

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March 2018

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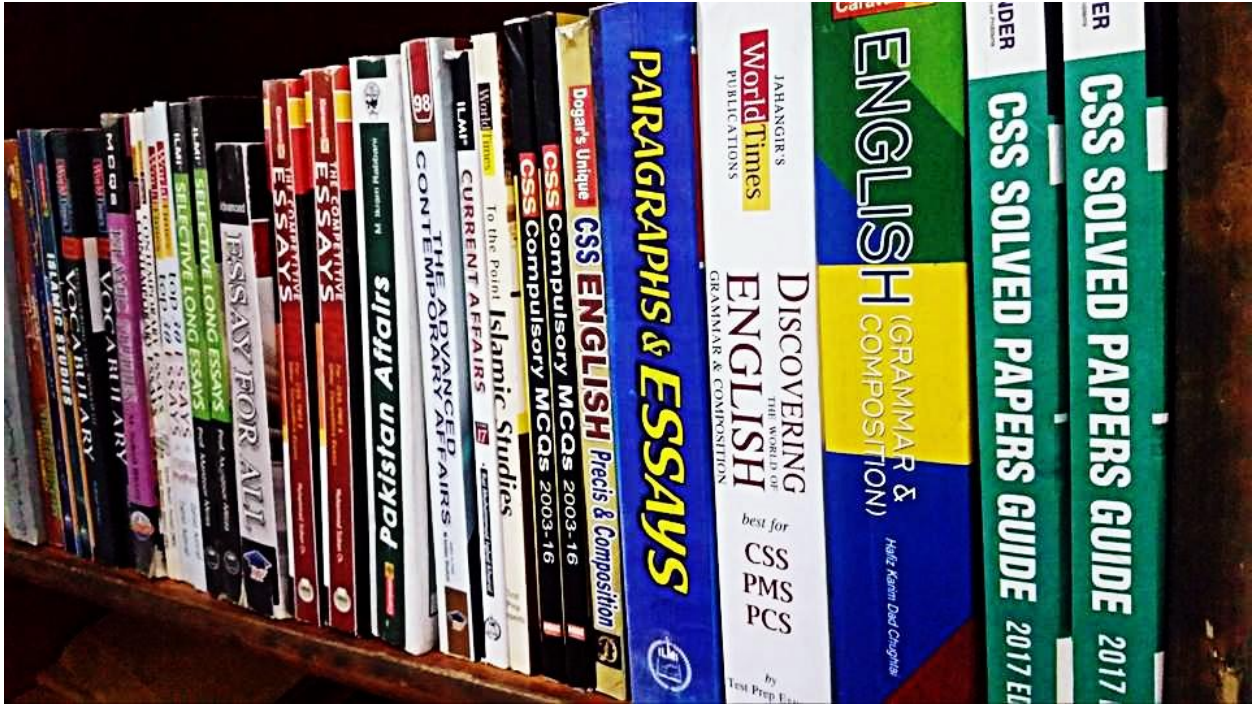
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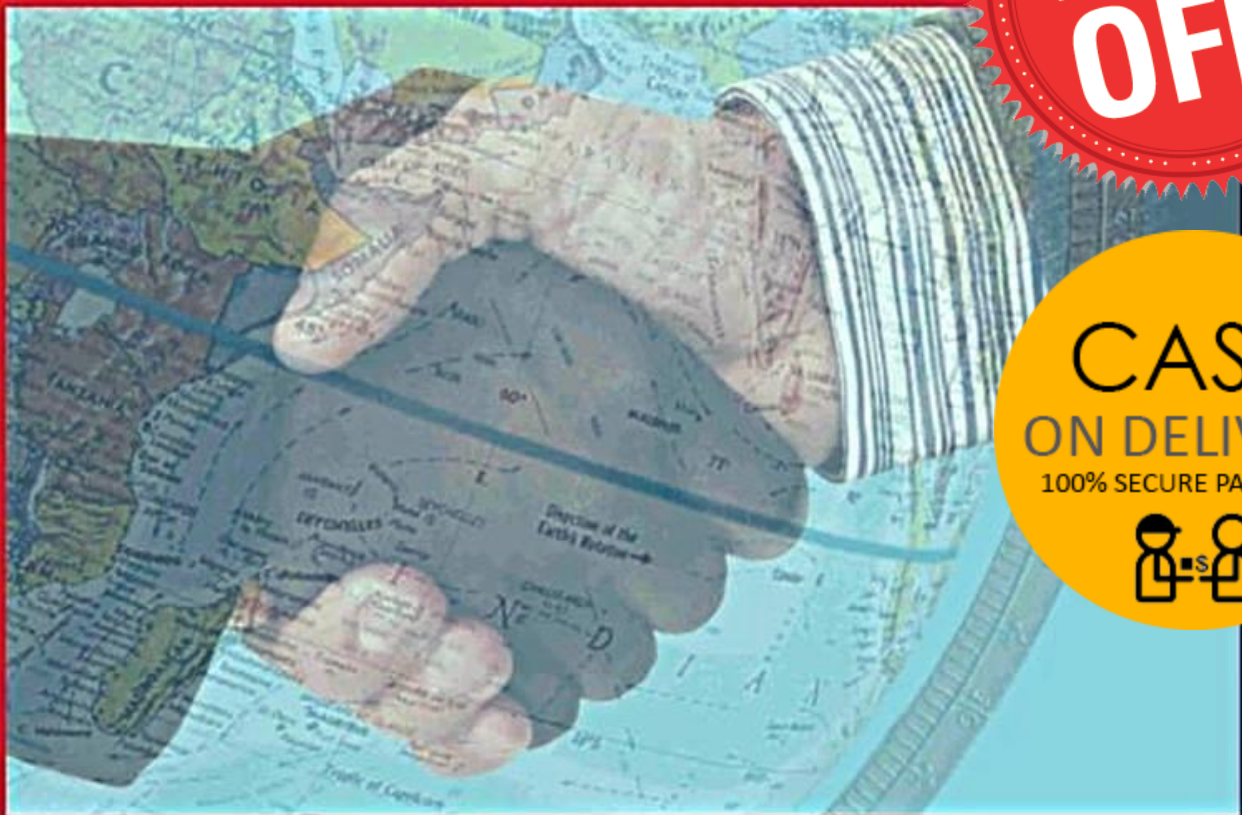
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Sharif brothers' new role

IT is all in the name. One cannot really take Mian Nawaz Sharif out of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz.

The former prime minister inspires his followers with political values and a style all his own; in fact, these have seen him scale ever newer heights in Pakistan's corridors of power.

Even though Shahbaz Sharif is considered to have been the biggest recipient of his older brother's coaching, the Punjab chief minister's appointment as PML-N president in dynastic fashion may still not be deemed to reflect a true Sharifian continuation.

The Nawaz element must be seen to be fully reinforced and operative.

And so, when Shahbaz Sharif took over the reins of the party on Tuesday it was thought necessary to also elevate Nawaz Sharif to the position of PML-N's eternal guide.

It is, ultimately, Mr Sharif's party even when his bright understudy appears to be leading it to fulfil a condition that is required by the law.

The moment throws up new possibilities and challenges, just as it brings back memories of how the party came to represent Mian Nawaz Sharif over the years.

The challenges, including those faced now and previously during the rule of Gen Pervez Musharraf, are remarkable given the rather inauspicious handing over of power to a young Nawaz Sharif in the 1980s.

At that time, the reins were quite literally snatched away from the gentle grasp of Muhammad Khan Junejo and given to the man who had proven to be a keen and obedient student of the art of politics during Gen Ziaul Haq's time and under the military dictator's patronage.

The crucial turn came in the 1988 general election in which this chief of the biggest PML faction allowed himself to be used by the establishment to contain Benazir Bhutto's PPP.

Not only was he able to contain the PPP's presence in the National Assembly, Mr Sharif shocked and defeated the party in the 1988 polls in the Punjab Assembly too.

This singularly significant incident in history had a defining effect on the PML-N's fortunes and put it on the road to where it finds itself today — as, perhaps, the most popular political party of Punjab since independence.

But it is not about the party — it's about the man, whose decision it is primarily to set the direction for his successor as party chief.

Yes, the loyal younger brother is known to have a mind of his own but as the new president of the PML-N he cannot be expected to practise his reconciliatory craft in a way that overwhelms Nawaz Sharif's visibly popular agitation.

It has to be a careful mix. The younger Sharif should be intelligent enough to understand that right now, politics and the times demand that he appear to play a true custodian of his brother's interests.

Disarray at PSX

THE wrangling amid the board of directors at the Pakistan Stock Exchange is testimony to the enduring power of the broker community over the front-line regulator. The present board is now at the end of its term and fresh elections are due. In view of this, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan had asked the board to hold elections by Feb 28, 2018. That date has come and gone, but the board has been deadlocked on the process despite at least five meetings held thus far to sort out the matter. At issue is the age-old problem of who will have how much of a say on the board, which is a key policy-setting organ of the front-line regulator. The broker community wants to retain its sway by weighing in on the nomination of independent directors on the board. The SECP, on the other hand, wants to protect the interests of minority investors, as well as push the PSX towards greater independence from the influence of the broker community, and the constitution of the board is a key element in pursuit of this objective.

Almost from its inception, the PSX has been held hostage by the power of the broker community. The ongoing demutualisation has diluted some of that power, and the arrival of a new Chinese management following the sale of PSX shares and its listing as a publicly traded company has changed the regulatory landscape in important ways. The Chinese management, along with some independent directors, is of the view that such wrangling over the constitution of the board negatively impacts the regulators' policy-setting and enforcement role. It is hard to disagree. The bourse badly needs reforms to move into the 21st century, and start putting in place the safeguards to prevent the malpractices that have afflicted it over the decades. The credibility of the bourse will only be established once a new and professional management, free from the vested interests

of large brokers, is able to advance the right reforms to enhance its oversight and safeguard investor interests. It is high time that the transition from the old world to the new got under way in earnest at the PSX. Continuing to limit the role of the brokers is key to this process, and the SECP, along with the new management, should persevere in its efforts to ensure that setting policy at the bourse is freed from broker control.

Mobile phone suspension

IN the long fight against militancy, the state has faced a number of new difficulties and made many mistakes. Yet, measures intended to protect the people ought to be refined to minimise public inconvenience. The shutdown of mobile phone services on public holidays and occasions deemed a security risk by the state is an example of a disproportionate, and an arguably counterproductive, response to the terrorist threat. The official explanation for such shutdowns, to the extent that officials have felt the need to inform the public, has revolved around the potential for militants to coordinate and launch attacks using mobile phones as communication devices and triggers. No consideration was given to the disruption in the lives of the citizenry by such bans and the failure of emergency response systems in the event of an attack. Now, the Islamabad High Court, petitioned by the telecommunications firms and a member of the public, has declared illegal the suspension of mobile phones services on the pretext of security concerns. It is a welcome move that the state should accept.

Two considerations matter here. First, is the suspension of mobile phone services legal and within the ambit of the powers of the authorities that routinely enforce such suspensions? In the long fight against militancy, now well into a second decade of counterterrorism operations, the state cannot endlessly rely on ad hoc solutions and unproven assumptions. Not only is the telecom sector a significant part of the economy, but quite literally tens of millions of Pakistanis have faced the frustration of suspension of mobile phone services, sometimes for several days in a row. To date, there has been no evidence provided publicly by any institution or security agency of the need or usefulness of suspending mobile phone services. Secondly, then, why should the public be inconvenienced because the state prefers disproportionate and unproven methods under the pretext of public security?

Kabul's bold offer

THROUGH a pall of extreme violence, a glimmer of hope has appeared.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani opened a peace conference in Kabul on Wednesday by offering the Afghan Taliban peace talks with no preconditions.

In a sweeping proposal, a first in over 17 years of war against the Taliban, the Afghan leader suggested a ceasefire, prisoner swaps and recognising the Taliban as a political party to facilitate a Kabul-based peace process.

The offer of dialogue itself is not new and many elements of Mr Ghani's proposal are familiar, but taken together they offer a potentially comprehensive path to eventual peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Importantly, Mr Ghani spoke mainly about peace and reconciliation and eschewed bellicose rhetoric in his speech.

In a country where so many missed opportunities and poor choices by all sides in the war have blocked all avenues to peace so far, the tone in which positive, peaceful suggestions are made can be as relevant as the substance of the offer itself.

While the few, halting efforts at peace process so far have failed, it has long been clear that for peace and stability in Afghanistan, a successful dialogue can only be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Certainly, countries such as Pakistan, the US, Iran and others with influence in Afghanistan will have a role to play, but the dialogue must be primarily conducted among the various Afghan groups.

In the case of the US, the Taliban's general insistence on bypassing Kabul and directly talking to Washington, the apparent unwillingness of the Trump administration to engage in dialogue with the Taliban, and the need for a decision on withdrawal of foreign troops from the US suggests that an intra-Afghan peace process will have significant hurdles to overcome.

Nevertheless, without a predominantly internally driven peace process, it is not clear how peace can ever be achieved in a war where neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban appear capable of winning a decisive military victory.

For Pakistan, the path ahead is relatively clear: do as much as possible to nudge along an intra-Afghan dialogue while seeking the cooperation of the government in Kabul against anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Certainly, given their long history of conflict and mistrust, Pakistan and Afghanistan will not easily be able to deliver the mutual cooperation that is needed to progressively eliminate militancy from the region.

Yet, that very history of conflict and mistrust should be reason enough to force new, positive change.

Neither have a succession of governments and military leaderships in Pakistan been able to vanquish militancy inside Pakistan, nor have three US presidencies and two very different attempts at a national government in Afghanistan delivered an acceptable level of security in Afghanistan.

There is an alternative to permanent war and conflict.

President Ghani has demonstrated boldness and vision; Pakistan should reciprocate for the region's sake.

Pakistanis at Gitmo

ALTHOUGH reduced to a few dozen prisoners — six of them Pakistani nationals — Guantanamo Bay has held terror suspects indefinitely, for the most part without fair trials.

Years of arbitrary detention and the use of sustained abuse and excessive interrogation techniques, that reportedly have not stopped, makes the case for the prison's closure even more compelling.

This week a group of independent experts reporting to the UN Human Rights Council have asked for the release of Pakistani national Ammar al-Baluchi while condemning both detainee conditions and the use of degrading interrogation techniques.

Held at Guantanamo since 2006, his imprisonment breaches at least 13 international human rights covenants, they said.

Denied due process and a fair trial under the US judicial system, even the UN special rapporteur on torture found the prisoner was still being tortured.

If there are reasons to suspect Ammar al-Baluchi for acts of terrorism (he was briefly married to Aafia Siddiqui, and is a nephew of 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed), there must be a fair investigation and trial.

It must be noted that the UN has pointed to his detention as “an act of discrimination based on his status as a foreign national and his religion”.

Moreover, the Pakistani government should push for fair trials for other detained citizens — including Ahmed Rabbani, a taxi driver rendered in 2002.

The failure of the Foreign Office to pursue cases of detained citizens cleared for legal release from Guantanamo but still languishing incommunicado is reprehensible.

It is hard to recall when our government has registered its protest over the torture of detainees in such jails.

Justice Project Pakistan, for instance, had alerted the Lahore High Court to the inhumane treatment of Pakistani prisoners at Bagram in Afghanistan — until then, the government had been apparently clueless about the fate of many men rendered to the Americans by the Musharraf regime.

Indefinite detention without charge is intolerable.

The US must recognise civilian courts have brought more terrorist suspects to trial than military tribunals in Guantanamo.

For this, Congress must release funds to try alleged terrorists on US soil.

Torture must not continue on any American president's watch.

A Pakistani detainee on hunger strike encapsulates this fight against injustice: “I don’t want to die, but after four years of peaceful protest I am hardly going to stop ... I will definitely stop when President Trump frees the prisoners who have been cleared, and allows everyone else a fair trial.

Moody’s report

DESPITE the challenges faced by Pakistan’s financial system, there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic given the latest report from Moody’s.

The rating outlook on Pakistan’s banking system is “stable”, says the latest report from the key rating agency.

Moreover, the fact that the “biggest challenge facing the banks is their large holdings of low-rated Pakistan government bonds” is also an improvement from a time when domestic banks saw their credit ratings downgraded due to overexposure to government securities.

Last year saw some drastic reductions in government borrowings from banks, and the balance sheets are showing a growing trend towards private-sector lending.

In part, this is born of necessity considering that interest rates had been coming down until recently, and there are large-scale retirements under way of the longer-tenor Pakistan Investment Bonds into which banks had collectively stampeded starting around 2010.

But major challenges still remain if the trend towards private-sector lending is to continue.

For one, domestic banks are still waiting for their slice of CPEC action.

Moody’s says that as growth picks up and CPEC-related investments gather momentum, the banks are likely to find more opportunities in the private sector.

The present trend, however, has led to some scepticism about that claim.

For one, the growing role of consumer finance these days is likely to plateau out.

Corporate lending has more potential over the medium term, but given the trillions that are locked up in government securities, it will be a challenge for the banks to find

borrowers in the magnitude required, unless they are willing to significantly upgrade their credit risk evaluation capacity.

The same holds true in agriculture lending.

And rising interest rates could restore some of the allure of government securities, depending on how far the tightening will go.

The banks appear to be emerging from a prolonged period of lending almost exclusively to government, but the road ahead is longer and more difficult than many might bargain for.

Punjab-centric politics by PML-N

A DECISION has been made, the party has fallen into line, but great uncertainty remains.

Shahbaz Sharif is the interim president of the PML-N, Nawaz Sharif the so-called quaid for life, but neither has expressed a vision for national politics that is encouraging.

The PML-N made a stunning return to politics in Pakistan in 2008, winning an unexpectedly high number of seats in an election in which the PPP was the front runner.

But 2008 confirmed what has become an inescapable trend for the PML-N: despite objections by party leaders, the N-League is steadfastly a party of Punjab.

The party has genuine support in a region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and there is a smattering of support in Balochistan, but it cannot reasonably be argued that the PML-N is a party of Pakistan.

In effect, the PML-N has embraced the fracturing and regionalisation of the electorate in a cynical bet that because Punjab is the most populous province, sweeping elections there will carve a path to power at the centre.

With the collapse of the PPP as a national political party, the recent electoral dominance of the PML-N and the emergence of the PTI as a contender for federal power have exacerbated the Punjab-centric nature of politics in the country.

As prime minister and now as politically wounded candidate barnstorming the country, Nawaz Sharif has occasionally wandered into the so-called smaller provinces, making promises, pledging that he is interested in the socioeconomic conditions of the people, claiming that he will further the political emancipation of Pakistan — but is all this credible? Perhaps Shahbaz Sharif will be able to effect a turnaround.

Yet, there is nothing in the younger Sharif's record so far that has suggested he is able, willing or interested in carrying the message of the PML-N to a broader, national audience.

He surely must and there are options, but first he must evince a genuine, public interest in a truly national agenda.

If Shahbaz Sharif does choose to use his stint as PML-N president to appeal to a broader, inter-provincial audience, he will have to overcome a historical belief that the PML-N is a Punjab-centric party.

That will involve not just holding rallies in other provinces, but investing time and energy in cultivating and growing a party machine in those provinces.

In the past, the PML-N has opted to align itself, for example, with anti-PPP options in rural Sindh. That is not genuine political outreach.

Poor as the PML-N's record has been, the PTI's lack of interest in cultivating a national political base is mystifying.

Imran Khan has held rallies in urban and rural Sindh, but it is clear that his relentless focus has been on Punjab, even though the PTI is the governing party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Punjab may be a path to power, but it is a narrow one. Better to embrace a national politics.

Rangers in perpetuity?

THE phrase ‘Rangers-led operation’ is one that Karachi’s residents have become used to.

Indeed, any announcement about it being wrapped up would be greeted with incredulity and even some trepidation.

The visit on Thursday of army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa to the city’s corps headquarters where he was apprised of the security situation in Sindh, particularly Karachi, made it clear that in the view of the security establishment this is an open-ended operation that would “continue to maintain normalcy” in the city.

There has certainly been a precipitous decline in major crimes, including targeted killings, terrorist attacks, extortion and kidnapping in the metropolis since the campaign began in September 2013.

The preceding years had seen Karachiites become hostage to a host of lawless elements, including militant wings of political parties and violent extremists; the near-cessation in their activities thus elicited much relief.

However, street crime remains the Achilles’ heel of the much-vaunted operation, and until the law-enforcement authorities manage to bring it under control, residents of the city will continue to feel vulnerable every time they step out of their homes.

That is not the definition of a truly successful law-and-order operation.

With around 105 police stations in Karachi, the police, unlike the Rangers, have a grass-roots presence in Pakistan’s biggest urban centre which gives them an important advantage over a paramilitary force institutionally at a remove from the public.

This advantage, however, means little when recruitment and promotions in the police have for years been based on political considerations rather than merit, and when

hundreds of personnel, even those belonging to the elite force, are on protocol duty for VVIPs.

Moreover, for a long-term, sustainable solution to Karachi's law-and-order problems, it is imperative to strengthen the police, weed out the politicisation that has corrupted it; increase its funding; and bring in criminal justice reforms that will supplement its work.

Fortunately, there seems to be some realisation of how deep the rot had gone, or at least events have so transpired that the Sindh government has been unable to interfere in the workings of the police to the same extent.

Recruitments are said to have taken place on merit for the first time through credible tests.

Nevertheless, a spate of incidents in recent months, including the killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud and Intezar Ahmed, shows that much has to change if the police are to serve the public.

Film policy at last

IT all sounds well-meaning and encouraging, but as always, the challenge lies in actively pursuing the vision.

Earlier this week, Minister of State for Information, Broadcasting and National Heritage Marriyum Aurangzeb announced the country's first-ever film and cultural policy.

Speaking at the conclusion of a three-day cultural event in Islamabad, she explained that film would be formally recognised as an industry, and that a fund and film academy would be set up while public-private partnerships would play a vital role in the building of studios.

Along with all this are other encouraging plans, including the abolition of taxes and duties in areas such as the import of film equipment.

The artists themselves have not been forgotten and are set to benefit from health schemes.

As far as the construction of cinemas is concerned, 80pc rebates, Ms Aurangzeb said, would be offered by the government.

If even half of these ambitious goals are achieved, it will go a long way towards reviving a moribund sector that Pakistan has consistently ignored over the decades, to its own detriment.

The country's film and culture industry — once a fairly thriving sector that not just earned a name for itself but also went some way towards building a unique cultural identity that hoped to give others in the region a run for their money — is a much underrated area, the potential of which policymakers have simply chosen not to see.

The truth is that in a country that is constantly seeking to explain to the world its own unique perspective, the power of stories, both fact and fiction, is immense.

And this is quite apart from the many ways in which an active and strong film and cultural policy can impact the economy and the employment sectors.

Such a policy ought to have been developed years ago; if it is now ready to be implemented, it is not a moment too soon for a country that has needed much support in this area.

A better Senate

THE initial reaction of the major political parties to the results of the Senate election has underlined why parliament has failed to become the fulcrum of the democratic process in the country that it ought to be.

The reaction of winners and losers has been intensely political, a reality that in and of itself is not a problem.

The Senate electorate is the people's representatives in the country's assemblies, which are rightly dominated by political parties.

Yet, the very composition of the Senate — equal members for the four provinces and different elected categories of senators — suggests a higher, federation-binding purpose.

But a familiar trading of allegations of vote-buying, a real problem that no party attempted to solve in good faith before the election, and a scramble to grab the Senate chairman slot in a house where no single party has anything close to a majority, suggest very different priorities of the parties themselves as compared to what the Constitution envisages.

The incoming senators have six years to demonstrate their commitment to the democratic project and interest in strengthening institutions.

The Punjab-centric focus of the PML-N and the party leadership's near disdain for parliamentary norms and traditions have accelerated the weakening of parliament as an institution, but other parties and most senators themselves have played their part too.

It is striking how other than a handful of senators, the Senate has remained quiet about some of the most pressing issues of the times.

From missing persons to promoting a fair federation via the rights of the smaller province, especially the dire security situation in Balochistan, in general the senators have not nudged the state towards better outcomes.

If the situation is to improve, the issue of vote-buying and horse-trading must surely be addressed at the outset.

The PML-N is cheering the election of party-backed but officially independent candidates for now.

That may change as inside the Senate there are a number of new independents, particularly from Balochistan, whose political allegiances may quickly change.

If the old pattern repeats itself now, perhaps attention can be given to Imran Khan's call for direct Senate elections.

Criticisms of the PTI's role in perpetuating the current system aside, positive suggestions from all quarters should be considered.

The country needs a better Senate than what it has had in recent years.

Gender inequality

BY not maintaining gender equality and failing to incorporate the opinions and experiences of half the population, we are losing out on opportunities to improve health and economic growth.

The many reasons, both institutional and behavioural, for this kind of gender imbalance are highlighted in a joint UNDP and UN Women report that explores women's representation and access to decision-making roles in Pakistan's civil service.

Gender Equality in Public Administration looks at women's perception of barriers and opportunities to identify discrepancies between official policies and their implementation with regard to inducting women in the civil service.

In the last 15 years, women's labour force participation has increased by more than 50pc as documented — however, this still translates to employment for only one out of five women, according to the report.

Clearly, access to education remains an unrelenting obstacle to women's empowerment.

Moreover, nothing will give without reforming policies to boost women's economic rights.

Consider these figures: from 2013-14, the federal government (all grades 1-22) inducted 444,521 persons in the civil service; only 20,428 were women.

Because traditionally defined roles compartmentalise women professionals, federal departments recruit more women as teachers and medical staff.

Besides most women are admitted into the civil service at entry levels; fewer receive promotions; and almost all face discrimination when it comes to selection and remuneration.

Realistically, it will take generations to remove entrenched gender stereotypes and misogynistic social norms, virtually enslaving girls for life and denying women agency.

Yet the only way to bridge the gender imbalance is through quality education — especially significant when higher education is a prerequisite to increasing women's representation in the civil service.

Meanwhile, women's political representation matters because countries with a larger number of women as ministers or in parliament witness lower levels of inequality, more confidence in government and higher health spending.

With few women in the provincial and federal legislatures in this country, political parties must support increasing female participation in government knowing it will contribute to improved trust in public institutions and favour more informed and inclusive policymaking.

When women have a voice in shaping public policy, it also maximises their economic potential which is critical to achieving national growth.

Despite girls outperforming boys at schools and even with more visible changes in the boardroom as women step into leadership roles, many are still denied their full potential.

Even men in power would concede this is socially unfair and economically flawed.

Militancy threat remains

THE arrest of a “most wanted militant” by police in Karachi on Friday illustrates the hydra-headed nature of the battle against violent extremism.

Addressing a news conference, the SSP West alleged that the individual is associated with the banned Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and had links with some of the men who carried out the Safoora bus massacre in 2015.

That attack, one of the worst incidents of sectarian violence in Karachi, left 47 members of the Shia Ismaili community dead.

According to the police, the suspect was planning to form a new AQIS cell to target law-enforcement personnel and carry out sectarian killings in the city.

He allegedly has close relatives actively involved in militancy as well, including a brother running a militant network in Balochistan, and an uncle who is an AQIS member.

During his interrogation, the suspect also apparently revealed that he had met a number of other militants, some of them Arab, in Balochistan.

When violent extremism has had a chance to metastasise in a society, eliminating every vestige of it takes time and diligence.

If one can give credence to the police's claims about the arrested man, it is clear that despite the anti-militancy operations in the country, the danger from scattered elements of largely dismantled terrorist networks remains.

Karachi with its urban chaos and areas of severe deprivation offers many opportunities for militants to blend in and lie low, emerging only when needed to carry out a strike.

In short, Pakistan's largest city is a perfect incubator for sleeper cells.

There is thus no room for complacency on the part of the law-enforcement machinery.

It is also worth noting that the 'terrorist trail' almost always includes Balochistan.

Yet what action are authorities taking against the pockets of militants in that province? We cannot take the chance that violent extremism will survive below the radar only to once again emerge with renewed vigour.

The battle may have been won, but the war goes on.

Opposition to privatisation

ONE can have many opinions regarding privatisation, but a knee-jerk rejection of all plans to privatise any state-owned enterprise, without any mention of what alternative one has to stem the mounting losses, means the political opposition in the country is running out of ideas.

The senior leadership of both, the PPP and the PTI, have categorically stated that they will resist the government's plans to privatise PIA or the Pakistan Steel Mills.

These plans are unrealistic to start off with, and not many people believe that the government can pull off in a matter of months what successive governments have failed to do in close to a decade and a half.

Attacking such unrealistic aspirations from platforms as high as the parties' top leadership only shows that the rival parties are firmly opposing things for the sake of opposing them.

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What might have lent more credence to such pronouncements coming from such high offices is if the parties in question had advanced any alternative vision for how the ailing public-sector enterprises can be turned around.

The accumulated losses at PIA are now about Rs320bn while PSM's losses have touched Rs161bn. At this rate, within a few years, these losses could swell to become larger than our annual peacetime defence budget.

Both entities required regular injections of equity from the government, at taxpayer expense, to make their payroll or meet crucial debt-service obligations.

Clearly, they cannot continue lumbering along like this for much longer.

The fact that they stand at this pass is testament to the failure of our collective political leadership to develop any kind of vision of the way forward.

This style of politics, of opposing strategic steps only to put up resistance to an idea conceived by political rivals, has done enormous damage to Pakistan over the years.

There are some realities that just should not be politicised.

Our rising gas deficits, for example, or the lack of indigenous mining expertise or the bleeding of the public-sector enterprises are clearly among those realities.

Each of these issues has been the subject of opposition for the sake of opposition, of crude smear campaigns and sinister innuendo, and have therefore suffered from the lack of any political consensus on a resolution.

Now, in the twilight of its reign, the government has come up with a plan that few are taking seriously regarding the hasty privatisation of two large public-sector entities.

It is one thing to decry the haste in which this is being championed, but quite another to do so while having no ideas of one's own of how the mounting losses are to be contained.

When dealing with these issues, some sort of consensus on the way forward is what is needed more than cheap political point-scoring.

On ephedrine's trail

THE observations by the International Narcotics Control Board about the use of ephedrine by Pakistan would appear to suggest that the authorities here need to further tighten their focus on the matter.

The INCB in its annual report of 2017 says that the country continues to use huge quantities of the drug despite a global realisation and increasing warnings about overreliance on it and its adverse effects.

Whereas many other parts of the world have curbed pseudoephedrine drugs, the region in which Pakistan is located has, in the past few years, caused the most concern.

Even within the region, Iran and Afghanistan are now hailed for their efforts to curtail the usage of the herbal substance which is liable to illegal administration to achieve ends such as weight control.

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Meanwhile, the INCB says the annual "legitimate requirements for combined bulk and pharmaceutical preparations containing pseudoephedrine for Pakistan has remained around 50 tonnes".

The inherent message is that there may exist in the country a network which has the capability to make illegal ephedrine drugs and promote their unhealthy, dangerous use.

This is in contrast to the view presented by some pharmaceutical experts.

It is said the infamous, even if yet to be concluded, ephedrine case being heard in the country for the last five years or so has awakened the Pakistani government to the challenges of preventing illegal ephedrine drugs. An effort is on to promote a more restrained and strictly legal application of ephedrine.

Official vigilance should have resulted in some reduction in the use of the drug by now, and if this has not happened, the authorities must review their campaign to understand their shortcomings on this front.

When a general election is beckoning, there is always a tendency among governments to be lost in other, generally political, concerns at the cost of crucial campaigns that are abandoned midway, or put off until after the polls.

This is where global watchdog agencies come in handy, as they seek to maintain pressure on governments, insisting that they do not stop their campaigns midway.

Ephedrine control has been a high-profile cause in Pakistan that has cast its shadow across political parties and highlighted how easy illegal access to the substance can be.

Far from the effort to control its use being abandoned or slowed down, the authorities must push ahead to put in place a sound drugs-monitoring system.

Plea for ‘amnesty’

FORMER Karachi mayor Mustafa Kamal is known for his no-holds-barred approach to politics, often tearing into his political foes with a fair degree of ‘frankness’.

Once a rising star in the united MQM, Mr Kamal has launched one verbal attack after another against his former party, particularly his ex-boss Altaf Hussain, after returning to Pakistan and forming the Pak Sarzameen Party in 2016.

Never one to shy away from controversy, Mr Kamal made a strange call while addressing a party event in Karachi last week by asking the army chief to grant a “one-time amnesty” to the youth of Karachi similar to the offers made to “militants in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/Fata”.

He added that “Mohajir youths” would never go astray should Gen Qamar Bajwa accept this demand.

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This is, by all means, a bizarre plea from the PSP chief.

Firstly, it is not clear why he is asking the army chief to issue such a reprieve.

After all, if certain political or ethnic militants in Karachi want to give up the way of the gun and reintegrate into the mainstream, it is the civilian government they should approach.

Secondly, it is not clear which type of militants Mr Kamal is seeking amnesty for.

The PSP chief's former party, the MQM, has a well-earned reputation for violence; is he issuing an invitation to his ex-party comrades to join the PSP and in the bargain have all their crimes 'dry-cleaned'? If this is the intention, then it is regrettable considering Mustafa Kamal's constant claim of aspiring to principled politics.

Ethnic and political militants of all stripes have wreaked havoc in Karachi for decades.

If there is a genuine desire to decommission political parties' armed wings, then this should be welcomed.

However, selective efforts to mainstream fighters for political reasons through dubious amnesties are an affront to justice.

All parties in Karachi should work towards ending the culture of violence in the city by first
gBalancing ties

Balancing ties

RECENTLY, the National Security Committee claimed that a so-called recalibration in foreign policy is under way.

The emphasis henceforth will be on ratcheting up ties with countries of the region and pursuing economic initiatives.

Now, two senior ministers of the PML-N government have in comments to Reuters suggested that a number of energy-related projects with Russia may cause a breakthrough in bilateral ties that were strained for much of the Cold War and plummeted after the then USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

Alongside a deepening of economic ties with China, CPEC being a significant component of the Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan could finally realise the potential for regional trade and connectivity that this country's geographic position has given it.

Therefore, pursuing a deepening of economic and diplomatic ties on a mutually beneficial basis with Russia and creating opportunities for the Pakistani public to travel to and work in regional economies ought to be a central goal of the state and elected governments.

Certainly, there will be a number of challenges.

The ambitious CPEC partnership has deepened doubts about the willingness of the Pakistani state to be transparent and its ability to negotiate the best possible economic terms in every deal.

Beyond negotiating strategy and economic vision, however, there is potentially a greater problem: viewing ties with China and Russia through the prism of deteriorating relations with the US.

A rising China and a more aggressive Russia have shaped a global narrative of greater competition and the increasing likelihood of conflict with the US.

But in Pakistani strategic circles, a deterioration in ties with the US, primarily because of the war in Afghanistan, and a perception that India and the US are combining to put pressure on Pakistan are offered as compelling reasons why this country must turn away from America and towards China and Russia.

That is the wrong approach.

Instead, as Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif has said, Pakistan is not seeking a "divorce" from the West, "but a balance in [Pakistan's] relationships".

Indeed, a great benefit of Pakistan's geostrategic position ought to be friendly ties with all big powers, not tilting from one side to the next.

The visit of Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua to the US, then, ought not to be merely about fire-fighting, but part of a wide-ranging and high-level process of stabilising and improving ties with the US.

While there are legitimate grievances on both sides of the Pakistan-US relationship, it ought to be clear that disengagement or a further ratcheting down of ties would be mutually damaging.

Regional engagement should not mean global disengagement.

Perhaps the national security apparatus should also make it clear that regional engagement means all countries of the region.

Afghanistan and India should be encouraged to join regional trade and connectivity projects that Pakistan may pursue.

Trouble in Kashmir

FOR several decades now, India-held Kashmir has experienced an ugly cycle of repression followed by an explosion of violence.

The Indian government — particularly through the brutish tactics of its armed forces — keeps pushing the Kashmiri people to the wall by denying them their rights and attempting to crush their desire for self-determination.

This untenable situation then boils over into popular protests and confrontation between the people of the held valley and the enforcers in New Delhi.

The grim scenario has been repeating itself since the late 1980s, though the roots of Kashmiri disaffection go back to the ‘unfinished business’ of Partition.

Once again, occupied Kashmir is simmering with discontent.

The latest protests have come after a number of civilians were killed in Shopian district by troops.

Thousands of Kashmiris marched in protest, saying that the murdered men were non-combatants.

The demonstrations are a reminder of the unrest that shook the held region after Indian forces gunned down young Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani in 2016.

Unfortunately, New Delhi seems to have learnt no lessons over the decades and is intent on using the same blunt methods to quell Kashmiri dissent.

Obviously, these tactics are not working as the region's people continue to thirst for freedom.

Things have only worsened since the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi took the reins at the centre in 2014. India-held Kashmir's people have to live under the suffocating footprint of the Indian military.

While India claims to respect democratic norms, it has used thoroughly undemocratic methods to crush Kashmiri resistance; these include the barbaric use of pellet guns on civilians, including children, as well as the much-publicised incident last year when Indian troops tied a man to a jeep as a human shield.

Such atrocious activities will hardly win Kashmiri hearts and minds; they will only increase the disaffection of the valley's people and further distance them from Delhi.

Moreover, the BJP's attempt to tinker with the Indian constitution to remove Kashmir's special status has not gone down well.

India must realise that clamping down on Kashmir is not the solution; the only remedy lies in talks, involving all three parties: India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris.

The path of negotiations will help the Kashmiris secure their legitimate rights, and hopefully clear up the toxic atmosphere that has poisoned ties between India and Pakistan since 1947.

Hair they come again

LET'S suppose a barber is constrained by certain factors, or his own beliefs for that matter, to refuse certain services to his clientele.

However unusual this situation may be, the barber can simply convey his decision to the client at the salon. It is simple.

But under what compelling circumstances would hairdressers — in fact a whole barbers' organisation — purportedly numbering in the thousands, hold a news conference to announce such a decision? Just as the practitioners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa declare that, from now on, they will not trim beards or hair in the French or English style, the question is raised about the kind of social pressure they must face for matters to come to this point.

The pressure had been building up — without any intervention from anyone, least of all the government.

It has indeed been a sustained campaign peppered along the way with incidents in which a district in one province expresses its disapproval of haircuts seen as 'unIslamic', only to have its views echoed in another province.

In what is not a surprise, quite often the ban is supported by a senior, local official who is not just content with backing it morally, but who actually signs the letter asking barbers to behave, making it a governmental decree, as happened in a Balochistan district.

It is these small victories that embolden those wanting to impose a strict 'religious' code.

Those who oppose them can face dire consequences, especially in the absence of a state that is unwilling to, or incapable of, playing its due role.

While announcing the restrictions, the association of KP hairdressers made an exception for foreigners — mainly Chinese nationals — working in the province, but obviously the fears that more and more stringent rules may follow a successful implementation of the hair and beard ban are based on genuine concerns.

The question is, who can stop the juggernaut once it is set in motion and is fed on something as emotive as faith?

Celebrating women

FOR the first time in two decades, International Women's Day will be celebrated in Pakistan with a statistical clarity: 101,314,780. That is the female population of the country according to the provisional results of the census conducted last March-May. More than 100m female Pakistanis, a population larger than most countries in the world, who have different lives, face different risks and have different opportunities. With the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women set to open next week in New York, the UN has called for International Women's Day to draw special attention this year to the rights

and activism of rural women. For Pakistan, that theme has special resonance. While sections of the urban female population have made undeniable progress towards gender empowerment and equality, the situation in rural Pakistan is almost certainly grim. Indeed, the absence of systematic documentation of women's contributions to the rural economy, both outside and inside the home, and the prevalence of regressive social codes often means that threats and opportunities for Pakistan's rural women can only be broadly estimated.

The recent election of a Thari Hindu woman, Krishna Kumari, to the Senate has briefly shone a national spotlight on the courageous activism of rural women, but it is clear that much work remains to be done. In terms of greater political inclusion for all women, there is an early opportunity to test the commitment of political parties: the upcoming general election. Certainly, the three major political parties in the country each have a reason to boost women's participation in the electoral process both as candidates and voters. The memory of PPP's iconic woman leader, Benazir Bhutto, still greatly influences the party. In the PML-N, a front-line political role for Maryam Nawaz can pave the way for greater female participation in a party that historically has been male dominated. The PTI's vibrant and inclusive political rallies are now so well established that the party can force positive change across the political spectrum if it gives women a greater role in party decision-making. Perhaps today, on International Women's Day, political parties will announce new measures to promote women's rights and participation in the political process.

Clearly, International Women's Day is not just for some women and some causes — it is a day to celebrate all women and press for progress in all women's causes. Over the last year, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have shone a much-needed spotlight on the discrimination, degradation and violence that women all over the world, even powerful ones in advanced economies, routinely contend with. Last month, Pakistan lost its iconic rights activist, Asma Jahangir. The lesson to be learned from her activism is that all wrongs, big and small, against women emancipated and less free, must always be fought with vigour and resoluteness. May more Pakistani women carry Asma Jahangir's immense legacy forward.

Sri Lanka violence

OVER the past few days, disturbing news of communal violence has been coming out of the island nation of Sri Lanka, involving members of the majority Buddhist Sinhalese community and minority Muslims.

Much of the trouble has been fuelled by rumours; the fallout has been deadly, with a number of deaths reported as well as widespread arson and rioting.

The district of Kandy has been at the centre of the storm.

While there was sporadic violence last week in which a mosque and Muslim-owned businesses were attacked, violence again flared on Monday after rumours spread that a Sinhalese man had been killed.

Sri Lankan authorities have declared a state of emergency to quell the trouble, while on Wednesday, the state moved to block social media in order to curb “hate speech”.

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka has over the last decade or so witnessed the rise of hard-line Buddhist groups, such as the Bodu Bala Sena, which have targeted the Muslim minority community.

Even in the latest violence, extremist monks are believed to have played a central part in stoking trouble.

In many ways, the rise of the extremist Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka mirrors the situation in Myanmar, where monks have been at the forefront of anti-Muslim agitation, particularly targeting the embattled Rohingya.

In fact, Wirathu, a fire-breathing monk, has been dubbed the “Burmese bin Laden”.

Perhaps these currents have something to do with the global rise of the hard right; in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, many Buddhist clerics have combined their religious vision with a xenophobic hyper-nationalism to create a combustible mix that threatens members of minority ethnic and religious groups.

Sri Lanka has witnessed a brutal civil war which lasted over 25 years, pitting the separatist Tamil Tigers against the primarily Sinhalese state.

Now, new fault lines are pitting the Sinhalese against Muslims.

The state must act before divisions are further fuelled.

The first priority must be to restore order, while those who work up mobs must be dealt with as per the law, even if they have donned clerical robes.

South Asia has already witnessed far too much communal violence, whether in the shape of the growing power of the religiously inspired right in this country, or the relentless march of the Sangh Parivar in India.

The authorities in Colombo need to undertake urgent efforts to maintain communal harmony in Sri Lanka..

Smear campaigns

THE last few days have seen a tawdry demonstration of the depths to which mainstream media and social media can sink for the sake of political point-scoring. It began with a story that was less news and more scandal-mongering, and which should never have seen the light of day. That in turn was met with even more scurrilous trolling on Twitter targeting the journalist concerned. The personal lives of politicians, male or female, should not be fodder for the media when the information has no significant bearing on politicians' public lives. It is especially reprehensible when women are maligned in the process. Similarly, private individuals have a reasonable expectation that they will not be subjected on social media to smear campaigns targeting their families.

Notwithstanding the many principled individuals who call out the most egregious excesses in an effort to maintain some degree of civility on the forum, social media is too often a free-for-all cesspit for proxy battles. The anonymity afforded by Twitter often further sharpens the skirmishes. In such an environment, social media can even set the agenda, and push mainstream media and politicians into raising their decibel levels — which inevitably leads to a lowering in the quality of content. Public discourse has noticeably coarsened in the last few years: political parties, intelligence agencies and their trolls have shown little restraint in maligning the other side, and some media personalities have played along — much to the detriment of their professed vocation. If what has transpired over the last few days is any indication of the quality of debate that will be on display in the run-up to the general election, we are in for a season of unseemly

mudslinging. However, it is high time that Pakistani media as a whole adopted a more mature approach instead of using their platform to settle scores and further personal agendas. Journalists must abide by the ethics of their profession; that is what distinguishes real journalism from that of the jaundiced kind. something as emotive as faith?etting rid of the black sheep within.

For PPP, power trumps principles

FOR a brief few days, a more positive side of the party re-emerged.

But quickly enough, the uglier side has reasserted itself.

The election of Krishna Kumari to the Senate was a much-needed and welcome move by the PPP.

The farewell speech of Farhatullah Babar and the strong comments in defence of democracy by outgoing Senate chairman Raza Rabbani gave cheer to PPP ideologues and supporters of democracy across the political spectrum.

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A turnaround in the recent politics of the PPP was not expected, but the swiftness and brutality with which PPP supremo Asif Zardari has slapped down Mr Rabbani and his long-time personal spokesperson Mr Babar is stunning.

To be sure, the PPP leadership is not bound to support Mr Rabbani for another term as Senate chairman and Mr Zardari can select whomsoever he deems appropriate to be his personal spokesperson.

But the timing and the indecorous nature of the moves against Mr Rabbani and Mr Babar suggest more cynical motives.

In effect, Mr Babar and Mr Rabbani appear to be facing punishment for their blunt expressions in support of democracy and against anti-democratic interference in the political process.

Set aside the personal repercussions for the two senators, what does the PPP stand for today politically? Like other major political parties and political actors in the country, the PPP has had to make compromises at many points in its history.

That is the reality of mainstream politics everywhere and the burden of civilian politicians in Pakistan.

But compromise cannot and should not amount to a thorough dismantling of political legacy and rejection of all principles and political ideology.

Mr Rabbani and Mr Babar are not the primary custodians of the PPP's democratic politics, Mr Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari arguably are.

In publicly slighting the outgoing Senate chairman and a loyal retiring PPP senator, Mr Zardari has once again implicitly suggested that power politics trumps all principled considerations.

Perhaps Bilawal Bhutto Zardari will finally attempt to emerge from the political shadow of his father and carry the PPP back to its political roots.

For all of Mr Zardari's machinations, or arguably because of them, the PPP is in a historic electoral decline.

His brand of politics may have allowed Mr Zardari and a close coterie of advisers to thrive, but surely even the PPP's political base in rural Sindh is wobbly.

The absence of organised political opposition to the PPP in rural Sindh could be as large a factor in the PPP's continuing dominance in the region as voters' genuine allegiance to the party.

More than Mr Zardari may appreciate or even understand, the country needs the PPP and its original brand of national, people-oriented, progressive politics.

Power politics has a place and time, but not in every place at every time.

IMF warning

IT has been more than a year since the IMF managing director, Christine Lagarde, came to Pakistan and said that Pakistan faces a “moment of opportunity” as it graduates out of a fund programme.

Reserves were at an all-time high, growth was gaining momentum, and inflation was subdued.

The moment was perfect, she said in every interview, to undertake the right reforms to put the economy on a sustainable footing.

But now, the IMF board has issued a warning.

In a surprisingly worded statement, the board says that the government needs to urgently focus on short-term measures to contain the deterioration in the external and the fiscal accounts.

Quite clearly, that ‘moment of opportunity’ has been squandered, and the country is now back on a glide path towards another IMF programme, and yet another round of macroeconomic ‘stabilisation’ is on the horizon.

As the current account deficit continues to register massive increases, despite a slight depreciation in the exchange rate and two rounds of regulatory duties to discourage ‘nonessential imports’, the trade deficit is eating away at the reserves.

Where it all ends is something that history has taught us with an almost monotonous consistency.

Given that the year ahead is an election year which will see an interim government come and go, with an election in between, followed by the arrival of a new government, it will prove to be an increasingly difficult task to put the growing economic imbalances of the country on the public radar.

This is also the year when the deficits, particularly on the external account, could grow to unmanageable proportions if present trends continue.

In short, this could be, if trends do not correct themselves quickly, the year when the economy needs the most attention and is unable to find it because politics is in the driving seat.

The warnings have been sounding for a few years now, especially since the visit of the IMF MD in October 2016.

That was the month that reserves began their downward trajectory on which they have stayed ever since.

Now, an authority no less than the board of directors at the IMF is warning that matters are urgent and require immediate attention.

Given the politics of the moment, it is unlikely that the attention required will be forthcoming.

Ban on loose cigarettes

IT has taken a while to achieve the goal, but better late than never.

It was in December 2016 that the Senate Standing Committee on the National Health Services suggested that the sale of loose cigarettes be banned to bolster the state's efforts to reduce the incidence of tobacco addiction in society.

While that suggestion could not be implemented then, on Tuesday, the federal cabinet took the laudable decision to impose such a ban.

The logic is sound, as many other countries have already demonstrated in the West, and in the region (such as Iran and Nepal).

The availability of loose cigarettes has particularly given children, who do not have enough money to buy a pack of cigarettes, ready access to poison.

Banning their sale thus protects this significant section of the population.

WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control also recommends this move.

Pakistan has already outlawed the sale of cigarettes to minors (though implementation has been patchy) and 10-cigarette packets.

Smoking is prohibited in all public places.

Even so, last year the Network for Consumer Protection released a report that showed that cigarette-manufacturing companies target children as young as six by placing advertisements and products in shops around educational institutions.

The health ministry says that as soon as the cabinet's decision is received in writing, a statutory regulatory order will be issued to enforce the new ban across the country.

The way will then be paved to impose fines on violators and send them to jail.

While this is an appreciable move in the country's anti-smoking efforts, what is also needed as a bolstering mechanism is a wide-scale and sustained awareness-raising campaign with an emphatic focus on the dangers of tobacco use.

True, cigarette packets by law carry warning labels.

But arguably, many of those who read these are already addicted to the scourge.

As the West has demonstrated, resistance also has to be stoked within society, stripping away decades — even centuries — of lies that smoking is acceptable and non-injurious to health.

Democracy's custodians

IN the absence of a single-party majority, hard bargaining and intense negotiations are inevitable.

Almost immediately after the Senate elections, a race began to capture the Senate chairman slot.

Political parties, especially rival political parties, holding consultations to fulfil constitutional obligations ought to be a net positive for the democratic process.

But in the unseemly scramble to capture the post of Senate chairman, it is difficult to discern any higher democratic purpose that the major parties in the country are chasing.

Certainly, there is prestige at stake.

The Senate, with equal representation for each of the four provinces and significant representation for Fata and the federal capital, is a potent symbol of the federation and a political party that can win the Senate chairmanship can lay claim to at least a degree of national support.

But the Senate is not merely a symbol or a prize for politicians to vie for; it exists to strengthen the democratic process, legislate, hold the executive accountable and promote the rights of the people of Pakistan.

That parliament as a democratic institution is in the doldrums is an undeniable reality and all major political parties must share the blame.

The PML-N ought to have been the primary custodians of the democratic process in the current parliament, but it is striking that the most democratic debate the party leadership has had over the past four and a half years has come since the ouster of Nawaz Sharif from the prime ministership.

Barnstorming the country, the ousted prime minister has tried to position himself as a democrat and populist, but Mr Sharif's vision for democracy appears to begin and end with his personal position within the democratic system.

While Mr Sharif has several legitimate grievances, the democratic process is much more than the fate of an individual.

While he fights anti-democratic forces aligned against him, could Mr Sharif not urge his party to boost the profile and improve the workings of parliament in the final few months ahead of a general election? The cost to Mr Sharif would be near zero, but the benefit to the democratic process could be significant.

The PPP and PTI have not performed significantly better either.

PPP supremo Asif Zardari and PTI chief Imran Khan have no parliamentary agenda for their parties that can be discerned.

In recent days, Mr Zardari is seemingly more intent on punishing those in the PPP who have strayed from establishment-friendly politics than to promote the cause of democracy.

As for Mr Khan, his unwillingness to even cast a vote in the National Assembly in the Senate election suggests an arrogance and obsession with apex power that does not behove a democrat.

For all the intensity of the negotiations in recent days, which party has an agenda for the Senate that can be considered democracy-strengthening?

Transforming Karachi

It is about time that the city of Karachi received the kind of detailed and thorough treatment that the recent diagnostic report by the World Bank has given to it.

The shame, however, is that much of what ails Karachi lies beyond the mandate of the World Bank.

These include politics and rackets, or more specifically, the political economy of racketeering.

The bank rightly emphasises the importance of local government and the multiple mandates in the city.

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“Limited mandates for city governments and high and increasing fragmentation in local governance prevent Karachi from reaping the benefits of urbanisation” it points out in its usual diplomatic style.

But one has to read down to the footnotes to find the real reason why this might be the case.

The PPP favours the Sindh Local Government Ordinance of 1979 (ironically, a Zia-era relic) which gives most powers to the provincial government, while the MQM favours the Sindh Local Government Act of 2001 which brings the city under one city district government.

It is not hard to see the politics behind this division, and how so much hinges on it.

But the bank is not able to take a clear position on the issue, although the report repeatedly swivels back round to the point that Karachi will benefit from an empowered city government.

That, of course, raises an obvious question: where did these benefits go when the city had an empowered mayor from the MQM between 2005 and 2009?

Regarding the SLGA 2013, under which the city continues to function today, the report says little more than that under it the provincial government “retains substantial control over these local governments, which limits their autonomy”.

The report deserves a careful read, and many of the problems that plague the city are meticulously studied and catalogued in it.

But when it comes to future directions, its recommendations are hamstrung by the fact that the bank cannot venture with clarity into divisive political issues, which are at the heart of Karachi’s many dysfunctions.

The report will be enormously useful for reference purposes since it brings so many issues together in one place, from land and water management to financing and taxes and much else in between.

But as a pointer for future directions, it is, unfortunately, unable to make a significant new contribution to the country’s Karachi conversation.

Child labour bill

THE display of good intentions, succeeded by a woeful follow-through, appears to have become an indelible hallmark of governance.

Countless examples are available, but let us take only the most recent.

On Thursday, a Senate select committee was due to meet at Parliament House to discuss the Islamabad Restriction Employment Bill, moved by Senator Sehar Kamran of the PPP.

In a country where child labour is rampant as well as a complex issue given the levels of poverty, it would have been expected that the proposed legislation would draw robust debate.

However, at the appointed time, 25 of the committee’s 27 members failed to even show up, including notably Ms Kamran herself, who is due to retire this month.

The only persons in attendance were the chairman of the committee, Mir Kabeer Ahmed Mohammad Shahi, and Senator Sassui Palijo, leading the chairman to remark that “this is a highly important bill but unfortunately members showed no interest in it”.

According to him, no success has been met in passing the bill despite the passage of three meetings.

The absent members of the committee deserve strong censure for taking their duties lightly and that too over such an important issue.

The practice of employing children for even hazardous work is common all over the country.

While estimates as to the exact numbers differ, given that tens of thousands of children work in the undocumented informal, agricultural or domestic sectors, certainly there are millions being forced to earn their keep at an age when they are physically and emotionally vulnerable.

Any piece of legislation that takes Pakistan closer towards the international and humanitarian commitments it has made, in this case the ILO’s core conventions, needs to be given due importance.

On Thursday, Senator Palijo said that after the retirement of her colleague Ms Kamran, efforts to get the bill passed should be continued through another member.

It is to be hoped that this proves to be the case.

Uncouth pre-poll politics

THE politics of protest has intersected with campaign politics and a potentially dangerous trend has emerged. The weekend saw two distasteful incidents against PML-N leaders: Khawaja Asif had ink thrown on him in Sialkot and Nawaz Sharif had a shoe thrown at him in Lahore. The motives of the attackers are allegedly linked to support for a group that has been agitating against the PML-N government on the blasphemy issue, a disturbing development given a penchant for violence among fringe political elements. But the upcoming campaign season was already expected to be perhaps the fiercest in a generation, with mainstream political parties launching verbal onslaughts against one another in a climate of deep political uncertainty. While robust electoral competition ought to be welcomed in a democracy, politics spilling into violence of any sort can only harm the democratic process. Perhaps the major political parties should put forward level-headed leaders from among their ranks to meet and draw up an emergency code of conduct acceptable to all parties. The Election Commission of Pakistan could consider facilitating such a necessary dialogue.

Certainly, political violence is not a new phenomenon or threat in the country. The PPP has inarguably been the greatest victim of political violence. In 2007, the party's iconic leader, Benazir Bhutto, was attacked twice, first in Karachi on her return to Pakistan and then in Rawalpindi; the latter attack claimed her life and plunged the country into a state of near chaos. In 2013, the TTP threatened mainstream political parties, the PPP, ANP and MQM, as a result of which the PPP and ANP severely curtailed their election campaigns. The TTP threat has receded in the years since, but a number of high-profile attacks suggest that the network may still have the capacity to negatively disrupt the electoral process. It is to be hoped that the ECP along with the caretaker government that is to be installed will coordinate closely with the country's security apparatus to prevent a repetition of the damaging events of 2013.

Also problematic, and an issue that the political parties themselves will have to address, is the coarsening of political discourse in the country. From the politics of dharnas to the age of social media and its unrestrained conventions, the decibel level in politics has reached an uncomfortable point. With several major parties, a fractured electorate and a war of attrition between the leading party and sections of the permanent state, intense

political rhetoric was perhaps inevitable. But the abiding political lesson of the 1990s is more relevant than ever today: when politicians fight among themselves, the winners are the anti-democrats. Since Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan and Asif Zardari do at least agree that the ballot box is sacred and the electoral process paramount, can they and their parties not find a way to ratchet down campaign-related tensions?

Power surcharges

ALMOST half a decade ago, three separate surcharges were imposed on the price of electricity to help the power sector meet certain costs that were otherwise unaffordable for it. These costs were debt-service obligations on the outstanding payments owed by the government to power generation companies, what we sometimes call the 'circular debt'; the cost of 'future investment', particularly the Neelum Jhelum hydropower project; and 'tariff rationalisation' to ensure uniform price across the country and cover the cost of part of the subsidy provided to low-income consumers. All three surcharges are now up for renewal, and in an almost reflexive manner, the government has asked the power sector regulator, Nepra, to allow them to continue.

Taken together, the surcharges are living proof that the core problems of the power sector have not been resolved, despite the addition of massive new generation capacity. The core problem relates to sector liquidity, and if the government has to resort to surcharges to raise the funds to pay for its own inability to improve recoveries, it amounts to asking the consumer to pay for the government's failure. The Neelum Jhelum hydropower project is nearing completion, so it is hard to understand why a surcharge levied only to pay for its construction costs should be indefinitely renewed. If the purpose is to raise funds for 'future investment', then the government needs to provide iron-clad assurances that the funds will not be diverted to pay for current expenditures, as has happened with the gas development surcharge. The financing cost surcharge is simply another way to get consumers to pay the interest charges on the borrowing that power generation companies have to undertake in order to bridge their funding shortfall when the government is unable to pay for its power purchase. If this surcharge is being renewed at the time when the government boasts about adding thousands of megawatts of additional generation capacity to the power sector, it just means a leaky bucket has been enlarged in size, rather than the cracks being fixed. The request for renewal will in all likelihood be granted, because without these surcharges the government would not be able to pay for power

generation for too long. This is unfortunate, and a sad reality for the consumers; the latter may find that while loadshedding has been reduced, the costs of the power sector's dysfunctions remain firmly on their shoulders.

A woman of substance

WHEN women believe in themselves — even while fighting the odds stacked against them — it's true to say the rest does follow. This month, 39-year-old Krishna Kumari Kohli, a former child bride from a low-caste Hindu community in Sindh's Tharparkar district, won a seat in Pakistan's Senate. This is a historic achievement, to say the least, given Ms Kohli has suffered discrimination and poverty and spent two years as a child with her family shackled to a life of hard labour on fields owned by feudal landlords. In her words, she could never have envisaged a seat in the upper echelons of political power, especially when around only one in five women hold parliamentary seats in male-dominated assemblies. As the first Dalit female member of the Senate, Ms Kohli, who ran on a PPP ticket, had perhaps underestimated her abilities. Over years she has shown indefatigable determination to bring about change through her grass-roots activism focusing on education and ending child marriages and bonded labour. Having married at 15, though fortunate enough to attend university, she knows of the travails of young mothers. So how she uses her new position for bringing development to districts with some of the country's worst socioeconomic indicators will be her test. Preventing child marriage, ending malnutrition, and decreasing maternal and child mortality rates are not easy challenges when corruption is rife and resources poorly allocated. Tackling such entrenched injustices requires perseverance.

Further, while the PPP must be commended for supporting women in politics regardless of religion, caste or gender, it would do well to take note of the shambolic healthcare and education facilities under its governance. For improvement in the country's abysmal human development indicators, all political parties should work on encouraging gender inclusivity in politics. Party manifestos should outline measures for including more women in decision-making and as nominees for the general seats. It would be wise of politicians to note that women leaders deliver on promises, so supporting them will improve human rights, education, justice and economic development.

Sanjrani's election

THE first order of business in the new Senate may prove to be the most controversial decision of its term.

The Senate has a new chairman: Sadiq Sanjrani, an independent member of the upper house who was elected to the Senate by a rebel faction of the PML-N in Balochistan.

Mr Sanjrani's meteoric rise to the top of the country's constitutional leadership is being presented as a feel-good story by his public, political backers. The argument is that a first chairman of the Senate from Balochistan is a victory for democracy.

To put it mildly, that remains to be seen.

What is clear, however, is that the Senate election has opened the door to fierce and otherwise implausible political alliance-building, encouraged by anti-democratic forces in the shadows.

From the coup inside the Balochistan assembly against the PML-N to yesterday's strange election results in the Senate, the auguries are not good for the democratic project in the country.

Certainly, a stinging loss for the PML-N in the Senate was made easier by the PML-N leadership's general disdain for parliament and Nawaz Sharif's obsession with turning electoral politics into a referendum on himself.

Mr Sharif's attendance in parliament was dismal, while Senate sessions were routinely derailed by the absence of government ministers from the upper house.

Only in recent weeks, with the Senate chairmanship up for grabs, did the PML-N leadership suddenly evince deep interest in the Senate. That interest was always likely to greatly decrease following the now-concluded Senate elections.

Yet, where the PML-N has failed, the other major political parties have not boosted democracy in the country either. In electing Mr Sanjrani, the PTI and PPP are entitled to celebrate a defeat inflicted on a major political rival, the PML-N. But yesterday's events are hardly a victory for either of the leading opposition parties. After all, it is not a PPP or PTI senator who is the new chairman.

More worryingly, with all eyes now turning towards a general election, the machinations in the Senate may be a prelude to a season of intense political wheeling and dealing, arm-twisting and horse-trading.

Anti-democratic forces may seek to dismantle the PML-N electoral machine and prise away winning candidates if Nawaz Sharif continues to fight attempts to remove him from frontline politics.

Other major political parties, sensing an opportunity as they did in the Senate elections, may form otherwise implausible alliances to increase their chances of success in a crowded field. An election in such circumstances may appear to be intensely competitive, but it would be fundamentally unfair and undemocratic.

The net result would be a strengthening of anti-democratic forces in the country, with the complicity and collusion of political mainstream. In the last parliament it was the PPP that suffered, in this parliament it is the PML-N; at this rate, will the next parliament not bring further democratic suffering?

Diplomatic spat

IN the decades since Partition, relations between India and Pakistan have oscillated between open hostility, and a mutual ambivalence marked by a state of no war, no peace. The current phase of relations is surely not one of friendship and respect. And as is usually the case, the frigid state of bilateral relations has a particularly negative effect on the diplomats representing their nation in the other's capital. As reported in this paper recently, Pakistani diplomats and their families in Delhi have been facing various forms of harassment. Sources told Dawn that the children of Pakistan's deputy high commissioner were stopped while on the way to school, while staffers have also been harassed while moving around the Indian capital. Islamabad has made a demarche to Indian diplomats to address these concerns. Reportedly, the Indian antics have been fuelled by the refusal by an Islamabad institution to grant membership to an Indian diplomat. Pakistan has said it will pull out diplomats' families if the intimidation continues.

Even in times of relative normalcy, diplomats of one country are usually shadowed by intelligence operatives of the host nation. However, in tense times such as these, the spooks can resort to more unsavoury behaviour. Such intimidatory tactics are totally unacceptable and represent a new low in the bilateral relationship, particularly the targeting of diplomats' families. The Indian authorities must ensure that Pakistani diplomats in New Delhi, as well as their dependents, remain safe and free from harassment. It is clear that elements within the Indian establishment wish to damage

Pakistan-India relations irreparably. Saner elements on both sides must prevent this from happening. While it is true that tensions are high, especially on the Line of Control, the situation must not be allowed to deteriorate further. And it is diplomats in both capitals that can play a key role in lowering tensions. But when these very diplomats are the targets of harassment, what avenue for dialogue is left? Certainly ideological elements within Narendra Modi's administration — particularly the troops of the Sangh Parivar — would like to end all bilateral relations with Pakistan. In this country as well, the hard right would want the exact same thing. However, statesmanship and vision are required in both capitals to ignore such shrill, hawkish noise and work to restore some sort of harmony in Indo-Pak relations. Delhi can take the initiative by providing a safer atmosphere for Pakistani diplomats.

Hidden workers

IT is an undeniable truth that women account for a large portion of our massive informal economy and, in an already unregulated sector prone to labour violations, are among its most vulnerable workers. Yet women workers — on our farms, in our factories and fisheries, as domestic workers in our homes or as bonded labour at brick kilns — are routinely taken for granted, and perhaps none more so than the millions of unseen, uncounted home-based workers. It is these women in particular who were highlighted by the Women's Action Forum and other women's and labour rights organisations recently in Lahore. Within the fragmented informal value chain, home-based workers are generally paid per piece for low-value work, with no guaranteed minimum wage, monthly income, social security or benefits that workers are entitled to.

In a report published last year on home-based workers in Karachi, ILO found that those surveyed were paid a small fraction of the minimum wage. Even though home-based workers are predominately women, research revealed that here, too, the gender wage gap is evident — with some contractors explicitly favouring male workers for higher valued work. With almost all workers dependent on single sources of work, and given their lack of access to collective bargaining, attempts to negotiate better rates almost always fail. Despite this, home-based workers have successfully managed to make the Sindh and Punjab governments adopt home-based workers' policies in recent years. Yet these have yet to be effectively implemented. To tackle deficiencies, the government must ramp up its efforts to strengthen minimum wage processes and mechanisms, include home-based

workers in minimum wage and social security protections, and enhance their ability to negotiate for higher wages. Women's labour, without which any society and economy would fall apart, is the quotidian heart of the struggle of all Pakistani women. It is those who labour unseen — out of sight, out of mind — that we must stand in solidarity with, and do more for.

ECP's responsibility

THE Constitution is clear. Article 218(3) states: "It shall be the duty of the Election Commission to organise and conduct the election and to make such arrangements as are necessary to ensure that the election is conducted honestly, justly, fairly and in accordance with law, and that corrupt practices are guarded against." Furthermore, Article 220 states: "It shall be the duty of all executive authorities in the Federation and in the Provinces to assist the Commissioner and the Election Commission in the discharge of his or their functions." Clearly and unambiguously, the holding of free and fair elections is the remit of the Election Commission of Pakistan. And in the execution of its duties, the ECP has the power to demand the assistance of all executive authorities in the country if the ECP deems it necessary. It is difficult then to understand why Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has asserted that the judiciary will ensure free and fair elections in the country.

Perhaps Chief Justice Nisar is seeking to reassure an anxious electorate that anti-democratic forces will neither be allowed to derail the electoral process nor manipulate it. A strong judiciary standing guard over the democratic process could strengthen a system that is teetering. Yet, a strong democratic process also requires that institutions remain within their constitutional ambits and not seek to usurp the prerogatives and responsibilities of other institutions. Strengthening the ECP has been a focus of successive parliaments and the next general election to be held will be supervised by an ECP that is more independent and empowered than at any other point in Pakistan's political history. This, then, is the time for other institutions to support the ECP wholeheartedly. The campaign season ahead and the general election are expected to be fiercely contested and both will surely test the mettle of the ECP, its commissioners and the vast administrative apparatus that will report to it.

Certainly, the judiciary will have a role to play. While there has been no announcement as yet, returning officers could be selected from among the lower judiciary. Moreover, legal challenges to the nomination or disqualification of candidates may well end up before the superior judiciary. But those are supporting functions; the core responsibility to organise and conduct a general election belongs to the ECP. Away from the specific issue of which institution has primary responsibility for supervising a free and fair electoral process, there is a more general problem emerging of institutions interfering in the workings of democratic bodies. The Constitution is supreme and the rule of law inviolable, but separation of powers and checks and balances are an integral part of a successful democracy. A long, bitter history of undemocratic interventions and oversight ought to have been warning enough for the institutions. Tamper with the democratic foundations and all will suffer.

Gas price hike

BY itself a hike in the price of natural gas is not something anybody should oppose, considering the heavy subsidies that the sector benefits from, as well as the wastage of the precious resource that its low price encourages. Eventually, gas pricing will have to be reformed drastically given the massive injections of imported gas that the country is increasingly relying on as sources of domestic gas decline. The imported gas is two to three times more expensive than its domestic counterpart because it is purchased from the open market, and the price differential between both categories — imported and domestically produced — will increasingly complicate the shift towards LNG that is envisioned to reach its peak in a few years. But when we hear that the government has decided, in principal, to increase the price of gas to pay for system losses, and make the increase retroactive, it smacks of failure and is yet another example of passing the cost of the government's inability to do its job on to the consumers. The petroleum division has warned, in a recent summary sent to the cabinet, that Rs18bn are required urgently to plug the finances of both gas distribution companies due to leakages, known in the industry as unaccounted for gas, or UFG.

This is gas-sector reforms turned inside out. Only a few days ago, we heard that crucial reforms to restructure the gas sector and bring in the play of market forces to drive efficiencies, and possibly even pricing reform, has been postponed. Since the state-

controlled management of both gas distribution companies has been unable to plug their UFG losses over the years, huge losses are piling up on their books. So now, where the government is too squeamish to undertake the reforms and restructuring of the utilities, it is preparing to ask the consumers to foot the bill. This story is repeating itself in other areas too, be it the power distribution or the national airline or the steel mill. The advantage in the energy sector — gas and power — is that a vast pool of consumers exists to readily pass the costs of governmental failure on to, whereas in other public-sector enterprises, these costs pile up on the balance sheet. This government has behaved like a technocratic enterprise ever since the fateful Panama verdict, but, increasingly, it is becoming clear that its expertise and capacity are only skin deep.

Punjab dance ban

THE project of dismantling arts and culture by a 1,000 cuts continues this week in the form of a ban on dance announced by the Punjab School Education Department. When a similar attempt was floated in Sindh in 2016, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah reacted swiftly to quash it. The provincial government, he said, believed in preserving and promoting culture. “It will not be dictated [to] by isolated extremist elements and will not allow its progressive agenda to be hijacked at any cost. Dance and music are integral parts of a liberal society.” Over the decades, similar attempts to narrowly redefine our identity have been made. None have fully succeeded because, inevitably, we show our true stripes: diverse, tolerant and defiantly joyous. This is reflected in our shared kinetic energy, whether through the boisterous bhangra, the elegant Kathak or the transcendental Sufi raqs. Yet, each time, the habitually out-of-step fringe concocts a new straw man, such as the selective fear of ‘alien culture’, to exploit society’s existential anxieties.

While not explicitly stated, it seems that the proscription du jour is a cynical, misguided appropriation of a pressing issue, recently foregrounded by the rape-murder of little Zainab and all the abuse allegations that have since followed: how do we keep our children safe? As is regrettably the case with systemic violence, a particularly unproductive response emerges. Sexual abuse, it is argued, is something that can be rationalised and avoided provided a potential victim behaves appropriately — dress and act just right, and you won’t be a target, the logic goes — stopping just short of suggesting

that victims, even children, are morally responsible for being abused. Such thinking should be resisted at all costs. Surrounded by poverty and violence, Pakistani children are already forced to grow up too soon. They won't be better off, or safer, for being forced to forgo simple, earnest displays of expression. We should be holding perpetrators accountable, not abetting in the broader crime of stealing childhoods.

aNacta's dubious app

AN attempted solution must not perpetuate or worsen a problem. The latest brainchild of the National Counter Terrorism Authority is a smartphone app to help fight extremism. Launched with some fanfare in a ceremony in Islamabad, with Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal attending as chief guest, the Nacta app purports to allow the public to anonymously report instances of alleged hate speech. Complaints thus lodged will be vetted by an unspecified committee among law-enforcement agencies, including the FIA. Certainly, the fight against extremism is a vital component of the moribund National Action Plan and attempts to revive the plan are welcome. What is not welcome is a publicity stunt disguised as serious action, especially when the newly launched app could entrap law-abiding citizens and reveal the identity of individuals correctly reporting actual hate speech. The government ought to seriously reconsider its attempt to turn citizens against each other and provide malicious actors a tool with which to harass and intimidate peaceful individuals.

The Nacta app and its potential efficacy cannot be seen in isolation. Hate speech, properly considered and defined under the Anti Terrorism Act and superior judiciary rulings, is a significant problem in the country. But the extremism that NAP envisages fighting as a priority is propagated by well-entrenched networks, many of which operate openly and brazenly. There is no smartphone app based on citizen reporting that is needed to locate and dismantle extremist networks backed by violence; only coordinated action by the intelligence and security apparatuses can address such threats. But the problem with the app is not merely that it will be ineffective in dealing with actual hate speech, it is also open to gross abuse and may even promote vigilantism. While Nacta insists that the legal definition of hate speech will be applied when vetting complaints, it has also admitted to having no investigatory powers.

What that means in practice is that individuals reporting hate speech could well use their own, wholly illegal and malicious standards to file such reports, and agencies such as the FIA can harass or intimidate law-abiding citizens on the basis of false complaints. Moreover, because the promised anonymity to anyone using the app to lodge a complaint cannot be guaranteed by the very design of the app, the identity of individuals who file legitimate complaints against organised extremist networks could be exposed to the latter. Perhaps Nacta and the interior ministry mean to try and stem the tide of negative news about Pakistan's floundering counter-extremism efforts. If so, few of Pakistan's serious partners externally or stakeholders domestically will be convinced or reassured. Better to focus on a wholesale revamping of Nacta and re-energising of NAP than to attempt ad hoc interventions that could turn citizen against citizen and promote vigilantism. The Nacta smartphone app is a bad idea come to dangerous life.

Prisoner releases

IN a recent move that bodes well for cooperation between the two countries, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif accepted India's prisoner exchange proposal for vulnerable categories of inmates. Perhaps this can be expanded to all prisoners languishing in each other's jails for years. Most prisoners are hardly the sort to pose a danger to the country where they are being detained; and they are poor with no means to ensure they obtain

their rights. In the light of this, the release on Monday of a Pakistani man imprisoned in an Indian jail since 2009 was a welcome gesture — notwithstanding the lack of clarity around the circumstances that reportedly resulted in him crossing the border at the age of 11. His complex case, and that of countless others imprisoned on both sides, reveals the two governments' failure to provide consular access to such prisoners. This week, the Sindh High Court taking note of a petition seeking the repatriation of 17 Pakistani prisoners in Indian jails asked the federal government to furnish explanations for the delay in action. Also, it is no secret that prisoner swaps are witnessed when both countries require bargaining chips especially when kick-starting peace talks. Otherwise, only activists lobbying governments on humanitarian grounds results in prisoner releases, for instance, two Pakistani sisters, one of whom gave birth in jail, were released last November after serving 10 years for drug smuggling.

It is shameful that Pakistan and India detain mostly those who cross over inadvertently; this has resulted in the arrest of hundreds of fishermen over allegations of violating maritime borders. With such callousness on both sides, a prisoner-exchange initiative is imperative if only for humanitarian reasons. The current proposal calls for the release of female prisoners, detainees over 70 years of age and mentally challenged persons. Interior ministry sources say 40 Pakistani prisoners fit these categories. Medical visits to each other's jails to examine mentally ill prisoners must be facilitated. Mr Asif has rightly called for the revival of the Pakistan-India Joint Judicial Committee on Prisoners shelved in October 2013. Governments should be reminded that diplomatic representatives must be allowed to verify nationalities before the release of detainees. Surely, if both sides can commit to talking peace at back-channel diplomacy sessions in exotic locales, they can also work out how to release prisoners through official channels. This would set an example of a civilised approach.

Death of a star

PERHAPS few on this earth have come close to epitomising the term ‘differently enabled’ as did physicist Stephen Hawking, who passed away on Wednesday at the age of 76. In addition to the books he penned, he is credited with having carried Albert Einstein’s revolutionary scientific ideas forward, be it the behaviour of black holes in space, or the discussion on space-time continuum. Yet the reason he is a household name in much of the world is that he brought science, specifically expositions on the workings of the universe and the physics that underpins them, to the average reader. In clear, understandable, and yet academically sure terms, Hawking presented to the layman a view of the universe that perhaps many had never before had the opportunity or ability to contemplate. In doing so, he set the bar for future generations of writers of science — particularly the hard sciences.

The fact that Hawking achieved all this despite a debilitating illness makes his life even more extraordinary. At the age of 22, Hawking was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease, a motor neuron disorder that causes the loss of control of muscle movement which leaves sufferers eventually bereft of their ability to walk, eat, speak, and in the end, breathe. At the time, he was given about two years to live. But for decades, confined to a wheelchair and able to speak only through a voice synthesiser, Hawking — despite the immense odds stacked against him — left his mark upon the world of physics. As the first scientist to work out a theory that explained cosmology “as a union of relativity and quantum mechanics”, his academic legacy will continue to inspire many scientists looking for answers in the stars. Additionally, he will serve as a notable inspiration for millions of the ‘differently enabled’ across the world. As Hawking himself said in 2015, “If you feel you are trapped in a black hole, don’t give up. There is a way out.”

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Raiwind attack

THE long war against militancy grinds on, claiming yet more lives on Wednesday.

A suicide attack in Raiwind, Lahore, near a venue where members of the Tableeghi Jamaat had gathered has claimed at least nine lives and injured 20.

That several policemen were killed after the suicide bomber detonated explosives at a checkpoint and that the Sharif family's Raiwind residence is a few kilometres from the site of the attack have added to the uncertainty about the motive and identity of the group behind the attack.

The banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the Raiwind attack, but the TTP is not known for targeting the Tableeghi Jamaat.

In 2014, following an attack on a Taleeghi Jamaat centre in Peshawar, the newly installed TTP chief, Mullah Fazlullah, explicitly distanced the terror network from the attack.

While terror groups have been known to pivot away from old targets and towards new ones, and the TTP certainly has no compunction in attacking civilians, a thorough investigation will be necessary before the identity of the group responsible for the Raiwind attack is positively identified.

Meanwhile, there are two other considerations.

First, with the annual festival of cricket that has become the Pakistan Super League T-20 championship set to conclude in Lahore and Karachi next week, external forces that do not wish this country and its people well may pounce on any opportunity to sow fear.

It is possible to recognise such threats without resorting to conspiracy theories.

At this stage, the PSL is about more than just cricket; it is an opportunity for Pakistan to demonstrate to the outside world that the country is open for business and welcoming to foreigners.

For forces opposed to Pakistan achieving normality and asserting itself on the international stage in a positive manner, perhaps for reasons related to regional strategic rivalries, disrupting the run-up to the PSL semi-finals in Lahore and final in Karachi could be a low-cost intervention with significant dividends.

The security apparatus nationally and law-enforcement agencies in Lahore and Karachi in particular should be extra vigilant in the days ahead.

Second, there is the broader issue of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts having reached the point of diminishing returns.

While the frequency of attacks across the country is significantly lower compared to the situation before Operation Zarb-i-Azb, there are still enough acts of militancy to suggest that terrorist networks are either regenerating or have been able to avoid detection by the state.

Domestic networks that facilitate and arm attackers do play a significant role, but it is clear that the leadership of anti-Pakistan militants has found sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Solving that problem will require three-way cooperation among Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US.

Reciprocity will be needed as will sustaining dialogue.

There will be no quick fixes, but determination and statesmanship could effect a breakthrough.

Rights for rivers

IT might sound like a new thought to some, but the idea of giving rights of personhood to rivers is actually an old one.

It has recently been advanced by the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum in a rally to mark International Rivers Day in Hyderabad, and is worth taking a closer look at.

The original idea, as a pure legal theory, originated in the early 1970s to get around a problem in environmental litigation: who has the right to bring a complaint, or a suit, in a matter involving the degradation of nature?

Rights groups argued that since the law requires that the complainant first establish what negative impact he or she has experienced from any given action, groups doing advocacy for the environment found it hard to fight their battles in the courts since they had a difficult time establishing precisely how they had suffered any damage from the activity they were contesting.

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So the idea was to grant rights of personhood to nature itself.

It was not until 2006 when the first precedent was set in Pennsylvania (US), quickly followed by Ecuador in 2008, then Bolivia and New Zealand and most recently India.

The theory is finding widespread acceptance now, and its implementation has helped to enable the law to become a tool with which to protect nature from degradation, pollution and the destructive impact of human activity.

Now a nascent demand has been made to grant rights of personhood to the Indus, and it is coming from a group that has its livelihoods directly tied to the river.

The river has been 'imprisoned' by mega projects, they argue and its waters are so heavily polluted that the livelihoods of those who depend upon it are now threatened.

For too long, we have looked upon the Indus river system as nothing but a 'natural endowment', or a source of wealth and driver of growth for our economy.

It is indeed all these things, but it is also much more.

Rivers, like everything else in nature, need the space to regenerate themselves, and renew their vitality.

In using the river system for industrial and agrarian purposes, it is important for the law to provide the space to protect it from the damaging effects of human activity.

Granting rights of personhood is one tool being used around the world for this purpose; given local adaptation, it is an idea worth exploring for Pakistan as well.

UNMOGIP targeted

WHILE Indian fire has claimed the lives of a number of civilians and men in uniform on this side of the LoC over the past few years, it appears that the Indian military has also not spared UN peacekeepers.

As reported in this paper, members of the United Nations Military Observers Group for India and Pakistan had a narrow miss when Indians shot at civilians the UN personnel were accompanying near the LoC.

Two locals were injured in the incident.

A local police officer in Azad Kashmir said the officials had arrived in white vehicles displaying blue UN flags.

He added that the UN team had informed the Indians through a “hotline message” of their arrival.

A similar incident involving UN personnel was reported last May.

As a supposedly mature democracy striving to gain a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, it is hard to fathom what India seeks to achieve by targeting the very personnel of this august global body.

The fact is that New Delhi has displayed ambivalence — hostility even — towards UNMOGIP, resorting to the tired mantra that Kashmir is an ‘internal’ matter.

It has made things difficult for members of the UNMOGIP, while the UN’s access to the India-held side of the LoC is extremely limited.

Moreover, senior Indian officials have said on record that the observers’ mission has “outlived its relevance”, whereas former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon had regretted India’s lack of cooperation with UNMOGIP while he was still in office.

Such behaviour begs the question that if all is well in India-held Kashmir, why is New Delhi resorting to such deplorable tactics? India needs to stop targeting innocent people on this side of the LoC, including UN observers.

Instead, New Delhi must realise that the Kashmir issue can only be resolved through dialogue with Pakistan and taking on board the Kashmiris.

In this matter, the good offices of the UN or other interlocutors to encourage such dialogue should not be shunned.

Pak-India tensions

ONCE again, relations between Pakistan and India are deteriorating fast. This time, it is the diplomatic arena where ties have gradually been souring over the past few weeks. On Thursday, the Foreign Office announced that Pakistan’s high commissioner in New Delhi, Sohail Mahmood, was being recalled to Islamabad for “consultations”. The move

follows reports that Pakistani diplomats in the Indian capital, their family members and Indian employees of the mission have been facing a steady routine of harassment by mysterious forces. At its Thursday briefing, the FO said that over the past eight days there had been 26 incidents of harassment. The incidents mentioned by the authorities include harassment of the children of Pakistani diplomats on their way to school as well as the tailing of diplomats by unknown persons in the Indian capital. The Indian authorities claim their diplomats have also been facing harassment in Islamabad. In another sign that ties were quickly nosediving, Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif said he did not expect improvement in bilateral relations, particularly due to the hostilities along the LoC.

While acts like chasing diplomats and filming them may seem trivial, these antics may well snowball into something far bigger and more serious. The recall of the Pakistani high commissioner should not be taken lightly, and New Delhi must understand that Pakistan takes the incidents of harassment seriously. However, instead of engaging in tit-for-tat measures, both sides must discuss their concerns frankly and with mutual respect. And while it may not be uncommon for intelligence operatives to tail diplomats, the harassment of staffers and their families has to stop. If diplomatic relations are downgraded or snapped, it will only be a victory for hardliners on both sides and will not result in anything positive for the people of South Asia. There are a host of issues poisoning the bilateral relationship currently, including trouble along the LoC, the Kulbhushan Jadhav episode, militancy etc. However, rather than follow the desires of security hawks and populist right-wingers on both sides — who dream of permanently scuttling bilateral relations — saner counsel must prevail. Currently, the constituency for peace in both countries has been drowned out by the shrill noise generated by hardliners who thrive on conflict. The Hindutva brigade has captured state power in India while their ideological twins in Pakistan are ever-present. These warmongers must be ignored, and for that, diplomats must be allowed to operate unhindered.

Happy Pakistanis

IT was only a matter of time before they discovered the true Pakistani — over and above the circumstances we have constantly had to tackle, with a smile on our face. Someone has recently been to Pakistan at the perfect moment — when we were all in the right mood — to record that we are, after all, a happy people. Not just happy but the happiest amongst all our neighbours, says the report, issued by an organisation no less than the United Nations — even if it's a finding which some Pakistanis may accept with reluctance. And not out of modesty, but because of the cynicism, sustained by the general grimness of the situation, that prevails. There is plenty of space between rank 75, which Pakistan occupies, and the rungs some of our closest neighbours stand on. China is placed at 86;

Iran 106; Bangladesh 115; followed by Sri Lanka at 116; and Afghanistan at rank 145. And wait a second ... many of us will be happy to know that, India, the neighbour we compare everything with, lags well behind at a depressing 133.

This is a huge gap, and, indeed, it is time for media managers in the government to cash in on this UN declaration and claim credit for cultivating this positivism. Also, we are now in for all kinds of speculation and sceptical analyses of the surprise Pakistani showing on the UN index, as well as some boasts about our real selves, and how badly understood we often are, how negatively projected. The pleasant news comes just when the calls for painting Pakistan in positive colours were getting louder and louder. The argument will be that the UN recognition proves to the world, to the doomsday-prone media, and, most importantly, to the Pakistanis themselves, that it is possible to show this country in a positive light. Seriously, there is no reason for us to not celebrate our latest UN billing. No reason for us to not look for more positive stories within.

Grim picture by IMF

GOING by the IMF's latest post-programme monitoring report, the economy continues to deteriorate, even as private-sector activity is gathering momentum. The government expects the GDP growth rate to rise to 6pc by the end of the fiscal year, while the Fund projects the same figure at 5.6pc. The difference is appreciable, but in both cases the trend is still upward, showing that the pace of activity in the economy is rising. But the external sector, the traditional Achilles heel of Pakistan's economy, is rapidly deteriorating. Foreign exchange reserves are falling fast, mainly on account of a growing trade deficit that the government is struggling to contain through ad hoc measures like regulatory duties and a slight depreciation in the exchange rate. The Fund report

estimates that net international reserves, the figure we get after deducting key short-term liabilities as well as money owed to the IMF from the gross foreign exchange reserves, is now negative \$0.7bn. Back in 2016, when the last Fund programme ended, the same figure stood at \$7.5bn. This is a very large decline, even though the gross reserves are still sufficient to cover just over two months of imports, above critical levels but below the benchmark for sustainability, which is four months. The decline appears to be driven by a fall in the gross foreign exchange reserves since September 2016 as well as a doubling of the State Bank's own short-term liabilities in the form of forwards and swaps.

An obvious question asserts itself regarding these two developments: rising GDP growth rate and falling foreign exchange reserves. The question is, which of these trumps the other? Will the GDP growth and the attendant investments that lie behind it become some sort of auto-correcting mechanism, in due course driving up exports, boosting competitiveness and thereby arresting and reversing the growing current account deficit? Or will the continuously declining foreign exchange reserves eventually force an abrupt correction in the form of a large devaluation, hike in interest rates and collapse of domestic demand, as happened in 2008? Projected out into medium-term future, common sense says that eventually economic growth bows to economic fundamentals, and not the other way round.

The report shows that the Fund staff and the government did not see eye to eye when looking into the future in the medium term. The government's projections of the state of inflows and outflows of foreign exchange were clearly more bullish than that of the Fund. According to the Fund's projections, gross foreign exchange reserves will not hit the critical level of one month's import cover for another three years. There is still time for corrective action, but ad hoc measures, which include short-term borrowing and regulatory duties, do not seem to be doing the trick.

Countering militancy

FURTHER attempts to curtail the public operations of the Jamaatud Dawa, this time by the KP government, ought to be welcomed.

In the run-up to the FATF measures against Pakistan and after the furore it caused in the country, it was always apparent that true progress in a state takeover or shutting down of the operations of all banned militant groups and their affiliated networks would depend on sustained, national action across the various tiers of the state.

Earlier this month, the Secretary of Interior Arshad Mirza said before a Senate standing committee that the process of taking over the assets of the JuD and its sister organisation

the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation had yet to be completed. It is hoped then that the KP government has moved in coordination with the interior ministry and security agencies to put the country further in compliance with its legal and international obligations.

The era of obfuscation and delay must well and truly be left behind.

A problem that is apparent with the currently evolving approach against militant and extremist networks, however, is that it is event-driven. An event such as the FATF redesignation causes a shock to the system which then tries to address the specific, narrow reasons for the particular shock. Surely, such an approach can deliver only limited results.

The political and military leaderships as well as the provincial governments routinely insist that without a coordinated, sustained campaign – a nationwide counter-militancy and counter-extremism programme that breathes fresh life into the moribund National Action Plan – the long fight against terrorism will be difficult to win. But then, none of the entities tasked with winning the fight against militancy and extremism appear serious about coordinating their actions in a long-term, sustained manner.

The latest actions in KP could presage a change, but that remains to be seen.

Perhaps a way of injecting fresh energy into the counterterrorism and counter-extremism campaigns nationwide would be to strip away the aura of secrecy surrounding state actions. While from an intelligence and operational perspective, some details of a crackdown cannot realistically be shared with the public, there is unnecessary secrecy surrounding state actions against banned groups, which adds to the confusion and can sow doubts.

It is as if the state hopes it can dismantle vast networks that have penetrated deep into Pakistani society across the country without drawing too much attention to what, if done right and fully, would amount to one of the most far-reaching social reversals in decades.

Contrast the record with counter-insurgency operations in Fata and Swat: the operation names were widely promoted; regular press briefings were held by the ISPR; and while no timelines were set, the contours of a systematic plan to bring peace to Fata were publicly apparent. Yet, when it comes to Lashkar-e-Taiba, JuD, FiF, and other militants and extremists networks, there is secrecy and confusion.

The state should make it publicly clear what it intends to do with all banned organisations and how it broadly intends to achieve that.

Grim anniversary

IT has been seven long years since Syria descended into the pit of civil war — a war marked by intense brutality by all sides. What had originally been an uprising against Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad, apparently part of the Arab Spring, very quickly took on ugly sectarian colours as militants from the four corners of the globe flocked to the ‘jihad’ in the Levant. Regional players and international powers also decided to jump into the fray to settle strategic scores. The result of all this chaos has been utter misery and devastation for the Syrian people, condemned to either face death at home, or to try to make it to safer climes, risking their lives in the process. While there have been highs and lows over the years, the past few weeks have witnessed a great deal of bloodshed. On Saturday, there were reports that civilians fleeing the Kurdish enclave of Afrin had been hit by Turkish fire. Turkey — which denied it had hit civilians — had entered Syrian territory in January to battle the Kurdish YPG militia, whom it has termed ‘terrorists’ allied to its arch-nemesis, the PKK. Meanwhile, in the Ghouta area near Damascus, there have been a large number of civilian casualties as Bashar al-Assad’s forces, backed by Russian airpower, launched a relentless assault last month to retake the area. The government in Damascus also claims it is fighting ‘terrorists’ in Ghouta.

As claims and counterclaims mount, with each side blaming the other of committing atrocities, one thing is beyond doubt: all sides — whether it is the government, the rebels, their respective foreign backers or the jihadis — have displayed a stunning lack of compassion for human life during this war. Nearly half of the population, over 10m people, of Syria is either internally displaced or has fled abroad, while at least 400,000 have reportedly been killed. And there is little hope that the violence will end soon. If anything, with the involvement of so many external actors — Turkey in one part of Syria; Israel and Iran eyeing each other ominously; the American presence; various jihadi groups — there is a very real possibility that the violence may turn even bloodier. Multilateral actors — the UN, OIC, EU etc — have roundly failed to bring peace to Syria, mainly because the belligerents and their foreign backers have shown no eagerness to lay down arms. It might sound a tad trite, but the fact is that the world has failed Syria and its people.

Abject state of zoos

WHEN animals fall victim to unwarranted human intervention and ineptitude, it gives pause for reflection. The past few days have brought to light some distressing cases. On

Thursday, a snow leopard — listed as a ‘vulnerable’ species with a population of only around 200 in Pakistan — was found dead in its cage at Peshawar Zoo. Captured from the wild at the age of two, the beast had been living at the Ayubia National Park in Abbottabad district, a cold and hilly area that is not too unlike snow leopards’ natural habitat. It had recently been brought to the lower altitude of Peshawar. The cause of death is disputed — zoo authorities insist it was a ‘natural’ death, while conservationists’ believe that the rising temperatures and poor living conditions played a major part. An animal used to temperatures of 15°C or under, died on a day that was recorded at 26°C, and that too whilst being kept in a cage covered with iron sheeting. This is the third animal to have died at Peshawar Zoo since the facility’s inauguration just last month. Then the past few days also saw the deaths of two female tigers at the Lahore Zoo, while a male is in critical condition. The cause is a blood parasite attack, and if the male succumbs as well, the zoo will be left with just two tigers.

One could go on about the cost of purchase and the upkeep of such exotic animals and the losses incurred on account of their death, but that would be to miss the point. Pakistan’s zoos are everywhere in bad shape, filled with disheartened, suffering animals. Far from being places where the diversity of life can be celebrated, zoo facilities here are mostly candy-wrapper-littered wastelands where creatures of the wild are jailed. Even in the developed world, where zoos are sanctuaries, a movement is building about not confining animals. In Pakistan, where they are kept in abject conditions, there is urgent need to dismantle zoos altogether.

Inter-institutional harmony

IT could prove to be the briefest of respites, but in this season of great political uncertainty and danger, common sense and caution articulated by national leaders ought to be seriously considered. Four political speeches delivered over the weekend, if taken together, could provide a template for a de-escalation of institutional tensions in the country. The newly installed president of the PML-N and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif delivered an unsurprising, but important speech in which he once again suggested an inter-institutional dialogue in the country. The aim is to reduce political tensions, have institutions operate within their constitutional domains and re-establish national stability to address some of the fundamental challenges that continue to plague state and society. The younger Sharif is right. He may be unable to explicitly say so, but the country cannot afford a forever-crisis that leaves mainstream political parties fearful for their futures and

desperate to seek political accommodation with seemingly all-powerful anti-democratic forces.

Over the same weekend as the chief minister's sensible call for dialogue, two other members of the Sharif family — the two at the centre of the national political storm — Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz, delivered political speeches that, unusually for them, did not directly verbally assault the judiciary or indirectly attack the military leadership. In these fraught times, that itself could constitute an opportunity for moderate political forces to try and institute an inter-institutional dialogue. The elder Sharif and Ms Nawaz ought to consider holding their political fire for a while. While some of their grievances are valid, there is an argument to be made that the cause of democracy will not be strengthened by political elements that have been deeply wounded by anti-democratic forces. A verbal truce by the Sharifs could allow for more cooperative-minded political forces to find a path to democratic revival.

Of the four speeches, perhaps the National Party's Hasil Bizenjo delivered the most institutionally relevant argument. Mr Bizenjo was irate following the Senate chairman election, a vote that will surely be remembered in the annals of manipulated elections in the country as a grave disservice to democracy. But the NP leader has rightly indicated that the only path forward must be an inter-institutional dialogue. Democratic institutions, constitutional institutions and state institutions must work together to find national stability. For that to happen, there must be recognition by other institutions that they have, either unwittingly or directly, destabilised the democratic process in the country. Set aside the Sharifs and their political fate. Some of the actions attributed to other institutions or suspicions of the intentions of the latter have undermined democratic tenets and principles. Democratic continuity requires other institutions to accept their constitutional remits and respect political mandates.

IN his first budget speech in June 2013, then finance minister Ishaq Dar gave an assurance to the country that the circular debt of the power sector, which had just been retired in a massive exercise of almost Rs500bn, would not be allowed to return. "[It] is imperative that we must do all that is needed to stop its recurrence in the future," he had said in his budget speech, after outlining the huge proportions that the problem had

assumed by the time he had taken office. He hailed as “historic” the decision by his government to settle the entire debt in one go, an exercise to ensure “that every available and economically viable source of power could be brought on line”. Eliminating load-shedding and preventing the return of the circular debt were two central pillars of the new government’s promise to the country, and for a while at least, it seemed like they were on their way to accomplishing both. Load-shedding has indeed been controlled, if not fully eradicated, and up till late 2015 or so, the circular debt was also kept restrained as some improvement in power-sector recoveries took place due to new billing reforms.

But it all began to unravel rather quickly. Today, the circular debt is beyond the levels it was at when the government came to power, and it is only a matter of time before it begins to jam the turbines of the power sector once again. It all depends on how one defines the circular debt, but one recent report in this newspaper shows that it could be as high as Rs922bn, making it almost double the size it was when the government took the reins of power. More megawatts mean stronger billing and recovery to plug the leaks. That is not happening though. All the policy emphasis of the government has been on mega projects, adding more power plants, and hardly any on reforming the power sector so it can handle the additional power without running into severe liquidity issues. With its rapid pace of accumulation, it is possible for the circular debt to once again choke the power sector. If that happens in the days leading up to the election, the debt will not be the only thing that will be circular. The government’s journey from its first day to its last would also have come full circle.

Upgrading investigations

TO put it mildly, the state of the criminal justice system in Pakistan is abysmal. Instead of being investigated along scientific lines, most crimes are probed through rudimentary methods, with the result that conviction rates nationwide are low. The key to rectifying this lies in setting up proper training institutes where investigators can be educated in the latest methods and asked to apply these in the field. One step in the right direction was taken on Sunday in Sindh when the provincial police chief inaugurated a school of investigation, built with German assistance. Sindh IG A.D. Khowaja said the establishment of the institute was “imperative to improve professional training of investigators with the help of modern technology”. He added that similar institutes would

be set up in other parts of the province while “serious steps” were being taken to establish a forensics lab.

In an age where criminals and terrorists are using the latest methods to disrupt life, law enforcers cannot afford to rely on outdated crime-fighting techniques. It is hoped that the training centre can help change the police culture in Sindh so that crimes are investigated along modern lines and that, as a result, criminals are brought to justice. Moreover, similar institutes/labs are needed at the district or divisional levels so that the evidence is not compromised while being transported out of the city/town or even the province. Investigators and policemen of all ranks must be taught to preserve crime scenes and treat evidence with care so that solid cases can be built. Also, well-trained, motivated medico-legal officers are needed in sufficient numbers to examine victims at hospitals. There have been various efforts in the past as well to reform the police through the establishment of various centres and institutes. What is needed is a holistic overhaul of the criminal justice system so that all arms of law enforcement are working in tandem and as per standard operating procedures.

Saudi transformation

SAUDI Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is in the US for a rebranding exercise of a kingdom he already has de facto control of. The ambitious Saudi heir appears to genuinely want to modernise parts of society, but his hawkish views on Iran, headlong rush into a military quagmire in Yemen that has turned into a humanitarian disaster, and determination to purge potential rivals in an anti-corruption crackdown suggest that his country’s future is very much in the balance. Add to that the lack of any political reforms in his domestic agenda and in many ways the new Saudi Arabia could very much come to resemble the old Saudi Arabia: an absolute monarchy with concessions to preferred sections of society. Where those sections once were a deeply regressive clergy, in a Saudi Arabia with a younger population that is chafing under extreme social restrictions, the crown prince is seeking younger allies among the people.

Political and human rights define a modern society. The Arab Spring sent shockwaves through Middle Eastern monarchies and authoritarian regimes precisely because it was an attempt for the people of those countries to try and take control of the governments that ruled them. A furious pushback by many regimes and a sharpening of tensions between Sunni-led governments and Iran has now turned spring into winter. But the underlying yearning of the Arab people for political rights, which alone can guarantee that social and economic rights are not snatched away or selectively bestowed, remains. If the crown prince wants to truly take his place among progressive Arab rulers, he will need to carve a path towards not just greater personal freedoms for the Saudi people, but also political rights. Piecemeal efforts will not suffice as attempts in other Arab monarchies have demonstrated.

To be sure, the social changes under way in Saudi Arabia are not insignificant. While Saudi society will take many decades to achieve true gender equality, it is remarkable that a crown prince and future king has spoken publicly about women being equal to men, as Mohammed bin Salman has. The efforts to free women from decades of state-sanctioned repression are commendable. Saudi women celebrating the right to drive can be an enduring symbol of the early 21st century. Indeed, other conservative regimes should take note of women seeking greater rights — the tide of history is inexorable when it comes to one half of humanity having the same rights and privileges as the other. Equal rights and rights for all is a fight that men and women can wage together — after all, states exist to serve their people.

Sexual harassment

IN Pakistan, not only do women suffer the toxic culture of workplace misogyny, they also fear that breaking their silence on sexism and physical violations will have serious consequences. This is because sexual harassment happens where there is a power differential, where men in authority wield control over women's careers and reputation. In a report published on Tuesday in this newspaper, women from many professions — law, medicine, education, etc — spoke of their experience. They reported unwanted contact, catcalling, gender-related comments, groping, unwelcome promise of rewards for sexual favours and persistent propositioning. Based on interviews and the findings of a countrywide poll on sexual harassment, the report suggests the true scale of the problem is far greater than what is generally believed. Of the 300 respondents surveyed, for instance, 83pc believe men will get away with inappropriate behaviour. Women everywhere in the workforce suffer economically, socially and professionally for

challenging abusers. Interviewees sharing their harrowing experiences confirmed this: a medical student didn't complain when propositioned in the operating theatre; a teacher suffered relentless intimidation and physical abuse to keep her job; students spoke of sexual favours exchanged for grades. Despite a 2010 law to protect against workplace harassment, many women are dissuaded from making official complaints — only 17pc had approached an internal inquiry committee, according to the Dawn poll.

Although organisations and universities are legally obligated to institute inquiry committees mandated to rule impartially on harassment cases, most fail to follow through. Improving law and policy is critical, especially as conversations are being triggered about women's rights to workplace respect and safety. These conversations must include the precarious workplace conditions endured by vulnerable women, including factory workers and contract employees. Provincial women's commissions could also act as watchdogs by checking on inquiry processes at workplaces. Also, the 2010 law should be amended to allow provincial ombudspersons to take suo motu notice of harassment cases. As always, the Achilles heel lies in executing legal requisites — since April 2017, Punjab has had no ombudsperson, while this slot has not been filled in KP and Balochistan for the past eight years. To end, breaking the silence on harassment will break the hold of power and patriarchy and pave the way for lasting change. Writer, Maya Angelou's advice is gold for Pakistani women: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you."

Politics of expediency

FROM Maulana Samiul Haq in KP to the 'electables' in Punjab, Imran Khan has consistently chosen expedient alliances over defining his party's ideological underpinnings in order to expand the PTI's vote bank. Yet the decision to add Aamir Liaquat to the party's coterie, just to shore up support in Karachi, is a new low — even in the current landscape of political opportunism. Mr Liaquat, who had previously criticised the PTI, has time and again revealed that he holds no scruples in the service of ratings and personal brand-building. Over the years, his incendiary remarks, repeatedly exposed in the media and courts as unacceptable hate speech, have seen him shunted from one platform to another. For him to have now landed on the PTI's stage is worth taking a moment to reflect on.

It might seem like a good match — a union between an attention-seeking TV anchor and a politician who seems desperate to win votes in the upcoming general elections. But as

a serious political contender — someone who advertises himself as a principled politician— we must expect more of Mr Khan. We must assume that he would put country above personal gain. Yet this risible decision only exposes his lack of judgement as a leader. Such mercenary tactics might win votes, but with the base band of brothers Mr Khan is amassing, the question is: then what? What message does his party's induction of a man who is accused of using his bully pulpit to espouse sectarian and religious bigotry send to our minorities? What should progressive voters expect from a party that supports a man who is not unwilling to engage in smear campaigns against missing rights activists? Mr Liaquat's rhetoric has justifiably been viewed as endangering lives. For the PTI to associate itself with him paints a grim picture of its vision for a 'naya' Pakistan, and indicates how the most defenceless among us might be treated under its stewardship. Mr Khan must reconsider going down this route.

Rupee devaluation

A SUDDEN and sharp depreciation of the rupee on Tuesday has plunged it to its lowest value against the US dollar. That is unsurprising. Other than a single person, former finance minister Ishaq Dar, and those in official positions that Mr Dar forced into toeing his line, there has been hardly any independent economist or financial analyst who has argued that an artificially propped-up rupee was either sustainable or wise. The more relevant question, then, is how much closer is the rupee valuation now to its value if allowed to be freely determined by the market. Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Miftah Ismail has tweeted that the "current devaluation is a good thing" and that a pick-up in exports and a slowdown in the rate of growth of imports in February are positive trends. If the February trade figures, a 16.5pc reduction in the trade deficit over January 2018, do go on to become a trend and pressure on the external accounts abates, perhaps Mr Ismail will be vindicated. But that remains to be seen.

Many a finance minister and adviser has claimed before to have put the state's finances and the country's economy on a stable, sustainable path — only to be undone by economic reality or external shocks. Perhaps more telling than official claims is that independent analysts continue to cite political concerns in the run-up to a general election as an important factor in the management of the rupee and the economy. So, after several years of counter-economic management by Mr Dar, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and his economic team will need to prove in the final months of the PML-N government that they are guided by economic reality and not political considerations of the Sharif family and its small coterie of advisers. The issue has become all the more important since the revelations of army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's comments on the civilian economic stewardship of the country.

There is some truth on both sides of the civil-military divide on the economy and the role of institutions, but a collapse in civil-military relations could itself become the biggest threat to the economy and the state's finances. The jolt to the rupee on Tuesday was the latest indicator that the triple threat to the economy remains the external account; the budget deficit, especially circular debt in the power sector and failing, debt-ridden state-owned enterprises; and the wait for China-led imports to deliver economic growth and job creation, as the government has claimed it will. Mr Abbasi and Mr Ismail ought to also consider continuing to reverse the hyper-concentration of power under Mr Dar and allowing institutions such as the State Bank of Pakistan and the Federal Board of Revenue to operate with greater autonomy. Strong institutions are unequivocally and always better for the economy and democracy.

The MMA is back

THE religious parties have come together in anticipation of a general election. The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal has been revived, with the JUI-F and Jamaat-i-Islami taking the main offices ie president and general secretary.

The grouping is supposed to be representative of all shades of opinions on the right of the political spectrum. But while it does reflect some election-specific agreement among a wide range of views, many groups, which are at the moment striving to assert their roles with far more persistence than the MMA components, are not part of the alliance.

One purpose of the MMA then would be to contain the extremist influence, besides aiming for the main objective of capturing power where it can or at least attaining a bargaining position in places such as KP. The decision of the various parties to be part of the alliance, especially the JUI-F and JI, raises significant questions.

Is the revival of the MMA proof that these parties had lost all hope of striking some kind of a partnership with a strong mainstream party? Or was a grouping of these right-wing outfits thought to be their best bet to attract votes in the general election? Perhaps a bit of both led to the MMA's restoration.

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Situationer: Time ripe for MMA reunion?

In the run-up to the elections, none among the so-called secular parties has appeared keen to embrace a religious party. There was also realisation of the need to consolidate the religious vote bank and to offer a united countrywide front. It was the religious parties' answer to the seemingly more popular, 'secular' parties to their left and the extremist option emerging on their right, in KP, Balochistan and elsewhere.

It cannot after all be a coincidence that the formal declaration of the revival of the MMA took place in a very important and supposedly conducive Karachi. The city is thought to be struggling to find the right party to back in the next poll after the collapse of the MQM there.

Reviving old times when religious parties exercised considerable influence over the voters in Karachi would perhaps be one of the aims of the MMA. The parties have been trying on their own but there are as yet few indications of a return to those times when they thrived in certain parts of the country.

The MMA is out to exercise an option that emanates from a compulsion collectively and strongly felt.

Electronic media ethics

TRUTH was not the only casualty the day that Shahid Masood aired his since-debunked claims regarding the Zainab rape-murder case on his TV programme.

Already stretched judicial and law-enforcement resources were diverted to investigate his allegations, which were so sensational and politicised that they detracted from and threatened to diminish the very real horror of this case.

That the Supreme Court took notice of this instance of fake news and sanctioned the person responsible for spreading it might be viewed as a positive development — but it should not have come to this.

Editorial: Yellow journalism

At its best, the electronic media exposes the excesses of power. But as a potent force itself, particularly in defining public opinion, it must practise the same commitments and hold its own to account.

Mr Masood is certainly not the first TV anchor to have broadcast misinformation on air. Nor will he be the last, unless the independence and effectiveness of Pemra is guaranteed, and our media houses work collectively to develop and maintain a code of conduct for news coverage.

Read: Fake news in Pakistan

Granted, in a 24-hour news cycle, split-second decisions often need to be made that might not always be the best in hindsight. But such failures go unchecked (or are even tacitly encouraged) when the authority of a media house's own news and current affairs director is circumvented to cater to ratings, personal agendas or special interests.

Their autonomy and strength within organisations must be ensured.

Moreover, an industry-wide committee of such directors must be constituted to build consensus on a range of ethical issues, and to adopt checks and balances accordingly.

Adherence to a time-lag for terrorism-related coverage is one example of the maturity Pakistan's electronic media displays when it works together. But the industry has a duty to serve the public's interests better.

This paper stands with our broadcast journalist peers in defending press freedoms, but in the course of doing so, we must acknowledge the enormous responsibility we have to command those rights fairly and honestly.

The PSL victory

THE past few days have been happy ones for cricket enthusiasts in Pakistan, especially those in Karachi and Lahore, as the country endeavours to emerge from a prolonged negative phase.

There have been some calls about how the three games organised as part of the PSL finale in Lahore and Karachi had made it difficult for many to go about their daily business. But these complaints have either not been pressed or have been put on hold for a later discussion in the backdrop of the larger picture of international cricket in the country.

The PCB must be applauded, in particular its chairman Najam Sethi, who has promised many more games spread over many more venues in Pakistan next year, and who moved with determination to achieve the goal of reviving international cricket in the country.

Also read: Situationer — Lights, laughter hug Karachi

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As the tournament brought top-level cricketers and a clutch of international names to Pakistan over the last few days, there were a number of statements from politicians who also claimed credit for the PSL homecoming. Some were clearly more deserving of the applause than others, but again, while due praise has been bestowed upon all those out to bring back a normal Pakistan, perhaps the administrations in the cities where the games were held have not been appreciated enough.

It was by no means an easy event to organise and the administrations, evident in the manner in which they have organised the latest PSL show, gave the people enough confidence to boldly take part in the ongoing exercise to dispel the notion that Pakistan's soil is not safe for international competition.

Explore: Resilient Karachiites brave scorching heat, security checks to welcome PSL

This confidence in the ability of the organisers is essential. It is apparent that the PSL has not as yet drawn the cream of international talent. Quite a lot has been said about how foreign cricketers can be bound by contract to feature in games staged here, while others have pointed out that they cannot be forced to come to the country.

The truth is that there can be no alternative to building — gradually and patiently — an atmosphere free of fear that encourages the best in the business to be part of the PSL.

In this context, this year was an improvement over the last one, even though, technically, there are areas that need review.

It is ultimately about who scores how much; the spectators naturally longed for power-packed exhibitions, and they might have felt a little underserved with the runs, with no side managing to cross the 200-run barrier during the entire league.

New territory will be explored with practice — this being a very young league still.

The show, and the talent, will only get richer once we make a habit of playing not just in Karachi and Lahore but in other cities of Pakistan as well.

Delayed power projects

IT has long been understood that one of the most important pillars in the election strategy of the PML-N is to commission power projects in the pipeline in time for the general election, and with the augmented power generation, go to the electorate and ask them whether or not the party has fulfilled its pledge to eliminate load-shedding during its tenure. All along it has been pointed out that though this strategy is sound in terms of how democratic politics is supposed to operate, by being directly responsive to the needs of the people, it has a number of weaknesses that could be its undoing. Chief among these is the financial aspect, where additional megawatts pumped into a leaky transmission and distribution system would only cause a more rapid accumulation of the circular debt, with its potential to choke the power sector. Now another major weakness is coming into view: the rush to commission these plants has resulted in a series of technical faults that are delaying commercial operations, while adding to the costs.

At issue are five power projects, three LNG-fired plants in Punjab, the Neelum Jhelum hydropower project, which is already years behind schedule with cost overruns in the billions, as well as an extension project in Tarbela that will add 1,410 MW once completed.

In total, these projects have a generation capacity of 6,000 MW. The three LNG power plants have suffered from a series of technical problems that are complicating the start of commercial operations, and potentially driving up the cost at which they will provide power to the national grid. These plants have received numerous extensions already, and were last expected to begin commercial operations by December 2017. But a series of continuing technical problems has pushed that date further down, with the latest being May 2018. This puts them very close to the last days of the government, and if the issues they are facing are not resolved in accordance with the new timeline, it is probable that their commissioning could be pushed into the tenure of the next government. This is just another reminder that in pursuit of delivering on its promise to eliminate load-shedding — a laudable goal — the government has relied excessively on adding new power and not enough on reforming the power sector to improve its governance.

US gun violence

IF, for many observers, the scandal-laden Trump administration represents an existential crisis for American democracy, then the gun-control march in Washington offers a hopeful counterpoint of how its youth might save it. For a group of students to turn their personal grief into a national political movement is inspiring — in both its size and its intersection with recent movements highlighting racial and gender marginalisation. But it also represents the colossal failure of the government in ensuring their safety. From Martin Luther King Jr's daughter articulating her dream for a better tomorrow, to the student journalists of Parkland high school spotlighting their agenda in the Guardian, these socially conscious youth have been forced out of desperation to place themselves at the epicentre of the hotly debated but seldom reformed issue of gun control. Since the Columbine massacre 19 years ago, US legislators have been unable and unwilling to address the unending tragedy of mass shootings. Already this year, the number of school shootings has reached double digits. That American children are so psychologically resilient despite this is a testament to the optimism of youth.

While there are signs of shifting public opinion as major companies divest their ties with the National Rifle Association, counteracting the immense pressure and deep pockets of

the gun lobby, increasingly militarised police forces, and a culture that valorises gun ownership and violence will take sustained political commitment to voting out those office bearers who have a material stake in perpetuating the status quo. Neither is it productive to add fuel to the fire in the form of knee-jerk responses such as President Trump's prescription of arming teachers — a recommendation that was strongly criticised in Pakistan following the APS massacre in 2014. Such tactics derail the effort to dismantle structural violence through a combined process of dewatering and supplementary reforms such as additional funding for mental health and school security resources. For the next generation, the choices of today might make the difference between life and death tomorrow.

Undeclared assets abroad

It is not surprising that the suo motu hearing begun by the Supreme Court into Pakistanis' undeclared assets in foreign jurisdictions has led to a cul-de-sac.

Ultimately, inquiries into this matter always end up with the same question: how do we trace these funds? In this case, the court created a 12-member committee to help it address the question; unfortunately, the answer is one which may not make judicial action easy.

The reason is simple. Tracing flows of undocumented wealth into foreign assets is not possible so long as there remains a large undocumented sector of the economy at home. Undocumented assets in foreign jurisdictions are tied in with undocumented assets within the country, because the black economy at home is the nesting ground from where the incomes that flow into these assets originate.

And tackling the black economy within the country is a policy task; it is not one that can be pursued through instructions or even a stricter application of the laws.

It is unlikely that the committee would be able to recommend much that is useful on the issue of shutting down the channels through which undocumented incomes travel. The main reason is that these channels are integral to the conduct of normal trade as well as the normal cross-border flow of capital.

Heightening surveillance or attaching larger penalties to the misuse of these channels will negatively impact investment and trade. So long as practices like benami accounts and assets at home, as well as opaque property markets and multiple tax-evasion techniques persist, using the instruments of law and foreign treaties to create a meaningful dent in the accumulation of foreign assets abroad is unlikely to yield the desired results.

And therein lies the rub. By targeting the accumulation of undeclared foreign assets, the judiciary could find itself outside the remit of the law and firmly in the domain of policy.

At the end of the day, this is a task that requires large-scale documentation of the economy, not just a vigilant eye or even a one-time amnesty scheme. It has to be achieved through creating the right policy incentives to bring the vast mass of business people into the tax net so that their transactions become visible to the state.

And before that can happen, the compact between the state and capital needs to be reformed to lessen the fear and mistrust that most businesses have of the state and its petty officialdom that is tasked with implementing such policies.

The court has done right to order such a study of the myriad pathways through which illicit and ill-gotten gains are being taken out. But the job of putting restraints on this racket will have to await a proper policy response.

Restoring vision

LAST summer, the Khyber Teaching Hospital and Lady Reading Hospital, both in Peshawar, began offering free corneal transplantation surgeries. Their efforts have so far resulted in more than 100 recipients, many from underserved areas, having their eyesight restored. Given the inextricable link between visual impairment and poverty — indeed, one national survey found its prevalence to be significantly higher among the poor — it is commendable that ophthalmologists across Pakistan volunteer their time,

resources and expertise to deliver eye healthcare to patients who would otherwise be unable to afford it. But meeting the overwhelming demand for ophthalmological services requires a supply that neither the medical community nor money can fulfil. For thousands with blindness or low vision, whether by disease or trauma, that can be ameliorated with corneal transplants, it requires that their fellow Pakistanis commit to organ donation.

As this paper has often highlighted, despite our society's immense record of philanthropy, the practice of cadaveric organ donation is virtually non-existent compared to other Muslim countries, despite multiple religious schools of thought endorsing it. Not even a luminary such as Abdul Sattar Edhi offering his eyes so that others might see has moved us to pledge to emulate his vision. Even today, eye donations in Pakistan are generated almost exclusively from abroad, typically Sri Lanka and the US. The lacuna of local donors has not only deprived the tens of thousands suffering from end-stage organ failure per year of a chance of survival, it has also allowed illegal organ trade to proliferate in the country, creating a black market in which the bodies of the poor are made into commodities. In the case of cornea donations, it is all the more vexing, given that eye tissue degenerates at a much slower rate than a deceased person's other organs, making it likelier to be harvested and remain usable, and that cornea grafting has a 95pc success rate. Dispelling the apprehensions and lethargy of our public when it comes to organ donation requires a concerted awareness-raising drive at every level — health departments, the media and community leaders all have a role to play. For those who have benefited from eye transplants, the gift of vision will undoubtedly aid in uplifting their conditions. But there are thousands more patients hoping for their turn on an ever-increasing waiting list. We must all pledge to do better by them.

Transgender news anchor

IT takes much self-assurance and determination to forge ahead when the world is resistant to or fearful of understanding diversity in individuals. On March 23, Marvi Malik, Pakistan's first transgender news anchor went on air after she bagged a coveted slot as newsreader with Kohinoor News, a Lahore-based broadcaster. Twenty-one-year-old Ms Malik's back story resonates with the confidence required to contend with bigotry and discrimination. In fact, her resilience, lauded in the media this week, reminds one of the transgender character coping with societal prejudice in this year's Oscar-winning film *A Fantastic Woman*. Qualified as a Punjab University graduate, Ms Marvi has financially

provided for herself since the age of 15. Though estranged from her family, her achievement is inspirational not only for her community but also wider society. Meanwhile, also deserving of praise is the news director who saw potential in her audition and hired her. Others employers should adopt this thinking that workforce inclusivity is about providing equal opportunity and building a multitalented team.

Recorded for the first time in the recent census, the country's transgender population is close to 10,000 in a population of 200m. Even if this isn't the real figure for various reasons, the majority of this community has been reduced to begging on the streets, dancing or becoming sex workers to make ends meet — a damning indictment of our leadership that has failed to see transgender rights as human rights. However, this month's Senate bill to protect transgender rights is a significant development. If passed, it would enable individuals to change their gender on national identity cards, inherit property and not be discriminated against as political candidates. Further, reports of transgender people receiving driving licences and identity cards are the results of campaigns. That said, this community has received minimum attention from political parties though it constitutes a potential vote bank. Removing this community from the fringes requires increased rights advocacy by groups willing to take on their concerns.

Memogate regret

BETTER late than never. Former prime minister and PML-N quaid for life Nawaz Sharif has finally expressed regret for petitioning the Supreme Court in the so-called Memogate affair that rocked the previous PPP-led government's foundations.

With the Supreme Court seemingly intent on returning to the issue and forcing the return of former Pakistan ambassador to the US Husain Haqqani, Memogate has been back in the news.

Several points need to be made here. It is important that Mr Sharif has expressed regret for his instigation of the Memogate affair and seeking to judicialise what was patently a civil-military spat.

In pictures: The rise and fall of Nawaz Sharif

As Mr Sharif once again fights to save his career in frontline politics and claims to be waging a struggle for democracy, it is necessary that he also publicly acknowledge and repent for his previous anti-democratic actions.

In particular, Mr Sharif's association with military dictator Gen Ziaul Haq is a black mark on his political career that has not faded with time.

It is Mr Sharif's inability or unwillingness to express remorse for past actions that partly fuels the opposition to the PML-N today and makes many a democratic actor reluctant to support pro-democracy actions that he may take now.

Memogate was also an early, though significant, indicator of a problematic judicialisation of politics in Pakistan. Setting aside whether the actions and events alleged in Memogate did or did not occur, it has never been clear why the matter was justiciable, i.e., whether there was a clear question of law, either in substance or procedure, for the judiciary to answer.

That problem only deepened in subsequent years; the judicialisation of politics is now rampant and arguably requires a fresh understanding between institutions to return all to their original, constitutional domains.

Certainly, the superior judiciary has an interest in ensuring the rule of law and is by oath required to uphold the Constitution. The superior judiciary should not be expected to turn away from a matter merely because it raises difficult questions of law and politics.

What is necessary is for all institutions to recognise that the Constitution envisages a separation of powers.

Just as Mr Sharif and politicians must recognise they must respect and accept court rulings, other institutions need to consider their actions in light of what the Constitution permits.

Finally, opposition parties, in particular the leading parties PPP and PTI, need to consider their present role in instigating encroachment of other institutions in the democratic domain. It is surprising that the PPP, having suffered the Memogate attack, is now seemingly willing to unlearn the lesson of the 1990s: when politicians fight among themselves, it is usually anti-democratic forces that win.

Meanwhile, the PTI's perceived willingness to use virtually any means to hurt the PML-N is undermining the party's credible political standing as a serious contender for power in the general election.

More fake encounters

IT seems that there is no escape from fake police encounters in this country.

More worrying, there is no sign of a realisation on the part of the authorities that they should end the gory practice — even though public anger against fake encounters is at an unprecedented level.

The killing of young Naqeebullah in Karachi in January this year led to an outpouring of grief followed by widespread protests. It has now come to light that Maqsood, another youth killed by the police in the Sindh capital within a week of the Naqeebullah incident, had also fallen prey to the same evil.

Whereas a police version maintained that Maqsood had been caught in the crossfire between the law enforcers and a group of criminals, a fresh investigation has confirmed that he died after being targeted by the police.

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In news reports, this has been described as a ‘blow’ for the Karachi police, and the role of civil society in pursuing these latest cases has been highlighted.

Dawn Investigation: Rao Anwar and the killing fields of Karachi

Since the campaign against staged encounters appears to be at its peak, this is perhaps the right time to contribute to solutions that can end this deplorable practice that law enforcers across the country resort to. However, it would have been easier to sustain such hopes had previous such impressions created on the back of a heightened drive not fizzled out in the face of a particular ‘doctrine of necessity’ — one that the police who kill in fake encounters and their even more powerful backers freely subscribe to.

The case of Rao Anwar, the senior police officer in Karachi arrested following the Nageebullah killing, is reflective of just how complicated the fake encounter phenomenon is.

It is also widespread and many in positions of authority apparently have their own list of suspects they would like to see eliminated via the fast route.

There are examples in which the police have been found to exceed their limits on their own and instances where they are puppets in the hands of others.

Whatever the case, the police force must be held accountable for what is no less than a crime.

In these times when the superior judiciary is taking a keen interest in so many things — from operations inside hospitals to proceedings at airports — it may appear a trifle odd that the sponsors of fake encounters have so far not been warned of a swoop.

Young achievers

AWAY from the negative publicity this country often receives is the heartening news that nine Pakistanis are on the annual '30 Under 30' Forbes Asia list that showcases the achievements of young people who have come up with ground-breaking answers to global challenges. Be it poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, improving women's rights, or environmental change, Asia's millennials are finding innovative and sustainable solutions. Spanning a region that contains 60pc of the world's population, the Asia list, published on Tuesday, features 300 individuals from 24 countries. With 30 honorees in each of the 10 categories — the arts, technology, social entrepreneurship, healthcare, science, media, and more — these innovators are tackling issues of concern to their generation. One of them, Hamza Farrukh, the founder of The Solar Water Project, had a mission to bring clean drinking water to rural Pakistan; he has set up two solar-powered wells for 1,500 residents of a village. Replicating this project when clean water in this country is a scarce commodity would help tackle disease, and contribute to reducing maternal and child mortality.

Such international recognition of our youth demonstrates the talent and social conscience of young Pakistanis. In the 24-hour news cycle about the sorry state of governance and human development, these achievers give hope for a more progressive future. As such, investing in the future of our youth — which has sometimes been referred to as a ‘ticking time bomb’ — is the only way forward. If Asad Raza and Abraham Shah, both 24, have worked out ways to remove critical health service deficiencies, their model needs to be studied for its successful use of technology. Their healthcare startup provides quality low-cost, wearable and implantable medical devices for the developing world including prosthetic services in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria. And while acknowledging all such youth visionaries, including others involved in grass-roots movements for change, our governments must remove the social and educational impediments that stand in their wayfringes requires increased rights advocacy by groups willing to take on their concerns.

Malala returns home

ORDINARILY, a 20-year-old returning home should not be cause for comment. But this is Malala, and there is nothing ordinary about her.

The world’s youngest Nobel laureate arrived in Islamabad yesterday on a brief visit to Pakistan, the first time she has set foot in her country for five years. It was a deeply emotional moment for her — a dream come true, as she tearfully said during her speech at the reception given for her at Prime Minister House.

This is also an emotional occasion for many of her fellow Pakistanis. They have cheered Malala’s every accomplishment along her remarkable journey to becoming a global icon for girls’ education, and despaired of her ever being able to return to the country because of threats to her life from extremists.

Malala can justifiably be described as currently the most famous Pakistani in the world, and for all the right reasons. But her story illustrates much of what bedevils this country, and the conflicted narrative that feeds its sense of perpetual victimhood.

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Barely a teenager when the Pakistani Taliban banned girls' education in Swat, Malala began writing a diary for the BBC from her home in Mingora, the valley's largest city. On Oct 9, 2012, a Taliban militant shot her, a 15-year-old child, in the head for her activism; she had to be airlifted to the UK for emergency treatment.

Until now, security threats had prevented her from even visiting Pakistan.

Meanwhile, she has been feted by world leaders, won the most prestigious accolades and tirelessly continued her advocacy, not only through words but actions as well, for the right of girls to be educated.

However, against all logic, and regardless of her youth and the obvious travails she has endured in her road to recovery, some sections of society have consistently directed vicious invective against her, questioning her 'motives' and that of the world in lauding her.

Blinded by a simplistic, binary worldview — even as they crave a more positive international image — they see conspiracies where they should see courage, cast aspersions where they should celebrate a Pakistani who represents the best among us.

Then again, Pakistan has not done well by its heroes. Pakistan's first Nobel laureate, the renowned physicist Dr Abdus Salam — an Ahmadi — was also a lightning rod for some of this society's worst impulses.

The honour he brought his country went unacknowledged in his lifetime, and largely even after his death, his achievements subsumed by prejudice against his faith. His desire to establish a top-notch scientific institute in Pakistan remained unfulfilled.

Only societies devoid of vision treat their best and brightest with such indifference. For that to change, the leadership of this country must emphatically articulate its pride in its Nobel laureate and to support her mission, ensure that every girl in Pakistan gets an education. Meanwhile, welcome home Malala

Ball-tampering row

THE nasty ball-tampering incident at the Cape Town Test involving Australia's top cricketers has sent shockwaves across the world of cricket. Skipper Steve Smith, vice captain David Warner and young opener Cameron Bancroft have been at the centre of the appalling episode that has brought Australian cricket at a crossroads after Smith confessed to hatching the tampering plot in connivance with his two teammates in order to outfox the dominant South Africans. Television footage clearly showed Bancroft taking a yellow object out of his pocket while fielding in the post-lunch session on Saturday and appearing to rub it on the ball.

The incident has embarrassed Australia, prompting Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to say that his own integrity as well as the team's had come into question. Such a strong statement from the prime minister compelled the game's governing body in the region, Cricket Australia, to conduct a hurried probe after initially resisting an inquiry. As a result, Smith and Warner have been stripped of their roles as captain and vice captain and are banned from international and domestic cricket for a year. Cameron has been suspended for nine months. There has been huge public outrage in Australia whereas most former players have called for life bans. There are others, though, such as spin wizard Shane Warne, who believe that the punishment is 'excessive'.

Ball tampering in cricket is not new. Several bowlers from England, Australia, South Africa, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, etc, have previously been accused of it. Some of them have been penalised while others have escaped with a reprimand. But what is mind-boggling about the Cape Town Test controversy is the level of desperation that made the players resort to such an unethical practice and to deliberately plot the opposing team's downfall. It is time that the International Cricket Council and individual countries' cricket boards devised stricter laws for such offences and gave more authority to the umpires to take swift action against the offenders in order to prevent future occurrences.

Cricket Australia has, indeed, set the tone by imposing year-long bans which could well see the end of Warner's career besides minimising Smith's chances of a comeback. However, it would be well advised to further reprimand the team's long-standing coach

Darren Lehmann who, despite having been absolved of any wrongdoing in the ugly saga, asked for forgiveness for the three culprits on the grounds that they were “not bad people”

Curbing antibiotic overuse

FOR decades, scientists have warned of growing antibiotic resistance because of the misuse of drugs. Recently, the authors of a new study on antibiotic consumption, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, criticised the global response to this public health crisis as “slow and inadequate”. The study warns of the serious danger of drug-resistant infections. Based on sales data from 76 countries, the study found that antibiotic use had increased by 65pc between 2000 and 2015 — that’s a whopping 42bn doses annually. In Pakistan, antibiotic consumption, too, rose by the same figure in this period; in China, the increase was 79pc; in India, drug usage more than doubled to 103pc. When the burden of disease is increasing and antibiotic misuse rocketing, the need for urgent action cannot be more apparent. Thwarting a public health crisis in vulnerable low-income countries requires a multifaceted response, including infection prevention and control. Radical policies to reduce antibiotic overuse are needed. Investment in clean water, sanitation and vaccinations could prevent infections from occurring in the first place. If a superbug develops in a patient with no access to a toilet connected to a sewage treatment plant, for instance, it is likely to spread into the local water supply.

The reality is that antibiotics handed out for viral infections are ineffective and unnecessary. True, it is challenging to restrain doctors prescribing antibiotics on symptoms alone. However, tighter controls on drug prescription and diagnostic tests are recommended. Generating awareness about the risks of self-medicating and inappropriate antibiotic prescription requires concerted advocacy campaigns by the health ministry. One tested method is to ensure the availability of vaccines for viral flu and diarrhoeal infection to curb antibiotic misuse. Because our healthcare system is simply appalling, it would be a shame if the government failed to muster all its tools to reverse the tide of antibiotic misuse that threatens to unleash drug-resistant infections.

Militant threat in Punjab

IT is a reality check and a warning against complacency. The recent arrest of members of a 'group of terrorists' linked with the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan from Lahore, Gujranwala and some other districts in Punjab is a grim reminder of the widespread threat that continues to persist in the province in spite of a considerable decrease in militant violence over the last couple of years.

The suspects were said to be responsible for launching at least two suicide attacks from a madressah in Lahore last year against army personnel on Bedian Road and policemen on Ferozepur Road.

The provincial counterterrorism department claimed that the militants had planned to target the Pakistan Super League matches in Lahore this month.

They also had plans to hit politicians and imambargahs just before their network was busted by the department in a joint operation with the Intelligence Bureau.

The capture of these militants indicates that Punjab has still to come out of a phase in which it is vulnerable to terrorist attacks, besides being viewed as a nursery of terrorism.

It appears that all the calls to the people to celebrate victory against terrorism outfits have been premature. The so-called intelligence-based crackdown on militants including sectarian groups in the province, launched as part of a nationwide operation in the aftermath of the 2014 APS attack in Peshawar, has succeeded only to a point in the effort to secure the people — even those living in major cities where the law-enforcement agencies carry out stronger checks.

Indeed, the agencies have hunted down a number of militants over the last few years, averting several potential terrorist attacks. The perpetrators of several sectarian and terrorist strikes across the province have also been captured, killed or convicted.

But the fact remains that the government has not been able to completely dismantle the terrorist infrastructure.

Much deradicalisation also needs to be carried out at various levels. Politicians, including those belonging to the ruling PML-N, openly associate themselves with one extremist group or the other if that can help prop up their electoral chances.

It is well known that a majority of militant attacks in Pakistan are ordered, planned and financed by the TTP leadership based in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The state has provided Kabul with strong evidence about the existence of sanctuaries of the banned TTP and Jamaatul Ahrar in that country, and has asked the Afghan government to take effective action against them.

It is important to sever the links that sustain terrorist networks — including the sponsors of terrorism and its local facilitators.

This, however, doesn't mean that we neglect the task of monitoring our own territory while concentrating obsessively on the threat emanating from across the border. There must be no hesitation in dismantling militant infrastructure across the country.

Cold War again?

OVER the past few days, relations between Russia and the Western bloc — led by the US and UK — have plummeted to depths reminiscent of the Cold War era, when the Soviets and the free world were locked in a global ideological struggle. At the centre of the current storm is the poisoning of a former Russian spy and his daughter with a nerve agent in the English town of Salisbury earlier this month. Both victims survived the attack but are not completely out of danger yet. Britain has blamed Moscow for the attack, an allegation the Russians have dismissed. However, the poisoning has had far-reaching consequences, with scores of diplomats belonging to both camps being given marching orders. The US has expelled 60 Russian diplomats along with closing Moscow's consulate in Seattle, while Russia has responded by sending 60 Americans home and ordering the closure of the US consulate in St Petersburg. As reported in the media, 29 states have sent nearly 150 Russian diplomats home, while Nato has also taken similar steps. It is, therefore, understandable why the UN secretary general has said that the situation resembles “what we lived during the Cold War”.

Perhaps at the core of the current stand-off is the fact that under Vladimir Putin, Russia has attempted to reclaim the position it occupied on the world stage during the heyday of the USSR. Many in the West have not taken well to Moscow's policies; in a number of global hotspots, Russia and the Western bloc are supporting completely different positions. Ukraine, Syria and the Iranian nuclear question are some examples where Russia's and the West's policies are diametrically opposite. Moreover, with many former Soviet satellites being absorbed into Nato, Moscow has viewed this as an incursion into its sphere of influence. It is in this perspective that the current row over the spy's poisoning must be seen. However, the world order has already been shaken by a number of crises — militancy, failing states, the right wing capturing state power in capitals around the globe. Therefore, both Moscow and its Western counterparts need to step back and try to prevent the further souring of ties. Diplomatic channels should be kept open while Russia should cooperate with the British authorities to investigate the Salisbury poisoning. The world definitely does not need a return to the bad old days of the Cold War.

A new political party

CONSIDERING that the 'B' of 'Balochistan' and the 'P' of 'Party' were always there for the taking, it is a tad odd that it took even the ingenious amongst us so long to locate the connecting 'A' for a very meaningful union. The popular 'awami' has finally been found and the result is a remarkable addition to the book of patronage and politics. The BAP — Balochistan Awami Party — brings under one umbrella legislators in the provincial assembly and the Senate — and surely many, many more in the days to come. This is a throwback to the past when a party was crafted inside parliament after the 1985 'non-party' polls under Gen Ziaul Haq. At that time, the independent members were moved by an urge of conscience to serve the country to form a Muslim League in the assembly, which eventually transformed into what today is the PML-N. It's a measure of our love affair with circular journeys and our belief in remedies that, in these times of changing ideologies and new doctrines, old recipes are still applicable sometimes.

It is just the beginning, a new beginning, the party's well-wishers would say. It is quite an incredible beginning really, so there is no reason to doubt the approval that is coming the BAP's way. Despite the scepticism that was displayed by some at the outset, ultimately the party will have to be given some time to prove itself. Many would be hoping that the

new party can do what no political setup has been able to achieve in the province over the last few decades. All parties that have been in power have enjoyed outside support that is thought to be essential to run a government in Balochistan. If relevance at the mass level is something of interest to the BAP, it must aim to bring to Balochistan an elected government that at least to some extent represents the aspirations of the people in whose name politicians are elected and selected.