

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of MAY 2018

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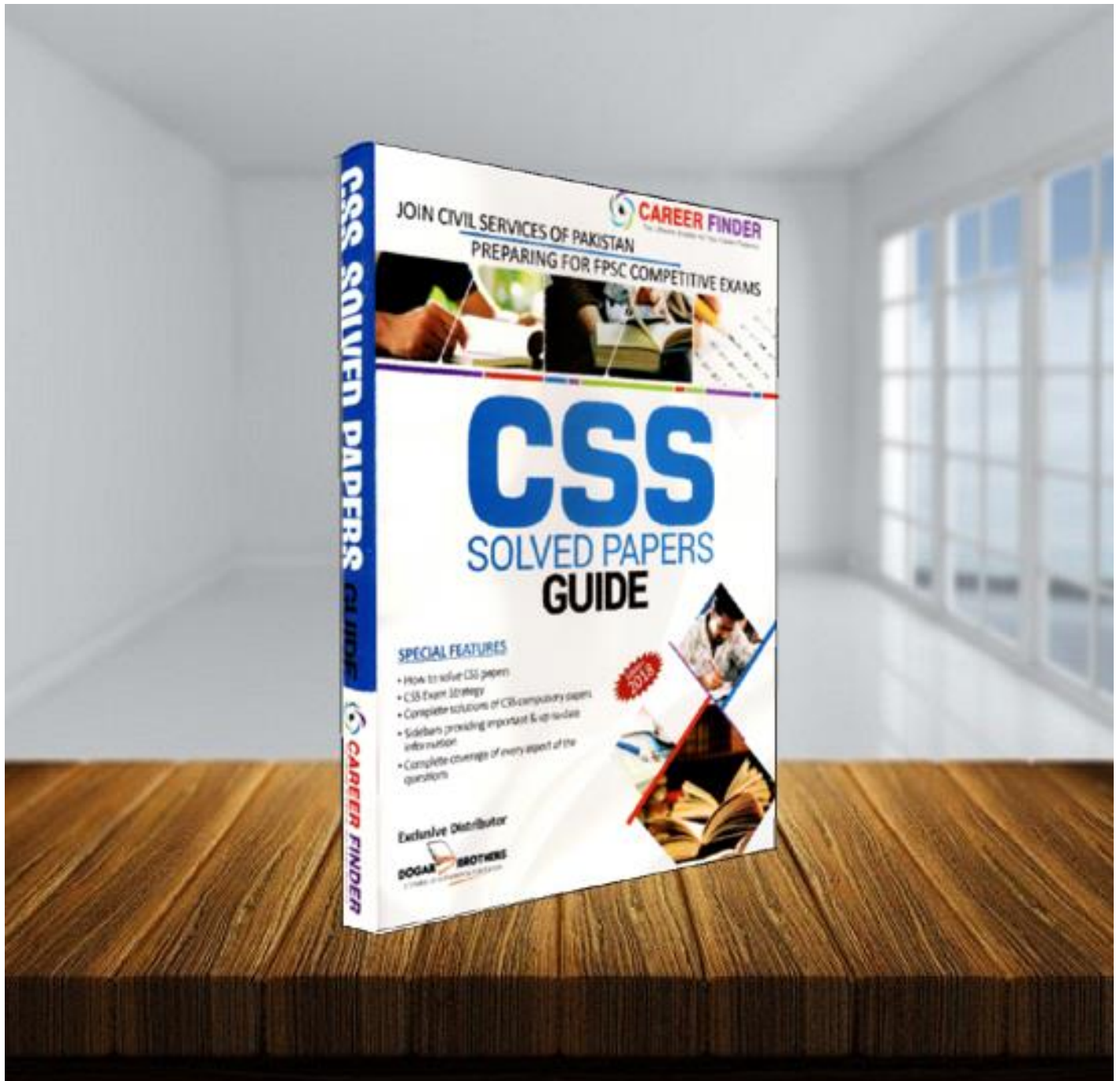
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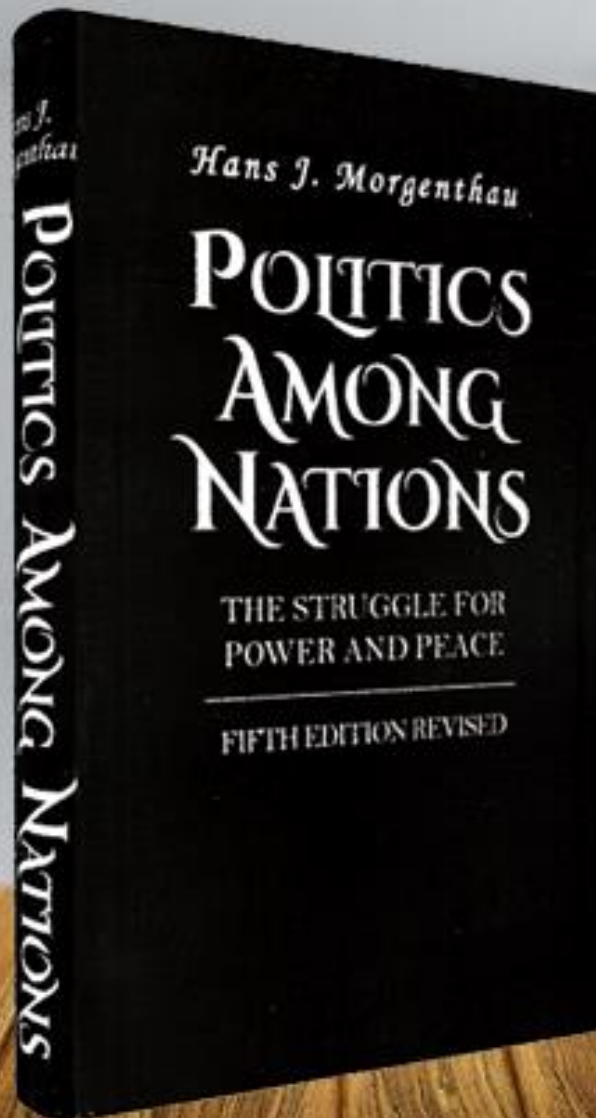
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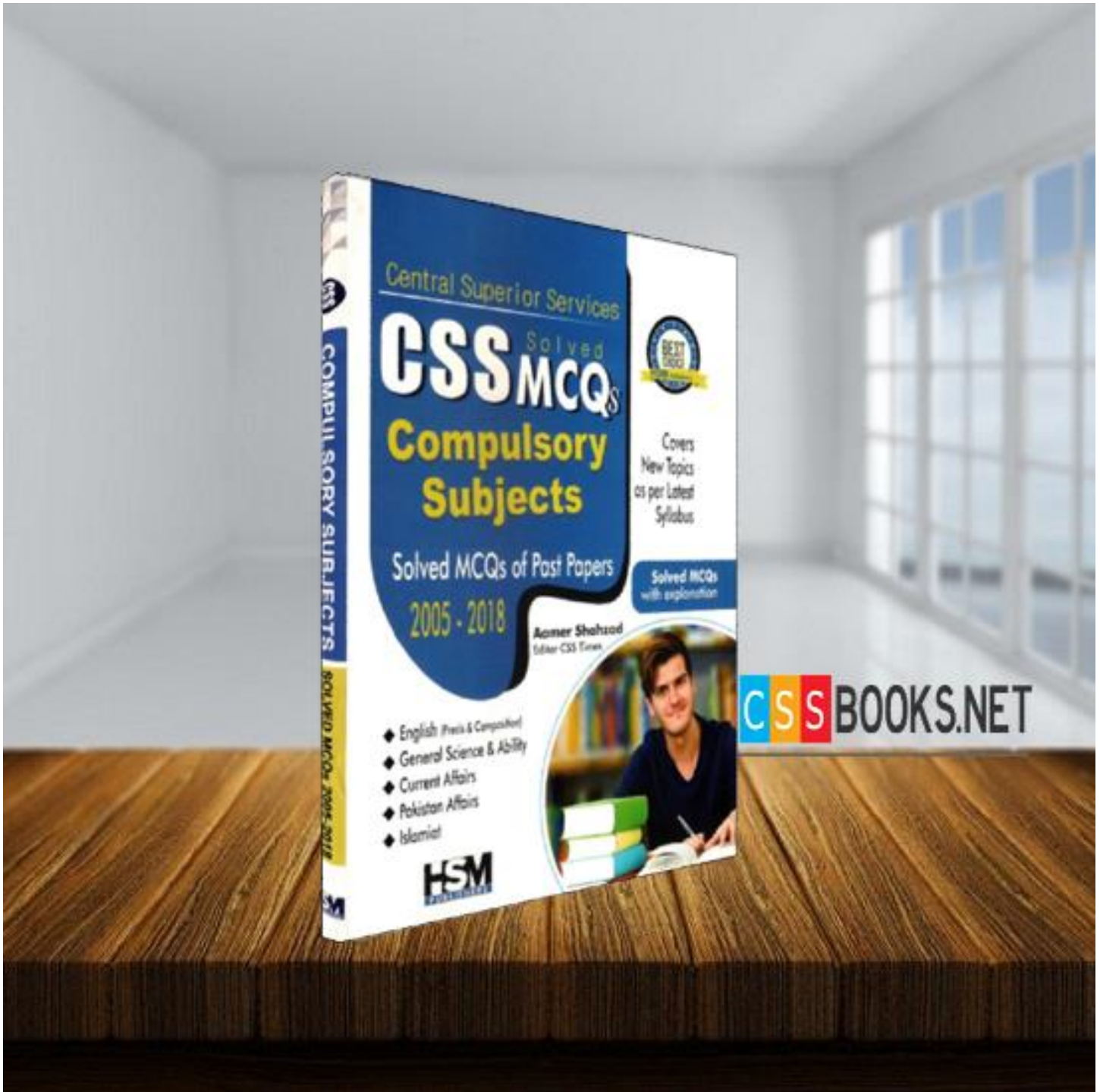


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Journey begins

A SUNDAY of mega rallies in different parts of the country by major political parties appears to have informally kicked off campaign season. With the parliamentary term set to expire at the end of the month, political parties must prepare to abide by the Election Commission of Pakistan rules that will be in force for the duration of the formal campaign season. Given new election rules and constituencies across the country redrawn on the basis of the latest census, the electoral system known to many candidates in previous polls has been significantly amended and will require rapid familiarisation by political parties and their candidates. It is hoped that the ECP will chalk out effective candidate and voter education campaigns and work with the political parties to enable a smooth and fair campaign season. The democratic project is under undeniable stress at the moment and the ECP and political parties themselves should be mindful to not repeat the mistakes of the past. Lingering controversy over the fairness of the election is in no one's interest.

Imran Khan and the PTI have certainly started on the right note. The rally in Lahore on Sunday was significant for Mr Khan's unveiling of an 11-point agenda to create a so-called 'naya Pakistan'. A turn towards the party's own governance priorities is a welcome change from the unnecessarily overwhelming focus the PTI has tended to have on attacking its opponents. While politics is also about highlighting the opposing parties' deficiencies, it is fundamentally about a party putting forward its own governance priorities. The PTI's 11 points lay out the party's vision and priorities in an easily understandable manner and should help the electorate make informed decisions about which party to vote for. Other parties ought to also consider a similar approach; it could help make comparisons for the voter easier. Certainly, the PTI's 11 points are not an automatic path to a prosperous, peaceful Pakistan. Stating an intention to significantly increase tax collection and make the tax system fairer is not the same as producing a feasible plan that can be implemented. In addition, some of the PTI's promises for the next election do not necessarily compare well to its performance in KP over the last five years.

Nevertheless, elections are about choices for the voter and it is encouraging that with the onset of campaign season, political parties are looking towards serious solutions to some hitherto intractable governance problems. A second consecutive full-term parliament and a third consecutive on-time election are democratic

milestones, but the political process in the country is arguably weak and may come under further attack by anti-democratic forces. It is necessary then that political parties play their part in ensuring a competitive and fair general election.

Reporting in Kabul

ONCE again, life came to a standstill in parts of Afghanistan after a series of devastating attacks: twin suicide bombings in the capital, followed by another attack in Kandahar, and a shooting in Khost.

The Afghan Taliban's annual spring offensive may have technically begun only a few days ago, but for ordinary Afghans there had never been any let up — especially not with an emboldened militant Islamic State group escalating the state of terror, as both outfits vie against each other with increasing brutality.

Yesterday's IS-claimed attack in the heavily fortified heart of the capital dealt a deadly blow to its already beleaguered press corps; nine journalists — another journalist died in a separate incident in Khost — were killed by a second bomber, disguised as one of them, as they rushed to the scene of the first bombing.

The horror of the enemy in plain sight is not an unknown phenomenon to Kabul — in March last year, IS gunmen (some dressed as doctors) stormed a military hospital, while the Taliban claimed the shocking ambulance bombing earlier this year.

Still, the tactic of targeting emergency first responders, volunteers and journalists in a secondary attack is a grisly escalation of the violence which the Afghan government seems helpless to contain.

We grieve for journalists in Afghanistan, who even prior to this dark day were no strangers to such tragedy.

There have been several attacks on TV stations in recent years, and Reporters

without Borders documented the death of at least 15 media workers in Afghanistan in 2017.

Reporting itself has become more difficult, as pressure from insurgents has created 'information black holes' and prompted many women to leave the profession.

The necessity of unrestricted and extensive reporting (especially of underrepresented voices) cannot be stressed enough.

Yet, being the first to cover a newsworthy event is never worth losing one's life for.

The Afghan media might note, for example, how here in Pakistan we responded to the issue of secondary targeted attacks by establishing consensus to maintain a safe distance from bomb sites until law enforcement arrives and secures the area.

There is another reason to be circumspect about such coverage; terrorists thrive on media attention, and a strong correlation has been found between sensationalist reporting on terror-related incidents and follow-up attacks.

But a time lag is only a precaution, not a guarantee of safety, as it becomes clearer day by day that for peace and security to return to Afghanistan, Kabul must initiate talks on a political settlement.

May Day reflections

WITHOUT doubt, it is the hard labour of millions of men and women that drives our economy forward.

However, as a society we have failed to improve the working and living conditions of the masses. While unions are hardly as powerful as they once were, it is also true that the state has ignored workplace safety regulations, with the result that many working men and women have lost their lives in horrific industrial accidents that could have been avoided had safety measures been in place.

The Baldia Town tragedy of 2012 (in which it is suspected criminal elements were involved in deliberate arson) and the fire at the Gadani ship-breaking yard in 2016 instantly come to mind.

These are just some of the major examples; workers across this land have to operate in hazardous workspaces on a daily basis.

The fact is that people are desperate for work and unscrupulous employers exploit this need by making labourers work in unsafe conditions.

As activists have pointed out, governments — federal and provincial — must make occupational safety and health a priority and ensure that working conditions within their jurisdictions are safe.

This means, of course, ratifying the requisite ILO conventions and legislating where necessary. But beyond the paperwork, enforcement is needed to ensure that workers are operating in spaces that meet legal health and safety standards.

What is more, labour courts need to be made more active so that they can adjudicate on cases speedily.

While the system indeed favours big business and only pays lip service to the working classes, it is time those political parties that swear by progressive and egalitarian ideals put their money where their mouth is: it is election year and parties in their manifestos must clearly enunciate what they intend to do to improve the lot of workers.

Working people are not asking for much; all they want is dignity and respect, safe workplaces and a better future for their children. Surely these are demands the state can meet.

Implementing Fata reforms

WORDS do not amount to action — and urgent action is what is needed.

Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi visited North Waziristan on Tuesday, and once again suggested that the so-called mainstreaming of Fata is vital to peace and prosperity in the region.

That is a theme the prime minister has often returned to since his elevation to the chief executive's office.

Indeed, it was one of Mr Abbasi's earliest pledges as prime minister.

But with only weeks left until the end of the current parliament and nine months of an unexpected prime ministership having already expired, there has been virtually no progress.

A parliamentary bill approved last month extending the jurisdiction of the Peshawar High Court and the Supreme Court remains the only notable recent achievement and was supported by several parties in the Senate.

Mr Abbasi's apparent enthusiasm for the mainstreaming of Fata has not resulted in the government he leads doing much about that objective.

There is, of course, a ready explanation for the inaction despite the prime minister's repeated pledges.

Mr Abbasi's political boss and predecessor, Nawaz Sharif, had put on hold his own government's recommendations on Fata for political reasons.

It is now well known that Mr Sharif did so to accommodate two political allies, Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the JUI-F and Mahmood Achakzai of PkMAP.

With the PML-N short of allies at the national level, Mr Sharif preferred the political support of the two veteran Pakhtun leaders over the needs of the tribal areas.

Even now, it is not entirely clear why the maulana and Mr Achakzai are adamantly opposed to the mainstreaming of Fata and its merger.

Neither has offered a convincing public explanation for their opposition, and that has fuelled speculation and conspiracy theories.

Whatever the case, it is the government's responsibility to implement the Fata agenda. The PML-N has clearly failed to do so.

Certainly, there is still time, even now in the final weeks of the government's term, for several parts of the Fata mainstreaming plan to be implemented.

Most of the recommendations have substantial political support in Fata, KP and nationally.

In any case, the next elected government will have to take up the issue of Fata reforms relatively quickly.

Prime Minister Abbasi was accompanied in North Waziristan by the army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa.

The military leadership has both endorsed the reforms agenda for Fata and urged its implementation.

A historic opportunity, then, beckons as the overwhelming majority of the national leadership, political and military, supports reforms in a region that needs them if it is to move past a period of prolonged conflict.

Mr Abbasi owes his current position to Mr Sharif, but the nation needs more of its prime minister than blind political support.

Water policy

THE approval of a new national water policy in the closing days of the current government is a tribute to the capacities of democracy. Water is the lifeblood of Pakistan, and since the building of the world's largest irrigation system, along with a huge storage infrastructure, in the 1960s and 1970s, the sharing and utilisation of water across sectors and among provinces has been one of the thorniest issues in our politics. The policy itself has been under discussion, on and off, for over a decade, and the final signatures of the four chief ministers and the prime minister last week can be seen as a milestone, much like the water-sharing accord of 1991.

But now comes the hard part. The policy calls for increasing the share of resources from federal and provincial development programmes to be dedicated to the water infrastructure. At the federal level, this means accelerating work on the Diamer Bhasha dam, and at the provincial level it means public works to plug leaks through lining the water courses. The latter ought to be the biggest priority. Losses of water are estimated at 46 MAF annually, whereas the Diamer Bhasha dam will add 6.4 MAF of storage capacity. If the policy succeeds in reducing losses by a third, as is the stated goal, the amount of water it would free up would be double the capacity of the Diamer Bhasha dam, at presumably less than half the cost. Far too often, Pakistan's water woes during climate change are presented as shortage in the supply of water, whereas the real challenge is in the improved utilisation of the existing supply. This involves some investment in physical infrastructure, but also large-scale changes in farm-water management techniques and the sound measurement of water flows through the system, to give a few examples. This requires a crucial reform: water pricing — the only way to sensitise farmers to the prevailing scarcity of water, and to urge greater efficiency in the use of this resource. And yet, this is one area where the policy minces its words. It wants to link water pricing with the "users' ability to pay", which is going to be next to impossible for the state to assess. Until a realistic water-pricing regime is brought into play, mobilising investment and changing utilisation patterns in agriculture will prove to be a losing battle.

Hazara protests

SURELY there is no community more beleaguered in Pakistan than the Shia Hazaras.

Recent events in Quetta have once again underscored that grim reality. Six Hazara men were shot dead and one injured in four separate attacks, all in the month of April.

Protesting community members have staged a sit-in outside the Balochistan Assembly building, while a group of Hazara women, led by young lawyer Jalila Haider, has gone on hunger strike outside the Quetta Press Club.

They are demanding that targeted killings of Hazaras end immediately, the perpetrators be arrested, and the army chief meet the protesters so they can personally apprise him of the community's plight.

What the Hazaras have had to endure over the last several years in Balochistan is nothing less than a blot on this nation.

Hundreds of them have been murdered in sectarian attacks, largely in the form of targeted killings or devastating truck bombings.

They have been driven into enforced ghettoisation for the sake of safety, rendering their children's education disrupted and thriving businesses abandoned.

Tens of thousands have chosen to risk the perils of illegal migration to Australia over their restricted existence and the dangers that lurk on the streets of the province's heavily securitised capital.

Time and again the community has protested, demanding that the state ensure their right to life.

Who can forget the gut-wrenching sight of thousands of Hazaras in February 2013, following a massive bombing in Quetta that killed over 100 and wounded twice that many, refusing to bury their dead until the military took immediate action against sectarian terrorists?

The rest of the country too was vocal in its solidarity with them at the time.

Now however, that outrage is absent as is the demand for accountability.

The media is paying but perfunctory attention, instead of keeping the issue front and centre.

The slow yet steady decimation of the Hazara community has been relegated to a footnote, even as we congratulate ourselves for having triumphed over violent extremism.

Load-shedding despite megawatts

AS if on cue, the power crisis has returned — soon after the government declared victory in the epic battle against it. As temperatures have shot up over the last few weeks, the demand for power has surged. But the new system that the PML-N government trotted out as its favourite accomplishment has been unable to keep pace. It turns out that the country's fuel supply chain cannot keep up with the rapid increase in demand. Owing to the depleted furnace oil stocks following a winter order by the prime minister to halt imports of the dirty, expensive fuel in favour of imported LNG, power plants were unable to ramp up generation. The result was that the power deficit shot up to 7,000MW at its peak, according to ministry sources, which is broadly the same level it hit during the years of severe power shortages. The fact that this happened only days after the government boasted that it had added 13,000MW of new power-generation capacity to the system, more than what was added in the previous 70 years — as per its telling, though not far off the mark — is ironic.

If any further validation were required that it will take far more than raw megawatts to decisively end the chronic power shortages the country has been living with for decades now, then the present circumstances provide it. Beyond megawatts, the reform of power-sector governance, finances and pricing, as well as a more intelligently thought-out power-sector expansion plan that breaks out of the decades-old thinking of large mega projects towards distributed generation, are

among the ideas that will need to be admitted into the policy mainstream. Currently, we are only adding more and more megawatts of generation capacity to a system that is already beleaguered and unable to recover even its own costs, let alone provide for future expansion.

The government can brag all it wants to about adding megawatts, but the fact remains that the country cannot afford, nor manage, the additional generation capacity. Repeated episodes of widespread load-shedding amid plenty are clear reminders of this. The way matters stand, if the power system is run at close to full speed, major problems will arise in either fuel supply or the circular debt, or both. This means that the fundamentals of the power crisis are still with us. It is too late for the party to address this problem now in the twilight of its term. But as a departing thought, it is worth the while of all political parties to reflect carefully on the institutional reforms needed for making meaningful progress on the long road leading out of the power crisis. Beyond power plants, how do they intend to address the problems of sector liquidity and fuel supply, and encourage distributed generation through renewable energy sources?

Anti-women remarks

AN apology alone will not be enough, even though an unconditional one is absolutely necessary. The ugly, hateful and, yes, deliberate remarks of Rana Sanaullah, Punjab law minister, and also Abid Sher Ali, an evidently uncouth PML-N politician related to the Sharif family, against women have been widely condemned and only somewhat repudiated by the PML-N. There is further disgust at Mr Sanaullah's intransigence, for he not only refused to apologise for his unacceptable remarks but has scurrilously attempted to rake up disquieting allegations against Imran Khan. A public backlash against the PML-N's seemingly regular verbal vileness against female political opponents and voters has caused sections of the PML-N to distance themselves from the comments, but that is not enough. Within the PML-N, there are far too many male politicians, senior and frontline party leaders, who are repeatedly obnoxious to women in politics and the electorate. An apology loses its meaning and effect if the offending behaviour does not change. The PML-N must not only censure but should also sanction party members who are repeat offenders. A meaningful deterrent is needed at this point.

Certainly, the PML-N is not alone in spewing anti-women rhetoric. All political parties have male leaders who have either publicly made derogatory remarks or are dismissive of female colleagues and politicians. While the Constitution has enshrined and the law encourages the participation of women in the political process, the mostly male leaderships of political parties have not evolved quickly enough to genuinely regard women as political equals deserving of the same respect that male peers are accorded. True, there are positive examples of men in politics who are respectful of women, but the overall position is unpleasant enough to warrant serious intervention. Perhaps incidents against parliamentarians can be referred to an ethics committee for action. The ECP could consider requiring political parties to have effective internal disciplinary mechanisms. The next assemblies could have mandatory training and awareness sessions for incoming representatives about what the rules require of them in working with and addressing female colleagues. Women parliamentarians should be invited to make recommendations for improving the political atmosphere for women in politics. All this should be backed by a sense of a decency and willingness to punish misbehaving colleagues. As a frequent offender, the PML-N should help lead the way in correcting an ugly problem.

Out of school

NOTWITHSTANDING the efforts made by the provinces to improve education in Pakistan, the situation persists in remaining dismal. One example of this comes from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the Elementary and Secondary Education Department completed a survey spread over a year under which 4.52m households were surveyed across 25 districts. The findings, which came with a price tag of Rs227m, indicated that more than 1.8m children are out of school — or 23pc of the total population of those aged between five and 17 years. Out of this figure, some 34pc of boys have never gone to school or have dropped out, while girls, at 66pc, fared even worse. Meanwhile, in the most populous province of Punjab, some 5.03m girls remain detached from the school network, out of 9.2m similarly situated children. This was revealed last week by a Unicef education specialist, who also pointed out that in the world ranking of out-of-school children, Pakistan is placed only behind Nigeria; amongst the provinces, Punjab is rated as the worst, mainly on account of the higher number of people living in the province.

It is no secret that the scourge is countrywide, with out-of-school figures for Sindh and Balochistan equally distressing. It has been years since an 'education emergency' sounded alarm bells, but the state has failed to address it. No doubt, poverty is largely to blame for children not going to school, but that alone does not stand in the way of access to education. Poor infrastructure — many government schools remain without boundary walls, toilet facilities and drinking water — and long distances, along with chronic teacher absenteeism have all combined to keep millions of children out school; they have either not been enrolled or have dropped out after primary education. Perhaps it is the scale of the challenge in each province that has made the education authorities feel helpless. But the larger picture is more terrifying, as childhood gives way to an unlettered adulthood.

Missing transparency

PARTIAL compliance with the Supreme Court's orders has only intensified and increased the questions that have to be answered. On Wednesday, the federal government informed a three-member bench of the Supreme Court that is holding hearings on missing persons that 1,330 individuals are detained in internment centres set up under the Action in Aid of Civil Power Regulations, 2011, and a further 253 individuals have been released. If those bare numbers are confusing and do not shed much light on the issue of missing persons, it is perhaps by design on the government's part. A three-member bench of the Supreme Court headed by Justice Ejaz Afzal, set to retire later this week, has been demanding that the state share basic details on militancy and terrorism suspects held in internment centres. As the court itself has made clear, the state has a constitutional duty to declare who is in its custody, what are the individuals charged with and whether they have been put on trial. Such details are fundamental to the functioning of a lawful state; they become all the more necessary when relatives of missing persons move the courts in search of their family members.

Yet, the state once again failed to comply with the Supreme Court's orders on Wednesday and the state has sought and been granted two weeks to furnish more details on the 1,330 individuals who are detained in internment centres. It is not clear how or why the state can declare the number of people held in internment

centres, but not have information immediately available on the status of the legal process against them. A lawyer representing the families of missing persons suggested in court that the state's strategy may be to buy as much time as it can and perhaps wait for the retirement of Justice Azfal. But as the soon-to-be-retired justice himself noted, there are two other justices on the bench who will continue to hold hearings. With regular retirements from and elevations to the Supreme Court, and the latter repeatedly returning to the issue of missing persons, it is clear that the state cannot simply hope for the matter to go away. Now that the government has acknowledged 1,330 individuals are detained in internment centres, it will have to share information on the status of legal proceedings against those individuals. Transparency is being resisted, but it is necessary and essential.

The Supreme Court, the families of missing persons and legal counsels have all made clear that in seeking details of those detained by the state, they are not trying to ensure the automatic release of such individuals. The fear that militants and terrorists may be summarily released is not only misplaced but mischievous too. The state is strengthened when it acts in a lawful manner and all detainees have the right to a fair trial.

Unmet aspirations

IT is about time that someone listened to young people in this country. And there are a lot of them: no less than 64pc of the population is below the age of 30, the largest percentage of young people ever recorded in Pakistan's history — which makes the findings of the recently released report by the UNDP a cause for deep concern. According to this comprehensive document — based on various activities involving this demographic, including 81 focus group discussions held across the country — 69pc of them have 10 or less years of education, including 29pc who have no schooling at all. Depressingly, if the current rate of enrolment does not improve, it will take 60 years for every Pakistani child of school-going age to be in an educational institution. Whether they have access to quality education, a vital consideration, is another matter altogether. Moreover, the unemployment rate among young people is 9pc, while only 6pc have access to libraries and 7pc to sports facilities.

Such appalling neglect of young people's mental and physical well-being and, by

extension, disregard for their aspirations — a term that does not extend to gainful employment alone — does not augur well. The ‘youth’ bulge can work to Pakistan’s advantage if its potential for high productivity and entrepreneurship is properly nurtured and harnessed. If not, and time is fast running out, the resulting frustration and sense of powerlessness are likely to foment political unrest and societal collapse. The growing influence of mainstream and social media means that this generation is more aware of the promise the future can hold, and how far it lies beyond their reach. At the same time, within the alarming data in the report, there is also an encouraging, if poignant, statistic, because it indicates that despite getting such a raw deal, young people still have hope their voices will be heard — such is the innate optimism of youth. How else can one interpret the fact that though only 24pc of them trust politicians, 90pc of men and 55pc of women among them 18 years and above, intend to vote in the next election? Policymakers, if they have any interest in shaping Pakistan’s future direction, must tap into this yearning. Thus far, they have only shown unconscionable negligence towards this massive and fast-expanding demographic. Now is the moment, when political parties are preparing their manifestos, to address this gap and the challenges that come with it.

Scorching heat

AN alarming heatwave has gripped many cities, with Nawabshah at the epicentre.

Temperatures in that city rose above 50°C, the highest recorded April temperature anywhere on the planet ever since meteorological data began to be maintained over 100 years ago.

This is a truly alarming development and yet another demonstration of the unprecedented climate anomalies.

The Met Office did its job early last month by forecasting that “heatwave conditions are likely to affect the major cities occasionally during the months of April and May”, but it was unable to say anything beyond this.

Heatwaves present greater challenges of forecasting than floods or unusual rainfall, but they are still not impossible to predict if the right models and meteorological data are used.

The complete silence with which this extreme weather event passed us by is another source of alarm.

Some might wonder what one can do in the face of such weather abnormalities. But the fact of the matter is that the meteorological authorities have to shout to be heard with regard to the dilapidated state of our weather-monitoring and forecasting infrastructure.

Pakistan is unusually vulnerable to changing weather patterns by virtue of its geography. Weather patterns need to be monitored from the east from where the moisture for the monsoon rains largely comes, as well as the west and south because winds from these directions interact in important ways with the monsoon system.

At the moment, there is very little infrastructure looking anywhere other than the east. This is important because mindsets at the top, regardless of party affiliation, see infrastructure solely in terms of brick and mortar, whether roads, airports, highways, or in the power sector.

Investments that upgrade our weather-monitoring and forecasting abilities are seen as little more than a distraction.

Such thinking has left the country increasingly susceptible to the vagaries of nature which is showing less and less mercy with each passing year.

Charter of Non-Intervention'

IN accusing his principal political opponent of having received help from the military leadership to win the last general election, PTI chief Imran Khan has, perhaps unwittingly, highlighted an overarching problem in the country's democratic process. In his trademark fashion, Mr Khan stirred fresh controversy in an interview with a private TV channel by making specific allegations about the role of individuals in the military in helping the PML-N virtually sweep the polls in Punjab in May 2013. Mr Khan stopped short of accusing the then army chief Gen Ashfaq

Kayani of ordering electoral rigging, but the claims he did make are quite remarkable. To be stressed is that Mr Khan offered no proof or independent corroboration of his claims and until now there has been no evidence of significant pre-poll, polling day, or post-poll rigging by the military or other institutions. Indeed, during the PTI's ultimately failed quest to dislodge the federal government in 2014, there was no public mention of or hostility towards the military's alleged role in manipulating the 2013 general election.

What is true, however, is that the arc of Pakistan's political history has repeatedly and for long stretches been shaped by anti-democratic forces. No political party has been immune from credible allegations of collusion with forces that seek to undermine or destroy the democratic order in the country. The political empire of the Sharifs was made possible by the intensive support of Gen Ziaul Haq and his regime, and Nawaz Sharif has yet to disown his and his family's close association with a dictator who distorted the country, its politics and society itself. More recently, the PML-N's willingness to undermine the previous PPP-led coalition government led Mr Sharif to take the so-called Memogate affair to the Supreme Court. Mr Sharif has expressed some remorse for his role in that damaging episode, but regret has only been expressed after Mr Sharif had himself been ousted by the superior judiciary from the prime ministership and found himself in deep legal jeopardy.

With Mr Khan, too, now seemingly awakening to the threat of institutional interference in the electoral process, and with the next general election scheduled to be held in less than three months from now, it can be hoped that the major political parties will not only pledge to protect the democratic order but take some steps to prevent or minimise interference by anti-democratic forces. With all institutions having publicly pledged to support democratic continuity, the political parties will have to do their part in making the upcoming election transparent, free and fair. Perhaps the collective political leadership of the country will have to draw up another Charter of Democracy, this time focusing on non-intervention by institutions. A 'Charter of Non-Intervention' that has the support of the political leadership and incorporates sensible suggestions could help protect the next parliament from institutional interference.

Water shortages

REPORTS of severe water shortages afflicting large areas of Sindh and southern Punjab are on the increase, and large-scale damage to key crops, particularly cotton, paint a troubling picture. From Badin to Mirpurkhas to Nawabshah and all the way to Rahim Yar Khan, farmers are reporting that the sowing season for cotton has been badly disrupted because the water that is so essential at the time of sowing did not arrive at the scheduled time. Large sugarcane fields stand burnt, and vegetable output has suffered hugely. Demands from farmers and residents of agrarian towns have shifted away from water for irrigation. Now they are reduced to demanding drinking water since the shortages have parched more than just arable land.

Some lawmakers from Sindh have asked that the Indus River System Authority cut flows into two key link canals, arguing that these are to be used only in times of flood and not to make up for water shortages upstream. Irsa has responded that the situation in Punjab is just as bad, even though the sowing season for cotton has not begun there, while the wheat crop is ready for harvest. Thus far, the dispute at the national level has not gone beyond the confines of some testy exchanges between a few senators and key people in the water bureaucracy. Those exchanges demonstrate that the matter is unlikely to find resolution at that level. It is difficult to see what the government can actually do about the problem, given that it has been created by low inflows into the dams. But if it is true that there are significant withdrawals being made through the link canals for lands in Punjab, then the question of fairness in allocations must take centre stage. In Sindh too, the shortages have driven a politicised allocation, particularly from the Kotri Barrage, as well as illegal pumping of water by those closer to the canal head, leading to bitter complaints from the tail enders. The episode cries out for high-level attention. The Sindh government needs to wake up to its responsibility to ensure equitable sharing of the scarce quantities of water in its own areas, while the federal government must wake up to its obligations to ensure that interprovincial allocations are being done as per the spirit of the 1991 water-sharing accord. The shortages are a fact, but the acrimony they are giving rise to can be better handled.

With egg on their face

THAT Pakistanis are quick on the draw has been proven yet again by a member of parliament who has multiple identities.

Retired Capt Mohammad Safdar is a former army officer. Husband of the rising political star Maryam Nawaz, he is also the son-in-law of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, the latter a born-again democrat lately known for championing progressive causes.

But to the captain's credit, he is always able to create situations that bring out his individual traits for ready public appreciation.

Of late, he has once again attracted attention by being the spirit behind a National Assembly resolution.

Led by him, a group of MNAs — duly representative of all the dominant shades in parliament — has come up with a resolution asking that the physics department at the Quaid-i-Azam University be named after Abu al-Fath Abd-al Rehman Mansour-al-Khazini. This was apparently the nation's way of honouring the student of the famous Muslim scholar Al Biruni.

But to the likely 'horror' of the prime movers of the resolution, some Pakistanis mistook this for an attempt to rename the Abdus Salam Centre for Physics.

The centre had been named after the outstanding Pakistani scientist and Nobel laureate by none other than Mr Sharif in 2016.

Now, whereas it is true that Capt Safdar has previously expressed his displeasure, on the basis of faith, at the centre being named after Dr Salam, teachers have said that it was not to be confused with the university's physics department, and that the two were separate entities.

"The centre is an autonomous body affiliated with QAU, while the department of physics is part of QAU," the senior university dean told this paper.

It would be naïve of anyone to think that the parliamentarians who signed the resolution did not understand this simple distinction.

As for Capt Safdar, he stands absolved of all ‘charges’ in this case. His resolution clearly asks for renaming the physics department at QAU.

No protection for coal miners

THE frequency of mining accidents should not numb officials and the public to the terrible human toll the accidents inflict. Disaster struck coal mines in two areas relatively close to Quetta on Saturday as seemingly preventable accidents caused a death and injury count in the dozens. In one coal mine, a methane build-up was the cause of a devastating explosion that killed many. In the other coal mine, a mudslide trapped and killed and injured several miners. A professional investigation can determine if criminal liability is warranted for the mine owners or operators, but it should be apparent that without a radical overhaul of the mining sector, further accidents are regrettably inevitable. While mining is and will remain a dangerous sector for workers — accidents also occur occasionally in advanced economies — what is galling is that few lessons, if any, are learned in Pakistan. Methane build-ups and conditions conducive to cave-ins ought to be identified early and adequate steps taken to protect workers.

It is possible to identify specific problems in the mining sector, particularly in coal mining. The Mines Labour Federation, which has been protesting the latest deadly accidents in Balochistan, has demanded better protection for workers and can surely offer sensible and reasonable suggestions for strong safety measures.

But with manufacturing and mining safety generally a problem across the country, particularly in the unregulated sections of the economy, the problem is fundamentally of capacity and will at the policy and administrative levels. When political leaders and government officials talk about workers, it is either in terms of enhancing the minimum wage or job creation. The quality of jobs and particularly safety protections for workers barely register in political and governance discourses. Compounding that problem is either a disinterest in or hostility towards

labour unions, which if effectively organised and capably led can help improve the quality of industrial and mining jobs.

The upcoming general election is unlikely to see immediate positive change in worker safety. In Balochistan, for example, mining safety may be at the bottom of governance priorities given the myriad problems in the region. The record of other provinces may only be marginally better when it comes to worker safety.

Ultimately, safety requires resources and effective enforcement. The formal sector has its own problems, but there are safety lessons that can surely be learned from the management of well-run, exported-oriented factories, for example. Finally, compensation for the injured and the families of the dead in industrial accidents should be examined. Mining attracts some of the hardest working but poorest workers in the labour force. When catastrophe strikes miners, entire families and multiple generations can be blighted. It is a moral responsibility of the state and should be a legal responsibility of employers to provide reasonable compensation in the case of injury or death.

Gaza protests

FOR the past six weeks, every Friday thousands of Palestinians in Gaza have been marching to the Israeli border to protest for the right to return to their land. Included in these protests are Palestinian men, women and children, who have rejected living in what is described as a giant open-air prison and simply want a life of dignity on their own land, a right that has been denied to them by the Israeli settler state for seven decades. Tel Aviv has responded to the Arab protests in a familiar way, using violence to break them up. A number of Palestinian protesters were wounded on Friday as the Israelis responded with live fire and rubber bullets. Perhaps if this was some other nation and a state's security apparatus fired into an unarmed crowd, there would be a global outcry, and justifiably so. But over six weeks, the Israeli war machine has killed some 50 Arab protesters, and there has been little from the international community other than the routine condemnation. Indeed, Tel Aviv has shown little respect for human rights while dealing with Palestinians; the Israeli state has killed a disabled protester (Ibrahim Abu Thuraya) and held Palestinian minors in detention (most famously Ahed Tamimi). It seems

that for the Arabs living within Israel and the occupied territories, fundamental rights do not apply.

Tel Aviv's response to the Gaza protests has been reprehensible. However, it should be borne in mind that if Donald Trump goes ahead with his plan to shift the US embassy to Jerusalem on May 14, the occupied territories — already choking under Israel's suffocating grip — may explode in protest. Indeed, further protests may give Tel Aviv an excuse to step up its repression, sparking a new cycle of violence. The situation does not look promising for the Palestinian people, with the Trump-led US least concerned about their welfare as it gives Israel carte blanche to do as it pleases. Moreover, the Palestinians' 'Arab brothers' are either silent, or appear to be in league with Israel to pursue their geopolitical and economic interests. The international community through the UN must raise its voice against the brutal violence the Palestinians are being subjected to. Israel might have powerful supporters, but the nations of the world that swear by human rights and fundamental freedoms must make it clear to Israel and its foreign friends that violence against the Palestinians will not be tolerated and must be stopped immediately.

Drug-testing proposal

THERE is no shortage in Pakistan of attempts to address grave issues through superficially thought-out ideas or rhetoric. Take the abuse or recreational use of drugs. On Thursday, the IGP Islamabad, Sultan Azam Temuri, stated at a seminar that the capital police, in collaboration with teachers, would conduct drug tests on students suspected of using narcotic substances; he pointed out that many parents come to know of such practices only after their children are already addicted to drugs. This is not the first time such a suggestion has been floated. Towards the end of January, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah announced that it would be made mandatory for students to undergo drug-detection tests.

What became of the latter proposal is as yet unknown. But now that a similar announcement has been made in the capital, it is necessary to point out the issues that need to be disentangled. There is no doubt that drug abuse is a deeply serious matter and needs to be addressed at all levels of society and across age groups. However, before any policy can be chalked out, research is needed to determine

the extent of the problem. Even without making people undergo tests, at the very least data can be collected through rehabilitation centres and medical records of suspected or confirmed users. Secondly, there is a pressing need to curtail the manufacture of non-medicinal drugs in the country — including by clamping down on the availability of ingredients (such as ephedrine) — and cross-border smuggling. UNODC estimates, for example, that Pakistan is the transit and destination country for about 40pc of the opiates produced in Afghanistan. Further, the supply chain of dealers has to be broken.

Before violating individual privacy by subjecting students to drug-testing, which is not the answer to ending drug abuse, the state has to look into its own failings regarding the ready availability of dangerous substances, and seek to block the latter's access.

Attack on minister

THE threat had never quite receded and now may be on the verge of exploding. Serious, urgent and unified action is needed by the state, the political class and society. Ahsan Iqbal, federal interior minister, has mercifully survived an assassination attempt in Narowal. The suspect is in police custody and has been declared to be a supporter of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan, a fringe group that has catapulted itself to the centre of the national consciousness through extremist politics. It is necessary to question how a man with a gun was able to come within shooting distance of the interior minister, the top civilian law-enforcement official in the country, because while election campaigns must necessarily be relatively open, senior government officials ought to have reliable security. It was not a PML-N politician who was shot and injured on Sunday; it was the serving federal interior minister. The tragic assassination of Salmaan Taseer, then governor of Punjab, ought to have been the last time a catastrophic security failure occurred. There must be accountability.

The attempted assassination of Mr Iqbal has dire implications for the upcoming election and for public safety generally. The TLP is one of many groups actively promoting intolerance and religious hatred in the country, but the politics of this organisation are particularly dangerous for national peace and cohesion. Once the controversy stirred after the overhaul of the election laws had been resolved inside

parliament, the government ought to have handled the protests and the Faizabad sit-in by the TLP decisively. Whatever the suspicions created by the chaotic and catastrophic end to the protest in Faizabad, the PML-N governments in Punjab and Islamabad appear to have been paralysed from the time the protesters set off in Lahore until close to the end. Then, when action was finally ordered by the centre and supervised by the interior minister, removing the violent protesters from Faizabad was a poorly executed operation. Incompetence allowed for total capitulation to be engineered.

Yet, there is more at stake here than just the incompetence of some in government and the cravenness of the state when challenged by religious bigots and demagogues. The flames of hatred stoked by the TLP and sundry groups to engulf the political process, the upcoming election and the country itself, can spread quicker than wildfire and may be impossible to stamp out. Faizabad was a disaster and lessons should have been immediately learned. It is not clear why the TLP's status as a registered political party has not been re-evaluated, the group's leadership has not been investigated for violating anti-extremism laws and the national leadership has not worked out a plan to mitigate violence in the upcoming election campaign. Democracy is under attack, the national fabric is being torn apart and the country's leadership is preoccupied with power struggles. Pakistan needs and deserves better.

Kashmiri killings

THE year so far has been a bloody one for India-held Kashmir as some 120 people have been killed in various violent incidents since January. Sunday also witnessed a spate of violence in the troubled region as five armed men — a university professor who taught sociology among them — were killed by Indian troops, while five protesters died when security forces opened fire on them. It is simply not acceptable for any state's security apparatus to open fire on a crowd of unarmed protesters. There are less lethal ways to control crowds, but it is doubtful that India believes in these, preferring, instead, to unleash maximum brutality upon the Kashmiris. Meanwhile, a university teacher's joining a group of armed fighters indicates the depth of Kashmiris' disillusionment with Delhi's suffocating rule in the region. While earlier, perhaps, a narrower segment of society was seen taking up arms against the Indian state due to the regime's militarised handling of Kashmiri dissent, a wider cross section of society — intellectuals, students etc — now appear willing to fight as they have lost faith in any political process aimed at securing their rights. The decision-makers in Delhi, who have placed nearly half a million troops in the held region, need to reflect on their failed policies. Moreover, under Narendra Modi's rule, there have been moves to roll back the autonomous position Kashmir has in the Indian constitution. Couple this with the acts of extremists — such as the recent brutal rape and murder of a young Muslim girl — and the roots of Kashmiri rage can easily be traced.

Instead of using more violence to quell protests and fuelling a cycle of further bloodshed, both the administration in Srinagar and those who call the shots in Delhi need to revisit their approach. The militarised response to Kashmiri unrest has been an abject failure, and if such state-sponsored brutality continues the whole region may be engulfed by a renewed wave of protests with Kashmiris doing all they can to secure freedom. India must deal with Kashmir with respect, and respond to the legitimate grievances of the held region's people. However, considering the right-wing clique that currently holds power in Delhi, and its counterparts in Kashmir, this is difficult to expect. The Hindutva brigade should realise that force has failed to dampen the Kashmiri spirit for over three decades, therefore, a new approach is required.

Law of the hammer

DO the laws of judicial gravity apply equally to a man throwing a shoe at an officer of the court as they do to the book being thrown back at him? Perhaps they do, if the offence is adjudicated in an anti-terrorism court. In March, during a courtroom hearing in Multan, a suspect imprisoned for theft and awaiting written orders for pre-approved bail lashed out at the judge — first verbally and then with his shoe. The FIR filed against him included Sections 186, 353 and 506 of the Pakistan Penal Code and, rather incredibly, Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act. With the matter of projectile footwear classified as an act of terror, on Saturday, an ATC judge handed down a cumulative 18-year sentence (14 years, or what was previously considered a life sentence, for Section 7). Could there be a better illustration of our criminal justice system, in thrall of a monolithic security paradigm, frivolously using the instrument of ATCs to try cases that fall outside their intended purpose and deliver disproportionate punishments?

While there is no condoning attacks on judges — or anyone, for that matter — the crime must be seen in the context of the circumstances in which it occurred. The right to speedy and fair justice applies as much to defendants as it does to litigants. It does not require much imagination to place oneself in the shoes of a suspect, languishing in prison for months, even years, awaiting lengthy court proceedings. That such a man, in police remand in a relatively secure environment, could ‘terrorise’ the courtroom so is an absurd application of the ATA, made even more baffling by its arbitrary interpretation. Consider another, more high-profile shoe-hurling incident that took place in Lahore around the same time, in which three men were charged for attacking former prime minister Nawaz Sharif at a public gathering. There, the ATC judge ordered the removal of Section 7 from the FIR. Not every offence is a nail in search of a hammer.

Mishandling coal

IT seems that even moving towards a 19th-century technology is too challenging a task for the government to manage. Handling coal in the kinds of quantities needed for power generation is a huge logistical exercise that requires large investments in rail and port facilities. Ensuring that the supply chain remains

environmentally sound, however, is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, as reported by this paper, the authorities at Karachi's Port Qasim, where shipments of imported coal land for onward transportation to Sahiwal, have failed to fulfil even the rudimentary requirements of environmental protection. The port has begun operating its coal handling without a green signal from the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency. To make matters worse, the authorities are handling massive quantities of coal in open containers, and the process of transferring these loads from ship to rail is causing large quantities of coal dust to fly around. This poses a serious risk to all workers, infrastructure and industrial units located at or near the port.

While conceding that the concerns are valid, port authorities have indicated that the project was rushed through. According to reports, the power plant that is served by the coal shipments landing here had its commercial operations date pushed forward. But that should not prevent them from completing the formalities, and ensuring the safe and environmentally sound handling of coal subsequent to the start of operations. According to the letter sent by Sepa to Port Qasim, the coal terminal has been built on berths that were not even designed for the purpose. Managing tens of thousands of tons of coal on a regular basis for the power plants was never going to be a straightforward exercise for a country that has virtually zero experience when it comes to large-scale coal handling. The task requires very careful management in order to prevent pollutants from covering the area. Disposing of the ash after combustion in the power plants is another crucial challenge, and one can only wonder how much care the authorities at the power plant in Sahiwal are taking in carrying out their responsibility there. Coal is always dirty business, whether it is a question of its handling, combustion or disposal. Quite clearly, the government has grossly underestimated the scale of the responsibility that falls upon it to minimise coal's harmful impact on the people and the ecology.

Sindh's 'ghost' teachers

It is unfortunate that the reforms attempted in Sindh to tackle the educational crisis in the province have been unsuccessful in reducing the incidence of teacher absenteeism in schools. The Sindh School Education and Literacy Department has just released a long, regionally disaggregated list naming absentee teachers and staff. While the current list records absenteeism for the month of March, it is not for the first time that teachers have been called out for irresponsible behaviour. Teacher absenteeism has remained a persistent challenge; but naming and shaming school teachers has clearly not pulled the plug on this behaviour. Despite the use of biometric verification, the problem will continue until teachers and managers are penalised for absenteeism and held accountable for their responsibilities — years of government failure to crack down on 'ghost' teachers, a euphemism for absent teachers, is the real challenge.

When teachers are absent from classrooms, and the rate of student enrolment and retention has hardly increased, investing in rebuilding school infrastructure is not the solution. In February, the Sindh chief minister had told a World Bank delegation that the rehabilitation of over 4,000 schools had been planned. With more than 6m out-of-school children in a province with an education budget of Rs202m, these are merely tall promises that do nothing to make quality education accessible to all. For any education system to be able to provide students with opportunities, teachers are the most critical stakeholders. As is the case with other professions, it is only when teachers are incentivised through career development and annual awards for good performance that they will excel. Another aspect is to ensure that teachers are equipped with subject-specific skills as well as pedagogical standards. With disturbingly low learning outcomes in Sindh — and particularly for girls — it is critical that this government execute a progressive approach to improving teaching standards for bettering the prospects of our future generations.

Taking note of an unsolved murder

THE acquittals last August should have jolted the prosecution and judicial systems into conducting an urgent review of the traumatic episode. Yet on Monday, a bench of the Lahore High Court ordered the release on bail of the five suspects who were acquitted last year of conspiring to assassinate Benazir Bhutto.

The five acquitted men were kept in prison through a number of short-term executive and judicial orders.

In February, a review board comprising three justices of the Lahore High Court acceded to the Punjab government's request to keep in state custody the five men for a further 60 days.

Before that, a 90-day detention request had been acceded to by the review board in November 2017.

The review board proceedings were held in camera, and each time, police were able to produce enough evidence to convince the judges on the review board that the continued detention of the five men was in the public interest.

Inevitably, however, courts tire of repeated requests to detain terrorism suspects under public safety laws and bail is usually granted.

The failure is not of the judges who order the release of the individuals detained, but of the prosecution and the overall judicial system.

Governments relying on archaic public safety laws to detain terrorism suspects is itself an abuse of the judicial system.

Yet, the Benazir Bhutto case was no ordinary matter and the iconic leader's assassination shook the foundations of the country.

While myriad failures of the executive and the criminal justice system allow many an accused to go scot-free, in the judicial process against individuals accused of

involvement in a crime that reshaped the country's politics, a higher standard of professionalism and commitment is required.

Surely, rather than simply allowing the suspects to walk free on bail and possibly return to militant activities, the state ought to have explored more thoroughly the legal options to bring to a satisfactory conclusion the trials of all suspects in the Bhutto assassination.

Perhaps, then, this is an ideal matter for Chief Justice Saqib Nisar to look into. The chief justice has vigorously pursued all manner of lawbreakers in recent months and has also expressed a desire to put right some of the structural flaws in the justice system in the country.

There are few cases as important as the several related trials of individuals suspected of involvement in or covering up evidence of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, and surely a high-profile intervention could jolt the state and the judicial system into taking necessary and positive action.

Judicial intervention at the highest level could also demonstrate that the superior judiciary is serious about improving the performance of the criminal justice system and is willing to nudge the state in the right direction.

The country deserves to know the facts of the Benazir Bhutto assassination.

How to wreck a deal

IN one of the biggest foreign policy decisions of his presidency to date, Donald Trump has pulled the US out of the JCPOA, as the Iran nuclear deal is formally known. The American president took the decision despite entreaties from some of his closest European allies — the past few days had seen much transatlantic diplomacy as European leaders tried to convince him to stay in the deal — as well as consistent confirmation from the IAEA that Iran was in full compliance with the agreement. Mr Trump's decision has been mostly condemned by the world community, with the notable exception of Israel and Saudi Arabia. In fact, Israel's leader Benjamin Netanyahu issued a gushing statement welcoming Mr Trump's "historic" decision soon after it was announced.

While fathoming the US leader's actions is not easy, two apparent motives spring to mind to explain why he quit what was by most accounts a successful deal. Firstly, Mr Trump is surrounded by warlike hawks — most of them close to Israel — who want nothing less than a full confrontation with Iran. Secondly, it seems that Mr Trump wants to undo every major decision made by his predecessor Barack Obama. Whatever the case, pulling out of the deal has put into question America's commitments with the rest of the world; critics would be justified in asking that if the US cannot honour a multilateral agreement that was being respected by Iran, can its promises be taken seriously elsewhere? Moreover, the Middle East is a complicated place. Multiple actors are involved in the region's numerous wars. Therefore, tearing up the JCPOA due to Iran's alleged activities in the region is to mix two separate issues.

Iran's reaction to the US move has largely been measured, except for an episode on Wednesday in which lawmakers inside parliament torched the US flag. President Hassan Rouhani has said his country will continue to honour the deal, while the EU nations have stated the same. However, the question arises: if the US sanctions any state doing business with Iran now that it has pulled out of the JCPOA, how will the deal survive? From here, effectively it is into the unknown. If Washington's rhetoric gets more aggressive, Tehran can be expected to reply in kind, which does not augur well for regional peace. Around the time the deal was announced, there were reports that Israel had fired upon Iranian targets in Syria from the occupied Golan. With the nuclear deal scuttled and the coterie of hawks in Washington itching for a fight, there is a very real chance that Iran and Israel's confrontation in Syria may transform into an open war. Mr Trump may have completely dismissed world opinion on the JCPOA; however, he needs to heed more rational voices and prevent a new war with Iran.

NAB's flawed pursuit

ACCOUNTABILITY reduced to a farce damages institutions and undermines the public trust in a much-needed process.

Unhappily, the chairman of NAB, Javed Iqbal, a retired justice of the Supreme Court no less, does not appear to understand the damage that careless or perhaps

deliberately mischievous investigations by his organisation can cause to an already suspect accountability process.

A startling press release by NAB on Tuesday set off a furore in the country. NAB had apparently discovered a two-year old World Bank report via a months-old newspaper column in which it was alleged that several billion dollars of remittances were sent from Pakistan to India and that these were part of a massive money-laundering scheme by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The World Bank report was discredited immediately after its publication.

The Bank itself has admitted that the methodology used to calculate remittances globally were mere estimates and not a measure of actual money flows. Indeed, it is implausible for the Bank to measure money flows to India that the financial system of Pakistan itself does not detect. The sums alleged are also wildly disproportionate to the size of the Pakistani economy and the official remittances that are reported.

Even an amateur ought to have suspected something was amiss in the allegations.

What is deeply troubling, however, is that NAB is now acknowledging that it is mobilising its investigatory resources on the basis of flimsy reports in the media. Will monitoring social media and launching corruption probes on the basis of the freewheeling allegations in that medium be the next step? After a fierce reaction by the government, including Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's speech in parliament, NAB has backtracked a bit.

But it is telling that its initial reaction to the outcry was one of defiance, going so far as to ask why the World Bank had corrected its 2016 report if it was wrong. It is possible that NAB was misled or swept up in the anti-corruption fervour that has been whipped up, committing an honest mistake that quickly escalated into a public relations disaster for the institution. But NAB's recent focus has been overwhelmingly on the political class and within that class on the PML-N.

Mistakes, when they occur, ought to point in many directions; otherwise, suspicions of a witch-hunt or partisan probes gain credibility. NAB must put its house in order.

Quetta Literary Festival

WHETHER one is there to listen or speak, literary festivals are like magical realms which take us away from the humdrum of everyday life to celebrate the written word.

In countries where open expression is becoming rare, literary festivals are opportunities for freedom of opinion without being censured for dissenting views. This week, the organisers of the debut Quetta Literary Festival pulled off a remarkable two-day feat bringing literature and culture to a troubled area of the country at a time when all narratives of peace have been outstripped by violent attacks in Balochistan including its capital.

Holding a festival in an intensely securitised province only shows that intellectual activity can never be fully suppressed. With a slew of respected writers and artists, as well as journalists, participating from all over the country, Quetta's festival must be commended for its smorgasbord of words and ideas that kept audiences engrossed.

Creative platforms are imperative when opportunities for conversations to comprehend everyday realities have been eschewed by the state, thereby sidestepping people's suffering and concerns. In Balochistan, similar events have included a children's literary festival in Turbat and the Gwadar book festival. These are all invaluable avenues, especially when the written word is a platform from which writers can bear testimony to their times.

Because writers talk about factors that shape the sociopolitical landscape, such vibrant platforms for birthing new ideas must be supported in a nascent democracy. Taking literary discourse to a region that has had sparse interaction with visiting intellectuals in recent years, the curators of the Quetta festival have also overcome the long-time, albeit informal, security-driven restriction on outsider movement in the province.

Here, poet John Donne's prose holds relevance when he says "no man is an island". For Balochistan's young people, keeping the oxygen of culture and ideas flowing will offer them a doorway to imagining a future without violence and uncertainty.

Behind bars in Pakistan

MANY Pakistanis, weary of the violence that has wracked this country in recent years, may not spare much thought for conditions inside the nation's prisons, or have any sympathy for those who endure them. However, the issue has a significant bearing on the security environment in the country as a whole; in fact, it can even determine the extent to which we can hold on to the tenuous and hard-fought peace we have achieved. It is therefore appropriate that Nacta along with the ICRC and Code Pakistan, a local NGO, has explored the matter in some detail and recommended urgent, short- and long-term reforms. Among their findings, compiled in a recently released report, is that Pakistani prisons are severely overcrowded, housing on average 57pc more inmates than their authorised capacity. Appallingly, eight of these detention facilities have an occupancy rate of 300pc to 500pc more than the official capacity. Another important revelation is that undertrial prisoners comprise 66pc of all those behind bars, over twice the international rate of 27pc.

The shockingly lax security protocols in prisons across the country have already received much attention time and again, often in spectacular ways. There were the jailbreaks in Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan some years ago, for instance, in which militants managed to free over 500 inmates, including many of their own ilk. More recently, two hardcore Lashkar-i-Jhangvi militants, accused of over 60 murders between them, escaped from Karachi's Central Prison. Investigations revealed not only active collusion on the part of several jail officials in the getaway, but also that high-profile militants — instead of being isolated in their barracks away from the other inmates — were virtually running the prison.

Aside from the obvious health consequences such as the spread of infectious disease, overcrowding in prisons also contributes in many subtle ways to a less secure society. For one, it results in a loss of control over the prisoners — even more so when the latter include dangerous individuals who can easily intimidate prison guards. That precipitates high levels of stress among jail personnel, leading to a situation where they can make critical mistakes, or even cede space to violent criminals. Living in an intolerably confined area also exacerbates tensions and increases the risk of violence among the prison population, a majority of whom have not even been convicted by the courts. The close proximity also makes it easier for hardcore outlaws to influence undertrial prisoners, thereby fuelling an

endless cycle of criminality. There are thus several vital reasons why the various aspects of the criminal justice system, including investigation and prosecution, must work together so that trials can be concluded within a reasonable period of time. Aside from this, it is about time that Pakistan discarded the outmoded concept of retributive justice and adopted the more modern, humane path of reformative justice.

Affirming trans identity

PAKISTAN made history this week by becoming one of only a few countries in the world to pass progressive legislation guaranteeing the fundamental rights of its trans citizens — including rights of employment, property, inheritance, to vote and to hold public office.

One of the hallmarks of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, passed by the National Assembly on Tuesday, is its culturally relevant, gender-affirming definition of trans Pakistanis based on their self-perceived identities. This stands in stark contrast to an earlier iteration of the bill that would have forced trans persons to be ‘screened’ for legal recognition and subjected to humiliating, unsafe medical and bureaucratic hurdles.

Another salient revision includes changing the enforcement mechanism (to redress harassment and discrimination complaints) from a dedicated committee to existing bodies such as the federal ombudsperson and the National Commission of Human Rights.

While marginalised communities do need certain exclusive services, being able to access mainstream services that are appropriately sensitised to their needs is often more effective than relegating them to outsider status through the creation of parallel systems.

Once signed into law, the bill will extend to the whole of Pakistan, but it is important to note that though it is overriding, implementing affirmative policies for subjects that have been devolved from the centre, such as health and education, will require provincial legislation — and action.

The bill, and the stakeholder process that leads up to it, should serve as a template for elected representatives to follow, as it demonstrates how essential it is for policymakers to connect with grass-roots activists so that the most disenfranchised voices are heard and meaningful legislation formulated.

This is a watershed for the khwaja sira and wider trans community, and a moment for all Pakistanis to reflect on.

Related: Kami Sid expresses joy as the Transgender Persons Bill 2017 passes

The struggle for rights and recognition is woven into the very DNA of this nation. Their community, too, suffered under a colonial regime that pathologised and criminalised their existence. Too often, however, the narrative around human rights issues is delegitimised as a Western construct, exacerbated to an extent by an overreliance on donor-driven paradigms in the development sector, which can depoliticise local movements.

But the overarching moral impetus of rights-based activism in this country has always been an indigenous struggle to decolonise from inherited systems of oppression. Almost 71 years since Independence, our fellow trans Pakistanis have given us the gift of this reminder.

Limitless bans

IS there recognition in policy circles about the increasingly right-wing stance that the country is taking? There is no shortage of examples, but suffice to mention the most recent one, which some may see as judicial overreach. On Wednesday, the Islamabad High Court banned the airing of Indian movies, dramas, and advertisements on local private channels, and barred the broadcast of “substandard” infotainment programmes and “obscene content” during the Ramazan transmission.

Barrister Syed Ali Zafar, counsel for the PBA, has said that he intends to file an intra-court appeal against the single-bench order. That is certainly the PBA’s right, and it is to be hoped that good sense prevails. A number of factors to be taken into

account. For one thing, it is the job of Pemra to regulate what is broadcast into households, surely not that of the judiciary. More germane to the point, though, is the fact that who is to decide what is substandard, obscene, or inappropriate, and by what objective yardstick? And, even if there is some authority sitting in judgement on Pakistan's viewing habits, is this a state where people are 'allowed' only to access that which is approved by the state? To be sure, it is true that there are a number of examples of misjudged or problematic programming. However, the answer lies in not bans but education so that people are equipped with the discernment to choose what is relevant. What is not popular will automatically fall by the wayside. Beyond that, the state and its various enforcement mechanisms must recognise that censorship has no end — and also not much point, given that the country has a thriving pirate market for all sorts of content to people's choice.

Blocked by the US

AN unusual decision by the US suggests that behind the ongoing diplomatic engagement lie deep strains that, if not managed carefully, could lead to a rupture in bilateral ties. Seeking to add Abdul Wali, aka Umer Khorasani, leader of the Jamaatul Ahrar faction of the banned TTP, to a UN sanctions committee list was a sensible move by Pakistan. Blocking the Pakistani move, as the US has done, is insensible. The JuA as an organisation was added to the UN sanctions committee list in mid-2017, while in October, a US drone is believed to have targeted Khorasani, who was initially reported to have been killed in the attack but survived. What, then, does the US hope to achieve by blocking Pakistan's request? With no reasonable or positive answer readily available, it would appear that the US is using what it perceives to be leverage against Pakistan to bring this country's actions fully in line with US demands in the region.

The US blocking manoeuvre in the UN has also come at a time when a tussle over diplomats between the US and Pakistan may significantly disrupt diplomatic ties. The threatened imposition of travel-related restrictions on Pakistani diplomats and their families in the US is now a reality. In retaliation against the unfair US move, Pakistan has announced reciprocal measures against US diplomats in this country. The ill-timed squabble is likely diverting diplomatic energies away from substantive issues. It appears that the US is intent on ratcheting up pressure on Pakistan, presumably as part of the do-more mantra that is once again being shrilly

deployed. But such manoeuvres are unlikely to be effective because even if short-term concessions are wrested from Pakistan, they will come at the cost of further vitiating the diplomatic environment in which the two countries have to try and address long-term problems in the region.

The decision to block the listing of Khorasani in the UN sanctions committee is particularly egregious because it suggests the US is willing to corrupt anti-terrorism measures to deny Pakistan its legitimate security goals. The JuA and its leader are a serious problem for Pakistan because the group has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to launch high-profile and deadly attacks inside this country. When US President Donald Trump unveiled his so-called South Asia strategy last year, US officials insisted that a sustainable, cooperative relationship was being sought with Pakistan. That would mean addressing some of this country's legitimate security concerns rather than heaping pressure on Pakistan to acquiesce to a US war strategy in Afghanistan that has been criticised by many US analysts outside the Trump administration. Khorasani of the JuA is a significant threat, and the UN sanctions committee should not be used to deny Pakistan a legitimate request. Pakistan and the US need to return to effective engagement immediately.

Irresponsible budget

THE budget announced by Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah is tall on promises and short on measures. So short, in fact, that it does not even require the tabling of a finance bill, since it contains no changes in the revenue framework, even though it expects a reasonably sharp increase in revenues of 13pc. Not only that, the provincial government seems to think that authorising expenditures for only three months is political prudence, allowing the next government to either continue with the expenditures as programmed, or to effect changes before renewing the authorisation. The absence of any revenue effort is the glaring part of the budget, something that has been a sticking point for the provincial governments ever since the devolution framework of the 18th Amendment and the eighth National Finance Commission award were announced back in 2009.

Far from being prudent, what the budget has done is to program unrealistic revenue targets while maintaining development spending and hiking current expenditures. This burdens the next government with the job of either slashing

spending or sharply raising taxes to keep within the framework established by the budget. This is the classic trap of postponing the consequences while enjoying the benefits. The budget contains a large hole of Rs174.9bn, to be plugged by a combination of capital receipts and carryover cash balance. Should these inflows materialise, there may be redemption for the chief minister. But, as is more likely, if the budgetary framework ends up requiring large-scale adjustments in the revenue plan and expenditures, it will belie the stated intention of being prudent by keeping a three-month limit on the expenditure authorisation. This is irresponsible budgeting, even for an outgoing dispensation.

The PPP government in Sindh has made a great deal of political noise over the failure of the federal government to finalise the ninth NFC award, or to devolve further revenue heads to the provinces, and has objected to the less-than-programmed federal transfers every fiscal year. But for its own part, it has shown little willingness to build its own revenue base beyond the low-hanging fruit of the sales tax on services, which has given the provincial government a bonanza because much of the country's services industry base happens to be in Karachi. It can only be called an irresponsible budget, one that fails to live up to the promises of its drafters.

Rally in Karachi

REPORTS that Sindh Rangers have sought to disrupt Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement meetings in Karachi ahead of its intended rally on Sunday, and that Sindh Police has issued charge sheets against scores of its activists, are deeply troubling. The sweeping indictments include sedition, rioting, unlawful assembly — as well as terrorism and sectarianism under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Since February, PTM has successfully staged peaceful gatherings in Islamabad, Peshawar, Swat and Lahore. There is no indication that Karachi's rally would be any different; even concerns that holding it on May 12 might be misconstrued along sectarian lines have been dispelled. Such heavy-handedness is even more surprising given the province's long and vibrant political tradition, one that has seen peasants, socialists, Sindhi nationalists and even separatists hold mass rallies in its major cities, including Karachi, over the years. That a large political rally can be held without any untoward incident would only serve to bolster the case that law and order has genuinely been restored in the city.

The authorities' clampdown is thus paranoid and counterproductive. The movement's language may often be incandescent, but their ends are just and their means constitutional. Brokering an honest dialogue (which is what they desire in their demand for a truth and reconciliation commission) would soothe their rancour, while using the very methods that they seek to reform (overreach and excessive force) can easily backfire. These activists have so far peacefully endured attempts to malign their intentions and suppress their activities. But even the most non-violent movements, if pushed too far, can be sabotaged and succumb to violence. The jirga constituted by the government to facilitate talks with PTM has rightly called for restraint. Public disaffection existed long before PTM came to the fore of national politics. Calls to change the status quo have, in fact, long dominated it. PTM is entitled to its say in this debate. There should be no more arbitrary actions against them. Like everyone else, they must be allowed to exercise their rights to free speech and assembly.

What happened to the budget debate?

THE likelihood of a substantive debate was always low. This is not surprising given that the end of parliament's term is imminent, a controversy over the PML-N government's presentation of a full-year budget is still continuing, politicians are focusing on the nomination of a caretaker setup, and political parties are going into poll campaign mode. Still parliament's disregard of its duty to have a thorough discussion on the federal budget before it passes the Finance Bill was clearly evident when the government was unable to ensure quorum in the National Assembly on Friday during Finance Minister Miftah Ismail's winding-up speech. Quorum may be ensured this week when Mr Ismail tries once again to wrap up the budget, but the damage has already been done and the PML-N has yet again embarrassed itself in parliament. The inability of the PML-N to ensure its elected representatives do not hinder parliament's constitutional work is sadly one of the more prominent aspects of the party's tenure.

To be sure, the opposition did not perform especially well either during the budget debate. While the parliamentary arithmetic is in the PML-N's favour, a spirited and substantive debate by the opposition could have put pressure on the government to change some aspects of the federal budget. The handouts galore on the

expenditure side and revenue projections built on seemingly unrealistic assumptions will likely require serious changes after the next federal government is sworn in later this year. But the major opposition parties missed a significant opportunity to demonstrate that they are better prepared than the PML-N to take on the serious responsibilities of managing the state's finances and sustaining economic growth. Instead, further embarrassment for the government could be in store for the PML-N government during the passage of so-called cut motions during the budget session, which could threaten to trigger the resignation of the government if the PML-N does not ensure adequate numbers in the house.

While procedural skirmishes are indulged in, the worrying reality is that the next parliament is not poised to deliver an improved democratic process. Among the major political parties that could form or become a part of the next government, only the PPP has shown interest in introducing structural reforms to the institutions of democracy. But the PPP's governance record is undeniably poor and the party's interest in improving the performance of parliamentary committees, for example, has been patchy at best. The PTI has unveiled a governance agenda for the next five years if elected to government, but Imran Khan has set a trend of PTI MNAs taking minimal interest in parliament when in opposition. While the treasury benches attract far more spotlight, the work of the opposition is also important. At the very least, all parties should pay some heed to the economic storm clouds and think through some stabilising measures that may be needed early in the next parliament.

May 12 questions

IT has been 11 years since Karachi was held hostage and witnessed much bloodshed on its streets. The reason behind the May 12, 2007, violence was the thwarted visit of the then deposed chief justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Chaudhry.

The MQM — then a united and much more powerful entity than it is today — practically controlled the Sindh government and wanted to prevent the judge from reaching a reception arranged in his honour by members of the bar. This was being done in order to please the military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf, the Muttahida's political patron. However, the MQM's foes in Sindh — principally the PPP and the ANP — wanted to welcome the judge and had arranged rallies to receive him.

What resulted was an ugly power play. By the end of the day at least 50 people had died and 100 were injured, while Mr Chaudhry was unable to leave Karachi airport as the streets of the metropolis became a battleground.

However, despite the passage of over a decade, and the change of several governments at the centre and in Sindh, the perpetrators of the May 12 violence have not been brought to justice. In fact, as reported in this paper on Saturday, the cases are still at the pre-trial stage.

Several reasons have been noted for the absence of progress in the cases, including the state's lack of interest and lethargy at the police's end. This is so despite the fact that an apparently 'crucial' piece of evidence — a confessional statement by an MQM lawmaker — has been recorded. Apart from the state's slothful attitude towards bringing to justice those involved in one of Karachi's bloodiest episodes, it also shows how the rulers can use political militants to their advantage, and later, disown and discard them. As mentioned above, the MQM enjoyed vast powers at the time, with ministers in the Sindh government and a powerful political patron at the centre. The Muttahida was used as a key tool to unleash mayhem in the metropolis — though armed wings of other parties also participated in the violence. However, the party dramatically fell out of favour with the powers that be following the 2015 raid on its headquarters. The PPP also needs to answer the question of why it has done so little to bring May 12's perpetrators to justice. It has used May 12 as a rallying cry, but the Sindh government has done very little to speed up the investigations.

Crippled for life

KOT Asadullah and Kalalanwala are not obscure villages that invite researchers to explore their hidden mysteries. They are located only a small distance away from Lahore along GT Road and are known for the hazards they pose to their residents — the two villages infamously have a high prevalence of people with physical impairments, most notably of the limbs. It has been close to two decades since Kalalanwala hit the news with a series of reports on its residents' physical handicaps. In many cases, the featured victims of this condition are children and

young adults. It did not take very long for the 'cause' to be pointed out. And the suspicion is that some 'experts' already had a fair idea of what was wrong with the place: its groundwater. The water was contaminated to a point where it now threatened to cripple for life large groups of people, their system weakened by constant consumption over a long period of time. With civilisation having entered the 21st century, with all its advances in modern and safe living, much concern was expressed. That there has been little by way of remedy for these unfortunate villages has been confirmed by a new feature in the papers of late, in which the focus is on the perils of leaving people exposed to highly toxic water. There seems to have been no progress on the matter over the past two decades.

However, much has changed in Kot Asadullah and Kalalanwala in this period. Both have been, off and on, in the news — the intensity of attention varying from time to time. Many residents are said to have left their old homes to resettle in other, safer neighbourhoods. Farmers who have lived and worked here for many generations have been forced to sell their lands and many a soul has had to take up other means of earning. Yet, shockingly, there appear to be no conclusive answers. A whole lifestyle has been lost, ruined by conditions that surely do not appear insurmountable.

PML-N on the brink of rupture?

IT does not appear that the dust will settle quickly after the latest storm to hit the country's political landscape and buffet civil-military relations.

Quite what former prime minister Nawaz Sharif intended to achieve with hard-hitting remarks about what he perceives to be fundamental flaws in the country's national security and foreign policies can perhaps only be explained by him.

What is clear after his remarks yesterday to the media outside the Islamabad accountability court, where Mr Sharif and his daughter, Maryam Nawaz, are on trial, is that he stands by what he said in an exclusive interview to this newspaper.

In the Buner rally later in the day, Mr Sharif appeared to up the ante further, if that were possible, by demanding a national commission to establish who has committed treason in the country in light of his comments about militancy in general and the Mumbai attacks in particular.

Mr Sharif's hard line has drawn an unprecedented response from the National Security Committee, convened overnight at the request of the military leadership to discuss Mr Sharif's allegations.

In effect, the PML-N government, senior ministers of which form one side of the NSC, has denounced its own party leader, Mr Sharif, in the NSC.

The contortions that Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has had to perform appear to have driven the prime minister to breaking point. It is possible that Mr Abbasi, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and others in the PML-N will attempt to provide further clarifications overnight in a bid to try and minimise the perceived damage to the PML-N's election hopes.

But what is already clear is that the PML-N is in an unprecedented situation: pulled in different directions from within and put under enormous pressure from outside.

A historic political rupture and the breaking up of the most dominant version of the PML in modern history could yet happen. The upcoming general election has been plunged into further uncertainty than ever.

Dangerous and bewildering political turmoil aside, the role of the media, particularly the electronic media, in India and Pakistan, has been deplorable. What Mr Sharif has alleged is not unprecedented and the Indian media's reaction has been worryingly hysterical.

Wild allegations, over-the-top coverage and transparent misrepresentation and manipulation of statement created a frenzy in India that the Pakistani media felt compelled to respond to.

Certainly, tit-for-tat coverage is not what is expected of a responsible media in any country, but the freeze in bilateral ties between Pakistan and India appears to have encouraged coverage that is contrary to fact and reality.

Inside Pakistan, condemnation of Mr Sharif's comments is the right of the public and the media. What is disconcerting, however, is the trotting out of allegations of treasonous behaviour and demands for summary punishments.

The media should support, not undermine, the rule of law.

Settling bills

IN his recent visit to Karachi, Finance Minister Miftah Ismail held a round of meetings with industry leaders and heard the same refrain that every finance minister has had to hear from industry. Sales tax refunds are stuck, industry complained, and the amount has become so large that it is hampering industry's ability to function. This is a constant theme in the government's relations with business leaders, because the rulers rely on and hold on to these refunds to help shore up the fiscal framework, while industry has to resort to bank borrowing to make up for the liquidity shortages that it must endure as a result. One hears of different amounts that industry claims is outstanding in the form of refunds, but the figure tends to be in the hundreds of billions of rupees. In Karachi, the finance minister assured industry leaders that Rs100bn worth of these refund claims will be settled by the government before its departure. Industry leaders are sceptical, however, perhaps because they recall a similar commitment made to them in February which has yet to be fulfilled.

This is not the only outstanding amount that the government is committed to clearing up, even if partially, before its departure. According to reports, emanating from post-budget consultations, the government is also pledging to settle at least Rs100bn worth of the power sector's circular debt — the total level of outstanding amounts payable by the government has crossed Rs1tr. The politicians might yet be successful in this because it is the start of the fiscal year and those in power do not have to worry about even the close of the first quarter, let alone the whole year. The stars are aligned for a large payout before the government's departure. But the fact that it has come to these last-minute commitments to settle a portion of the large overhang of outstanding payments owed by the government is a serious indicator of the failure of reforms in the areas of taxes and the power sector. In both, the government likes to brag about the quantum increases it has managed.

Power generation has increased in five years by more than it did in 70, the politicians tell us. And revenue collection has more than doubled in this time. But the inability of both systems to make their payment obligations is the real story, and it is here that very little seems to have changed.

Pointless animosity

A POET and political figure of international fame, Faiz Ahmed Faiz is known for his belief in building bridges — be it between people, countries, or cultures. How disheartening it is then that his daughter Moneeza Hashmi was not permitted to attend a conference in India a few days ago. Making matters even more shameful is the fact that she was not there as a casual attendee: in her capacity as the head of the creative and media wing of Kashf Foundation, Pakistan, Ms Hashmi had been invited as a guest speaker at the 15th Asia Media Summit, held in New Delhi on May 10. Arriving in the city a day before, however, she found that no room had been booked in her name at the hotel where the event was being held, since, she was told, no Pakistani had been invited. It turned out that, in fact, no Pakistani had been granted a visa to attend the event; she had been able to fly in because she had a prior visa that was still valid. When Ms Hashmi raised the matter with the organisers of the event, they expressed their helplessness in the face of pressure from the Indian government.

Perhaps the saddest part of the story is that this is only the latest example of India making immature moves against ordinary Pakistanis. On at least two earlier occasions, Pakistani theatre groups have been barred from performing in New Delhi. Certainly, this country does not have a shining record either when it comes to cultural events featuring Indian artists, but it is better than that of its neighbour under the Modi government. Ironically, the world's largest democracy is fast losing the legitimacy that is expected to flow from the status. If even cultural events and ordinary people, who matter little on the diplomatic stage, are being targeted, it is difficult to see what hope there can be for a future softening of ties in the political realm between the two countries.

Israeli brutality

THE contrast could not be starker. On Monday in occupied East Jerusalem, there were smiles, applause and gushing praise all around as the US shifted its embassy — as promised by American President Donald Trump — from Tel Aviv to a city that practically the whole world recognises as disputed territory. Almost 100 kilometres away, in the open-air prison of Gaza, the scene was quite different, as the Israeli war machine was indulging in the butchery of Palestinians protesting for the return of their land. By the time the Israeli guns had fallen silent, thousands were wounded and over 60 Palestinians lay dead, including children. Among the victims was an eight-month-old infant girl, along with other minors. These appear to be the ‘terrorists’ the Israeli military has said it was confronting, while Jared Kushner, Mr Trump’s son-in-law and point man for the Middle East, who was present at the Jerusalem embassy shifting, has blamed the Palestinians for their own deaths. Even by Israeli standards, the level of brutality unleashed on Monday was almost unprecedented, as snipers took shots at Palestinian protesters. As for the American response, it is devoid of all compassion and humanity, and reflects that under Mr Trump’s watch, Arab lives don’t matter, while the appeasement of Israel is paramount.

Meanwhile, the reaction of the Muslim states has largely been without substance. Even in this country, local political developments were the lead story in the media; the carnage in Gaza received only scant coverage. Unfortunately, where the Muslim world is concerned, we appear to be big on slogans only. Kuwait did try to raise the matter in the UN Security Council, but its efforts were blocked by the US. However, South Africa deserves praise for its moral courage: the country pulled its ambassador out of Israel in reaction to the massacre. If Muslim states, especially the Arab bloc, are serious about letting Israel and the US know that they will not stand silent in the face of anti-Palestinian violence, they need to take a leaf out of South Africa’s book.

On the foreign front, Mr Trump has been playing a destabilising role, particularly where the Middle East is concerned. Recently, he tore up a landmark deal (the JCPOA) signed with Iran, much to the displeasure of the international community, and managed to ‘legitimise’ Israel’s illegal occupation of Jerusalem by shifting his embassy there. With these moves, it appears that the Arab-Israeli peace process is dead and buried. Jerusalem, or Al Quds, lies at the heart of Palestine’s religious,

cultural and national identity. Handing the holy city over to Israel will further inflame the region, and no Palestinian body — Fatah, Hamas or any other — will be able to convince their people to give it up. Therefore, Palestinian disquiet, and Israel's vicious response, seems to be the pattern for the foreseeable future in the occupied territories.

Provincial budgets

THE provincial governments, it would seem, have largely given up their responsibilities as the end of their terms approaches.

The latest example of this comes from the government of Punjab, which has shied away from announcing a budget at all, giving as their justification “the limit of our mandate” and the need to avoid “passing the burden of our development works on to the next government”.

For its part, Balochistan has presented a full-year budget, but with a massive deficit that is 70pc of its development expenditures.

Clearly, very little thought has gone into formulating this budget and finding ways to balance out its priorities and obligations.

Both governments perhaps stand on opposite ends of the spectrum: Balochistan is not worried about leaving an uncontrollable fiscal situation to its successor, while Punjab would have us believe that it is so concerned about the sensitivities of the next government that it will not even announce a budget or authorise expenditures beyond the end of the provincial government's term.

Both stances are disingenuous.

The authorities in Lahore cannot be so concerned about the end of their mandate that they would practically halt disbursements to ongoing schemes once their term ends.

Halting work on development projects under implementation does nobody a service, not even the incoming government.

If the authorities in Lahore were actually worried about the prerogatives of the next setup, there were better ways of addressing the issue instead of shying away from announcing a budget.

Doing so smacks of disingenuousness.

They could have, for instance, issued an authorisation for the interim rulers to continue with the expenditures, while approving funds for those projects that are already under way, and leaving behind an unallocated portion in the development budget for the next government to use as per its wishes. Likewise for Balochistan, hiking development spending by 25pc while programming lower revenue growth shows that the province is more interested in spending rather than worrying about where the funds to pay for all the projects will come from.

What Punjab and Balochistan have done is to simply signal that they have lost all interest in what happens once they are no longer in office.

That is not respecting the mandate of the incoming government.

In fact, it is a dereliction of duty to not prepare for a handover of power while ensuring that the process remains smooth and orderly.

A ghastly ‘punishment’

IN a horrific act of familial violence, a young man, beginning his adult life, has been left sightless. As reported, the 22-year-old, hailing from a village near Loralai in Balochistan, had approached his parents hoping to convince them to send a marriage proposal to a woman he wanted to wed. Matters needlessly escalated to a point where the mother was forcibly removed from the scene, and the victim’s father, along with his other sons, meted out his own unique brand of punishment by gouging out the eyes of his youngest. A police case was registered in the aftermath; two of the four brothers who abetted the father in the crime were arrested while the search for the remaining perpetrators continues.

It is commendable that the police took quick action in this crime of monstrous proportions — and it is hoped that the guilty are duly punished. Unfortunately, the swiftness with which this case has been handled is the exception, rather than the norm. While laws to protect individuals from family-inflicted violence have been strengthened in recent years, for most victims, the wheels of justice don't turn at all — in part because many crimes such as spousal violence, corporal punishment, child sexual abuse, even 'honour' killings, go unreported. It is essential to understand and explore the causes both from a legal and societal perspective. The inability to resolve family crises amicably, a lack of coping skills to navigate family relations and deficient self-esteem can lead to violent acts within family units. No longer can society afford to define personhood conditionally through values reinforced by a patriarchal society; instead, we should recognise personhood as an individual's right to inherent human dignity to be protected by the state and its machinery. The Pakistani justice system should not allow patriarchal constructs to perpetuate violence, misogyny and intolerance.

The worsening water crisis

THE almost drought-like situation in many parts of the country at the start of the Kharif sowing season is cause for serious alarm.

There is a tendency to treat such conditions with an air of resignation, as if we are totally helpless before the vagaries of nature; in fact, some people, in view of the scarce water available for our agrarian needs, start talking, reflexively, about building the Kalabagh dam.

Given that we are likely to face similar situations in the future, with weather patterns becoming more erratic, it is vital to move beyond these simple positions. Pakistan's food security, as well as its industrial base, is largely built on the irrigation system bequeathed to us by the Americans, working through the World Bank in the wake of the Indus Waters Treaty.

This country is, at its roots, a hydraulic society, and water, especially for irrigation, is its most important natural endowment, upon which is based our entire social structure.

When looking at water issues faced by the country, quantity is only one dimension of the challenge. The real area of concern, for which urgent solutions are required, is utilisation.

According to the Indus River System Authority, the body tasked with managing the allocation of the country's irrigation water, somewhere between 9 MAF to 10 MAF of water is usually released during the Kharif crop sowing season. This year, the amount that has been released is 5.8 MAF, a near disastrous shortfall due to diminished inflows in the dams. But the real story is that of this amount, nearly 1 MAF has been lost, ie it was released but never reached the command heads further downstream.

Some losses are normal, due to seepage and evaporation, but Irsa says the figure is unusually high this year. This loss is south of Taunsa Barrage.

Reports of widespread black marketing of water, which is pumped out illegally using pumps and then poured into tankers which are sold to farmers at a steep price, are widespread across Sindh.

Tail-end farmers on the Nara canal, which feeds large parts of Mirpurkhas Division, for example, claim they have counted more than 800 pumps operating upstream while their watercourses are parched.

Can this sort of theft be possible without the connivance of the provincial irrigation department?

On top of this, there is the matter of poor water practices on farms, where large landowners still use antiquated flood-irrigation techniques, resulting in much wastage, instead of investing in modern irrigation technologies to conserve and make judicious use of a scarce resource.

Until these problems — theft and waste —are adequately addressed, it would be futile to talk of Pakistan's water crisis in terms of quantity alone

Drought is indeed a natural phenomenon that humans can do little to reverse. But how we adapt to it is in our control.

Pak-Afghan plan

SEEMINGLY against the odds, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity has moved from a conceptual framework for bilateral engagement to the implementation phase. Based on seven principles and six working groups, APAPPS could create a much-needed stability in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan and improve security, intelligence and economic cooperation between the two. Certainly, no quick or easy breakthroughs should be expected.

Political uncertainty and worsening insecurity in Afghanistan when paired with a teetering democratic process in Pakistan is not a recipe for a stable environment in which incremental movement can be made towards peace and solidarity. Hard decisions lie ahead, trust will have to be established and both sides will need to demonstrate a willingness to compromise to achieve common goals. Quiet but intensive diplomacy and keeping discussions away from the media glare that can often lead to counterproductive posturing seem to have been key to the progress Afghanistan and Pakistan have made with APAPPS. Behind the scenes, it is likely that outside powers have nudged the South Asian neighbours towards the new dialogue format, which allows for movement in one area not to be affected by stalled talks in another.

Yet, no dialogue and no dialogue format will be able to overcome reluctance on the part of Afghanistan or Pakistan to address the core security problems.

Afghanistan needs an intra-Afghan peace process to be urgently restarted while both countries must address the problem of cross-border militancy and military sanctuaries on the other's soil. America's recent decision to block Pakistan's request in the UN to have the leader of the anti-Pakistan Jamaatul Ahrar, Umar Khorasani, listed by a UN sanctions committee will have deepened doubts whether reciprocal action is possible rather than just unilateral cooperative steps by Pakistan. Positive early gestures by Afghanistan and Pakistan could help pave the way to a sustainable dialogue that can address bigger issues. Also welcome is the emphasis that APAPPS appears to have laid on economic cooperation.

Regional ties can only truly be made interdependent if geo-economic advantages are utilised. Afghanistan's medium-term economic future is tied to the possibilities of trade regionally, while Pakistan's CPEC infrastructure can and should be

extended to neighbouring countries. The promise of APAPPS is its emphasis on Afghanistan and Pakistan forging a joint path to regional peace and solidarity. Too many years of war have gone by without meaningful attempts at a lasting peace. That must change.

Ramazan price hike

AS has become increasingly evident, Ramazan is seen by some unscrupulous elements as an opportunity for profiteering. Across the country, in anticipation of and during the period of fasting, prices of daily essentials are jacked up in order to gain advantage over what is undoubtedly a hostage clientele-base. Whether it is fruit, vegetables, meat or other staple commodities, unjustifiable price hikes seem to peak around the time of Eid after which prices slide back to 'normal' levels. It is welcome, then, that in anticipation of the holy month, on Tuesday in Karachi a meeting was held at the commissioner's office to formulate a strategy to contain profiteering during Ramazan. At the meeting, presided over by Commissioner Ejaz Khan and attended by all deputy commissioners, it was decided that 'stern action' would be taken against all those involved in making unfair profits, with Mr Khan directing the deputy commissioners to 'stay vigilant' in their respective areas and 'conduct raids' regularly.

It is possible to rue the fact that matters in Pakistan have reached such a low that strategies must be formulated to combat unfair practices. Be that as it may, the fact is that this is a real, and pressing, problem — one that stalks the average citizen on a daily basis, at the very least during a given period of time, if not more. Plans are all very well, but their success is dependent entirely on how far, and how strictly, they are implemented. The reality is that for a citizenry already badly hit by spiralling commodity prices, inflation, and the inaccessibility of goods, the upcoming rise in food-related expenditures can only be seen as rubbing salt into the wound of general injustice. The Karachi city government might have recognised this as a pressing issue, but it is hoped that it effectively employs the strategy it has come up with, and that other cities, too, can curb profiteering during Ramazan.

Power breakdown yet again

THE latest near-countrywide power breakdown happened at exactly the same place where multiple such events have already occurred over the years.

The point at the Guddu thermal power station is a crucial junction in the national grid, from where transmission lines go out in three directions, towards the south, north and west in the direction of Quetta.

The region itself is a desert, with hot and humid temperatures in the summers and prone to powerful gusts of wind. Both these weather-related features have been blamed for large-scale power breakdowns in the past.

This time it is not clear what the precise cause of the breakdown was, nor does it really matter to most of the country. Keeping a power grid operational in adverse conditions has its challenges, but it is certainly not rocket science.

Basic common sense tells us that a significant role needs to be played by power-sector professionals. Yet that is precisely what is lacking in Pakistan. The last professional who occupied an important position in the power sector was Fiaz Chaudhry, the managing director of the National Transmission and Despatch Company. He was pushed out unceremoniously because, being a professional, he had fallen afoul of the factional politics that the power bureaucracy is full of.

Today, all important posts, from NTDC to NPCC, PPIB and Pepco to name a few, are staffed with DMG officers, who are more qualified for factional rivalry and railroading members of their own clique into vacant positions than to run the power sector of the country.

The breakdown that caused a massive power outage in Punjab and much of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for most of the day is an obvious example of the incompetence of this entire lot. It is the clearest signal yet that the power bureaucracy is in dire need of reform, which should begin with replacing DMG cadres in positions of authority with properly credentialed professionals.

The same critical node in the grid cannot be allowed to be a source of tripping that cascades through the entire system, causing power plants to fall like dominoes.

No doubt the bureaucracy will move to save its skin the same way it has in similar situations in the past: by fabricating an eyewash of an inquiry report.

The plain fact is that technology exists that can help prevent cascading effects of tripping in one section of the grid from knocking out all other power plants. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats who are running the show in our power sector have far too pedestrian a grasp of the technicalities they have to supervise to be able to properly select and oversee the installation of such technology. The result is repeated tripping at the same point in the grid, and endless blackouts across the country.

Balochistan operation

RADDUL Fasaad, the 'mopping up' phase of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, was always going to be a dangerous undertaking, albeit a necessary one. As reported by the ISPR on Wednesday, an intelligence-based operation in Quetta district's Killi Almas area claimed the life of a senior military official in a fierce exchange of gunfire with the terrorists. Colonel Sohail Abid was martyred in the line of duty, even as his courage and that of the security forces accompanying him — four soldiers were wounded, two of them critically — resulted in the death of Salman Badeni, a key Lashkar-i-Jhangvi leader. Badeni, who had a Rs2m bounty on his head, is believed to have been involved in the murder of over 100 Shia Hazaras and policemen in Balochistan. Two would-be suicide bombers were also killed, and one militant taken into custody. The intelligence leading to the operation had been provided by previously arrested 'high-value' targets.

Over the past decade, Balochistan has come to be viewed purely through a narrow, securitised lens which has for various reasons contributed to the province becoming a melting pot for all manner of outlawed groups, including both Baloch insurgents and violent extremists, with dire consequences for all Pakistanis. In particular, the Shia Hazaras have been consistently targeted by bloodthirsty sectarian groups such as the LeJ. The spike in attacks against them recently was clearly the catalyst for the latest military action. And that is where the state falls short in its counterterrorism strategy. While such intelligence-based operations are vital, they deal with the symptoms rather than the disease. Last June, there was a

similar IBO in the aftermath of the kidnapping of two Chinese nationals from Quetta, and a number of hard-core terrorists militants were slain in an area that was an operational base for the LeJ and elements of the militant Islamic State group. Yet, the targeted killings of the Hazaras — who live in the backyard of these violent groups — did not end, even as the rest of the country heaved a sigh of relief at the respite from violence. To ensure the gains from kinetic operations are sustained, extremist ideologies must be eradicated. That requires steps such as ensuring no one gets away with inciting hatred and violence, whether in sermons or in wall chalkings, no banned groups hold rallies, none of their activists/members stand for elections, etc. In short, it requires an unflinching application of the National Action Plan.

Indonesia bombings

IN the shadowy world of religiously motivated militancy, terrorist groups are constantly updating their tactics to cause maximum harm. However, a series of bombings in the Indonesian city of Surabaya a few days ago, in which an outfit linked to the militant Islamic State group bombed a number of churches, has thrown up a disturbing new trend: the use of families, particularly children, in acts of terrorism. While terrorism of all sorts is condemnable, the use of innocent children in such acts is particularly reprehensible. As per reports emerging from Indonesia, a number of families, apparently radicalised through a 'study group' with ideological links to IS, were involved in the lethal church bombings. Family members of all ages — including teenagers and minor children, some as young as nine — took part in the attacks.

While adults can and should be held responsible for their crimes, the use of innocent children in such ghastly acts of violence is truly shocking. Youngsters cannot be expected to comprehend the twisted ideological justifications adults use to carry out such abhorrent acts; in fact, involving them in militancy amounts to child abuse and murder. As it is, war and militancy in many parts of the world — the Middle East and Africa particularly — have robbed countless youngsters of their childhood and left them permanently scarred. Some children have become mere statistics, killed or maimed in the wars that rage across Syria, Iraq etc.

Others have been uprooted and are living in subhuman conditions (for example, the Rohingya). However, for adults to use youngsters to carry out acts of terrorism

marks a particularly cynical low. It is hoped that the Indonesian incidents do not spark copycat attacks. Moreover, counterterrorism and law-enforcement agencies must keep an eye out for this particular practice of using minors for militancy. While battling militants in the field may be the 'easy' part, security services must adapt themselves to spot new 'trends', such as the use of children in terrorism, and neutralise these methods.

Nawaz's self-centred approach

THE party has not split asunder yet, but the forces pulling the PML-N in opposite directions are significant. Chief Minister of Punjab and recently elected PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif chaired his first parliamentary meeting of the party on Thursday in extraordinary circumstances. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's explosive comments in an exclusive interview to this newspaper a week ago and in multiple public appearances since then may have radically altered the PML-N's poll prospects and the electoral landscape itself. The younger Sharif brother has been put in an untenable position: trying to lead a national party into a difficult election campaign for the first time while having family loyalty tested to a staggering degree by his brother. Whatever the elder Sharif's compulsions and whatever justifications he may feel he has for unburdening himself of issues pertaining to civil-military discord at this juncture, he has arguably done a disservice to his party and perhaps the democratic project too.

The younger Sharif brother's eagerness to strike some kind of deal with the security establishment that permits him to fight a relatively open election for the PML-N may be problematic in its own right, but the elder Sharif's act of political arson has potentially dangerous implications for democracy and the PML-N.

Nawaz Sharif's recent remarks may be the subject of much debate, but it also appears that Mr Sharif has decided that if he is going to be removed from frontline politics and perhaps sent to jail too he will not allow his eponymously named political party a separate existence and immediate political relevance. His approach of 'either I will be the leader of the party and the country or the party will be condemned to oblivion' is a thoroughly unnecessary and destructive approach

to politics. More is expected of a three-term prime minister, the quaid of the largest political party in the country and de facto leader of a party that, for all of Nawaz Sharif's personal problems with the law, was until days ago widely considered to be the front-runner in the upcoming general election.

Political and campaign strategies are for parties to decide themselves and for the electorate to embrace or reject. In this wrenching phase of the PML-N's politics, however, it is not clear that the Sharif rival factions, if they can be termed as such, are even able to communicate with each other, let alone seek internal compromise. Alleged shouting matches and harsh remarks across camps suggest total disarray and confusion. If Nawaz Sharif is determined to continue down the path he has recently and explosively chosen, perhaps he could formally and publicly distance himself from the PML-N campaign and allow the party and candidates that remain to chart their own electoral course. Now is not the time for the politics of chaos and disarray.

Missing budget debate

IF ever there was a budget exercise that was mere sound and fury, it was this one. Judging from the level of the furore that the opposition raised in the National Assembly during the budget speech, it was reasonable to expect that there would be plenty of substantive changes that would be demanded in the Finance Bill before its passage. Instead, all we got was a little tinkering at the margins, and the bill was passed more or less in the same form in which it was presented. After this, it is necessary to ask: what was all that screaming and shouting for? If there were such strident objections to the budget, why did we not hear more about them during the budget debate? The stark contrast between the noise and chaos of the budget speech with the near total silence when it came to the budget debate shows that our political parties are not interested in economic policy, only grandstanding and scoring political points.

More than any other finance act, this one went the furthest in incorporating the interests of big capital. The massive tax breaks, and the sharp increase in penalties for non-filers are its defining feature. The amnesty scheme is a one-off measure. It is the large changes in tax rates as well as the breaks offered to big business that will be the budget's biggest inheritance for the next government.

Hardly any substantive debate revolved around these matters though, other than small changes in some of the applicable rates in a few cases. Unfortunately, our political parties have lost contact with whatever philosophical moorings they had in the past, and the budget debate is an excellent example of this. Where parties in other, mature democracies bring different philosophical positions to the conduct of economic policy — adherence to free-market principles or state-sponsored entitlement programmes for example — in Pakistan, there is very little that separates one party from the next on economic matters. Most of our economic policy consists of gimmicks, such as new taxes on existing taxpayers but with new names, or rushing to meet quarterly performance targets set by the IMF. The present budget, in the words of the finance minister, seeks to change the landscape of economic activity, which is a breathtaking ambition to have in the last few days of one's rule. What a pity that there was hardly any debate on its proposals.

Rohingya rape victims

AS a weapon of war, rape is used to orchestrate sexual violence as a way to impose the most extreme humiliation on victims.

In August last year, a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign by Myanmar's army displaced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Rakhine state. Extensive testimonies from survivors sheltering in Bangladesh's refugee camps described the systemic rape and killings.

Nine months on: the search is on for Rohingya babies born of rape

Among the many rape victims are those whose babies will be born this month, according to aid groups preparing for a spate of births and abandoned infants.

With most women hiding their pregnancies fearing the stigma, humanitarian agencies warn of an imminent 'child protection crisis'.

Although doctors have treated hundreds of rape cases in the past months, research estimates two-thirds of traumatised women have not reported their

ordeal.

Take a look: 21 Rohingya women recall rape horrors perpetrated by Myanmar security forces

Without exact figures of pregnant victims, coupled with a shortage of post-rape care and increasing unsafe abortions in overcrowded camps, a health crisis is inevitable.

Reportedly with few resources, aid agencies should focus on short-term measures, including emergency health service provision and shelters for women shunned by their families.

Survivors must receive medical and psychological assistance so that children already born in these circumstances, or those who will be in the next few weeks, are not discarded as 'rape' babies.

Although the UN has placed Myanmar's army on a watch list of security forces and armed groups suspected of using rape in conflict, there must be an internationally led investigation into these crimes so that evidence can be presented before the International Criminal Court.

Knowing that extreme violence was visited upon women, the global community must ensure the perpetrators will never again act with impunity.

From the rape of women in Bosnia to mass rape in Sudan's Darfur region, there are many bone-chilling examples of sexual violence being perpetrated to destabilise communities.

This is because women's lives and bodies have been perceived for too long as acceptable collateral damage in conflict. For this to end, justice and restitution are imperative.

NSC and Fata's merger

CREDIT goes to Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and the military leadership for tenaciously advocating Fata reforms in the face of unreasonable opposition by two key allies of the PML-N government, Mehmood Achakzai of the PkMAP and Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the JUI-F.

The National Security Committee returned to important matters of the state on Saturday with a marathon meeting that, among other issues, endorsed the merger of Fata with KP and a raft of administrative and judicial changes to bring the tribal areas into the national mainstream.

The endorsement of the NSC could boost the possibility of a constitutional amendment bill being tabled in parliament and approved before parliament is dissolved at the end of the month.

The amount of time available is certainly less than ideal for debating an amendment to the Constitution, a legislative process that should never be rushed through, but the issue of Fata reforms has been nationally debated and other than the PkMAP and JUI-F, there is no known and significant parliamentary opposition to the reforms and to Fata's merger with KP.

The triumph of the latest push to introduce meaningful reforms is the decision to merge Fata with KP relatively quickly, within a year, according to reports in the media, rather than allow uncertainty to linger.

As a compromise, an earlier plan had suggested a five-year process of so-called mainstreaming of Fata followed by a decision on whether to merge the region with KP.

Certainly, there are vast implications for the people of Fata and KP whether they are merged into a single federating unit or have separate identities.

But a Fata stand-alone province would have affected the very balance of the federation by introducing a fifth province and could have spawned a number of foreseen and unforeseen problems in the original four provinces.

The debate on whether the country ought to have more provinces is a significant one and will continue, but the needs of Fata are far too urgent to allow further delay.

Rapid mainstreaming with the end-goal of a relatively quick merger with KP is the right way ahead for Fata.

With only days left until the end of the parliamentary term, delays and obfuscation could prove fatal to the cause of Fata reforms.

All parliamentary parties that support Fata reforms should ensure the presence of their MNAs and senators in parliament and the party leaderships should work with Prime Minister Abbasi to push through what would be a historic moment for Fata and the country.

There has been too much suffering in the tribal areas; it is time to offer the people of the region meaningful stability, peace and prosperity.

The rights, systems and services in the rest of the country must be made available to the people of Fata.

Fake news

PAKISTAN will soon be going into election campaign mode, and already the engines of fake news are working overtime. It was in the aftermath of the US election in 2016 that this phenomenon became big news itself, and social networking sites — the principal means of spreading disinformation — received much negative attention. The fact that the underhand activity was ostensibly aimed at influencing the outcome of the election made the issue one of utmost gravity. Undoubtedly, electioneering everywhere is always punctuated with claims and counter claims by political rivals that are not always based on fact, and at times are demonstrably false. But the echo chamber that is the social media has made disinformation a far more potent weapon in recent years.

At a time when the political climate is at fever pitch, Pakistan too is awash with

reports of dubious credibility, further amplified by a section of the mainstream media, which sometimes takes its cue from disinformation being peddled on social media, and presents it as fact rather than taking the trouble to verify it first. A polarised public makes the situation murkier still, but that puts even more onus on the media to sift truth from the morass of lies and innuendo. To cite one example of such disinformation, further embellished in the retelling on both social and mainstream media, is that pertaining to the circumstances surrounding Nawaz Sharif's interview published recently in this newspaper. Among the falsehoods were claims that Mr Sharif or his aides themselves reached out to the reporter, Cyril Almeida; that a special plane was sent by the PML-N to take him to Multan; that he was in the city expressly to interview the former prime minister, etc. The fact is that the journalist had arrived in Multan (by road) the day before to report on the political situation in south Punjab; he contacted Mr Sharif's team upon learning that he would be coming to Multan for a rally; and the interview was conducted not at the airport but at a PML-N leader's residence. Perhaps a phone call to one of the senior editors at the newspaper office would have helped quash these rumours. In an environment where fake news threatens the very foundations of journalism, it is imperative that editors of various media outlets connect with each other 'across the aisle' and collaborate on a code of ethics that will sustain and strengthen their profession.

Supporting nurses

SOME days ago, Balochistan Chief Minister Mir Abdul Quddus Bizenjo lauded nurses on International Nursing Day and promised to take measures to improve their condition in the province. His remarks call for revisiting some shared moral principles regarding what is required of a healthcare professional working in resource-limited settings such as Balochistan. What makes people ...“zealously seek to nurse those who are ill wherever they may be and whenever they are in need” as the Nightingale Pledge for Nurses asserts? From the outside, healthcare workers have a way of making it seem as if working together, analysing multiple health crises — even during unceasing conflict — is effortless. However, the paucity of professionals willing to live and able to work in Balochistan tells a different story altogether. A healthcare provider's mission is to deliver care to those in need despite the human rights violations they themselves face, with human dignities remaining unaddressed. But the very presence of healthcare

professionals working in resource-poor, conflict-affected areas within Balochistan advocates for human welfare in impossible contexts — something nurses do even if they have to endure challenges to their dignity and care.

Across the world, the four aspects of healthcare most ignored are mental health, hygiene, vaccination and emergency care for vulnerable populations. Balochistan is no exception. In a world built to sustain modern nation-state systems, vulnerable populations in perpetual transit are referred to as internally displaced persons, asylum-seekers, migrants and other groups of men, women and children who have no permanent abode. The nomadic groups in Balochistan can also thus be classified as vulnerable populations. Nurses in Balochistan strive to provide crucial and timely medical support to these populations, doctors and surgeons. In addition, their invaluable emotional support to these vulnerable groups often goes unrecognised. Considering the dire healthcare situation in his province, Mr Bizenjo should act on his pledges and ensure that nurses have the backing they need to provide services to the population.

Census validation

GIVEN how much noise was made about conducting the census and the acrimony that followed its results, it is strange to witness the near-complete silence with which the decision to cancel the validation exercise has been received. Two political parties expressed their anger over the results. The MQM claimed that “half of Karachi’s population has not been counted”, rejected the results, and tried to move the Sindh Assembly in a resolution against them. The PPP initially rejected the results as well, only agreeing to withdraw its reservations against a commitment to conduct a larger-than-normal validation exercise. Even when the census had gotten under way, the PPP took the matter to the Sindh High Court, asking for more transparency in the exercise. By August, it had teamed up with the MQM to air strong reservations. PPP leader Khurshid Shah demanded tallying the counts gathered by the army with those of the Statistics Division as the provisional results were announced. Later, the Sindh chief minister joined in as well, and in a long and tumultuous session of the provincial assembly, several ‘anomalies’ were pointed out in the provisional results. The federal government tried to engage with these parties, but by December, the PPP was threatening street protests if the census data were not corrected before the delimitation of the constituencies took

place.

It was in mid-December that an agreement was reached to validate the results through a second round of data gathering in 5pc of the census blocks. Just as that process was set to move forward, the PPP again intervened and claimed that the 'third party' that is supposed to conduct the validation was the Senate. With that demand, the process stopped altogether. The delimitation of electoral constituencies has been carried out based on the provisional census data, and since most of the important constituencies of those holding high party office have not been impacted in a way that undermines their prospects, there is silence on the issue now.

It is evident that there will be no third-party validation of the census results, which is a big mistake because the reservations raised were considerable, and it will leave a big question mark over the results for all times. It is also clear that the parties airing their grievances, especially the PPP, were disingenuous in invoking the enormous policy implications of the census to push their point. All through the process we were told how the results would impact resource sharing, and how Sindh would fight for its fair share. Now, with the validation exercise no longer in the works, the sheer lack of interest on the part of all parties to the dispute shows clearly that they were in it for only one thing: the preservation of their constituencies. All else, it seems, was hot air.

The first 100 days...

IF, indeed, the party does win the general election and if he is elected prime minister, the PTI and Imran Khan would have indicated that they will not just bask in the glory of a historic electoral victory but that they intend to quickly turn their attention to the serious business of governance and reforms.

The elaborate ceremony in which the PTI unveiled its agenda for the first 100 days in office has been criticised as presumptuous and gaudy.

But there was substance to the PTI's agenda, and a party that is seeking to

galvanise support among traditional non-voters, especially the young, perhaps needs a touch of glamour and political theatre.

The first 100 days in office is an arbitrary marker, but it has gained traction as a measure of perceived success in many countries.

Certainly, as Mr Khan emphasised in his remarks, political capital reaped by an election win needs to be used quickly if it is to be used effectively.

Pakistani politics is rarely calm and recent times do not give hope that a smooth transfer of power will be followed by the smooth functioning of democratic institutions.

In the case of the PTI, if it does win the election, there will also be the inevitable uncertainty and confusion as a first-time winner settles into government.

The six points presented by the PTI will be analysed and dissected in the days and weeks to come.

Promising transformation and revolution is surely easier said than done.

Where executive action is needed, the government will have a relatively free hand, but in matters of legislation and structural reforms, much will depend on the numbers in parliament.

Nevertheless, it is significant and encouraging that a major political party has laid out some metrics against which its performance in office can be judged.

Other political parties ought to consider emulating the PTI and offer their governance agendas that have some relevance to reality.

With some of the major structural problems well known and potential solutions bandied around for many years, mainstream political parties will likely have similar approaches to addressing the problems.

If each party were to offer an agenda for the first 100 days, six months or one year in office, it could help the next parliament reach a consensus that has eluded

previous parliaments on major economic challenges and governance problems.

As the PTI gets serious about the business of governance, other parties should look to improving their own outlook too.

Karachi law and order

THE crime graph in Karachi has witnessed numerous fluctuations, particularly over the past four decades or so. Since the 1980s, this unfortunate city has seen bloodshed on ethnic, sectarian and political grounds; Karachi has often been called an orphan city, with both the central and provincial governments unconcerned about its fate. While numerous law-enforcement operations were launched over the years, they merely did the work of a band-aid ie stopping the bleeding temporarily but not addressing the causes of the wound. However, the Rangers-led operation that has been under way since 2013 seems to have achieved relatively better results, though much remains to be done before Karachi can be declared a peaceful city. On Saturday, while delivering a lecture,

the head of the Sindh police's Counter-Terrorism Department gave a detailed breakdown of the pre-operation and current scenario. The CTD chief observed that while there has been a 'drastic' reduction in most crimes, a strategy for sustainable peace in the metropolis needs to be formulated, or else crime will resurface with greater intensity.

Indeed, high-profile crimes such as sectarian killings and kidnapping for ransom are down after 2013. Yet street crime persists, a fact acknowledged by the CTD head. Moreover, the police officer was not off the mark when he said that unless long-lasting solutions are formulated, political and sectarian violence may re-emerge. The active involvement of the Rangers has been cited as one of the reasons for the operation's success. Indeed, the paramilitary force has played a key role in reducing violence in Karachi. But the long-term solution, as mentioned by the CTD head, lies in a depoliticised, technologically updated police force. Many criminal justice experts have reiterated the need for community policing in Karachi, while political interference must be eliminated. Or else,

officers will concentrate more on VIP protocol and pleasing their political masters than patrolling the streets and protecting citizens. Therefore, the next Sindh government must make independence of police a priority.

Kishenganga dispute

AS the country hurtles towards the chaotic flux of a fast approaching election, a critical dispute is set to be decided upon in an international forum. Pakistan has just activated its request for arbitration in the case of the Kishenganga Hydroelectric Project, or KHEP, that India has just commissioned on the Neelum river. India describes KHEP as a storage work for power generation purposes only, whereas Pakistan maintains that because its design actually diverts water from the Neelum river into the Bonar Madmati Nullah, it qualifies as a breach of Article III(2) of the Indus Waters Treaty under which all the flows in the Neelum river belong to Pakistan, as well as Article IV(6) of the IWT which safeguards the natural flows of all water channels under the treaty. This is a particularly important dispute for Pakistan because this is a hydraulic society and irrigation water from the tributaries of the Indus river system plays a vital role in sustaining livelihoods, the economy, food security and overall social stability in this country.

The Court of Arbitration, to which the dispute was originally referred in 2010, found in its first interim order that the dam component of KHEP would “eventually enable India to exercise a certain degree of control over the volume of water that will reach Pakistan” and ordered a temporary halt to construction.

A second interim order in 2013 allowed construction to resume because entitlement to prevent such diversions was based on a demonstrated utilisation of the waters in Pakistan’s territory. Since Pakistan’s own Neelum Jhelum Hydropower Project was conceived and initiated after KHEP, the Court of Arbitration found that Pakistan did not have any demonstrated requirements for utilisation of the water of the tributary at the time when the dispute began.

Today all that is left for Pakistan to object to is the level to which the dam can be drained, particularly for desilting purposes. The scope of the objections has been narrowed, but the implications for Pakistan have not. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already threatened to use water as a weapon against Pakistan in 2016,

even though his reference was carefully worded to refer only to the waters of the eastern rivers over which India retains full control under the treaty. Nevertheless, the level of belligerence at the top levels of the Indian government in water politics, as well as the level of control that KHEP gives to India over Neelum river flows makes this a particularly important case for Pakistan. The World Bank has, thus far, looked to postpone its involvement in the matter by referring it back for bilateral settlement. But that did not work. The time has come for the bank to step up, and discharge its obligations under the IWT by taking Pakistan's request for arbitration more seriously.

Pompeo's bluster

LACKING all diplomatic nuance and statesmanship, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech directed at Iran on Monday sounded like a declaration of war.

Containing threats, insults and dire ultimatums, it has confirmed what many feared: that team Trump is seeking a confrontation with Iran and undoing all the limited diplomatic gains the Obama administration had made vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. The first sign of greater trouble on the horizon was of course Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA earlier this month, despite international consensus that Iran was abiding by the nuclear deal. Pompeo has underlined 12 'conditions' Tehran has to meet in order for the US to back off; or else there is dire talk of Iran facing the "strongest sanctions in history" while the tough-talking US official has promised to "track down Iranian operatives and their Hezbollah proxies ... and crush them". The 'charge sheet' against Tehran is extensive. The US has demanded Iran effectively shut down its ballistic missiles programme; stop aiding Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis; "respect the sovereignty of Iraq" and cease its support for the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda.

But the twelfth demand is the clincher: Tehran needs to "cease its threatening behaviour" against Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Expectedly, the Iranian president has dismissed the threats and said his country would "continue our path".

The Middle East is a very complicated place, and to assume Iran alone is responsible for the mess is both naive and disingenuous. For one, the US itself has for decades supported vile dictatorships in the region, while its regime change adventures have destroyed nations such as Iraq, Syria and Libya. Moreover, while Iran has played a key role in propping up Bashar al-Assad's regime, the US, its European allies and their Gulf Arab friends have funnelled money and arms to numerous anti-Assad militant groups in Syria, many of whom have been far from moderate. So for the US to lecture Iran on its 'bad behaviour' is a tad hypocritical. The solution to the Middle East's problems lies in a regional approach; Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other major states must sit down and frankly discuss their issues. Inviting the US or other outside forces is a recipe for disaster. One direct outcome of Pompeo's harangue will be that the conservatives in the Iranian establishment will now push to answer America in the same tone.

Ongoing heatwave

THE impact of global warming came home in a brutal way three years ago when a record-breaking heatwave in lower Sindh resulted in around 2,000 fatalities, mainly in Karachi, over the course of a few days.

The rising temperatures across much of the country this week, which rendered major cities into 'urban heat islands', are reminiscent of those deadly days in June 2015.

As reports of fatalities in Karachi emerged on Monday, meteorological experts warn of impending heatwaves liable to occur more frequently and for longer durations.

However, there is evidence of increased official preparedness to tackle the weather crisis, particularly in Karachi.

Unlike in the past, early weather warnings were circulated by the Met department and short-term disaster management plans swung into action involving city administrations, hospitals and philanthropic organisations.

Contingency planning is particularly critical especially when climate scientists warn that severe weather conditions will become annual occurrences.

This must include public messaging campaigns explaining measures to combat heat emergencies, with life-saving information for those most at risk.

However, more viable long-term solutions for cities will help prevent an unendurable increase in temperature and reduce deaths.

Because global warming is a potential instigator of lethal heatwaves that pummel vulnerable populations, focusing on urban design and construction material is crucial.

Instead of felling trees and erecting monstrous high-rises that elevate city temperatures, more public parks and green belts must be encouraged.

Public-private partnerships have previously proven successful with open spaces turned into parks.

One way to combat the vagaries of the weather is to plant more shady trees — a mitigating measure at work in KP.

Additionally, a well-laid out public transport system for major cities will also reduce carbon emissions, another factor strongly correlated with rising temperatures.

For Pakistan, at ever increasing risk of extreme weather, combating climate change requires action on a war footing.

With the latest heatwave in the country setting off alarm bells that a recurrent pattern is setting in, the message could not get any clearer.

A bridge too far?

DIALOGUE is necessary and urgently needed, but how likely is dialogue in the current atmosphere? A recently launched book co-authored by former DG ISI

retired Lt Gen Asad Durrani and former RAW chief A.S. Dulat has once again turned regional attention towards the need for bilateral dialogue at a time when Pak-India ties are all but frozen. Tellingly, while Mr Durrani and Mr Dulat advocate greater engagement, the conversations with writer Aditya Sinha that form the basis of the book took place in Istanbul, Bangkok and Kathmandu. The former intelligence chiefs do not appear to have been able to meet in their home countries and Mr Durrani was unable to travel to India for the book launch. While both countries have contributed to the impasse over the decades, it is undeniable that in recent years a hawkish approach towards Pakistan by the BJP-led government under Narendra Modi, and a harsh security crackdown in India-held Kashmir, has massively undermined even the possibility of talks.

A ceasefire declared in IJK by the Indian government at the start of Ramadan was tacit recognition that repressive security tactics in the region had caused a backlash among the people that has threatened to grow into a genuine mass, populist uprising against the Indian state. Even that small gesture by the Modi government was almost immediately undercut by violence across the Working Boundary and Line of Control. More generally, the Modi government has been willing to use all manner of tactics to disrupt the minimum amount of people-to-people contact and diplomatic engagement that has existed in previous stretches of a deep freeze in ties. Denying Indian visas to Pakistani religious and cultural delegations has been a particularly churlish move by the Indian government, while the recent harassment of Pakistani diplomats in New Delhi was a dismal violation of diplomatic norms. Meanwhile, there is no indication that backchannel contacts at the NSA level caused India to consider a high-level meeting with Pakistan. The end of the parliamentary term in Pakistan and the upcoming general election will likely give India a further excuse to delay re-engagement.

The fierce and counterproductive Indian stance can be contrasted with more positive signals emanating from Pakistan, including from the security establishment. Pakistan's military leadership has been reported to be willing to engage India in dialogue and Mr Dulat has suggested that India invite army chief Gen Bajwa for talks, presumably for military-to-military dialogue. Yet, it will be difficult for an army chief to directly and publicly engage with India as long as repression in IJK continues and India does not offer the possibility of agreement on so-called low-hanging fruit. These are areas in which dispute resolution can be carried out relatively quickly in the presence of the required political will. Dialogue

may be difficult to envisage currently, but leadership demands that it be considered on both sides.

Forced marriages

CONTROLLING women's sexuality to uphold antediluvian notions of family honour is a common motivation for forced marriages that end in violence, rape and even murder.

On Wednesday in a landmark judgement, a British court found a mother guilty of deceiving her teenage daughter into travelling to Pakistan and forcing her to marry a much older man.

Even more horrific was that the man in question was the same maternal relative who had raped her on a previous visit to Pakistan.

Only aged 13 at the time, she had to undergo an abortion to terminate the resultant pregnancy.

The verdict finally sends a strong message that victims' voices will be heard and that there are consequences for those who coerce them into marriage.

Despite a 2014 law criminalising forced marriages in the UK (even those conducted abroad involving British nationals), few cases are reported.

This is attributed to complex, patriarchal family structures that traverse countries, and make it difficult to seek help if the upshot is that parents could go to jail.

Because many girls from diaspora communities are taken abroad during school vacations to get married, teachers and even airport staff are instructed to watch out for signs of distress.

The fear is real.

Refusal to obey parents in such matters can attract the ultimate retribution.

The recent murder of Sana Cheema, an Italian-Pakistani tricked by her family into travelling to Pakistan to be married, is a case in point.

According to the UK's Forced Marriage Unit, Pakistan, with 439 cases, ranked the highest among the top four 'focus' countries in 2017, followed by Bangladesh, Somalia and India.

The adherence to such oppressive practices is linked partly with the high prevalence of arranged marriages among second and third generation Asian immigrants with spouses from their country of origin.

This trend has encouraged ghettoisation and impeded integration for decades.

Coupled with poor employment prospects, a lack of language skills and education among immigrants — especially among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who come to the UK through such arranged marriages — the result is further socioeconomic isolation from the mainstream.

Clearly, instituting strategies to foster multiculturalism is essential but the British government must do more to address the underlying reasons that perpetuate imported misogynistic practices.

A forced marriage is not a cultural matter but a criminal offence that must be investigated, even if collaboration from other governments is necessary, so that those at risk are protected.

Prime time violence

With elections drawing near, political temperatures are bound to rise as nerves get frayed.

However, while debates and exchanges with opponents can get heated, politicians must always remain within the bounds of decency and respect.

This was obviously not the case on Tuesday evening when, during the recording

of a talk show on a TV channel, physical violence was witnessed between two political heavyweights.

In the midst of an intense debate between Privatisation Minister Daniyal Aziz, who belongs to the PML-N, and veteran PTI leader Naeemul Haque, harsh words were exchanged, which culminated in Mr Haque slapping Mr Aziz.

This is, of course, not the first time such behaviour has been witnessed on talk shows.

In one episode, an explosive showdown took place between a political cleric and a female political analyst and rights activist.

More often than not, these programmes degenerate into shouting matches and end up resembling fish markets rather than forums for informed debate.

This might make for 'good' TV and bump up the ratings, but it reflects poorly on our political class.

The leaderships of all our major political parties must set the standard for debate and discussion.

This is, admittedly, a tall order as in the heat of the moment, especially on the election trail, even national level leaders can target their opponents with unparliamentary language.

This needs to change and party leaders must lead the way by ensuring that debate does not degenerate into insults and personal attacks.

Particularly on television, millions of eyes are tuned in to enjoy the verbal jousting of politicians, especially on the more popular shows.

That is why language must remain family-friendly while there can be absolutely no excuse for physical violence.

On an even more serious note, if people see that their leaders are attacking each other verbally and physically, supporters of opposing parties can also take the 'battle' to the local level.

This is certainly not needed if we are to have a violence-free election.

Nawaz's 'revelations'

THE latest allegations are unsurprising and have been made by others before, but the bluntness and detail with which they have now been spelled out are remarkable and potentially dangerous.

Former prime minister and undertrial PML-N supremo, Nawaz Sharif, has once again set the cat among the pigeons by claiming that his quest to put former president and military dictator retired Gen Pervez Musharraf on trial for treason was the trigger for a campaign to oust Mr Sharif from public office and frontline politics.

Mr Sharif's further claim that the 2014 joint dharna by the PTI and Tahirul Qadri was sponsored by sections of the security establishment is virtually an open secret, but could nevertheless prove further destabilising.

Also compelling are the details that Mr Sharif has purportedly divulged, including an alleged demand by a former spy chief for Mr Sharif to either quit the prime ministership altogether or temporarily step down from office.

Behind the facade of democracy appear to lie deep divisions.

Surely, Mr Sharif must bring convincing proof to back up his serious allegations.

In addition, the more Mr Sharif speaks his mind, the more contradictions in his pro-democracy narrative appear.

Set aside the timing of his latest broadsides and revelations.

Clearly, the imminent possibility or perhaps likelihood of a conviction and jail sentence being handed down by the NAB court has factored in Mr Sharif's

calculations.

But what is more troubling is that the former PM wants to be regarded as a latter-day champion of democracy without expressing remorse for his role in the dismantling of democracy in the past.

In condemning the hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Mr Sharif is correct: the judicially sanctioned murder of the founder of the PPP is an undeniable, historic catastrophe.

But it is odd to condemn the hanging of Bhutto without condemning the man responsible for the murder by the state, Ziaul Haq.

Mr Sharif has had a number of opportunities to disavow the dictatorship of Gen Zia, but has conspicuously chosen not to do so.

Indeed, it is impossible to imagine that the Sharif political dynasty and business empire could have reached anywhere near the proportions it has without the patronage of Gen Zia.

It is conceivable that Mr Sharif has truly come to understand the pernicious effect of institutional interference in the country's political process and genuinely desires change.

But the deepening and strengthening of democracy will not come about simply by pointing out the mistakes that others have made; the would-be custodians of the democratic project need to candidly acknowledge their own role in undermining democracy.

Why is it so difficult for Mr Sharif to publicly recognise the disaster that the Zia regime was for this country and the Sharif family's role in perpetuating the regime?

To establish his bona fides as a democrat today, Mr Sharif should seek the people's forgiveness for past mistakes.

Water shortages

IT is becoming a familiar ritual now. When water flows in the Indus river system go down, the leadership of Sindh accuses the upper riparian, Punjab, of drawing water out of the Indus through the Chashma-Jhelum link canal, thereby depriving the lower riparian of its fair share under the water sharing accord, and imposing a drought on the province. The leadership from Punjab, joined by the senior officialdom of the water bureaucracy, responds by pointing to the failure to build Kalabagh dam, as well as the high levels of water loss in Sindh. Lack of storage, coupled with theft and corruption of the provincial irrigation department, they retort, are the root causes of Sindh's problems, not withdrawals from the CJ link canal. There ends the debate. Meanwhile farmers continue to suffer, and disputes fester between tailenders and those located upstream, closer to the canal commands. And citizens of Karachi increasingly have to resort to expensive water tankers to fill up their tanks and get through the day. Nothing changes.

The latest example of this is provided by Khurshid Shah's outburst in the National Assembly against the water shortages in Sindh, in which he tore into the federal government for opening the CJ link canal at a time when his province is parched for water. The fact of the matter is that climate change has affected river flows in complex ways, affecting snowfall in the mountains, creating heatwaves in the south, and massively disrupting sowing and harvesting seasons across the country, but especially in Sindh and southern Punjab. The answer is not necessarily more water, or to replay familiar arguments in water politics. The answer today lies in adaptation, improvement of water utilisation, pricing, and investment in water conservation technologies, to name a few examples. Mr Shah's outburst would be easier to understand if he could point to any initiatives taken by the Sindh government to address the grievances of lower riparians in his own province, such as tailenders of the Nara canal, or water theft from Kotri barrage. If the Sindh government had done more to promote investment in drip irrigation technology, it would make it easier still. But none of this has happened. All that we hear are the old, tired tropes from the 1980s about water withdrawals upstream in the Indus. The net result is that farmers will continue to suffer, while the leadership continues to trade barbs

The same old kingdom?

SINCE Mohammed bin Salman's rapid ascension to heir apparent of the Saudi throne, his pronouncements to radically reform the kingdom have come in tandem with broad crackdowns on his subjects. In recent days, according to reports in the international media, at least 11 activists, mostly women, have been swept up in the security dragnet. International rights groups are expressing concern that the detainees, their whereabouts unknown, are being held without charge and interrogated without access to legal representation. Meanwhile, a Saudi state security agency issued a statement branding these activists — several of whom have been women's rights campaigners for decades and faced imprisonment before — as 'traitors' working with 'hostile foreign elements' to undermine the kingdom. Only weeks before the ban on women driving is due to be lifted, it is pertinent to ask: is this the new Saudi Arabia the millennial crown prince promised, in which women are entitled to drive — but not to speak?

Along with hope, there was scepticism of Mohammed bin Salman's chimerical vision, big as it was on touting a neoliberal rebranding exercise yet thin on any discussion of genuine political reform. Following a spectacularly orchestrated media blitz to woo the West that would have rankled many in his still deeply conservative kingdom, the recent arrests might indicate an attempt to appease hard-line regressives at home. The Saudi women's movement represents one of the last remaining spaces of civil rights advocacy in a country where protests are illegal and dissent is quashed. Women in patriarchal societies are often treated as expendable collateral — and their rights the first to be bargained away — in any renegotiation of power, but no modernisation drive can succeed without their emancipation. The crown prince has been notably silent in the face of actions that clearly contradict his progressive public posture and his professed commitment to a relative relaxation in the state's control over personal freedoms. That inevitably raises the question as to whether there are, after all, constraints on his power in the kingdom.

Sialkot mob attack

IT is, unfortunately, all too easy in this country to work up people's religious feelings and then direct these zealous sentiments in a destructive direction. The latest example of this negative trend was witnessed in Sialkot on Wednesday when a mob descended upon an Ahmadi place of worship and proceeded to destroy it. According to reports, the building in question was said to be an 'illegal construction'; however, regardless of its status, there can be no justification for the assault by a mob of hundreds, reportedly including members of the local government, political workers and seminary students. As per some reports, a local PTI leader was part of the mob; the PTI has condemned the attack, with its spokesman correctly saying that no one has the right to instigate violence against minority communities.

Religious issues must always be handled delicately; however, in these tense times with elections around the corner, all political parties have a duty to ensure that matters of faith are not included in political narratives. In the run-up to the polls, there will be candidates who will try and play to the gallery by raising sectarian and communal issues. In fact, some sectarian groups have formed political fronts and intend to run in the polls. Therefore, political parties, the state and the ECP must all work together to isolate such hatemongers; the ECP in particular has a duty to keep an eye on rabble-rousers. Politicians, in their parties' manifestos as well as on the campaign trail, must promote tolerance and inclusion, instead of focusing on exclusivity and parochialism. As it is, there have been plenty of bitter exchanges between major political players, including the PML-N, PPP and PTI. Exploiting religious or communal issues will further poison the atmosphere. As for the Sialkot incident, a thorough probe should be conducted and the guilty brought to justice. The Constitution guarantees minorities freedom of worship; therefore; there can be no tolerance for such acts of violence.

Truth commission

COMMISSIONS have been proposed and used in the past with a view to sidelining issues of national importance that may have awkward implications for the state or powerful individuals.

Yet, the idea remains a sound one; it is the practice that needs to be improved. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's suggestion that a truth commission be established to probe major national controversies since 1947 to uncover facts that the public may not be aware of is an interesting idea that deserves some consideration.

Others have made similar suggestions and the demand for a truth and reconciliation commission has been periodically raised in the country.

If a commission does come to fruition, much will depend on political as well as the state's will to create and support an independent and autonomous body with the power to both demand compliance and make recommendations that would have to be considered, for example, by parliament.

The design of the commission itself would have to take into account the possibility of powerful elements inside and outside the state seeking to prevent embarrassing details from becoming public and the need for some serious repair to the democratic project in the country.

If done right, with the consensus support of mainstream political parties and state institutions, the commission could set a much-needed precedent of truth and accountability where a need for it is identified.

A truth commission is not beyond the realm of possibility. The coming together of political forces in parliament for the National Assembly to approve the 25th Amendment bill on Thursday has underlined the possibility of political and state consensus even when there appear to be bitter political divisions ahead of what may be a bruising general election.

Moreover, the historical role of the commission proposed by Mr Abbasi can help ensure that it is not perceived as targeting specific sets of individuals or institutions.

Indeed, the Asghar Khan case and the PML-N's role in taking the 'Memogate' issue to the superior judiciary suggests that the PML-N, too, will have to open itself up to deep scrutiny.

Surely, the prime minister is not unaware of the possibility and the PML-N leadership should welcome a fair inquiry into much that ails the Pakistani state and national politics.

As noted in these columns and elsewhere in the media, Nawaz Sharif's refusal to renounce the Zia era, which is when the Sharif political dynasty and business empire really took off, is a troubling manifestation of an age-old problem: politicians are all too willing to point fingers at others, but rarely acknowledge their own mistakes.

Prime Minister Abbasi himself recently tied himself in knots alternately trying to disavow and explain comments made by his political boss Nawaz Sharif in a recent interview to this newspaper. A truth commission should look at both the past and the present.

The youth vote

THE approaching general election in Pakistan is not just about choosing a political party that promises the best change, but one that can solve some of the most pressing issues, particularly those impacting young citizens. It is for the first time that the country has registered such a large number of young people with voting rights. According to the electoral rolls, some 46m individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 years are registered to vote out of an electorate of 105.96m. Many among the 17.44m voters between 18 and 25 years would be casting their ballot for the first time; however, it remains to be seen how many will actually vote on election day, especially those in the 26 and 35 age bracket — about 28.99m registered voters. Many of the latter have experienced years of socioeconomic poverty that has left them disillusioned and unable to foresee real change. If the 2013 polls are anything to go by, being registered to vote does not necessarily translate into a large turnout at the ballot box. Nonetheless, young citizens — including activists demanding development and rights in the country's most

underprivileged regions — will hopefully use their vote wisely to elect politicians that better represent them, and hold them accountable to their democratic duties.

Evidently, the understanding that effective political and civic participation by the youth is a prerequisite for democracy is lost on political parties. Though the PTI saw itself as a champion of the youth agenda in 2013, it failed to galvanise a diverse cross section of young voters, especially in the rural areas. Clearly, it takes more than media messaging, Twitter campaigns and Facebook ‘likes’ — and even online supporters attacking opposition parties’ candidates — to displace traditional voting patterns. So, amid the various unknowns for this election, it is impossible to predict the youth voter turnout. Punjab with the largest youth bulge among the provinces will be interesting to watch. While the PML-N has won praise for its investment in development, the question is how many among the young will actually support it as right-leaning parties gain ground. Mustering a full youth vote requires long-term political planning. Educational institutes must help young people develop political consciousness, while parties should prioritise young people’s demands and empower them to become future leaders. If young voters want to turn the coming election into a transformative opportunity, choices made at the ballot box will matter.

NAB investigations

FOR the land mafia in Sindh, whose tentacles reach all the way up to the highest echelons of power, this is unfamiliar territory — a reckoning of sorts, even though it touches only the tip of the iceberg. According to a statement by NAB on Thursday, the anti-corruption body has had relevant authorities cancel the fraudulent allotment of 10,000 acres of state land in Jamshoro district on the basis of what it termed “irrefutable evidence”. The case involves alleged collusion of provincial revenue officials with real estate developers in order to enable the latter to acquire prime real estate — worth an estimated Rs75bn — along Superhighway for a fraction of its value. Three officials were arrested last month, accused of tampering with the official record to facilitate the land-grab.

According to the statement, a reference will be filed against them after the investigation is completed. A few days ago, NAB also launched a probe into three projects of Bahria Town — including its humongous gated community in Karachi

— upon directions from the Supreme Court, which found massive irregularities in the acquisition of land for the schemes.

It is for good reason the court in November 2011, during a suo motu case hearing about lawlessness in Karachi, ordered a freeze on mutation or allotment of government land across Sindh: one of the principal drivers of crime and violence in the country's largest city is land. It is the font of much of the corruption in the provincial government and bureaucracy; often, even what may seem like political violence stems from disputes over land. That the revenue officials referred to in NAB's statement on Thursday allegedly went to the extent of record tampering in order to circumvent the apex court's directives, offers a glimpse into the sordid world of wheeling and dealing over prime real estate in Karachi and its surroundings. Here, regulations pertaining to disposal and use of land have long been flouted with impunity. Inside umpteenth files in bureaucratic offices can be found reams of bogus permits, false affidavits claiming land title, etc — if the anti-corruption body cares to look. While it is encouraging that some light has at last been shone on this cesspool, NAB had until now been curiously lackadaisical about moving against the land mafia. Will it now expand its net to also include the powerful individuals who control the racket, or will it confine its actions to the lower tiers only?

Mental health awareness

AS the 69th World Mental Health Awareness month, observed in a number of countries, comes to a close, the theme of fitness “for the mind and body” should prompt us to ask how we ourselves can take charge and keep healthy, exercise and nutrition being a crucial part of overall emotional well-being. A 2016 study utilised published data of mental illnesses to demonstrate how scientific approaches thus far have consistently underestimated the global burden of mental illness by more than a third. This places mental illness in first position in the global burden of diseases with cardiovascular and circulatory ailments at a distant second place. Further, the treatment gap for mental illness is almost 90pc in developing countries. The fundamentals of mental health and mental illness define mental disorders as emotional patterns, revealed by behavioural changes that are associated with distress or disability within society. It is well-documented that a background of prolonged violence and displacement worsens pre-existing mental

health burdens of populations as has been apparent throughout Pakistan's historical narrative. The shared experiences of violence through acts of terrorism and insecurity, disruption of societal structures, economic constraints, increasing unemployment and reduced access to care as people sink further below the poverty line all point to a country rife with political uncertainty seven decades on.

However, leaders in nutrition and fitness fields in many other parts of the developing world are using information and working with mental health professionals to promote health overall, keeping the focus on emotional hygiene. This, together with mental health screenings, can impact the emotional well-being of millions — through social media where possible — with local events connecting communities. However in Pakistan, the apathy shown by the authorities' lack of investment in public-sector service provision for mental health — for both patients and professionals — has to be overcome to reduce the human, social, and economic costs of mental illnesses in the country.

Still no agreement on caretaker PM

THERE will be a caretaker prime minister appointed, the Constitution guarantees that. But it is disappointing and perhaps worrying from a democratic perspective that Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khurshid Shah have failed to reach an agreement on the caretaker prime minister.

Article 224A of the Constitution sets out the procedure in case Mr Abbasi and Mr Shah are still unable to agree on the caretaker prime minister three days after parliament is dissolved.

At this stage, it looks likely that the decision will be transferred to a bicameral parliamentary committee and perhaps ultimately to the ECP itself.

But the candidates that the committee and perhaps the ECP may have to consider will be nominated by the prime minister and the leader of the opposition.

So why cannot the prime minister and leader of the opposition end the uncertainty and select a caretaker prime minister themselves?

Certainly, Mr Abbasi and Mr Shah are not personally feuding but following party instructions on the matter.

Yet, of the several names that have been reported in the media as nominees of the PML-N and PPP for caretaker prime minister, there are no obvious differences in the level of professionalism and skill the candidates would bring to the job.

The caretaker prime minister's responsibilities are narrowly defined by law and convention and in the presence of an empowered, and independent ECP, there is less space than ever for the executive to try and interfere in the electoral process on behalf of any political party.

It appears, then, that pettiness and unreasonable attitudes may be more to blame for the lack of agreement between the PML-N and PPP.

In 2013, too, both parties failed to agree on a candidate for caretaker prime minister, and it was left to the ECP to select Mir Hazar Khan Khoso, a retired judge from Balochistan, from among the pool of candidates provided to the ECP.

The failure to reach an agreement so far on the caretaker prime minister is stranger still when the PML-N, PPP and most mainstream political parties in the country have been able to come together to endorse historic Fata reforms and the region's merger with KP with a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, the Senate and the KP Assembly.

Perhaps also the two sides are complacent in the matter of selecting a caretaker prime minister because they recognise that the stakes are relatively low and the Constitution guarantees a caretaker prime minister will be appointed.

But a cavalier approach is not what is needed at a time of great political uncertainty in the country, with the democratic project itself under great stress. The prime minister and leader of the opposition should try again to reach an agreement.

Fata's historic transition

HISTORY has been made; Fata is no more. Established on Aug 14, 1947, the colonial construct has finally been dismantled and the people of the region now have formal access to the constitutional and political rights that are legally available to all citizens of Pakistan. Whatever the challenges ahead, whatever the impediments to a smooth merger of Fata with KP, whatever the dangers to the democratic project in the country today, set them aside for a brief moment to acknowledge the immense step collectively taken towards a more perfect union and a better federation. A vast political consensus and agreement by all institutions of the state that Fata had to be dissolved and the region merged with KP is an immense achievement. It demonstrates that core beliefs about the Constitution, the enduring reflection of the will of the people, still prevail, and that Pakistan can and should only be ruled in a democratic, constitutional manner, with the rule of law, freedoms for all and the greater good of the people kept at the heart of state decision-making.

The final days of the current parliament and the KP Assembly will be rightly remembered in history as when the elected representatives did the right thing by the people of Pakistan. Congratulations to all the people of the old Fata and the new KP are truly in order. If the state is to deliver what it has now pledged to the people of Fata, however, there is much work that remains to be done. Take the province of Balochistan, large parts of which are comparable socioeconomically and in terms of governance to the Fata region. Balochistan has for many decades had the same formal systems of governance as do the other three provinces, but that has not transformed the province or improved the quality of life for the people very much. Fata may avoid a similar fate because a merger with KP will give it access to already functional institutions, but like south Punjab or south KP, without real political commitment by traditional centres of power, meaningful change at the periphery is difficult.

There is also the more recent experience with the 18th Amendment. A vast transfer of powers and responsibilities to the provinces from the centre has not led to quick or significant improvements across a range of subjects now under provincial control. The 18th Amendment is politically irreversible as are the changes in Fata, but governance is also about the hard work of strengthening institutions at the grass roots and local levels. Finally, while major military operations and counter-

insurgency operations in Fata have come to an end, the region is a recovering war zone and instability is still a threat. Care must be taken to support nascent political institutions in the now former region of Fata.

Digital Pakistan

OVER a year since it was first floated, the federal cabinet approved the Ministry of Information Technology's 'Digital Pakistan' policy last week. As the country's first digital policy, ICT professionals have hailed its approval as a landmark move. The timing — at the tail end of the government's tenure — is curious, but if seen as indicative of the PML-N's future legislative aspirations, it merits scrutiny.

Mainstream policy discussions in Pakistan rarely focus on this oft-neglected yet vital sector in any modern economy. Over the last five years, without much government support or clear terms of business, our IT sector has experienced tremendous organic growth — generating \$3.3bn in revenues, according to the 2016-17 Economic Survey. There is ample room for further growth, and the IT ministry's stated target is to raise exports of IT goods and services to \$10bn by 2020, through the introduction of several economic incentives. The potential this has to revolutionise both private and public services, attract foreign investment and deepen our integration in global value chains cannot be overstated.

Where the policy is surprisingly thin on details are the very issues that the government has compromised on in the past when it enacted the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016: data protection and content regulation. PECA affords the PTA the power to remove and block any content based on extremely generalised parameters. Given the lack of clarity on content restrictions and the distributed nature of the internet, as long as the potential for broad and arbitrary bans on content (even whole ICT services as well as the internet itself) exists, the law in its current iteration fosters a non-conducive business climate. Here, people's right to information and freedom of expression are intrinsically linked to ensuring an open and free cyberspace. Meanwhile, the policy makes only passing reference to the need to ensure consumer rights by passing a data protection law. In recent years, citizen databases in India, Turkey, Brazil, etc have been breached many times — reportedly, even Nadra has experienced this. Yet the policy, which aims

to consolidate all citizens' personal information under one cloud, fails to address specifics of how such data is to be collected, stored and, most importantly, protected. For Pakistan's IT industry to truly flourish, any future government must ensure that the country's digital laws are harmonised with global standards. This policy is a start, but in the upcoming election campaign, all political parties ought have well-articulated digital visions.

Brilliant victory

ENGLAND'S annihilation at the hands of Pakistan in the first Test of a two-part series at Lord's on Sunday brilliantly underscored the young national team's talent that has blossomed under the leadership of wicketkeeper-batsman Sarfraz Ahmed. The nine-wicket victory over a strong, experienced English side, playing on its own soil, and dubbed as clear favourites, indicates that the rebuilding phase of Pakistan cricket is over. The win stunned critics who until a week ago had thrown barbs at the Pakistan team for being a 'rookie' outfit and had predicted that the series would turn out to be a lopsided affair. To be fair, the critics could be forgiven for their assessment. With an average age of 24 years, and with as many as seven players playing their first Test on English soil, few could have envisaged such an admirable performance from Pakistan. But cricket, since its inception, has been known as a 'game of glorious uncertainties', a description that was endorsed by the Pakistanis at Lord's. The mental toughness of players such as Mohammad Abbas, Haris Sohail, Babar Azam, Fahim Ashraf, Imam-ul-Haq, Shadab Khan and Hasan Ali in overcoming worrying patches in this Test as well as against Ireland at Dublin earlier this month augurs well for the future.

More importantly, the players are gelling well with each other. Their resilience, discipline, innovative thinking and quick learning skills make Pakistan a favourite in next year's World Cup which is set to be played in England. Credit here ought to be given to the selectors too for inducting players on the basis of merit. Chief selector Inzamam-ul Haq, though initially under fire for ignoring the prolific Fawad Alam and for the contentious selection of his nephew Imam, now stands vindicated. It is vital, too, for the Pakistan Cricket Board to thwart the needless controversies that have hurt the team on many occasions during the past and to

ensure that the winning combination is retained for the many challenges that lie ahead.

ECP's unwarranted remarks

A NECESSARY and welcome briefing to a parliamentary committee was made unnecessarily controversial by some decidedly strange remarks. On Monday, in a briefing to the Senate Standing Committee on Interior on security arrangements for the upcoming election, ECP Secretary Babar Yaqoob stated: "We think that an effort will be made at an international level to sabotage the elections but it would not be appropriate to share details here. We are ready to inform you in an in-camera meeting." In the current regional environment and the speculative mood in parts of the country, the ECP secretary's comments can be interpreted in a grossly exaggerated manner for partisan political and diplomatic purpose. While it is possible that Mr Yaqoob is in fact privy to intelligence that cannot be shared with the public at the moment, it is nevertheless unusual for the ECP to be sharing such information with parliament in the presence of an elected government or the caretaker government that will be sworn in shortly.

Might the ECP want to consider avoiding unnecessary controversy and focusing on its core job as set out in Article 219 of the Constitution? The Duties of the Commission as stated in Article 219(d) are "the holding of general elections to the National Assembly, Provincial Assemblies and the local governments".

Meanwhile, Article 220 of the Constitution states: "It shall be the duty of all executive authorities in the Federation and in the Provinces to assist the Commissioner and the Election Commission in the discharge of his or their functions." Surely then, if the ECP is privy to, has been informed of or, improbably, has itself gathered intelligence of not just the possibility of foreign interference in the upcoming general election, but violent plots to disrupt polling day, it should urgently seek the advice of the executive and the security apparatus. Serious as the work of the parliamentary standing committees is, it is not clear what the Senate Standing Committee on Interior could do about Mr Yaqoob's warnings.

It is certainly welcome that the ECP is taking the issue of election-related violence seriously. In 2013, militant and other violence marred the run-up to the election and significantly affected the campaigns of secular, liberal parties on the left. The

2018 general election is set to take place amidst greater political uncertainty than at virtually any other point since the transition to democracy began in 2008, while the security establishment continues to credibly warn of militants and external actors seeking to destabilise the country. For a free and fair election, there cannot be a climate of fear in the country. At the same time, the security of voters, candidates and the democratic process must also be ensured. Far better, then, for the ECP to concentrate on its core job and not unnecessarily stoke tensions or fears. Now is the time for calm leadership

Perfect storm

A SUSTAINED dry spell in the rivers is devastating agriculture across the country, with lower riparians and small farmers hit especially hard. A recent report from Punjab, for example, clearly shows that sowing patterns have now changed but farmers are having a difficult time adapting, in part because of their difficulty in perceiving the problem as a climatic phenomenon. Even rudimentary measurements of the ground level impacts on farm activity that changing climate patterns are having, are proving to be a challenge for independent researchers since farmers routinely report market and climate related impacts synonymously due to lack of information or sensitisation to climate change. But reports are now coming from all over the country, where settled agriculture is an important source of livelihood, that weather is becoming more erratic and cultivation increasingly difficult. Rains are far less predictable, hot and dry spells are getting harder to forecast, water flows in rivers and canals are becoming more volatile and allocation regimes at all the canal heads are coming under stress. A variegated set of impacts is being reported from around the country, with complicated consequences for growers.

Awareness may well be emerging as a challenge that is at least as big as absolute water shortages and this limits farmers' ability to fashion appropriate adaptive responses. Even more importantly, lack of awareness at higher levels of government ensures that the country's water and agriculture conversation remains limited to the interprovincial water apportionment disputes that date back decades to the time when the large-scale hydraulic infrastructure was first laid down. Voters and the common citizenry do not realise what this all means for the future of

livelihoods and the country's food security, which is built on agriculture and water. As a result, there is little to no interest or active focus on the problem in our national conversation, which remains locked inside the theatre of politics. The ravaging impacts of climate change are now comprehensively upon us, sparking low intensity conflicts over growing water scarcities in some areas, eroding the agrarian base of the country in others, and visiting upon us a bewildering array of climatic oddities, like untimely dry spells, prolonged heat waves, growing glacial lakes that await like water bombs ready to detonate at the first heavy rainfall. Add to this list the five seasons of floods that we have already seen, and a perfect storm is cooking.

Mass student expulsions

FAR from being places of enlightened and spirited debate, institutes of learning in Pakistan all too often train youth for obsequiousness to authority.

For protesting against not being given permission to attend an Iftar party, which would fall after their 6pm curfew, 320 female students of Minhajul Quran University Lahore were expelled on Sunday.

A few days before, a leaked video of Pakistan Awami Tehreek leader Khurram Nawaz Gandapur verbally abusing the students went viral.

It showed him, in a fit of rage, accusing them of not being raised properly, insinuating what fate might befall them in a private hostel, and threatening to have them all thrown out.

However, as per the PAT's own spokesperson, the varsity's affairs are not Mr Gandapur's responsibility.

This incident is indicative of our culture's deeply problematic relationship with its youth.

Our authority figures (even self-appointed ones) often forget that respect is earned; it cannot be taken for granted as a right.

Their distorted perception, and its corollary, that young people must respect the powerful without question, has led us down many a wrong path.

Added to this is the gendered moral policing of female students through onerous regulations on their attire, physical proximity to male students and movement.

The varsity has a duty of care to ensure the safety and good conduct of its students on campus, but this should not (even if, allegedly, at the behest of parents) extend to infantilising students, most of whom are legally adults.

While it is unjust to penalise the students en masse for the protests of a few, even those few have the right to protest.

Any institute committed to imparting a progressive education must be aware of the need to redress the patriarchal silencing of women by encouraging a safe space in which they can speak up — even in disagreement — without intimidation.

As for the expulsion itself, the varsity must immediately reinstate the students and issue a formal apology for Mr Gandapur's unbecoming behaviour.

Pak-India peace

THE relative rarity in recent times of good news on the Pakistan-India front makes it all the more welcome when the two states reach an unexpected agreement. The decision to restore a ceasefire across the Line of Control and Working Boundary is significant.

Violence across the LoC and Working Boundary has been unacceptably frequent and intense in recent weeks, constituting a pattern of ebb and flow in the exchange of fire and the trading of allegations between India and Pakistan that had threatened to spiral out of control.

With a month-long ceasefire declared by the Indian government inside occupied Kashmir seemingly already in effect, and now the militaries on both sides pledging to “exercise restraint” in case of a flare-up in violence along the LoC and Working

Boundary, the oppressed people of India-held Kashmir may get a respite from hostilities while border populations in Azad Kashmir and the Working Boundary can also look forward to a resumption of the 2003 ceasefire that had frayed.

Alleviating the suffering of the people of the region and protecting them from violence should be a priority for peacemakers in both states and the Kashmir region too.

A decision to uphold the 2003 agreement is also significant because it suggests both pragmatism and recognition of the need to protect hard-won gains in the long and tumultuous road to bilateral normalisation and eventual peace.

After Pakistan and India engage in a period of low-level conflict or verbal warfare, subsequent attempts at normalising ties can sometimes veer towards unnecessary new approaches and ideas.

The 2003 ceasefire was historic and, as both Pakistan and India have once again acknowledged, deserves to be kept in place because it is a sensible arrangement and there is no clear, better alternative.

The agreement announced on Tuesday immediately after the DGMOs of the two countries used a special hotline to speak to each other suggests that the Pakistan-India back channel may be active and that the national security advisers of the two countries continue to either meet or discuss confidence-building measures.

The agreement coming on the eve of the dissolution of the National Assembly indicates that quiet back-channel diplomacy and security contacts could continue through the term of the caretaker dispensation rather than such engagement being blocked until an elected government assumes office in Pakistan.

Positive signals sent by the Pakistani military leadership in recent months appear to have been received in India and a willingness to reciprocate shown.

As ever, there is no room for complacency, but the moment should be seized by both sides to try and effect further positive change.

Among the so-called low-hanging fruit and issues that can help improve the

atmosphere in which dialogue can be considered between the two countries, the issue of prisoners offers the possibility of quickly creating goodwill.

Whatever the issue chosen to help reopen dialogue, the moment should be built on quickly.

Hunger in Afghanistan

A DROUGHT is threatening to worsen the already poor living conditions of some 15m Afghans who rely on farming, livestock and agricultural labour to make ends meet, according to a recent UN report. Thousands of people have left their homes due to rising food and fodder instability accompanied by livestock deaths, as the devastation continues. Such a situation could not have come at a worse time for Afghanistan where the fear of severe food scarcity has only added to the burden of conflict. To complicate matters, the poppy crop has replaced traditional crops as seen in Helmand province, which once produced winter wheat and summer cereals. No doubt the government claims it has made some effort to revive the agrarian sector by providing farmers with better seeds and helping set up poultry farms. But clearly, not much has been achieved, especially when nature too has had no mercy: according to farm authorities in Helmand, a fertile agrarian year requires at least 12 inches of rain, whereas only half an inch of rain has fallen thus far. Similarly, Nimruz province, which received wheat from India only a few months ago, has seen one of its two main rivers run dry, raising the spectre of hunger as farmers cultivate only a minuscule percentage of the land they once farmed.

Widespread insecurity, as witnessed in the escalating attacks in Afghanistan by the Afghan Taliban and the militant Islamic State group, has amplified the drought's impact as market access for consumers has been reduced. Farmers now need special permission to access markets in government-controlled areas.

Officials have reported a 60pc decrease in the wheat harvest in some areas with the government planning to store a part of the produce in anticipation of worsening drought conditions. In comparison, Pakistan has enough wheat to be able to export the grain; this is reason enough for it to lend Afghanistan a helping hand. Besides, Pakistan has had a fine record of extending humanitarian aid to many countries that have been struck by disaster, and it should live up to this image. In helping the

Afghans rebuild their lives and stave off death and destruction, Pakistan should play a proactive role — so far the international community has not even met a third of the UN's appeal to provide food and fodder for cattle in Afghanistan. Years of hostility between the two neighbours should not stand in the way of a sincere effort to help and thus reduce distrust.

Big Tobacco's win

A RECENT report says that the government watered down a proposal to prominently mark cigarette packs with health warnings largely because of pressure from big tobacco companies. The report cites an unnamed official from the FBR that the tobacco companies' contributions to the national exchequer — \$500m in excise duties — served as the main impetus, with the Prime Minister's Office also getting involved. At issue was a proposal floated by the health minister that would have placed pictures of the ravages that prolonged tobacco use wreaks on the human body across 85pc of a cigarette pack's area. Such images are now routinely used in many countries to deter smokers and send constant reminders of how they endanger their own health when they light up. Given that government estimates say that over 100,000 people die of smoking every year in Pakistan, any proposal to sensitise smokers to the risks they face is in the public interest.

The proposal is a good one and should be allowed to go through. As it is, there is such a dearth of awareness of health issues in a country where the use of tobacco is rampant; thus a sensible proposal should not be stopped at the behest of the tobacco companies. They might be large taxpayers, but the cost of their taxes in the form of damage to public health is far bigger, and the government is expected to take a more holistic view rather than act on the basis of revenue collection alone. As per the report, a decision was made in the finance ministry to 'review' the proposal through a committee, which was formed immediately after a meeting between then finance minister Ishaq Dar and representatives of British American Tobacco. The rule has been changed only days before it was supposed to go into effect, marking a victory for Big Tobacco, and a defeat for public health in the country.