

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of October 2018

Note: This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is NOT FOR SALE. You may order this booklet and only printing and shipping cost will be incurred.

Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

www.thecsspoint.com



10012345678902



BUY CSS BOOKS ONLINE

CASH ON DELIVERY

ALL OVER PAKISTAN

<https://cssbooks.net>

**ALL COMPULSORY AND
OPTIONAL SUBJECTS BOOK
FROM SINGLE POINT**

ORDER NOW

03336042057 - 0726540141

DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



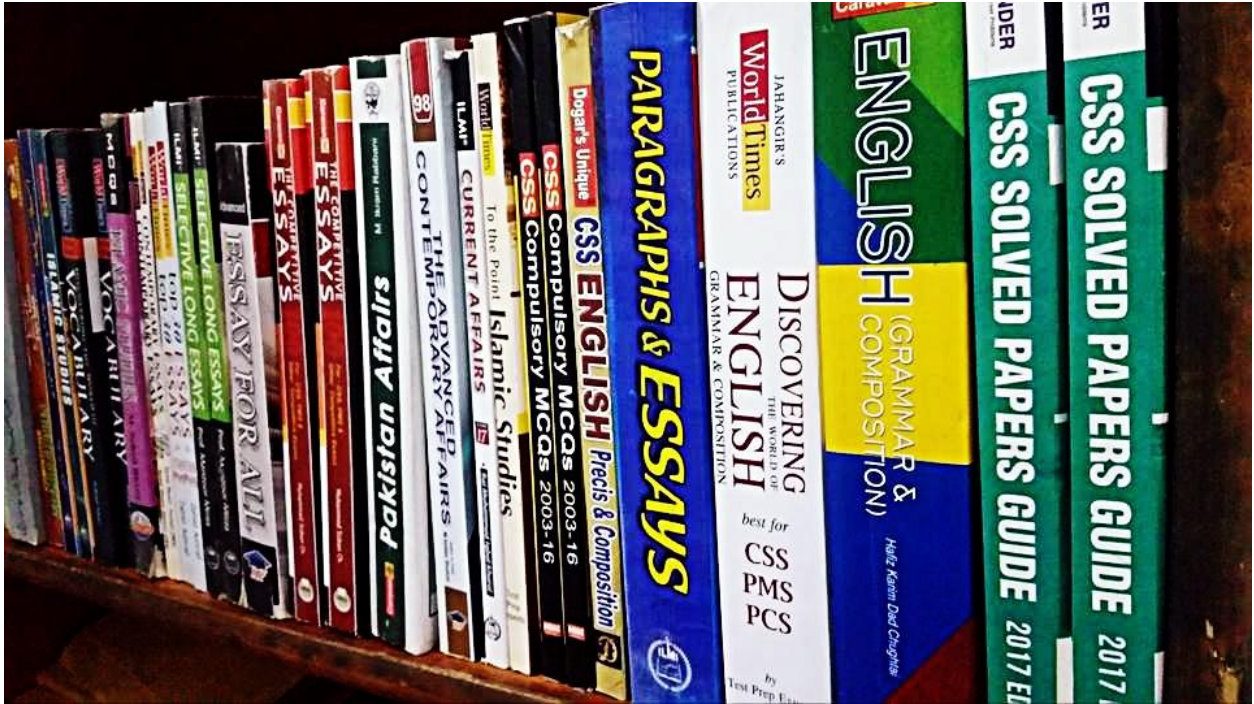
THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

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

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

Email: info@thecsspoint.com



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

Visit Now:

WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET

For Oder & Inquiry
Call/SMS/WhatsApp

0333 6042057 – 0726 540316

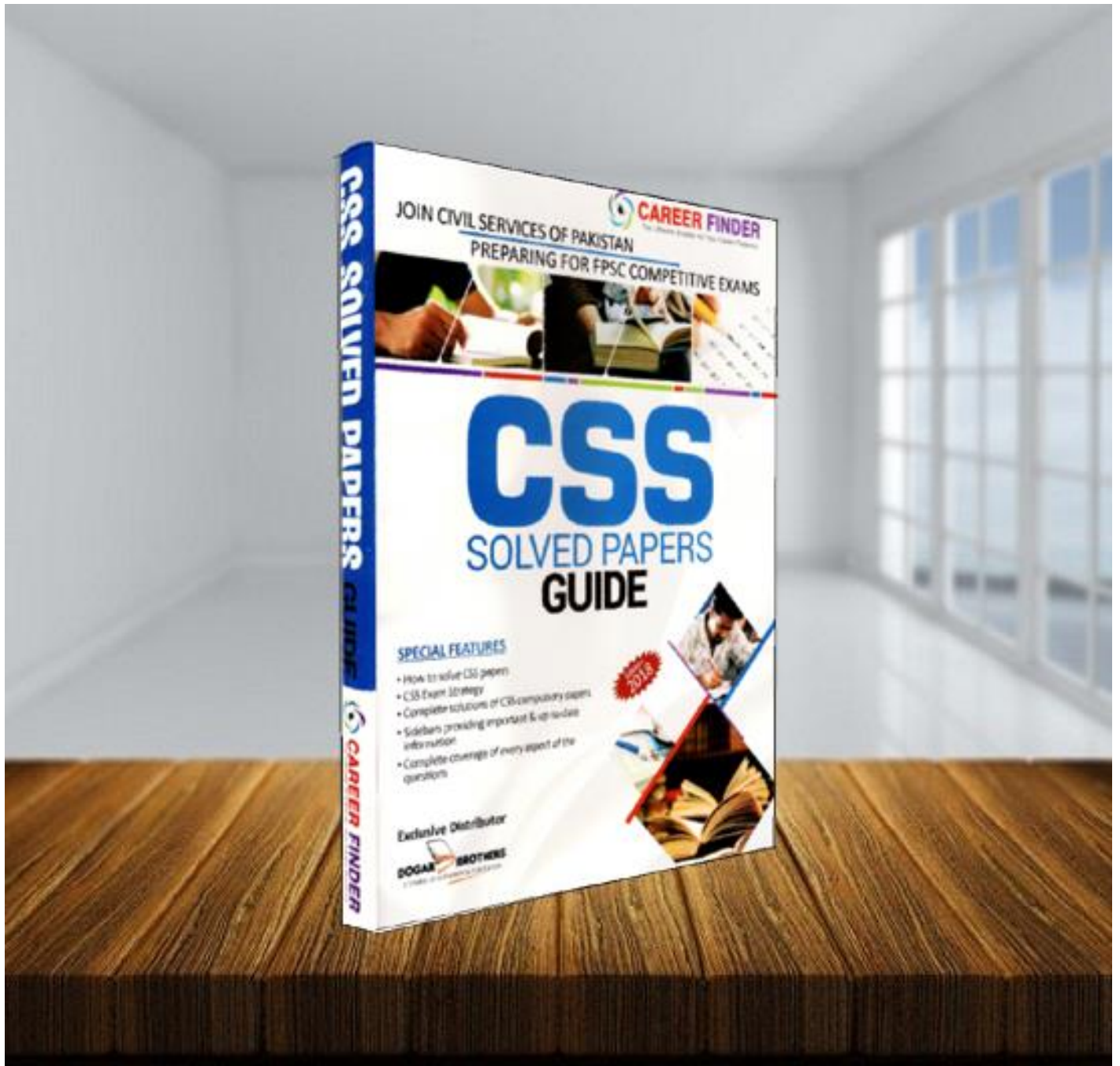
CSS Solved Compulsory Papers Guide Latest 2018 Edition

By Dogar Brothers

Fully Solved Papers from 2011 to 2018

Order Now

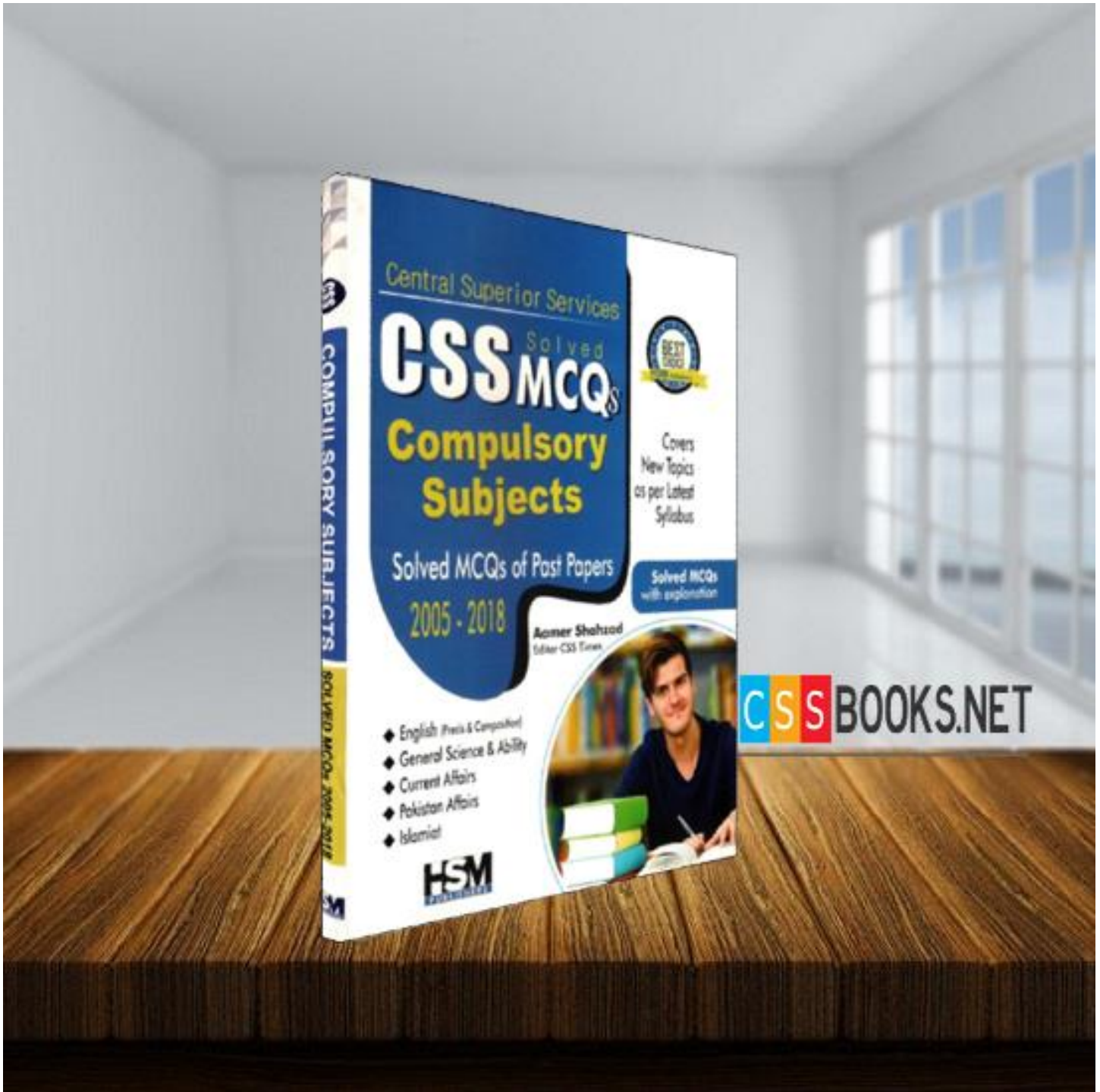
Call/SMS 03336042057



CSS Solved Compulsory MCQs 2005 to 2018 Updated

Order Now

Call/SMS 03336042057



33rd
Edition

ADVANCED

M. Imtiaz Shahid

FPSC

& Other Federal
Model Papers

A Combination of
Original & Model Papers

Best Book for:
FPSC Screening Tests,
FPSC, NTS, OTS, PTS, BTS,
UTS, STS, JTS, CTS, MTSP,
and all other
allied examinations



Added Features:
Sample Model Papers
English, Mathematics
Arithmetic, General Abilities Tests
Analogy Questions

New Revised &
Updated Edition

Solved

Advanced AP Publishers

20%
OFF

FOR ORDER PLEASE CALL/SMS
0726540141 - 03336042057

Contents

Pak-India Challenge.....	11
Palestine imbroglio	12
Heritage vandalism	13
Attack on AJK PM	14
Protecting the media	15
Smoking scourge	17
No economic clarity	18
'Decreased' CPEC cost.....	19
Poverty in Sindh	20
Talks with the US.....	21
PML-N's blooper	23
Anti-encroachment drive.....	24
Tax reversals	25
Madressah reform	26
Pakistani migrants.....	28
IMF speaks	29
Karachi operation.....	30
Crackdown on students	31
Fair accountability?.....	32
Pressure on INGOs	34
Human smuggling	35
Balochistan: a new opportunity.....	35
Fighting rape	37
Karachi blackouts	38
Economic predicament	39
Mental health.....	40
Snow leopard losses.....	41
IMF decision.....	42
Irreversible penalty.....	43
Punjab's gender initiatives.....	45
Police politicisation	46
High dropout rates.....	47

Airport safety	48
Housing for all	49
The reckoning.....	50
Beating breast cancer	52
CPEC transparency	53
Judicial accountability	54
From books to guns	55
Judicial reform	56
Registering handsets.....	57
Climate change threat.....	58
US-Taliban talks.....	59
Public service message.....	60
Investing in the young.....	61
Inflation pressures and the future	62
Election truths.....	63
Remembering Asma.....	64
IMF and China's support	65
E-voting lessons	66
Brick kiln workers.....	67
Shahbaz's claims	68
Jamal Khashoggi case.....	70
Trees and mass transit.....	71
Population crisis.....	72
Border abductions.....	73
Billboard business	74
Kandahar attack	75
GSP-Plus facility.....	76
Kaneria's confession	77
FATF's demands	78
Curbs on media?	79
Sartorial choices.....	80
Criticising the bureaucracy	81
From PTA to FIA	82

Thar deaths	83
Zardari's threat	84
Fresh IHK violence.....	86
Desperate measures	87
Changeover in Swat	88
Misuse of ECL	89
Punishing plagiarism	90
Lopsided foreign ties.....	91
Plastic pollution.....	92
Clash over evictions	93
Banned groups	94
Concern over INGOs.....	96
Justice for Khashoggi.....	97
Poll observers' report	98
Afghan peace	99
Education dysfunction	100
Undoing the 18th Amendment.....	101
Polluted waters	102
Yemen forsaken	103
Forum for complaint	104
Israeli rapprochement?.....	105
T20 clean sweep.....	107
IGP Islamabad's removal.....	108
PAC tussle.....	109
Erasing girl students.....	110

Pak-India Challenge

AFTER the abrupt and bewildering cancellation of a meeting between the Pakistani and Indian foreign ministers by the Indian government, the speeches by the two foreign ministers at the United Nations General Assembly took on added importance.

Would Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Sushma Swaraj try and rein in emotion and avoid further escalating tensions or would a fresh crisis in Pakistan-India relations erupt?

For now, it appears that India and Pakistan have stuck to their respective lines: India petulantly and counter-factually blaming Pakistan for the absence of dialogue, Pakistan calling for dialogue while emphasising that such a call should not be interpreted by India as a sign of weakness.

Given the unfortunate build-up to the UNGA, two relatively low-key speeches by the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers were perhaps the best that could be expected in the circumstances. What is far from clear is how and when the distance between the Indian and Pakistani positions on dialogue can be bridged.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same as it has been for at least two years now: drawing the world's attention to the state of repression and violence in India-held Kashmir while also being able to discuss a range of other issues with India.

The Pakistani state has rightly insisted that a solution to the Kashmir dispute lies at the heart of long-term peace and stability in the region, but has also acknowledged that several other issues can be addressed in the meantime.

Indeed, Prime Minister Imran Khan's letter to his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, was sensibly crafted and demonstrated a willingness on Pakistan's part to not impose unrealistic expectations or demands on dialogue with India.

Yet, even though India has seemingly conclusively spurned talks with Pakistan for the foreseeable future — though in the context of South Asia, the foreseeable future can quickly change — Pakistan should continue with its balanced approach.

Arguably, the best possibility for Pakistan drawing the outside world's attention to the harrowing circumstances that the people of IHK are living in is to maintain a reasonable approach to India in the context of the overall relationship.

For India, between now and the general election scheduled for next year, there will need to be a reckoning with the BJP's perplexing attitude towards Pakistan's government.

A reluctance to engage Pakistan in dialogue has been complemented by bellicose statements and a hawkish military approach — but it surely cannot be argued that India is any closer to achieving its goals. All that the hawks in India have achieved is another wasted few years of opportunity and a region that is more tense than it was before the BJP returned to power.

If war is not a possibility — and it is categorically not in a nuclear South Asia — then dialogue is the only option.

Palestine imbroglio

WHILE much of the world may have forgotten the plight of the Palestinians, the people of this occupied land continue to pay with their blood for raising a voice for their rights, specifically the right to return to the land of their forefathers. On Friday, Israel butchered at least seven Palestinians in Gaza as protesters had taken to the streets to call for lifting the suffocating Israeli blockade of the coastal strip. Among the dead were teenagers and a 12-year-old child. However, it seems the international community can do little to stop this frequent slaughter, principally because Tel Aviv has important friends in the world willing to whitewash its crimes. The US heads this list; while American administrations have always been beholden to Israel, the current incumbent of the White House heads one of the most openly pro-Israel administrations in recent memory. In fact, the 'deal of the century' that Donald Trump is championing to bring 'peace' between Israel and the Arabs is anything but — as per details available in the public sphere, it is a plan to legitimise the occupation and confine the Palestinians to Bantustans.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in his recent speech at the UN General Assembly painted a grim picture, describing where his people currently stand. He was critical of the recently passed Israeli 'nation-state' law, terming it a racist law

designed to erase the Palestinians' link with their homeland. While criticising Israel and the US, he put on a brave face, saying that "Jerusalem is not for sale". Indeed, the American decision to recognise the disputed city as Israel's capital, and to shift its embassy there, flies in the face of global opinion. As he has proved on multiple occasions, Mr Trump is not particularly worried about world opinion. However, the situation for the Palestinian people is appalling. Confronted with frequent bouts of Israeli violence, seemingly abandoned by the world community and left with little option but to resist the occupation, the end to their suffering is not in sight. If the Americans go ahead with their so-called peace plan and try to impose it on the Palestinians with the help of regional Arab countries, to Israel's delight, another intifada may well be in the offing. There is also the danger of greater communal violence if fanatical Jews bent upon building the Third Temple by destroying the Haram al-Sharif continue with their provocations.

Heritage vandalism

VANDALISING historical or religious monuments not only destroys cultural heritage, but also makes space for some elements to exploit ignorance and hatred. In effect, last week, it was distressing to learn that thieves had vandalised tombstones from the 15th-century mausoleum of Jam Nizamuddin II situated within the Makli necropolis near Thatta; they also stole four gauges for measuring cracks from inside the monument. One of the several architectural splendours dating back to the Samma dynasty, this is a tall, sandstone tomb adorned with floral and geometric medallions with an exterior featuring decorative motifs. Protected since 1981 under Unesco's world heritage status, Makli is said to be the largest ancient funerary site in the world, and is of outstanding importance for its assemblage of massive structures in varied architectural styles from the 14th to the 18th centuries. Unfortunately, it is under threat from encroachments, vandalism and decay caused by climatic conditions and the shift of the riverbed. In spite of such persistent degradation, the Sindh government, which is responsible for preservation, has not done enough to conserve these magnificent monuments. If the government is short on resources, then private philanthropists and the Sindh Endowment Fund for the Preservation of Heritage should be approached. Furthermore, as damaging or defacing protected heritage is in violation of cultural and antiquity acts, all identified perpetrators should be prosecuted.

The government must recognise that the benefits of cultural endowments, including unique streetscapes and historical sites, extend beyond their historical significance. Conserving and managing heritage increases employment and tourism opportunities. This is evident in the recent rehabilitation of Pakistan Chowk: a landmark heritage space in Karachi that was turned into a sustainable public space for local stakeholders; another is Lahore's Walled City project, in which private-public partnerships have adapted sites into tourism spots. It is pertinent to end with a reminder that a nation stays alive when its culture is alive.

Attack on AJK PM

THE line between catastrophe and the tension-ridden norm along the LoC in the disputed Kashmir region has yet again been shown to be unbearably thin.

On Sunday, Azad Jammu and Kashmir Prime Minister Farooq Haider survived what could have turned into a nightmare attack for the region.

A civilian helicopter carrying the AJK prime minister came under fire from across the Line of Control as Mr Haider travelled to a village along the LoC to condole the death of a relative of a cabinet member.

Predictably, the Indian side has claimed that Mr Haider's helicopter strayed across the LoC, but AJK officials have denied that to be the case.

It is also unlikely that Indian security personnel mistook Mr Haider's helicopter to be a military aircraft, which are required to inform forces on the other side of the LoC ahead of flights along the volatile and highly militarised zone.

As ever, the facts are likely to be swallowed up by partisan accusations on both sides.

Yet, the incident on Sunday should serve as an urgent warning to military leaders on both sides of the LoC that if tensions are not reduced and military-to-military communications not increased, disaster could strike at any moment.

Over the years and decades, the pattern that has emerged is that when one side is perceived to have scored a psychological advantage or small gain over the other, the other side seeks to respond.

With no less a person than the AJK prime minister himself coming under attack in murky circumstances, it is perhaps necessary for the DGMOs of the Pakistan and Indian armies to contact each other and reiterate the rules of engagement across the LoC.

The recent bellicose statements of Indian army chief Gen Bipin Rawat, the Indian government's bizarre spectacle of celebrating a so-called Surgical Strike Day — an attack that Pakistan denies occurred — and the continuing protests in India-held Kashmir against military repression are all contributing to an environment of intolerable tension in the region.

While it is clear that India needs to reassess its approach to IJK and on the issues of talks with Pakistan, it does appear that at the moment it is heedless to the demands of peace, normalisation and the lowering of regional tensions.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will not be able to force the people of IJK into subjugation through repressive tactics and neither he nor any other Indian leader will be able to take away the legitimate rights of the Kashmiris.

It is Mr Modi who has turned up the heat in the region to near intolerable levels and it is incumbent upon him to lower tensions not only along the LoC and the disputed Kashmir region but between India and Pakistan as well.

Before dialogue, there must be a common-sense acceptance of regional realities. Mr Modi is totally on the wrong track.

Protecting the media

MEDIA freedom is at its lowest point when journalists are forced to operate in an increasingly hostile environment.

While in Pakistan, there are no official curbs at the moment, as they were in the days of Gen Ziaul Haq, there is increasing pressure on media houses to conform to the narrative spun by various state institutions.

It is this rapid deterioration of press freedom that has prompted the main faction of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists to call for a nationwide protest on Oct 9.

Read more: Journalists plan protest on Oct 9 against curbs on press freedom

While the PFUJ has stated its protest will form the bedrock for a sustained press freedom campaign, it is imperative all factions of this organisation unite to lend it unequivocal support.

Only collaboration among various media platforms — the CPNE, APNS and PBA included — and concerted advocacy with rights groups, media house editors and owners can highlight the seriousness of efforts to safeguard journalists' constitutional rights.

The relentless pressure on journalists is such that self-censorship is now the new normal. In a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, editors say this self-censorship is the result of direct and indirect 'methods'.

Read more: Freedom of press on the decline in Pakistan: Committee to Protect Journalists

What is unfortunate is that polarisation within the media has also eroded press freedoms. Journalists say the principle threat to their safety has come from the establishment — especially during civil-military tensions, with the media struggling to report both sides.

Resultantly, dissenting views have been purged with authoritarian vigour, newspaper sales restricted and television broadcasts blocked. Journalists crossing 'red lines' by reporting on sensitive subjects (the military, religion, militancy, the courts etc) often pay the price.

Though few journalists and editors have spoken publicly about these unofficial curbs imposed by the government, the military and some militant groups, there is widespread awareness of the established lines of control.

The PTI government must recognise that restrictions on freedom of expression and information under the pretext of 'national security interest' have detrimental consequences.

Also, impunity for aggressors creating a coercive environment curtails the right to information.

When the job of a journalist is to speak truth to power, how will the government ensure that the media is able to report without fear or favour?

For is it not an established fact that the relationship between a free media and state institutions in a democracy is often adversarial because the press as the fourth pillar of state has the responsibility of a watchdog?

Indeed, without independent journalism, democracy can have little chance of survival.

Smoking scourge

IT is encouraging that action is being taken on an issue that has for long been relegated to the back burner. According to recent news reports, the federal health services minister, Aamer Kiani, has written to the chief ministers of all four provinces about the need to apply more stringently the law on enlarged pictorial health warnings on cigarette packets. Suggesting a crackdown, one of the letters — to the Punjab chief minister — notes that the use of tobacco products causes the deaths of some 160,000 people every year across the country. Almost 23.9m adult Pakistanis use the leaf in some form or the other, and the economic cost resultantly incurred by the national economy stands at a staggering Rs143bn. Pointing out that under the targets, that are in line with the UN SDGs, the country is obligated to reducing one-third premature mortalities from non-communicable diseases, Mr Kiani noted that tobacco use is the leading preventable risk factor from NCDs. He added that under SDG 3(a), Pakistan must strengthen the implementation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The most frustrating aspect of the war of attrition that Pakistan must continue to wage against the use of tobacco is that at least on paper, the laws have been framed and are available. Section 4 of the Cigarettes (Printing of Warning) Ordinance, 1979, prohibits the manufacture and/ or sale of cigarette packets that do not carry health warnings as prescribed by the government. Similarly, as recently as December, the health ministry prescribed enlarged pictorial health warnings for tobacco packaging, a notification that came into force in June this year. These are part of a network of laws and directives that includes bans on smoking in public places, the sale of tobacco to minors, the sale of loose cigarettes etc. Even so, violators are legion, and smoking continues to entrap millions. This is a battle that the country can simply not afford to give up on.

No economic clarity

IF unofficial reports in the media are correct, then the IMF team that is in Pakistan for consultations not directly connected to any bailout has expressed its reservations about the fiscal adjustment measures taken by the government in September.

Those measures were best encapsulated by what was referred to as a 'supplementary budget' and the finance bill introduced by the government to amend tax measures as well as revise expenditure targets.

The IMF team echoed the views of many independent voices that the measures announced by the government are altogether too inadequate to address the scale of the fiscal adjustment they are trying to undertake, and run contrary to the impression created by the finance minister that the magnitude of the fiscal slippages is far larger than he imagined at first.

Lately, the finance minister has taken the same strident line in public remarks, saying that the scale of misreporting of economic imbalances is massive, while giving examples from the circular debt to buttress his point.

The supplementary budget was announced after weeks of internal consultation within the finance division, and the government had been saying all along that it would take up to the end of the month of September to come up with a realistic plan to address the twin deficits that plague the economy.

The amount of time that went into drawing it up raised expectations that something big and bold was on the way. Instead, what we saw were marginal adjustments and a pusillanimous revenue plan that relies on stricter enforcement actions for almost half of the incremental revenues it aims for.

Such actions are fine, but they make for poor revenue measures because they take a long time to come to fruition, as repeated recourse to them by past governments has amply demonstrated.

Now we have the Fund asking for a more credible revenue plan, as well as more action on the structural side where the finance minister has repeatedly gone on record saying that privatisation was not on the agenda of the ruling party.

True, one cannot argue that privatisation is the only way forward. But it is also important to lay out the specifics of an action plan on what to do with state-owned enterprises and their mounting losses and inefficiencies, and thus far there has been little more than broad directional pointers, with some international examples invoked — there is as yet no word on any reforms.

It is high time that the government's finance team began delivering on an action plan and giving the country economic direction. Weak steps that are quickly backtracked on do not count as setting the right direction for the economy. The government needs to embark on its macroeconomic adjustment journey immediately.

If it continues to procrastinate, it will only signal further weakness and indecision.

'Decreased' CPEC cost

THE new government appears ready to renegotiate with China the price of a railway megaproject that will upgrade the main railway line in Pakistan linking Peshawar with Karachi.

The indication came from Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid. He says the cost estimates of the scheme ML-1 had been scaled down by almost a quarter from \$8.2bn to \$6.2bn.

The mega venture will be executed with commercial Chinese loans as part of the CPEC initiative around which Beijing has agreed to invest \$62bn in infrastructure in Pakistan.

The minister, however, stopped short of explaining the dramatic decrease in the cost of the venture.

It still remains unclear if the government is restructuring the terms of the deal or making a compromise on its range and size. The government is said to have convinced Beijing to tweak the original CPEC framework to attract third-country investments in schemes, and it is reviewing the costs of ventures like ML-1 that have yet to be undertaken.

Read more: Pakistan, China agree to broaden CPEC base

But it has done little to address the allegations that the way CPEC has been executed gives unfair benefits to Chinese contractors, who obtained almost every project with no competition, and at the expense of Pakistani companies.

The Chinese firms are also accused of charging higher prices for lower-quality equipment brought for power projects.

Loans were given by Chinese banks to their companies in China that bought equipment from the latter country to bring to Pakistan, and not a single dollar of the \$26bn-\$30bn (borrowed so far by Islamabad for power and transport schemes) has crossed into Pakistan.

Read more: 'CPEC is not a gift': Professor Jia Yu at the CPEC 2018 Summit

On top of that, expensive projects completed so far as part of the CPEC scheme are accused of exponentially increasing the country's import bill, widening the current account gap, draining foreign currency stocks, and spiking the external debt.

The Nawaz Sharif government which signed the CPEC agreements with Beijing kept the deals a well-guarded secret, and anyone questioning the fairness of the terms was immediately accused of working against the 'national interest'.

In spite of its promises, the present government is also following in the footsteps of its predecessor as far as the lack of transparency around Chinese loans and investments is concerned.

It would be doing a huge service to the people by making good on its pledges with the voters and putting before them the financial and other details of all CPEC projects, so that we can calculate their impact.

Poverty in Sindh

ALLEVIATING poverty and inequality calls for effective policy intervention that is only possible when extensive data is collected through household surveys. Such was the realisation that prompted the Sindh government on Monday to announce it would conduct a survey prior to implementing a poverty-alleviation programme. Unfortunate delays in providing relief to underprivileged Sindh districts, particularly drought-ridden Thar, has resulted in severe malnutrition and stunting.

For relief to come to these desperate communities, the government must collect data to identify areas where socioeconomic disparity has caused much suffering. This information will help it design projects that ensure the provision of basic human needs such as food, safe drinking water and healthcare. Moreover, the authorities must know that only national housing or living standards measurement surveys, for instance, will furnish essential data on income, consumption, health, education etc. Flawed surveys result when the sample size is unrepresentative or the questionnaire worded incorrectly. While these considerations may be apparent to Mr Shah's team, international agencies that have tried and tested methodologies to enhance data quality could also be consulted.

Officials in the last government might have claimed that Pakistan saw a decline in poverty levels, but the scale of the challenge to offer relief to the vulnerable is still huge. Tailoring development projects in line with resources especially at a time of economic downturn is imperative. While the prime minister has taken note of starvation and poverty in Thar, as always the onus lies on the PPP-led government to provide relief to its long-suffering constituents. If Pakistan is to meet its UN SDG poverty eradication target by 2030, concrete steps to boost economic activity and develop institutions and processes are mandatory. Here the key question is how best to create decent living standards. Only information-based action plans that are implemented and go beyond political rhetoric will earn this government respect on the world stage and acceptance from its own people.

Talks with the US

FOR the second time in less than a month, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his US counterpart, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have met to try and achieve a so-called reset in Pakistan-US ties.

It is not clear what progress was made during Mr Qureshi's meetings in Washington D.C. — the foreign minister also met US National Security Adviser John Bolton — but the absence of a joint statement after the foreign minister-level talks suggests that there was no breakthrough.

Last month, following Secretary Pompeo's hours-long stay in Pakistan, a so-called 2+2 meeting in New Delhi immediately after produced a harsh joint US-India statement against Pakistan.

Yet, the frequency of high-level meetings between the US and Pakistan is in itself an acknowledgement that the interests of the two countries, in this region and bilaterally, can only be furthered through dialogue and cooperation.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

With the US continuing to insist that the bilateral relationship with Pakistan be seen primarily through the prism of Afghanistan, it is inevitable that much will depend on a second review of US policy in Afghanistan that President Donald Trump appears to want.

Oct 7 will mark the 17th anniversary of the beginning of the UN-sanctioned, US-led war in Afghanistan — the longest in American history. While Mr Trump has shaken up the post-Second World War global order and sowed a great deal of confusion among America's traditional allies, at least on the issue of Afghanistan the president's scepticism of the advice given by his generals and national security team is a potentially welcome disruption.

Opposed to fighting endless wars abroad and seemingly agnostic about what a peace settlement in Afghanistan may look like, Mr Trump's apparent instincts align with what is known to be the only viable solution in Afghanistan: an Afghan dialogue process that creates political space for the Afghan Taliban and allows foreign troops to leave a relatively stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

Yet, like previous US administrations, the Trump administration has been unable to align its various interests in the region. While Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US are central to an eventual peace in Afghanistan, other regional and international powers — from Iran to India and from Russia to China — also matter.

But US policy towards those other countries has increased the complexity of the Afghan problem. From re-sanctioning Iran to getting closer to India, and from trade wars with China to sparring with Russia over election interference, the Trump administration may be unable to elicit the cooperation needed from those countries to achieve a stable Afghanistan.

If there is a point of convergence among all the regional, international and Afghan actors, it remains the militant Islamic State group and the need to prevent it from gaining a long-term presence in Afghanistan.

In recent years, Pakistan has consistently offered to do what it can to nudge along an Afghan dialogue and peace process. The US should seek to cooperate with rather than browbeat Pakistan.

PML-N's blooper

A statement — perhaps a bluff turned into an embarrassing gaffe — by the PML-N's Rana Mashhood Ahmed Khan has rekindled a debate that remains central to the functioning of politics and state in Pakistan.

The politician said that there was an understanding in the making between his party and the establishment which could restore power to the PML-N. This begs the question why, in all situations, we take interference by the establishment in all political affairs as a given. Rana Mashhood, a former Punjab minister known for his closeness to Shahbaz Sharif, has since retracted his words. His party, led by the 'pro-reconciliation' Shahbaz Sharif himself, has distanced itself from the 'irresponsible' remarks, and suspended Rana Mashhood's membership.

Not least, the ISPR chief himself has expressed disappointment over the blooper, while many members of the PTI government have, in truly combative fashion, condemned the thought as utterly absurd. Yet such rumours and thoughts persist — just as they have over the many decades of Pakistan's history.

It was widely presumed that the errant former provincial minister had thought it wise to talk about the 'patch-up' as a ploy to shore up support for his party in the run-up to important National Assembly polls in Lahore, plus the election for the Senate seat vacated by Chaudhry Sarwar. Those who claim to have greater knowledge of PML-N politics insist that, as a comparatively junior member of the party's statement-firing brigade, Rana Mashhood could not possibly have come up with such 'details' about his party's revival without prior approval from the N-League's high command.

There is also a view, informed by the history of Pakistani politics, that, from time to time, the PML-N resorts to giving out 'reassuring' updates about its relationship with the establishment or risks becoming irrelevant to national

politics. Whichever view one might take, there is no escaping the fact that, for most of Pakistan's history, including the recent past, political parties have historically been resigned to the establishment's influence on national politics.

The more the politicians — on either side — refute Rana Mashhood's insinuation of there being some kind of a deal in the making to restore a modicum of authority to the PML-N, the more obvious it is that they are unable to break free of the tradition. That would suggest the long route that the Pakistani democratic caravan still has to travel in order to establish its credentials.

Anti-encroachment drive

AFTER a Supreme Court order, the Lahore Development Authority launched a crackdown on land encroachment in Johar Town, recovering illegally possessed land, including 80 kanals worth Rs5bn 'belonging' to alleged land grabber Mansha Bomb. Ostentatiously, saplings were then planted on the cleared land. The chief justice also ordered police to arrest Mansha who is wanted in over 80 cases and is said to have enjoyed political patronage and police protection for decades. Mansha, who has gone into hiding, owns more than 12 residences, besides several commercial markets in Lahore. Anti-encroachment operations are under way in Faisalabad, Multan, Sheikhpura, Nankana Sahib and Kasur. Amidst all the hue and cry — with the authorities boasting about their success and social commentators wondering about the man with the strange name — the residents and shopkeepers who had been renting out properties in Johar Town have been noticeably missing from the conversation. Reported to be seen grabbing their valuables in a state of panic when the bulldozers arrived, they later complained that they were not informed of the drive; and were unable to make arrangements in preparation for their evictions. In other parts of the city, residents protested, resulting in the arrest of one person by police on rioting charges. As of now, the future of around 100 to 150 families remains uncertain, as no compensation or safety nets have been announced as yet.

In Karachi, the much-hyped 16.5km-long Lyari Expressway, which has been under construction for 16 years, has affected the lives of at least 200,000 people. Resettlement packages were announced, giving residents new plots in far-off areas in the city along with financial packages. But conflicts and disputes in allotments were reported, and some are still struggling to receive the

compensation they were promised. While the anti-encroachment drive is certainly a positive step taken by the government, the lack of thought and care is not. It is necessary to ensure legality, but it is equally necessary to be humane towards vulnerable groups.

Tax reversals

AS the government is accused of having effected an about-turn in the matter of allowing non-filers of tax returns to purchase property and new automobiles, it is worthwhile to remember that the more important part of the story is that they have done the right thing.

The new finance act passed by the National Assembly will certainly need to be supplemented further in the months to come since it is clearly inadequate to the purpose.

But one positive signal that has come out of it thus far is the willingness of the finance team to not roll back an important reform measure designed to promote documentation of the economy and create a culture of filing tax returns.

It was assumed by everyone that the government team had previously acted at the behest of property developers and auto assemblers.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

But by keeping the restriction in place, the finance team has shown that even if that were the case, they are still capable of acting independently.

The distinction between filers and non-filers of tax returns is new to our economic culture. It has been in place for only a few years.

In the months and years to come, the government ought to build upon this distinction, and progressively close off more and more doors for non-filers of tax returns.

This is an easy task in one sense: there is hardly any constituency that can speak publicly against the measure.

Those whose business interests are adversely impacted by this measure are many, and they are powerful in several ways.

But they have a very hard time making a case before the public, other than taking circuitous routes such as what the auto industry did the day before the passage of the finance act, when they argued that the measure would adversely impact their industry, and could cause layoffs and slow down investment if sales dropped precipitously as a result.

Such criticism is easily dismissed. It is nothing more than vested interests trying to pass off their specific concerns as the larger interest of society, a common tactic but one that is ineffective in this case.

Pakistan has a huge latent demand for automobiles, which is why hundreds of millions of dollars worth of fresh investment are lining up to enter.

The same is true for housing and the property market. If current players cannot play even under conditions of a virtually captive market, then perhaps they should take up some other business.

In times to come, as the government seeks to build upon this reform, and make the conduct of day-to-day business even more difficult for non-filers, such specious arguments are going to be heard again.

Let this episode be a learning experience that better prepares the finance team for such challenges as they continue down this important journey to build a culture of tax compliance.

Madressah reform

MADRESSAH reform has had a chequered history in this country; whenever a new dispensation takes over, there seems to be great zeal for reforming religious seminaries.

However, with the passage of time this passion for change dies down and the initiative is put on the back burner. In the aftermath of the Sept 11 attacks, the Musharraf regime took up the gauntlet of madressah reform with great gusto.

Yet, the fact that we are still talking about the need to reform seminaries shows that nothing much has been accomplished.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Imran Khan discussed issues related to religious schools with heads of the country's five madressah boards, affiliated with various religious sects.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Mr Khan said that the government wanted to do away with class-based education and introduce uniform syllabi, adding that multiple education systems in the country were counterproductive.

He also reiterated the desire that many governments over the past few decades have aimed to achieve: mainstreaming of madressah students and involving them in all sectors of life.

Indeed, it is unfair to label all madressahs as hotbeds of extremism and militancy.

Many parents, driven by poverty, send their children to seminaries as they provide free lodging and meals, as well as impart basic literacy skills to young ones along with religious instruction.

In fact, it is the failure of the public school system that has pushed many parents to send their offspring to seminaries.

So the state's desire for a uniform education system must be lauded. What is problematic, however, is that militant and sectarian organisations use certain madressahs as fronts for recruiting fighters and raising funds.

Moreover, some religious schools have a narrow focus that brainwashes students, with the result that madressah students are taught to hate sects and religions other than their own.

It is these matters that need the government's urgent attention, for the sake of internal security and communal harmony.

Any seminary promoting militancy and hatred of others must be dealt with under the law. There is also a need to register and deal with thousands of illegal madressahs operating in the country, as outlined in the National Action Plan.

Indeed, if sectarian and extremist material is excised from the curriculum, and modern subjects are taught to students, children studying in madressahs can contribute positively to national life, supplementing their religious education with life skills.

The government must, therefore, take madressah reforms to their logical conclusion.

Pakistani migrants

IT is no secret that low-wage workers in the Gulf are the most vulnerable of Pakistan's expatriate community. The kafala (sponsorship) system giving employers tremendous control over workers has created exploitation of a magnitude that can be compared to modern slavery. It is also no surprise that these states have the highest population of Pakistani prisoners abroad. Their notoriously opaque legal systems essentially deprive migrants of their rights through habitual due process violations. Over the past few days, as our new government has sought to cement its ties with Saudi Arabia — which, despite a dramatic reduction in Pakistani labour in recent years (50,000 in the past eight months alone) is still one of its largest employers — its constituents at home and abroad have been calling for commitments of another kind. On Tuesday, a Senate body was told that around 650 laid-off Pakistani workers are now petitioning Saudi labour courts to claim their unpaid dues. According to an overseas Pakistanis ministry official, one firm owes 127m Saudi riyals in back wages. Similar cases have been reported in the past. Meanwhile, on Wednesday, protesters in Islamabad called on the government to assist in the release of their loved ones currently incarcerated in the kingdom. There are approximately 3,000 Pakistanis languishing in Saudi prisons, including many on death row. Since 2014, the kingdom has executed more than 70 Pakistanis, most of them poor and convicted on drug 'smuggling', which they were likely tricked or coerced into.

While the issue of unpaid salaries, as well as of increasing the job quota for Pakistanis, reportedly being broached with the visiting Saudi delegation, is a positive step, there is an urgent need to address the lack of safeguards — functional consular services, legal support, a prisoner transfer treaty and a labour agreement — for Pakistanis living in Saudi Arabia. They, and their families at home, are desperate for a more equitable relationship between our two nations. Clearly, it is not only livelihoods but lives that are at stake.

IMF speaks

There are many right ways to read the words of the International Monetary Fund, but the one wrong way to do so is to politicise them.

The Fund is neither a friend nor an enemy of the countries it interacts with, and this includes Pakistan. It is a lender of last resort whose primary duty it is to safeguard the international monetary system from the disruptive effects of sovereign default by any of its member countries.

Beyond this, it serves several other functions too, such as that of surveillance to detect and flag emerging vulnerabilities in a member country's fiscal framework, as well as help it to overcome its balance-of-payments difficulties.

It is important to say all this here because, far too often, the IMF's pronouncements pertaining to Pakistan are seen in sinister terms by the general public, and its helping hand is viewed as an ATM machine by policymakers.

Both these perceptions need to be set aside, even if for a moment, because the Fund has now spoken on Pakistan's economic predicament for the first time since the new government came to power.

To start with, the Fund has not said anything that it was not already widely expected to say. It has pointed to "high fiscal and current account deficits, and low international reserves" as the signature features of the "difficult economic situation" the country is facing.

It does not use the word 'crisis' anywhere in the statement, for the simple reason that Pakistan is not experiencing an economic crisis — not yet anyway. It attributes the genesis of this "difficult economic situation" to an overvalued exchange rate and loose fiscal and monetary policies.

It says corrective steps began to be taken from December 2017, and lists them as a hike in interest rates, depreciation of the rupee, a rise in gas tariffs and new revenue measures announced in the 'mini-budget'.

Many of these were taken before the PTI government came to power, meaning corrective action had begun long before the general elections in July.

It is essential to remember that, taken together, this amounts to nothing more than “steps that go in the right direction”.

Much more is obviously required, that the Fund lists as more hikes in gas and power tariffs, more revenue measures, further interest rate increases and exchange rate depreciations and credible action on public-sector enterprises.

Considering that the government’s search for alternative sources of funding from friendly countries and overseas Pakistanis has more or less dried up, while foreign exchange reserves are declining at an accelerating rate, the moment of truth is now practically upon us.

The PTI will not be the first government to implement a harsh macroeconomic adjustment programme, but going by its rhetoric, it wants to be the last. If it wants to live up to its promises, it needs to stare reality squarely in the face.

Karachi operation

IN the early hours of Thursday, within the congested lanes of Karachi’s low-income Lyari area, Ghaffar Zikri, one of the city’s major crime figures, was gunned down in a shoot-out with law enforcers. Zikri is the latest in a series of Lyari-based crime dons to have met a violent end facing off against law enforcement; Abdul Rehman ‘Dakait’ and Baba Ladla are among other gang leaders that the police and Rangers have eliminated over the years. While Zikri was facing a host of cases, it is unfortunate that his minor son died in the crossfire; police say the gangster was using the child as a human shield. Ghaffar Zikri’s elimination coincides with the Karachi anti-crime operation’s fifth anniversary. Indeed, over the years, law enforcers have been successful on a number of fronts. For example, as mentioned here, some major underworld figures have been ‘eliminated’, though capturing, trying and punishing them through the courts would have done much to strengthen the rule of law. In other areas, violent crime numbers — such as targeted killings, kidnappings and extortion attempts — are down, but can be further improved. However, while the state has seen considerable success, it has miserably failed to contain street crime, which continues to bedevil the citizens.

Along with dealing with street crime in an efficient manner, the authorities need to address the root cause of crime in Karachi. For example, the Lyari area was

used as a base by crime dons because of its lack of facilities and opportunities for the inhabitants. Indeed, political parties at one time patronised gangsters in the area to shore up their street power. Youths in Lyari and other low-income areas of the metropolis are drawn to crime as they see no future for themselves. So while neutralising gangsters is important, the systemic issues that allow crime to flourish need to be addressed by the authorities. Moreover, for the operation's long-term success, the law-enforcement and judicial arms of the state must work in tandem to ensure that criminals don't find their way back to the streets. Senior police officials have complained that criminals manage to obtain bail and thereafter resume their activities, while the judiciary says the investigation of crimes is flimsy. Together with these key issues, for lasting peace in the metropolis, the militarised approach to policing must evolve into a community policing model that can protect the citizenry.

Crackdown on students

ON Thursday, police baton-charged Peshawar University students protesting against a 10pc increase in semester fees, as if they were on a battlefield against an unarmed 'enemy'. Several students were arrested while others sustained injuries. As soon as the news hit the air waves, the finger-pointing and blame game began. The students maintained that their agitation was peaceful. It also didn't come out of the blue. The students had presented a list of demands, which included their issues with hostels, transport and registration. In 2017, with the announcement of a new BSc department, they were forced to pay Rs36,000 for just one semester. In comparison, in 2008, they were paying much less — Rs10,000. At that time, a visit by a government official had eased some of their tensions. But the latest announcement just added salt to their wounds. During the ANP's tenure, several public-sector universities were inaugurated in KP, partly to lift some of the pressure off PU. However, political appointments were made and the fees was raised. Mashal Khan's lynching at Mardan University is one extreme example of the misuse of power by a corrupt administration.

Student unions were first banned in 1984 during the Ziaul Haq dictatorship. Violence and lawlessness had increased on campus, but observers believe it was also because Gen Zia was afraid that students would challenge his regime (as they had Gen Ayub's). Unions were reinstated shortly during Benazir Bhutto's tenure in 1988, but then the Supreme Court banned politics on campus. The

absence of student unions — legitimate bodies for student representation — is disempowering. Instead of preparing democratic citizens, cultivating an environment of respectful debate, and teaching them to articulate their grievances peacefully, students are reduced to consumers or criminals. There are genuine fears that student politics will resemble the worst of the 1980s and 1990s, with gangs operating on campuses. But suppressing what is legitimate often gives rise to the unlawful. And then we have a bigger monster on our hands.

Fair accountability?

THE National Accountability Bureau has struck again, and once again it appears that a disservice has been done to the cause of across-the-board, fair and lawful accountability.

The arrest of the president of a major political party and multi-term chief minister is a significant step, but NAB and other investigative agencies must not fear to tread in certain areas simply because powerful individuals are implicated in wrongdoing.

All are equal before the law and where there is evidence of wrongdoing, the accountability process should march forward confidently.

Yet, the manner in which Shahbaz Sharif has been detained and the murkiness of the allegations against the ex-Punjab chief minister suggest that NAB has launched itself headlong into yet another high-profile inquest without adequate preparation and perhaps even disregard for due process and the principles of justice and transparency.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Now that NAB has secured custody of Mr Sharif for 10 days it must use that time to assemble a compelling case of alleged corruption and malfeasance.

Anything short of that and the allegation that NAB is working on a partisan agenda will gain further strength.

Selective accountability is as unwelcome and undesirable as no accountability because selective accountability undermines public trust in the accountability process itself.

To be sure, the accountability record of all major political parties in the country is poor. Successive PPP and PML-N governments at the centre and in the provinces failed to yield a single instance of internal accountability against senior party figures and public office holders.

The two parties were also content to desultorily negotiate a new accountability framework, allowing NAB to continue to exist despite a bipartisan consensus that the organisation needed to be scrapped in favour of an empowered but fair accountability setup.

The PTI is a first-time ruling party at the centre, but in KP little progress was made towards meaningful and institutionalised accountability between 2013 and 2018.

And while the PTI federal government is wholeheartedly supporting NAB in its efforts today, it is yet to be seen if it will allow its own party ranks to be scrutinised as closely as today's opposition parties are experiencing.

Indeed, if NAB's focus remains on the PML-N and the PPP, it will be difficult to deny that a political decapitation effort is under way. The country cannot afford to return to the vendetta politics of the 1990s and the disaster that it led to in the form of the Musharraf dictatorship.

Perhaps the NAB high command should pay heed to the advice of the superior judiciary, with Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar last month calling on the accountability body to improve its investigatory and prosecutorial systems.

Before showy arrests and news conferences are undertaken, the careful work of collecting evidence and assembling rock-solid prosecution cases should be the focus for NAB.

Pressure on INGOs

IT seems that the steady squeeze on international non-governmental organisations working in Pakistan is not going to let up under the PTI government. A spokesperson for ActionAid said on Thursday that the interior ministry without citing any reason had ordered the INGO to cease its operations and leave the country within 60 days. She added that 17 other INGOs had been issued similar notices but did not disclose any specifics. While there has been no confirmation from the interior ministry, Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari's tweet indicates that matters may indeed have taken such a turn and that the affected INGOs are among those who had appealed against the expulsion orders issued earlier by the government.

This is the latest chapter in a saga that began in 2011 with the capture of Osama bin Laden in which a fake vaccination programme run by a foreign-funded aid organisation played a key role. That episode triggered a paranoia that has only intensified over time, and rendered the work of INGOs increasingly difficult and uncertain. They have had to re-register with the interior ministry, a process entailing cumbersome vetting procedures to ensure total transparency in their operations and funding. This is not objectionable in and of itself, of course, as any development work must conform to the local laws and not be a cover for anything other than the stated objectives. However, the crackdown on INGOs is consistent with a coercive environment in which critical voices are being silenced and the media brought to heel. Foreign-funded is not synonymous with 'anti-state', and the government itself must be more transparent about its reasons for expelling any development organisation. Many INGOs and their local partners do invaluable work that enables people to access healthcare, legal aid, education, food security and disaster relief. They provide employment to thousands, and their role in empowering local communities, particularly women, is critical. According to Human Rights Watch, INGOs and their local partners impact the lives of about 20m Pakistanis annually, and they are needed precisely because successive governments have failed the people on so many fronts. However well-meaning, it will take the PTI government several years and huge amounts of money to address this historical dereliction of duty. One might have expected Ms Mazari to recognise that, rather than assume a stridently nationalistic tone that will not compensate for the loss of upliftment services to deprived sections of the populace.

Human smuggling

THIS week, police claim to have halted the smuggling of around 100 boys from Gujrat, Lalamusa, Mandi Bahauddin and Hafizabad to Iran and Turkey, through the usual passage of Balochistan. The final destination is Europe — or that is the ‘dream’ at least. Each year, it is said that around 30,000 to 40,000 Pakistanis attempt illegal passage into Europe, the Middle East, Turkey and Russia. Most of these migrants are from the small towns and villages of Punjab. They are literate or semi-literate. And while most may not be living in abject poverty, or in conditions of conflict, opportunities are few. So there is nothing remarkable about the latest news except for one detail: nine of the boys were just 13 years of age. It is said that a ‘culture’ has been created in parts of Punjab to migrate to greener pastures, ensuring a thriving business of human smuggling. Young boys express excitement at the prospect of living in Europe and the thought of adventure, sometimes even going against their family’s wishes. When reminded of the often fatal dangers that await them in their journey, they say that death is inevitable where they live now too. But the freedom and riches they seek eludes them. Even if they survive the journey, border police and perilous sea routes, many of the migrants end up in detention centres, are unable to find work, or they become engaged in sex work or crime.

For a number of years now, human smugglers, said to be based in the rural areas with a network that extends to Tehran, Istanbul and the border areas of Greece, have profited from misery and desperation by selling false dreams to the vulnerable. The approval of the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Bill this year, which imposes three- to five-year prison sentences and a penalty of Rs50,000 on traffickers, was certainly a welcome and much-needed move. But as with all laws in Pakistan, enforcement remains the real challenge.

Balochistan: a new opportunity

A MAIDEN, day-long trip to Balochistan by Prime Minister Imran Khan has yielded a familiar set of statements regarding economic development and the PTI’s fight against corruption. Mr Khan’s comments about reviewing CPEC projects to address the concerns of the Balochistan government are likely to add to the uncertainty regarding how the government intends to proceed with the vast

portfolio of Chinese investments in and loans to Pakistan. Yet, perhaps most striking was what the prime minister did not dwell on in Balochistan: the sense of alienation among swathes of the Baloch population that has fed a long-running low-level separatist insurgency in the province. Prime Minister Khan was quoted as saying that the federal and provincial governments will take steps to bring back Balochistan's people who have left the province because of terrorism and violence, but it is not clear who the prime minister was referring to. There was no appeal to either alienated Baloch citizens or Baloch separatists living abroad to engage in dialogue with the state.

Over the years, what has been apparent is the standard twin approach of the Pakistan state to Balochistan: casting the province's political problems as wholly a matter of underdevelopment and poor economic growth and adamantly viewing Balochistan through the prism of security and regional strategic policies. In 10 years of elected governments and from the latter half of the Musharraf dictatorship, the approach favoured by the Pakistani state in Balochistan has not worked. Indeed, large swathes of the province continue to remain virtual no-go areas and there is very little independently verifiable information that trickles out of the province today. While no provincial or federal government has been able to make much headway in peacefully ending the insurgency in Balochistan, new assemblies and governments at the centre and in the provinces can be an opportunity to reassess the situation and make fresh peace overtures. That does not appear to be the case in 2018 so far.

It is hoped that the Balochistan government and the PTI at the centre will not continue to avoid dealing with hard issues in the province. Arguably, at no point over the last decade have the government in Balochistan, the federal government and the military leadership been working in as close and accommodating a manner as the dispensation today is. In Balochistan that can be opportunity for positive change. Prime Minister Khan has the political capital to attempt a different approach in Balochistan — if he is inclined to do so. A day-long trip to Balochistan nearly two months since being sworn in does not suggest the province is high on Mr Khan's priorities. Perhaps the prime minister would do well to begin by seeking the input of moderate political forces in Balochistan on the way ahead.

Fighting rape

IN a year when a global reckoning of sexual violence has taken centre stage, two brave activists — a young Iraqi-Yazidi woman forced into slavery by the militant Islamic State group in 2014, and a Congolese gynaecological surgeon — were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for fighting to end the use of rape as a weapon of war.

This award not only celebrates the extraordinary courage and relentless campaigning of Nadia Murad and Dr Denis Mukwege but also casts a spotlight on two global regions — Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo — where women have paid the price for years of armed conflict and terrorism.

Known to put his own security at risk after criticising the government for perpetuating sexual violence, Dr Mukwege administers the Panzi hospital in Bukavu in DRC where he has treated thousands of rape victims in the country's recurrent civil conflict — a country once called the rape capital of the world. To date, his hospital has helped more than 40,000 rape victims.

Read: Nadia Murad — from IS slave to Nobel laureate

The second youngest laureate, 25-year-old Ms Murad, the voice and face of rape victims, was sold as a sex slave herself, and repeatedly raped when her home in Sinjar in northern Iraq was overrun by IS men.

Such is her courage she asked to be named and photographed when recording her testimony on global platforms revisiting her torture, repeatedly and in public, so she could draw the world's attention to the enslaved Yazidis. Calling for action against impunity for perpetrators, she has suggested collecting and preserving evidence that could bring IS militants to trial.

It is time, therefore, the world treated sexual violence in conflict as a war crime; not as the unfortunate collateral damage of war.

And a solution is urgently sought for the lack of reparation for women victims in most countries. Since the 1994 Rwandan genocide when around 250,000 women were raped, women have suffered devastating forms of sexual violence in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Darfur and Bosnia among other conflict zones.

Recently, the killing of Rohingya babies and girls, the gang-raping of women and displacement of entire villages has shown that irreparable wartime horrors against minority ethnic communities will continue when authoritarian rulers act with impunity.

This is precisely why the world community must lend humanitarian and legal support to survivors. Ms Murad's rare resilience to keep telling her story because she wants to ensure she is "the last girl in the world with a story like mine" should be enough inspiration for global leaders to act.

Karachi blackouts

ALL through last week, Karachi saw a series of power outages that left the entire city — including the airport and many hospitals — without electricity. Some of these incidents left the city without electricity for hours on end, and it took almost a full day for power to be restored to several areas — that only plunged back into darkness a short while after. At least three such incidents were reported in the past week that K-Electric blamed on the Extra High Tension line that supplies power to the city from the national grid. All that the residents were told was that 'supply from the national grid to the city is off', without much elaboration on why this might be the case. In another instance, the utility's spokesperson blamed the outage on excess humidity. Meanwhile, the power regulator, Nepra, issued a short press release saying that K-Electric had not invested in its transmission system, and that had left it vulnerable to tripping due to various reasons.

Residents of the city can only guess at what is going on. What is clear is that the outages are not the result of any power shortage, nor any sudden surges or other unforeseeable events. They are, pure and simple, the consequence of a transmission system that is highly vulnerable to vagaries and in dire need of maintenance as well as upgradation. That this situation should exist at a time when K-Electric sponsors enjoy boasting about all that they have invested in the utility and the miraculous turnaround they have brought about in its financial condition is beyond belief. There are no extreme weather events happening around us to put the blame on, and if there are problems with purchases from the national grid, that has in years past caused blackouts of this sort, then K-Electric should be clearer in stating this. As it stands, the power outages simply underline the fact that there is nobody to care for the city's well-being.

Economic predicament

A SENSE of panic is evident in the markets as the government continues to issue vague signals about its plans for plugging the growing external sector deficit and arrest the accelerating slide of the foreign exchange reserves.

Monday saw an intensifying sell-off in the stock market that fell by 1,328 points, with most stocks hitting their lower locks, and accompanied by unusual movements in the currency markets as well.

Dealers and brokers pointed to Prime Minister Imran Khan's statement that Pakistan may have to approach the IMF for a bailout.

The statement was vaguely worded, and couched in fiery talk of ending corruption and searching for looted wealth stashed abroad, which fed further anxiety in the markets about whether or not the government has a clear policy direction at the top.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Mr Khan talked about reaching out to overseas Pakistanis for help as well as locating and bringing back looted wealth stashed abroad as a panacea for the economy's twin deficits throughout his campaign trail, as well as after coming to power.

But the markets are not comforted by this talk, because they know that such moves can never plug the deficits, and certainly not in the time required.

Then clarity arrived in what appeared to be a hurriedly crafted press release on Monday, which announced unequivocally that "the government has decided to approach the IMF for stabilisation and an economic recovery programme".

This admission has been weeks in the making and the delay in the announcement may have contributed to market uncertainty.

Now that it is finally out, the markets will no doubt search for further clarity on the shape of the stabilisation programme that will emerge from the talks set to begin in Bali in a few days.

What needs no searching, however, is the immense pressure that has built up in government accounts at various points.

This past week also brought news of a report, for example, drafted by a panel of senators, many from the PTI, which concluded that the government had no choice but to enact a circular debt settlement of up to Rs400bn in order to keep the power sector running.

This may well be necessary, and the next clock to start ticking on a massive government decision could be on the circular debt.

The question is, how will the IMF see such an operation? Now that the government will be in programme talks with the Fund, its opinion on the use of government resources to settle power-sector arrears will be important.

And if the Fund demands in return that the bill be borne by consumers and not the government, there could well be a second bitter pill to swallow.

The delay in the decision has done no service to the government, and now speed is of the essence.

Mental health

‘YOUNG people and mental health in a changing world’ — the theme for Mental Health Day 2018, which falls tomorrow, is particularly relevant to Pakistan. Around 30pc of our population is between 15 and 29 years old. For this age bracket the world over, suicide is the second leading cause of death; and for each person who puts an end to their life, there are many others who attempt the same. That means millions of young Pakistanis suffer from mental distress that is severe enough to be cause for concern, even if they do not resort to extreme measures. This is a critical phase in the psychological timeline of an individual’s life. It is when people — regardless of which part of the world they live in — often experience identity crises; when they are trying to reconcile their aspirations with their reality; and when interpersonal relationships can take a toll too hard for an immature psyche to bear.

Then there are added stressors in countries like Pakistan, with its social inequalities and conservative mores. For one, there is an acute disconnect between the older generation and younger people who have far more exposure to the world through the internet and the media. A young person’s desire to exercise individual choice in matters related to marriage, career, sexuality, etc is often seen as an act of rebellion that must be suppressed, by force if necessary.

Secondly, a huge segment of the youth belongs to the lower socioeconomic strata with few opportunities for career advancement, which is a vital aspect of a positive self-image. Instead, economic insecurity compels many of them to abandon their education, if they had access to it in the first place, and work dead-end jobs to support their families. The anger arising from unresolved frustrations can turn inwards, leading to self-loathing and depression. Thirdly, specifically in the context of Pakistan in recent years, countless families have experienced social upheaval from internal displacement, whether as a result of natural calamities or military action; there is also the emotional fallout of living in a society wracked by terrorist violence. Such conditions affect everyone, regardless of age or gender, but young people are especially vulnerable. As always, the lack of understanding about mental illness and the stigma associated with it are the biggest obstacles to timely intervention. However, the future of this country is inextricably linked with the mental well-being of its younger generation.

Snow leopard losses

ALTHOUGH not entirely unexpected, it is still regrettable that the country's efforts at conservation and the protection of wildlife are often an exercise in taking one step forward and two steps back. Consider the case of the Himalayan snow leopard. It is the top predator of its habitat which extends up to three million kilometres across the great mountain ranges. But the species' population is thought to number only 10,000 worldwide at the most generous estimate. Only a few hundred are believed to exist in this country, on the slopes of the Karakoram, the Himalayas, and the Hindukush. About a decade and a half ago, the feline was listed as critically endangered in the IUCN Pakistan Red List. Hectic work on the issue and the dedication of conservationists meant that the numbers went up enough to take it to 'merely' the endangered status. But now, wildlife experts are noting an "alarming decline" in the animal's numbers in this country. As reported by this paper on Sunday, while the problem of poaching remains, as does that of the targeting of the animal by villagers in a bid to protect livestock, the emerging threat is climate change and an expanding human footprint that is leading to the loss of the predator's habitat and the food chain of which it is a part. The populations of its natural prey — the ibex, markhor, Ladakh urial, etc — are also dwindling for the same reasons, which recursively leads to the small snow leopard population hunting livestock.

None of this is to detract from the importance of success stories, such as those generated by the efforts of the Snow Leopard Foundation, where villagers have been sensitised to the endangered status of the species and solutions have been found for providing compensation for livestock losses. Even so, the example of this species ought to be taken as reason enough to recognise that conservation efforts cannot be slowed down, otherwise the gains can too easily, too heartbreakingly, be lost.

IMF decision

It took a crisis to get the government to focus on reality, but it finally happened.

The government's announcement of seeking support from the IMF to help shore up the deteriorating balance of payments has triggered a frenzied debate in the country about the merits, and the underlying necessity, of the move, as well as unleashing feverish market sentiments.

Monday saw a rout on the trade floor, and on Tuesday, the panic spread to the currency markets as the exchange rate plunged by more than anyone can remember in recent years.

A Rs10 devaluation in one day is intense, even by Pakistani standards, and sentiments are set to be stirred further once the price effects of this adjustment work their way through the economy.

Read more: Devaluation pushes up total debt by Rs900bn

On top of this, further pressures have built up in the power sector and the public-sector enterprises and their finances.

The turmoil can now spread beyond the financial markets to the real sector if urgent action is not undertaken.

Almost two months after Prime Minister Imran Khan was sworn in, reality is now knocking hard on the doors of the government, and the country as well.

The markets are impervious to emotional appeals, and they cannot be inspired or otherwise persuaded, other than through the cold inducements of gain and loss.

This is a reality every government faces, and the PTI cannot expect to be the exception.

The minister of state for revenue hit the right note when he said that the challenge for his government is to “use the space offered by the bailout to undertake much delayed structural reforms”, which is how such bailouts are meant to be used.

The minister is right to identify the space as an opportunity to undertake the right reforms, but all governments have made this claim before him and the real challenge will be to keep to this goal.

The biggest enemy now is optics. What needs to be done is comparatively straightforward, and the best path forward can be mapped out quickly as well since the PTI leadership has no shortage of competent people to turn to for advice.

Perceptions, or optics, can derail the whole enterprise in a number of ways. One is if optics becomes the only priority of the government at the top.

A hint of this appeared on Tuesday night when news arrived of the appointment of a new spokesperson for economic affairs, who is known for his focus on optics than the facts.

A further hint was provided when the prime minister summoned his media team for a meeting on how to manage the perceptual fallout from the turmoil gripping the financial markets.

What need to be managed urgently right now are the fundamentals, not the perceptions. That is where the prime minister’s focus is immediately required.

Irreversible penalty

ON World Day Against the Death Penalty, the question once again arises: should the state — consisting of human beings, prone to human error — make decisions on who gets to live or die?

There are philosophical arguments in support for and against the death penalty and intrinsic to these are themes of social order, punishment and retribution.

But what about justice?

When emotions and paranoia run high, humans are less likely to be convinced by the lucidity of an argument. But justice has to remain impartial; it cannot be swayed by popular sentiment. And it cannot be rushed to cover up its systemic failings.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Pakistan is one of 57 countries that retains the death penalty law.

Since 2004, we have sentenced 4,500 people to death by hanging.

In 2008, a moratorium on the death penalty was imposed. No executions occurred between 2009 and 2013 (barring one in 2012).

But in the aftermath of the APS attack in 2014, when 132 schoolchildren and nine others were brutally murdered, the moratorium was lifted and military courts were propped up.

Few challenged the decision. The country was hurting. Blood had to be repaid in blood.

Since the lifting of the moratorium, Pakistan has carried out 465 executions.

True, the death penalty gives citizens living in chaotic times a superficial sense of security; it also satiates the darker aspects of human nature (revenge, scapegoating, and the element of 'purifying' society of 'anti-social' elements).

But it is also evident there can be no trial in which courts guarantee flawless prosecution or ensure complete absence of arbitrariness.

And it is the poor who are largely made victims of a faulty justice system.

Unable to cover legal fees, they are at the mercy of state-appointed lawyers. It is also common practice for investigative officers, on a tight budget, to write reports in favour of whoever pays them well. Mental illnesses are rarely factored in.

The vast majority of admissions of guilt are through confessions, which can be extracted through torture.

Despite all these faults and more than enough reasons for doubt, we continue to have on the statute books the highest form of punishment for 27 offences, ranging from (alleged) murder to (alleged) treason to (alleged) blasphemy.

Death is irreversible. Let's not create more victims in the process of 'justice'.

Perhaps both state and society should also reflect on the circumstances, and their own role, in creating criminals.

Punjab's gender initiatives

ENDING gender-based violence not only requires commitment from policymakers but also support from civil society and development partners who can design integrated approaches. This was the strategy that prompted Punjab to implement progressive gender equality initiatives under a Strategic Reforms Unit spearheaded by the former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif. For its efforts, global recognition came this weekend in the form of the prestigious Mother Teresa Award given to the SRU's (former) director general, Salman Sufi, for promoting women's empowerment and social justice. This is an honour especially when there are so few projects focused on women's security and justice. In a province that has registered a 21.5pc increase in crimes against women, including 1,265 cases of domestic violence in 2017, reforms designed and implemented by SRU have included the Punjab Protection Against Violence Act, 2016; the Punjab Women Protection Authority Act (PWPA); women's rights in school curricula; and the Women-on-Wheels initiative. Perceived as a blueprint for replication, nonetheless, is a Violence Against Women Centre in Multan offering a one-stop facility run by women where first aid, medical and forensic assistance, police reporting and investigation, legal aid and post-trauma rehabilitation services are available. No wonder that its former director general was added to a list of the top five men from around the world in 2017 who worked to end violence against women.

However, bringing justice to women is too often crushed by political power play. In June, Mr Sufi was removed from his position by the interim government presumably because he worked closely with Shahbaz Sharif since 2014. Removing support from those driving change not only flies in the face of rights pledges made by the state but is reminiscent of the modus operandi of governments adept at undoing projects initiated by their predecessors. Here a

word of advice for the government: it would do well to consider nurturing visionaries rather than political opportunists in its quest to bring change to Pakistan.

Police politicisation

THE removal is, prima facie, a classic example of political interference; the denials and explanations of the federal government are scarcely believable — and the whole matter is doubly egregious because it goes to the heart of the PTI's governance promises.

On Tuesday, the PTI federal government tried to remove Punjab Inspector General of Police Mohammad Tahir.

It is not clear if the attempted ouster of Punjab's top cop has succeeded because the Election Commission of Pakistan has blocked the transfer citing a notification barring provincial transfers and postings ahead of by-elections on Oct 14.

However, the Establishment Division of the federal government has objected to the ECP's intervention, claiming that transfers are barred only in the districts where by-elections are to take place and that Mr Tahir can be transferred as per the government's wishes.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Imran Khan's point man on police reforms in Punjab, former Khyber Pakhtunkhwa IGP Nasir Durrani, is reported to have resigned following the federal government's decision to remove Mr Tahir as Punjab's top cop.

The fiasco appears to be yet another self-inflicted wound for the PTI and is especially significant given the party's public stance on the politicisation of the police and the need for deep-rooted reforms.

What is in question here is not the authority of the federal government to transfer a police chief, but the reasons for doing so.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry's explanations have failed to dispel doubts created by media reports that the reason for Mr Tahir's expulsion from Punjab is his unwillingness to transfer police officials as desired by the PTI in Punjab.

Indeed, with the current assemblies and governments less than two months old, it is difficult for legitimate professional reasons to have arisen that made Mr Tahir's service in Punjab no longer tenable.

The PTI ought to consider rescinding its order to transfer the Punjab IGP or it must urgently provide a full and credible explanation for why it is necessary that Mr Tahir be removed from his post.

Prime Minister Khan has for years decried the politicisation of the police under the PPP and PML-N; the PTI has claimed one of its principal achievements in KP between 2013 and 2018 was the so-called depoliticisation of the provincial police force; and Mr Khan as prime minister has vowed to depoliticise the police in Punjab and purportedly demonstrated his resolve by installing Mr Durrani, the retired KP IGP, as police-reforms chief in Punjab.

The same Mr Durrani is now reported to have resigned in protest at Mr Tahir's sudden attempted ouster from Punjab.

Certainly, the PML-N and PPP did not just fail to introduce police reforms over the past 10 years, at times they were seen as actively opposing them.

But Mr Khan and his PTI have vowed to be different. There is still time to do the right thing. Mr Tahir should be reinstated as Punjab IGP.

High dropout rates

ACCORDING to a report in this paper, KP's school dropout rates remain high despite Rs130bn being pumped into the province's education sector in the past six years. Previously, an annual report stated that out of the total 51.53m children (between the ages of five and 16), 22.84m were out of school ie nearly 44pc. This is despite the claims of success made by the authorities and reforms being introduced. Some of the reforms mentioned include raising teacher salaries; monitoring teacher attendance (to combat the problem of 'ghost schools'); teacher training workshops; and improving existing infrastructure and facilities. Undoubtedly, these are laudatory and necessary steps. So why does the national dropout rate continue to be so high? Firstly, unemployment rates amongst graduates are high. The economy is unpredictable, and coveted government jobs are few and difficult to acquire. When parents, or children, see their 'educated' family members unemployed or struggling to make ends meet, they assume their

own education is a waste of time. Secondly, a lack of monitoring and disciplinary action against teachers who engage in corporal punishment and bullying, or neglect children's learning and safety by way of an unprofessional or indifferent attitude, also results in a high dropout rate.

Lastly, Article 25-A of the Constitution states that the state must ensure free and compulsory education for all five- to 16-year-olds. But even if government schools provide free education and books, parents cannot afford other expenses such as uniforms, shoes, bags, notepads, stationery or transport. Often, struggling parents pull children out of school to earn, help with domestic chores or take care of their younger siblings. Girls suffer even more. Some parents remove their daughter from school when she hits puberty. They fear harassment and 'shame' — both at school (their concerns are due to the presence of male teachers and staff) and on their walk to school, since many parents do not have the time to accompany their children. However, regressive attitudes around 'honour' are often a cover for more legitimate security fears. And even if children complete primary schooling, secondary and higher schools are even more scarce and at greater distances. Research shows that enrolment (including for girls) increases when the state provides free transport to and from school. This can be seen in Islamabad, where the Federal Directorate of Education has distributed 60 buses among government schools and colleges. Education is a universal right. In countries like ours, it has become a privilege.

Airport safety

IT can only be considered a mercy. On Tuesday, a passenger boarding bridge, also known as an airbridge, at the Islamabad International Airport collapsed just moments after it was disconnected from a Gulf Airlines flight. An employee of the Civil Aviation Authority, which handles the facility's operations, and a worker were injured in the accident, though not seriously. CAA engineers who visited the site to determine what went wrong and compile a preliminary report found that the bridge operator had been retracting the pathway when it collapsed, even as the aircraft had been cleared to taxi. Preliminary findings show that the reason for the collapse might have been loose or wobbling parts in the structure of the walkway that could perhaps have affected its balance.

To millions of passengers, this will come as frightening news — it does not bear thinking of the tragedy that could have occurred had the accident happened when the plane was being boarded. The incident takes on greater significance given that the IIA was inaugurated barely six months ago, and was sold to the public as a state-of-the-art facility that would be well worth the billions that were spent on it from the national exchequer. Yet the new Islamabad airport begs questions about its design, purpose and functionality, especially in light of the construction cost. For months, not just travellers but even airport staff have had to contend with serious inconveniences such as non-functional rest facilities, half-finished features that include ceilings, wiring etc. Now, with Tuesday's accident, the issue of basic safety and the stability of airport structure has been raised. The CAA director-general has constituted a four-member board of inquiry to further investigate the collapse of the airbridge. This would be taken as an encouraging sign — except for the fate of most such inquiries in the country. Much more stringent action is needed, and urgently. To avert a potential tragedy, the CAA cannot dismiss the matter and must ensure full attention is given to all aspects of safety.

Housing for all

THE housing initiative announced by the government is highly laudable considering the seriousness of the housing shortage in the country. By some estimates, demand for housing increases by 200,000 every year, with a backlog of almost nine million units, yet no major government housing scheme has been launched in decades. Instead, vast swathes of prime, state-owned land in urban as well as agricultural areas are being eaten up by rapacious property developers in the private sector who build to cater largely to elite demand. As the housing shortage grows, the vast majority of the poor find themselves left to the mercy of the rental market and the informal sector. Successive governments have shown marked apathy towards this situation, since catering to the housing needs of the poor does not carry the promise of outsize profits.

Given this context, the PTI government at the centre has done the right thing to prioritise housing and own the initiative at the highest level. The next step is to bring greater transparency to how the scheme will be structured and more importantly, how it will be financed. Housing is a complex issue in Pakistan because it touches on so many areas that are only partially under the control of

the federal government, and many of the issues involved go far beyond housing alone. Zoning and tenancy laws play a big part, as do taxes and the depth of the financial markets. A scheme built on the simple idea of providing free land to private developers, with the condition that they will build only for low-income groups, runs the risk of ending up like the 14,000 plus acres reserved for that purpose by the Sindh government in Karachi's Malir district. That land, through the provincial government's own machinations, was instead handed over to Bahria Town as part of a huge, for-profit gated community.

A major source of scepticism about the plan, however, is the sheer size of the financing involved — a reported \$180 billion — and its scope, which is to build five million houses in five years. The fervour with which the party and its followers believe in their ability to do big things can be admired, but questions remain about the viability of the initiative. If it is implemented in project mode alone, without accompanying legislation that seeks to change the power structures of urban Pakistan, give more voice to the poor in representative municipal bodies, improve the provision of civic services like water, sewerage and solid waste management, then it will amount to little more than another speculative enterprise. And the ability to finance \$36bn per year, even through mortgage financing, will be challenged by the shallowness of Pakistan's debt markets. The intention behind the initiative is laudable, but translating it into outcomes on the ground is likely to prove a bigger challenge than what the party seems to have bargained for.

The reckoning

OVER the last few days, the #MeToo movement, which largely swept through the Western media industry in recent months, has witnessed a dramatic surge in neighbouring India.

The litany of allegations against powerful men in journalism and Bollywood — of sexual impropriety, harassment and outright assault — is overwhelming in scope.

The allegations share an almost universal DNA: the perpetrator was shielded by enablers, complaints were ignored by bystanders, and the victim was herself ostracised.

To break this implicit code of silence is a tremendous act of courage and, in such a toxic milieu of victim blaming, a profound personal sacrifice to make in service of this cause.

To these women we owe our unmitigated support.

But such platitudes are empty in the absence of a commitment to take stock of work cultures here in Pakistan that — it is no secret — are rife with abusive men.

The obvious existence of whisper networks is proof of a system that is failing women.

Despite the passage of anti-harassment legislation increasing the onus on employers to ensure a safe and equitable work environment, the burden of demanding accountability is still almost exclusively for survivors to bear and, even then, there is no guarantee that their complaints will be addressed appropriately.

The same misogyny and classism that permeates every strata of society is inherent in our workplaces and in our legal system — designed by and almost exclusively for privileged men.

Divesting institutions of anti-women and anti-poor biases is a long and painstaking process, but an endeavour we should affirmatively undertake all the same.

Due process requires that victims are believed, without censure or stigma.

In our role as watchdogs, holding the powerful to account, journalists too must address whether we have failed to check abuses of power within our industry.

While many are quick to prejudge the movement as a witch hunt, a gender war or a means of settling old scores, and though there is a genuine threat of sexual harassment allegations being weaponised to call for increased gender segregation and the withdrawal of women from public life, neither should deflect from the legitimate need to redress structural oppression through a framework of restorative justice.

Will this country finally see its own #MeToo moment?

Pakistani women have and are speaking up. The dam will one day break, but which side of the deluge we chose to stand on is a decision we must make now.

Beating breast cancer

WITH 83,000 women diagnosed annually with breast cancer in this country, social taboos, lack of health facilities and the absence of a national cancer policy are among the challenges that must be overcome to stall the progress of this disease. October, as breast cancer awareness month, is a reminder that Pakistan has the highest rate of breast cancer in Asia: 40,000 women succumb to this disease annually. These statistics should be enough to push the government into taking action. All women must have access to prevention and treatment methods, including screening options. Disseminating information on causative factors (such as a rise in obesity levels and lack of physical activity) through sustained messaging on television, radio and social media could reduce the mortality rate. In the past, successive governments were reluctant to launch awareness campaigns given pressure from conservative elements. This must change; if detected early, the breast cancer can often be successfully treated. Also Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital, a state-of-the-art centre for cancer treatment and research — the brainchild of the prime minister himself — could serve as a blueprint for the federal government to share with provincial health authorities. Advocacy without action would be disastrous, given that investment in healthcare facilities and infrastructure forms an essential component of the UN's 2030 SDG agenda to which Pakistan is signatory.

Tackling the underlying causes of breast cancer through the SDGs is one way to reduce the disease burden. A holistic approach is advantageous because most development goals are intrinsically linked to improving women's health prospects. In other words, to achieve gender equality, alleviate poverty and improve nutrition outcomes, the government must focus on women and child health. That women who breastfeed reduce their risk of breast cancer is a well-documented fact; breastfeeding also has the added benefit of reducing infant mortality. However, breast cancer treatment is possible only with upgraded hospital services that are adequately funded. Cutting funds for healthcare in the name of austerity is thus a huge disservice to women's wellbeing.

CPEC transparency

A MOMENT of truth seems to be rapidly approaching for the PTI government. The managing director of the International Monetary Fund said clearly that the fund will expect “absolute transparency about the nature, size, and terms of the debt that is bearing on a particular country”, and although she did not explicitly mention China in her remarks, they were given directly in response to a question about Pakistan’s stockpile of Chinese debt. The transparency must extend to “the extent and composition of that debt,” she added, whether it was government-owned or by state-owned enterprises “or the like of it”, which presumably means it also includes private-sector debt. The government representatives enjoy giving the figure of \$95 billion as the total size of Pakistan’s external debt in their public remarks in an attempt to impress upon us all the sheer size of the debt mountain they have inherited. Since this figure includes bank borrowing and other private-sector debt, we can see this repeated mention of it as a sign that all debt, whether private or public, has a bearing on Pakistan’s external debt sustainability.

If the IMF indeed insists on disclosure of the “extent and composition” of all debt, including CPEC related, then the government has an obligation to ensure that such details are also shared with parliament and the State Bank of Pakistan. The government and the IMF cannot keep the details of these future liabilities, that have a direct bearing on the country’s external debt sustainability, as a private matter purely between themselves. At the moment, even the State Bank does not have these details and has to compile its own debt sustainability forecasts on the basis of whatever open information there is, meaning the curator of the country’s foreign exchange reserves is left to draw external debt sustainability forecasts on the basis of informed guesswork. Even the payment mechanism involved in the Chinese projects were not known to the State Bank, resulting in a significant under-reporting of imports from China because many of the payments were not routed through this country’s banking system.

The PTI leadership, while in opposition, made strong demands for full disclosure of all CPEC deals, as well as the LNG deal. In their early days in power they repeated their commitment to follow through on their promise to disclose both of these. But today they are backtracking from this commitment. If their hands are tied through legal covenants that prohibit disclosure, then surely these also apply

to the sharing of such details with the IMF. It would be unacceptable to have a situation where the government and the IMF are both in on the details of these important deals, while the people of Pakistan and the State Bank are left to guess what the future holds for them.

Judicial accountability

THE right decision has been made, but perhaps not be for the right reasons. Applied to superior court judges, the right decision made for the wrong reasons could send the wrong signal to the judiciary and undermine confidence in the judicial institution.

Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, a justice of the Islamabad High Court until he was stripped of his position by the Supreme Judicial Council on Thursday, was manifestly unsuited and unqualified to be a superior court judge. Mr Siddiqui had demonstrated he did not have the temperament, a necessary respect for the law or even basic decency and humanity to be a superior court judge.

Also read: The fall of a high court judge

The term ought not be used lightly, but Mr Siddiqui is the textbook definition of a religious bigot and he used his high office to strike terror into the hearts of some Pakistani citizens. It is right that he no longer holds high judicial office in Pakistan; indeed, the ousted judge has through his hateful actions likely disqualified himself from holding any public office in the country.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Yet, the manner in which Mr Siddiqui has been dismissed and the reasons given for why he is unfit to hold judicial office have raised a fresh set of questions about judicial independence, the rule of law and the role of state institutions.

Mr Siddiqui was initially referred to the SJC for conduct unrelated to the charges on which he has been dismissed. Before the original allegations against Mr Siddiqui could be adjudicated on by the SJC, he gave a speech in which he made sensational allegations against a military-run intelligence agency.

While it is arguable that he made the speech to try and save his judicial career and his purpose was to stir controversy rather than shed light on alleged

unsavoury behaviour by elements within the state, the allegations should have been transparently investigated. An investigation could have helped dispel the doubt that Mr Siddiqui may have cynically tried to create in the first place.

Now, there is the reality of a high court judge dismissed from service and the public not necessarily knowing if there is any merit to the claims for which he has been dismissed. The SJC acts exceedingly sparingly; the negative opinion against Mr Siddiqui is reportedly the first since the regime of Gen Ayub Khan.

Judicial accountability is welcome and necessary, but it must be transparent and fair.

From books to guns

FOR those that call the shots in Delhi, especially those tasked with overseeing Kashmir policy, the fact that a 'new' type of fighter is emerging in the held territory should be a matter of concern. However, it is unlikely that India will see the problem through a rational lens where India-held Kashmir is concerned, as it deals with the region in a colonial manner; and especially during the BJP's rule at the centre, the Indian state has treated Kashmir with increasing arrogance and contempt. The killing of young resistance fighter Burhan Wani by Indian security forces in 2016 had sparked a series of protests in the held region, with Kashmiris facing brutal tactics as they bravely took to the streets to demand freedom and dignity. Now, another killing of a Kashmiri fighter has shown that highly educated individuals are taking the path of armed resistance to fight the Indian occupation. Manan Wani, a former PhD scholar at Aligarh University, was killed on Thursday by Indian forces. Kashmiri leaders, including Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, have expressed their anguish at the loss of "a budding intellectual and writer". Indeed, the details emerging about Manan Wani reveal a well-read, eloquent young man with a scholarly bent. Those that killed him need to indulge in some soul-searching to comprehend why this academically inclined man dropped his books and picked up a gun.

The India establishment only has itself to blame for the estrangement of the Kashmiri people. By smothering under the jackboot their desire for freedom, India has turned a peaceful campaign for self-determination into an armed struggle. Kashmiris are disillusioned with the political process and feel their only option is to fight India in the field. That is why fighters like Burhan and Manan Wani (not

related) are being feted as folk heroes and symbols of the anti-India struggle. Delhi can still salvage the situation by dealing with the Kashmiris with respect — or, it can continue on the same path and perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Judicial reform

THE judicial activism of Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar can and has divided opinion in independent legal circles, but on occasion the chief justice does speak frankly to his institution in a manner that few other jurists have done. Addressing a Supreme Court Bar Association seminar in Lahore on Friday, Chief Justice Nisar once again spoke plainly about judicial failures, remarking that the legal fraternity, both lawyers and judges, were in part responsible for the endless delays in settling legal disputes in court and calling into question the judicial qualifications and competence of some judges. The searing remarks may not sit well with some members of the judiciary and the legal community, but there is truth in what Chief Justice Nisar has said. Indeed, the myriad failures of the legal system are well known, widely lamented, and have created deep distortions in both state and society. Arguably, judicial reforms must be at the core of across-the-board institutional reforms that are needed in the country. Without a viable, fair and effective judiciary, a modern, tolerant, inclusive and progressive society cannot be established.

The theme of judicial reforms is one that Chief Justice Nisar has frequently dwelled on in public comments during his tenure, but perhaps the chief justice may be the first to acknowledge that it has not resulted in much change as yet in the judiciary, particularly at the lower levels where most of the judicial work ought to be done. The chief justice has approximately three months left in office and he has succeeded in drawing a great deal of national attention to the judicial institution. With a new federal government in office that has sought to place reforms at the centre of its governance agenda, there may be few better opportunities to focus the judiciary's attention on a reforms agenda that can be taken up by parliament and the executive as necessary. Chief Justice Nisar has himself initiated proceedings to determine the contours and limits of the superior judiciary's suo motu powers — another essential aspect of judicial reforms. Judicial reforms ought not to be a choice between a top-down or bottom-up approach but a process that addresses shortcomings and deficiencies at every level of the judicial process.

Certainly, as Chief Justice Nisar has publicly recognised, it will not be easy to turn around a moribund judicial institution. If current trends continue, the increase in the population and stagnation in the legal system could combine to drag the standards of justice in the country for the average citizen even lower than the standards of today. The nightmare scenario does not necessarily have to become reality, but it will if corrective action — ie sweeping judicial reforms — are not undertaken soon. The current chief justice has shown a light on where change is needed; will his successors carry forward the mission of judicial reforms?

Registering handsets

THE Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has announced that the long-anticipated Device Identification, Registration and Blocking System will become functional on Oct 20, after which any mobile devices that are not registered on it will become unusable. DIRBS is aimed primarily at combating the influx of smuggled or counterfeit mobile sets that make their way into the country. These counterfeit devices adversely affect the government, mobile phone operators, distributors and consumers, according to the PTA. While this is certainly a welcome step, perhaps its rollout should have been managed better. The public awareness drive accompanying the rollout of DIRBS has suffered from some sort of communication failure. With Oct 20 announced as some kind of ominous deadline for when mobile devices might suddenly stop working, the result has been widespread concern and confusion.

In fact, most users need not be concerned. Any devices that are being used on a daily basis are very likely to have already been registered. Merely making a phone call or sending a message from a device is enough to get it on the DIRB database. PTA has said it has already 'legalised' (added to its database) nearly 160m mobile devices, active on all local mobile phone networks. None of these devices will face any service interruption after Oct 20. What users should be cognisant of, however, is that they ought to verify any new device they buy after October by texting its IMEI number (usually printed on the box) to 8484. Only devices certified 'compliant' should be bought. If a handset is being brought into the country from abroad, it has to be registered with the PTA if it is to be used with a local SIM. The PTA also needs to do more to alleviate the concerns of mobile phone sellers who may be sitting on unsold inventory. How does the legal

status of their stock in hand change after Oct 20? Perhaps it would be a good idea if the PTA revisited its approach to educating the public about this important new system. It is also worth noting that the system, if implemented vigorously and maintained diligently, can greatly help curtail the menace of mobile phone snatching. If permanently disabling a device is as easy as flipping a switch for the PTA, a vast black market that thrives on the resale of stolen mobile phones can be shut down permanently. Is the PTA taking any steps in this regard?

Climate change threat

IT was once said that we have to preserve the well-being of the planet for future generations. But it now seems that the threat is imminent, and within the span of current generations' lifetimes. A recent report by the United Nations' scientific panel on climate change warns of looming consequences as early as 2040 — wildfires, the death of coral reefs, and rising food shortages being just some of the anticipated disasters. The panel recommends rethinking and restructuring the global economy. But are the decision makers — world leaders, economists, and the owners of giant corporations — paying attention? And will they be able to put aside political differences, urgently form new policies and implement them across the board?

Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to the risks of climate change. According to a Gallup poll, we are also now one of 19 countries in which the majority of the population considers climate change to be a leading threat. Although we produce only 0.34pc of global greenhouse gases, we suffer the effects disproportionately due to our geographical makeup. Being an agrarian economy, with more than 50pc of the population linked to agricultural activities directly or indirectly, the implications are even more disastrous. We have already witnessed the distressing effects of unpredictable and unprecedented weather changes in the form of floods that have displaced millions in Sindh; severe water shortages, drought, and starvation in Thar and Balochistan; heatwaves in Karachi that claimed the lives of 1,200 people in its worst spell; and flash floods and landslides in the Gilgit-Baltistan area. This has led to large-scale climate-caused migration. The Paris Agreement stated that responsibility for climate change lies with all countries. Encouragingly, the PTI government has made climate change a top priority. In his first address to the nation, the prime minister listed environment in his 11-point agenda. The country must follow a strict course

of action and implement the frequent reporting of progress. Adapt or perish. If not, the future looks dystopian.

US-Taliban talks

A PUBLICLY acknowledged meeting between a US envoy and the Afghan Taliban is perhaps another sign that the US is, at long last, willing to acknowledge the political and military reality in Afghanistan.

Zalmay Khalilzad, a hawkish diplomat appointed as the US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation last month, has met with six Afghan Taliban leaders in Qatar, raising hopes that a meaningful peace and reconciliation process may be underway in Afghanistan.

While cautious optimism may be called for this time — and it is to be hoped the days and weeks ahead will bring more positive news — the long history of false starts and broken promises in Afghanistan should not be forgotten.

A clear-eyed but purposeful approach is called for by all sides.

Failure at this stage could throw Afghanistan and the region into fresh turmoil at a time when the global order is facing unprecedented stresses.

It is not clear what approach Mr Khalilzad is taking in his attempts to reinvigorate a stalled peace process in Afghanistan.

The US diplomat's reputation as a hawk, particularly his near-incendiary views on Pakistan's role in the region, did not bode well for regional peace efforts when his latest appointment was announced last month.

Yet, if Mr Khalilzad proves to be a hard but pragmatic negotiator, he may be able to help break a negotiating stalemate in Afghanistan.

An Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process is desired by all sides, but the reality of the US's military, political and financial role in Afghanistan has long meant that a peace with the Taliban would entail difficult decisions on a future role of the US in the country.

If Mr Khalilzad has the full backing of President Donald Trump, he could thread the needle between the Taliban's demands for a complete withdrawal of US

forces and the Afghan government's and, likely, the US's demand for a future political set-up in Afghanistan that is acceptable to them.

It is possible that the Taliban themselves are recognising that a potential window for a peace deal, backed by regional and international powers, may be closing.

The US, China, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, among other countries with stakes or a role in Afghanistan, are themselves being drawn into complicated bilateral and multilateral struggles that could affect their ability to cooperate and coordinate on Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: helping achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan while better managing strained ties with the US.

Public service message

IN a room full of cameramen, Sindh Education Minister Sardar Ali Shah enrolled his eight-year-old daughter into a government school in Hyderabad. By entrusting his child to a government school, the minister showed trust in his own institution to provide quality education and safety. It serves as an important symbolic gesture. For decades now, public education and healthcare in Pakistan has been faced with a public relations problem, and not without some basis in reality. It was in the 1980s that privatisation of state-owned enterprises and services really took hold, with the reversal of the policies of the Bhutto era. This continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The privatisation of education and healthcare was seen as a means of filling gaps in the provision of quality services. But it was also a way for the government to abdicate its responsibility of meeting the basic demands of its citizens. As private schools and hospitals popped up all over the country, competing with one another for reputation and capital, government hospitals and schools increasingly became an afterthought. Today they are associated with corruption and incompetency, indifference, and poor service. As a result, state-run schools and hospitals remain few and far between whereas private-owned enterprises are peppered across the country's urban centres. It is estimated that around 70pc to 80pc of all hospitals in Pakistan are privately-owned.

This may all be very well, but one group loses out tragically: the poor. According to the Economic Survey 2018, Pakistan's percentage of people living below the

poverty line is 24.3pc. It is even worse for those in rural areas, due to low population densities and distance. The most qualified professionals prefer to stay in urban centres where there are more social and financial opportunities. Yet the fact is that the state cannot and must not abandon its most vulnerable citizens. The private sector will not provide services where it does not benefit financially. One way to go is increased private-public partnerships. Punjab, which is said to have most systematically privatised its service sector over the years, handed over 1,000 schools to NGOs as a test for transferring another 2,500 — despite opposition from teachers. Over 45pc of Punjab's children now go to low-cost private schools. Increasing the prestige of state facilities lessens the burden on poor and middle-class families. More persons in positions of leadership need to follow the Sindh education minister's gesture, thus building up pressure for the improvement of state education and healthcare services.

Investing in the young

NEW World Bank research explains investing in human capital should be prioritised by governments aiming for sustained economic growth. Launched at the World Bank's annual meeting with the International Monetary Fund in Bali, the World Development Report 2019 calls on countries to focus more on future outcomes for children or risk hundreds of thousands of young people without adequate skills. The report notes even the poorest countries with the least funding must form development models benefitting populations with the least opportunities. As an add-on is a first-time Human Capital Index (HCI) measuring the link between health and education investments and the productivity of future workers. Among Asian countries predictably topping the HCI for under-investment in human capital, Pakistan is ranked lower than the average for its region and income group; a child born today will be 39pc as productive when she grows up as she could be if she had adequate education and healthcare. Here a child will complete only 8.8 years of schooling; 44pc of children are stunted and thus at risk of cognitive and physical disabilities. Despite this shameful report-card, a seemingly unchanged prognosis for years, the state has failed to protect the future of young people. Here it would do well to learn that development is not just about more money but how well it is spent.

For a government to ensure its people, including women, have relevant workplace skills, it must sustain investment in education, health, social

protections and nutrition. More importantly, given an evolving labour market shaped by technology, we are not aware today what kinds of jobs the future holds but we can invest in skills needed to compete globally such as problem-solving and critical thinking, as well as empathy and communication abilities. This government must stay committed to pulling out all the stops by investing in its young generation so that it is not lured by regressive ideologies in antithesis to democratic values supporting peace and development.

Inflation pressures and the future

PAKISTAN is no stranger to inflation, its corrosive effects on the economy and the well-being of the populace, but even by historical standards the country may be about to enter a period of acute inflation – and it is far from clear if the federal government is willing or able to do what is necessary to reduce the impact and duration of the seemingly inevitable inflation spike.

Take a look: Feeble rupee, IMF and rising inflation

Unhappily, political discourse on the economy still appears to be mired in the politics of denial and opposition. That needs to change urgently.

A recent projection by the IMF that inflation in Pakistan may touch 14 per cent by June next year ought to immediately focus the national political leadership's on what can be done to mitigate what may be one of the worst-ever spells of inflation in the country. Worryingly, the federal government may have few options in the short term.

Indeed, much will depend on the straitjacket that the IMF imposes on the federal government. One of the likely demands of the IMF will be greater autonomy for the State Bank of Pakistan, which was made virtually an extension of the finance ministry under the last PML-N government.

That, combined with a likely demand for higher interest rates, could help dampen inflation in the medium term. But in the short term, the IMF could demand a further devaluation of the rupee and increases in gas and electricity prices – which will add to inflationary pressure.

If international oil prices rise or a similar exogenous shock buffets the Pakistani economy, the inflation rate could be higher still. For the PTI economic

policymakers, the challenge will be to swiftly enact structural reforms in the first two years of the government's term so as to position the economy to bounce back quickly from the upcoming inflation attack.

For the PTI's political mavens, the challenge will be to curb the party leadership's penchant for blaming political enemies because the cooperation of the opposition, particularly in the Senate, will be needed if reforms are to be successfully pushed through.

Therein lies a challenge for all sides. The combined opposition could choose to savour the political difficulties of the PTI or it could choose to do what is morally right and support the PTI in any plans that help limit inflation and return the economy to stable growth.

Runaway inflation will eat into the PTI's political capital, but it would also attack the economic wellbeing of all Pakistanis, whatever political party they belong to. Surely, the democratic order in the country needs a political leadership that is willing to lend a hand across the political aisle to help fight an imminent threat to national security in the shape of high inflation.

Perhaps Prime Minister Imran Khan and Finance Minister Asad Umar can lead the way on ratcheting down the political temperature and turning the nation's focus on an economic reforms agenda.

Election truths

THE PTI politicians are reporting the 'positives' from the by-election held on Oct 14. It will be no surprise, however, if the secrets of their much flaunted satisfaction escape a large number of citizens. It is just the initial phase of a PTI government in power, a period where Prime Minister Imran Khan is seeking to set the direction for his rule. The Oct 14 by-election, in which the PTI, among other losses, failed to retain two of the seats that were won by Mr Khan himself in the July 25 general polls, is by no means a an occurrence that can be easily ignored. It represents an early reminder to the PTI about how to run itself, and its politics. The impact of the by-poll setback is multiplied by the fact that it came close on the heels of some very difficult steps that the government said it was forced to take, such as the decision to go to the IMF for a bailout package. The PTI's opponents are surely going to project the negative trends thrown up at

crucial points of the national map courtesy of the Oct 14 by-election as some kind of spontaneous public reaction to Imran Khan's coming to power.

The PTI's opponents are various, depending on which province we are talking about. But what is quite remarkable is that many of them, if not all, appear to have gained on the Imran Khan party of change in this by-poll. The ANP and MMA have something to be happy about now after they were routed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the PTI in the July general vote. In Punjab, the PML-N looks unbroken and solid, scoring victories in the by-polls over the PTI, in Lahore, in Faisalabad and in Attock, along with other areas. This performance by the PML-N will add to its reputation as being the most efficient election-contesting machine. However, it places a big question mark over the PTI, which in many places — such as NA-131 in Lahore where Khawaja Saad Rafiq of the PML-N won — failed to perform the very basic election chore of wooing voters to the polling stations on the important day. There might have been so many other factors. But a little more effort on polling day could have saved PTI politicians some of the explanations on offer. Perhaps those at the helm at the PTI were still too busy celebrating the July 'revolution'.

Remembering Asma

THIS week, the Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell and Supreme Court Bar Association held its first 'Justice for Empowerment Conference' to honour the late human rights defender and lawyer. Some of the panelists included Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar. They discussed everything from the independence of the judiciary and the rights of women and minorities to freedom of expression and enforced disappearances – all topics close to her heart. Asma Jahangir spoke of human rights at a time when the concept was considered difficult in Pakistan. She co-founded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the AGHS legal aid cell in 1987 which influenced 17 pieces of legislation advancing the rights of the vulnerable sections of society: women, children, minorities and labour. These included the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992; Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace Act 2010; the Anti Rape Bill 2016; the Child Marriage Restraint Act; the Elections Act 2017; and the Acid Control and Crime Prevention Act 2011. For her efforts, she won her share of accolades, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1995), Millennium Peace Prize by

UNIFEM (2005), and the Hilal-e-Imtiaz (2010). She also gained her share of detractors.

Where men with greater power and agency cowered, Asma stood fearless in her resolve. She stood for principles, not personality, and spoke against anyone abusing their power. Whether it was the military, politicians, judiciary or men of religion, Asma Jahangir towered over all of them. Always on the frontlines of the right side of history, she never let the batons, bullets, jail terms or smear campaigns derail her from what she believed was right. The void left in her absence will be difficult to fill, but the law firm she left behind continues to work in providing quality legal aid to underprivileged clients. One hopes the politicians, judges and dignitaries who attended the conference show the same courage and resolve that Asma lived.

IMF and China's support

THE public endorsement is likely a result of a great deal of behind-the-scenes lobbying.

It is welcome that China, via its foreign ministry spokesperson, has announced its support for the IMF “making an objective evaluation of Pakistan based on professionalism and earnestly helping it properly address the current difficulty”.

For Pakistan, walking a familiar IMF tightrope has been significantly complicated by the increasing competition and hostility between China and the US on the global stage and in this region. The US, which at least until the Trump administration touted its adherence to a so-called rules-based world order, had initially come out in an almost ugly American fashion against CPEC, virtually demanding that Pakistan limit the scope of the project if the IMF is to be allowed to deliver a bailout package to Pakistan.

At least publicly, the hostile and threatening US rhetoric has been toned down in recent days and it is, instead, the IMF leadership that has underlined the need for greater Pakistani transparency on its CPEC-related financial commitments.

What is not known is the extent to which China is resisting Pakistan sharing CPEC data with the IMF or, indeed, if there are binding covenants that prevent Pakistan from making public such data.

Worryingly, the PTI federal government may not have the expertise or the clarity necessary for navigating such fraught international political and financial challenges — though arguably no other Pakistani government would be considered well placed to deal with such complex challenges either.

At a minimum, however, the federal government ought to use the imminent IMF bailout as an opportunity to draw some new lines in this country's fiscal dealings with the outside world and transparency at home. The US hostility towards and seemingly the IMF's scepticism of CPEC aside, there is no plausible reason for the PTI to continue with the excessive secrecy that characterised the PML-N's approach to CPEC.

If binding commitments have been made regarding the secrecy of certain contracts and they can be justified in light of international best practices, the PTI government should publicly say so. If not, why is the PTI seemingly reluctant to place before parliament and other appropriate forums the full scale of Pakistan's debt and financial exposure to China?

If new best practices are to be instituted and financial transparency promoted, the shackling and blindfolding of the State Bank of Pakistan under the previous PML-N government in particular will need to be reversed.

An autonomous and empowered State Bank that has access to the full range of financial data is not only necessary for a well-managed economy, it could also help protect the public's interest when IFIs and global powers squabble among themselves and heap pressure on Pakistan.

Whatever Washington's motives, the IMF's incentives and China's fears may be, surely the Pakistani public deserves to know the full picture of the state's financial liabilities, external and domestic.

E-voting lessons

THE pilot project for e-voting by overseas Pakistanis in the by-elections on Sunday has gone smoothly and, as it turns out, the most distinctive feature of the experiment was the tepid response by potential voters. Out of 632,000 overseas Pakistanis eligible to vote in the constituencies where the by-polls were being held, only 7,419 — a little over 1pc — registered to cast their ballot. And from among these, on polling day itself, 15pc did not exercise their right of franchise.

While Section 94 of the Elections Act 2017 empowers the ECP to explore the feasibility of e-voting by expats, the electoral body had expressed reservations about handling such a mammoth task — involving an estimated 6m-plus eligible voters — within the short span of time available. A report by a task force set up by the ECP listed a number of challenges — the risk of software failure, including security concerns such as the possibility of foreign intelligence agencies hacking into the system, and the fact that secrecy of the ballot and exercise of free will could not be ensured.

For these reasons then, it was sensible to settle for a pilot project which would entail smaller numbers; perhaps it would have been even more prudent to initially test for vulnerabilities in non-political elections, as suggested by the task force, and scale up gradually. Fortunately though, the exercise went off without a hitch. However, there are several points to note in the aftermath of this experiment. The most obvious is the miniscule number of overseas Pakistanis who registered for e-voting — in fact, for a particular constituency in Balochistan, only one voter signed up. Granted, low turnout is a feature of by-elections in general, but given this was the first time that overseas Pakistanis had access to e-voting, courtesy a landmark decision by the Supreme Court, one would have expected a more enthusiastic response. One could even argue that their eagerness to participate in the electoral process had been overestimated. However that may be, the right of expats to cast their ballot must be supported and furthered through improved outreach, particularly to those who do not have the requisite literacy and computer skills to navigate the process of e-voting. There are now five years before the next general election is due: the ECP must take this opportunity to build on what it has learnt from its pioneering attempt at e-voting.

Brick kiln workers

EACH winter, Lahore is enveloped by a thick blanket of smog. Fearing yet another public health disaster this year, Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has reportedly approved Rs250m to aid the introduction of ‘zigzag technology’ in brick kilns. Under this model, which has been implemented in some other Saarc countries with success, bricks are arranged in a ‘zigzag manner’ and a ‘single-man-coal-feeding system’ is applied. This ensures greater air flow inside chimneys, which then reduces the levels of black carbon emissions. If the new technology is implemented across the board, it could help decrease carbon

emissions by around 60pc. The move is welcomed by members of the brick kiln owners association, though confusion about the exact details remains. However, the government's second proposal — about shutting down brick kilns that are not implementing this new model from Oct 20 till Dec 31 — has been met with sharp resistance. Owners argue it would make redundant the large workforce that is directly or indirectly linked with the brick kiln industry. The smog lasts for approximately seven days, they say, so it makes little sense to shut down the kilns for 70 days. For their part, officials admit they have no way of ensuring that brick kilns remain closed; they have also not announced any plans for compensating owners for their losses or providing an alternative means of livelihood to the labourers. In its attempt to mitigate a health crisis, the government might create an employment crisis.

Absent from this entire conversation are the voices of the workers themselves. It is no secret that workers in the brick kiln industry are some of the most exploited, sentenced to work on the land until they pay off their debts to the owners. In order to come up with a comprehensive, realistic and, most importantly, humane plan, the government has to take all stakeholders into the fold — and that includes the workforce. Because the workers are the ones who have everything to lose.

Shahbaz's claims

WHETHER true or false, a political leader ensnared in a corruption investigation is always likely to cry foul and blame political opponents.

Therefore, if the probe is to be effective and the cause of accountability furthered, it is necessary for the investigating body to be scrupulously fair, adhere closely to due process and act in a manner that is beyond reproach.

The NAB leadership does not appear to understand either its mandate or the political aspects of its job. And because of NAB's failures, it is the democratic process and the public interest that could be further undermined.

Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif has reportedly become the first opposition leader to be brought to parliament from incarceration on the orders of the National Assembly speaker. It is to the credit of Asad Qaiser, the speaker who is a member of the PTI, that Mr Sharif was brought to the

Assembly by NAB and allowed to address parliament as per the rules of the house.

But the unfortunate spectacle and Mr Sharif's speech have furthered muddied the political waters, and if the response to Mr Sharif's allegations is not managed well by the PTI government, a fresh round of political instability could be triggered.

NAB needs to urgently reconsider its approach in the investigation of not just Mr Sharif but also of a range of public officials who are in the accountability body's crosshairs.

To be sure, Mr Sharif cannot and should not expect any special treatment under the law. He must submit to the NAB process as required, as must all public officials and political leaders.

Yet, two problems are apparent in the detention of Mr Sharif. First, the opposition leader was cooperating with the anti-graft body as required by the law, so why was he physically detained at this stage?

Second, where is the preliminary evidence collected by NAB that justified not just an investigation of Mr Sharif but his detention too? If NAB claims that it cannot take into account the political status of an individual under investigation — which it clearly must not — that does not absolve it from its duty to investigate in a fair and transparent manner.

Surely, if NAB is free to arrest a suspect when it decides to, that decision must be rooted in a reasonably strong case that has already been assembled and presented to the public.

Finally, Mr Sharif's allegation of collusion between NAB and the PTI government are unfortunate. Prima facie, it suggests a willingness to politicise an accountability inquiry rather than acquit oneself through the legal process.

It is to be hoped that NAB itself will recognise its flawed approach and change course quickly. A slanging match between the opposition leader and the federal government could quickly escalate.

Jamal Khashoggi case

THE accounts doing the rounds of senior Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's possible murder in the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul are chilling.

While authoritarian governments the world over have no qualms about killing dissidents — including journalists — the details swirling around Mr Khashoggi are reminiscent of the dark ages.

The facts up till now are that the self-exiled Saudi writer went inside his country's consulate over two weeks ago to get documents, leaving his Turkish fiancée at the door, and has not been heard from since.

While Riyadh has strenuously denied any knowledge of his fate, media outlets have painted a more gruesome picture: they say a hit squad consisting of Saudi intelligence operatives flew into Istanbul and killed Mr Khashoggi within the consulate, with some outlets claiming his body was dismembered. Because of Mr Khashoggi's prominence as a Washington Post columnist and the grisly speculation surrounding his disappearance, there has been an international outcry, with calls for the Saudis to explain what happened to the journalist.

The seriousness of the matter can be gauged from the fact that President Donald Trump dispatched the US secretary of state to Saudi Arabia to discuss the matter with the king and crown prince.

Mr Trump's response to the matter has wavered; from initially saying that the Saudis would face "severe punishment" if they were found involved, he has since tweeted that Riyadh has "totally denied any knowledge" of the matter.

While one should not jump to conclusions before all the facts are available, the burden of proof is on Saudi Arabia to establish that Jamal Khashoggi left the consulate of his own volition.

If it is confirmed that some elements within Saudi intelligence were involved in his disappearance and possible murder, it would prove true the criticism that reforms initiated by the Saudi crown prince are cosmetic, and the same old authoritarianism persists in the kingdom's power corridors.

Mr Khashoggi was no radical reformist; hailing from a well-connected Saudi family of Turkish origin, he had for long enjoyed access to some of the most powerful members of the House of Saud.

However, it was his mild criticism of Mohammed bin Salman's policies that apparently made him fall out of the crown prince's favour. And while Mr Khashoggi's case has been highlighted internationally, it should be remembered that scores of other activists and intellectuals remain incarcerated in Saudi Arabia for criticising the government.

It is, therefore, critical that Riyadh shares the facts about Jamal Khashoggi.

Trees and mass transit

PAKISTAN'S biggest city has suffered long-standing transportation woes. With its expanding population, and a large number of privately run transport vehicles on its roads, Karachi has witnessed rising traffic congestion, air and noise pollution, risk of accidents, and health and environmental hazards over the years. The cost of transport and fuel also forms a major chunk of daily expenditures. So when in 2016 it was reported that the city would have its own mass transit system — comprising colour-coded lines as part of a plan that the Japan International Cooperation Agency conceived in 2012 — the city's long-suffering citizens were thrilled. Other than fulfilling practical concerns, public transport also helps in reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions and the pollutants that create smog, substituting numerous separate emissions-producing automobiles with fewer transit vehicles that generate less pollution on a per person basis.

But what happens when thousands of trees are removed to make way for such a transport system? Recently, the Sindh government presented an environmental impact assessment report of the 23km-long Red Line at a public hearing. One of the major concerns articulated was the chopping down of approximately 23,693 trees; that is a massive number for a city already deprived of greenery. Due to the lack of trees, extreme weather conditions can have a disastrous impact on the city. In 2015, Karachi witnessed its deadliest heatwave, resulting in the death of over 1,000 people. For its part, the authorities have given their assurance that the majority of trees being cut down will be 'compensated' with replantation drives; and 300 indigenous species might be uprooted and replanted, as recommended by the forest department. Similar concerns were raised when

7,321 trees had to be cut down for the construction of the Green Line, but authorities reasoned that 6,321 of those trees were of the invasive conocarpus and eucalyptus species. One hopes the authorities know how to achieve a balance between development and environmental needs. Greenery in urban areas, too, is in the public interest.

Population crisis

THE perils of a runaway population are well known. Pakistan, with 208m people at last count, is often described as a ticking time bomb in this respect. Indeed, we are already witnessing the fallout of a piecemeal, half-baked approach to population planning over the decades. To contain the burgeoning numbers that put increasing strain on our limited resources, we need to act now. A new UNFPA report examines the various factors that have a bearing on fertility rates across the world, which in turn determine a country's developmental gains. The factors contributing to higher-than-optimum fertility rates are largely rooted in institutional, economic and social realities — including gender inequality, shortfalls in healthcare, low education levels, etc. The report correctly holds that these impediments stand in the way of many countries achieving the SDG goals. Although Pakistan scarcely receives a mention, the document should nevertheless give our policymakers valuable insight into the scope of the issue, so they can come up with a well-considered, holistic and result-oriented policy.

Gender-based discrimination is the biggest obstacle to a successful family planning programme because it cuts across virtually every aspect that influences family size. As a country that figures near the bottom of the gender parity index each year, Pakistan confronts many challenges. While conservative social mores sometimes deprive even couples from taking independent decisions about their reproductive behaviour, patriarchal systems militate particularly against women's autonomy. Gender-based violence and forced/ early marriage further erode their agency and increase the likelihood of unwanted and repeated pregnancies. In the absence of a robust health infrastructure, bearing a child is fraught with risk for the woman. That too feeds into the low status of half the country's population, the perception they are dispensable. Moreover, Pakistan has the worst under-five mortality rate in South Asia, which further incentivises the desire for more children. There is also the issue of unmet need: according to the UNFPA report,

20pc of women of reproductive age in this country, who want to stop or delay childbearing, are not using any method of contraception.

Often, conservative attitudes are cited as a major obstacle to family planning in Pakistan, resulting in stop-start campaigns, and tentative, even obtuse, attempts at raising awareness that leave the target audience none the wiser. However, this is a misleading argument that diverts attention from the apathy and lack of planning by successive governments. After all, Iran has successfully brought down its fertility rate, not in spite of, but with the support of its powerful clergy. Indeed, the importance of government-sponsored information campaigns and family planning services cannot be overstated. Fertility rates in Bangladesh, for instance, start declining from decades ago even in poor, rural areas due to the state's active involvement. The recently installed PTI government, with its emphasis on social upliftment, must accord population control the priority it deserves.

Border abductions

THE periodic violence along the Pakistan-Iran border has the potential to escalate into a full-blown crisis if not managed adroitly, particularly at a time when regional tensions are high. It is therefore welcome that the Pakistani state appears to be taking seriously the recent abduction of Iranian border guards and intelligence officers from along the Pak-Iran border. Iran has publicly blamed unnamed hostile regional forces for the kidnapping. However, regional observers believe the incident could be a continuation of recent violence in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan and the border region with Pakistan between the sectarian militant group, Jaish-i-Adl, and the Iranian state. What matters first and foremost is for Pakistan to do its utmost to help recover the kidnapped security personnel and intelligence officers, either by locating them inside Pakistan or sharing intelligence with Iran of their presence in a neighbouring country. Timely and efficient intelligence cooperation, or a security operation if necessary, can help prevent diplomatic tensions from escalating. From Prime Minister Imran Khan to the military leadership in Pakistan, there is a consensus that friendly ties with Tehran should be maintained and enhanced; helping Iran locate and recover its abducted security and intelligence personnel would help maintain cooperative bilateral ties.

Certainly, while Pakistan should extend reasonable cooperation, Iran should recognise that securing the border between Balochistan and Sistan-Baluchestan is a joint responsibility. The vast border region between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan is exploited by myriad criminal groups, smuggling organisations and militant networks that move easily between the countries. In recent years, Pakistan and Iran have stepped up border security, but insurgent elements in Sistan-Baluchestan have proved tenacious and continued to attack Iranian forces. Militant groups such as Jaish-i-Adl, which could be responsible for the latest abductions, exist not necessarily because of a regional or international conspiracy against Iran, but due to the complex security environment in the region. Pakistan too continues to suffer attacks in Balochistan. Security officials believe these are either planned by a neighbouring country, or executed by militants who have found sanctuary there. Too often, regional and border security cooperation remains a relatively low priority until an incident causes tensions to flare up and senior officials on all sides rush in to firefight. Keeping lines of communication open is important as is regular engagement across the gamut of bilateral relations. Pakistan and Iran must maintain friendly ties because that is in their best interest.

Billboard business

A three-member bench of the SC, while hearing a case about billboards on public property in Lahore, ordered the removal of publicity hoardings on public property across the country within the next 45 days. It was brought to the attention of the bench that in some areas, billboards were propped up on footpaths, posing a risk to pedestrians. According to the Punjab Outdoor Advertisement and Signboards Policy, 2013, local governments have the authority to determine the location, size, type and density of billboards and signboards in accordance with the 'character' of the land use of an area. The policy was formulated after a survey of 750 of the 1,139 billboards mounted across the city; it was concluded that the billboards hinder the view of the city's heritage sites, historic monuments, traffic signals and road signs. Apart from disfiguring the city's landscape, they pose practical and security risks. And yet, now and again, the law continues to be bent or broken to suit vested interests.

In 2016, similar orders were given by the SC in Karachi after over a dozen 20-year-old trees were chopped down to make way for advertisements on one of its

main thoroughfares. A few years before that, there were also some fatalities reported by falling billboards. In 2014, it was estimated that there were over 3,000 billboards in Karachi alone. The apex court stated that no law allowed for the mounting of outdoor advertising billboards and signboards on public property and ordered KMC, DHA and cantonment boards to remove them. Billboards and publicity hoardings was held responsible for cluttering the city's landscape, increasing visual pollution and posing risks to pedestrians and drivers alike. They had been allowed to mushroom because the sale of outdoor advertising is an enormously lucrative business for city government officials, cantonment authorities, and outdoor advertising agencies. That is why the 2016 ban is slowly but surely being flouted once again in Karachi.

Kandahar attack

IT is an attack that will have significant repercussions and perhaps a lasting effect on a war that has entered its 18th year this month.

The assassination of a notorious police general, Abdul Razek, inside the governor's compound in Kandahar in an attack that appears to have targeted the top US general in Afghanistan, Gen Scott Miller, is shocking.

The Afghan Taliban have demonstrated that they can reach inside the very heart of the Afghan and US military commands. And they have done so in the Taliban heartland of Kandahar, where Afghan forces had established a modicum of stability in recent years.

Gen Razek's death could quickly result in further gains for the Taliban across southern Afghanistan — such was the stature and influence of the assassinated police general, whose brutal methods had brought stability to the region, but almost surely involved what would be considered war crimes. The parliamentary elections scheduled for today have already been overshadowed by his death.

Almost as stunning is that a Taliban attacker got close enough to the top American general in Afghanistan to have injured several Americans who appear to have been part of Gen Miller's entourage on his trip to Kandahar.

The attack has bloodily underlined the need for an urgent political process to end the war in Afghanistan. The military strategy approved by US President Donald

Trump is unsuccessful, and where three consecutive American presidents have now failed, it is unlikely that a miracle solution can suddenly be found.

The only solution is to end the war through a negotiated settlement with the Afghan Taliban at the earliest and allow the political dispensation that will emerge from that settlement to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan.

What is considered a military stalemate in Afghanistan at the moment is, in reality, a terrible toll that is being inflicted on the people of Afghanistan. Gen Razek's assassination will dominate the latest news cycle from Afghanistan, but there is mass violence and misery being inflicted in Afghanistan on a daily basis. That must end.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains to do what it can to nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table both with the US and the Afghan state.

The US now appears willing to engage the Afghan Taliban in dialogue, but there is likely to be some resistance to that path — from hawkish military and national security circles in the US and from some elements within the Afghan states.

It is important, then, that all sides seeking an early end to the war in Afghanistan work in cooperation with each other and purposefully. Afghanistan could slip into chaos if stubbornness and bloody-mindedness are allowed to prevail at this stage. The Afghan Taliban must be coaxed and cajoled where necessary to negotiate peace.

It will not be easy, but the alternative may be too horrible to contemplate.

GSP-Plus facility

GENEROUS tariff concessions given by the European Union on its imports from Pakistan under the GSP-Plus facility since January 2014 are inextricably linked to the country's progress on the implementation of 27 core international conventions on human and labour rights, environmental protection, and governance. Any shortcoming on this count can deprive our exporters of this much-needed facility. Indeed, the government has taken certain initiatives to enforce these conventions ever since Pakistani exporters qualified for the facility. But progress has been painfully slow and gaps continue to exist in spite of monitoring by the EU Commission on Trade, which evaluates the situation every

two years to help the EU Parliament make a decision on whether or not to continue the facility in the future. Little wonder then that the EU ambassador to Pakistan, Jean-François Cautain, was forced to remark: “So far, the glass is half full and half empty.” His remarks came on the eve of the arrival of an EU Commission on Trade delegation here to evaluate the situation. The delegation’s findings will help the EU decide if the country has made adequate progress on the conventions to justify tariff concessions to the bloc beyond 2019. In an interview, he had pointed out that Punjab has made laws on child rights, but they have not been fully enforced yet. Similarly, a tendency to restrict freedom of expression in Pakistan is being observed, and no action is taken on the promised legislation on torture. His concerns will find a prominent place in the next biennial assessment report and could hurt Pakistan’s interests.

The EU is important for Pakistan — we sell almost a quarter of our total global exports in the European market. And the tariff concessions offered by the GSP-Plus facility are crucial for our exporters — it lets more than three-quarters of our shipments to the EU countries enter markets without attracting any duty. Consequently, Pakistan’s exports to the EU increased from 4.54bn euros in 2013 to 6.29bn euros in 2016. Had the EU not offered our products duty-free access to its consumers, we might have lost a big portion of our market share to competitors like India, Vietnam and China. Earlier this year, the EU promised to consider upgrading its trade ties with Pakistan — from a GSP-Plus beneficiary, the latter could become a free-trade agreement partner. But that will depend on our willingness to implement the conventions on rights, environment and governance.

Kaneria’s confession

FORMER leg-spinner Danish Kaneria’s recent confession regarding his role in a spot-fixing scandal that had rocked English county cricket in 2012 has reignited the debate over the eradication of this menace. The cricketer, who was banned for life by the England and Wales Cricket Board six years ago for being the ‘middleman’ in the nasty scam that involved his county teammate, Mervyn Westfield, had been denying the charges all along, besides fighting his case in court. However, the prolific leggie who remained Pakistan’s leading spinner in Tests with 261 wickets, finally admitted to his crime this week in a documentary. The former cricketer’s confession, which refers to Indian bookie Anu Bhatt as the

main culprit in enticing the players, coincides with the disclosure made by the ICC's senior anti-corruption unit official Alex Marshall, who accused India of being the hub of corrupt bookies. Fixing, it seems, is rampant, especially in Asian cricket.

It is unfortunate that despite the damage done to world cricket by match-fixing since the reprehensible practice erupted in the mid-1990s, the authorities have been unable to get to the bottom of it. Piecemeal measures taken by cricket boards in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have hardly helped. Even domestic cricket circuits in the countries have been sullied. Besides, the mushrooming T20 leagues around the world, which allow even the lesser-known players to earn a full year's remuneration in a matter of weeks, are now seen as the primary venues for fixing and are a happy hunting ground for bookies. Our own PSL was hit hard by a spot-fixing row last year that saw opener Sharjeel Khan, Nasir Jamshed, Khalid Latif and Shahzaib Hasan banned from international cricket for varying periods. Critics have warned that with the advent of the T10 league in the UAE, the fixing phenomenon could reach outrageous proportions. They correctly insist that the ICC and member boards verify the credentials of league owners and their motives before allowing the players to be part of the project.

FATF's demands

IT is not unexpected, but it is hugely disappointing. Pakistan's continued entanglement with the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force has been an object lesson in how not to address complex international legal obligations in the financial sector. FATF is an opaque organisation and the demands it puts on countries when it comes to anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing regimes can be onerous. Indeed, the delegation of the Asia Pacific Group of FATF that visited Pakistan and expressed its overall dissatisfaction with the steps Pakistan has taken to remove itself from a so-called grey list also noted that the country has made some progress against the benchmarks that have been set. What is puzzling, however, is why the Pakistani state has not been more vigorous in addressing the shortcomings that FATF has identified. After all, money laundering has become a significant political issue in Pakistan and the PTI government has vowed to crack down on what it claims is an enormous racket. Should not the government be eager to demonstrate its bona fides when it comes to a global net that is tightening against money laundering? With the

grey-listing having occurred under a previous government, should the new dispensation not be eager to move swiftly and decisively to curb money laundering and terror financing?

The country's latest entanglement with FATF could be an opportunity to address some underlying structural deficiencies. The list of consultations that were held by the visiting APG delegation is vast: the ministries of interior, finance, foreign affairs and law; the SECP; the State Bank; Nacta; the FIA; the FBR; NAB; ANF; the Central Directorate of National Savings; and the provincial counterterrorism departments. The scale of cooperation required across a range of government institutions and organisations is likely proving an obstacle. Do those organisations have the capacity, skill and will to address a complex set of demands by FATF, or is it the case that individuals in those organisations are merely passing the buck and waiting for high-level political intervention at the last possible moment? The draining out of institutional capacity and the hollowing out of government departments and state institutions is a long-term malaise that the FATF predicament has perhaps helped to further expose. The road back from the FATF grey list may involve a great deal of other changes in Pakistan's approach to complex international obligations.

There is never a good time to deal with a problem such as being grey-listed by FATF, but given the current economic predicament of Pakistan, the challenge could scarcely have come at a worse time. The PTI-led government has inherited a wide range of problems, but it needs to transition from blaming its predecessors to putting in place effective strategies so that it can address the problems it faces.

Curbs on media?

THE PTI government's intentions with regard to the media are rightly fuelling a growing sense of unease. At a Senate standing committee meeting on Thursday, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry announced the draft of the recently proposed Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority under which the existing regulatory bodies are to be consolidated to oversee print, electronic and social media. Adding that all the relevant legislation and rules would be merged in order to achieve a one-window operation, the minister said that "no one will be able to defame anyone under the new law". The statement should raise a red flag, for

the prevention of defamation is often a pretext for introducing curbs on the media. Strengthening existing libel laws is a far better approach, the efficacy of which was illustrated by the outcome of two recent cases in the UK involving Pakistani media houses.

When the government first suggested a centralised oversight authority days after coming to power, one could assume that perhaps the new setup was well intentioned but naïve in trying to create such a regulatory body, not only in terms of its scope but also its far-reaching implications. That hope, however, is fast fading. In the months since, the PTI government has been silent in the face of pressures exerted on media outlets and journalists to censor information or present it in a certain light. The report by the Committee to Protect Journalists, which condemned the throttling of press freedom in Pakistan through brazen acts of intimidation, elicited no statement asserting the government's commitment to a free and independent media and the protection of journalists. Can one see this in anything but a negative light? Granted, lifting censorship from state-run PTV and PBC was laudable, but these media outlets remain under the information ministry's control, rather than being overseen by an independent board. At present, it is still very unclear how the government plans to implement its proposal, and how the existing regulatory laws will be affected in the process. Even if the intention is not to use the resulting mechanism to victimise the media, it could become a handy tool for another, future dispensation to employ it to that end. The state's attempts at controlling the media in Pakistan have an ugly, brutal history rooted in some of the worst excesses of dictatorship, and the government must take all stakeholders on board before it embarks on an ill-advised exercise in perceived authoritarianism.

Sartorial choices

WHEN it comes to women's clothing, everyone has an opinion. Recently, two separate incidents were making the rounds on social media — and everyone had an opinion to share. The first involved a woman at a private software company being asked to remove her hijab at the workplace — or resign. The second saw women being denied entry to the Punjab Civil Secretariat by security guards since they didn't have dupattas. These events would have been seen as 'non-issues' had anger not been expressed on social media. In the first instance, the CEO apologised; he was later asked to step down. In the second, the guard said

he had no issue with what women wore, and was simply acting on the orders of a woman politician, who denied the allegation as 'absurd'. These may seem like disparate events, but they share a common thread: the policing of what women wear, whether by removing articles of clothing or enforcing extra layers on women simply going about their work. Each society has a set of norms, and while norms change according to practicality and the politics of the time, most women (particularly in conformist societies such as ours) make choices within the ambit of those unwritten rules.

Attempts at policing women's sartorial choices have come up time and again, but they have always been resisted. Linked to the need to 'comment' is an attempt to 'control' half the population because of the deep-rooted belief that 'respectable' women should not leave their homes. When they are out in public, they become 'public property', for others to leer at, reprimand or harass. But women are not public property, they are private citizens with minds of their own, whose choices (insofar as they don't harm another) must be respected. They are also not infants, and they don't need anyone's permission to decide how to clothe themselves as they go about their day-to-day life.

Criticising the bureaucracy

IT is emerging as an unfortunate trend and it ought to be curbed quickly if the PTI is to grow in its role as a national governing party. Addressing two groups of journalists on Saturday, Prime Minister Imran Khan made what is fast becoming a familiar set of complaints and promises. Amidst the prime minister's claims and allegations, fresh attacks against the bureaucracy stood out. The bureaucracy, according to Mr Khan, is creating hurdles in the way of the PTI and it is doing so to help the PML-N, which, according to the prime minister, appointed a great number of favoured bureaucrats during its last term. Politicisation of the bureaucracy and the police forces are a fact of national life; indeed, the centrepiece of the PTI's reforms agenda is the depoliticisation of the bureaucracy and police. But before Mr Khan and his government can unveil their reforms for the bureaucracy and the police, the prime minister and the PTI may be creating further problems for themselves and the public at large with reckless attacks against the bureaucracy.

Surely, if the PML-N is influencing senior bureaucrats to perform poorly in their jobs or to undermine their political bosses, and the PTI has proof of such machinations, it is incumbent on the rulers to transparently investigate such officers and take administrative action against them. The bureaucracy exists to serve the public and execute the rightful policies of a duly elected government. Mr Khan's complaints on Saturday suggested an approach of identifying and targeting uncooperative bureaucrats in a manner similar to what has been considered political victimisation in the past. How will the prime minister and the PTI determine when they are not getting the so-called full cooperation of bureaucrats? Arbitrary reassignments, a constant reshuffling of the bureaucracy and demanding personal loyalties are afflictions, not solutions to a more effective bureaucracy.

If the PTI wants firm accountability of the bureaucracy it must also extend fair accountability and rules-based promotions and transfers. Thus far, in some early high-profile incidents involving bureaucrats and police officers, the PTI governments at the centre and in the provinces have failed to provide adequate explanations for what appear to have been politically motivated transfers. Moreover, as with many of the task forces set up by the prime minister, the task force on civil service reforms has not produced a road map. Consultations with the bureaucracy across the country are ongoing, but if the prime minister himself is of a certain mind, will a task force or prime ministerial adviser be able to steer the right course? There is much criticism of the bureaucracy that is warranted; what the PTI leadership needs to recognise is that glib words and ill-thought-out attacks can be counterproductive. Produce a viable road map to civil service reforms now rather than descend into the ultimately self-defeating practice of bureaucracy blaming.

From PTA to FIA

WHEN it comes to tackling cybercrime in Pakistan, the problems are two-fold. First, the hurried passing of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act in 2016 laid out an ill-defined set of laws that have been criticised for giving the state room to curb free speech, conduct surveillance with relative impunity, and unfairly prosecute citizens. Second is the issue of implementation. In this regard, the primary agencies involved are the PTA as the regulatory body, and the FIA cybercrime wing that looks into crimes reported. PTA has offered to relinquish its

role of monitoring electronic crimes to the FIA. This was shared with the Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology recently for reasons that require further explanation. A primary argument put forward by the FIA was that it had “the capacity and expertise to approach the subject from an angle of fighting crime”. This suggestion flies in the face of a similar meeting in June where the FIA shared that it is operating far below capacity with only 10 experts, who were trying to investigate 2,600 cases of cybercrime out of over 18,000 complaints received at the time. It was also shared that there are just over 100 officials in the cybercrime wing, and that they lack necessary training. Has the situation changed so drastically since June that the FIA can now not only investigate thousands of cases, but also monitor millions of sites, social media activity and more?

The PTA chairman informed the Senate committee that his department lacked the capacity to block content and had to do it manually as they required “millions of dollars of investment to install web management systems”. What was not shared was whether the FIA had the web management systems in hand or the money to procure them, let alone the issue of manpower and expertise in monitoring, which is different from investigating a crime. Even if the FIA can handle both monitoring and investigation, is this an ideal scenario? From what we’ve seen of the state’s sledgehammer approach to governing cyberspace, further centralisation of power is dangerous. As such, this act of passing the buck is regressive. And easy. What’s hard to do is work on the big questions — are the laws fair and sufficient? Are they built taking into consideration the state’s capacity? What crimes need to be focused on? It is telling that the lawmakers at the meeting were concerned about not only child pornography, but also defamation of politicians who “cannot tolerate insults”

Thar deaths

ONCE again, the beleaguered citizens of Thar are in the headlines.

On Friday, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was briefed about the abysmal healthcare situation in the region, with the information being provided that over 500 children have died during the current year in the desert area — this is the highest figure for the past four years. According to the provincial health secretary, 450 children lost their lives in 2017, while 479 died in 2016 and 398 in 2015.

The reasons for the deaths vary, according to the authorities: pre-term and low birth weight, birth asphyxia, pneumonia, respiratory distress syndrome, acute malnutrition with complications, and diarrhoea.

The chief minister's response was that "we have to take a holistic approach to resolve the issue for good".

One outcome of the briefing was that Mr Shah directed public-sector medical universities to set up health camps in the region, and make greater efforts to ensure the implementation of family planning measures, a nutrition programme, and the provision of clean drinking water amongst other mitigation moves.

It is an unfortunate fact that the country — and more importantly, its administration — tends to not remember its most vulnerable citizens in their time of need. For several years now, the Thar region of Sindh has been in the news because of the number of child deaths and maternal mortality rates.

Part of this tragedy has been attributed to the fact that the area has been in a state of drought, but more relevant is the reality that the state has abdicated its responsibilities towards those who have no voice and hardly any agency in lobbying for improved access to their rights.

Thar is a grossly underserved part of the country, and drought or not, the state needs to step in to do what is required of it to save lives and futures.

This means providing incentives for healthcare and education, and investing in other infrastructure, with the introduction of innovative interventions where required.

Zardari's threat

IT is far from a clarion call, but it is significant enough to have repercussions.

PPP supremo and former president Asif Zardari has suggested that the combined opposition in parliament ought to bring a resolution against the PTI federal government and possibly demand its ouster.

Mr Zardari surely knew he was stopping short of a no-confidence motion, but the loss of a clutch of seats in recent by-elections and the razor-thin majority of the

PTI and its allies in parliament, together with a potential combined opposition assault, would make life very difficult indeed for the federal government.

While it is entirely possible that Mr Zardari's threat is meant more to unsettle the PTI than launch an actual assault, the very fact that he chose to articulate it should give all sides pause about the direction that politics is taking or has already taken in the country. The bad old days of the 1990s should not be recreated.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Unhappily, it is far from clear that the major political parties in the country are able or willing to do what is necessary to avoid a serious political crisis. If Mr Zardari is willing to escalate political tensions, Prime Minister Imran Khan and the PTI are unwilling to back down in any manner.

The repeated attacks on the opposition by the government have helped create an environment of constant tension that is surely getting in the way of governance and parliamentary business.

The PTI has gained power at the federal and provincial levels by promoting a politics of change and reforms; instead of working feverishly towards unveiling the change it has promised, the PTI seems to be backward looking and preoccupied with blaming its predecessors.

Of the legislation that the federal government has introduced so far, a revised federal budget appears to be the main achievement and independent economic observers have struggled to find reformative measures in the PTI's budget for the abridged fiscal year.

Yet, whatever the inefficiencies, shortcomings and failures of the PTI government so far, it ought to be remembered that it is the PML-N and PPP that have significant experience running a federal government and it is their cumulative mistakes that have in part brought the country to the present pass.

Mr Zardari may threaten to bring down the PTI government, the Sharif leadership of the PML-N may attack the government and sundry other opposition figures may cry foul, but it has only been a matter of weeks since the assemblies were sworn in and the governments installed, and they deserve the time and space to introduce and implement their policies.

Mr Zardari and others in the opposition may believe they have identified irreversible flaws in the PTI government's approach, but continuity of governments and assemblies is key if democratic institutions are to be maintained.

Fresh IHK violence

INSTEAD of listening to the grievances of Kashmiris and resolving the issue through peaceful political means, India's stubborn attempts to subdue the people's aspirations in the occupied territory through military measures is only making the situation worse. On Sunday, at least 14 people were killed in the held region, including a number of civilians. The civilian deaths occurred in the Kulgam area, as Kashmiri fighters and Indian forces were trading fire. Thousands of people were reportedly demonstrating against Delhi's rule in the area and the civilians died apparently due to an explosion caused by Indian security forces. On Monday, the occupied area witnessed a shutdown as the Joint Resistance Leadership — a conglomerate of groups fighting for Kashmiri freedom — had given a strike call. Prime Minister Imran Khan has also taken note of the bloodshed, tweeting condemnation of the "new cycle of killings of innocent Kashmiris in IOK by Indian security forces". Indeed, it has been a bloody year for occupied Kashmir; as per figures quoted in the media, over 250 Kashmiris have died in clashes in the held territory, around 80 of them civilians.

It is shocking how a country that claims to be a democracy is so out of touch with what the Kashmiri people desire. Unfortunately, the BJP-led government is meting out barbaric treatment to Kashmir and its inhabitants. Every time popular discontent with Delhi's harsh methods boils over, the Indian state sends in its armed enforcers to crush dissent. This method has failed for over three decades, yet the powers that be in Delhi have not learnt any lessons. The way out appears quite clear: give the Kashmiris dignity and respect. And with Pakistan and the Kashmiris, figure a way out of an imbroglio that has remained unresolved since Partition. Yet as simple as it may seem, it is unlikely that the Hindu revivalist BJP will show any relaxation where Kashmir is concerned, especially as it prepares for a general election next year. Sadly, the Indian establishment, for petty domestic political gains, refuses to look at the bigger picture and think of bold solutions to the Kashmir question. Resolving this issue in line with the genuine aspirations of the Kashmiris will bring peace to the region, and indeed to South

Asia. But this requires visionary leadership, especially in Delhi which, at the moment is sorely lacking, as the Indian ruling elite seems to be dominated by those with tunnel vision.

Desperate measures

THE death by self-immolation of a rickshaw driver in Karachi yesterday provides a glimpse into the injustice and humiliation suffered every day by innumerable people on the streets of Pakistan. It was last Saturday that the rickshaw driver, Khalid, had set himself alight near the city police chief's office in the Saddar area, saying he had had enough of the daily harassment and extortion by traffic police. Allegedly, ASI Mohammed Hanif had been extorting him for Rs100 every day, but on Saturday he handed him a ticket when Khalid could only shell out Rs50. A police investigation found that the ASI's actions were based on mala fide intentions; he was subsequently arrested and a case registered against him.

Such extreme measures, as that taken by Khalid, arise from the most desperate of circumstances. They arise when the daily grind of toiling for one's family is not enough to meet basic needs, or when people are victimised by state functionaries who abuse their power to humiliate and punish. Sometimes, they are triggered when the cry for justice falls on deaf ears; victims of rape in this country, confronted with an apathetic and corrupt police, have also been driven to such actions. The many stories of want and powerlessness that one can see all around, if we choose to do so, are the outcome of a grossly unequal society. Where wealth and connections can enable individuals to buy or bully their way out of being held accountable, those without, have little security of life or property. In Karachi, there was a time not too long ago when traders and regular citizens, if they valued their lives, had to regularly pay protection money to thugs affiliated with political parties. The operation to restore the writ of the law in the city successfully addressed such cases. But, as Saturday's incident grimly illustrates, among the law enforcers themselves are individuals who continue to extort the poorer segment of society. Such police personnel must face severe consequences for their criminal behaviour.

Changeover in Swat

IT is an essential milestone in the long road back to normality in Swat. The return of security responsibilities and administrative control of Swat to civilian authorities was carried out in a handover ceremony in the district on Monday.

A district police officer has now assumed primary responsibility for security in Swat, more than a decade since the military was drafted in under Article 245 of the Constitution to fight the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan that had overrun Swat and much of Malakand division.

The fight-back against militancy gathered pace in Swat, and military operations in Malakand division a decade ago were a springboard for a series of security gains in Malakand and the erstwhile Fata.

The long pause before the start of Operation Zarb-i-Azb in 2014 was unfortunate, but today, there is no region in the country that the Taliban have under their de facto control.

Sporadic militant violence in various parts of the country clearly continues and the triple threat of terrorism, militancy and extremism has not been eliminated. But the recovery since the security lows from 2007 to the start of the 2010s is undeniable and remarkable.

The bravery and sacrifices of Pakistan's security forces, military and civilian police, are tremendous and shall not be forgotten by a grateful nation.

As security commanders at the handover ceremony noted, the ongoing fencing of the Pak-Afghan border is an important plank of the military's strategy to bring true peace to Pakistan's militancy-hit regions. The killing in Afghanistan of Mullah Fazlullah, the TTP kingpin who rose from Swat, earlier this year underlined the cross-border nature of militancy and why the TTP has proved so resilient.

Fencing alone will not solve the problem; border security cooperation, intelligence sharing and the elimination of militant sanctuaries on both sides of the border will be required. It is to be hoped that Pakistan and Afghanistan can work jointly to deliver regional peace goals.

The handover to civilian authorities in Swat should also draw attention to the inability of the state so far to build on important counter-insurgency and

counterterrorism gains: the fight against extremism has virtually stalled, and it appears that extremist elements in certain quarters are in the ascendant.

The history of the rise of Fazlullah and the Taliban in Swat began with a dismantling of the social contract and space afforded to extremist elements. History should not be allowed to repeat itself elsewhere in Pakistan.

Finally, Swat is an important lesson in both the civil and military sides of the state working in cooperation with each other to deliver stability and peace with prosperity to follow. The fight against terrorism, militancy and extremism requires the full array of the state's resources, civil and military.

The ongoing merger of Fata with KP is the next big test of state institutions' willingness and ability to cooperate.

Misuse of ECL

ON Monday, a Senate panel called for revamping ECL policy. Indeed, there appears to be no set criteria governing the Exit Control List that restrains individuals whose name is on it from travelling abroad. There is plenty of elasticity in the rules laid out, allowing the arbitrary and discriminatory use of the law — sometimes as a psychological weapon even when it is clear that the subject, eg a suspect politician or government servant, has no intention of leaving the country. Consequently, the most puzzling cases of Pakistanis being denied their right to travel internationally continue to surface. One such example is of a Pakhtun social activist, fighting for the rights of women and upholding other causes, who was recently detained at the airport when she returned home from a foreign tour and told that her name was on the ECL. No less important has been the debate thrown up by a petition in which an adviser and personal friend of the prime minister pressed for the privilege of being taken off the dreaded list that has been instrumental in aborting many a promising journey. According to some reports, the adviser is contesting his right to be free of the ECL halts, apparently arguing that he was a British citizen and thus not bound by the law of this land.

The ECL rules were set via an amendment to the Constitution in 1981. The law loosely says that the ECL is to deny an escape to those who are alleged to have committed fraud, embezzlement, etc. It is a little odd that whereas the

accountability laws in the country have evolved with time, this has not been the case with the ECL whose provisions have often been abused and misused, sometimes — as has been confirmed by officials in the past — to settle personal scores. A few years ago, the PML-N government did momentarily evince some interest in redefining the policy that governs the dread list; but other than that, the subject has, by and large, been left untouched and, unfortunately, the demand for a review does not appear to have been entertained by the powers that be. Now the ECL is becoming a part of the national discussion as the current setup says it is going to intensify its campaign against those who stand accused of corruption. For the sake of change, the government could try and free the ECL law of its wrong tendencies.

Punishing plagiarism

THE resignation of the HEC's executive director over charges of plagiarism should act as a wake-up call to the education department, the government and academics at all levels.

The education official was alleged to have lifted large chunks of his research paper from a foreign researcher's work. Currently, the department is investigating similar charges against two other senior officials.

Some have argued that the rot took root in HEC in 2002 when it was decided that the salaries and promotions of university professors would be rewarded on the basis of how many research papers they published.

Though perhaps a well-meaning move, in this effort to increase the number of PhDs in the country it seems to have 'incentivised' dishonest practices on the part of some.

Nepotism and political appointments in public-sector universities is another widely acknowledged malaise. Younger teachers who come into the profession with a certain idealism and passion for their subject are confronted with the ugly reality of incompetency in the status quo.

All this negatively affects the quality of teaching, and thus the next generation of students and professionals. Pressed for time, with looming word counts to fulfil, students, too, plagiarise, copy-pasting text from the internet, with few teachers making the effort to check.

While the standardised use of plagiarism-detecting software can limit the stealing of words, it cannot catch the theft of ideas, achieved through paraphrasing.

Students, who may genuinely lack awareness of scholarly ethics, may question the value and rhetoric of 'merit', especially when confronted with the reality of profound inequalities that exist both within and outside campuses.

One can even argue that original or innovative thought is not encouraged in traditional learning setups from the very beginning when curiosity and speech are stifled.

After all, the menace of plagiarism isn't just limited to academia; it can be found in journalism, the arts and other fields.

It's time the theft of intellectual property be seen as the serious offence it is.

Lopsided foreign ties

THE tightrope that Pakistan must walk in balancing its interests in relations with predominantly Muslim countries in the region and beyond is becoming ever more difficult. Forces unleashed by the Arab Spring and foreign military interventions from Libya to Syria have drawn the Arab world and Gulf countries into increased rivalries, hostilities and even outright war. From the wars and humanitarian catastrophes in Syria and Yemen to the blockade of Qatar, to Turkey and Saudi Arabia's competition for influence in the Muslim and Arab worlds, Pakistan has friends and allies on both sides of the complex struggles for power and influence that have broken out in the greater Middle East. Prime Minister Imran Khan has now claimed that his government will try and mediate to end the Saudi-led war in Yemen. By itself, that is a welcome sentiment. If Pakistan can help its friends and allies end their wars among themselves, navigating a fraught region could become somewhat easier for this country.

Indeed, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was the first foreign leader to visit Pakistan after Mr Khan took office, while the prime minister has now visited Saudi Arabia twice. As a first-time holder of high office, Mr Khan has a steep learning curve in international politics and diplomacy, but at least he has not shied away from such matters and remained focused wholly on a domestic agenda. What is far from clear, however, is whether Mr Khan's government and the Pakistani state can play a more effective role as peacemaker in the region.

Having secured a partial economic lifeline from Saudi Arabia while not having made progress in building economic and trade ties with Iran, particularly the Iran-Pakistan pipeline that is in limbo, the lopsided ties of Pakistan with Saudi Arabia and Iran are unlikely to give Pakistan much leverage as peacemaker. Further complicating Pakistani ties with Iran is US President Donald Trump's determination to severely weaken Iran with crushing sanctions.

Yet, the war in Yemen is an undeniable disaster, and diplomatic intervention is urgently needed there. Perhaps Pakistan can reach out to other Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia to coordinate its peace efforts, or a collective effort can be made to revive the moribund OIC, which could become a plausible forum in which the conflict in Yemen is brought to a peaceful end. Prime Minister Khan could also increase confidence in his own role as potential regional peacemaker if he takes the Pakistani parliament into confidence about the true terms of the financial assistance he has secured from Saudi Arabia. Mr Khan must adapt to his new position quickly and choose his words carefully when speaking publicly or on the record about regional conflicts. Credibility will come from both action and words.

Plastic pollution

EIGHT individuals from Europe, Russia and Japan were asked to keep a diary of everything they ate for a small study. After a week, they provided stool samples to scientists. All eight subjects were found to have traces of plastic in their system. Each had had plastic-wrapped food or had drunk from plastic bottles, while six had consumed seafood. It bears repeating — our planet has a plastic problem, and it isn't going away anytime soon. The worldwide production of plastic is said to have swollen to nearly 300m tonnes a year. More than 8m of that ends up in the oceans, where it can take anywhere from 100 to 1,000 years to disintegrate, contaminating beaches, endangering marine life and eventually making its way into the food chain. The survey results may shock some, but it was inevitable that the material found all around us would one day be inside us. Recently, the EU Parliament voted for an outright ban on single-use plastics. With a growing population and rapid urbanisation, Pakistan's demand for cheap plastic will keep increasing. Are policymakers paying attention? Those in the corridors of power should be — particularly since many have stakes in large-scale industries.

A UN report states that the Indus River has the second highest amount of plastic waste dumped into it at 164,332 tonnes. Most of the untreated industrial waste of Lahore, Faisalabad and Sialkot also ends up in the rivers, lakes and sea. Another WWF study mentions that plastic contributes nearly 50pc of the beached pollution at Karachi's Clifton beach, while other beaches along the coastal belt are also getting polluted. The implications for public health are worrying. In the past, there have been several attempts at banning non-biodegradable polythene bags, but these were always resisted by manufacturing industries, which employ thousands of workers. It is said that some 10,000 manufacturing units produce over 50bn plastic bags a year in Pakistan. The Sindh government announced a ban this year (although the law has existed since 2014), but little evidence of its compliance exists on ground, as is evident from the absence of large-scale, inexpensive, environmentally friendly alternatives and the lack of awareness amongst the general population. However, informed consumers can change some of their lifestyle choices by prioritising the environment and health of their fellow citizens over convenience. After all, even in the absence of strict laws, the market still only responds to demand.

Clash over evictions

EVEN if there is a legal case to be made out, the optics were horrendous. Scores, if not hundreds, of protesting men and women were beaten back with water cannons and baton-wielding police in riot gear on Wednesday during a court-mandated eviction operation in Karachi. At least 12 people — including some law-enforcement personnel — were injured on the second day of clashes and over a dozen arrested. The operation was in response to the Supreme Court's orders in July directing the authorities to ensure the eviction of allegedly illegal occupants of premises in Pakistan Quarters, Martin Quarters, Jamshed Quarters, Clayton Quarters, Federal Capital Area, and other residential areas in the city meant for federal government employees. However, the melee on Wednesday prompted the apex court to extend its deadline by two months.

This is a classic illustration of why illegality in the housing sector, when allowed to fester for long, can become so intractable. According to a report submitted in court, 4,128 quarters constructed for serving federal government employees have been occupied since decades by the now long-retired individuals and/ or their descendants. Properties are also being illegally sub-let and sold in these

localities, while commercial concerns such as workshops, etc have come up on land allotted for residential purposes. Certainly, possession does not confer ownership; and the authorities have reportedly moved with the forcible eviction after issuing notices to the residents to vacate. Nevertheless, such matters cannot be addressed in cut-and-dried ways. Over the decades, residents have developed community ties in the neighbourhoods concerned; and of course, commercial interests as well. Also, this could not have happened without relevant authorities looking the other way in return for pecuniary gain or even out of sheer negligence. Given all these reasons, a more humane way must be negotiated out of this quagmire, one that does not involve people being cast out into the street without sufficient time to make alternative arrangements, even as powerful land grabbers elsewhere encroach upon state land without any repercussions.

Banned groups

WHEN the move was announced earlier this year, it appeared that the state was beginning to take seriously the fight against militant and extremists groups that had until then largely avoided scrutiny and sanctions.

Unhappily, that now seems to have been little more than a familiar last-minute effort to temporarily avoid international scrutiny and censure.

The Jamaatud Dawa and Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation, offshoots of and widely perceived to be fronts for the banned Lashkar-i-Taiba, were outlawed in Pakistan in February via a presidential ordinance amending the Anti Terrorism Act, 1997. Even though the presidential ordinance was suddenly moved ahead of what turned out to be a fateful Financial Action Task Force meeting in Paris, it was a sound decision to ban groups active in Pakistan that have been blacklisted by a UN Security Council committee on sanctions against terrorist groups.

Aligning Pakistan's domestic policies with its international obligations is a welcome and necessary step.

Yet, presidential ordinances have been constitutionally curtailed, and as soon as the ordinance to amend the ATA was passed, a 120-day expiration countdown began.

In April, it was reported that the federal government was considering placing a bill before parliament to replace the presidential ordinance. But parliament's term

ended in May; a caretaker government was in place till August; and now lawyers for Hafiz Saeed have told the Islamabad High Court where they are challenging the JuD and FiF bans that the presidential ordinance has lapsed.

Staggeringly, this has happened as a FATF team has visited Pakistan as part of a year-long compliance assessment and determined that Pakistan's overall progress has been unsatisfactory when it comes to removing this country from the FATF grey list.

Nacta, which maintains and regularly updates a list of banned groups in the country, no longer has either the JuD nor the FiF listed as a proscribed group on its website.

While the JuD and FiF, and all groups that face state sanction and closure, are entitled to and must receive due process, the legal process should not be reduced to a farce.

If in February an assessment was made that Pakistan should expand the list of banned groups to include groups that have been banned by the UNSC sanctions committee, what has changed between then and now to justify a reversal of that decision?

The opaque and, at times, irrational decision-making that has characterised Pakistan's fumbling attempts at rolling back some militant groups and extremist networks not only harm the country's international standing but will make it more difficult to eventually win the fight against all forms of terrorism, militancy and extremism.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has pledged to reinvigorate and purposefully implement the National Action Plan. The military leadership has consistently maintained that there is no space for terrorism, militancy and extremism of any stripe inside Pakistan.

The national leadership must deliver on its promises.

Concern over INGOs

A LETTER signed by envoys of the US, EU, Canada, Australia, Japan and Norway has requested the Pakistani government to exhibit a more 'nuanced' attitude towards INGOs. Earlier this month, it was reported that 18 INGOs had been asked to wrap up operations for allegedly not conforming to the criteria laid down by the government. The clampdown, the reasons for which have lacked transparency so far, feeds into the prevailing narrative surrounding INGOs, in which they — and many of the causes they espouse — are viewed with suspicion particularly by conservative sections of society and the state. In this narrative, all foreigners are viewed with distrust. While INGOs have been working in the country since the late 1970s, their growth proliferated in the 2000s, especially after the earthquake in 2005. At that time, heavily funded INGOs were encouraged to fill the gaps in areas such as education, environment, health and sanitation, in places the government could not reach or because it did not have adequate funds to fulfil its responsibilities. Many also propagated human rights agendas, focusing on women, children and minority rights, while encouraging democratic attitudes and participatory development. They also worked closely with local NGOs, and a handful with the state itself, providing ample employment opportunities. Over time, however, the state's attitude towards INGOS deteriorated — particularly after the Shakil Afridi fiasco, following the US raid in Abbottabad in 2011 — and a crackdown ensued.

True, there is valid criticism against some INGOs — for mismanagement of funds, red tape, and ineffectiveness etc — but blanket vilification not only ignores all the good work done on ground, it is also extremely dangerous. In 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross suspended countrywide activities after one of its workers was beheaded in Quetta. Despite great risk to their lives, NGO and INGO workers continue to work for issues such as the reproductive rights of women, school education and the provision of clean drinking water in remote villages. All states have the right to protect themselves; it is not unreasonable to have concerns. But if there is a lack of transparency, then the state needs to develop better monitoring policies. After all, foreign money goes into everything from the corporate sector to the security state. Pakistan is part of the global community, and signatory to many human rights conventions. No good will come of striking an isolationist pose by sending away those who may genuinely want to help.

Justice for Khashoggi

OVER the past few weeks, Saudi Arabia has come under unprecedented international pressure over the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the kingdom's Istanbul consulate. From initially denying any knowledge of what happened to the slain journalist, to coming up with a number of unconvincing alibis, Riyadh has now endorsed Turkey's stance that Khashoggi's murder was premeditated. While the Saudi foreign minister has said 'rogue agents' were responsible for this reprehensible crime, many across the world are questioning whether such a high-profile operation could have been given the green signal without the crown prince's knowledge, especially since Mohammed bin Salman is the kingdom's de facto ruler. Moreover, some intelligence operatives supposedly linked to the prince's security detail are said to have been part of the hit squad that flew into Istanbul to murder Jamal Khashoggi. A number of people linked to the case are reportedly in custody in the kingdom.

While numerous prisoners of conscience are detained in Saudi Arabia, the Khashoggi case has made headlines the world over. Perhaps the main reasons for this are that the late journalist wrote for the Washington Post — and the apparently brutal nature of his killing; the gory details have been widely publicised. Such a barbaric act is wholly unjustifiable and all those responsible in the planning and execution of this crime — up to the highest echelons — must be held accountable. Riyadh must work with the international community to bring the perpetrators to justice, in a manner that is transparent and in accordance with due process. It must immediately help locate the dead journalist's remains so that his family can have some sort of closure. Looking at the bigger picture, if Saudi Arabia is serious about reform, then there can be no tolerance for monstrous, cold-blooded acts of brutality such as the Khashoggi assassination. If critics and those who voice their opinion freely are punished and eliminated, the talk of reform will remain nothing but a sham.

Poll observers' report

THE final report of the European Union election observers is out, and its findings, to put it mildly, reinforce the misgivings that many within the country have already expressed about election 2018. There are several basic requirements for a relatively controversy-free election — transparency, an equal playing field and a free media. However, unhappily for anyone invested in a strengthening of the democratic process in this country, the report clearly indicates that all these ingredients were in significantly short supply in the run-up to the July 25 polls, on polling day itself and the weeks following. The media's critical role in facilitating political debate was neutralised through intimidatory tactics, and the resulting self-censorship rendered election-related coverage "devoid of journalistic, non-partisan scrutiny". Election candidates were subjected to inconsistent scrutiny criteria, even as the ECP allowed over 925 extremism-linked candidates to make it to the final list — one of several shortcomings in the ECP's conduct pointed out in the report. The document also notes that security personnel played a markedly dominant role during polling and, in some instances, the counting and tabulation process as well. To all intents and purposes, the observers seem to imply that the election was a 'managed' exercise.

No doubt some members of the ruling party, and others, will dismiss the findings as biased; some may even question the need to give much credence to the views of international election monitors. However, such missions, precisely because they are unencumbered by local institutional pressures, are considered to be best placed to undertake a neutral and accurate analysis of an exercise which is at the very heart of a democratic system. That is why international election observation is a widely accepted mechanism to gauge the integrity of elections in developing countries, and its reports carry weight both locally and internationally. In fact, if there has indeed been a 'conspiracy' to engineer the elections, one could posit that is why the EU observers found themselves facing unprecedented procedural complications prior to and during their stay in Pakistan. These roadblocks disrupted their methodology of long-term observation and limited their access to critical information and fact-gathering.

That said, the mission's report presents an opportunity to address the shortcomings that have mired the July elections in controversy. The Elections Act 2017 was intended to strengthen the electoral process by enhancing the ECP's

powers and mandating a more transparent results management system to be put in place. Instead, the apparent breakdown of the RTS system caused even more chaos, while the ECP did not assert itself to the extent that the new legislation allowed. It is encouraging that the government has set up a parliamentary committee to finalise the TORs for investigating rigging allegations. If it is to achieve its objectives, the inquiry must be dedicated to uncovering the truth — however inconvenient it might be.

Afghan peace

THE reported release from detention is another sign that at a minimum confidence-building measures are being taken to nudge the peace process along. More than eight years since he was captured in Pakistan and five years since he was nearly officially released, it appears that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar has been freed by the Pakistani state. An Afghan Taliban spokesperson has acknowledged the release of the former senior Taliban leader, though it is not clear where Mullah Baradar is at the moment or where he intends to relocate. Media reports suggest that a recent visit to Pakistan by the Qatari foreign minister may have helped paved the way for Mullah Baradar's release. Qatar hosts the political office of the Taliban that is likely to play an important role in at least the early stages of a peace process inside Afghanistan. In addition, the US envoy for Afghan reconciliation is reported to have helped coordinate the release of Mullah Baradar from Pakistani custody. Perhaps the weeks and months ahead will also help establish Mullah Baradar's present-day influence with the Afghan Taliban. At the time of his capture in Pakistan, Mullah Baradar was widely respected and had significant influence with the rank and file of the Afghan Taliban.

However, the Taliban leadership has changed at least twice since Mullah Baradar was detained in 2010, and independent analysts suggest that his incarceration in Pakistan may have caused some among the insurgents to question his loyalties. Nevertheless, reports of Mullah Baradar's release will add to a general sense that there could be a meaningful peace process under way in Afghanistan relatively soon. As before, the two key issues will likely be the willingness of the US to engage the Afghan Taliban in dialogue and the readiness of the latter to reach an agreement with Kabul. Another factor could be the imminent winter lull in fighting, which in recent years has meant more high-

profile and deadly attacks in cities — if Kabul or other power centres are bombed, it could make it more difficult for the Afghan government to pursue peace. For Pakistan, the challenge remains to facilitate an Afghan peace process that produces a stable balance of power inside Afghanistan. Mullah Baradar may have been the most high-profile of Afghan Taliban officials in Pakistani custody, but there are surely other steps Pakistan can take to nudge a nascent dialogue process forward.

Education dysfunction

AS first visits go, particularly for a government that has been at the helm for only a few months, it should come as reason for grave concern. A few days ago, the federal education minister, Shafqat Mahmood, made his inaugural visit to the Federal Directorate of Education. The latter oversees the operations of 423 public-sector educational institutions in Islamabad. FDE directors informed him that some 30,000 children are out of school in the capital. The dysfunctions do not end here. Control of the FDE was transferred to the education ministry only recently; earlier, it had been under the Capital Administration and Development Division that has now been abolished. It seems that the education oversight body lacks a permanent — or even temporary — director general given that its interim head was asked to relinquish charge. In addition, there are challenges such as the ongoing litigation between Piera, the regulatory body for private educational institutes, and the latter themselves, over fee hikes. There is also the concern that a large number of private schools are not even registered with Piera.

The state of disrepair that is evident in the educational sector in the capital is far worse in the provinces with their larger populations of school-age children. The provinces have not stepped up to the responsibilities of the autonomy they won via the 18th Amendment. Earlier this year, for example, the KP education department revealed after a comprehensive, year-long survey that more than 1.8m children were out of school — 23 per cent of them aged between five and 17 years. And earlier, Unicef reported that in Punjab some 9.2m children were detached from the school network. Meanwhile, the situation remains abysmal in both Sindh and Balochistan. This is a shocking situation. Reforms are necessary and must be carried out urgently — both in the capital territory and the provinces. And yet, while good intentions may be there, it is difficult to detect the will to do the work required.

Undoing the 18th Amendment

IT is the oldest trick in the book of politics, and because of the clumsiness of the government and the wiliness of the opposition, it could yet work.

Ahead of what is expected to be a stormy session of the National Assembly today, former president and PPP supremo Asif Zardari has fired a shot across the bow of the PTI federal government. Linking the investigations and arrests of PPP figures to a federal conspiracy to undo the 18th Amendment, Mr Zardari has warned that any manoeuvres to unravel the historic achievement of his presidency will not succeed.

Though somewhat undermining his own argument, Mr Zardari also pointed out that it is not up to him to undo the 18th Amendment — to re-amend the Constitution and restore the pre-18th Amendment division of subjects and fiscal shares would require a parliamentary super majority.

At least two points need to be made here. First, whatever Mr Zardari's motivations in making his latest accusation, it remains true that there are powerful federal forces arrayed against the 18th Amendment.

In the main, the argument — which is weak and should not be countenanced — against the 18th Amendment is twofold: it has diverted excessive fiscal resources towards the provinces and effectively starved the centre; and it has delegated too many powers and legislative subjects to the provinces, preventing a rationalisation of policy in key areas nationally.

But such arguments are anti-historical and against the clear scheme of the 1973 Constitution in its original form. An overdeveloped federal state suits centralising powers in the country, but runs counter to the constitutional and democratic scheme.

Moreover, the argument that the centre needs more resources and fiscal space can be addressed in part by increasing revenue collection; after all, every government and dispensation has claimed that increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio is a principal policy goal.

Second, Mr Zardari and other opposition figures ought to reconsider their approach of stoking controversy and mixing issues.

The weight of argument is in favour of Mr Zardari, the PPP and other political forces that support the 18th Amendment. But if unnecessary links are drawn to legal troubles of those political figures, there is a risk that public support for the 18th Amendment could be undermined.

After all, if Mr Zardari himself argues that there is a link between his legal troubles and the 18th Amendment, sections of the public opposed or indifferent to the politics of the PPP may consider it a price worth paying — that sacrificing the 18th Amendment is perhaps necessary to further the cause of political accountability in the country.

Surely, Mr Zardari and others can fight their legal troubles and defend the 18th Amendment separately. The 18th Amendment must be protected by democratic forces.

Polluted waters

A MYSTERIOUS black ‘oil spill’ stretching from the coast of Mubarak Village in Sindh to Churna Island in Balochistan has spread panic among the local fishing community and residents, who quickly alerted the authorities. The black slick on the surface of the water that is clinging to rocks and fishing nets is thought to be some days old. Although workers of various NGOs, the navy, Karachi Port Trust, the Pakistan Disaster Management Authority and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency have begun cleaning up some of the mess, the extent of the damage to marine life can only be ascertained in the coming days. The source of the spill has still not been found, but Balochistan’s Environmental Protection Agency has ordered the nearby Byco Petroleum plant to halt its operations for now. They fear the spill will spread towards other beaches. Fishermen, who will be the worst affected, have demanded that the government take strict action against the owners of whichever company is found to be responsible for the discharge.

The incident brought back memories of the 2003 oil spill off the coast of Sea View beach in Karachi. Back then, a Greece-registered oil tanker carrying 67,535 tons of light crude oil spilled around 31,000 tons into the surrounding waters. Traces of oil could be seen even one year after the incident. It was catastrophic on all accounts — environmental, social and economic. Mangroves, fish, mammals, turtles, bird and crustacean life were affected by the spill on a large scale. A report stated that out of the 31,000 tons of oil spilled, less than 1pc was

recovered in consequent cleanup drives. The implications for the health of those living on the coastal belt were even worse. In 2017, similar fears of another oil spill surfaced after residents noticed that the waters of Sea View and Hawkesbay beaches were growing increasingly dark. Later, it was found that the dark colour was caused by sewage that was being directly flushed into the sea from a drain, which had unclogged due to the rains. There are two sewage and industrial waste dumps at Sea View that discharge untreated water directly into the sea. It is said that around 500m gallons of waste are discharged daily, which adversely impacts vegetation and marine life, and disturbs the ecological balance. Due to the pollution of these waters, KPT officials bemoan spending millions extra on the maintenance of ships. Pakistan's polluted waters are costing us in every way.

Yemen forsaken

JAMAL Khashoggi's monstrous murder has sparked a global debate about Saudi Arabia, with particular focus on how its de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, deals with dissent.

While there is not enough concrete evidence at this time to directly link the crime with the prince, there are numerous credible accounts emerging that point to the involvement of senior figures within the Saudi security establishment overseen by him.

The great and the good in many Western capitals — leaders, activists, corporate heads — have all indicated their disgust at the crime.

While Khashoggi's brutal slaying deserves to be condemned in the strongest terms, and the perpetrators brought to justice, another appalling operation directed by the Saudi crown prince — the ruinous war in Yemen — has not elicited similar global outcry.

Take a look: Yemen still invisible as Khashoggi murder comes to light

This is the case despite the deaths of thousands of civilians in Yemen, many of them at the hands of the Saudi-led coalition that is fighting the Iran-allied Houthis.

The coalition, armed and supported by the West, has repeatedly bombed schools, hospitals and buses full of children. Yet the sight of the tiny coffins of

Yemeni children, and starving youngsters, has not drawn any major calls for accountability from the global community. This hypocrisy must end.

The Yemeni people are facing what the UN says may be the worst famine in a century, while cholera is rampant in the country.

True, no party involved in the war can be absolved of responsibility; but the Saudi coalition and its backers are mainly to blame, in particular for the bombing of civilians.

Just as the international community is demanding answers about Khashoggi's assassination, similar questions need to be asked of Riyadh regarding the war in Yemen.

The over three-year conflict has brought nothing to Yemen apart from death and misery. It is time all belligerents were pressured to lay down arms and to come to the table to negotiate an end to this disastrous conflict, so that the Yemeni people can start rebuilding their lives.

Forum for complaint

IT is a problem of two parts: the ability of the citizenry to lodge complaints, and the government's ability to address the latter. On Sunday, Prime Minister Imran Khan unveiled the Pakistan Citizens' Portal, a primarily online system to lodge complaints against government departments and public officials. The key feature of the PCP is that the complaints system will be monitored by the Prime Minister's Office; Mr Khan has vowed to himself regularly oversee the resolution of the public's complaints. To the extent that the portal will make it easier for the public to lodge complaints and that complainants will have to reveal their identities to reduce frivolous and malicious complaints, the PCP could be a step in the right direction. But a great deal will depend on the implementation of the system.

Indeed, the specifics of the PCP may be new and updated for a more connected age, but the idea of a prime ministerial portal for public complaints has been attempted several times before, whether as a call-in programme on television or some similar scheme. The effectiveness of those previous schemes was perhaps more in the public relations domain than actual problem-solving. Perhaps the PTI government and Mr Khan have a better road map than their predecessors — the

PCP is based on a scheme introduced in KP by the PTI during the last government's term there — but there are essential questions regarding scale and efficacy. Even if it is accepted that it will not micromanage the complaints redressal system and Mr Khan is seeking simply to gather aggregate data that will expose the worst performing of government departments, the PMO is unlikely to have the infrastructure to deal with the flow of complaints and analyse them in a meaningful manner. There are also legitimate questions that can be raised about the federal government interfering in the work of provincial governments.

Where the prime minister can, and perhaps should be, given the benefit of the doubt is that, a first-time holder of elected high office, Mr Khan is keen to try new schemes to connect his office to the citizenry as a way of not falling victim to the insulation from public concerns that the PMO can impose. However, it is surely time for the federal government to unveil its substantive policies and reforms agenda that the PTI has promised. At the moment, the complaints that will pour into the PCP will necessarily be about generic inefficiencies and corruption — the government's absence of reforms or a substantive policy agenda so far means that the PCP will be unable to record complaints about the PTI's own policy aims. Finally, the prime minister's time is finite — it should be used to guide the policy direction of the government rather than focus on issues that can be better handled at other tiers of government.

Israeli rapprochement?

OVER the past several days, there has been a flurry of reports concerning Israel and its contacts with Arab and Muslim states.

Last week, it was reported that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu flew into Oman for a secret meeting with Sultan Qaboos; news and pictures of the visit were only made public after Mr Netanyahu was back in Tel Aviv. Following the visit, a senior Omani minister told a conference in Manama that it was time to accept the Zionist state.

Along with these political developments, Israeli competitors and ministers have been in the UAE and Qatar of late as part of sports and cultural activities, with Israel's flag flying at the venues, along with the playing of its national anthem.

Then, of course, there were reports of an Israeli business jet mysteriously flying into Pakistan; the reports have been vehemently denied by the government, but the rumours refuse to die down.

It would be naive to assume all these developments — especially the growing bonhomie between Tel Aviv and the Gulf Arabs — are mere coincidences.

It is highly likely that both parties are being given a 'friendly' nudge by the US to make peace officially (backchannel contacts are a barely kept secret), especially considering that both Israel and the Arabs are under American patronage.

In pictures: 'Bloodiest day in Israel-Palestine conflict' as US moves embassy to Jerusalem

This perception is given credence as senior US officials have welcomed the contacts. If peace — and justice for the Palestinians — are the goals, then there may be no harm in diplomatic initiatives.

However, if there is a sinister plan at work, such as isolating Iran, then there is cause for alarm. Both the US and the Gulf Arabs have no love lost for Tehran, and vice versa, hence the normalisation of Arab-Israeli ties could be linked to further squeezing Iran.

But while geopolitics may be governed by selfish interests rather than morals, it should be remembered that Israel continues to slaughter Palestinians at will. In fact, as Gulf Arabs were posing for pictures with Israeli officials, the Zionist state's military was busy exterminating Palestinian children in Gaza.

Israel's behaviour towards Palestinians, especially under the current Likud regime, has been appalling, hence the Arab autocrats will have a tough time explaining the sudden warming of relations with Tel Aviv.

As for Pakistan, considering that this push for rapprochement in the Gulf may be linked to isolating Iran, as well as the repeated violation of Palestinian human rights by Israel, the government needs to proceed very carefully.

T20 clean sweep

BY registering a spectacular 3-0 clean sweep against Australia in the recent T20 series in the UAE, Pakistan has successfully managed to shun the tag of the most unpredictable side in international cricket — at least in this shortest format of the game.

The humbling of the Aussies has given Sarfraz and his men their 10th successive T20 series win — a feat that reaffirms their status as the best T20 side in world cricket. In fact, Pakistan's supremacy over their rivals from Down Under in all departments of the game has surprised even their staunchest supporters.

The Australians, though still recuperating from the unfortunate ball-tampering saga early this year that took away two of their best players — skipper Steve Smith and David Warner — were at full strength in the T20 series, and tipped to prove a handful.

The lopsided contests, however, have bared the many chinks in Australia's armour, their failure to adjust on low-bounce wickets being the most pronounced.

The lack of all-round class and temperament among the current lot of Australian players has earned the ire of cricketing greats including Shane Warne, the legendary spinner, who did not mince his words when he recently asked the Australian team to shape up quickly or prepare for a summer of disappointments.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has basked in the glory of its recent T20 success. But there is little reason to be content with their batting, especially the fledgling middle order that has misfired in nearly all the three matches against Australia.

Babar Azam yet again spared the team's blushes with his brilliant run of scores, and deservedly sits atop the ICC batting rankings.

The key to Pakistan's dominance in T20 cricket is the variety and sting in their bowling which has excelled in different conditions and against different teams.

With the New Zealand series commencing in a week's time, Pakistan will surely be aiming to extend their winning run and provide their fans with some more thrilling cricket.

IGP Islamabad's removal

JUDGING by recent events, Prime Minister Imran Khan's long-held assertions about upholding the independence of law-enforcement agencies appear increasingly unconvincing.

On Saturday, the government abruptly announced the transfer of the Islamabad IGP, retired Lt Jan Mohammad, without assigning any reason.

The impression of arbitrariness was compounded by the fact that the notification was issued while the senior official was on ex-Pakistan leave to attend a course in Malaysia.

Conflicting reports about the reasons for the transfer, and information that it had been effected on the verbal orders of Mr Khan, prompted the Supreme Court on Monday to suspend the notification. Chief Justice Saqib Nisar indicated he may constitute a fact-finding committee to get to the bottom of the issue, something that the government will certainly not relish.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

The findings of a similar exercise in the case of the dismissal in August of the DPO Pakpattan had left the government red-faced, with the Punjab chief minister and former IGP Punjab having to tender unconditional apologies to the court for their role in the fiasco. That, it turned out, was only the first of several controversial police transfers.

Unhindered exercise of executive authority is the government's right, one that is critical to its smooth functioning, and Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry yesterday vigorously defended the prime minister's power to transfer police officials.

However, executive actions must be transparent, based on reasoning that can withstand public scrutiny and follow due process.

When the government's actions are contrary to these fundamental requirements, it can reasonably expect to be accused of capriciousness or, even worse, of abusing its powers. Where law and order is concerned, the PTI has always correctly held that depoliticisation is key to improving the performance of the police and strengthening the institution.

As illustrated by the Sindh government's repeated attempts — thwarted by the Supreme Court — to remove former provincial IGP A.D. Khowaja, there can be entirely self-serving reasons for the state wanting to see the back of some police officials.

In 2015, the PML-N government dismissed Islamabad SSP Nekokara from service for his reluctance to use violence against participants at the PTI-PAT dharna the previous year, a politically motivated reprisal denounced by the PTI.

Indeed, the party has touted police reforms in KP as one of the stellar achievements, the veritable jewel in the crown, of its previous government in the province. Even many detractors concede that it succeeded on this front.

Why then is the PTI-led federal government appearing to succumb to the very temptations it had abjured earlier? The resignation in October of former KP IGP Nasir Durrani, the architect of the KP police reforms who had been tasked with replicating the same in Punjab, was in itself very telling.

It is difficult to avoid the perception that the PTI's actions are compromising a key pillar of the better, more accountable government it had promised.

PAC tussle

THE Public Accounts Committee is a central plank of parliamentary oversight of the executive; an effective and empowered PAC can nudge governance in the right direction and also help stamp out corruption. But practice has not lived up to potential so far, and few would argue that the PAC has been an effective parliamentary committee. Yet, in the PTI federal government's misguided quest to deny Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif the PAC chairmanship, the rulers may inflict more harm on the committee and the overall functioning of parliament than they recognise. It is still not too late to change course. The thrust of the PTI argument for refusing to give Mr Sharif the chairmanship of the PAC is that, at least initially, the committee will be auditing accounts from the PML-N's last term — therefore, the PML-N should not judge its own performance. Against the PTI's arguments are several factors, especially the parliamentary norm that the leader of the opposition be offered the committee's chairmanship. Even assuming that Mr Sharif will act in a partisan manner as PAC

chairman, would it really be easy for him to sweep the PML-N's alleged corruption under the rug?

The PAC is an important parliamentary cog, but it is by no means the only forum in which the government can pursue corruption allegations against the PML-N or other opposition parties. Moreover, if Mr Sharif were to try and overrule the objections of the PTI members of the PAC, it is unlikely that the matter would die right there. The PTI could quickly take matters to the court of public opinion, and from there any number of investigatory or judicial bodies could leap into the fray. What is also unusual is that the PTI is putting forward its own recommendation for the PAC chairmanship — a PTI MNA rather than a neutral figure. Surely, if the PTI is arguing that PML-N leadership of the PAC would result in a cover-up, the opposition can argue that the PTI leadership of the PAC will result in a witch hunt. Part of the problem is the unnecessary delay in the work of the PAC; if the PAC were up to date, it would not today have to examine accounts from several years ago. Whatever the case, parliamentary norms should be respected, and not violated.

Erasing girl students

ON Monday, the KP government announced a ban on any male parliamentarian or officer entering, or being invited as chief guest to attend any event in, government schools for girls. The circular, issued by the KP education department, also ordered a blackout of coverage, whether on social or mainstream media, of any such functions. Public opinion on this move has been split, with those arguing that it will encourage more conservative parents to 'allow' their daughters to access education (virtually half of all girls in KP do not attend school, according to a recent Alif Ailaan report) without fear of their 'honour' being compromised. Indeed, there has been speculation that the order was issued following complaints that photographs of such functions were being uploaded on social media, without the participants' consent and in an affront to cultural mores. Many others, on the other hand, argue that such an ill-conceived measure will only serve to further marginalise girls and women in the province — reinforcing rigid gender segregation, depriving them of recognition and denying them a role in shaping public life.

Women in KP and across Pakistan have long been systemically disenfranchised under the guise of ‘cultural sensitivities’, despite the fact that such feelings are, day by day, colliding with the aspirations of a younger generation that is often more attuned to issues of injustice and less invested in the preservation of an inequitable social order. A government that seeks to command any kind of moral authority among its people should be able to lead, not simply follow. And it should be able to assign responsibility for transgressions against the privacy and personhood of women and girls squarely where it belongs — with the violators, not the victims. Women can engage in public life and be treated with dignity and respect — the two are not mutually exclusive. Customs that threaten to deny one half of the population their constitutional right to education should not be pandered to. This ban must be overturned, immediately.