing, while it also backed the cruel Pinochet regime in Chile that had overthrown the elected Allende government. Closer to home, the Americans played a crucial role in the British-backed removal of the Mosaddegh dispensation in Iran, while Washington was a strong backer of the Shah’s dictatorial rule before the ayatollahs proclaimed an Islamic Republic. And during the Cold War, as Moscow backed socialist Arab strongmen, America propped up kings and princelings to prevent the spread of communism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Therefore, the US should think twice about lecturing others on democracy, and particularly about interfering in others’ internal affairs. Let the people of Venezuela decide their own fate; external powers should not be meddling in their domestic affairs.

## **An ever-widening dragnet**

MANY local and global Twitter users have, in recent months, reported receiving notices from the micro-blogging website stating that it had received “official correspondence” alleging their tweets were in “violation of Pakistani law” — ie, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. One recent recipient is lawyer Reema Omer, who on Monday stated that she was handed such a notice, citing posts in which she questioned the constitutionality of military courts and their judgements. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry responded incredulously, denying his government had reported the tweets he described as purely “academic”. But the ludicrous application of Peca in the context of Ms Omer and many others’ online expression requires more than mere denial, it demands answers. Who, exactly, is ‘officially’ widening the censorship dragnet to include entirely legitimate and constitutionally protected speech?

According to Peca, at least, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority is solely vested with the power to block content, or request websites to remove or ‘withhold’ content within local jurisdictions. Regarding surveillance, however, one

PTA official recently told this paper that multiple public and state bodies also have access to its monitoring portal. So is PTA failing to exercise discretionary oversight in processing requests from these external sources, or is it being bypassed altogether (and potentially at cross purposes)? For it seems that a concern repeatedly raised by rights activists is being made increasingly manifest: the mala fide use of Peca, with its broad parameters and nebulous terminology, to roll back fundamental rights and to harass and intimidate the public into silence. Given recent trends in the suppression of political speech, dissent and even satire in both mainstream media and online spaces, the rulers ought to be reminded of the fact that they too are made 'of the people', and to them they shall inevitably return. A true expression of their commitment to being the people's (including those they are in disagreement with) representatives, therefore, would be to urgently seek to reform Peca and divest it of its lack of transparency and democratic safeguards.

## **Visa on arrival**

LAST week, the Pakistani government announced a new policy of granting visa-on-arrival facilities to 50 countries. It will additionally provide e-visas to citizens of 175 countries. Previously, visa-on-arrival privileges were extended to only 24 countries.

This announcement follows Portugal declaring Pakistan safe for travel last month, while France is working to relax its travel advisory to visit this country.

This is a welcome move, which will surely boost tourism to the country and improve foreign investment.

Foreigners have often bemoaned the complicated and difficult visa application procedures and red-tapism they encounter to enter the country. Last year, a British travel magazine listed the Pakistan visa as one of top five most difficult to acquire. Isolation does not benefit us.

Welcome to Pakistan: 'Tourist-friendly' but not visa-friendly

The Pakistani tourism industry took a severe blow post-9/11, suffering from an 'image' problem; the country was perceived as an unsafe and unfriendly destination for foreigners, in contrast to our neighbours to the east. Hopefully, the new policy will benefit the country in two ways.

First, it will promote tourism, endorsing the 'soft image' of Pakistan, which successive governments have tried to advertise with little success. Pakistan is a beautiful country, with much to offer to the curious and adventurous at heart. It is rich in cultural diversity and history, hosting some of the oldest civilisations within its borders. And it is home to breathtaking natural wonders, which tourists can enjoy at a fraction of the cost of other countries. Lifting NOC for foreigners to travel to places like Gilgit-Baltistan is a great way to promote these natural wonders.

Take a look: 16 Pakistani tourist spots you must visit

Another aspect to look into is religious tourism and pilgrimages, as Pakistan is fortunate enough to contain holy sites of several major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. The relaxing of visas of Indian-origin American and British citizens will be an additional boost.

Read more: 5 gurdwaras that could be made part of Kartarpur Corridor

Second, it removes some of the paranoia and hostile attitudes towards foreigners that have deepened in recent decades. Prevalent attitudes towards INGOs, many of which do good and thankless work where the state fails its citizens, is just one example.

True, there have been several instances of foreign nationals resorting to terrorism, militancy and espionage here, and this will have to be kept in mind by policymakers as they ease restrictions. But blanket vilification, demonisation and xenophobia towards all foreigners is not the answer.

There are certain other things that the government must keep in mind as it promotes tourism and relaxes visa policies. The most obvious being whether Pakistan even has the necessary infrastructure to accommodate a large number of tourists. This is something the government and private sectors should work towards, in order to be more inviting towards guests. And while security has certainly improved, we must remember that peace remains a fragile, relatively new luxury.

Pakistanis are an overwhelmingly hospitable and welcoming people. It is time our policies reflect that.

## **Borrowing from SBP**

IT is easy to be alarmist about government debt data, and equally easy to politicise the figures. But given every context, and every nuance, the figures that are piling up for government borrowing from the State Bank are now assuming alarming proportions. Before going into a detailed discussion of the data itself, and what it tells us, it is important to emphasise the previous government helped create the present situation. When the fiscal year began in July 2018, the total stock of outstanding government borrowing from the State Bank stood at Rs3.667tr, which is where the previous government left matters. Ideally, this figure should be as close to zero as possible towards the end of the quarter, so things were far from ideal in July. Very quickly, it shot up to Rs5.247tr as the interim government had to borrow heavily to continue financing its operations. But then, it dropped sharply, as the interim government retired its borrowings steadily, and by August, it returned to Rs3.37tr.

After that, it began climbing again, touching a peak of Rs6.859tr by November. This is a dangerous level and can fuel inflation, so every expectation was that it would soon fall equally fast as the government moved to retire this amount. The only way to retire it would be through commercial bank borrowing, via debt auctions, or through increased inflow from tax revenue. But both those options failed, as one after another debt auction showed a tepid response from the banks, and tax revenues fell far short of their target. From the peak in November, government borrowing from the State Bank fell briefly, by Rs1.89tr in December, but began its precipitous climb once again. As per the latest data, it has now hit Rs7.647tr, more than double where it was when the fiscal year ended, and when the PTI government was sworn in. There is no way to spin this other than as a deep and growing fiscal failure. A government has three options to raise funds to pay its bills: it can raise taxes, borrow or print money. Each option has a cost. Printing money is the worst of these options because it debases the currency and fuels inflation. And this is the path the government is on currently. Bringing down this stock of government borrowing from the State Bank should now be a critical mission in the remaining months of the fiscal year.



## **Illegal land use**

ALL sections of the power elite are not equal. It was therefore all the more unexpected when on Thursday, at the Karachi's Supreme Court registry, Justice Gulzar Ahmed demanded answers to certain questions that many dare not articulate, at least in public. This spectacle occurred before a two-judge bench during the hearing of a case pertaining to illegal construction in the city. The judge wanted to know why the armed forces and the Civil Aviation Authority were running wedding halls and cinemas, asking whether it was their job to do so. Driving home his point about the security risks inherent in such ventures, he assailed the existence of wedding halls in the vicinity of the Karachi airport, which was the target of a major terrorist attack in 2014, and the Central Ordnance Depot. He also ordered the wedding hall inside Askari Park to be demolished immediately and the land restored to its intended use.

In a predatory state, the levers of power are concentrated in a few hands, both elected and unelected; a supporting cast of corrupt civil bureaucrats, unscrupulous businessmen, police and local strongmen enables them and maintains the status quo. In this unequal hierarchy, the less privileged live in a state of perpetual insecurity. A recent, particularly harrowing illustration of this was the anti-encroachment drive in Karachi where thousands found their decades-old means of livelihood destroyed. A far bigger travesty than small-time traders trying to make a living in a city that has not provided them the means to do so strictly by the book are the actions by the well connected who derive illegal profits from Karachi's real estate. Using land legally entails it being employed for the purpose for which it was allotted. Yet we see umpteenth examples of 'china cutting', of amenity plots swallowed up by shopping malls and wedding halls, land demarcated for sewerage plants taken over by residential colonies, etc. There must be a reckoning for those involved in such large-scale violation of land-use regulations.

# **Taliban-US talks**

AT this point, the situation where peace talks between the US government and the Afghan Taliban are concerned remains fluid.

After a series of marathon parleys lasting several days between Zalmay Khalilzad, America's point man on Afghanistan, and representatives of the Taliban in Qatar's capital Doha, the outlines of a possible peace deal between the US and the Afghan militia are emerging, though the details are not known.

While the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo termed the development "encouraging news", the Taliban were more circumspect, saying nothing was final. Of course, in international diplomacy such posturing is natural, as stakeholders often release statements for public consumption, yet take a different line behind closed doors at the negotiating table until a final deal is reached.

Mr Khalilzad has also briefed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on the developments. The Taliban, on their part, have dismissed calls for talking directly to Kabul, terming Mr Ghani's setup as 'powerless', and, instead, choosing to talk directly to the Americans.

While genuine peace in Afghanistan may still be far off, the developments are encouraging considering the country's troubled modern history, especially the last 40 years of near-constant war and political upheaval.

Related: How Pakistan can help with the Afghan peace process

Indeed, the Soviet invasion, the subsequent Afghan 'jihad', the era of the warlords and, thereafter, the US invasion and Taliban response have all played a part in destabilising Afghanistan and preventing the formation of a functional modern state.

However, after sustained US failure at nation-building post-2001, it appears that the Trump administration is in a hurry to bring its troops back, while evidently the Taliban would also like to conclude the nearly two decades of constant fighting and bloodshed.

Take a look: Endgame in Afghanistan

The peace efforts need to be encouraged by the international community as well as regional states; all must play their part to ensure a peaceful and democratic future for Afghanistan.

Where the Taliban are concerned, their key demand is a timetable detailing when American troops will leave their country. On the American side, Washington wants assurances that Afghan soil will not be used for international terrorism by Al Qaeda and similar outfits.

In between these two major demands, the finer details need to be worked out — specifically the role of the Afghan government in the whole process. While the Taliban may have dismissed any role for Kabul, they need to shed this rigid stance and work with the Ghani government to reach a negotiated settlement.

The way to lasting Afghan peace is long and winding. However, all three sides — the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US — must agree to a roadmap while some basic guarantees are needed, especially from the Taliban, regarding the protection of fundamental rights and basic freedoms in a post-war Afghanistan, as well as a pledge to prevent transnational terror groups, such as the militant Islamic State group, from using Afghanistan as a base for their activities.

## **PM's speech**

AN MNA from Mianwali, Prime Minister Imran Khan returned to the town on Sunday to speak his heart out on some of the topics he is most urgently confronted with. The occasion was the sixth convocation of the Namal College and much of his speech sought to enlighten the audience on how best to establish democracy in the county. As a consequence, both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif were summarily assigned to the basket of suspicious items in the prime minister's book — having been prodded on the path to power by military dictators, though with Bhutto having at least made some effort of his own as compared to Mr Sharif's comfortable journey to the top. The speech made what appeared to be a mandatory mention about how other countries had punished their corrupt. And as proof of how unhappy he is with the recent criticism of his handpicked Punjab chief minister of Punjab, Mr Khan profusely praised Mr Usman Buzdar, predicting his choice would emerge as the best chief executive of the province — unlike his predecessor, Shahbaz Sharif, for whom

the prime minister reserved the harshest words, even stronger than his censure for the Zardari duo of the PPP. The reasons given for Mr Buzdar's pre-eminence were simple: he shuns protocol, is not corrupt and would not misuse his office for amassing wealth; he is cognisant of issues and is in the best position to tackle them.

This was a speech made in anger, a riposte to all kinds of criticism that has been heaped on the PTI government. But the prime minister's words were not suited to the occasion. They would have been more appropriate for a jalsa, perhaps even a heated exchange in parliament. It did nonetheless capture the combative mood that the government is in at the moment and provided further insight into how Mr Khan wants to set the pace and direction for his idea of a safe, lasting and efficient democracy that can deliver to the people at large. There was never any shortage of evidence about the fighting qualities of the person behind the prime minister. He has been congratulating us about the raw material that we are blessed with. But, instead of heaping opprobrium on rival politicians and defending his own, perhaps his next speech should be more to the point about the ways in which we can use these resources at our disposal.

## **Who'll watch the watchmen?**

LEAKED images apparently from Safe City camera feeds went viral on social media last week, sparking concern about whether we are in fact being kept 'safe' under such projects.

Both Islamabad and Lahore's police authorities gave statements to the media absolving their respective departments of any responsibility — some even denied that they were from Safe City cameras, a claim that is difficult to square given the angle from which the footage was taken.

Hence there is an urgent need for an impartial investigation to uncover the source of the images and to determine how ostensibly strict SOPs were somehow circumvented.

Besides, one senior police official, speaking to this paper on condition of anonymity, did admit to a similar breach in 2016, and stated that other authorities also had access to monitor and control the capital's Safe City feeds. The public's trust in those appointed to protect them is essential to the effective discharge of

law-enforcement duties. That trust is liable to erosion without accountability and transparency.

The controversy also touches on an issue that has hitherto been neglected in mainstream discourse: balancing contrasting notions of security and liberty, and how the latter has been almost entirely overshadowed by a security-centric policy framework.

The need for ensuring public order and security is undisputed, thus justifying the forfeiture of some individual freedom in service of the 'greater good'. However, the notion of personal security — integral to which is the right to privacy — not just for its intrinsic value but also as a countervailing force against the potential for state overreach and abuse is still rarely acknowledged in policymaking circles.

yet, there is no escaping the fact that, increasingly, every aspect of our lives are being tracked and documented through ever-sophisticated technologies. Thus, we can also no longer deny how vulnerable we as citizens are to be living in a country without a data protection law outlining strict parameters and safeguards to ensure that neither private nor public bodies mishandle our personal information.

## **TTP sanctuaries**

AN Afghan peace deal seems tantalisingly within reach, especially as the Afghan Taliban have reportedly agreed to one of Washington's key demands, that they not allow Afghanistan to be used by Al Qaeda or the militant Islamic State group to attack the US or its allies. This is an opportune moment for Pakistan, which has played a crucial role in the Afghan peace process, to seek a similar pledge from the Taliban to eliminate TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. It was Operation Zarb-i-Azb in 2014 that drove TTP operatives to flee across the border, only to regroup and continue their campaign to destabilise Pakistan. There was an element of quid pro quo in this: when Afghanistan was attacked by US and British forces in 2001, the Taliban — and several Al Qaeda — operatives escaped into Pakistan's northern areas, where they found shelter with fellow Pakhtuns.

However, the fact that the TTP found refuge in areas that were strongholds of the Afghan Taliban over whom Pakistan is believed to exercise considerable

influence, speaks even more to the competing strategic interests in this conflict. The Afghan insurgents were unwilling to open up another front; plus, the TTP's presence reinforced their control over the border areas and helped in recruiting Pakhtun tribesmen to fight Nato forces in Afghanistan. Tellingly, even if they disapprove of TTP's attacks inside Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban have rarely voiced condemnation of them. Indeed, Afghanistan has a long history of allowing space on its soil for violent extremists from Pakistan. Hard-core sectarian groups ran training camps in Afghanistan while the Taliban were in power, slipping across the border to carry out targeted killings in this country. Shortly before the 1999 coup, then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, through the DG ISI at the time, made a vain attempt to press the Taliban government to shut down these centres.

In this wheels-within-wheels scenario, even the Kabul government has used the TTP as leverage to pressure Pakistan into withdrawing its alleged support for the Afghan Taliban, especially the Haqqani network. It is a strategy tacitly backed by the US, the most recent evidence of which was the drone strike in Afghanistan that killed Mullah Fazlullah. The TTP leader's capture had been Pakistan's long-standing demand and his death came in the wake of Pakistan's success, over several rounds of talks, in nudging the Taliban towards a three-day ceasefire with President Ashraf Ghani's government. That development sparked hopes of a breakthrough in relations between the two countries. The need for Pakistan and Afghanistan to enhance intelligence sharing and security cooperation is even more urgent in the face of a growing threat from the IS, a threat that we know does not respect any borders. The gains from the Pakistan military's operations in the northern areas will remain tenuous until violent extremists have nowhere to hide — on either side of the border.

## **Water economics**

PAKISTAN is getting very poor economic returns from its large water resources, and when we add in the costs of environmental degradation due to misuse of water, the returns are pushed even further down. This is the finding of a new World Bank report Pakistan: Getting More from Water that takes a close look at the country's water endowment, and how well the water is used for productive purposes. Some of the findings are so counter-intuitive as to merit a more spirited debate. For example, the authors say that irrigation, which consumes the

lion's share of total water resources, only contributes \$22bn to the annual GDP. The four major crops — cotton, wheat, sugarcane and rice — consume 80pc of the water in the system, while they generate less than 5pc of the total GDP. This is a startling perspective because laypersons are used to thinking of Pakistan as an agrarian country, and the gross asymmetry in the water allocations between industry and agriculture, as well as city and country, is almost considered normal under the shadow of this assumption.

The figures point to massive waste as the primary problem in the water sector of Pakistan, not quantity. Proponents of the argument that dams are the only solution to our water woes need to reflect on some of the findings of the report. The amount of water that goes into the cultivation of major crops is far out of proportion to what is needed. Wasteful practices such as flood irrigation will remain in place so long as our water conversation continues to be dominated by the talk of dams. The simple fact brought out by the report is that improvements in water utilisation can do far more to ensure the water security of future generations than any number of dams will. Besides waste, the other main cost that poor utilisation practices impose upon society is through environmental degradation, a fact that is unfortunately absent altogether from the country's water conversation. This degradation is made possible by the poor state of water data and monitoring, the authors note. One is reminded of the sorry end that the telemetry system installed in the early 2000s met with; it was supposed to measure the streamflow down to the watercourse level. Without data and monitoring, and a woefully outdated pricing regime, Pakistan's water security will remain on shaky foundations regardless of how many dams the country builds.

## **Journalists' own lament**

A NEWS item that appeared in Dawn's 'Fifty years ago' section yesterday, described a 24-hour strike by Karachi journalists to protest what was happening in their city, Lahore and Dacca. It was another era altogether. The journalists were agitating against police high-handedness. As a result of their protest, there was no paper the next day. Half a century later, much bigger issues confront the journalists. There are layoffs and pay cuts along with curbs on freedom of expression. We have the current substitutes of Yahya Khan's very vocal information minister Gen Sher Ali Khan wanting an iron grip on the media. But we don't have protests that will effectively convey the message to the authorities —

and to the people — that the journalists who are holding aloft the flag of fundamental freedoms on their behalf have it in them to fight the battle for their own survival. The 1960s and 1970s were ideological decades. The divide between the right and left among the journalists didn't prevent them from coming together for a common cause. What was established by way of the journalists' trade union in the early decades following 1947 — with much help and leadership from the then East Pakistan — was very much in the vanguard of the fight for liberties throughout the Bhutto and Zia periods.

Factions were created, the most well known during the Zia days, but overall, the journalists managed to continue their struggle together. Later, new divisions came about, making it impossible for journalists and newspaper workers to demand free expression with one voice. There is a distinction between non-journalists and journalists in the media. There are classes and no ideology. There are monetary gaps which disallow those getting good salaries from getting together under one banner with the underpaid. There are irreconcilable factions of journalists, with the owners (in many cases the editors themselves) routinely compromising long-term unity for quick personal gains. It is no surprise that all they can do is celebrate 1969 — the glory that was.

## **Justice for the missing**

THE PTI government has done well to show a measure of consistency in tackling the controversial yet unambiguously venal practice of enforced disappearances.

In a Senate committee meeting last year, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari proposed that Pakistan become a signatory to the International Convention Against Enforced Disappearances (albeit without assenting to it in full) and that a truth and reconciliation commission be set up to provide aggrieved families with answers and, perhaps, closure.

Another recommendation was to introduce an amendment to the Pakistan Penal Code explicitly criminalising the practice. This bill, according to the minister, has now been sent to the law ministry. In a press release from the Prime Minister's Office on Tuesday, the prime minister too expressed his government's commitment to safeguarding human rights while being briefed on the upcoming legislation.



That the government has come this far where previous elected dispensations have faltered deserves praise. However, this must be tempered by acknowledging the fact that justice for missing persons has been systematically obstructed not by any lacuna in the Constitution or existing criminal statutes, but through a culture of impunity for practitioners of this dark art — ie rogue elements within the state apparatus widely alleged to be behind most disappearances.

Since it was constituted, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances may have done well to document many cases and even trace some of the disappeared, but it has failed to ever identify and hold anyone to account.

And, barring a scathing judgement by the Islamabad High Court last year, not since a brief period during former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's tenure has the superior judiciary shown consistent mettle to demand transparency and accountability of state institutions.

Along the way, public officials have repeatedly prevaricated and downplayed the seriousness and scale of the crisis. This must change.

The PPC amendment can be a distinct signifier of the government's intent towards reform. The latter would constitute formal recognition of Pakistan's resolve to deny carte blanche to those who have steered this country away from the rule of law by muddying the waters of its counterterrorism and insurgency efforts with extralegal tactics.

The dividends of these measures will not materialise overnight, and neither will the faith of potentially thousands of families who have lost loved ones be rebuilt without extended outreach and support. Besides the pain of physical absence, relatives and advocates of the disappeared — in protest camps across Sindh, Balochistan and the erstwhile tribal areas — have long suffered another form of forcible erasure: neither their anguish nor their struggle against their loved ones being forgotten have been acknowledged.

But, despite suppression of information of the disappearances, we have long known of them — and can no longer tacitly approve of them. We owe it to the missing to correct the course of justice in this country.

## **Freedom, finally**

ALMOST a decade after she was wrongly accused of blasphemy, Aasia Bibi was acquitted by the top court in October 2018. This Tuesday, the Supreme Court dismissed the final roadblock in the way of her freedom: a petition by a local cleric seeking review of the court's judgement.

This clears the former death-row prisoner of all malicious charges. In strong, uncompromising words, the newly sworn-in Chief Justice Asif Khosa reiterated the court's position. He voiced the court's support of the farm labourer and mother of two, while casting doubt on the character and intentions of her accusers.

But freedom does not mean security: not for the judges and lawyer who braved the odds and acted according to the principles of their profession, not for the family members of the ill-accused who never gave up their struggle, and most certainly not for Aasia Bibi herself.

Also read: What you need to know about Aasia Bibi's trial

While the court may have freed her, it is now the government's responsibility to make sure her life is out of harm's way, as well as the lives of all those connected to the case.

Since the verdict was announced last year, Aasia Bibi was given protective custody, while her family went into hiding. It is now up to the government to facilitate either her safe exit from the country, or grant her security in the unlikely event she chooses to stay on.

A disturbing report sometime ago stated that extremists were going door to door to hunt down the most recognised blasphemy-related victim in the country. The case was an ugly reminder of how far the bigotry had spread, and how deep the bloodlust had seeped.

Take a look: The day Salman Taseer fell silent

It is unlikely that a poor Christian woman from rural Sheikhpura would ever have imagined her story would one day be given international headlines, and that so many major events in the country would be tied to her sentence in the past eight years. Two high-profile lives were lost in connection to the case — Punjab

governor Salmaan Taseer and minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti — and countless damage caused in the ensuing protests by the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, formed after Taseer's killer was executed by the state.

While those with reason and heart celebrate her acquittal, let us not forget the scores of others languishing in jails over such wrongful allegations. And let us remember Mashal Khan, Shahzad, Shama, and all others who have lost their lives over false and malicious allegations by mobs.

## **Circular debt**

WITH the approval of a plan to float Rs200bn worth of Sukuk bonds to partially settle some claims of the circular debt, the government has chosen to walk down an oft-tried road. Since the first floatation of Term Finance Certificates in 2009 for the same purpose, this will be the fourth major retirement of the outstanding amounts in the power sector in a decade. Along the way, there have been other such retirement exercises or liquidity injections, but none have succeeded in dealing with the problem in a sustainable manner. The largest such exercise was undertaken in 2013, when the PML-N government was sworn in, while making promises that the circular debt would not be allowed to return. Yet today, it is higher than it ever was, standing Rs1.4tr, and threatening to choke the power sector all over again.

Retiring at least a portion of these outstanding amounts from government funds is probably the only option available today, as it was in the years past. But simply retiring the amount without bringing about any deep-rooted changes in the billing and recovery systems of the power sector, as well as reforming the pricing and governance regime will be a fruitless exercise. That is how we have run this circle for decades. Sadly, accompanying the announcement of the plan for Sukuk bonds, there was also the announcement that the power division had backed away from its commitments to bring about improvements in system efficiency. As of now, more than six months into its term, the government has advanced no vision and no big ideas about how it intends to reform the power sector to improve its liquidity position and streamline its governance. So the Sukuk bond looks like nothing but a temporary measure at the moment. The amount is not large enough to make a meaningful dent in the problem, yet is big enough to

impact public indebtedness. The time to bring forward a vision for reform of the power sector has long arrived.