

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March 2021

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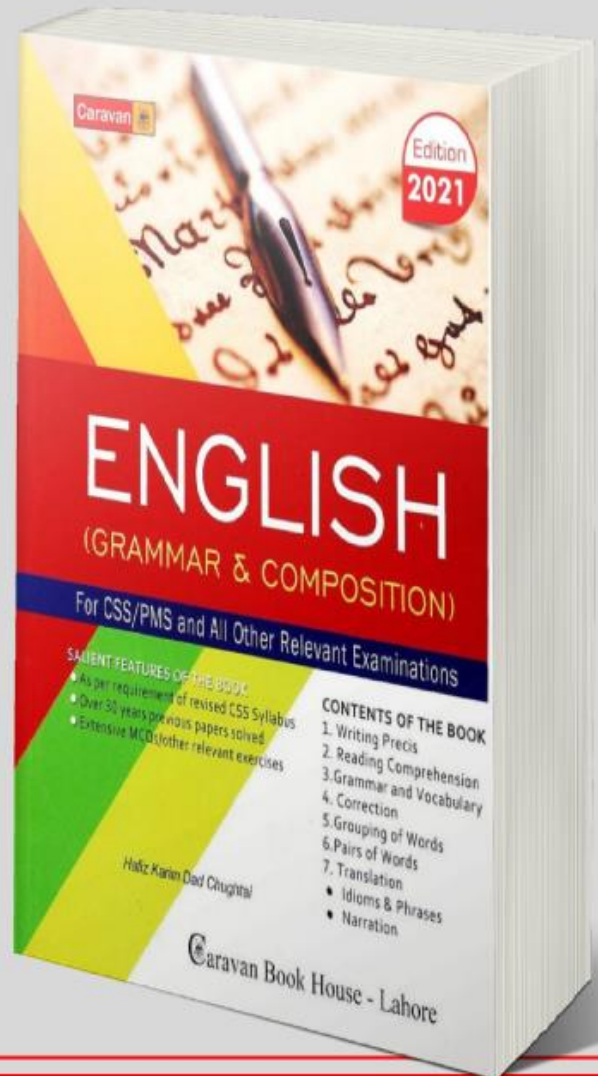
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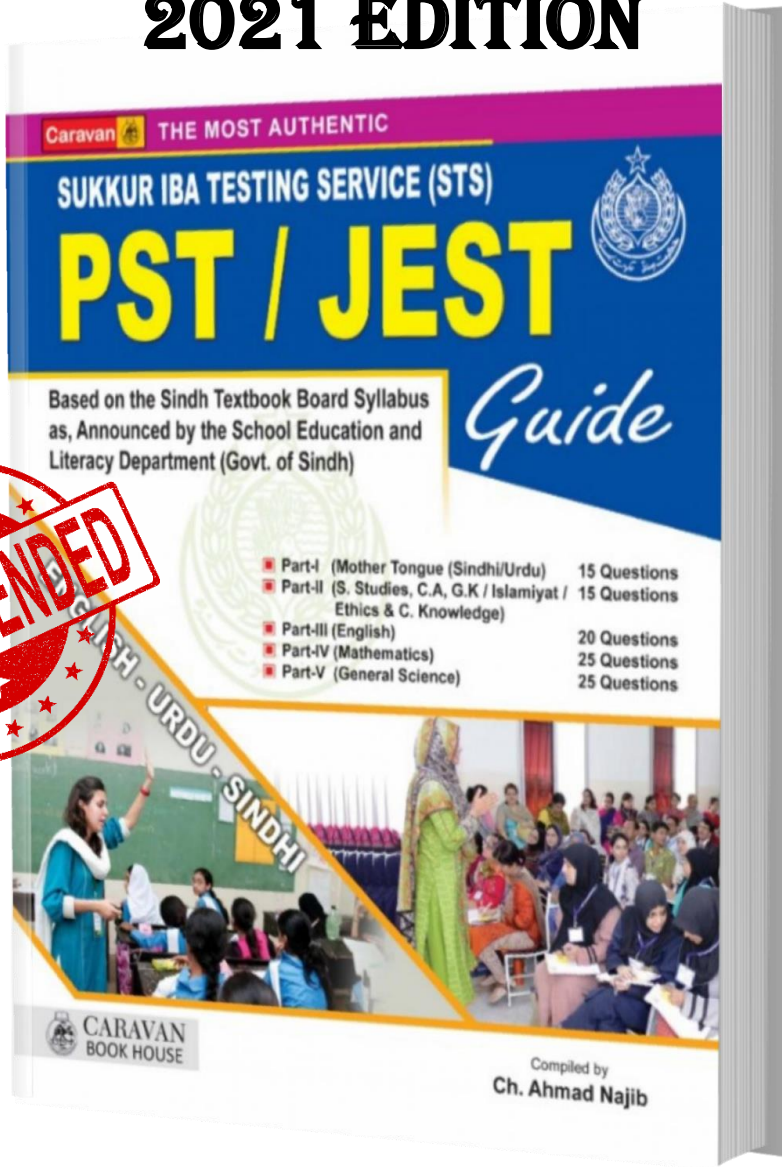
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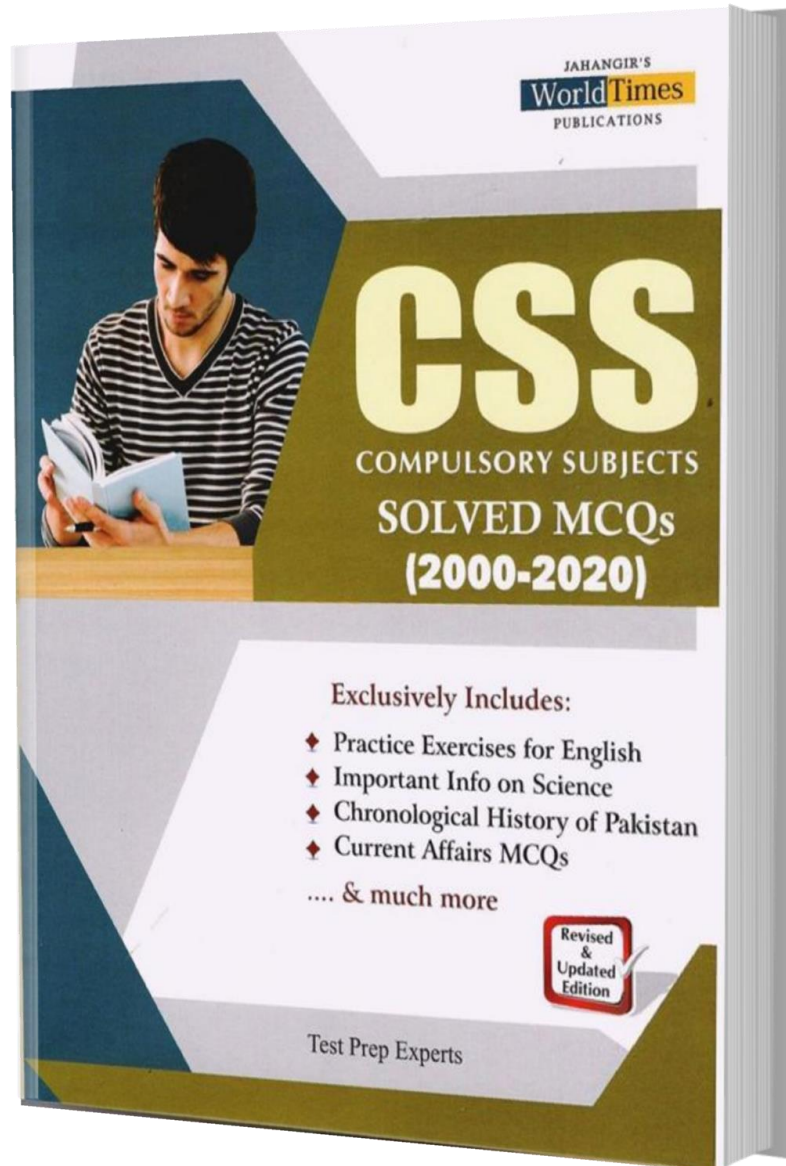
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US Syria strike

IF the US is serious about mending fences with Iran, then firing missiles at fighters allied with Tehran in Syria may not be the best way to go about it. In President Joe Biden's first major offensive overseas action, over 20 fighters belonging to militias loyal to Iran were killed when American missiles struck facilities in eastern Syria. While the Pentagon has termed the attack "a message", Damascus has called it "American aggression". The strikes came as an apparent reaction to the targeting of a base in Iraq hosting American forces on Feb 15, reportedly by pro-Iran militias. The fact is that the entire region, particularly Iraq and Syria, is a proxy battlefield where the US and its allies regularly square off against Iran and its loyalists. And while many Shia militias in Iraq take orders from Tehran, there are numerous armed factions that operate independently. Therefore, the need here is to proceed with caution, and prevent any sort of escalation, with both sides required to exhibit restraint.

It is entirely possible that the Biden administration has flexed its muscles through the missile strike, letting Iran know that while it is ready to talk, it still has offensive options on the table. Iran, meanwhile, has called upon Washington to lift sanctions before it returns to its commitments under the nuclear deal, which Mr Biden's predecessor unilaterally pulled the US out of. The Islamic Republic has been scaling back on its commitments ever since the Trump administration started intensifying its 'maximum pressure' campaign on Iran. Therefore, at this point there is both great opportunity and great peril for the region. The opportunity lies in the fact that the new incumbent of the White House is using a less confrontational tone with Iran, and if both sides reach a halfway point progress can be made in returning to the deal and improving relations. However, peril lies in the fact that if the US chooses to talk through its considerable firepower, as it did in eastern Syria, and Iran opts to respond in a similar tone, the confrontation will worsen. The US can send a more positive signal to Iran by letting it know that sanctions relief will be guaranteed if it returns to its commitments, while the Iranian leadership should also lower the temperature and talk to the Americans, for the sake of its struggling economy.

LNG deal

PAKISTAN has clinched a good deal for the long-term supply of LNG from Qatar. Under the new contract, Qatar will provide an additional 200mmcf/d at around 10.2pc of Brent for 10 years starting next year. The expected reduction in port charges by Doha would further push down the price to 10.13pc of Brent.

The government says the new bargain entails the lowest-ever publicly disclosed price under a long-term contract in the world, which is 31pc less than the 15-year contract signed by the previous administration. This is almost the same price at which Qatar is supplying LNG to China. The new price is also 15pc-16pc less than the average spot purchases of 11.9pc of Brent in 2020.

The current rate has been locked for the first four years of the life of the contract after which it can be renegotiated. The monthly supply of the two cargos will replace the demand of an expiring and two existing long-term, but more expensive, contracts. Islamabad also has the option to shift its summer demand to winter without any changes in the agreed gas price.

The debate on the gas sector during the last two years has mostly focused on the price of imported gas at the expense of much-needed reforms. Now that the PTI government has proved that the 2015 deal with Doha has cost the country quite a bit, it's time to move on to address the real challenges facing the gas market and overhaul it.

With indigenous gas reserves depleting fast because of decades of inefficient use, Pakistan's increasing reliance on imported LNG to meet demand has exposed many fault lines in this sector. The situation calls for immediate liberalisation of the LNG market to ensure energy security and affordability through greater involvement of the private sector. The private sector can deliver LNG more efficiently and at a reasonably lower price than the public sector.

Though the government has in the recent months taken steps to encourage private investment in new LNG terminals and virtual pipelines, bureaucratic snags continue. Policymakers, it seems, are still unable to grasp the changes that the country's increasing dependence on imported LNG has brought about in the last few years. Continued government controls over the market mean growing gas shortages for domestic industry and other consumers.

The authorities are unable to bridge the supply gap, which is estimated to grow to 3.68bcfd in the next five years and 5.39bcfd in 10 years because of financial reasons and slow decision-making processes. At the same time, the two public-sector gas companies have together accumulated a debt of Rs550bn-Rs600bn owing to their inability to recover costs, massive subsidies given to powerful industrial lobbies, exceptionally high system losses and theft. If we don't start the process of gas market liberalisation by finalising the Third Party Access rules and Inter-User Agreement, winter shortages next year may worsen.

Sri Lanka cremations

SRI LANKA has in a welcome move reversed its order that mandated all those dying of Covid-19 be cremated. The government had issued this controversial order last year based on fears expressed by some people that burying Covid-19 victims could contaminate groundwater and spread the infection. The Muslims in Sri Lanka, who constitute nearly 10pc of the population, had protested this order and said that they should be allowed to bury their dead as per Islamic rites but the government had turned a deaf ear to these demands. The Muslims had correctly pointed out there was no scientific basis for the fears that led to the ban on burial, and no other country in the world had enforced such a policy.

Prime Minister Imran Khan, it has now been reported, spoke to the Sri Lankan president and prime minister on the matter during his recent visit and urged them to respect the sentiments of the Muslims. It was primarily due to the prime minister's persuasion that the Sri Lankan government decided to lift the ban and allow Muslims to fulfil their religious requirements. The news has made international headlines. Mr Khan deserves praise for taking this initiative and resolving an issue that was deeply troubling for Muslims in another country. What must have helped the Sri Lankan government reverse its order was the fact that the prime minister had a successful tour of the country and was able to generate significant goodwill. It is also safe to assume that Sri Lanka would be happy to have Pakistan on its side on various issues and especially those that figure in international forums. Both Islamabad and Colombo deserve credit for resolving the matter amicably and making it a win-win for all. It is foreign policy wins like these that add gravitas to governance and improve relations between countries. The prime minister has done well and the Muslims of Sri Lanka are better off and relieved due to his initiative.

SC on Senate polls

THE Supreme Court has declared in its short order on the reference sent by the president under Article 186 of the Constitution that “The Elections to the Senate of Pakistan are held ‘under the Constitution’ and the law”.

The president in his reference had asked for the opinion of the court “Whether the condition of ‘secret ballot’ referred to in Article 226 of the Constitution ... is applicable only for the elections held ‘under’ the Constitution such as the election to the office of President of Pakistan ... and not to other elections such as the election for the members of the Senate of Pakistan held under the Elections Act, 2017 ... which may be held by way of secret or open ballot, as may be provided for in the Election Act, 2017?”

The order issued on Monday makes it clear that the election of the Senate is to be held under the Constitution, which means it will be conducted through a secret ballot. The court order is in essence a repudiation of the government’s position, and the ordinance it promulgated through the president, that the Senate election should be held with an open ballot.

However, there is a twist. The order then proceeds to quote a 1967 judgement “where it has been held that secrecy is not absolute...” From this observation, the Supreme Court then declares that the “Election Commission is required to take all available measures including utilising technologies ... to ensure that the election is ‘conducted honestly, justly, fairly ... and that corrupt practices are guarded against’.” This has added an element of ambiguity to the real meaning of the order.

While the opposition is asserting its principled position has been upheld that the election must be conducted under the Constitution and if the mode of election has to be changed, it must be done through a constitutional amendment, the government is saying the order vindicates its position that secrecy is not absolute and therefore the ECP should ensure that ballots in Wednesday’s Senate elections are identifiable if required. The detailed judgement, whenever it is issued, may help clarify the matter but for now it appears that the ECP will have to interpret the order to the best of its ability and combine it with its discretion to decide how to hold the Senate election.

The entire affair has generated a controversy that the country could have done without. Parliament shoulders the responsibility of amending the Constitution if and when needed, and the courts should not be needlessly burdened with such matters. Now that the Supreme Court has clearly stated that the mode of voting in the Senate elections is under the Constitution, it would be better if the political parties brought back the issue for discussion in parliament and legislated electoral reforms, including the mode of voting for the next Senate elections.

Khashoggi report

THE grisly 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate shocked people around the world, with calls for those behind the heinous crime to be brought to justice. However, over two years since the crime was committed, those who ordered the hit are yet to be punished, with realpolitik apparently trumping the demands of justice. The US last week released an intelligence report that very much points to the role the Saudi crown prince apparently played in this murder, saying that Mohammed bin Salman approved the operation to "capture or kill" Khashoggi. The late Saudi writer was once close to the halls of power in Riyadh, advising senior members of the royal family, but his writings, particularly in the Western press, apparently rubbed the kingdom's de facto ruler the wrong way. However, regardless of the American report's findings, only low-level Saudi operatives have been sanctioned by Washington, and the powerful crown prince has been let off the hook. Riyadh for its part has said it "completely rejects the negative, false and unacceptable assessment" while Pakistan's Foreign Office states that this country "recognises Saudi efforts in this regard and expresses solidarity with the Kingdom". Meanwhile, Hatice Cengiz, the Turkish fiancée of Khashoggi, has called for the crown prince to be "punished without delay".

Amidst this web of claims and counter-claims, the killers of Jamal Khashoggi remain unpunished. While a trial is still under way in Turkey, eight men have been convicted of the murder in a Saudi trial, a process a UN special rapporteur has termed "the antithesis of justice". It was always highly unlikely that the Americans — Khashoggi was a US green-card holder at the time of his death — were going to take action against the big guns in Saudi Arabia, especially under Donald Trump's watch. But considering Joe Biden's comments on this case before he entered the White House, it was expected that the US would censure

those who ordered this monstrous crime. However, this was not to be. While the Saudi government claims innocence, the fact is that it has changed its statements regarding Khashoggi's murder. It was first stated that the journalist left the Istanbul consulate alive, while later the official line was that the hit was a "rogue operation". All of the above creates the impression that the Khashoggi case is far from closed, and a transparent trial is needed to punish all the perpetrators.

Heritage trail

THE heritage trail project in central Punjab, inaugurated by Prime Minister Imran Khan on Sunday in Jhelum district, presents yet another opportunity for the rehabilitation and preservation of our rich history. The project relates to seven sites starting from Al Bairuni Point at Nandana Fort where Al Bairuni, a scholar of many disciplines, is said to have calculated the circumference of the earth. The other sites include the Shiva Temple, Tilla Joggian, the Khewra salt mines, Mallot Fort and Takht-i-Babri. The Punjab tourism and archaeological department, with an initial grant of Rs120m, plans to develop this area for international heritage tourism. The prime minister is right in seeing the potential of this trail as an international heritage site. However, developing historical sites is only the first step towards building a tourism economy. The upkeep and maintenance of such locations, the provision of adequate living facilities, good road access and security as well as ease in obtaining a visa will also play a huge role in the successful promotion of the tourist industry in Pakistan.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's tourism infrastructure remains below par in all essential departments. Successive governments have failed miserably in protecting and preserving the existing archaeological sites in the country. There have been a number of reports of damage to the ancient structures in Mohenjodaro while Unesco recently warned that Makli would be taken off its list of heritage sites if the government did not act on its recommendations for the necropolis's conservation. Moreover, the environmental impact of tourism cannot be overlooked. For instance, as has been pointed out, while domestic tourism in the northern parts has increased, the environmental footprint is taking its toll on scenic landscapes in ways that include cutting down trees to build hotels and restaurants. If the government plans to develop the Pind Dadan Khan region for international tourism, it should also be vigilant in other areas and promote

conservation while ensuring easy availability of modern facilities in places with tourism potential.

Vaccine challenges

THE last few months have seen several countries rolling out vaccination drives against the novel coronavirus, which is a matter of immense relief, but the pandemic still has many twists and turns in store.

Several highly transmissible strains — of the thousands now known to exist — originally detected in the UK, Brazil and South Africa have spread far and wide. Pakistan happens to be one of 92 countries where the UK strain has been detected, making it all the more imperative for vaccines to be made available and for people to get themselves inoculated.

The vaccination campaigns themselves, especially for developing countries with large populations, are a daunting task. Ensuring swift, fair and comprehensive coverage is one challenge; vaccine reluctance is another. As per figures supplied by the Ministry of National Health Services, only 180,000 of approximately 8m senior citizens in Pakistan have registered themselves for inoculation; that adds up to a mere 2.25pc of this demographic.

Curiously, a similar reluctance can be seen among the South Asian communities in the UK as well. And within that segment of the population, Pakistani-origin seniors are the most chary of getting their jabs. A survey in Bradford city found 23pc of Bradford-based Pakistanis older than 80 years refusing to get vaccinated, compared to 14.9pc of Bangladeshis and 6pc of Indians. Among the whites, the refusal rate was 3pc. As in the UK, Pakistan too needs to work harder to overcome the misgivings among the elderly towards the vaccine, given they have the highest fatality rate from Covid-19.

There is so much we still do not know about how this virus behaves that any new developments deepen the scepticism. For example, it was reported in this paper yesterday that a couple, both health workers at Mayo Hospital in Lahore, have tested positive three weeks after being administered the first of the two-shot Sinopharm vaccine. That is bound to raise questions about how long it takes for immunity to kick in, even with one dose. The government must reiterate that

while no vaccine offers 100pc immunity and SOPs must continue to be observed, getting inoculated greatly reduces the odds of falling seriously ill with the disease.

If things go according to plan, close to 20m doses in total of the AstraZeneca vaccine will have arrived in Pakistan by late June, aside from the over 500,000 doses of Sinopharm that are being given to health workers across the country. And that is not counting the vaccines that will be imported by the private sector, for which the government has given permission.

We certainly do need to rev up our inoculation campaign. Pakistan at the moment is administering less than one vaccine dose per 100 people. With the government relaxing many earlier restrictions on social distancing, including reopening educational institutions, we cannot afford to be sluggish on this score.

Rising prices

CONTRARY to government projections and market expectations, the cost of goods and services for the public during February rose by 8.7pc, one of the fastest increases in a given month owing mainly to the resurgence of food and electricity prices. The February CPI inflation reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics jumped to a four-month high after having slipped to 5.7pc the previous month. The low January CPI had afforded the rulers an opportunity to claim that the reduced pace of increase in prices was “lower than when our government was formed” in 2018. A slowing inflation rate in January had apparently also led the finance ministry to predict that the sliding trend in price growth would continue and the State Bank to issue ‘forward guidance’ in its last monetary policy statement to quell reports of a possible increase in the headline policy rate after the revival of the IMF programme. The bank is unlikely to jack up borrowing costs in the next few months in order to continue its support for the present growth momentum in an economy battered by Covid-19. But it will not be able to keep the lid on the rate for too long if prices continue their upward trajectory. The eight-month CPI for July-February stands at 8.3pc, which is well within the annualised inflation forecast of 7pc-9pc for the ongoing fiscal year though. Numbers indicate that the gap between the prices of goods and services consumed in the rural and urban areas is closing rapidly because of a faster increase in the food inflation rate in urban areas.

Even though headline inflation has eased this fiscal year as compared to the previous year, the government's inept policy response and inaction as underscored by the rising prices of essentials has compounded the misery of low-middle-income people. PBS data shows the spike in electricity tariff and food commodities helped push up the inflation rate last month, reversing the downward trend in consumer prices. Food inflation has been in double digits for some time now and the government's failure to reform the energy sector means a steep increase in power and gas prices every few months, punishing middle-income households that are already struggling to cope with the pandemic's impact on their lives and livelihoods. Rising prices are not only taxing pockets and patience; they are also eroding the political capital of the current set-up as evidenced in the recent by-elections.

Myanmar crisis

THE political crisis triggered by the military coup in Myanmar on Feb 1 is worsening, with the generals refusing to budge and the country's people not willing to accept the derailing of the democratic process. By now, several people have been killed as protesters have squared off against security forces. As per one count, at least 30 deaths have been reported since Feb 1, while over 1,000 people have been detained. Some of the worst violence was witnessed over the weekend, as troops reportedly fired live rounds at demonstrators. The crisis was triggered when the military — which wielded immense power in the country even before the coup — refused to accept election results in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy put up a strong showing. The junta, citing 'irregularities', decided to swoop in, overthrowing the elected government and putting major civilian leaders, led by Ms Suu Kyi, in detention. Ever since, hundreds of thousands of people in Myanmar have been taking to the streets, demanding a return to democracy.

There has been great international pressure on Myanmar's generals to step back and let civilian rule resume. The latest effort came on Tuesday, when leaders of Asean — the regional bloc the country is part of — called for a release of political prisoners and a restoration of democracy. While Myanmar's democracy was far from perfect, it is only the continuation of the political process that can address the country's myriad ethnic and religious problems with justice. Asean, the UN and other multilateral bodies must communicate clearly to the junta that an early

return to civilian rule must be a priority, while deadly force against protesters cannot be tolerated. Too many developing nations have seen their political growth retarded because of interventions by unelected forces. Myanmar itself was just emerging from decades of military rule. The country's generals must go back to the barracks and return power to the civilians immediately in order to prevent the crisis from escalating further.

Senate upset

THE Senate election results have delivered a stunning blow to the PTI. While the ruling party has seen an increase in its overall Senate numbers, the control of the upper house remains with the opposition parties — a development which is viewed by many as a much-needed victory for the PDM. The key Islamabad seat, which saw a battle between the PPP's Yousuf Raza Gilani and Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Sheikh, has been the defining moment of this election with significant symbolic and practical consequences. With 169 votes, Mr Gilani defeated Mr Sheikh who got 164 votes — a shortfall that not only has shaken the PTI's confidence but which also warrants introspection within the party.

Predictably, elements in the government have already started the conversation about Mr Gilani's disqualification, based on the leak of a controversial video which shows his son Ali Haider Gilani instructing someone on how to waste a Senate vote. Though the video is a dramatic last-minute twist to the Senate election saga, it is very much in keeping with the season of horse-trading, vote-buying, threats and engineering that haunt every upper house poll — a continuation of an unsavoury tradition that favours personal gain over party stance. While there may be some truth to the allegations of horse-trading in the Gilani-Sheikh upset, the unscrupulous deal-making on Senate seats is not something restricted to any one party.

The PTI must seriously reflect on how a seat Prime Minister Imran Khan himself was so confident about was lost. It is entirely possible that elements in the PTI, who make no secret about their grudges against non-elected position holders, defected to thwart the possibility of a cabinet dominated by technocrats. Time and again, there have been reports of factions in the PTI that have worked against each other, to the extent that some have been accused of engineering sackings and cabinet reshuffles. The 'unelected versus elected' guard in the PTI

has been at war since the beginning of this government — a reality ignored by Mr Khan who placed his trust in unelected individuals. Today, those rifts in the party have come to the fore. The PTI will pay a heavy price for it, as it appears it will have to find a new finance minister at a time when the economy needs stability. No doubt, this seat is a huge symbolic victory for the opposition, and the new composition in the Senate will set the tone for the future of political discourse in the country. For all its bravado ahead of the Senate election, the government's desperate push to have an open ballot perhaps was one indication that it feared the upset that was witnessed yesterday. One thing is certain: the Gilani victory will haunt the PTI for a long time — even if the prime minister goes for a vote of confidence in parliament.

ME 'security pact'

THERE has been an overflowing of bonhomie between the Gulf Arabs and Israel over the past few months, much of it engineered by the Trump administration. It was barely a secret that Tel Aviv and the sheikhdoms had been enjoying clandestine relations for some time, and last year's so-called Abraham Accords, brokered by the US, saw relations established between Israel and the UAE and later Bahrain.

While the parties involved — the US, Israel and the Gulf sheikhs — gushed over the prospects of 'peace', more critical voices said the Palestinians had been thrown under the bus by their Arab 'brothers'. Moreover, it was said that the alliance was basically being formulated to counter Iran, a country both the Israelis and their Gulf allies consider their arch-nemesis.

Now, it appears these suspicions are being confirmed, as the outlines of a military alliance between the Israelis and the Gulf potentates is shaping up. Talking to the media on Tuesday, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz said that while it would not be right to term it a "defence pact", there is a process under way of "setting up [a] special security arrangement" between Israel and its friends in the Gulf.

While the Gulf states — and indeed any other states within the Muslim world — are free to choose their friends and enemies, forming alliances to counter any member of the Islamic comity of nations is a matter of grave concern. Already Iran and Israel have been fighting a proxy war in Lebanon and Syria; now, as

Israel has established an official toehold in the Gulf, the situation is likely to escalate.

An Israeli-owned vessel was recently attacked in the Gulf of Oman, an attack Tel Aviv blamed on Tehran, which denied involvement. Moreover, the Israelis have regularly been targeting Iranians and their allied militias in Syria. Should this confrontation spill over into the Gulf — Iran has said it will target US bases in the region if attacked — the results would be catastrophic.

Instead of joining controversial military alliances that will disturb the balance of power in the region, the Gulf Arabs need to resolve their differences with Iran at the negotiating table, while Tehran should also respond positively to Arab concerns. Moreover, Israel must refrain from taking any provocative steps. The Arabs and Iranians must not fall into a trap as they will be the primary sufferers in case of conflict as outsiders watch.

Students' protest

A GROUP of university students in Karachi and Hyderabad caught the media's attention when they announced a 100-hour-long hunger strike outside the press clubs of both cities. The students are affiliated with a small group that calls itself the Sindh Students Council, comprising mostly university students. According to them, their hunger strike will end today ie March 4, a date they remember as relevant to the Sindh students' struggle against the dictatorship of Ayub Khan. Their demands include the restoration of student unions, provision of adequate facilities such as hostels and eviction of the security forces from university campuses. Additionally, their demand for checking 'fake' students' domiciles in Sindh may create the impression of nationalistic aspirations but the issue of falsified documentation has been of concern and must be addressed to ensure that the process of granting domiciles does not entail any kind of unscrupulous tactic.

Meanwhile, it is a pity that there seems to be no move to revive the defunct students' unions. University campuses must be avenues for the intellectual and ideological grooming of young men and women to allow them to be part of a vibrant political discourse. These unions also play a key role in resolving day-to-day student issues and can guard students against the unsavoury influence of those holding obscurantist and narrow-minded beliefs. The platform of unions is

also considered an equaliser of sorts, making it easier for students from modest backgrounds to enter politics in a country with dynastic traditions. Though several governments, including the present dispensation, have declared their intention to revoke the Zia-era ban on student unions, none have actually acted on their promise. In fact, not too long ago, the incumbent rulers displayed an authoritarian streak by registering cases against student activists, not unlike the 1960s when Ayub Khan's government unleashed the state's force on protesting students. The authorities, instead of suppressing the voices of young people, should listen to them. Dissent only grows when voices are silenced.

Ravi project

THE assault by an enraged group of farmers on a provincial revenue team assigned to acquire land for the multibillion-dollar Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project on Tuesday was unfortunate. But it was expected, and may also prove to be a harbinger of worse things unless the government agrees to give the market price of land to the thousands of landowners who would have to relocate because of the rulers' insistence on building a new city on the outskirts of Lahore.

The poor farmers are apparently not against the project, but they rightfully want a fair market price to help them start over since the private developers for whom their land is being acquired will be raking in billions of dollars in profit. Currently, they are being offered only a fraction of the market value of their land. The Punjab government does not appear to be in any mood to listen to the grievances of the affected population, let alone agree to their demand for higher prices.

It is sad that Prime Minister Imran Khan has decided to go ahead with the project although the PTI — when in opposition — had criticised such large brick-and-mortar, high-visibility schemes pursued by its predecessors. Apparently, the painful economic slowdown during the first half of Mr Khan's tenure and the debilitating impact of Covid-19 on growth may have convinced him otherwise.

For the last one year or so, the leadership seems to have pinned its hopes on real-estate development projects for faster recovery before the next general election in 2023. The government may achieve some of its targets but in the process would lose the support of the poor who would be left out.

It is unfortunate that Pakistan's ruling elite has developed a sort of consensus — as well as a deep economic interest — in high-visibility projects as the panacea for the nation's financial woes. Therefore, we see most state resources flowing into expensive schemes offering limited economic dividends and that too mostly to benefit the wealthy. Look at the generous tax and other incentives announced for the construction sector in the name of encouraging low-cost, affordable housing for the poor.

The biggest beneficiaries of these concessions are moneyed people with questionable sources of income who have been given general amnesty and access to more banking credit. The obsession of the elite with real estate has in the last few decades also resulted in shrinking space for the poor and middle-income groups in our sprawling cities. This is not a recipe for progress.

If we are to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth, the government will have to change its priorities and start investing in social infrastructure — schools, hospitals, sanitation, water supply etc. It is time for the government to stop acting as an agent of powerful lobbies and start serving the public at large.

Climate change

PAKISTAN received much less rainfall in January 2021 as compared to previous years, making it the 17th driest month in 60 years, according to the Met Office. Rainfall in February, as per the Met Office data, wasn't significant either, but the countrywide rain in January was 59pc below the normal, indicating the possible impact of climate change. A drastic decrease was especially reported from Sindh, Balochistan and KP. The Met Office termed the trend 'unusual', saying that data for March would help it understand the phenomenon better. Still, the amount of rain received in January and February reinforces a declining trend during winter. Regardless of the extent to which the diminished rainfall in these months signifies climate change, it is evident that weather patterns, water availability, agriculture and the climate's impact on the livelihoods of millions of people are becoming more pronounced with the passage of time. Pakistan is already on the list of the 10 nations most affected by climate change in spite of its negligible contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. Numerous studies in recent years have found the country's climate becoming increasingly uncertain, resulting in frequent and devastating flooding in some regions and droughts in others,

glacier melts, and — more importantly — temperatures higher than the global average. These trends are likely to continue in future with parts of the country experiencing extreme weather conditions.

The sad part of the story is that we are not doing much to adapt to climate change, which makes us more vulnerable to its adverse impacts that may threaten the country's food and water security and result in large displacements among the population. The impact of changing climate is already becoming conspicuous in some regions like Balochistan where tens of thousands of farmers have lost their livelihoods due to frequent drought conditions, leading to a significant increase in poverty and hunger. While some measures, such as the government's tree plantation campaign, have successfully been implemented in certain areas, we do not see much seriousness on the part of policymakers to take more action to mitigate the negative effects of climate change. No effort in isolation will be able to alleviate the potentially disastrous impact in the long term. The government must develop a comprehensive framework linking its mitigation efforts to its industrial, agricultural, energy-related and other policies and enforce it in letter and spirit to reverse the impact of fast-changing climatic conditions.

Antimicrobial resistance

WITH the focus on Covid-19, many health issues, though otherwise recognised as serious medical problems, tend to be overlooked. One of the biggest health challenges in this respect are germs that become resistant to antibiotics. It is an issue that has given nightmares to health experts around the world. In Pakistan, too, doctors and health officials have raised the alarm over the increasing resistance to even broad-spectrum antibiotics. Recently, the CEO of the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan warned that if the rampant practice of prescribing unnecessary antibiotics is not curbed, a superbug could emerge that would be virtually impossible to eliminate. He advised doctors to prescribe complete courses of antibiotics while also asking pharmacists to provide the entire course even if patients asked for a curtailed dose.

In 2016, a large number of cases of drug-resistant typhoid broke out in Sindh; the bacteria was later transmitted to other countries, prompting the World Health Organisation to raise the alarm and the US to issue a health advisory alert. The Sindh authorities responded in 2019 by launching a free vaccination campaign

against XDR typhoid. Moreover, over the years, we have also witnessed the increasing incidence of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis in the country. According to the WHO, resistance to drugs is on the rise all over the world, but the rate of microbial resistance in Pakistan has accelerated due to poor sanitation and the unchecked and unnecessary prescription of antibiotics, among other factors. According to a 2020 Lancet study, drug-resistant strains of bacterial infections claim at least 700,000 lives per year around the world. This death rate is projected to rise to 10m patients per year by 2050 at an estimated cost of \$100tr to the world economy. The solution to the problem, as advised by health experts, is to curtail the sale of antibiotics unless prescribed by a licensed medical practitioner. It might not be a question of 'if' but 'when' the bacteria outsmart us, making diseases untreatable in the future.

India ranking

WHILE India has often tooted its own horn as the 'world's largest democracy' — being supported in this endeavour by its allies and commercial partners across the globe despite evidence to the contrary — voices are finally being raised about its descent into communalism. As per US-based rights watchdog Freedom House, India under Narendra Modi's watch has dropped from 'free' to 'partly free' status. The Hindutva-infused dispensation in New Delhi is "driving India itself towards authoritarianism" says the watchdog's report, while adding that "the ruling Hindu nationalist movement also encouraged the scapegoating of Muslims" with reference to the spread of Covid-19 in the country last year, which was blamed on Muslims. To observers of India, none of this is new, as under BJP rule that country has begun the dangerous transformation into a Hindu rashtra, where other religions/cultures are to be pushed to the margins or excluded from national life in order to create a 'pure' polity. Indeed, the BJP has transformed its ideological shibboleths into state policy by introducing discriminatory citizenship laws designed to disenfranchise India's Muslims, along with letting murderous bands of cow vigilantes go unpunished. Moreover, New Delhi's brutal campaign in India-held Kashmir has seriously tarnished its claims of being a democracy.

The transformation from a secular republic into an exclusivist rashtra began in earnest in 1992, when the Babri Masjid was torn down by a mob of Hindu zealots to make way for a Ram mandir. Ironically, yesterday's extremists are India's

principal policymakers today, hence the recognition by right-thinking people and organisations worldwide that India has become a difficult place to live for its minorities. While the shock troops of Hindutva will renounce the report as 'intervention' in India's internal affairs and try and justify the hate-filled campaigns undertaken by the BJP, the fact is that New Delhi can no longer hide the grotesque wrongs that are being committed against India's Muslims and other minority communities under the BJP/RSS combine. More international actors should have the courage to call a spade a spade.

Vote of confidence

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's decision to take a vote of confidence from parliament today is a bizarre move with a fairly obvious outcome. It will mark the first time a prime minister has undertaken such an exercise after the passage of the 18th Amendment.

Prior to this, the law required every prime minister to take a vote of confidence from the Assembly within 30 days of being elected — a vote that Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and other prime ministers of the past had to seek after their election.

Since 2010, however, the law does not require such a practice. In fact, according to clause 7 of Article 91 of the Constitution, the president "shall not exercise his powers under this clause unless he is satisfied that the prime minister does not command the confidence of the majority" in the Assembly. Does the president feel this is the case? There appears to be confusion about whether the government even followed the correct procedure to call such a session.

This entire effort appears to be a remedial attempt by Mr Khan to put salve on the wounds inflicted on his party's morale by the stunning upset on the Islamabad Senate seat. Yousuf Raza Gilani's victory over Hafeez Sheikh has shaken Mr Khan, whose video message a day earlier was clearly a morale-boosting endeavour. Since his message, multiple senior members of his party, including serving federal ministers, have posted on social media that they "stand behind the prime minister".

The Senate shock jolted him and the party to such an extent that the latter feels compelled to publicly affirm its faith in the prime minister. The confidence vote,

too, is an indication of this mistrust. Unfortunately for Mr Khan, despite taking such a measure, the reality that there are people in his party who defected and voted for his rivals will not change. It would have been better if the prime minister left the subject of a no-confidence motion to the opposition, and then consolidated his position.

Instead of focusing his energy on a show of bravado, Mr Khan ought to reflect on the future of legislative business. The way to prove his strength in parliament is by getting bills passed — something that has proved to be a challenge time and again.

Neither the government nor the opposition have shown signs that they are ready to de-escalate tensions. The opposition has made the impulsive decision to boycott Assembly proceedings, apparently due to reservations that the correct process was not followed. It would have been better if the opposition had attended the session and recorded its protest, as parliament is the right forum for this discussion.

The days ahead will be challenging and fraught with high political drama. The government must adopt a mature approach and develop a pragmatic strategy for a way forward.

PSL disaster

RAPID escalation in the number of coronavirus cases has led to the postponement of the Pakistan Super League's sixth edition, sparking anger and disappointment among millions of fans, besides causing heavy monetary losses. The league's first leg, which was being played in Karachi, came to an abrupt halt amid reports of at least nine players and officials falling victim to the virus over the past three days. The bio-secure bubble was not foolproof to begin with, and SOPs were abandoned as players mingled freely with guests at team hotels while cricket officials and family members of franchise owners frequented the dugouts exacerbating the situation. Such scenes were enough to set alarm bells ringing. But it was a while before the Pakistan Cricket Board was rudely jolted out of its slumber. By that time it was too late. The catastrophic end to PSL-6 was yet again due to the gross mismanagement of the PCB; as the governing body for Pakistani cricket, it is expected to have the required skills to prevent such a crisis or at least limit its fallout. It was only last December that the PCB oversaw similar

chaos during the team's New Zealand tour. It should have ensured that no stone was left unturned in the implementation of strict Covid-19 protocols for its flagship event whose standing and popularity have been severely hit by the abrupt postponement. Unfortunately, it has not learned from its mistakes. The PCB was also found wanting when it came to setting terms for the franchises that were leniently dealt with, even though their players and staff flouted SOPs. Ridiculously short three-day quarantine periods were mandated for international players, which is laughable in the midst of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, some quarters have questioned the postponement of the entire event, pointing out that a curtailed version of the PSL would have been preferable and that extended breaks between matches, the observance of strict measures and far fewer numbers of fans in the stadium could still have provided some enjoyment to the cricket-hungry public. Another window of opportunity for the PSL's sixth edition to complete its remaining matches this year seems unlikely, mainly due to the packed schedule of the players in 2021. However, if prospects improve in the coming months, the PCB would be well advised to make the event a worthwhile spectacle by putting in its best efforts to keep its appeal intact.

Wasted food

THE number is mind-boggling. According to the UN Environment Programme's Food Waste Index, over 900 million tonnes of food is thrown away every year, with close to 60pc of this wasted at home. This is nothing short of criminal, considering the evil of hunger that stalks humanity. As per 2019 figures, 690m people were affected by hunger. To put things in perspective, the amount of wasted food could fill 23m trucks. These figures illustrate the fact that there is something very wrong with people's approach towards food. While such a huge amount of food makes its way into the bin, hundreds of millions of people are forced to sleep hungry. Therefore, more efforts are required on the global level to address this issue and reduce such wanton wastage.

Primarily, to reverse the negative trend of wasting food, efforts require to be undertaken at home. Consumers should only buy and cook enough food to meet their requirements, and avoid bulk buying or preparing more than is required. This way the needless waste of edible items can be minimised. Moreover, there

are several non-profits in the field that take surplus food from restaurants and other establishments and provide it to the less fortunate. This model needs to be promoted to prevent food from being thrown away, and ensuring the most vulnerable don't starve. Aside from the strange dichotomy of massive amounts of food being thrown away at one end and millions going hungry at the other, food wastage also has a significant impact on the planet. For example, when food is consigned to garbage bins, the resources invested in growing it are wasted, while discarded food is also a major emitter of greenhouse gases. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation offers numerous tips on how to reduce food loss and food waste. These include buying only what one needs, storing food wisely, using leftovers and donating surplus food before it rots. The fact is that it will require changing personal and family habits as well as putting in place policies to prevent such massive food wastage. At the local level, the importance of not wasting food must be highlighted by the state and within communities, for example by producing public service messages on a variety of media. Taking food wastage seriously will not only be better for the earth, it will also ensure no one in our surroundings goes hungry.

Covid-19 spike

FEARS about a spike in Covid-19 cases in the country turned real this week as coronavirus infections, hospitalisations and the positivity ratio marked increases. SAPM for National Health Services Faisal Sultan said the decline witnessed over the last two months is "clearly reversing" and that positivity had gone up from 3.31pc to 4.16pc within one week. In Punjab, Friday saw 860 cases — the highest reported figure in a day over the last three months — across the province. A report also suggested that cases in Punjab are the highest among people between the ages of 21 and 30. This increase in cases follows the lifting of restrictions across the country a few weeks ago. From educational institutions to indoor weddings, most activities are in full swing — while neither mass testing nor vaccination rollout are meeting satisfactory targets. On March 5, only 38,200 tests were conducted across the country, a figure that is far too low, especially since commercial activities and gatherings are in full swing. Experts and health bodies across the world have said that widely available testing is the only way to gauge the prevalence of the virus and the trends that are developing. But, for some inexplicable reason, the authorities in Pakistan have failed to go beyond 50,000 or so daily tests. The vaccination programme, too, has been

unimpressive, with low registration by healthcare workers and lack of clarity from the government about how it will be rolled out. The arrival of the AstraZeneca vaccine has been delayed. What is more alarming is that Pakistan is yet to purchase vaccines; all the vaccines available today, as well as those expected to arrive in the country, are donations by China or Covax.

An urgent vaccination programme should be the top priority. Across the world, countries battered by Covid-19 are looking at phased reopening as the vaccine is administered. People must be informed and protected. The government must do more than simply urge SOP enforcement, especially as the fear of Covid-19 appears to be absent from the public imagination.

A celebration of women

WE now know that the pandemic is no 'great equaliser'. The repercussions of the contagion on livelihoods, mental health, education, etc have been far more pronounced for females across the globe, but especially so in developing countries.

During the past year, far more women lost their jobs when the economy contracted due to shutdowns; female students found themselves being forced to prioritise household duties over online classes; and rates of domestic violence shot up with victim and perpetrator isolated in close quarters with each other for extended periods of time.

Today, March 8 — International Women's Day — women of the world, and their allies across the gender divide, stand in solidarity with each other and declare loudly and firmly: the status quo cannot endure.

The Aurat March, which is a definitive marker of International Women's Day celebrations in this country, has evolved into an inclusive platform for marginalised voices resisting the status quo. Transpeople, Baloch women whose loved ones have been forcibly disappeared, internally displaced women, women from urban centres and rural areas, all come together to draw strength from each other and from the inspirational battles that many of them have fought, and create networks for collective action.

Each year, the march manages to 'provoke' the gatekeepers of 'honour' and 'culture'— both notions often used to control women's behaviour and deprive

them of agency and autonomy. This time around, appropriately enough, the Aurat March is titled 'Patriarchy ka Pandemic', and its charter of demands largely focuses on access to healthcare as a right. One of the demands is for "massive state investment in rehabilitative programmes to manage the long-term effects" of gender-based violence on victims. Another urges the government to make public a plan to address "Covid-19-specific challenges faced by women and gender minorities". The charter also calls for sexual harassment committees to be set up in all medical facilities to create a safe working environment.

The women's movement has come a long way from the years of Gen Ziaul Haq, the military dictator whose regressive laws sparked a gender rights struggle as had never been seen before in this country. The pro-women legislation that has come about in recent years is the fruit of all those years of advocacy, of grassroots awareness-raising, of standing ground against character assassination and state-sanctioned violence, and of simply refusing to acquiesce to a patently unjust system.

It is time to reflect on what can be done so that women-friendly laws can better achieve their purpose, and how the environment can be made more conducive to that end. Having legislation is critical but it is one half of the battle. To bring about societal change, the minds of men — and the many women who have internalised misogynistic double standards — must become capable of reimagining a woman's role.

Loss-making SOEs

THE government has chosen 84 out of a total of 212 state-owned enterprises for privatisation, liquidation or retention in the public sector to meet a structural benchmark of the IMF as it moves towards revival of the suspended \$6bn loan programme. A bill is also being drafted to improve their governance and help the government strengthen their oversight. Under the agreement with the IMF, the PTI administration had pledged to initiate restructuring and privatisation of SOEs, and strengthen their monitoring for increasing transparency through a legal framework. But it has not done much until now. Given the continuing losses of these companies and their financial burden on the budget, it is encouraging to see the government finally coming up with a plan to deal with them after two and half years of being in power.

According to a finance ministry report, the selected enterprises, which together employed 450,000 people and generated revenues of Rs4tr in FY2019 against the book value of Rs19tr of their assets, had collectively suffered hefty net losses of Rs143bn. A year before, their combined losses stood at a whopping Rs287bn. The losses of the top 10 loss-making SOEs like PIA, Pakistan Railways, power companies and the National Highway Authority account for around 90pc of the total losses each year. While there is no doubt that some of these companies need to be liquidated and others sold to the private sector, the decision to retain certain enterprises and restructure them in the public sector should be supported conditionally. Indeed, the majority of public-sector organisations aren't suffering massive losses from the functions they perform. Incompetence, mismanagement, political interference and lack of investment are the key reasons for the losses and debt stocks they have accumulated over the decades. This implies that some of these companies can still be turned around and made profitable if competent people are inducted. In other words, the government needs to transfer the management of the enterprises it decides to retain to those with experience of running similar companies that have been transformed into profitable entities. Perhaps a good example of profitably managing public-sector businesses is the 'mixed ownership model' whereby the government owns the companies but these are run and managed by independently hired professionals without intervention from bureaucrats or politicians. Unless the reform programme has room for transferring the management of firms whose ownership the government plans to retain, successfully restructuring SOEs will not be possible.

Breast cancer awareness

CONSIDER the implications of the following statistic: no less than 70pc of Pakistani women suffering from breast cancer seek medical attention at an advanced stage of the disease. If detected at an early stage, the chances of the survival exceed 90pc. But too many women play Russian roulette with their lives if they are afflicted with this dreaded disease. There are several reasons for this: lack of awareness about symptoms; limited access to mammogram facilities; fear that the treatment will result in 'diminished femininity' that will drive their husbands away; and social stigma surrounding the disease. There is thus a dire need to have a more open discussion about breast cancer, which makes the prospect of a forthcoming web series on this very subject welcome news indeed. Scheduled to start in April, the series has been written by Haseena Moin, a

breast cancer survivor herself, and aims to address the stigma associated with the disease. It depicts how a woman's family, particularly her husband, can be a source of strength and support for her in her battle against breast cancer.

The statistics are frightening. Every year, some 90,000 cases of breast cancer are detected in Pakistan, the highest rate in all of Asia. Sadly, about 40,000 of these patients will die. One in nine women either has breast cancer or is at risk of developing it. In the rural areas, there is even more stigma surrounding the issue, and female gynaecologists are not always easily available. Moreover, while the average age worldwide of breast cancer patients is 55 years, the median age in Pakistan is 35 years, which is a truly alarming gap. It makes sense for us to strip away the misconceptions and stigma surrounding the disease and make an honest appraisal of how our attitudes are putting so many lives at risk. Tackling the subject through a web series is a sound approach; and with Ms Moin's proven gift for storytelling, the venture is likely to be a memorable one.

Hate-filled politics

THE speaker of the National Assembly has ordered a probe into the unfortunate incident outside the parliament building in which a crowd of PTI supporters harassed and manhandled senior leaders of the PML-N. The probe is not likely to produce an outcome. Since the incident most senior PTI leaders have either ignored the incident or blamed the opposition for holding the press conference at a venue where a PTI crowd had gathered. This amounts to blaming the victim. It is an illustration of the depths of partisan politicking we have fallen into that seemingly reasonable men and women of the government are ready and willing to justify the manhandling of their senior parliamentary colleagues — albeit from the other side of the aisle — to avoid blaming their own supporters. Such apathy and deliberate callousness is fast pushing our politics towards moral bankruptcy, and thereby chipping away at the legitimacy that politicians must retain in order to keep the representative system afloat.

This legitimacy also got a battering by the electoral manipulation that happened in the NA-75 Daska by-election under the direct supervision of the PTI's Punjab government. It got further degraded by the shenanigans Pakistanis witnessed before and during the Senate elections. Leaked videos of vote buying, allegations of horse-trading and the government's failed attempts to force

through a change in the mode of voting for narrow political interests are events that together have delivered a body blow to the legitimacy of the system in its present shape and form.

Nothing could be more unfortunate. After decades of struggling for constitutional democracy and a representative system of governance in which all parties are critical stakeholders, today's political outfits are reversing themselves — and the system — into an unpleasant past. Loathing is all pervasive. This hate is beyond the stage where rivals can construct a functional relationship for the sake of the system. The incident outside parliament has shown that those in government are unwilling, or unable, to dilute their virulent partisanship at any cost. The genesis of this virulence lies, to a great extent, in the unwillingness of Prime Minister Imran Khan to accept the PML-N and PPP leaders as genuine parliamentary rivals. He considers them corrupt thieves who should be in jail, not in the assemblies. His rank and file have internalised this narrative and therefore it is not surprising that partisanship has acquired the colours of personal enmity and collective loathing. It was this loathing that drove PTI supporters to attack senior leaders, including a woman, of the PML-N, and it is this loathing that disallows PTI leaders to condemn the incident without any conditions attached. Pakistani politics is hurtling down a worrisome path and few appear to recognise the threat, or care too much about it. Someone needs to usher in sanity and restraint before we hearken back to the demons of the past.

LNG concerns

TWO public-sector LNG companies have raised safety concerns over the excessive utilisation of the country's two existing LNG terminals. A joint report by Pakistan LNG Ltd and Pakistan LNG Terminal Ltd says that both terminals are overstressed and the LNG value chain is very fragile when compared to global standards owing to inflexible infrastructure constraints. It also points out that both terminals could face operational and safety risks. Contrary to perceptions, the combined utilisation of the two terminals has been around 84pc against a global average of 43pc, which leaves very little flexibility to handle shocks. Even countries such as Kuwait and Argentina, which rely on floating storage and re-gasification units like Pakistan, have a far lower utilisation rate. The reasons for overstressing the existing LNG import capacity are obvious. First, its inability to attract investment in new terminals means the government has no option but to

fully use the existing facilities to meet the country's increasing LNG import needs. Second, the failure to build LNG storage requires the authorities to overstretch the existing capacity, especially during winters when the demand for imported gas peaks, which shows up in lower-than-world-ratio 're-gas to storage' and 'import capacity to storage'.

There are several factors, including policy flaws, pipeline capacity constraints as well as malicious propaganda against the sponsors of the existing terminals, which have blocked or discouraged private investments in new terminals. Although the government has 'provisionally' allowed two more companies to set up terminals, the unavailability of sufficient pipeline capacity to bring imported gas to Punjab — where the most demand exists — is keeping them from breaking ground. For unknown reasons, the government is also not allowing the existing terminals to increase capacity for bringing more gas for private-sector customers. Meanwhile, the regulator is yet to approve 'third-party access rules' and the 'inter-user agreement' that would allow terminal operators to sell imported LNG to buyers including the textile, power and fertiliser industries. With Pakistan's gas demand increasing on account of economic growth and higher capacity utilisation, it is crucial for the country to build new terminals as well as invest in LNG storage and pipeline infrastructure. In recent months, we have seen gas companies rationing gas quantities at the expense of industrial output only because we do not have sufficient LNG import infrastructure to bring in the quantities required. Time is of the essence in this case.

Swiss 'burqa ban'

WHILE concerns about violent extremism may be genuine, in many situations these valid apprehensions can be used as a cloak for Islamophobia. This appears to be the case in Switzerland, where voters have narrowly backed a ban on face coverings, widely seen as a vehicle to prohibit burqas and full-face veils that some Muslim women wear.

Just over 51pc of Swiss voters backed the ban, with a campaign spearheaded by a rightist party in the alpine nation. While the proposal did not mention the face coverings by name, ominous posters with a fully veiled woman, plastered with slogans to 'stop extremism' sent a clear, disturbing message. The intentions of this campaign further come into question when the number of women who wear

the burqa/niqab in Switzerland are considered: according to one figure 30 women wear the niqab in a population of 8.6m.

This means there is no imminent ‘threat’ of veiled women overrunning the streets of Geneva and Zurich anytime soon. Unfortunately, Switzerland has taken such regressive steps before, such as the ban on minarets in 2009, also backed by a referendum. Amnesty International has called the burqa ban “a dangerous policy that violates women’s rights”.

Sadly, several other nations in Europe — France, Denmark, Austria etc — have taken similar steps. Rather than genuinely helping curb extremism, these moves only help propel the agenda of far-right parties in Europe, who see Muslims, people of colour and racial minorities as ‘outsiders’ trying to change the continent’s ‘pure’ culture.

We have seen the horrors this pursuit of ‘purity’ unleashed in the mid-20th century, when fascist forces seized power in several European states. Instead of promoting integration and coexistence, such moves will further fuel the divide between ethnic and religious majorities and minorities in Europe. Moreover, women should have the right to choose what they wear, and such decisions must not be imposed by the state. Has this central tenet of democratic thought been forgotten by those backing such bans?

Afghan peace push

AS the May 1 deadline for the pullout of American troops from Afghanistan under the US-Taliban Doha agreement nears, there has been a flurry of shuttle diplomacy involving American officials making calls in major capitals of this region.

On Monday, Zalmay Khalilzad, Washington’s point man on Afghanistan, was in Islamabad and met the army chief as well as the prime minister’s special assistant on national security. “Matters of mutual interest, regional security and ongoing Afghanistan reconciliation process were discussed,” said the military’s media wing. Earlier, Mr Khalilzad had visited Kabul and Doha, while also discussing the Afghan file with India.

Clearly, the Biden administration wants some sort of framework to be in place in Afghanistan — the ‘moonshot’ as it is being referred to — before it pulls its troops

out, hence the shuttle diplomacy. The US secretary of state has also written a letter to the Afghan president calling for a political settlement, and warning that the Taliban “could make rapid territorial gains” after his country’s troops leave Afghan soil.

However, as efforts are underway on the diplomatic and political fronts to reach a lasting peace agreement in Afghanistan, on the military front things do not look good. There has been a noticeable uptick in violence, with the Shia Hazara community as well as female media workers targeted in deadly attacks last week.

The Hazaras were brutally murdered in Nangarhar province, while the media workers were also targeted in the same region. The latter attack was claimed by the local affiliate of the self-styled Islamic State group. This, unfortunately is Afghanistan’s dichotomy: it has been unable to govern itself for the past few decades, and is dependent on foreign forces to provide security, while at the other end, despite the presence of foreign troops, there has been no let-up in violence, with even more virulent actors — such as the local IS ‘chapter’ — spreading their tentacles.

The fact is that no foreign-dictated peace can succeed in pacifying Afghanistan, and there are strong chances that bedlam will ensue as soon as the last foreign soldier leaves the country. Unless of course the various Afghan stakeholders decide that there has been enough violence, and it is time to bring peace to their battered land. Hackneyed as it may sound, only an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process can succeed, and in this regard the onus is on the Taliban to respond to peace overtures from the government in Kabul.

Regional states, including Pakistan, should play the role of facilitators, but decisions must be taken by the various Afghan stakeholders themselves. If foreign troops stay, the Taliban will continue to fight, and if they leave without a peace agreement in place, the brutal civil war will only intensify. Which is why the sooner the Afghans — particularly the government and the Taliban — reach a workable peace deal, the better.

Senate chair contest

THE race for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman has reached an interesting stage. With the election due on March 12, and a handful of votes

separating the government and the opposition in the upper house after the latest election, campaigning is at full swing. The incumbent chairman Sadiq Sanjrani, re-nominated by the ruling coalition, is six votes behind his rival from the opposition Yousuf Raza Gilani but since the election will be held through a secret ballot, the government appears confident Mr Sanjrani will scrape through to victory. The opposition coalition has 53 members to the government's 47. However, one PML-N senator, former finance minister Ishaq Dar, has not taken an oath since he left the country, so the opposition has a lead of five votes.

On Tuesday, events took a strange turn when Defence Minister Pervez Khattak told the media that they had offered to nominate JUI-F's Maulana Ghafoor Haideri as their candidate for the post of deputy chairman. This was a shock offer because JUI-F leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman is leading the opposition campaign against the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the two have been exchanging personal taunts for years now. The surreal offer symbolises the extent to which parties are willing to go to snatch victory in this closely fought contest. Maulana Haideri refuted the offer subsequently but the fact remains that in this high-stakes game, everything appears kosher for the contestants. The ruling party, however, will have a lot to answer if its candidate wins despite trailing in numbers. The entire edifice of the PTI's protest against the victory of Mr Gilani on the Islamabad seat for the Senate is built around the fact that the opposition did not have the required numbers, just like the government does not in the Senate today. The logic peddled by the PTI is that since Mr Gilani did not have the requisite vote count as per party positions, the votes that propelled him to victory were a product of corruption. This same logic will apply if Mr Sanjrani were to win. The PTI government needs to be ready to answer these questions, or see its narrative get degraded in the court of public opinion. In either case, it is important that these issues are addressed once the Senate elections are over. The political pollution witnessed in the past few weeks can only be cleansed through comprehensive electoral reforms.

Railway infrastructure

THE derailment of a Lahore-bound train near Sukkur the other day is yet another stark reminder of the government's utter failure to invest in the upgradation of the decrepit railway infrastructure to protect the lives of hapless passengers who cannot afford to pay for safer means of travel. Every time a tragedy occurs on the

rail tracks, an eyewitness of an inquiry is ordered, low- and middle-level railway employees are blamed for the accident and suspended, and the matter is swept under the rug. The families of the passengers who lose their lives in such accidents are left to fend for themselves. Accidents happen all the time and all over the world. However, a quick look at the long list of train accidents in Pakistan shows that the majority of these could have easily been avoided — and hundreds of precious lives saved — if the government had invested in the maintenance and upgradation of the infrastructure which at the moment consists of weak rail tracks, an erratic signal system and decaying rolling stock. Besides, the railway management has paid little attention to improving and enforcing passenger safety protocols. A preliminary inquiry, according to a TV channel, has suggested that the Sukkur accident took place when nine coaches derailed because of overspeeding and broken tracks.

How much money or effort is needed to ensure that the tracks are safe to run a train on? For long we have been told by successive governments, including the incumbent one, of big plans in the offing to improve the railway infrastructure and passenger service, but nothing has been done. The present government appears to have postponed all investments, even the ones immediately required to keep the trains rolling, in the hope of receiving Chinese investment in the ML-1 project. With the scheme having hit serious snags, it is time for the decision-makers to urgently start looking for other sources of money to repair and upgrade the railway infrastructure to prevent further loss of life.

SBP autonomy

THE changes suggested in the existing SBP Act should place the central bank in a better position to control price inflation and manage currency through an independent determination of its monetary and exchange rate policies as per international best practices. The changes approved by the cabinet the other day will reset the State Bank's core function and prevent frequent political intervention in its working. If parliament clears the changes, the bank will acquire vast powers to solely focus on its new function of domestic price stability without having to support the government's economic growth target. It will, nevertheless, continue to indirectly foster growth and help a fuller utilisation of the nation's productive resources by fighting price inflation and ensuring financial stability by using its policy tools.

Though the target inflation rate for the bank to achieve will continue to be set by the National Economic Council, the government will no longer be in a position to dictate monetary and exchange rate policies. Previously, we have watched the State Bank functioning as an adjunct to the finance ministry with its governors obtaining 'advice' from the government or easily succumbing to pressure, without thinking of the consequences for prices and financial stability. We have, for example, seen the bank go out of its way to interfere in the market and spend billions to maintain the exchange rate at the level suggested by the previous PML-N administration at the cost of exports and foreign exchange reserves. Not only that, it would not hesitate to print huge amounts of money to lend to the government and fuel inflation. Likewise, an independent view by the bank of the economic and financial trends and a critical analysis of government policies in its reports have been rare. There are many instances where central bankers were sent home if they took a stand. If the changes are approved, the situation is expected to become better.

The draft law also proposes sweeping administrative and other powers for the State Bank governor besides guaranteeing his tenure that has been extended from three to five years with the possibility of extension for another term. This is understandable because no one can steer the bank without complete administrative freedom and guaranteed tenure. Nonetheless, these kinds of powers also anticipate a strict evaluation of the candidates for the top office and their accountability by parliament. Parliamentary evaluation is crucial to ensure that the right person is chosen for the job after a thorough debate by the people's representatives who should also have the power to fire them if they find their performance below par. Clearance of their appointments by parliament will empower them further in executing their mandate. Hence, it is advisable that the government revisit the draft law and change the method of selection of the State Bank governor in line with international democratic practices.

Out-of-school children

HOW can a country hope to become economically self-sufficient when at least a quarter of its child population has never seen the inside of a classroom? According to the government's own figures, one in every four children in Pakistan has never stepped inside a school and learning poverty — the percentage of children unable to read an age-appropriate paragraph by the age of 10 — is 75pc

in the country. The incumbent government seems to have a fair idea of the challenge and the federal education department has come up with a framework to re-enrol out-of-school children. There are at least 18.7m children who do not go to school — a figure that is equal to the total population of a small European country. According to the framework, a summary of which was presented to parliament, the government plans a phase-wise reopening of classrooms from the most to least disadvantaged areas of the country. The plan calls for providing dedicated — and cheap — transport services to female students and teachers of secondary schools, training support for teachers and bridge programmes for students resuming school.

All this may look good on paper but how effectively will the plan be implemented, especially since education is a provincial subject? Though the federal education ministry has vowed to work in collaboration with the provincial and district tiers of government, it is easier said than done because ground realities differ from one area to another while district administrations are non-existent. Secondly, data has also shown that those children who are in school are not learning well. The plan makes hardly any mention of the existing education infrastructure and how it can be improved. The government needs to further develop this plan to identify problem areas and chalk out clear short- and long-term targets and then devise a mechanism of collaboration for their implementation. Getting 18m children to school is a mammoth task that will require consistent and backbreaking efforts for many years by all levels of government.

GB's demand

THE demand of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan for provisional provincial status is not a new one, and has been reiterated again by the region's assembly. On Tuesday, the GB Assembly passed a unanimous resolution, supported by all parties in the house, demanding an amendment to the Constitution to enable GB to become a provisional province of Pakistan, without prejudice to the Kashmir dispute.

It also called for representation of the region in the Senate and National Assembly. According to GB Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid Khan, the demand is of the people of the region, not of any party or individual. Moreover, before last

year's elections to the region's assembly, Prime Minister Imran Khan had announced that the northern region would be granted the status of a province.

The long-standing demand of the people of GB is indeed a just one. The region's people are present in almost every part of the country and very much form part of the national fabric. The area's people have contributed to this country's progress in the health, education, arts, sports and military fields, amongst others, and in fact opted for Pakistan right after independence, putting up a brave resistance to the Dogra rulers of Kashmir. Yet their constitutional status is ambiguous, while they have no representation in the upper and lower houses of parliament.

This is a situation that can and should be remedied. The concerns of some within the ruling circles about the matter affecting Pakistan's case vis-à-vis India-held Kashmir if GB is merged as a province are genuine, as historically the region has been linked to Kashmir. But that is why the proviso of granting provisional provincial status has been included in the resolution, to protect Pakistan's case under the relevant UN resolutions. Over the past few decades successive governments have taken steps to grant GB greater autonomy. This was witnessed during the Musharraf era, while under the PPP's watch in 2009 the region gained its present nomenclature, changed from the colonial-era Northern Areas.

While all these moves have contributed to ensuring greater rights in the region, the time is ripe to grant full provincial status — albeit on a provisional basis — to the mountainous area as per the democratic aspirations of the local population. Of course, homework on this front should be done thoroughly, and legal changes must be cleared by experts to ensure full rights to the region, as well as protect Pakistan's position in the Kashmir dispute.

Virus resurgence

THE resurgence of Covid-19 cases across the country and the subsequent decision by the NCOC to impose restrictions has highlighted once again how critical an effective vaccination strategy is to defeating the virus.

The directives include a two-week spring break in educational institutions in 10 cities as well as smart lockdowns. A 50pc-work-from-home policy has also been brought back. Though these decisions are much needed, they will disrupt both

education and economic activity — sectors that have already suffered huge setbacks due to the pandemic. Worryingly, results from a recent survey suggest that Covid-19 cases in the country are far more widespread than what is being officially recorded. While official records say that Pakistan has seen about 500,000 cases, the survey suggests the real figure could be 15m. This should serve as a wake-up call for the authorities that must increase testing and strive to make the immunisation drive a success.

That doctors and healthcare workers have shown hesitation in getting vaccinated is a worrying sign. Aside from the resumption of normal life and commercial activities, one of the key positive consequences of the vaccine is that it will lower hospitalisations, as seen in Britain, and ease the burden on healthcare workers who have been hit hard during the pandemic. The reluctance among hospital staff points to a poor understanding of the vaccine and the triumph of conspiracy theories as well as fear-mongering — challenges that can to a great extent be addressed by a robust awareness campaign.

At the moment, a vibrant and large-scale public information campaign is absent. The authorities must realise that investment in this campaign is in the interest of stabilising both education and the economy. An effective campaign can include public figures, mobile units, television and print advertisements, virtual seminars and telemarketing tools to spread awareness, combat misinformation and strengthen trust. Building awareness and trust is key to a sustained uptake of vaccines during the pandemic. It has been repeatedly stressed by health experts that a successful vaccination programme depends on high coverage, preparation and an effective delivery strategy. While Pakistan has been able to procure the vaccine, the rollout remains a challenge given the huge government target of 70m people.

While there is hope on the horizon with the availability of the vaccine to those over 60 years, the management of the programme is undoubtedly a challenge. Authorities should ensure that the vaccine is available and that information reaches those living in low-income communities. Officials must also think of how to utilise resources well as demand for the vaccine grows in urban centres. If hospitals are unable to deal with the volume of visitors, an alternative can be considered in mobile teams and door-to-door immunisations. It is imperative that the government dedicate resources to the vaccination programme, and adopt a proactive approach to developing a communications strategy.

Another ‘encounter’

HOW many ‘encounter’ killings will there be before murderous law-enforcement personnel are brought to book? On Sunday, a Sindh University student, Mohammed Irfan Jatoi, was gunned down in Sukkur in an ostensible encounter with the cops, who described him as a “notorious dacoit” wanted in connection with several crimes. Except, Irfan’s friends and social media activists denounced this version as a pack of lies, claiming he had been taken away from the campus on Feb 10 by the police and remained in their custody until they killed him almost a month later. Following the public furore, IG Sindh Mushtaq Mahar ordered an inquiry. The investigation could bring to an end the impunity with which extrajudicial killings are committed in this country, especially in Sindh and Punjab, or it could turn out to be yet more lip service to the notion of accountability for trigger-happy law-enforcement officials.

The case bears striking similarities to one that caused a furore some three years ago — that of Naqeebullah Mehsud who was gunned down along with three other individuals in a deserted farmhouse in Karachi’s Malir district on Jan 13, 2018. The area police, led by then SSP Rao Anwar — also known as ‘encounter specialist’ — had claimed that the men were terrorists affiliated with the TTP and had been killed in an encounter. Naqeebullah’s friends and family vehemently denounced these claims on social media, saying that the young man was an aspiring model rather than a danger to society. A subsequent inquiry determined that none of the men even had a criminal record. It also emerged, through the police record itself, that Rao Anwar was involved in the killing of 444 people in so-called police encounters. What has happened since, however, demonstrates to a sickening degree how powerful connections place some people beyond the reach of the law. The trial of the now former SSP has been a farce, a grotesque perversion of the notion of justice and accountability in which witnesses have been intimidated into silence or have turned hostile. It is thus worth asking how genuine will be the inquiry ordered in the case of the Sindh university student, and if the findings show that he was indeed murdered in a staged encounter, whether the officials concerned will be held to account. There can be little hope of an improvement in the criminal justice system when cops themselves can get away with murder.

Fukushima anniversary

THURSDAY marked the 10th anniversary of the devastating earthquake that hit the east coast of Japan, and the ensuing Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster. Close to 20,000 people were reported dead or missing after one of the most powerful quakes in recorded history, which caused a massive tsunami that overwhelmed the Fukushima nuclear power plant. There were sombre remembrances on the anniversary, led by the emperor and the prime minister of Japan, as the country mourned its dead. While families of the victims still grapple with their loss, there has also been worldwide debate on the safety of nuclear power plants, considering the immense damage caused by the disaster. The Fukushima tragedy was the worst nuclear disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl incident in the erstwhile USSR. Painstaking work to dismantle the Japanese plant continues to this day; experts say it may take three to four decades to complete the job, while over a million tonnes of radioactive seawater are still stored in tanks.

If a technologically advanced and financially strong nation such as Japan has been struggling to deal with the after-effects of a nuclear disaster, then one can only imagine the state of preparedness of developing countries that use atomic energy. There are valid concerns about the safety of nuclear plants — specifically in case of natural disasters — with particular questions about the protection of populations living near such facilities. Around 30 states use nuclear power to produce energy and there should be a thorough debate globally, including within Pakistan, involving the governments, experts and civil society to discuss the pros and cons of atomic power. Although nuclear energy may be important to wean states off fossil fuels, especially in the face of rampant climate change, perhaps a better option would be to develop ‘green’ and hydroelectric energy resources to cut carbon emissions, while at the same time reducing the risk of nuclear disasters. In the short term, nuclear power producers would do well to ensure all safety protocols are in place.

TikTok blocked, again

ON the direction of the Peshawar High Court, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has once again banned TikTok in Pakistan with immediate effect. This

ban follows an earlier one, unilaterally imposed by PTA on the Chinese app last October. Access was eventually restored some days later, after representatives of the social network assured the telecom regulator that they would cooperate with the Pakistan government in accommodating its requests for stricter moderation and content removal. In response to this latest move, TikTok released a statement in which it claimed it was “aggressively and proactively” complying with this pledge, including by growing its local-language moderation team by almost 250pc since September, but that it was also committed to ensuring its users’ “rights to express themselves creatively on the platform”.

Meanwhile, Minister Fawad Chaudhry has termed the ban one that citizens “will pay a huge price” for, and has offered to conduct “tech modules” for judges through his Ministry for Science and Technology, echoing statements he made last month in which he lamented that Pakistan’s industry and its relations with tech companies had been hampered by ill-conceived state policies and court decisions. This is a succinct summary of the problem with imposing wholesale bans on online services in the digital age, but the fact that TikTok bears the brunt of such capricious and arbitrary moral policing is particularly curious, given that similarly ‘immoral’ and ‘indecent’ content exists on all social media platforms. The only explanation for this outsized focus on TikTok, perhaps, is the fact that it is considered ‘the people’s platform’, with unparalleled popularity among Pakistan’s working class — many of whom have successfully leveraged their online profiles to earn incomes for themselves and reach audiences ranging in the millions. With the government struggling to create jobs amid stagnant growth, this country’s decision-makers should be more concerned with facilitating those who are using talent and innovation to generate revenue and opportunities, instead of taking it upon themselves to turn the country into a nanny state.

Senate chair poll

YESTERDAY’S election for the Senate chairman has yielded a result, but the saga is far from over. PTI-backed nominee Sadiq Sanjrani with 48 votes was declared the winner over the opposition’s Yousuf Raza Gilani who bagged 42 votes. However, eight votes were rejected of which seven were in favour of Mr Gilani — a revelation that has caused an uproar within the opposition, which is considering challenging the decision in the Supreme Court although the presiding officer maintains the votes were cast incorrectly. Ahead of the vote, the figures

for party strength suggested that 47 members would vote for Mr Sanjrani and 51 for Mr Gilani. But during the poll, Mr Sanjrani secured an additional vote, an indication that one opposition senator voted against party policy and in favour of the PTI. Interestingly, the deputy chairman slot was also secured by the PTI candidate, with 10 votes more than the opposition candidate — a result that shows some opposition members voted in favour of the ruling party. This is hardly surprising as Senate elections are routinely marred by allegations of vote buying, horse-trading and political engineering. But certain moments during yesterday's election set a new record in the proverbial book of dirty tricks. The discovery by opposition lawmakers of hidden cameras in the polling booth is an astounding and blatant violation of the sanctity of the upper house and the election process. An election, which according to the rules should be conducted by a secret ballot, was tampered with by unknown individuals who hoped to spy on lawmakers casting their votes. Who planted these devices and what exactly they were hoping to find out, is anyone's guess. Moreover, allegations from opposition politicians that their members were being threatened by the establishment to switch sides hint at yet another nefarious plot.

As the government celebrates its Senate victory, the truth is that democracy has lost — much like it did in the Senate seat elections earlier in the month when the ruling party alleged vote buying. Pakistan's Senate elections have often been held under a cloud of suspicion, as buyouts and underhanded tactics are employed to make lawmakers switch sides. Though politicians have normalised the unsavoury practice of buying loyalty, the role of undemocratic forces in allegedly threatening and spying on lawmakers is even more sinister. Such tactics are an affront to parliament, and unfortunately, will not end till political parties put their differences aside and collectively reject interference. Sadly, there are no signs that this realisation will dawn on our politicians anytime soon.

Anyone who thought the Senate polls would be a fair exercise has been proven wrong. If anything, it shows that the battle for power by any means will go on, and that politicians will continue to either be manipulated or participate of their own accord in undemocratic practices.

Improved auto sales

PAKISTAN'S automotive industry has posted a robust growth in the Covid period. The new data from PAMA, the automotive manufacturers' association, for the first eight months of the present fiscal, ie from July to end February, shows that the sale of passenger cars, jeeps, vans, pickup trucks, etc recorded a 24.3pc year-on-year jump to more than 113,905 units. The number doesn't show the sales of one of the more aggressive new players, Lucky Motors. The two- and three-wheeler segment also expanded by 17.3pc year-on-year to 1.27m units. The sales of tractors more than doubled. But the manufacturers of buses and trucks saw their sales plummet. The automotive industry's growth reflects an overall uptick in domestic economic activities after Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were lifted. The hefty reduction in interest rates that pushed auto financing has also played a major role in the turnaround in car sales. Car leasing jumped by Rs51bn in the seven months from July to end January. The automotive industry had been facing strong headwinds on tough economic conditions spawned by IMF-mandated economic stabilisation policies even before the country was hit by the coronavirus. Industry was shrinking on plunging sales as the government took unsuccessful actions to document the economy. However, the new impetus to the sale of cars and other automobiles in recent months has engendered hopes of an early revival. Total industry sales, barring trucks, buses and two- and three-wheelers, are projected to spike to half a million units over the next five to six years if the current growth momentum continues.

With several Chinese carmakers presenting their brands and investing in local assembly in Pakistan to take advantage of the tax concessions given in the 2016-2021 auto sector policy, the automobile industry is undergoing significant change as customers get more choices and old players come up with new and better models. The interest shown by Chinese automobile companies in introducing their electric cars at discounted prices and the expectation that Japanese carmakers will bring in hybrid vehicles could usher in more changes in the auto landscape and intensify competition. With the existing auto policy having attracted new Korean and Chinese automobile brands, the next policy for 2021-26 must focus on incentives for auto exports and the introduction of smaller, affordable, entry-level cars for middle-class consumers, especially working women. Additionally, the government also needs to ensure that carmakers pay special attention to complying with automotive safety to protect passengers.

Vile campaign

THE mob has been primed to act in self-righteous fury, and unless the state responds appropriately, the unthinkable could happen. Using a doctored video as part of a malicious disinformation campaign, hatred of the most visceral kind has been deliberately stoked against organisers of the Aurat March, which was held on March 8 — International Women’s Day — in several cities in Pakistan.

Shamefully, a number of journalists and political commentators — among them some habitual offenders — fuelled the controversy. Accusations of blasphemy are being levelled, often a chilling precursor to religiously inspired violence in this country. Sure enough, right-wing groups held angry demonstrations on Friday threatening vigilante action. Even the banned TTP purportedly issued a statement to that effect.

The Aurat March organisers have issued a strong rebuttal of the claims made in the disinformation campaign. They shared the original version of the video clip that was falsely captioned in an attempt to show the participants raising objectionable slogans, and explained that a banner being portrayed as offensive was the personal account of a child sexual abuse victim. It was also clarified that the flag seen at the march was not that of France — a lie being perpetuated to paint the event as being ‘un-Islamic’ and promoting a ‘foreign-funded agenda’ — but that of the feminist movement that is the main force behind the event.

The organisers also demanded an apology from those who, by design, have incited hatred on manufactured grounds in order to vilify the feminist movement and silence it. Needless to say, no apology has thus far been forthcoming.

In one sense, the venom being spewed against the Aurat March was expected; it has been so every year since the event became the centrepiece of International Women’s Day celebrations in Pakistan. But this time around, the campaign has been particularly vicious and for obvious reasons, potentially more deadly. Allegations of blasphemy are akin to painting a target on the backs of the individuals in the cross hairs.

What has been set in motion by reactionary elements demands an intervention from the state, which has been claiming credit for cracking down on religious

extremism in recent years. Instead of being a silent spectator, the government must act immediately to denounce the threats and punish the hatemongers.

Meanwhile, the new generation of rights activists by now know well the malevolent forces arrayed against them. These elements have no qualms using any tactic, howsoever despicable, to discredit the struggle for equality, dignity and security from gender-based violence.

Looking ahead, rights activists should build upon the momentum created by their determination and courage. They would also do well to take some cues from the activism of the feisty women who preceded them — those that earned their spurs during Gen Zia's dictatorship, and knew that resistance does not preclude engaging with the state.

Reluctance to test

THE increasing number of Covid-19 cases in Punjab tell a worrying story about the trajectory of the virus. With 36 deaths and nearly 1,000 new cases reported in just 24 hours in the province, it is clear the third wave has very much arrived. Authorities, too, have taken notice of the rise in cases and the province has banned wedding ceremonies, sports activities and public meetings in cities where the positivity rate exceeds 5pc. According to an official list of 'high-burden districts', Gujranwala has the highest positivity rate at 9pc, followed by Lahore and Multan at 8pc, Faisalabad and Sargodha at 6pc and Rawalpindi at 4pc. While these figures ought to be taken seriously, the reality may be far worse. Daily testing across the country is very low. In Punjab too, where the highest number of cases are being reported, the government is reluctant to increase testing. This hesitation is mind-boggling, especially given how critical widespread testing is to obtaining a true picture of the spread of the virus. What is also disturbing is that the rampant spread is said to be linked to the fast-spreading UK variant. Although the death toll is not as high as in the US or Europe where the population's median age is high, the government must understand that even a mild case of Covid-19 can have debilitating long-term effects on health. According to a study published in The Lancet in January, even after six months Covid-19 survivors who had suffered acute infections had multiple health issues. These included fatigue, muscle weakness, sleep difficulties and anxiety or depression. "Patients who were more severely ill during their hospital stay had

more severe impaired pulmonary diffusion capacities and abnormal chest imaging manifestations, and are the main target population for intervention of long-term recovery,” the study noted.

In this scenario, even if the death rate is not alarmingly high, the authorities must ramp up testing to gauge the transmission of the virus. Taking infections lightly is a huge mistake, as they can even result in increased hospitalisations and overburden healthcare staff. Data in mid-February showed only about 15,500 healthcare workers in the province had been vaccinated, which means there are doctors and hospital staffers who have not been immunised but are still treating Covid-19 patients. The government’s lethargy and casual attitude towards increased testing is inexplicable and defies what has clearly been established by epidemiologists and health experts across the world: the authorities must do better.

Depleting rainforests

THAT Earth’s ecosystems are in a race against time is well known. New data from the non-profit Rainforest Foundation Norway gives an alarming picture of the rate of their destruction as ecosystems that act as a buffer against the drastic impact of climate change rapidly disappear. Other reports too have rung the alarm, warning that rainforest cover equal to a football field is lost every six seconds; two-thirds of the world’s original rainforest cover has already been destroyed, with 34pc of old tropical forests having been cleared to make way for agricultural practices. Another 30pc have been degraded to a dangerous extent. Man feeds off nature. But the level of destruction involved in this parasitic relationship has been catastrophic: the annual rate of rainforest depletion only in 2019, matched the level of destruction over the past 20 years. In fact, the total loss of rainforest cover between 2002 and 2019 was greater than the area of France. The biggest impact has been felt in Brazil, which has witnessed a sharp uptick in the depletion of its forested land as a result of the country’s lax policies towards the environment.

Pakistan may not contain rainforests. However, it is home to a variety of other forests from the mangroves in the south to the pine forests in the north. Unfortunately, it is also among the top 10 countries that are most vulnerable to the impact of global warming and climate change — and it has one of the highest

deforestation rates in the world. Despite the current government's strong emphasis on the environment and the billion-tree tsunami project, the timber mafia's activities that destroy delicate ecosystems have yet to be curtailed. Keeping in mind that the UN has declared 2021-2030 to be the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, a sincere and consistent effort is required by the world at large to take steps to preserve forests so that we can be facilitated in putting in place measures to reduce the impact of climate change

Violence against doctors

IT is an unfortunate reality in Pakistan that doctors and other health professionals often have to face the wrath of angry attendants in case of death or injury to a patient. A number of such ugly incidents have been reported from Sindh recently, prompting medical professionals to call for the highest offices in the country to intervene and protect them from such violence. Addressing a press conference in Karachi on Friday, doctors belonging to the Pakistan Medical Association and the Ophthalmological Society of Pakistan demanded the prime minister, chief justice, army chief and Sindh chief minister initiate a judicial inquiry and bring elements involved in attacking medical professionals to book. Giving details of the incidents, the doctors said a senior eye specialist at a private hospital in Karachi — said to be one of the few retina specialists left in Pakistan — was attacked by attendants after a procedure allegedly went awry, while doctors were also attacked in Dadu and Ghotki.

Medical negligence is a very serious matter, especially when the death of a patient or disability occurs. However, there can be no justification for attacking medical staff and ransacking hospitals. As doctors have rightly pointed out, protecting medical professionals and probing cases of medical negligence is the job of the Sindh Health Care Commission and its corresponding bodies in other provinces. However, medics say cases of violence are rising because the regulatory body is not doing its job. To prevent this situation from deteriorating, it must be made absolutely clear by the state that violence against health professionals will not be tolerated and that those involved will be punished. Moreover, there should be a well-defined, transparent procedure if allegations of medical negligence do emerge, and doctors found guilty must be penalised. Already Pakistan faces a brain drain. If more doctors and other medical

professionals decide to pack up and leave because they want a safer working environment, it will mean greater distress for this country's fragile health sector.

Beyond Senate poll

THE election for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman on Friday has accentuated the crisis of credibility swirling around Pakistani politics. It has also deepened the fault lines between the government and the opposition and is likely to lead to greater acrimony in the coming weeks. While both slots were won by candidates of the government, the opposition's refusal to accept the results due to what it says is faulty ruling by the presiding officer rejecting seven votes for their candidate Yousuf Raza Gilani means the election will now be subjected to a gruelling legal battle.

The Senate elections this year have been marred by multiple controversies all leading to a dismal conclusion that political parties are unable, or unwilling, to frame the basic rules of the game and then adhere to them in letter and spirit. The discovery of hidden cameras in the main Senate hall was a travesty that could not have been imagined — and yet it happened in broad daylight for the whole world to see.

The summary rejection of the votes by the presiding officer was also done rather crudely and is now being challenged for reasons that appear to have some weight. The no-holds barred fight between the government and the opposition is wreaking havoc across institutions, processes, traditions, and even the basic values of right and wrong. It paints a picture of a system in peril. It is difficult to visualise how a semblance of normalcy can be returned to our politics and how adversaries can build a basic minimum working relationship. Every day brings new controversies.

The Senate elections also illustrated our inability to hold a simple and straightforward election. A sum total of 100 votes were to be cast in the upper house of parliament and not in some backwater polling station. We could not even manage this with consensus. If this is the state of our electoral capability, how would we be able to hold a national election in the near future? Before that, how will we be able to conduct a local bodies poll that has many times more candidates than a general election? The state of affairs is indeed worrisome and

unless some urgent steps are taken to frame a common understanding of how to move forward, we could be heading into an uncertain political future.

The Senate election has however presented an opportunity to both sides to cooperate. The issue of the hidden cameras is to be probed by a committee comprising members from the treasury and opposition benches. These members should get to the bottom of this mystery, identify those responsible and take appropriate action. If they are not willing to even protect the dignity of the house they belong to then it would be hard to imagine how they can shoulder the heavy responsibility of representing an entire nation.

RDA benefits

OVERSEAS Pakistani workers have shown a tremendous interest in the Roshan Digital Account initiative of the State Bank. Pakistanis living and working in 100 countries across the world have so far opened 100,000 accounts to transfer a total sum of \$671m back to the country of their origin in almost six months after the initiative was launched by the prime minister. Half of these deposits are said to have been shifted to local banks in the last two months as more non-resident Pakistanis learn about the scheme. The market expects the number of accounts to grow further and RDA deposits to jump to \$1bn before the end of the current fiscal on June 30 and to \$1.5bn-\$2bn by end December, shoring up the country's weak foreign exchange reserves. Lucrative interest rates compared with the nearly 0pc return they are getting in their host countries as well as the ease of moving their money into and out of Pakistan by clicking on their mobile devices whenever they need to is believed to have contributed significantly to the success of the initiative. In addition, the facility to non-resident Pakistanis to invest in property, government debt papers and the stock market, and to pay online tuition fee or utility bills through their digital accounts must have also served as a huge attraction.

By way of example, non-resident citizens of India as well as China have had a crucial role to play in the economic progress of their home country. They have not only helped by remitting their savings for investments but have also played an important role in changing the world's perception of their countries, resulting in the inflow of massive foreign direct investment. Overseas Pakistani workers have also been doing much to help their country by contributing to the stability of the

nation's external account via large remittances that are equal to our annual exports. It is regrettable though that it is only now that the government and the central bank have taken steps to facilitate them in moving their savings back home. It is hoped that the success of these digital accounts will encourage the central bank to come up with more initiatives to persuade overseas Pakistanis to invest in the manufacturing industry and other productive segments of the economy in order to enhance growth, create jobs and make up for the drying foreign investment.

Civilians vs army

DESPITE a brutal crackdown by the Myanmar military, civilian resistance to the Feb 1 coup has refused to abate, with regular demonstrations against the junta in the country.

This is despite the fact that the protesters have paid with their lives; over 120 have been killed in the demonstrations, as per one count, with the police and military at times firing live rounds into crowds. While generating such momentum can take time, in Myanmar the people came to the defence of the democratic system from the day the generals toppled the elected order.

This is not the first time the generals have struck in Myanmar, while it is also true that mass pro-democracy movements had taken shape in the late 1980s and 2007 as well. The resolve of the country's people is reassuring for all pro-democracy forces across the globe.

While Myanmar's hybrid democracy was far from perfect, there was absolutely no justification for the junta to overthrow an elected government however flawed. In other parts of the developing world, there have been mixed results where civilian power confronting extra-constitutional players is concerned. Myanmar's neighbour Thailand saw the military stage a coup in 2014 and though sustained protests have continued in that country as well, Thailand's powerful generals remain entrenched.

Meanwhile in Egypt, a brief democratic experiment was derailed by the military in 2013, when the Mohamed Morsi-led dispensation was sent packing. While the Muslim Brotherhood-supported government was trying to implement its agenda too hastily, the military had no business overthrowing an elected government.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has been something of a success story, with the civilians managing to maintain their supremacy, despite decades of military rule. However, the Awami League-led dispensation has displayed autocratic tendencies, though these deficiencies must be handled by the political opposition, not extra-constitutional ‘saviours’.

Perhaps one of the reasons that unelected adventurers succeed in thwarting democratic movements is the support they receive from established democracies. The latter will initially censure the coup-makers, but then start dealing with them under the doctrine of necessity. This was witnessed in Egypt, while Pakistan saw similar situations during Zia’s and Musharraf’s military rule. Perhaps Western states can change tack and keep up the pressure on Myanmar’s generals to return to the barracks.

A triumph for democracy in Myanmar will embolden constitutional movements everywhere, while the opposite will send the message to adventurers that they can overthrow elected administrations and get away with it.

A genuine offer?

IT seemed too good to be true. On Sunday, the PTI government extended an unexpected offer to the opposition, saying it was willing to initiate talks with the opposition on the issue of electoral reforms. Minister for Science & Technology Fawad Chaudhry said at a press conference that reforms were pending in a committee of parliament in which the government had proposed holding of polls through electronic machines, right of vote for overseas Pakistanis and the curtailment of powers of the presiding officers. Though casual in its tenor, the offer appeared to be a step forward — until the next day, when the government’s demand that ECP members resign cast doubt on the genuineness of its intentions.

It is true that electoral reforms require urgent attention from all political parties. The Senate elections are a reminder that the present system is struggling to conduct free, fair, transparent and credible elections. This means the fundamentals of running a democracy are under stress. If the country goes into the next round of elections — local bodies and general elections — there is cause for worry that they will generate further controversies and instability. It is therefore critical that electoral reforms are discussed in detail by all political

parties and legislated with consensus. If major parties are not on board then the entire exercise could become futile.

This is why it was unfortunate when PTI decided to go it alone on the issue of having Senate elections through an open ballot. However, if there is indeed a serious plan to discuss electoral reforms with the opposition, then it would do well to handle the matter at the appropriate level. A sincere attempt would include approaching the senior parliamentary leadership of the opposition and offering a formal meeting to discuss the agenda for the reforms. Parliament is the appropriate forum and the government should reach out to the opposition in all sincerity.

But the problem is that the government is struggling to overcome its acute partisanship when it comes to a discussion on such critical issues. It is in this respect that the demand of the government that ECP members resign is a highly inappropriate one. It boggles the mind when senior government functionaries are sent out to deliver such irresponsible statements. The chief election commissioner was appointed by Prime Minister Imran Khan himself, and under him the ECP has done well to stand up to pressure from the government. It is ironical that the party which allegedly indulged in severe electoral malpractices in the Daska by-election is now calling for the resignation of those who called out this gross manipulation and rightly ordered a re-poll. The government would do itself a favour if it were to take a holistic view of the situation before rushing to make statements that are difficult to take seriously.

Cricket selection

THE refreshing trend adopted by the national cricket selectors to induct promising youngsters in the Pakistan team since the New Zealand tour debacle last December has yet again been displayed in the choices made for the upcoming tours of South Africa and Zimbabwe recently. A number of newcomers and salient performers in domestic cricket have managed to find a place in the Test as well as the ODI and T20 squads named for the African tour by chief selector Mohammad Wasim. Budding players such as batsmen Saud Shakeel, Danish Aziz, Imran Butt, rookie pacers Arshad Iqbal, Shahnawaz Dahani, Mohammad Wasim Jr, spinners Sajid Khan and Salman Ali Agha all feature in the three squads named for the tour. The move has been widely hailed by

experts and fans. However, the shock omission of experienced opener Shan Masood, seasoned pacer Wahab Riaz and all-rounder Imad Wasim has earned the ire of some critics who contend that only a blend of youth and experience can improve chances of doing well overseas. Skipper Babar Azam, who leads in all three formats, and head coach Misbah-ul-Haq have reportedly taken exception to some of the selections, which is a matter of concern. Many times in Pakistan cricket, captains who have not had their way in team selections have refused to take responsibility for defeat. This has led to unpleasant situations.

Having said that, an independent selection committee is quite rare in Pakistan cricket which has repeatedly grappled with favouritism and nepotism at the expense of merit for decades. To be fair to the selectors, even if the team loses a few games on the tour, all they could be accused of is misjudgement, not favouritism. For the home Test and T20 series against South Africa played early this year, the selectors had drafted in more than half a dozen in-form players who clearly were willing to go the extra mile. It is useful to remember that this was the key catalyst in Pakistan's victories.

Increasing sugar rates

SUGAR prices are rising again. According to reports, the sweetener is now being sold for up to Rs110 per kilo in different parts of the country. This is in spite of an early and improved domestic sugar harvest when compared to the one last year and the import of significantly large quantities. According to official data, sugar output from July to December jumped to slightly below 73pc to 1.9m tonnes from 1.1m tonnes during the same period the previous year. In addition, according to the data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the country has imported 278,482 tonnes of sugar in the seven months to January. The Trading Corporation of Pakistan is reported to have brought 130,000 tonnes of the sweetener between August and November for consumption in Punjab and KP while traders have imported 150,000 tonnes to make up for the shortage. Still, barring a very brief period, sugar prices have stayed at an elevated level. Producers blame middlemen for hoarding the commodity to rig profits, and the farmers for selling sugarcane at 25pc higher than the rate fixed by the government. The government, however, appears helpless against producers and hoarders and has failed to stabilise the commodity's prices, its claims of proceeding against errant millers and middlemen notwithstanding.

Inflation continues to challenge the government's resolve to control the prices of essential kitchen items, especially wheat flour and sugar, which has forced most lower- to middle-income households to slash their other expenditure in order to put food on the table. Sugar is not a staple food. But it is a source of daily caloric intake for millions. In spite of its repeated claims of deploying the administrative machinery against unscrupulous millers and hoarders, the government has played the role of a helpless bystander. The last one year has been very hard on the majority of those with fixed incomes because of Covid-19's devastating impact. Real incomes have shrunk owing to high inflation. Millions have lost their jobs as businesses in the informal services sector struggle to cope with the effects of the health crisis. It is high time the government walked the talk and improved market governance to shield people from inflation, instead of making meaningless, empty claims. If no action is taken now, consumers will likely be compelled to pay more as sugar prices are set to rise further with an increase in demand during Ramazan, which is just around the corner.

Muslims targeted

FAR-right movements have gained ground across the globe, blaming ethnic and religious 'others' for all of society's failings. In some countries, groups that were once labelled extremists are now controlling the levers of power, making life difficult for minorities. Amongst the xenophobic trends spreading across the world is Islamophobia, as Muslims are targeted for their faith.

In this regard, the OIC's decision to observe the International Day to Combat Islamophobia is a welcome initiative to raise awareness about anti-Muslim hate and come up with solid strategies to counter bigotry. As the Foreign Office has observed in a statement to mark the day, Islamophobia takes many forms, such as negative profiling, mob attacks by cow vigilantes and harassment of women wearing hijab.

The fact is that in a number of states Islamophobic policies are being supported at the government level. In Sri Lanka, a minister recently announced that the burqa would be banned, along with the closure of 1,000 Islamic schools, though that country's foreign ministry said on Tuesday that the ban was "merely a proposal". Over the past few years, there has been a rise in xenophobic Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and following the 2019 Easter bombing carried out by IS

militants in the country, Muslims have faced problems as they are not able to practise their faith freely.

For example, the government was forcing Muslim families to cremate their loved ones who had died of Covid-19 until the decision was reversed last month. Elsewhere, voters in Switzerland recently banned the burqa and niqab in that country, although very few people in the alpine state wear them. And in India, the Hindu chauvinist BJP has apparently adopted Islamophobia as a central plank of its state policy, passing laws that discriminate against Muslims while looking away when acts of violence target the community. In a recent incident, a Muslim boy was beaten for drinking water in a Hindu temple in UP.

The OIC should emphasise that discrimination against Muslims will not be tolerated, and that those who indulge in hate crimes must face the law. While terrorists acting in the name of Islam must be brought to justice, their misguided acts cannot be used as a cover to tar all Muslims with the same brush. Moreover, the civil rights of Muslims must be ensured, and they must be allowed to practise their faith freely.

Perhaps rulers — Muslim and non-Muslim — can learn a thing or two about compassion and communal harmony from New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. When mosques were attacked in the city of Christchurch by a far-right terrorist in 2019, Ms Ardern led from the front and embraced her country's wounded Muslim community. On the second anniversary of the attacks, she again empathised with the victims, showing that if the state is determined, it can heal wounds instead of widening the communal gulf.

Attack on Rangers

MONDAY'S bomb attack targeting paramilitary personnel in Karachi left one Rangers official martyred and injured several people including members of the force. Though it is too early to say whether this incident signals the return of militancy to Karachi, the group that has claimed responsibility for the attack has also been behind several previous such incidents in the city. In 2018, militants of the Balochistan Liberation Army attempted to enter the Chinese consulate but were thwarted by security officials. Last year, it was behind an attack on the Karachi Stock Exchange building, in which two security guards and a policeman were martyred. In this week's attack, it appears the bomb was planted in a

motorcycle and detonated via remote control as a Rangers vehicle passed by — indicating that the area had been surveilled and that the attack was planned.

Though the previous attacks were foiled by a rapid and effective response from security forces, there is still a need for better intelligence gathering and vigilance. CCTV footage and evidence from the attack site should offer some clues to investigators, who must dedicate resources to getting more information in order to thwart the group's future plans. The BLA time and again has signalled its intent to attack both security forces and Chinese-backed projects, citing its grievances with China's involvement in Balochistan. It has claimed responsibility for some gruesome attacks on FC personnel in Balochistan, and has also carried out an attack on a hotel in Gwadar. As security and intelligence officials collect more information, it is worth noting that the BLA is part of a handful of armed resistance groups in Balochistan who for years have run an insurgency in the name of fighting for a greater share of resources in the province. Alongside counterterrorism operations, it is important for the authorities to address the grievances of disgruntled Baloch people to put an end to the bloody militancy that has hurt both the economy and the objective of peace in the country.

Rift in the PDM

RESIGNING from the assemblies was a 'nuclear option' in which the PPP always had the most to lose among its allies in the Pakistan Democratic Movement. After all, it alone of the component parties has a stake in the current set-up, including the Sindh government. Now that push has come to shove, the PPP's reluctance to take that step has become crystal clear.

The alliance on Tuesday announced the postponement of its March 26 anti-government long march owing to differences over submitting the resignations. Certainly, the rift in the alliance does not make for good optics, and government ministers are having a field day proclaiming the 'demise' of the PDM, once again.

Their glee, however, may be premature. Alliances like the PDM, composed of parties with interests broadly falling along the same arc but varying in their particulars, often suffer some discord along the way. Nor are such divergent political unions uncommon in this country. Even the anti-PPP Pakistan National Alliance, aside from several right-wing parties, also included the progressive

National Democratic Party. When cracks appear, strategies must be revised to keep an alliance intact.

The PML-N, fighting with its back against the wall under the PTI government, seems to be caught between two extremes and will be the most demoralised by the latest development. On the one hand is Maulana Fazlur Rehman who, for a change, has nothing to lose in the current set-up and has, perhaps unwisely, linked the resignations to the long march in an attempt to pressurise the other component parties. On the other is Asif Ali Zardari.

Regardless of what he may have led the allied parties to believe, the shrewd politician will only do what serves him or his party's interests. Indeed, it is worth asking whether a 'go slow' in the PDM campaign promises some advantage to the PPP. In the Senate election earlier this month, Yousuf Raza Gilani won the coveted Islamabad seat, a victory ascribed by the PDM to the establishment's 'neutrality'. However, the elections to the top Senate offices have thrown a wrench in the PDM's complacency. The PPP leadership may be thinking, who knows which way the wind will be blowing even if early elections are held?

Moreover, while the opposition alliance is well within its rights to call for early elections, to do so halfway through the PTI's tenure can be considered unreasonable, even a non-starter, given that poll rigging allegations are par for the course in this country. Compounding the challenge, the establishment for its own reasons is evidently still backing the same horse. Without its support, effecting a change in the political set-up is extremely unlikely. While the PDM may want to reflect on whether it created unrealistic expectations among the public regarding its capacity to bring down the government, the PTI for now has reason to celebrate.

Coal miners' deaths

THE deaths of over two dozen coal miners in Balochistan in two accidents in the past few days alone underscores the perennially dangerous conditions under which coal is extracted in this country. Archaic mining methods, ignorance or wilful neglect of safety precautions and the state's apathy have made coal mines across Pakistan venues where deadly accidents are simply waiting to happen. At least 13 coal miners were killed when a ferocious fire erupted after trapped methane gas exploded inside mines in Harnai district and the Marwar area of

Balochistan's Bolan district. In 2020, 72 deadly accidents in different coal mines across Balochistan claimed the lives of over 100 colliers. The dangerous working conditions and the excruciatingly slow and difficult process of granting compensation to victims' families — who don't have the resources or time to pursue mine owners and government officials — had come under discussion in the Senate in 2019. The upper house's Standing Committee on Petroleum lamented the hazardous working conditions of colliers, and yet nothing substantial emerged from that debate. It is an open secret that a large part of the mining industry operates unofficially and the colliers work on daily wages. At the same time, the provincial mines and minerals departments remain critically underfunded as safety inspectors lack even the basic equipment required to do their job. Though the Mines Act 1923 gives vast powers to mines inspectors to ensure compliance with safety standards, judging by the frequency of deadly incidents, it appears they are either neglectful or incapable of performing their duties. In 2019, the provincial government in KP passed the KP Mines, Safety, Inspection and Regulation Act that bars anyone under 18 or over 60 to become a coal miner but it is not clear how the law, which was a step in the right direction, is being enforced and whether miners and workers in the informal sector are now being duly registered.

Unfortunately, the state of the coal mines and the lack of protection for the colliers who risk death and disease as they work long hours underground are a reflection of the generally lax attitude of the government towards people's lives — especially when it comes to the poorest and most vulnerable segments. It is about time the authorities took stock of the situation and put an end to this cycle of death by strictly ensuring that international safety standards are met and errant mine owners punished.

Quad' meeting

AT the height of the Cold War, a web of competing ideological alliances crisscrossing the globe was the order of the day, with states allied either with the Western or Eastern blocs, or maintaining tenuous neutrality. With the end of bipolarity, the usefulness of these alliances appeared to wane. However, it seems that the US-China rivalry is helping forge new blocs aligned with either the sole superpower, or a rising China that Washington sees as a challenger. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, bringing together the US, Australia,

Japan and India certainly seems to be aimed at containing the growth of China and countering the People's Republic in its own backyard. The leaders of the four states recently held a virtual summit — the first since Joe Biden took office — to discuss the “China challenge”. Expectedly, Beijing has not taken kindly to the Quad discussions, issuing a hard-hitting statement in response. The Chinese foreign ministry has said the attempts to hem Beijing in “will not ... succeed” and that the states should “shake off their Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice”.

The US sees China as a serious economic rival as well as a threat to its global interests, thereby explaining the formation of such blocs. However, it is difficult to see how such formations can contribute to global security. What is more, such security and ideological alliances force non-aligned states to choose sides on the global geopolitical chessboard. For example, American officials have subtly and not so subtly criticised CPEC, Pakistan's landmark venture with China. Moreover, America's support to India as a bulwark against China has also upset the balance of power in South Asia, with New Delhi harbouring superpower illusions. Instead of forming competing blocs with military dimensions, a much better option would be to integrate regional economies and promote trade and people-to-people exchanges. As for those states that want to form geopolitical blocs, they should not force sovereign nations to toe their line or face isolation for not bending to diktat.

South Asia peace

THE peace process in South Asia moves in fits and starts: things look up one moment, only to come crashing down the very next. The last few years have been particularly tense, with the situation along the Line of Control volatile, while the two states came to the brink of another war in 2019 after India's Balakot misadventure. However, of late it seems that efforts are under way to cool temperatures and restart the dialogue process, apparently through the backchannel.

The first sign of this thaw came last month, when the respective DGMOs established contact and announced resumption of the ceasefire along the LoC. Further signs that something is afoot came on Wednesday when Prime Minister Imran Khan, speaking at the Islamabad Security Dialogue, said that India should

make the first move to normalise ties, while adding that Kashmir was the “lone irritant” standing in the way of better Pakistan-India relations. On Thursday, the army chief made similar comments at the same forum, saying it was time to “bury the past and move forward”, while again highlighting the need to resolve the Kashmir imbroglio.

The prime minister has a point because after the LoC ceasefire, India, being the bigger regional power, should initiate the dialogue process. Earlier on, Mr Khan had also said that if India takes one step towards peace, Pakistan will take two. The fact is that in the current atmosphere, the resumption of the dialogue process itself will be a major achievement. A state of perpetual conflict suits no one, particularly the millions of poor in South Asia, while better relations can pave the way for socioeconomic uplift for all. As the COAS noted at the Islamabad forum, South Asia is “amongst the least integrated regions of the world” and defence spending “comes at the expense of human development”.

However, as positive as the signals appear, it would be premature to celebrate ‘talks about talks’. Both countries have been at a similar juncture before, where negotiations had reached an advanced stage and peace seemed imminent. However, the process was derailed and soon it was back to square one. Such mistakes have to be avoided this time around and interlocutors on both sides need to tread carefully without raising expectations.

The progress achieved in earlier discussions should be built on, and so-called soft areas — people-to-people contacts; Sir Creek etc — can be a starting point to reach the tougher issues on the agenda, such as Kashmir, militancy etc. For starters, hawks on both sides must be sidelined so a conducive atmosphere is created for dialogue as there will always be noisy lobbies for war in both countries. Constituencies for peace need to be strengthened so that the complicated issues poisoning ties since independence are resolved, and South Asia can move forward on the journey of human development and economic progress.

SM growth

THE large-scale manufacturing industry posted a robust growth of 7.85pc during the first seven months (July-January) of the financial year, signalling the revival of economic activities after the protracted gloom of harsh IMF-mandated

stabilisation policies and later by the Covid-19 shutdown. Even though the expansion in LSM output remains narrowly based and is not unexpected given the low-base effect, many are projecting GDP will record higher growth than the targeted 2pc this year compared to the 0.4pc contraction the previous year. This is so in spite of new data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics showing slightly slower LSM growth in January compared to the two previous months. The rebound in large-scale industry, which represents almost 80pc of the country's total manufacturing and accounts for 10.7pc of the economy, after a contraction of over 10.5pc last fiscal year, is a hopeful sign. It not only signifies a substantial uptick in the domestic consumption of cement and other building materials, but also an increase in textile and clothing exports, leading many to invest billions in new projects, as well as in the expansion and upgradation of existing ones. Nonetheless the upturn remains fragile. Some likely adjustments such as increased energy prices and the withdrawal of certain tax exemptions for corporations for the revival of the suspended IMF programme could slow down LSM recovery and diversification of businesses. The lower interest rate and cheaper long-term financing for investment are a key factor driving LSM expansion. Any change in the present dovish monetary policy once the IMF programme is again operational could also trigger a negative impact on industrial recovery.

While industrial output has expanded, generating economic optimism, the agriculture sector remains a weak link in the economic chain. With food imports rising by 50.3pc to \$5.3bn year-on-year in the first eight months of the fiscal year to February, the widening trade deficit may bring the balance-of-payments position under pressure. Additional burden on the external sector is coming from cotton and yarn imports to meet the local textile industry's demand in the wake of the failed crop this year. The share of food items — eg wheat, sugar, edible oil, spices, tea, pulses — in the import bill has reached 15.8pc this year compared to 11.3pc last year. Economic revival requires the government to also focus on investment in agriculture to improve output. The poor performance of the farm sector could cancel out the gains of the manufacturing sector.

Another 500,000 doses

WITH the third wave of the coronavirus pandemic tearing across the country, the arrival of another 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine from China is

welcome news. Like the first batch, this one too is a gift from the Chinese government. On top of that, the first consignment of the privately imported Russian Sputnik V reached Karachi on Wednesday, although it will be a few weeks before batches are dispatched to government-approved inoculation centres. Another Chinese vaccine, the one-shot Cansino, is expected by the end of the month.

It is essential that Pakistan purchase sufficient doses to inoculate enough of its population so that herd immunity can be achieved. Given that the vaccination campaign got off to a somewhat lethargic start, with even many health professionals — who were eligible in the first phase — reluctant to receive their jabs, the government needs to put more effort into getting public buy-in. According to government data, in the first two weeks only 32,582 front-line healthcare workers out of 78,000 in Sindh got their first Sinopharm shot, with other provinces doing even worse. Until a few days ago, only 240,000 out of an estimated 8m Pakistanis over 65 years of age had registered themselves for vaccination; that works out to 3pc of those eligible. Vaccine aversion, mainly arising from misinformation and mistrust of official data, is a very real problem in this country — although one might have hoped the health community had more confidence in a scientifically proven procedure. With inoculation centres largely carrying out their task smoothly, and more first-hand accounts available about the vaccine causing few to no side effects, the pace may pick up. Nevertheless, this is an area that the authorities should look to pay more attention to. On a related note, the government has made a sound decision in revising its earlier intention to not place a price cap on privately imported vaccine. That would likely have put the jab out of reach of all but the most well-heeled Pakistanis.

Online transactions

A SIGNIFICANT number of Pakistanis have shifted to internet and mobile banking to transfer money, pay bills and shop online. Digital transactions are posting strong growth as reflected by new State Bank data for the period between October and December. The data shows online transactions spiking by 24pc in volume to 296.7m and 22pc in value to Rs21.4tr as more people switch to internet and mobile banking for convenience. Three major factors have played a crucial role in the online uptick. First, Covid-19 forced people to use online banking services. Second, the waiver of transactional fees on all online interbank

and intra-bank fund transfer encouraged many to start accessing internet and mobile banking services, where the most uptake is seen in the last one year. Third, the incentives offered by the provinces to taxpayers using mobile banking for payment of government taxes or restaurant bills also contributed to an uptake in digital transactions.

The number of point-of-sale machines also recorded growth of 18pc to 62,480, with digital payments being made through debit or credit cards. According to the bank, 23m transactions totalling Rs115bn during the three-month period to December were processed. Meanwhile, e-commerce merchants saw 5.6m transactions through card payment that climbed to Rs15bn compared to 3.9m transactions valuing at Rs11.9bn in the previous quarter. The expansion in online payments indeed marks a welcome shift in the customers' approach to payments and will go a long way in documenting the economy. The expansion in the digital payment infrastructure as well as the emergence of new payment aggregators have played a role in the growth. Nevertheless, it will be misleading at this point to assume that the increased online transactions show the expansion of financial inclusion. The existing number of POS machines, the limited number of people, especially women, with access to bank accounts or in possession of payment cards, and even fewer of

them with access to the internet, means we have a long way to go before a larger section of the population can use internet and mobile banking services.

Moscow talks

AS the May 1 deadline for America to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan draws close, efforts are afoot to speed up the peace process in the latter country. The latest sign of this came after a meeting was convened in Moscow featuring Afghan stakeholders, as well as representatives of regional and global players, to try and hammer out some sort of deal, and salvage the very modest successes that have been achieved between the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US. What is significant is that the US sent its emissary on Afghanistan to the event in Russia, despite the fact that Washington and Moscow rarely see eye to eye, especially in the international arena. Senior officials from Pakistan and China were also in attendance, as were Mullah Baradar of the Taliban and former Afghan president Hamid Karzai.

The joint statement issued after the event is important as it calls upon the Taliban to not launch any spring or summer offensives. Over the past few months, there has been a sharp spike in violence as civilians, including journalists and civil society figures, have been murdered. The Taliban say the US is not complying with its end of the deal signed in Doha in 2020, and there was no clear signal from the militia that they are willing to cease all hostilities in the interest of peace. Until there is such a commitment, it would be too early to celebrate. However, considering the complexity of the Afghan issue, the fact that the dialogue process is continuing is still a better alternative to settling scores on the battlefield.

At this point, the stalemate will apparently continue as the Taliban have the upper hand. The only major change to emerge from the Moscow conclave is that Pakistan, the US, China and Russia appear to have a common view of the Afghan peace process. America itself is not sure it will honour the May 1 deadline, with Joe Biden saying as much in a recent interview. However, the dialogue process must continue and be backed by a long-lasting ceasefire, which will act as the biggest confidence-building measure. The negotiation process is due to resume in Turkey next month and by that time the Afghan stakeholders — particularly the Taliban — must show that they are committed to the peace process by ceasing hostilities. If foreign troops leave abruptly without a peace plan endorsed by all Afghan factions, a return to the civil war seen during the Mujahideen period is likely. And if the foreign forces stay, the Taliban will have an excuse to abandon the peace process and return to the battlefield. The available options at this point are not very good, yet a modus vivendi must be reached where the violence stops, power-sharing is achieved and the Afghans start the long process of rebuilding their shattered homeland.

PM's assurance

THAT Prime Minister Imran Khan has assured the families of missing persons of assistance is indeed welcome news, but there are still miles to go before these families get justice. Last month, scores of Baloch citizens whose relatives have been missing for up to 12 years had gathered in the capital to protest against these enforced disappearances and try and obtain information about their loved ones' whereabouts. At the time, the protest was called off after an assurance was

given by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, who told the protesting families that she would arrange their meeting directly with the prime minister. This week, Mr Khan met three members of the Balochistan missing persons committee and tasked his principal secretary to ascertain the status of the missing family members and give an update to these families. The prime minister's meeting with the relatives of missing persons no doubt is a show of support to these citizens who have suffered a harrowing ordeal for years. But though it is encouraging, it also highlights what an utter failure the Commission of Inquiry into Enforced Disappearances has been. The commission was created in 2011 and, despite the passage

of a decade, it has failed to end enforced disappearances or bring relief to these families. Though the existence of such a body is necessary, this particular commission has yet to address the grievances of families who have endured traumatic years of separation and silence. Some observers say the commission is unsuccessful due to inadequate human and financial resources. Its head, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, is also the chairman of the National Accountability Bureau which is a significant and consuming responsibility in itself. Not only do these families place very little trust in this commission, even the few cases it has 'resolved' do little to pin responsibility or hold someone accountable.

The prime minister's pledge has created hope for these despondent families, but justice and closure will remain elusive unless concrete support and answers are given. The government should either disband the commission or provide it a chairman and team that will deliver results. Too many times, ministers and committees have given the affected families assurances that they will be provided information about their missing relatives — promises that have ended in disappointment. If Mr Khan's support to the missing persons' cause goes beyond lip service and delivers tangible results, it will be a praiseworthy achievement.

Buzdar speculation

THE fate of Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has become a permanent feature of the country's political discourse. A similar round of speculations about his status erupted in the wake of the Senate elections. However, so far there is no clear indication that he is on his way out.

The larger problem is the poor record of governance in Punjab. Whether it is the failure of the waste management system or frequent reshuffling of senior officials, in most areas the government of Chief Minister Buzdar has been found wanting. In addition, weak political management has led to disgruntlement among the ruling coalition parliamentarians from the province.

In the last two years, there has been a visible attempt by the PTI's federal leadership to run Punjab's affairs from Islamabad. The results have not been encouraging. Yet, Prime Minister Imran Khan continues to reiterate that Mr Buzdar is the most suitable person for the job.

This despite the fact that people in his own party and allies have been advising him to rethink his decision to keep him on as chief minister. This is linked to an increasing tempo of pulls and pushes by aspirants from within the ruling coalition to elbow their way into the province's top office. Within the PTI, there is a long list of aspirants who have been lobbying to replace Mr Buzdar. From among the allies, PML-Q leader and Speaker of the Punjab Assembly Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi is seen as the strongest candidate. However, the PTI leadership is said to be reluctant to hand over the reins of the province to an allied party. The PPP is also eyeing an in-house change in the Punjab Assembly by roping in the PML-Q and having the PML-N lend its support. For now, there is little headway on this front.

If the performance of the present chief minister is an indication of how things will be managed ahead, it is hard to see the kind of betterment happening in Punjab as claimed by the ruling party. This means with each passing day the poor governance will start to weigh heavy on the PTI's re-election prospects in the province. This can have dangerous consequences because Punjab remains a stronghold of the PML-N and mismanagement in political and administrative areas will help the PML-N build its own stock for the next elections.

The prime minister will need to take some action in order to halt the slide. However, the complexity of the situation will make such a change very difficult. Punjab is turning out to be the biggest challenge for the PTI government at a time when it needs to show performance in all areas. Till such a change happens and there are visible signs of improvement in the province, the fate of Usman Buzdar will keep featuring prominently in our national discourse.

A virulent wave

PAKISTAN'S third Covid-19 wave has seen an alarming jump in positive coronavirus cases, with the most recent figures released by the NCOC showing a national positivity rate of approximately 10pc. Reports coming from Islamabad and Punjab, too, are worrying. This week, the capital recorded the highest number of single-day positive cases since the pandemic started, while Lahore has persistently reported more than 60pc of the positive cases in Punjab. Prime Minister Imran Khan, too, has tested positive, a worrying development that underscores how rampantly the virus is spreading. It is important for the government to send a strong, unambiguous message that Mr Khan's vaccination two days prior to his Covid-19 test in no way means the vaccine is not effective. In fact, as Minister Asad Umar clarified, it is certain that the prime minister was infected before being vaccinated — a very likely scenario given that Mr Khan was seen at events and meetings that week without a face covering. His testing positive for Covid-19 will fuel vaccine scepticism, and it is imperative the government make it clear when and how the vaccine takes effect and that caution is still necessary.

As cases rapidly climb, there is speculation that a national lockdown is being considered. Given the spike in positivity, increased hospital admissions and several patients in critical care, this may be inevitable. But it is important to understand that it was avoidable. The past few months have marked a shocking and careless approach to the spread of the virus, as the country's public gatherings and commercial activities were allowed to resume at full throttle. Prevention protocols, especially wearing a face covering, are ignored even by some key government figures — a deeply disappointing reality given how fast the new Covid-19 strain is known to spread. How can the authorities expect members of the public to be responsible and observe SOPs if they themselves are not strict about following them? It is time for officials to go beyond appeals and caution about Covid-19 prevention. They must enforce a strict SOP mandate — one that even top officials are not exempt from. At the same time, they must encourage people to get vaccinated and be transparent and accessible when it comes to sharing information about vaccine data. Fearmongering and anti-vaccination sentiment in the country are a reality that the government must strive to overcome with an effective communication strategy. Failure to do so will come at an enormous price.

Journalist's murder

ANOTHER journalist has been murdered in cold blood, this time in Sindh's Sukkur district, indicating that reporting the truth in Pakistan remains a perilous pursuit. Ajay Laalwani, a reporter for a private TV channel, was reportedly gunned down on Thursday while he was sitting in a barbershop in Salehpat town. Despite the passage of several days since the crime was committed, no one has been arrested in the journalist's murder. Protests are continuing, however, with media workers demanding justice for Laalwani and calling on the state to provide them security. The journalist community's apprehensions are genuine, as despite the passage of over a year, the killers of Aziz Memon, a reporter found murdered in February 2020 in Naushahro Feroze, are yet to be convicted, with senior police officials saying he may have been killed due to 'enmity'. Moreover, it is of deep concern that terrorism cases have been lodged by the state against journalists in Sindh simply for doing their job. Some activists say that up to 50 media persons face terrorism cases in Sindh alone. This flies in the face of the government's stated 'respect' for freedom of the press.

Sadly, journalists face dire threats to their lives and safety all across Pakistan. According to the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, 10 reporters were murdered in the country last year. This is besides the numerous instances of harassment, threats and intimidation from powerful quarters that journalists face. The fact is that when killers of journalists go unpunished, it has a chilling effect on the entire media industry, with the truth and press freedom being major casualties. It is easy for officials to brush murder cases of media workers under the carpet by attributing them to 'enmity'. But they end up shielding powerful actors who seek to silence the media. The killers of Ajay Laalwani must be brought to justice and the Sindh government must withdraw dubious cases of terrorism against journalists if it is serious about respecting media freedom.

Monetary policy

THE State Bank's decision to keep an easy monetary policy in place is a clear sign that it doesn't want to upset the ongoing economic recovery. The decision signals the bank's willingness to hold steady interest rates in the near term to support recovery until it becomes "more durable" and the economy returns to full

capacity. Yet the bank has kept its doors open for “measured and gradual adjustments” to achieve mildly positive real interest rates going forward.

The State Bank’s dovish monetary stance is in line with broader market expectations, and the global trend of central banks supporting recovery from the effects of the coronavirus. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the low-interest-rate environment will continue for a while despite revival of the IMF programme and higher world oil and food prices fuelled by stronger global growth projections that could feed into domestic inflation.

In a departure from its pre-virus, contractionary monetary policy stance and with the average headline inflation expected to remain close to the upper end of the projected range of 7pc to 9pc this fiscal, the bank is maintaining interest rates in a negative territory at 7pc for the past nine months to help businesses fight the adverse impact of the pandemic, boost industrial output and avoid cancelling investment plans. Another major reason for the bank to maintain this policy is to offset the potential impact of the contractionary fiscal policy on economic growth and investment. “...[G]iven that fiscal policy is expected to remain contractionary to reduce public debt, it is important for monetary policy to be supportive [of growth and investment] as long as the second-round effects of recent increases in the administered prices and other one-off supply shocks do not materialise, and inflation expectations remain well anchored,” the bank noted.

Indeed, this response to the pandemic has played a key role in the economic recovery under way since last year. LSM has expanded by 7.9pc in the first seven months of the fiscal compared to a 3.2pc contraction during the same period the previous year. Yet output gap remains negative as LSM recovery is narrowly based. The external sector also appears stable and in spite of the rising trade deficit, the current account deficit is still projected to remain below 1pc of GDP. Encouraged by these developments, the bank has revised upwards its growth projection for the financial year to 3pc against the government’s target of 2.1pc on improved prospects for manufacturing output and stimulus to counter the effects of Covid-19.

However, risks remain because of the emergence of a virulent third wave of Covid-19, plus uncertainty regarding inflation and growth outlook. So far, inflationary risks have been outweighed by the uncertainty spawned by the pandemic in monetary policy determination. But for how long? The government’s

failure to tackle the supply-side factors fuelling inflation could compel the bank to reverse its accommodative stance.

Surveillance state

THERE is a long record of ‘known unknowns’ in Pakistan keeping tabs on individuals for purposes not consistent with fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution. On Friday, the PML-N blasted the Intelligence Bureau, the premier civilian spy agency, for “targeting it at the behest of Prime Minister Imran Khan”. The party’s secretary general Ahsan Iqbal accused the IB, which reports directly to the premier, of being instrumental in harassing and concocting false cases against the PML-N leadership. He reminded the agency that it was the PML-N that had strengthened the IB’s capabilities for fighting terrorism and urged it “not to pursue the political agenda of the PTI government as they are not bound by the Constitution to accept any such unlawful orders”.

Such accusations are not new. Successive governments in the past arbitrarily expanded the role of the agencies into domestic politics to keep the opposition in check. The task was made simpler by the fact that there is no law defining the jurisdiction of the three key agencies. Meanwhile, unelected forces have used some of these organisations to maintain an upper hand over politicians across the spectrum. In 2011, then prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani referred to one particular agency as a “state within a state”. Ironically, it was a civilian premier, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who created the political cell in the ISI. The purpose of the cell was a departure from the agency’s focus on monitoring threats to the country’s territorial integrity and the security of its people. It took the premature end of several elected governments through the 1990s for politicians to realise that using intelligence agencies against each other is a double-edged sword that renders the democratic process perennially unstable. By 2006, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif had agreed in the Charter of Democracy to curb these organisations’ influence and powers. During the PTI government’s tenure, however, the opposition has repeatedly denounced intelligence agencies as being part of a witch-hunt against them by NAB and other law-enforcement agencies. PML-N vice president Maryam Nawaz has also held the IB responsible for electoral malpractices in the recent Daska by-election. In his judgement on the Faizabad dharna in 2017, Justice Qazi Faez Isa wrote: “To best ensure transparency and the rule of law, it would be appropriate to enact laws which

clearly stipulate the respective mandates of the intelligence agencies.” There is certainly some merit to that. But who will bell the cat?

Cricket tour risks

THE Covid-19 challenge looms large for the Pakistan cricket team as it prepares to embark on its tour of South Africa and Zimbabwe later this week, with the players hopefully mindful of the risk of infection that resulted in the postponement of the Pakistan Super League early this month. The 35-member squad is led by batsman Babar Azam and will play three ODIs and four T20s in South Africa before travelling to Zimbabwe for two Tests and three T20s. From a purely cricketing perspective, the visitors may feel more confident about performing well having secured handsome wins over South Africa in Tests as well as the T20 series at home last month. Though the opponents are unlikely to be timid on their own turf, they are no longer the formidable unit they once were. However, the pandemic could well overtake on-field action. For the Pakistan players, who would have had several Covid tests prior to their flight, the strict adherence to a bio-secure environment on tour remains a daunting task indeed.

The players’ reckless attitude in New Zealand and during the cash-rich PSL at home was lamentable. Besides, it reflected poorly on the Pakistan Cricket Board that was unable to ensure that Covid-19 protocols were followed properly. South African players, too, will be under the spotlight during the upcoming series, having fallen well short of maintaining the desired safety standards for touring teams recently. It was just last month that Australia were forced to call off their tour of South Africa at the last minute citing unacceptable public health conditions there. That came as a major financial blow to Cricket South Africa, the game’s governing body in the region, that had already lost money after England pulled out of the ODI series last November. The Pakistan tour is a hurriedly arranged venture to compensate for some of the losses incurred by CSA. However, the respective boards must ensure strict safety standards so that the health of the players is not compromised.

Opposition alliance in trouble

THE PDM is in trouble. If the dispute over resignations symbolised the first crack within the opposition alliance, the disagreement over which party has claim on the office of the leader of the opposition in the Senate poses a graver threat to the unity of the alliance. After the defeat of PDM candidates in the election for chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate, it was expected that the scheduled long march would get a booster shot. Instead, the opposite happened.

The ultimate threat of the PDM — hurled over and over again in the last six months — deflated like a punctured balloon. The PPP made it as clear as possible that it was not interested in resigning from the assemblies, saying that was the action of last resort and the time was not opportune for it. With the much-touted long march postponed, and the decision very conveniently outsourced to the PPP's central executive committee, the PDM as an alliance stood on shaky ground. This before the next, and fairly unexpected, blow sent it reeling to the ropes.

The open and very public spat between the PPP and PML-N over who gets the post of leader of the opposition threatens to undo much of the goodwill generated by the opposition parties since the formation of the alliance six months ago.

When PPP and JUI-F candidates were selected for the top two posts of the Senate, the PML-N was openly saying that their getting the slot of the leader of the opposition was a done deal. It therefore comes as a surprise that the new cleavage has manifested itself on this issue. However, it is clear that the PPP is not interested in being diplomatic with the PDM on what the party considers its core interests. It may have subsumed its partisan agenda within the folds of the grand PDM ambitions a few months ago, but the party leadership appears to have sensed that those ambitions are unlikely to come to fruition. It is therefore in the fitness of things, its leaders argue, that the PPP protect its power base in Sindh while maximising its political muscle within parliament in order to compensate for its weakness in the most strategically important arena: Punjab.

This does not leave the PDM in a comfortable position. The alliance may carry on in name, and may coordinate in parliament to make life difficult for the government, but for that to happen, the alliance has to overcome this open spat. If it is unable to do so, and if neither the PML-N nor PPP back down, it would be

a huge challenge to keep the alliance together in any operationally meaningful way. The war of words raging between the two parties has ominous overtones for what lies ahead for PDM.

Vaccine on holiday?

AS the third Covid-19 wave rages in the country, the management of the vaccination programme leaves a lot to be desired. With infection rates rising, school closures and new restrictions, the authorities must put all their resources into making the vaccine roll-out successful. Unfortunately, at present, certain decisions regarding the inoculation drive betray a non-serious approach. For example, the decision to keep vaccination centres closed on Sundays and public holidays is absurd. The reason being given is that those involved in the vaccination process need a break. Without doubt, no individual should work without a break, but that is a poor excuse for interrupting the vaccine roll-out. By this logic, should hospitals also close on public holidays and weekends? The answer is no, because addressing a health crisis cannot be put on hold. Covid-19 will not stop spreading, and is, in fact, being transmitted at an alarming rate, so the approach of the authorities must reflect the urgency of the situation. In the UK, where the vaccine roll-out has been successful, the authorities have called on volunteers to be part of the immunisation programme. The idea is that the target of vaccinating the country's entire adult population is an imperative, even if gargantuan, task, and requires a mammoth effort. The authorities in Pakistan too must gear up to vaccinate people seven days a week, up to 18 hours a day. With the government's target vaccine population of 70m, the task of administering two jabs per person is a challenge that can only be met if the programme is executed with a sense of urgency.

So far, only 500,000 people have been vaccinated — a figure that paints a sorry picture. The vaccines that are available for free at vaccination centres have been donated by China. Another donation is pledged by Covax, but is yet to arrive. Separately, private companies have been allowed to import vaccines and sell them at a set price. In December last year, it was reported that the government had put aside \$100m to procure the Covid-19 vaccine, but it is not clear whether these funds are being used effectively. Vaccines have been procured by the government, but they have yet to arrive. The vaccine programme warrants a proactive approach, or Pakistan will be among those countries where the spectre

of Covid-19 peaks rears its head on a regular basis, spelling doom for the well-being of citizens as well as education and the economy.

Wheat support price

THE federal decision to raise the minimum wheat support price for the upcoming harvest to Rs1,800 per 40kg — above the commodity's international rate — seems to have been motivated by anxiety over missing procurement targets owing to competition from the private sector. At the previously fixed price of Rs1,650, there were strong chances that the private sector would outdo the government in the market to profit from the differential in international and domestic prices. In the existing wheat market, it's crucial for the government to refill its large wheat stocks every year to stabilise retail flour prices for urban consumers. The new price is 28.6pc higher than last year's Rs1,400, and factors in the impact of the recent spike in world commodity markets and currency depreciation. Though the government expects a better harvest compared to last year, it has decided to import 3m tonnes of wheat to keep the pressure off domestic flour prices, which will largely be determined by the actual domestic output and the size of official stocks. The government has further pledged to keep flour prices at the present level of Rs860 per 20kg, which would require a subsidy of tens of billions of rupees. Where will this money come from? Will the IMF allow it? The government is yet to share its game plan.

The Sindh government's decision to unilaterally raise the support price by almost 43pc to Rs2,000, ostensibly to achieve its own purchase target and please farmers in the province, has added another dimension to price uncertainty. This means Punjab's mills won't be able to purchase wheat from Sindh to meet the province's flour needs in the latter part of this month and the first two to three weeks of April. Market volatility in the last two years demands gradual liberalisation of the wheat market, with the government keeping interference to a minimum. This will help address market distortions, encourage efficient agricultural practices for better per-acre yield and stabilise prices on a sustained basis, benefiting both farmers and consumers.

Tackling the crime of rape

THE full might of the law has been brought to bear on the perpetrators of an atrocity that shocked even this crime-weary nation. An anti-terrorism court in Lahore on Saturday sentenced to death and life imprisonment the two main accused in the motorway gang-rape case that occurred one night in September last year.

The men had come upon the victim while she, along with her two small children, was stranded on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway in a car that had run out of fuel. Dragging them all out into the nearby fields, they beat and raped the mother in front of the terrified minors. An uproar ensued when the news broke, and the IG Punjab ordered an extensive manhunt for the suspects. It was thus that they were finally arrested and tried at a speed not often seen here.

Although Dawn does not support the death penalty, the swift prosecution and the fact that the victim's privacy was respected and she remained unidentified despite the publicity, may give other survivors of sexual violence some courage. However, the case also illustrated another major reason why the crime of rape is so grossly under-reported in this country, with an estimated nine out of 10 cases not even being registered with the police. That hurdle is the tendency of a misogynistic society to blame adult female victims for 'bringing' the crime on themselves by their appearance, actions, etc. Consider it was the then Lahore city police chief who suggested the motorway rape victim bore some responsibility for her ordeal by being out late at night. Such crass remarks further traumatise the victim, reinforce the 'stigma' of rape and act as a deterrent to reporting.

After a spate of horrific rape cases, President Arif Alvi in December promulgated the Anti-Rape Ordinance 2020. It expanded the definition of rape in terms of what acts constitute this crime and who can be defined as a victim, a much-needed step. The ordinance also stipulates measures to make the offence more prosecutable and act as a deterrent to its commission. These include anti-rape crisis cells; special courts for speedy trials of such cases; the establishment of a countrywide registry of sex offenders; and chemical castration of rapists, which is controversial on several fronts.

However, to bring in a law is one thing, and to ensure proper, foolproof investigation is another. Most cases of rape do not attract the kind of publicity the motorway case did. Often, the biases and judgemental attitudes of law-enforcement personnel can lead to lackadaisical and sloppy work of the kind that imperils convictions and allows rapists to go free on appeal. Intrusive and insensitive questioning of victims in court can also discourage them to pursue the case further. These aspects too need to be addressed. Rape victims need the support of society, not censure.

SBP Act

FROM a more technocratic point of view, the new amendments the government is seeking to bring to the State Bank Act might have a lot to recommend them. But the fact that they will place the State Bank beyond any oversight by elected authorities is problematic. One argument presented on oversight is that the State Bank will still be bound to submit an annual report to parliament on its performance, but this does not constitute oversight of any meaningful sort. Granted neither parliament nor the government should try to insert itself into core central banking functions, such as curating the money supply or banking supervision, nor try to influence the process of producing independent assessments of the state of the economy that the central bank provides via its quarterly and annual reports. These are functions requiring specialised skills and must be performed outside the glare and normal give and take of politics. Nevertheless, the State Bank is ultimately a public institution, not a private one, and it cannot and must not enjoy the kind of immunity from public scrutiny of its actions that come with its role. If it is allowed to become as completely autonomous as the proposed amendments to the State Bank Act envision, it will create a perverse incentive for future governments to appoint a weak individual as governor in order to retain some control of the office. This will hamper the central bank more in pursuit of its core mission than would some built-in mechanisms for parliamentary oversight.

The government is acting in haste given the directives of the IMF, and is clearly rushing the process along in order to meet deadlines for prior actions before the Fund programme can be resumed. But haste in legislation is never a good idea. So long as the conduct of economic policy remains ad hoc and in firefighting mode, no legal framework will be sufficient to bring order to it. The proposed

amendments to the State Bank Act must include a more robust mechanism for parliamentary oversight, and they must enjoy consensus within parliament to be effective. Otherwise, the exercise will be little more than a pro forma set of actions hastily implemented to meet an IMF condition and to unlock the next tranche of the Fund programme. The government must not seek to tie the hands of all its successors into a knotty legal framework they never consented to.

Yemen truce offer

AS the brutal war in Yemen drags on, a fresh push for peace is being made to end the six-year-old conflict. Saudi Arabia has offered its nemesis in Yemen, the Iran-allied Houthi movement, “a comprehensive ceasefire”, though the Houthis have initially dismissed it as “nothing new” and an initiative “for media consumption”. Moreover, the Houthis, who control the capital Sana’a, have called for a complete lifting of the air and sea blockade Riyadh has enforced. There could be several reasons for the recent offer from Saudi Arabia. Firstly, the Houthis are advancing on their way to the city of Marib, which is controlled by the internationally recognised government, and the strategic prize may fall to the rebel movement. Secondly, despite Saudi Arabia’s far superior firepower and finances, the Houthis keep giving the kingdom a difficult time through their drone campaign targeting Riyadh’s energy installations. Also, the Biden administration has withdrawn some support for the Saudi-led coalition, while the powers that be in the kingdom may have come to the conclusion that the Yemen war is unwinnable. They can keep pounding Yemen, while the Houthis can keep hitting them back, only protracting a bloody stalemate, and the long nightmare of the Yemeni people.

Whatever the reason for the peace initiative, all parties should take advantage of the opportunity and continue the dialogue process. Despite the Houthis’ apparent rigidity, the movement’s spokesman said they will continue to talk to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia being the larger power should take the lead, announce a ceasefire and allow in desperately needed humanitarian assistance. If this is done, the Houthis must respond in good faith. This grotesque war has left hundreds of thousands of people dead, and millions hungry and ill, with children being the major victims. It will take a long time to rebuild Yemen and heal the wounds of its people, particularly a generation that has known nothing but war. Therefore, all parties to this conflict must silence their guns and reach a negotiated settlement.

A fresh start?

EFFORTS are clearly afoot to de-escalate tensions in South Asia, with most of the action taking place behind the scenes, though some aspects of the nascent process are being highlighted for public consumption. The Pakistan Day message received by Prime Minister Imran Khan from his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi certainly comes under the heading of public diplomacy, designed to bring down the temperature in the region.

“India desires cordial relations with ... Pakistan,” said the Indian leader, adding that “for this, an environment of trust, devoid of terror and hostility, is imperative”. Indeed, after several years during which the traditionally tense relationship was going through a particularly low phase, cordiality will be difficult to achieve. Yet the first, careful steps have been taken, and if things proceed without any glitch tangible progress in the peace process is possible.

Mr Modi’s message to Mr Khan is only the latest in a series of moves designed to cool temperatures. The first sign that things were changing for the better came in the shape of the LoC ceasefire announced last month by the two countries’ respective military commanders, which was followed up by statements from Mr Khan and the army chief calling for better relations with India. Pakistani experts were also in India earlier this week after a long gap to discuss the sharing of Indus waters. Relations had of course hit rock bottom after India unilaterally annulled held Kashmir’s special status in its constitution in 2019.

This was followed by unsavoury exchanges, while both states — again — came close to armed conflict after Indian jets violated Pakistani territory two years ago in Balakot. At this point, various theories are doing the rounds to explain the change in tack. Some say a Gulf state that enjoys good relations with both sides is playing peacemaker, while the Biden administration may also be sending certain signals to Islamabad and New Delhi behind the scenes. Regardless of the trigger, the change in tone and desire for peace from the respective capitals is a welcome development.

The need right now is to move forward with guarded optimism as hawks on both sides — who thrive on confrontation — may well try and derail matters. This has been witnessed several times in the past; both countries were tantalisingly close to making peace, only for the process to be abandoned due to spoilers. This time

things should be different. The next opportunity for a high-level exchange will come in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, where both states' foreign ministers are due to attend the Heart of Asia meeting later this month. That meeting may point the way forward for the peace process. As a former Pakistani foreign minister and an Indian expert have written in this paper, if there is seriousness of purpose, everything standing in the way of peace — including Kashmir — can be resolved. This latest opportunity for peace must not be lost.

Regional trade

PAKISTAN'S exports to regional countries — including South Asian nations, Iran and China — have plunged by a hefty 22pc during the eight-month period from July to February, according to PBS data on international trade. Even without the full-blown impact of Covid-19, the downturn in the country's exports to the region would not have come as a total surprise. Pakistan's trade with regional economies, with the exception of China, has historically remained far below its potential. The data shows that trade with almost all our neighbours, especially India and Afghanistan, has been on the decline for some years. Decades of efforts to boost trade between Saarc nations notwithstanding, South Asia continues to be among the least economically connected regions in the world. The realisation that regional trade is one of the most crucial tools for economic progress and increased competitiveness of countries in various parts does not seem to matter. The close economic and trade relations between the Southeast Asian countries, for example, has played a major role in their turnaround in recent decades, and helped them cut poverty.

There are multiple factors which have long prevented economic connectivity of the Saarc countries that also include Afghanistan. Long-standing political and territorial disputes between individual states, terrorism and poor security conditions in other countries, non-tariff barriers created by some to protect their local businesses, higher cost of trading within the region etc are only a few of the many issues stalling the development of closer economic ties. There are also certain 'exogenous' issues such as the international sanctions against Iran, which keep Pakistan and others from developing commercial ties with the affected country. All these factors have been there for a very long time with little hope for their resolution anytime soon, forcing Pakistan and others to look to the West and elsewhere for trade prospects. Although Pakistan's economic ties with China

have improved since the two countries signed an FTA more than one and a half decades ago, a similar arrangement with Sri Lanka has not helped boost trade with Colombo. Pakistan and the rest of the countries in the region possess huge potential to tap into one another's markets and enhance the value of their trade. But that will not be possible unless they, especially India and Pakistan, take serious steps to start a conversation aimed at settling political and other disputes in the larger interest of their people.

Extreme weather in KP

ONCE again, extreme weather has upended life in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Torrential rain, flash floods and isolated snowfall in Swat, Bajaur, Khyber etc have brought home the looming spectre of climate change. On Tuesday, the second day the province has been battered by the downpour, a woman lost her life while two others, including a minor, were injured in calamity-related incidents. Nine houses were destroyed and 14 partially damaged. A village in Swat, along with neighbouring hamlets, was cut off when a bridge leading to the area was swept away by flash flooding.

Climate change is inexorably bearing down on Pakistan, one of the nations most affected by the global phenomenon. Extreme weather events seem to have become almost routine. Last year, at least 16 people were killed in the province when heavy monsoon rains triggered flash floods. Warmer than usual temperatures are accelerating the melting of glaciers, which can lead to glacial lake outburst flooding, or GLOF, sending millions of cubic feet of water crashing into human habitation. A report by the Ministry of Climate Change last year revealed that 33 out of a total of 3,044 glacial lakes are susceptible to GLOF. For mountain communities in the north of the country, the devastation caused by GLOF as well as torrential downpours is exacerbated by deforestation. Hillsides denuded of vegetation cannot break the momentum of the water rushing down the slopes, bearing with it not only tons of loose soil, but also huge boulders. Infrastructure such as wooden water mills is destroyed; damage is caused to micro-hydro plants and roads, thus causing a domino effect on various aspects of life. Prime Minister Imran Khan, through the Billion Tree Tsunami project — which has now expanded to the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami project — has brought a sense of urgency to the importance of increasing Pakistan's rapidly shrinking

forest cover. Along with this, the need of the hour is to enhance early warning systems and community-based disaster-risk management in vulnerable areas.

IMF: tough ‘adjustments’

PAKISTAN’S re-entry to the \$6bn IMF programme is being touted by both the lender and the government as a demonstration of the authorities’ commitment to critical governance and economic reforms to support sustainable growth for job creation and poverty alleviation. Or at least this is what the communiqué issued by the IMF following the approval by the Fund of the second through fifth reviews of the arrangement seeks to tell us.

But what the IMF and the government are not telling us directly relates to the impact on citizens of ‘adjustments’ that Islamabad has already made or is required to make in the next few months. During the period between July 2019 when Islamabad signed the deal with the IMF and April 2020 when the programme was put on hold because of Covid-19, fiscal and monetary policy adjustments made under the programme saw the economy come to a virtual halt with thousands of people losing their jobs and several businesses closing down.

The resumption of that arrangement has prompted fears of a revival of that period. For instance, the IMF wants the government to continue its “prudent”, contractionary fiscal policy, which requires it to drastically cut its job-creating development spending, reduce its subsidy bill, as well as “reform” (ie raise) sales tax and income tax from the next fiscal year for mobilising revenues to “achieve a lasting improvement in public finances and place debt on a downward path”. Who gets hit by these adjustments? Obviously, the brunt would largely be borne by the low-middle-income segments that have already been shaken by the hefty increase in electricity prices, food inflation, job losses and pay cuts. Businesses will also feel the impact.

The withdrawal of certain corporate tax exemptions worth Rs140bn has already caused unease in the corporate sector as it will hurt growth prospects and diversification plans of the companies. In return, it seems that the Fund is expected to condone the government’s inability to reform its corrupt, inefficient tax machinery or broaden the tax net and execute governance reforms.

There are also fears that the unprecedented powers, unencumbered by parliamentary oversight, for the central bank may limit the government's capacity to help people and businesses. Neither the IMF nor the government has explained how most of the proposed adjustments (in the name of reform), which will further squeeze fixed-income households and put more pressure on taxpayers, will "help the economy, and save lives and livelihoods". There is little doubt that these adjustments would bring a semblance of "macroeconomic and debt sustainability" in the near term. But the question is: do short-term gains justify the costs that people will have to bear in the shape of massive job and income losses in the wake of sluggish growth? Shouldn't the government focus more on real reforms instead of cosmetic changes to qualify for IMF dollars?

PPP's politics

IT comes as no surprise that the Islamabad High Court has dismissed the petition filed by PPP's Yousuf Raza Gilani to challenge the recent Senate election result. The IHC said parliament's proceedings can't be challenged in court, and also noted that the party has the option of tabling a no-confidence motion in the Senate against Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani. This suggestion of a no-confidence motion will no doubt rattle the PPP, as it will increase pressure on the party to prove its strength in the Senate. For the past two weeks, the PPP at every forum has said the Senate chairmanship slot was 'stolen' from it due to the alleged bias of the presiding officer who rejected seven votes 'illegally'. Had these votes not been discounted, Mr Gilani, who was proposed jointly by the PDM parties as the opposition's candidate for Senate chairman, would have won by a majority. But a lot has happened in these last two weeks in the opposition ranks that has changed the dynamics of the PDM. Therefore, the result of a no-confidence motion against Mr Sanjrani at this juncture will only further expose the fissures in the alliance. It appears the PPP is considering an appeal against the IHC's decision. But, given the debate over the controversial seven votes, perhaps the party would do better to investigate how this mess was created in the first place.

If the PPP is serious about the opposition's campaign against the government, it will have to reconsider its strategy to keep the alliance intact. As a starting point, it will have to withdraw Mr Gilani's nomination as the leader of opposition. This may be the sacrifice the opposition needs to send out a message of unity,

especially given the serious differences between the alliance's key parties. The days ahead will be challenging, but if they approach the issue with political maturity, the opposition parties may be able to sit together and chart a way forward. The task is no doubt challenging. Aside from a common enemy, these parties have disparate views when it comes to objectives and strategy. The PDM's existential crisis is underpinned by questions of what path to take; is the alliance adamant on bringing down the system, or is there room to discuss a more nuanced approach? Veteran politicians in the alliance have experience navigating such crises and should be able demonstrate whether or not the PDM will become a force to reckon with.

Hospitals' management

THE wrangling over three major Karachi hospitals between the Sindh and federal governments continues, with both sides trying to retain control of the facilities. In the latest developments, the Sindh administration has sought an agreement with the centre to run the JPMC, NICH and NICVD after Islamabad issued a notification calling for setting up a board of governors to manage the tertiary care facilities. The Supreme Court had in 2019 given the federal authorities control of the hospitals, while Islamabad later said they would be returned to Sindh due to "financial constraints". Now it appears a fresh move is being made to micromanage these Karachi hospitals from Islamabad. This tug of war has had a negative effect on the smooth running of the facilities as their management status remains ambiguous.

In this scenario, the suggestion made by the Sindh health minister in a letter written to the prime minister's special assistant on health — calling for the signing of a management contract between the centre and Sindh to run the medial facilities — can perhaps provide a way for both sides to reach a compromise. The fact is that health is now a devolved subject, while the Sindh government has improved the running of some of its medical facilities, such as the NICVD. However, it is also a fact that the province's basic health structure remains in abysmal condition. A mutually agreeable solution must be reached between the centre and Sindh so that the hospitals are run in optimum condition, and patients can gain maximum advantage from the public health facilities. Private healthcare is prohibitively expensive, and the masses have no other option but to turn to such facilities in the public sector. Therefore, both the federal and Sindh

governments must avoid protracted legal and administrative battles over the three hospitals and reach a solution which allows the facilities to run smoothly and improve on their service delivery. Along with claiming ownership, the provinces must also strive to improve their health systems from the bottom up.

Surging cases

MORE than 4,000 cases have been reported across the country over 24 hours, a foreboding benchmark that was last surpassed when Pakistan hit its first peak in summer last year.

The national positivity ratio has crossed 10pc — that means that one out of every 10 Covid-19 tests are positive. In some cities, the positivity rate is reportedly even higher. While the first wave saw an alarming number of cases in Sindh, this time the virus is spreading fast throughout Punjab. According to the NCOC, the cities where the highest number of ‘oxygen beds’ are occupied are Gujrat, Gujranwala, Peshawar and Islamabad. In Multan and Lahore, the percentage of ventilators being used by Covid-19 patients is also climbing.

Social media is once again seeing an increased number of accounts reporting people being critically ill. The situation is looking grimmer than before and appears to be the result of widespread public violations of SOPs and an overall devil-may-care attitude towards the pandemic.

It is disappointing that despite the success of the NCOC in flattening the curve in the past, the situation today appears to be spiralling out of control. The body must play to its strengths and effectively implement restrictions before the healthcare infrastructure in Punjab collapses. Covid-19 does not appear to be registering as a serious and lethal threat to members of the public.

What is also disappointing is that the prime minister himself flouted internationally advised SOPs, when, despite being infected with the virus, he invited members of his media team for a meeting in a closed room at his residence. It is even more bizarre that the information minister felt it was prudent to share a photo of this meeting on social media, a decision that elicited shock and justified criticism levelled at the top members of the government. If the holder of the highest office in the country is not in strict quarantine despite being infected, the message being sent to members of the public is that Covid-19 is not to be taken seriously.

This is unacceptable. The virus has wreaked havoc globally, and while Pakistan has been fortunate to have had to grapple with fewer cases than many countries in the West, it also has a much weaker healthcare infrastructure than these countries. Though the vaccine programme has raised hope, it will have to be matched with the right messaging about Covid-19 prevention. Even with a successful vaccination programme, prevention and SOPs are essential.

Urban Sindh' province

ONCE again, on the occasion of its 37th foundation day in Karachi, the MQM-P has called for the creation of an 'urban Sindh' province. This demand has been raised many times before, in apparent response to the perceived injustices the dwellers of urban Sindh have faced, with Muttahida leaders blasting the PPP-led provincial government for its 'biased' attitude towards Sindh's cities at Thursday's rally in Nishtar Park. While the Constitution allows for the creation of new administrative units, the process has to be channelled through the right forum — the respective provincial assemblies. Any attempt to carve out new provinces by bypassing the provincial legislature will create more problems and add to the ethnic divide. Moreover, as the PPP enjoys a comfortable majority in the Sindh Assembly, the move is a non-starter. Also, urban Sindh is a euphemism for the province's Urdu speakers, and the MQM's attempts to repeatedly use this card to revive its political fortunes will only fuel ethnic tension and give the more extreme Sindhi nationalist factions an opportunity to promote their narrow brand of politics.

There can be little doubt that where facilities and infrastructure are concerned, Sindh's cities lie in ruins, and the PPP is squarely to blame for introducing a failed local government system that is designed to be micromanaged by the provincial government. But it is also true that the province's rural areas are faring even worse. One way to address such issues, as we have indicated in our first editorial today, is to put in place empowered LGs that deal with local problems effectively. Elected district, city and local body heads can address problems better than ministers and bureaucrats sitting in Karachi, inaccessible to the people. The Muttahida's other grievances, such as the quota system, must also be discussed at the national level to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. Sindh has suffered from decades of ethnic strife, and all political stakeholders must promote communal harmony instead of indulging in the politics of division.

Restoring LGs

THE Supreme Court of Pakistan made the right decision in ordering the restoration of local government institutions in Punjab and declaring their dissolution more than 22 months ago as unconstitutional. Opposition politicians might celebrate the ruling as a setback for the PTI government. But it is not a victory for them either. In fact, to some others, attempts to end or weaken local administrations may not be as important as cases where federal or provincial governments were overthrown via presidential putsch or gubernatorial action. But the decision is an important win for the people, whose mandate is frequently invalidated through the premature dissolution of LGs. It will go a long way in consolidating democracy in the country in general and deepening local democracy in particular. It isn't without reason that the attorney general of Pakistan equated a section of the Punjab Local Government Act, 2019, which empowered the provincial administration to dissolve LGs elected under the 2013 law, with the infamous, erstwhile Article 58(2)(b) of the Constitution that gave the president the authority to arbitrarily send elected governments home. Future governments will now think long and hard before daring to remove elected local body institutions on a whim. Though the court will record the reasons for its decision later on, the order closes the door on dissolution of LGs through administrative actions — even if this is provided in the law — as unconstitutional.

Autonomous LGs are considered the building blocks of a functional democracy the world over. No governance, financial and administrative reform can be successfully implemented in the absence of a strong, powerful and steady LG system. Sadly, our political parties and leaders have never felt comfortable with grassroots democracy because they do not want to share powers with locally elected representatives of the people in spite of the crucial role of LGs in service delivery. Hence, we repeatedly find them introducing new LG systems to suit their political interests and wind up existing ones on coming to power.

The present government is no exception. What it did in Punjab, and the tactics it has employed to delay local elections since May 2019 when a new law was introduced only reflects the prevailing mindset across political parties. If the PTI government is serious about consolidating local democracy as it claims, it is time it started working on strengthening the weak constitutional cover given under Articles 32 and 140-A to LG institutions to ensure their continuity, and financial

and administrative empowerment by building on the court's decision. The effort requires strong buy-in from the opposition parties as well as the provinces. Without meaningful constitutional cover, the provinces and the political parties ruling them will continue to find ways of keeping LG institutions powerless and weak, and roll back local democracy whenever it does not suit their interests.

PPP on its own?

YOUSUF Raza Gilani's selection as opposition leader in the Senate has deepened the chasm among the PDM parties, with some in the opposition using the word 'betrayal' to describe the development. The PML-N is furious and has accused PPP of getting covert support from the treasury benches — an allegation which, though the PPP rejects, merits closer inspection.

Mr Gilani secured the seat by getting the endorsement of 30 'opposition' senators, including six independent legislators. Though these independent senators are not formally affiliated with a particular party, it is no secret that several of them are allied with the BAP and even sit on the treasury benches. Why, then, did BAP senators decide to support Mr Gilani?

The origins of BAP and its earlier role in Senate elections are shady as the party is seen as a creation of the establishment in the 2018 polls to deliver what is famously known as the 'Sanjrani model'. Interestingly, these independent senators, who endorsed Mr Gilani for opposition leader not too long ago, voted against him and in favour of Mr Sanjrani to re-elect him as chairman. In fact, it has emerged that one BAP senator, Samina Mumtaz, wrote a letter in support of Mr Gilani as opposition leader, only to revoke it later when she was told that the ruling party's ally could not endorse an opposition candidate.

These shenanigans point to more of the wheeling and dealing that yields a loyalty shift that has become a normalised occurrence in the Senate. The development also underscores the growing and perhaps irreconcilable mistrust among the PDM parties. Prior to the Senate election saga, the opposition parties had agreed among themselves that the nominees for Senate chairman, deputy chairman and leader of the opposition would be members of the PPP, JUI-F and PML-N respectively. It is when Mr Gilani lost the Senate chairman election that the PPP set its sights on the opposition leader slot.

Statements from both the PML-N and PPP in the aftermath of Mr Gilani's notification betray a gap in communication but unfortunately, the situation is far beyond a simple misunderstanding. The reality is that the opposition parties are divided. The PPP's go-it-alone strategy has come as a major blow to the unity of the opposition. What exactly is the benefit of this strategy to the party is the subject of conjecture; the only certainty is that it has given a boost to the government.

SAPM's sacking

IN an unexpected development, Prime Minister Imran Khan sacked SAPM Petroleum Nadeem Babar as he ordered an investigation into last summer's oil shortage in the country. The petroleum secretary, too, has been suspended and the FIA ordered to complete a forensic inquiry into the role of all players, including oil marketing companies, in 90 days. The shortages had forced consumers to queue up for hours at a stretch at petrol pumps for about a month as OMCs reduced imports to avoid inventory losses and cashed in on the misery of the public allegedly with the Petroleum Division's connivance. The OMCs also profited by not passing on the benefits of the massive reduction in global oil markets to the consumers.

The sacking of one of the most important members of the cabinet months after an earlier probe into the fiasco was completed and its findings leaked to the media has surprised many. For months, the prime minister and his team kept defending Mr Babar even when the media tried to highlight his alleged role in the petroleum crisis as well as in the delayed procurement of LNG. These crises are believed to have caused the country losses of billions of rupees, leaving citizens and industry to cope with crippling gas shortages in winter. The media was blamed for sensationalising the issue, despite the LHC observation in July that the SAPM was prima facie responsible for the petrol shortages as he was running the affairs of the Petroleum Division.

It is not for the first time that the government has dragged its feet on decision-making in cases where its own people may be involved. For example, nothing much has been done to bring those responsible for the severe sugar and wheat crisis in the country to justice in spite of incriminating evidence against the market players. Given the government's stance that there is no evidence to

suggest their involvement in the crisis, Mr Babar's removal and the secretary's suspension, even before the forensic probe is undertaken, appears unusual. Although the government says his sacking is not an admission of guilt, it can be perceived as otherwise. The initial probe also laid bare the weaknesses of the oil supply chain and exposed the role of the ministry, Ogra, the OMCs and petrol pump owners. The OMCs deliberately stopped supplies from their stocks and Ogra went slow on penalising the delinquent companies, some of which are also allegedly involved in the smuggling of inferior Iranian petroleum products. The SAPM's sacking has engendered hopes that the government is finally ready to take punitive action against what it often describes as mafias that have plundered the people and the exchequer to enrich themselves. But these events also underline the need for urgent market reforms in different sectors of the economy to prevent a repetition of similar crises.

Olympic torch relay

THE start of the Tokyo Olympic torch's journey in Fukushima on Thursday, after a delay of one year because of the coronavirus pandemic, is a ray of hope for many athletes and people around the world. The Olympic organisers were making final preparations for the relay last year when the emergence of the virus led to the postponement of the Games, as sporting events around the world came to a halt. Though the pandemic is still quite severe in the region despite strict safety protocols and vaccine roll-outs, the advent of the torch relay demonstrates Japan's unwavering determination to host the Olympic Games in the face of global adversity. The opening ceremony for the Tokyo Games is scheduled to be held on July 23 and carrying the torch safely across the country will assure the world that the Olympics can indeed be held in a secure environment.

Having said that, there are millions who continue to have their doubts. They have serious reservations about how the mega event got underway in an environment where the risk of infection is high; they fear further delay if matters spiral out of control due to the pandemic. Overseas spectators have been barred from the Games while the organisers are still debating the issue of how many people can be safely allowed at the Olympics venue and whether limits can be imposed on domestic fans for the events. As for the athletes set to participate, the idea of competing in near-empty stadiums for an extravaganza that can catapult them to

historic fame is indeed a depressing thought. It is a strange turn of events: they want to prove their mettle to the world and yet will have no friends or family to share their moment of glory with. Still, holding the Tokyo Olympics this year can serve as a much-needed step towards restoring the world's confidence in the belief that there is no feat beyond human endeavour and that we will all get used to the 'new normal'.

Tracking suicides

DATA gathered by the Sindh Mental Health Authority over the last five years reveals that the largest number of suicides in the province occur in Thar, followed by Mirpurkhas district. According to the SMHA, a total of 767 suicides were reported in the province over the last five years. Out of them, 79 were reported from Thar while 70 were reported from Mirpurkhas. These findings were shared at a seminar in Karachi on Thursday. Speakers agreed that though the SMHA figures may provide a vague idea of the prevailing trends, the actual number of suicides in the province is much higher than reported. There could be several reasons for this: first, SMHA officials gathered data only from the district health offices and the police department, and missed those reported at private hospitals and facilities. Besides, they did not even conduct a cursory survey of suicides reported in the media. Second, apart from being a taboo subject, suicide is also illegal in Pakistan. Most families are reluctant to report it for fear of social stigma. In fact, the DIG Administration, who represented the provincial police department at the event, called the findings "unrealistic", stating that the actual rate of suicide was far higher, including in Mirpurkhas district where he had been posted for several years.

It is sad that neither the government nor the public acknowledges mental health issues in society, let alone discusses treatment. Even if steps are taken, they are ad hoc and ineffective, and fall short of producing any lasting change. The SMHA study, unfortunately, reflects the same structural problem. Though the suggestions that emerged in the discussion, including the training of health workers to spot mental illnesses, access to psychological counselling and psychiatric treatment and training police officials to track suicide cases, are sound, they can only be acted upon once the true extent of the problem is known. For that, SMHA officials will have to carry out a detailed district-wise study of the number of suicides and their apparent causes.

An enlightened verdict

“A WOMAN, whatever her sexual character or reputation may be, is entitled to equal protection of law. No one has the licence to invade her person or violate her privacy on the ground of her alleged immoral character.” In a patriarchal society where a woman’s worth, often her very life, is premised on her perceived reputation and chastity, these words by the Supreme Court are no less than revolutionary.

They remind the criminal justice system that dignity is inherent, it is inviolable, and a woman’s sexual history has no bearing whatsoever on her credibility as a witness/complainant. Indeed, the landmark ruling — in a review petition filed by three men convicted of rape — which was released on Thursday, goes further. It holds that “reporting sexual history of a rape survivor amounts to discrediting her independence, identity, autonomy and free choice thereby degrading her human worth and offending her right to dignity guaranteed under Article 14.”

In other words, the character assassination that rape survivors are often made to endure at the hands of the defence is in itself illegal and unconstitutional. Harrowing legal proceedings are a major reason why women either balk at reporting rape in the first place or give up pursuing justice halfway through the trial.

The verdict authored by Justice Mansoor Ali Shah also notes the gender bias in medico-legal reports that freely resort to expressions such as “habituated to sexual intercourse”, “woman of loose moral character”, “non-virgin”, etc to describe the alleged victim. Echoing a judgement by the Lahore High Court in January this year that banned the humiliating ‘two-finger test’ of alleged rape victims, the apex court ruling says that physical examination of a rape complainant should only be done to determine whether the crime of rape was committed against her, “not to determine her virginity or chastity”. Indeed, even a sex worker can be subjected to rape, and she too has a legitimate expectation that law enforcement will investigate her complaint properly, apprehend the culprit and put him on trial.

Of course, it will take time for attitudes to shift in this misogynistic society, where women’s agency and autonomy are seen as alien concepts, where women are considered repositories of male honour, and where many of them have paid with

their lives for believing they have the right to spurn unwanted suitors. However, the Supreme Court's words matter; its decisions have weight.

When the highest court in the land takes such an unequivocal stance on a woman's inherent right to dignity, without pandering to regressive notions of 'culture' and 'tradition', it cannot but nudge society a little more towards a humane ideal. Consider this was once a country where women who could not bring four witnesses to the crime of rape against them could be charged with adultery and thrown into jail. And rejoice at how far we have come.

Weak prosecution

THE detailed verdict of the Supreme Court in the Daniel Pearl case has once again established the poor state of investigation and prosecution in Pakistan. The judgement, authored by Justice Sardar Tariq Masood, pointed out clearly the prosecution's failure to prove the guilt of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh who is the prime accused in the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

The Sindh High Court had last year overturned Sheikh's conviction and the family of Pearl had appealed to the Supreme Court. The detailed verdict of the Supreme Court is a direct indictment of the prosecution and should put the system to shame. The verdict says that regarding each and every piece of evidence, there was uncertainty on the part of the witnesses and it was a settled matter that the benefit of the doubt would apply to the accused. The verdict states that the evidence furnished during the trial was full of factual and legal defects.

There is little doubt that Sheikh is a dangerous terrorist. His track record of criminality ranges from kidnapping to blackmailing and murder. He has hoodwinked the authorities multiple times and committed horrendous terror crimes. The fact that Pakistan's criminal justice system cannot prove the guilt of such a man even after keeping him in a death cell for two decades speaks volumes for the state of the system. The unfortunate reality is that despite this dismal situation, little or no headway has been made in reforming the system. Investigation and prosecution remain in a shambles, ravaged by corruption, incompetence and habitual manipulation.

Innocent men are sent to the gallows while the guilty often walk free. It is this grim reality that has benefited Omar Sheikh. The judiciary and the executive both share the blame for their inability and unwillingness to cleanse the criminal justice system of the rot that has now seeped deep. The setting aside of Sheikh's conviction has elicited a strong reaction from the United States and other countries. It is a blot on our justice system. Yet few voices are heard demanding an overhaul of the system so that such travesties of justice do not become the norm. Such is the apathy, however, that this case is also being dealt with in a normal manner and shall soon be buried under heaps of similar failures. Nothing could be more unfortunate for Pakistan.

Myanmar bloodbath

THE sustained civilian resistance to Myanmar's military coup has been drawing a ferocious, bloody response from the junta. Saturday, when the country was observing its Armed Forces Day, was one of the bloodiest since the generals sent the quasi-civilian set-up packing on Feb 1, with over 100 deaths reported, including of children. As per one count, over 400 people have been killed since the coup took place, with soldiers and police officers at times firing into crowds. In a bizarre development, Gen Min Aung Hlaing, the junta leader, said the "army seeks to ... safeguard democracy" on the same day security men were mowing down protesters. It is beyond comprehension how such brutish tactics will help nurture democracy. The bloodbath has drawn widespread criticism from many in the international community. However, it is a matter of great concern that Pakistan, amongst a handful of other nations, including India, China and Russia, sent a representative to the Myanmar Armed Forces Day parade. This country should not have sent any official representation to an event meant to celebrate a military that is mercilessly cracking down on its own people.

The hybrid civil-military regime, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, that was displaced by the generals was hardly a model of good governance and representative democracy. However, it represented some hope for Myanmar, which had only recently emerged from decades of military rule. Now the clock has been turned back and while the generals have promised an election, no one knows when this will materialise. It is also possible that the junta will decide to do away with the hybrid system altogether and instal a puppet regime. The fact is that instead of aiding national integrity, authoritarianism only helps to further fragment nations,

especially ethnically heterogeneous ones such as Myanmar. In an ideal world the Myanmar military would agree to go back to the barracks and restore power to the elected government. However, this is far from an ideal situation and it is highly unlikely the generals will relinquish power anytime soon. Their actions will invite isolation and sanctions from the Western-led bloc, though the generals know they can get away with it through the support of powerful foreign 'friends'. The cycle of violence is likely to continue until the military feels it can no longer afford international isolation. Just when they reach that realisation is anyone's guess.

Housing difficulties

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's directions to the State Bank and the state-owned National Bank to 'facilitate' people seeking low-cost, subsidised home loans under his Naya Pakistan Housing Programme reflect the slower-than-expected pickup of mortgage financing in the country. Addressing a telethon on Sunday, the premier also instructed the central bank to push commercial banks to ease housing loan processes. What does all this signify?

For starters, it underlines the government's concern about the slow uptake in housing loans, and the fact that aspiring homeowners are facing difficulties in securing bank financing. Second, it shows that the central bank could now put more pressure on unwilling commercial banks to speed up the processing of loan applications. By doing so, banks would be forced to go for riskier lending in spite of repeated assertions by the central bankers that the State Bank would merely be refinancing loans to expand the mortgage industry and that credit-risk decisions would be taken by the lenders. Still, commercial banks are reluctant to give housing loans as they believe that expanding the mortgage industry is not possible without a strong foreclosure law that lets them repossess the property in case of default on repayment.

The government has time and again promised to improve the foreclosure laws but hasn't done anything about it. Third, it implies that the government may ask NBP to pursue a more liberal mortgage policy to make up for the reluctance of private banks. That will be disastrous for the bank's balance sheet. We still remember the yellow cab scheme launched by the PML-N government in the 1990s.

A World Bank estimate says the total national housing deficit is over 10m units, with the gap increasing by 350,000 units annually. The incremental deficit is estimated to rise to 400,000 units. Some believe that an increase in housing and construction pushes growth in 30 to 40 related industries in the economy. One estimate indicates that an increase of 100,000 in housing units in one year contributes to up to 2pc of GDP. Besides, the provision of housing to people significantly cuts health and other economic and social costs imposed by informal urban settlements.

But the development of housing depends largely on a vibrant mortgage market, which is virtually nonexistent here. Most countries that have overcome their housing deficit have done so by creating a functioning mortgage industry and offering ordinary people a range of borrowing options to purchase or build a house. Although the State Bank has taken some important initiatives to encourage banks to extend home loans to support the government's housing and construction industry, the banks remain reluctant. The housing initiative will not take off in a big way until we have a viable mortgage industry. That, in turn, will remain a pipe dream as long as the government does not strengthen recovery laws to protect the banks from potential losses.

Heatwave in Karachi

SUMMER has arrived in parts of the country with full force. The Met office has predicted that a heatwave is due to strike Karachi and some other areas of Sindh and also Balochistan after March 30. It has warned that the heatwave will hit Karachi particularly hard with temperatures expected to rise to 39°C during the day and humidity levels reaching 64pc. Though parts of Sindh and Balochistan, such as Jacobabad and Sibi, are known for their overwhelmingly hot and dry summers — the temperature often soars to as high as between 45°C and 50°C — heatwaves in Karachi have become a regular phenomenon only in recent years. Perhaps the first recorded heatwave of its kind struck the megapolis in June 2015. The people were caught completely unprepared. Over the course of a few deadly hot days, it was reported that over 2,000 people in the city perished, with the crisis being exacerbated as it was the month of fasting. Among the dead, a large number comprised the elderly, the homeless and those living in irregular housing settlements where houses are often small and poorly ventilated and where electricity supply is unreliable. In fact, Karachi also experienced an

unusual heatwave at the tail end of the summer season in October last year. There is little doubt that the increasing intensity and frequency of heatwaves is a consequence of global warming.

Though higher temperatures of up to 55°C have also been recorded in Jacobabad and Sibi, a drastic increase in mercury levels turns Karachi into what experts call an ‘urban heat island’ with devastating consequences. Met officials have advised citizens to stay indoors and keep themselves hydrated, but this is not enough. The authorities should immediately take steps to set up temporary shelters where people can rest and hydrate themselves. Over the long term, the authorities should also work with urban planners and other professionals to create more green spaces in the city and improve the transport system to reduce carbon emissions.

Shuffling on sugar

THE belated action initiated by the FIA against some sugar mills and market speculators allegedly involved in the recent manipulation of the sweetener’s retail prices has spawned doubts about the actual intentions of the agency — and the government. The FIA claims to have recovered “humungous” digital and “other” evidence against the owners of certain sugar mills of actively conniving with speculators to rig the market and cheat consumers. In the summons sent to the CFOs and heads of sales of these mills, it also claims to have discovered ‘secret’ bank accounts and involvement in money laundering. But the question is: what is stopping the country’s premier anti-fraud agency from bringing those involved in such criminal activities to justice if it has collected incriminating evidence against them? Instead, their CFOs and sales executives have been summoned for further probe. Apparently, the investigators don’t have enough evidence to get them convicted in courts — or are they trying to put pressure on the industry players, as is being claimed by the sugar mill owners, to reduce their prices? Why else would they waste more time conducting forensic inquiries?

It has been months since a detailed inquiry by a special commission was conducted and its report released with a prime ministerial warning of stern action against sugar mill owners, speculators and others allegedly involved in market manipulation and tax evasion, besides the extortion of subsidies to the tune of billions of rupees from successive governments. Numerous inquiries and actions

were announced in light of the report's recommendations, including measures to overhaul the sugar market and plug the loopholes used by the powerful sugar mafia to fleece the consumers and government alike. Nothing concrete has come out of those inquiries until now and few expect any tangible progress going forward because of the involvement of powerful politicians in the scandal. That is not all. While the government has zealously used the report to malign the opposition, it has taken no action against its own federal and provincial ministers, whose families own the mills that benefited most from export subsidies. The premier recently sacked SAPM Nadeem Babar to ensure a transparent probe into last summer's petrol shortages in the country. Why is he reluctant to treat the economic affairs minister and his younger brother, who is finance minister in Punjab, in the same way? Politics seems to always trump the larger interest of people in this country.

Finance minister's removal

THE abrupt ouster of Hafeez Sheikh as the ruling PTI's finance minister has triggered a greater level of uncertainty about the economic governance of the country. On Monday, Prime Minister Imran Khan relieved Mr Sheikh of his responsibilities and handed them over to Industries Minister Hammad Azhar. Mr Sheikh had been skating on thin ice ever since his shock defeat at the hands of the opposition candidate Yousuf Raza Gilani in the Senate elections.

This election, as it turned out, was a do-or-die one for Mr Sheikh. As adviser on finance, he had been barred by the decision of the Islamabad High Court to chair important forums such as the National Finance Commission and the Economic Coordination Committee. The court in its decision had declared that unelected advisers could not perform executive functions and head ministries. To bypass this restriction, the government had made Mr Sheikh a minister through an ordinance. However, the ordinance was set to lapse in June, which meant that either he had to get elected before that, or pack his bags. The government considered finding another way to get him into the Senate but, as is clear from his sacking, it decided it was not worth the cost. For PTI, the liabilities that Mr Sheikh now carried outweighed the assets he had brought to the job.

The government's decision to replace him could have been explained quite reasonably. It was, therefore, strange, and a bit unfortunate, that it decided to —

rather ungraciously — throw Mr Sheikh under the bus. Government spokespersons were tutored to say that Mr Sheikh had been sent packing because he could not control the spiralling inflation in the country. Had this been the case, the government would not have cashed its chips in a bid to get him elected. If Mr Sheikh won, it is reasonable to expect that he would have stayed on in the job regardless of the inflation rate. Hafeez Sheikh deserved a better send-off than the one he was given.

That said, Hammad Azhar is not a surprise choice. He has performed well in his responsibilities over the last two years and won praise from the prime minister. He has also displayed a fairly good understanding of the subject and brings with him the political heft of an elected politician. It would be interesting to see whether he is provided a good team to repair the economy before the next general elections. The cabinet reshuffle that appears to be in the offing will indicate the priorities of the prime minister for the rest of his term. If the reshuffle is confined to replacing one tried and tested person with another, it may not inspire too much confidence. However if the prime minister brings in a radical change by ushering in fresh blood, it could mean that he is prepared to come out of his crease for the final overs.

Miscarriage of justice

THE legal system in Pakistan leaves much to be desired, with cases at times dragging on for decades, while litigants endlessly wait for justice. However, when it comes to capital punishment — which is irreversible and which this newspaper does not support — the lacunae in the justice system become even more apparent, as they concern matters of life and death. One recent case has again highlighted the need for urgent reform of the justice system as a whole. As reported on Tuesday, convict Mohammad Anwar's death sentence was commuted by the Supreme Court in a murder case after he had spent 28 years in jail as it found him to be a juvenile at the time the offence was committed. He was arrested in 1993 and sentenced by a lower court in 1998; thereafter, his case sluggishly made its way through the judicial system. In the meantime, a presidential order was notified in 2001 granting special remission in capital punishment cases to juveniles under the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance 2000. Though Anwar applied for his death sentence to be converted to a life term

soon after the presidential order was issued, after a lengthy back and forth his juvenility has just been confirmed.

Though the man has been mercifully spared the gallows, a large chunk of his life has been spent behind bars when the law provided for remission. Anwar's is not the only case of its kind and if Pakistan's legal system is carefully examined, many more such grave miscarriages of justice may emerge. As this paper has argued before, juvenile justice laws need to be better implemented so youngsters are reformed and given another chance at life. Moreover, the case quoted above also highlights the need to speed up and improve the investigation and trial process. There can be no justification for keeping a person behind bars for nearly three decades only for the law to later realise that the statute books contained a remedy.