

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of December 2019*

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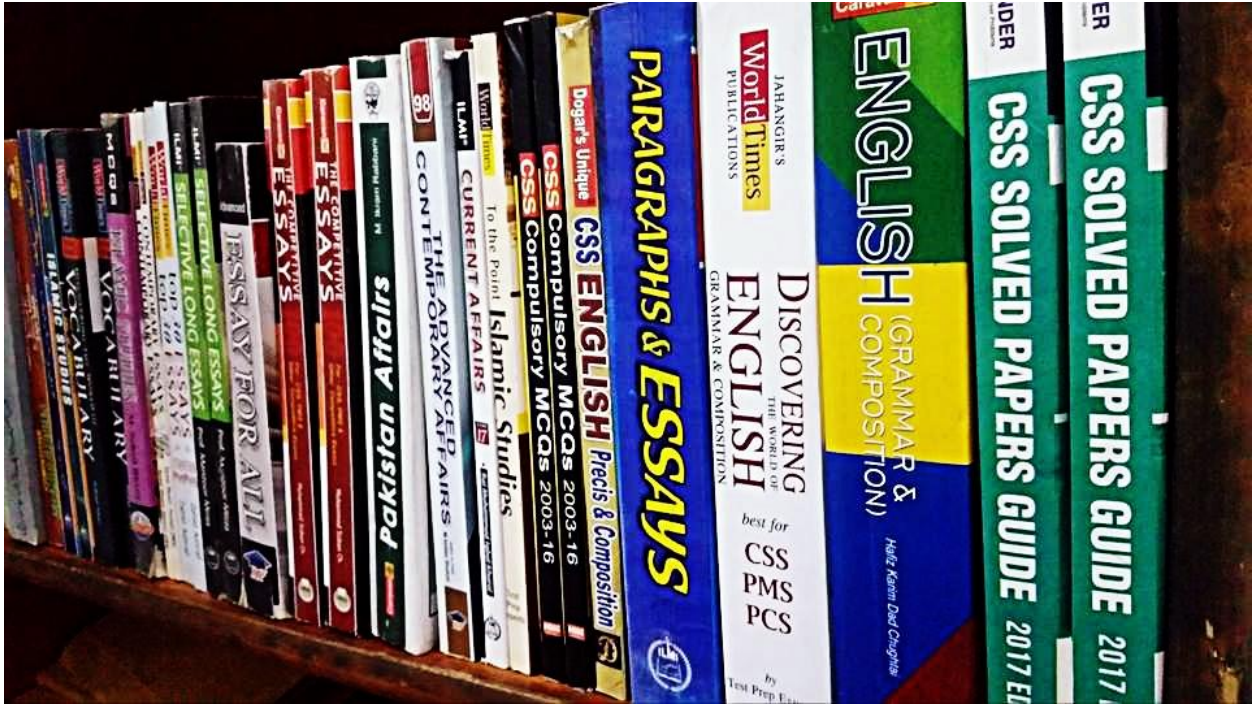
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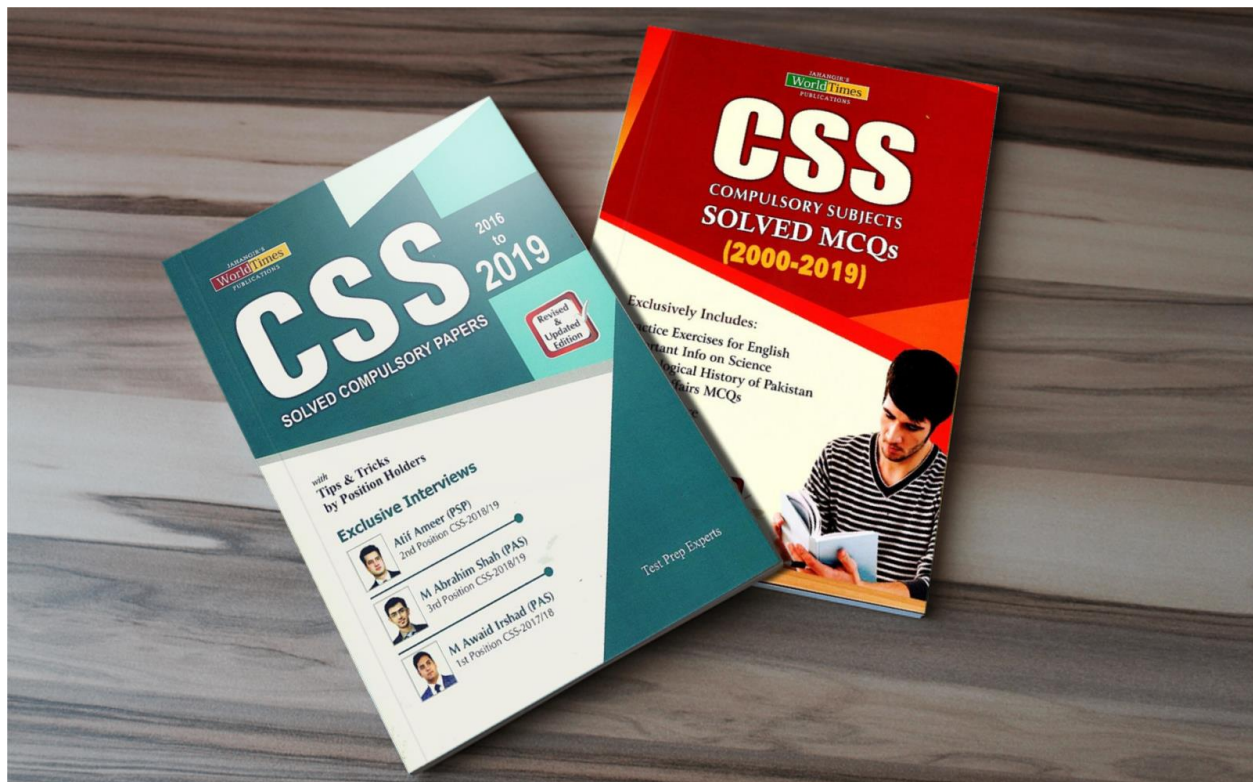
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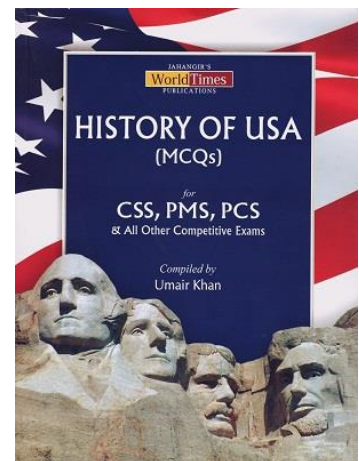
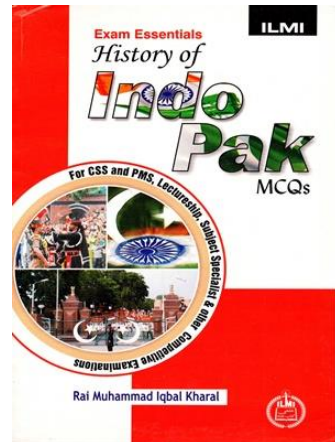
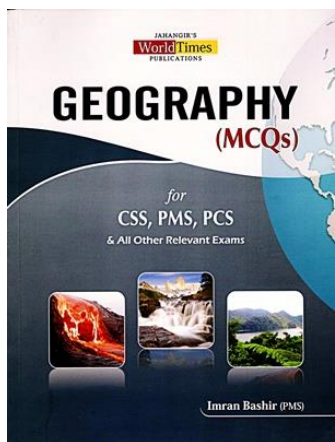
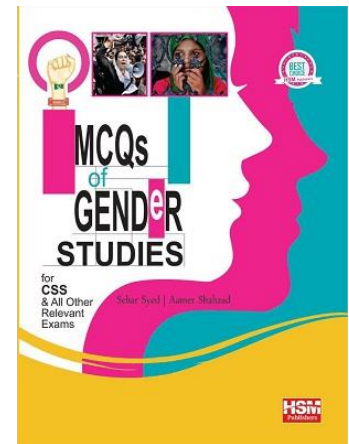
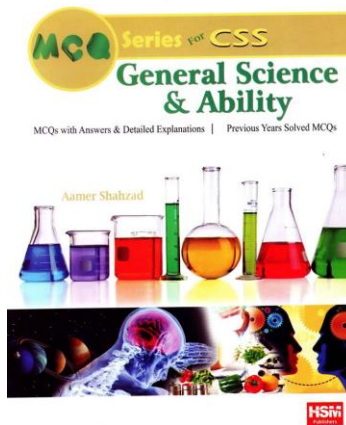
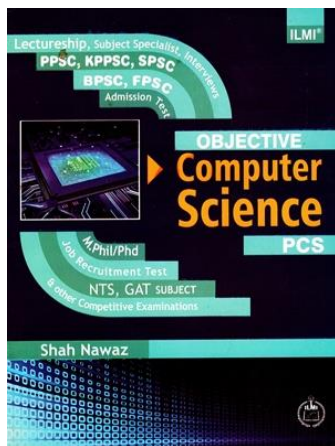
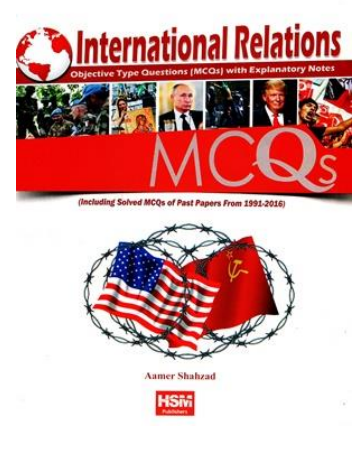
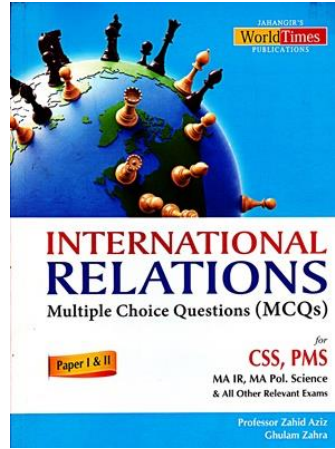
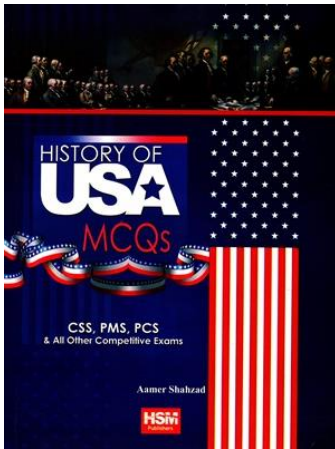
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# World AIDS Day

AS Pakistan braces for a potential HIV/AIDS outbreak for the second time this year, countries around the world are observing World AIDS Day today to acknowledge the role of communities in dealing with and controlling the spread of the deadly virus.

However, this day should be a sobering moment for the country's health authorities who keep grappling with an increasing number of HIV/AIDS cases even in the midst of a global decline.

After a severe HIV outbreak in May in Ratodero, Sindh, where many of those infected were small children, a significant number of HIV-positive cases have emerged in about 20 Punjab districts. According to official documents, almost 320 suspected cases of HIV/AIDS surfaced in these districts including Attock, Lahore and Multan, in October alone. To add to the sudden upsurge in HIV-positive cases, internal rifts within the Punjab AIDS Control Programme have sparked a series of resignations. With four key officials gone, the programme may almost be on the verge of closure.

Despite the PACP crisis, the blame for the uptick in HIV cases must not be heaped on AIDS initiatives alone.

The problem is part of a larger malaise that ails Pakistan's healthcare system. Social taboos, unqualified doctors and unsafe sexual and medical practices, including the reuse of syringes, sharing of needles by drug users, inadequate screening of blood donors, and contaminated surgical and dialysis equipment, have all contributed to Pakistan's place among the 11 countries with the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

As of 2018, there were more than 160,000 HIV-positive people in Pakistan, according to UNAIDS, while the number of AIDS-related deaths has increased by 369pc since 2010.

Popular narrative holds that drug users, male, female and transgender commercial sex workers and prisoners are most at risk of being infected. Also, a number of migrant workers, having acquired the virus because of risky sexual activity, infect their unsuspecting spouses upon their return.

However, the outbreaks in Sargodha (2018) and Ratodero have shown that unsafe medical practices are just as likely to infect the general population. In both places, the reason for the spread of virus was apparently the use of unsterilised equipment and infected syringes.

Unfortunately, a large number of people have limited access to healthcare services and are unaware of safe medical practices. Crucially, societal attitudes towards HIV/AIDS have complicated matters. Those infected are often shunned by society, and this prevents many others from seeking medical help or intervention for their symptoms.

The dilemma of our country's approach to HIV/AIDS is especially apt for this year's theme for World AIDS Day — 'communities make the difference'. Today should be a moment of reckoning for our healthcare providers, who not only need to come up with an overhaul of the healthcare system but must also work to eliminate social taboos surrounding diseases such HIV/AIDS.

## Iraq unrest

AFTER two months of unrest and violent confrontations between protesters and law enforcers in Iraq, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi has tendered his resignation, which the Iraqi parliament will most likely decide on today. The move came after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani — one of the world's leading Shia clerics — asked lawmakers in his Friday sermon to 'reconsider' their choice of supporting Mr Abdul-Mahdi, who had been in power for only a year, to prevent further bloodshed. The removal of the Iraqi prime minister has been one of the protesters' central demands; however, demonstrations continued on Saturday, with people calling for an overhaul of the entire political system. Arguably, it is massive government corruption and a poor standard of living that have fuelled the protests. Despite Iraq being a major petrochemical producer, the proceeds of oil sales have failed to create a welfare state where citizens have access to basic services, health and education. Poor governance coupled with an equally precarious law and order situation — thanks largely to violence perpetrated by the Islamic State and other militant groups — have combined to put Iraq on the path of becoming a failed state. Demonstrators have also vented their anger at what they see as Iranian interference in Iraqi politics, torching Tehran's consulates in Najaf and Karbala.

The fact is that after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saddam Hussein's brutal police state has been replaced by a corrupt system where cronyism and mismanagement are the order of the day. It can be argued that the US tried to create a 'democracy' in the Arab state in its own image, without understanding Iraq's tribal, ethnic and religious complexities. True democracies are organic and evolve over time; experiments in statecraft implanted by external players often end up in a shambles, much as Iraq and Afghanistan have. As for Iran's role, it is true that many of the Iraqi elite have deep ties with Tehran, while if it were not for Iran's help, IS may have taken over Baghdad. Although Iraq's demonstrators have every right to demand full sovereignty, care must be taken not to stoke the fires of Arab and Ajam, as such toxic ethno-nationalist rhetoric can easily spiral out of control. Iraq's political system cannot be fixed in weeks, or even months. Nevertheless, urgent steps are needed to create a system that delivers in a just and democratic way.

## Lesser humans?

TEN years ago, Pakistan made history with a landmark Supreme Court verdict that officially recognised a third gender. Then in May 2018, the National Assembly passed the historic Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. Under this law, individuals who do not fall into the male/female gender binary are guaranteed the right to self-identification, to have that identity recognised on all their legal documents, and to be safeguarded against discrimination. Further, the law guarantees the transgender community the same constitutional rights as any other citizen of the state, including "fundamental rights to inheritance, education, employment, vote, hold public office, health, assembly, and access to public spaces and property". In the general elections that same year, several members of the transgender community participated as contestants.

But despite all these legal gains, the community continues to suffer horrific violence, often with little hope for justice: rape, kidnappings, sexual exploitation, violent attacks and murder. In one of the most recent instances, a transgender person was raped and tortured at gunpoint in Sahiwal in September. Almost exactly a year before that, another transwoman was found outside a taxi stand with burns on 80pc of her body in Sahiwal. She died on the way to a hospital in Lahore. There have even been instances where medical staff would not attend to a transgendered patient; a morgue would refuse to keep the body of a

transperson; or a government contractor would not fulfil his duty of burying the body. A recent article published in this paper highlighted the trials and tribulations of a transgender beauty salon owner, but many others continue to have difficulty finding employment, and resort to begging at traffic signals. Then there are other forms of daily humiliation, where someone's identity becomes the butt of a 'joke', or a snide remark. So while transgenders as a community may have equal rights on paper, they are still treated as second-class citizens and lesser human beings.

## **Housing scams**

THE story of illegal housing schemes in Pakistan is one of untrammelled greed facilitated by a hollowed-out system of governance. All over the country, political bigwigs and members of the establishment in cahoots with a rotten-to-the-core land bureaucracy are making fortunes on the backs of ordinary citizens looking for a return on their hard-earned savings, or simply, a home to call their own. The police, as well as unsavoury operatives on the ground, provide the muscle for this ruthless land-grabbing industry that is a known catalyst for urban violence. While it is too early to speculate on the merits of the case, it has come to light that NAB's Karachi chapter has requested its chairman to launch a fresh inquiry into the Fazaia Housing Scheme in the city for allegedly defrauding 6,000 people who have invested in the project. The amount involved, says NAB, is Rs13bn. This is not the first time that the housing scheme has popped up on its radar. Back in March 2018, an inquiry had been initiated into allegations that land had been illegally provided to its management for developing the project. Not surprisingly, that investigation went nowhere.

In October 2018, the scale of the problem of shady housing schemes was highlighted by a Supreme Court-ordered forensic audit that found an astonishing 5,492 such projects in Pakistan to be illegal, unregistered, or existing only on paper. The number of registered or licensed housing schemes stood at 3,432. In such a system, only unscrupulous individuals prosper. When revenue officials collude with the power elite, their services are rewarded with 'files' for plots, but the land development authorities themselves are deprived of revenue they are entitled to through development charges, fees, etc. In February this year, an audit report presented in the National Assembly noted that the Capital Development Authority in Islamabad had suffered a loss of Rs5,217.39bn on

account of 109 illegal housing schemes in the ICT. Similarly, while Malir Development Authority officials conspired with Bahria Town Ltd to illegally exchange and consolidate land for its project in Karachi, MDA's own finances were running so low that it could not afford to pay salaries to its employees.

Indeed, so entrenched is the corruption that often when it appears that action is being taken against land scams, it is actually retaliation against perceived reluctance to fall in line with the land mafia's designs. An investigation by this paper a few months ago uncovered that a prominent feudal, unwilling to allow the ingress of multiple private housing schemes inside Jamshoro district — part of his 'fiefdom' — was chastened when illegal housing societies in which he himself is believed to have a stake were bulldozed by the provincial building control authority. Even among those with clout, real estate interests trump traditional centres of power. These Augean stables must be cleaned.

## **Terror suspect**

THE recent deadly knife attack in London, carried out by Usman Khan, a British militant of Pakistani origin, has reignited the debate about home-grown extremism in the West, and what Western governments are — or are not — doing to keep a check on such atrocities. While certain quarters will be quick to blame Pakistan for this outrage, considering the suspect's origins, the fact is that home-grown terrorism is very much a British problem, and pointing fingers at this country will not make it go away. While Khan did reportedly spend some time in Pakistan, he was born and bred in the UK, and was apparently radicalised by the speeches of Yemeni-American militant Anwar al-Awlaki. Moreover, up till now no solid evidence has emerged linking the suspect to any of the militant groups that have operated in Pakistan. The authorities in the UK need to ask themselves some tough questions, namely how a man convicted of planning an act of terrorism — Usman Khan was sentenced in 2012 for planning an attack as part of an 'Al Qaeda-inspired group' — managed to carry out a rampage with a knife without any red flags going up prior to the attack.

While Pakistan indeed has plenty of problems with home-grown militants of its own, terrorism in the West has evolved as an independent beast, and needs to be de-linked from actors in South Asia. Though there may or may not be operational links between terrorists in Europe, America and this region, there is

plenty of evidence that militants who have been born and have grown up in the West are quite capable of wreaking havoc on their own. For example, despite its efforts the British government has been unable to totally shut down Al Muhajiroun, a UK-based extremist outfit which enjoys support from Muslim Britons from various ethnic backgrounds, as well as radicalised converts. In fact Anjem Choudary, a convicted British terrorist and reportedly one of Usman Khan's mentors in extremism, remains a free man. The British authorities need to see what further can be done to ensure such dangerous individuals are prevented from preaching their hateful views and drawing recruits. Moreover, many Muslims based in the West flocked to fight for the militant Islamic State group, which shows that those in power in the UK and other Western states need to take a deeper look at why their citizens are shunning their home countries and systems to adopt the path of extremism.

## Houthi prisoner release

THERE are signs that Saudi Arabia is working on an exit strategy to extricate itself from the brutal campaign — in aid of the Yemeni government — it has led against Houthi rebels since 2015. Last week, Riyadh freed over 100 Houthi prisoners, who were transported by the Red Cross to the Yemeni capital Sana'a which is held by the rebels. The Houthis have naturally welcomed the move; Saudi officials in the recent past have said they have an "open channel" with the rebel movement supported by Iran. Though violent exchanges continue between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition, their frequency has decreased. The rebels claimed downing a Saudi helicopter recently, while Riyadh bombed a market in Saada, the rebels' stronghold, the other day. However, as compared to the past, the hostilities are currently in a low phase. Interestingly, the Saudis have toned down their rhetoric, which in the initial stages of the conflict was noticeably harsh. Perhaps these changes in strategy have occurred after the realisation dawned on the powers that be in Riyadh that the Yemen war is close to being unwinnable. The Saudis can continue bombing their adversaries for a long time; however, the Houthis, despite being the weaker power militarily and financially, have become adept at giving their richer northern neighbour a bloody nose, with frequent attacks targeting Saudi cities and installations.

For the sake of the people of Yemen, the sooner this futile war ends, the better it will be. The recent moves towards detente should be welcomed, and the Yemeni



government must open channels with the Houthis, with Riyadh and Tehran urging their respective Yemeni allies to come to the table. If both sides are serious about peace, there should be an immediate ceasefire, adhered to by all sides, which can pave the way for more confidence-building measures. The Yemeni people have paid a high price caught in the middle of this vicious war; it is time to end the violence and let them rebuild their lives.

## **Student unions**

IN a welcome move, Prime Minister Imran Khan has indicated that student unions in the country could be revived.

Responding to the countrywide demand, expressed in the form of solidarity marches in some 50 Pakistani cities, the prime minister tweeted on Sunday that the government might revive student unions, although after a “comprehensive and enforceable code of conduct” was in place. Mr Khan is not the first prime minister to have expressed his resolve to revoke the ‘ban’ on student unions.

The PPP’s Yousuf Raza Gilani, too, had declared his intention of reviving student unions in his first parliamentary address in 2008. But nothing came of it.

The Senate took up the matter in 2017 and its Committee of the Whole passed a resolution calling for the restoration of student unions, terming it a constitutional right. The committee also addressed the ‘ban’ imposed by a 1993 Supreme Court verdict, saying that the restoration of students’ representative bodies would not be in violation of it. Recently, the Sindh Assembly passed a unanimous resolution along the same lines, and PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari spoke in favour of the issue.

But there are challenges.

First, the politicians’ willingness has not been translated into action. Ambiguity still persists regarding the legality of students’ right to unionise. This may also be partly due to society’s negative perception about politics itself and because the student wings — that operate with impunity on university campuses — of various political parties are often confused with these unions. At best, such groups can be described as student organisations; but they are a far cry from an elected body of student representatives with the mandate to address students’ issues.

Hopefully, the 'code of conduct' will, besides formulating the rules for establishing unions, also make clear the distinction between elected unions and other groups led by students.

Secondly, and equally significant, Mr Khan's announcement was clouded by disturbing reports of arrests of student activists and march organisers, and the subsequent registration of cases of sedition — no less — against them.

Shockingly, those booked included Iqbal Lala, father of Mashal Khan who was lynched by fellow students at Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan on wrongful charges of blasphemy.

That episode clearly showed how dangerous forces have established themselves on campuses in the absence of legitimate student representation.

How can unions be restored in the face of such authoritarianism, and if student activists and march participants are arrested and accused of sedition?

Student unions are the first step towards participation in national politics and the grooming of future leaders. They must be healthy forums where debate and dissent are welcomed.

The government cannot afford to blunder.

The onus is now on the federal and provincial governments to come up with a workable solution to decriminalise and revive student activism.

## **Intra-party democracy**

LACK of democracy within political parties is an issue that Pakistan has been struggling with for the better part of its history. Parties with a national vote bank like the PML-N and PPP never really embraced this notion despite having agreed upon certain procedural requirements within the election rules. While the Election Commission of Pakistan inserted this requirement for elections within parties, the latter treated this as a formality to be completed in letter but not in spirit. Imran Khan's PTI made a big deal of these sham elections and instituted a system for its internal elections to show it was truly a democratic party and not a family-run enterprise. The one-time electoral exercise led to such a bitter feud within the party that soon everything reverted back to the leader nominating people for

various party offices. The PTI's romance with democracy within its party was short-lived.

It was, therefore, not surprising to hear a PTI lawmaker admitting this fact at a seminar in Islamabad recently. Sher Ali Arbab, an MNA from Peshawar, conceded that democracy within parties, including his own, was a huge challenge. He is right. With the passage of time, the PTI has stopped even pretending that its affairs are managed on any democratic principles. By reverting to this traditional manner of running political parties in Pakistan, it has joined the ranks of the PML-N, the PPP and most other parties. The adverse effects of this undemocratic culture inside these parties are greater than we realise. Such a culture stifles debate, scuttles healthy disagreements and suppresses dissent. It elevates the leader to a position where he is not answerable to the rank and file of his party. It also gives him or her veto power on decision-making and diminishes the role of others. More significantly, it promotes an acceptance of absolute authority and dilutes the essence of democracy. When such a culture reigns within parties, it is difficult to expect them to change their value system within the larger democratic dispensation. It is the ECP's responsibility to enforce the requirement for elections within parties and to ensure that these are not sham exercises in futility. So far the ECP has taken a lenient view of this deficiency. With a new leadership of the ECP due to be appointed, it is a good opportunity to take stock of the situation as it exists and to strengthen the rules so that we can strengthen democracy.

## **Removing the hurdles**

AROUND the world, the International Day of Disabled Persons is being marked with various stakeholders coming together to create a better and more inclusive world for people living with disabilities. According to the World Health Organisation, around 15pc of the global population suffers from some form of disability, while around 2pc to 4pc live with more severe and debilitating impairments. In Pakistan, the 1998 census found that 2.38pc of the population was living with disabilities, but this figure dropped to a mere 0.48pc with the 2017 census. Disability rights activists feel this statistic severely underrepresents their reality on ground, and instead cite WHO figures, which estimates that around 13.4pc of the total population suffers from some form of disability. Since the passage of the 18th Amendment, the responsibility of enacting legislation on

disability rests with the provinces. While Sindh and Balochistan have passed new laws on the subject, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab have not. Meanwhile, the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, is yet to be presented before the National Assembly. It is imperative that such a large section of society not feel excluded from mainstream society, and lawmakers must work closely with activists and members of non-governmental organisations who have a clearer picture of what barriers confront people living with disabilities, whether in politics, employment or education.

Most recently, the Punjab government's Special Education Department launched its new policy which aims to enrol more children in public schools by making the education system more inclusive and focusing on the various barriers that keep those living with disability away from their right to an education. According to studies cited by the programme, children with disabilities are less likely to go to school, and have a greater chance of dropping out, if they do, owing to stigmas and structural barriers. If successful, the data and research-driven model can also be adopted by other provinces that must strive towards greater inclusivity for those who are disabled.

## **Moody's upgrade**

IT is certainly welcome news that the global credit rating agency — Moody's Investors Service — has upgraded the outlook on Pakistan's debt from negative to stable as an acknowledgement of the signs of strength returning to the external sector and the fiscal balance.

Soon the government will venture into the global markets to float a bond, and a stable outlook on its B3-rated debt will help. It is also a sign that the economy is stabilising and the narrowing of its two critical deficits is being acknowledged by foreign creditors and investors. In time, other rating agencies are expected to follow suit.

But it would be a mistake to hang too large a hat on this peg.

First, it is important to bear in mind that a ratings upgrade shortly after accession to an IMF programme is actually quite routine. Similar upgrades on the ratings outlook have been witnessed in the past — for instance, in 2001 after the Paris Club rescheduling that provided some breathing room on the external front, and

then again in August 2009 when the country passed its IMF reviews and secured an augmentation of its quota.

Another upgrade came in July 2014, again in response to strengthening of the external liquidity position after accession to an IMF programme and the passage of successive reviews.

In each case, however, the ratings suffered a downgrade towards the end of that government's tenure as the deficits reappeared, and foreign exchange reserves that had been built up through pain and sacrifice once again depleted.

The point here is to avoid a repeat of this story, where a government begins its term with an IMF programme, implementation begins, the deficits recede, ratings are upgraded — and then the path of reform is forgotten and the hard-won fruits of stabilisation squandered to produce one quick growth spurt.

An upgrade of the outlook on the ratings is fine, and certainly indicative of the return of health to the macroeconomic framework. Above all, it provides comfort to the foreign holders of Pakistan's debt that the government is not likely to move towards a default or rescheduling in the next year.

It is not a triumph for the policymaker, and it certainly is not a moment to exalt and hail as a victory.

The real stakeholders in the country's economy are the ordinary people, particularly the poor whose interests must be kept foremost in mind when making economic decisions. For them, and for local investors and businessmen, the ratings action is far too abstract a reality.

In a sense, it can be said that the ratings action represents a setting of the stage. As fiscal and external space becomes available, the real triumph will be in how it is utilised. If the government can put growth on a sustainable footing, that would be something truly worth celebrating.

## **Transport woes**

IT is a matter of great shame that successive governments — federal, provincial or municipal — have, despite considerable financial help from foreign donors, failed to resolve transport problems in all major cities of the country. Be it

Islamabad, Peshawar, Lahore or Karachi, all mass transit projects are being subjected to delays, while the residents of these cities continue to be inconvenienced for no fault of their own. A cursory glance at their progress is enough to reveal that these projects — even if the work is ‘almost’ complete — are delayed not so much by the dearth of funds and resources as by political point-scoring and the sheer incompetence of the ruling elite.

As one PTI-led government in KP scrambles to manage the disaster of the Peshawar BRT, the other in Punjab appears to be delaying the launch of the Rs200bn Orange Line Metro Train initiated by former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif. The bidding process for the maintenance and operation of the Orange Line was restarted in July by the current dispensation because the leadership was unsatisfied with the earlier effort. It is deplorable that the people of Lahore should continue to suffer because of political rivalry and the government’s tendency to tamper with flagship projects initiated by past dispensations. Meanwhile, there are bureaucratic delays in the completion of the Islamabad Metro Bus Project, where 90pc of the construction work has been done. The relevant authorities seem to be passing on responsibility to each other, while contractors have halted work due to the non-payment of dues. Then there is the largest city of the country, Karachi, where no mass transit project announced by the past few federal, provincial or municipal governments have come to fruition. The Sindh government recently shelved a proposed Blue Line bus project due to the paucity of funds while ongoing construction work on the federally funded Green Line seems to have been stalled as parts of the city centre remain dug up and are inaccessible to commuters. However, the incomplete projects notwithstanding, the provincial government plans to start work on yet another project — the Red Line — for which around \$400m have been obtained from foreign donors. These mass transit projects were launched for the public, but their shambolic management have only added to commuters’ misery. If only the authorities focused more on providing relief to the people instead of political point-scoring, the country could witness positive change.

## **Disaster Down Under**

ON all counts, the Pakistan cricket team’s tour of Australia was more of a case of professionals versus schoolboys.

The visitors were comprehensively out-batted and overwhelmingly out-bowled by the hosts. Pakistan was trounced by a team that was operating on a different level altogether. Not only were the Australians at their zenith in terms of performance, they also executed their game plan with utmost discipline.

Meanwhile, Pakistan lost back-to-back Tests at Brisbane and Adelaide that followed the comprehensive T20 drubbing. The absence of a strategy was evident throughout, starting from the unceremonious removal of Sarfraz Ahmed on the eve of the tour. He may not have fared well at the World Cup, but he is a better leader any day than the clueless Azhar Ali.

The PCB also blundered by putting all its eggs in Misbah-ul-Haq's basket. With no prior experience, Misbah selected raw teenagers Naseem Shah and Moosa Khan to be the bowling spearheads, a move which hugely backfired. Inexplicably, Misbah left out experienced batters such as Fawad Alam, Sami Aslam and Abid Ali from the team and continued to back Haris Sohail and Iftikhar Ahmed for the Tests, both of whom were unable to survive the Australian onslaught.

Pakistan's dependence on leggie Yasir Shah must also end now and slow bowlers Mohammad Asghar, Umar Khan and others must be considered. Babar Azam's exploits as a batsman of exceptional quality remained the only real high point. The brilliant right-hander was undaunted by the strength of the opposition. The same, however, could not be said of Pakistan's other top order players Azhar, Asad Shafique, Imam-ul-haq and Shan Masud.

The PCB may be engrossed in preparations for the first home Test series in a decade, but it must realise that teams need to develop their players according to the challenges of the moment. The PCB should always keep in mind the importance of professionally grooming players, regardless of whether it's a home series or an away tour. The game is more competitive now than ever before.

## **Climate action**

IN an alarming, though not wholly unexpected, revelation, Pakistan has jumped three places to take fifth position on The Global Climate Risk Index 2020 in the list of nations most affected by climate change.

Last year's report had ranked Pakistan as the eighth most vulnerable country.

The 10 countries/territories most affected by climate change include Puerto Rico, Myanmar, Haiti, the Philippines, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal and Dominica. The report reiterates that of the places most affected by climate change in the past 20 years, seven are developing nations — in the low- or middle-income category.

Sadly, poor countries like ours are paying the ultimate price for the unbridled greed of the big polluters.

The release of the climate index report coincides with the two-week-long 25th UN Climate Change Conference taking place in Madrid where representatives of nearly 200 countries, including Pakistan, are meeting to discuss and strategise the impacts and solutions for slowing down the pace of global warming.

The climate risk index has called on participants of the Madrid summit to address the dearth of “additional climate finance” to help poor countries that must tackle the damage wrought by recurring extreme weather events. It asserts that developing countries are hit harder by climate change because their vulnerability is increased by a poor capacity to cope.

These remarks are especially true for Pakistan where the climate crisis, along with the rest of the world, has perhaps reached a point of ‘no-return’ in the words of UN chief António Guterres.

Explaining Pakistan’s increased vulnerability to climate change, David Eckstein, one of the authors of the report, said that the country’s geographical location made it more “prone to extreme weather events, in particular, heavy rainfalls”.

Between 1998 and 2018, some 10,000 people died due to extreme weather events including floods and heatwaves; the economic loss, meanwhile, was to the tune of nearly \$4bn. In fact, where economic figures are concerned, Pakistan ranked third among the most affected countries of the world over this period. This shows that climatic hazards, besides having a devastating impact on the ecosystem, also affect the overall development of nations, including public health, agriculture and the economy.

Pakistan, says the report, needs technical and financial support from the international community through platforms such as the Green Climate Fund to meet ambitious national goals set under the Paris Climate Accord.



However, it would be a mistake to expect foreign donors to come to our rescue unless we ourselves appear to be taking the crisis seriously and are ready to self-correct.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has highlighted the dangers of climate change both at home and internationally. But that in itself is not enough.

The country needs drastic steps to, among other things, improve its air quality and harness renewable energy sources if it is to tackle the damage inflicted by changing weather patterns.

## Child marriages

A RECENT report by Unicef reveals that the number of child marriages in South Asia has halved from where it stood 25 years ago. Undoubtedly, the on-ground efforts of activists and NGO workers, as well as of lawmakers—in particular, women politicians—have borne some fruit and created much-needed change in society. Despite such gains, however, the practice continues in many part of this country, as children’s lives and futures continue to be in danger. Just recently, heartbreaking images of two girls were being circulated on social media after it was claimed that they were exchanged to settle a personal dispute in Sindh. There have also been instances of underage Hindu girls forced to become brides after converting or being made to convert, which is in complete violation of the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act. To its credit, Sindh is the only province to have successfully increased the age of marriage to 18, while the other provinces continue to delay the matter on some excuse or the other. Punjab introduced amendments to the existing colonial-era law, but is yet to increase the age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18. Confusion over who is classified as a child in the eyes of the law remains due to many contradictory laws and continued resistance from religious groups and conservative politicians, which does not make legislating on the issue any easier. This is despite the fact that Pakistan is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which clearly states that anyone under the age of 18 is classified as a child.

Child marriage is a deeply harmful practice that disproportionately affects girls and has been likened to a culturally acceptable form of slavery that perpetuates or even legalises child rape under the guise of marriage. Not only are young girls unable to pursue their fundamental right of completing their education, they are

also subjected to difficult household work and responsibilities before they have even developed their full mental and physical capacities. Moreover, underage girls go on to face health complications during and after childbirth. Seen as a financial ‘burden’ on their families, they are married off early to escape oppressive poverty, or they are used to settle disputes as if they were the property of adults to be bartered and sold, and not vulnerable individuals with rights of their own that need to be fiercely protected.

## **Sino-Russian ties**

IN a world of changing alliance patterns, it is obvious that China and Russia must come closer, the signing of Monday’s gas deal between the two giants being just a small indication of the shape of things to come. While President Vladimir Putin called the 3,000-kilometre-long gas pipeline project “historic”, President Xi Jinping said that Sino-Russian relations were entering “a new era”. The gas deal is an indication of the booming trade — which is estimated to reach \$200bn by 2024 — between the two countries, and is in sharp contrast to China’s declining economic ties with the US, the two having slapped tariffs worth billions of dollars on imports on each other. This is in addition to apprehensions on the larger geopolitical canvas. Washington is hostile to China’s One Belt One Road project, and Beijing feels concerned over Washington’s moves to create an anti-China alliance in the Pacific. More important, America seems determined to slow down if not block China’s emergence as a world power. As for Russia, the end of the Cold War has not led to an idyllic peace with the West.

The 70th anniversary of Nato’s founding finds the US-led alliance in a mess, with President Donald Trump calling France’s Nato strategy “brain dead”. French President Emmanuel Macron has his own grievances against Nato member Turkey and accuses Ankara of working with extremists in Syria by waging war on the Kurds, who he says are the West’s allies against the militant Islamic State group. Turkey, which has purchased missiles from Russia, also opposes Nato moves to strengthen the Baltic states’ security. The fissures within Nato are no solace for Russia, which is aware of Western anger over its Crimean misadventure. On Tuesday, Gen Mark Milley, American military chief, said China and Russia, and not Muslim militants, posed a threat to America. With Cold War loyalties cracking, and the focus of the world’s economic and geopolitical power

shifting towards the East, both Moscow and Beijing feel it is in their interest to come closer.

## **An odd settlement**

THE whole affair of the UK's National Crime Agency coming to a settlement with Malik Riaz and his family is raising new and important questions each day.

It is clear that some sort of a confidential deal has been struck between the property developer and the NCA, and that the funds frozen in the UK totalling £190m are to be returned to "the state of Pakistan". What is not clear is the role that the Pakistani government has played in all of this, and what is even more puzzling is the manner in which the government has behaved in the days following the announcement of the settlement.

The case is a success story of precisely the sort that Imran Khan has been promising for years. The amount is substantial and the NCA said the freezing orders were issued because the funds and property are "suspected to have derived from bribery and corruption". Malik Riaz chose to settle rather than contest these suspicions, and the settlement certainly is a civil matter and not a criminal one. But it is still significant, and more than a little odd considering that he would rather part with £190m than go to the trouble of explaining how he acquired the money.

This is by far a huge success for the government and its Asset Recovery Unit, headed by Shahzad Akbar. So why did the government choose to remain silent about the whole affair?

It took some prodding and two full days before Mr Akbar even addressed the matter at a press conference, and even then he spent little more than a few minutes on it, saying he is prevented by certain confidentiality clauses from disclosing more details. That did not stop him from telling the press corps, however, that the recovered funds will indeed be used to pay Malik Riaz's liability in the fine imposed upon him in the Supreme Court judgement, and that the government has "asked the court" to give the funds to the federal, instead of the Sindh, government. The order issued by the implementation bench indicates that the money from the fine should be given to the Sindh government.

The whole affair now demands more answers.

Allowing the money to be used to pay Mr Riaz's fine is tantamount to giving it back to him. If the funds were indeed frozen because there was suspicion of them being the products of bribery and corruption in Pakistan, then the settlement means that the funds belong to the people of Pakistan and should not be allowed to be used to pay any fines imposed on Mr Riaz by the Supreme Court. If the government is a party to the settlement, as Mr Akbar seemed to say on Thursday, then we need to know whether the government consented to this arrangement.

## **Jalalabad attack**

AS a final peace deal between the Afghan Taliban and the Americans has yet to be clinched, the chaos in Afghanistan — and the ungoverned spaces that are created due to it — has given sanctuary to a new breed of even more violent actors. The US-backed government in Kabul has a tenuous hold on governance, which means areas not under state control are either run by the Taliban, or elements associated with the militant Islamic State group. The brutal killing of a Japanese doctor in the eastern city of Jalalabad, along with five Afghans, shows that unless a comprehensive peace deal is signed soon, territories outside the remit of both Kabul and the Taliban will be used by terrorist groups to wreak havoc. Tetsu Nakamura — the slain doctor and aid worker — had worked to help Afghanistan's long-suffering people since the 1980s; he was earlier based out of Peshawar and inside Afghanistan itself. The Taliban, who are no strangers to violence, denied any role in the doctor's killing, saying they do not target those who "contributed to the reconstruction of Afghanistan". Nangarhar, where Jalalabad is located, has been a hotbed of activity for IS militants, which means elements linked to the terrorist outfit may have been involved in the atrocity.

Last month, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had said his government had "obliterated" IS in Afghanistan, as hundreds of IS militants laid down arms before the state. The Taliban mocked Kabul's claim, saying it was they who had put IS on the back foot in the region. This series of events illustrates a strange situation in Afghanistan; the Afghan government as well as the Taliban have no love for IS and both claim to be fighting the self-styled caliphate. However, both Kabul and the Talibs are also sworn enemies, with the Taliban looking at Mr Ghani's government with disdain, labelling them American 'puppets'. Indeed, considering the circumstances, a peace deal in Afghanistan that brings together all the

country's factions and ethnic groups is the need of the hour. US envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad was recently in Kabul to kick-start peace talks with the Taliban. The Americans, Kabul, as well as the Taliban must realise that the biggest threat to peace in Afghanistan, and indeed, the region is IS. Therefore, instead of working at cross purposes, they need to combine their energies to defeat the group, which is in search of territory after its rout in the Levant.

## Jirga 'justice'

RARELY does a day go by without news of horrific abuse inflicted upon the women and children of this land. Daily newspapers are filled with reports of 'honour' killing, domestic abuse, rape, harassment, revenge porn, paedophilia, kidnapping, forced marriage, and so on. Such violence perpetrated on marginalised groups seems to have become so common that it barely causes a stir in the public conscience. However, the alleged details of a recent case were so gruesome that they caused mass outrage among social media users. Some two weeks ago, a young girl was hastily buried under mysterious circumstances in a small town close to Dadu. Because of a local newspaper report, rumours started circulating that nine-year-old Gul Sama had been declared 'kari' (adulteress) by her parents, and was brutally stoned to death on the instructions of a local jirga. Her father refuted the claim, insisting his daughter had been killed in an avalanche of rocks from the nearby hills. But police were not convinced. Two days ago, the child's body was exhumed from a graveyard in order to conduct medical tests. The marks and deep injuries on Gul Sama's neck, face, nose, head and torso pointed to death by heavy objects. If the worst is confirmed, one would be at a loss for words. How could a child be accused of adultery? While the mother has now been released, the father and a maulvi are still under investigation.

Even as we wait for a clearer picture, it is a disturbing reality that certain tribal practices in the form of jirgas continue to be at odds with the Constitution. At the beginning of this year, the Supreme Court pointed out that jirgas and panchayats were in violation of many international treaties Pakistan is bound to, yet they are tolerated under the pretext of speedy justice. More often than not, the jirga institutionalises the oppression of women and girls it treats as property. It is time to outlaw such barbarism in the name of culture and expediency.

# Test for parliament

WHILE Pakistani politicians are sometimes selectively targeted, the task of strengthening a central pillar of democracy belongs to them and to no one else. It is in their hands to make the Election Commission of Pakistan functional again.

With the retirement of the chief election commissioner, retired Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza, on Thursday, the ECP has become non-functional. Many fundamental ECP activities stand suspended, among them the scrutiny of funding for political parties.

The situation is not helped by the fact that the ECP was already two members short of its mandated strength. The nomination of these two members had been a bone of contention between the treasury and opposition, and the government's attempt at resolving the problem via a presidential order was thwarted by Mr Raza himself. He declared the presidential action illegal, thus casting serious doubts on the government's motives; tensions that already existed between the two sides were exacerbated.

Since then, both the government and opposition have proposed individuals of their choice for the post of the ECP chairman as also for the Sindh and Balochistan vacancies.

The chief judge of the Islamabad High Court, while hearing a petition, has [expressed][2] confidence in the ability of parliament to resolve this problem. Yet concerns remain, not the least serious of which is caused by the dynastic nature of parties where all decisions have to be taken by one or two people at the top. It is far from an ideal state of affairs: one party supremo is expected to set the direction from his hospital bed, while the parliamentary opposition leader has to take time out from tending to his ailing leader and elder brother to scrutinise a long list of people who could, on merit, make it to the ECP. Also problematic is the acrimonious attitude of the ruling party whose chief is trained to view all opponents as worthless and corrupt.

This is by no means an easy affair.

Picking an ECP chairman and two commission members requires negotiating skills of the highest order. It is all the more difficult to build consensus in a country polarised along so many lines.

Parallel to the intra-politicians fight, there is an ongoing battle where the politicians as an interest group are pitted against those who condemn them en masse as useless, selfish individuals who are unable to overcome their differences, ranging from petty considerations to matters of ideology.

The politicians as a whole seeking vindication of their role have to close ranks to prove that their journey on the path to true, unhindered democracy has not been without dividends.

They must jointly and with the requisite dignity resolve this issue of ECP membership without further delay. The fights amongst themselves can wait for another day.

## **Digital Pakistan**

DIGITAL technology is reshaping the world rapidly. It is transforming everything — from the way governments and citizens interact to how markets behave and consumers shop and pay their bills. It is boosting industrial and agricultural productivity across the globe, revolutionising healthcare and education, and enabling smart young men and women with little cash in their pockets to create billion-dollar companies. New technology is also changing itself very rapidly while disrupting economies and businesses. Economists and policymakers agree that digitisation helps an economy grow quickly, improves the business environment, creates jobs and alleviates poverty much faster than the ones that choose not to embrace it. So, it is sad to note that Pakistan has failed to adopt digital technology the way it should have and keep pace with its advancement. As countries such as Bangladesh are digitising their economies to fuel innovation, growth and jobs, we are still struggling with slow, patchy internet connectivity and a poor digital infrastructure. Our young entrepreneurs are finding it hard to access the funds required for business growth or to do business with the rest of the world. Attempts made by successive governments to push digitisation of the economy have mostly been erratic and have lacked direction. Against this background the Digital Pakistan initiative launched on Thursday by Prime Minister Imran Khan has raised some hope that the government has at last decided to make a concerted effort to promote digital technology in the country.

The initiative “sets Pakistan’s digital ambition” and is “designed both for the government and private sector to work towards a digitally progressive and

inclusive Pakistan” by enhancing connectivity, improving digital infrastructure, investing in digital skills and literacy, and promoting innovation and entrepreneurship. It is a good sign that the push for the initiative is marked by a commitment by the young and energetic to see it through. This aspect generates expectations and makes the digital future of Pakistan all the more worth looking forward to. Nevertheless, it will be a mistake to expect a change overnight. It is going to be a long run. For digital technology to create an impact on economic development, we will first require consistent efforts and political commitment, substantial investment in infrastructure and appropriate policies to catch up with the rest of the world. We have the ingredients to create a digital ecosystem and make this change happen. The question, in the words of Tania Aidrus, who will lead the initiative, is, how quickly can we begin?

## Curbing measles

THE damaging effects of the anti-vaxxing community’s propaganda are being felt around the world as WHO has raised the alarm over the surge in measles cases in many countries. WHO says that nearly 10m people globally were affected by measles in 2018, while around 140,000 children died from it. The problem only seems to be worsening with time as the data for 2019, until last month, revealed a three-fold increase for the number of cases, as compared to the corresponding period in 2018. The pandemic has been aptly described by the WHO director general as “an outrage”; he said that the spread of a vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles reflected the world’s “collective failure” to protect vulnerable children. This warning should alert Pakistani health authorities since the highly infectious disease makes a deadly comeback every few years in the country. In 2017, there were 6,494 confirmed measles cases in Pakistan, according to WHO; this figure accounted for more than 65pc of the total number of cases in the Eastern Mediterranean region comprising 22 countries. Around 130 children died from measles in 2017 while the number surged to nearly 300 in the first eight months of 2018, after which the government decided to launch a countrywide immunisation drive. The poor coverage of routine immunisation in Pakistan — which remains around 50pc at best when for infectious diseases it should be at least 90pc — combined with other factors such as rampant malnutrition in children under five, could render another major outbreak of this infectious virus in the country quite dangerous.



On the other hand, in Pakistan too, anti-vaccination propaganda has marred polio drives over many years, and more recently, the immunisation programme for XDR-typhoid in Sindh, making it all the more difficult to curtail the spread of illnesses. The measles virus is highly infectious and tends to linger on surfaces or in the air, putting every unvaccinated person at risk. If not nipped in the bud, a measles outbreak could spell disaster for our already stretched healthcare system.

## **Relentless tyranny**

WITH the passage of four months since New Delhi put India-held Kashmir under lockdown, another grim milestone has been passed. While the people of the forsaken Valley suffocate under India's stifling restrictions, there is no sign that those who call the shots are willing to relent. As pointed out by the Foreign Office on Friday, the situation in IJK is getting worse, as millions of Kashmiris continue to live in an open-air prison. In fact, it would not be wrong to compare the situation in occupied Kashmir to the miserable plight of the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, where similar restrictions on fundamental rights are enforced by the Israeli military machine. Perhaps this is not coincidental, as an Indian diplomat in the US was recently quoted as saying that his country should follow the 'Israeli model' in Kashmir; it is evident that quite a few of Tel Aviv's brutal tactics are being replicated by the Hindutva-infused government in New Delhi.

As the FO has indicated, Kashmiris are facing a multitude of problems, stemming from the communications blockade put in place by India. Thousands remain incarcerated under flimsy pretences. Speaking about the communications blackout, the Indian foreign minister has given the lame excuse that social media and the internet are being used to 'radicalise' people in IJK; this will convince few as the real reason New Delhi has blocked out the internet is to prevent Kashmiris from telling the world of their plight. In fact, as reports point out, India has even cracked down on some of its most loyal supporters in IJK, locking them up and treating them with contempt. For example, Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti — all former chief ministers of the held region — remain in detention along with other lawmakers, demonstrating that the BJP clique in New Delhi doesn't even trust those that never tired of siding with India. Pro-India Kashmiris have said they are being treated like 'enemies' by their erstwhile masters, while others say that they have been held in humiliating

conditions. It is clear that the BJP considers all Kashmiris — pro-freedom as well as loyalists — with suspicion and disdain, perhaps due to the rampant Islamophobia that thrives within its ranks.

The FO has appealed to the UN and other global bodies to speak up for the rights of the Kashmiris. India is mistaken if it thinks it can use brutal tactics to silence the people. Kashmiris have had enough of its suppressive tactics, and despite the restrictions, the desire for freedom will only grow. As India seeks to ape Israel's repression in Palestine, those who rule from New Delhi should realise that Tel Aviv's violence has resulted in even greater Palestinian resistance. If India wants to avoid a similar scenario, let it approach the Kashmiris with respect and let them exercise their democratic right to self-determination.

## **Threats yet again**

THE ratcheting up of anti-press hysteria has escalated in yet another episode of manufactured outrage against Dawn, purportedly for publishing a news report which was never officially denied and which subsequent events proved was factually sound.

In the past week, angry protesters in Islamabad and Karachi have demanded this news organisation be shut down and its staffers hanged, and have declared it 'anti-state'. All citizens have the democratic right to peaceful protest without endangering the lives of others. In tandem with veiled and direct attacks by government and other officials, as well as a renewed distribution blockade against this paper in certain localities, it is obvious that these protests are part of a years-long campaign to create a hostile environment for independent journalism in Pakistan and, in turn, to silence all dissent.

The press is by no means unaccountable, yet there are laws and rules governing its conduct — legal instruments that can be used if deemed necessary. It makes little sense why politicians, particularly those in office, would, instead, subscribe to the obscurantist tactic of branding any fact or opinion that offends them as 'anti-state' or 'agenda-driven' — without substantiating such claims with tangible evidence, and in full awareness of how dangerous such labels are.

Though Shireen Mazari's and Firdous Ashiq Awan's recent statements condemning the threats to Dawn are welcome, the fact that Ms Awan's remarks were qualified with scolding reminders for the media to 'protect Pakistan's interests' speaks to the PTI's ambivalence towards fundamental rights. Citing vague 'national interests' has become synonymous with a systematic effort to erode citizens' constitutionally protected freedoms of speech, expression and information. Yet it was precisely the exercise of these rights, under a more conducive climate for the media which aided then opposition politician Imran Khan's rise to prominence.

As our elected prime minister, he ought to declare his full-throated support for press freedom and have his government demonstrate this intent. The undermining of the fourth estate represents a dangerous drift away from democratic norms, away from the very spirit on which this country was founded.

Political dissent and the medium through which it was articulated — journalism — are in Pakistan's DNA; they played a key role in the emancipation of Muslims of the subcontinent from British rule. A democratic dispensation ought to embrace these intrinsic qualities of our history and identity, if for no other reason than that they might one day find themselves in need of a free press.

## **Jobs for the disabled**

WITH limited opportunities for their advancement, and difficulties in independently gaining access to private and public places, including universities and government departments, life is tough for people with disabilities in Pakistan. Even though there are laws pertaining to PWD rights including a job quota of up to 5pc in government departments and private entities, PWD still find it next to impossible to get employment and become independent, productive members of society. Recently, at a job fair in Karachi organised by an NGO, as many as 30 companies from multiple sectors, including textile mills and banks, engaged with potential recruits suffering from a number of physical and sensory impairments. A feature that made the event successful was the installation of ramps, tactile flooring and appropriate lighting that helped PWD independently navigate their way. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for most public places in the country including schools, universities, government departments, even corporate entities which lack proper access for the disabled. This reflects poorly on both our

government's attitude towards PWD whose needs are not factored into urban planning. Given that they encounter difficulties in simply gaining access to public and other places, is it any surprise that the job quota rules for PWD sees such little implementation?

Moreover, at the government level there are lapses in data collection with regard to the total number of PWD in the country. There are also structural flaws in the ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, tabled by the human rights ministry last year that need to be addressed before the bill is enacted into law. However, no law can be fully implemented unless public spaces are made accessible to PWD, ending their exclusion from the societal sphere. For this, no new law is required, only a change of attitude. Both the government and society at large would do well to be more sensitive to the needs of PWD and recognise that many of them can work just as well if not better than those without disability.

## **Bold PR plans**

THERE is no escaping the plight of Pakistan Railways and certainly no shortage of hard-to-believe projections about its turnaround. Only last week the project director of the 1,900-km Mainline-I plan briefed a Senate committee on the PR revolution in the making. He spoke of doubling the number of passenger trains from the current 40 and boosting the railways' share in freight traffic from Karachi to 20pc from the abysmal less than 4pc at the moment. Those tempted to hit the road between Peshawar and Karachi thanks to the recent opening of highways that are supposed to drastically reduce the distance will, apparently, have tougher competition from the old, 'reliable' train.

Moreover, after the opening of these new road links, a premier bus service promises to take passengers from Lahore to Karachi in 14 hours, with stopovers included. The railways, with all its 'romance' and 'comfort', claims it will complete the same journey in 10 hours once the ML-I project is finished. It promises greater passenger protection, though the 70-odd train accidents since August 2018 when the PTI came to power may prove to be something of a deterrent for aspiring rail travellers. There is also a promise to open up the railways and let it embrace new ideas, in contrast to the very strict government-controlled existence imposed on it over the years. During the briefing, the upper house committee was told that after the completion of the ML-I under the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor, trains will be outsourced to private operators. In response to the old reservations against entrusting maintenance of infrastructure to private hands, the government will keep control of the railway tracks.

All this is dependent on the successful completion of the ML-I, which experts say will take nine years. It is a huge project estimated to cost \$9.2bn and is being touted as the railways' saviour against a background of non-provision of sufficient and timely funds. The absence of resources and political decision-making has been the bane of PR. The calls about freeing the institution held captive by the ruling parties will have to be ultimately heard for a true revival. The debate must take place now with a frankness that the dire situation of the country's train system demands. The introduction of private operators once the system has been spruced up may be a good beginning but some experts advise releasing the PR from the often debilitating control of the Ministry of Railways. The idea of having an independent regulator help PR run its operations may at first sound too radical to some of those who are conservative and shy of fast remedies. Let it at least be the starting point of a 'save the railways' discussion that should not suffer on account of the absence of frankness and bold turnaround steps. Desperate times do not breed easy answers.

## **Religious tourism**

EARLIER this year, Prime Minister Imran Khan highlighted Pakistan's potential for religious tourism when a new policy of relaxing visa applications was announced. He spoke about the sleeping Buddha, the Katas Raj temples, Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur as a few of the many religious sites that would be of interest to those belonging to the Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh religions. This speech was followed by the grand opening of the Kartarpur corridor on Nov 9, which facilitated a long-awaited pilgrimage for some 12,000 Sikh men, women and children from around the world. That same month, at a meeting with Buddhist monks from South Korea, the prime minister reiterated Pakistan's commitment to promoting interfaith harmony and the pride it took in its Buddhist heritage. Most recently, the KP government has announced the setting up of the Gandhara Research Centre to promote religious tourism in the province. According to officials, the province boasts some 2,000 sites of historical and religious significance, and the government has pledged to preserve all sites with the help of the South Korean government. Other efforts made by the government

include the announcement of the launch of a new bus service in Lahore, Multan and other cities of Punjab to facilitate religious tourism to various vibrant shrines across the province which are so integral to the country's social fabric, and something that Mr Khan has also spoken about.

Undoubtedly, all such efforts to encourage interfaith harmony and religious pluralism are welcome. At the crossroads of many great civilisations, Pakistan is indeed blessed with a unique history and religious, ethnic and natural diversity that would appeal to many people around the world. Unfortunately, this country has also suffered from religious extremism and militancy over the past few decades, which has caused immeasurable damage to its international image. Who can forget the Nanga Parbat massacre, when 10 tourists and a local guide were brutally killed by terrorists in 2013? Such tragedies and the terror they strike in the hearts of people, along with the inability to market ourselves appropriately, are some of the reasons why few tourists have opted to travel to Pakistan. In comparison, other South Asian countries have performed much better in this regard, despite having their own share of political and social problems. Besides promoting tolerance, religious tourism can play an important role in reviving the country's economy.

## **Promoting SMEs**

PRIME Minister Imran Khan on Friday acknowledged the importance of small and medium enterprises in the country's economic progress and their role in employment generation. He promised to enhance their access to banking credit and to reshape policies to create an environment to facilitate operations and doing business. Distributing cheques to the recipients of subsidised business loans under his government's Kamyab Jawan Programme, he reiterated his commitment to promote SMEs. A few days ago, the economic affairs minister spoke of the government's efforts to push the development of SMEs, saying it was formulating a new policy and planned to increase the number of SME borrowers from 170,000 to 700,000 by 2023.

The SME sector is considered to be the backbone of any economy. No country has achieved sustainable economic growth and created jobs without promoting SMEs. It is generally estimated that SMEs create nine out of every 10 jobs. They are an integral part of the supply chains in the economic sector. In Pakistan, they

are responsible for 60pc of the total jobs, and contribute 30pc to GDP and around 25pc to export revenues. Yet the sector remains one of the most neglected areas, especially when it comes to access to formal finance. SMEs are facing a massive financial gap. Over the last one decade, the share of SMEs in the total private sector credit declined to 7.5pc — as compared to 20pc in Bangladesh and 29pc in Turkey — from a peak of 17pc in 2006. Governments have taken policy initiatives over the last two decades for resolving multiple issues facing the SME sector to create a favourable regulatory framework and increase their access to formal finance. But none has yielded the desired results because of the lack of a focused approach and political support. State Bank efforts to push the commercial banks to enhance their SME loan portfolios too have fallen through. No future policy or effort is likely to succeed unless these are backed at the highest level, just as Mr Khan is supporting his Digital Pakistan initiative.

## **Relying on provinces**

IN the wake of the 18th Amendment, some profound shifts in responsibility were supposed to take place between the federal and provincial governments but they never did.

It is not only resources that were to be devolved to the provincial governments, but also many of the responsibilities for maintaining social sector spending and improving outcomes in health and education.

Sadly, only the money was ever really devolved in earnest — and for the provincial governments, money is really all that seemed to matter.

All the provincial governments have increased their spending on education in the decade since the seventh NFC award devolved 57pc of all taxes in the federal divisible pool downwards. But what they have not done is to mobilise their own revenue sources, and as a result, even 10 years on, they receive Rs612.5bn from the federal government as transfer under the NFC award, and raise Rs104.5bn in their own taxes.

This is despite the fact that some of the largest and most promising revenue lines have been in the provincial domain for years, including tax on agricultural incomes.

This failure of both the federal and provincial authorities to live up to the terms of the 18th Amendment and the attendant seventh NFC award means the debate around devolution revolves principally around the sharing and utilisation of fiscal resources.

As part of this tussle, the federal government recently gave the IMF a commitment to recover some of the largest amounts under the head of provincial cash surpluses, ie those funds that the provinces receive from the centre but are unable to utilise according to the law and as per their mandate.

The most recent fiscal data released recently shows that in the first quarter the provinces spent Rs589bn between them and returned Rs202bn to the centre as their cash surplus. On development projects, the provinces could only spend Rs70.6bn, one of the lowest sums in many years.

Aside from social sector spending, the provinces also have certain responsibilities that come under the development head. They are responsible, for example, for maintaining irrigation canals and much of the urban infrastructure, including an effective mass transit system, and proper systems for waste removal and the provision of water, among much else.

If in times of fiscal constraints, the provinces are squeezed to the enormous extent that the newly released fiscal numbers suggest, then the 18th Amendment has already been reduced to little more than a formality.

It is important that the spirit of the devolution exercise be rescued from the austerity that the implementation of IMF programmes always brings.

Part of the responsibility for this, of course, lies with the centre. But in equal measure, the provincial authorities need to take their responsibilities more seriously, rather than simply living off NFC transfers.

## **US-Taliban talks**

AFTER abruptly being broken off on the orders of President Donald Trump in September, reports have emerged that parleys between the US and the Afghan Taliban have recently resumed in Qatar. Of course where matters in Afghanistan are concerned, it is best to expect the unexpected. Reports suggest that the Americans want to seal a deal by the end of this month; however, considering the



byzantine nature of Afghan politics, and the fact that Kabul has been suffering from four decades of conflict, this may be a rather ambitious deadline. Yet it is positive that Washington and the Taliban are talking, and perhaps a sustainable peace deal may be achieved in the months ahead. After all, it has been stated that both sides were quite close to an agreement when things went off track in September. It is also true that all sides — particularly the Americans — are suffering from battle fatigue and wish to call it a day. This impression is strengthened by a recent report in the Washington Post, which has quoted documents in which American officials have said the war in Afghanistan is “unwinnable”, though the US has not said this publicly. However, as America has learnt, and the USSR before it, getting involved in the Afghan theatre is quite simple; extricating oneself from this quagmire is a much more difficult task.

It is hoped that this time the talks achieve a solid agreement that sets the stage for a peaceful Afghanistan. But miracles should also not be expected, as a conflict this long and complicated will take time to untangle. The Afghan government should be involved while regional states, including this country, must also be kept in the loop as instability in Afghanistan has a direct impact on the security of neighbouring states. America might be in a hurry to get out of Afghanistan, but a final settlement needs to be hammered out between the Taliban, the Kabul government as well as other Afghan political players, and should not be imposed by external powers. Meanwhile, it is almost inevitable that should violence continue in the country, more extreme actors such as the militant Islamic State group will exploit the situation and use Afghanistan as a base for global militancy. After decades of bloodshed, the Afghan people need peace and reconciliation to rebuild their shattered homeland.

## **Policing in Kasur**

FOR some time now, the Punjab district of Kasur has been the go-to place for anyone wanting to create an example in law-and-order turnaround. Prime Minister Imran Khan took up the challenge when, a couple of months back, he promised to turn the Kasur police into a model force. Since then, the reform-focused police command in the district has notched up some encouraging initial successes. The complaint redress percentage has jumped from an abysmal 19.4 to 78.14, according to a report based on police performance in the two months after the capture of an alleged serial rapist-killer on Oct 2. The jump in itself makes it clear

how desperate the police were for a boost in quality. Under trying conditions, the force has also returned to some basic requirements of good policing. The report on police performance says that the force has prepared the profiles of 3,000 'known bad characters' allegedly linked to sexual offences — the number once again, *prima facie*, advocating vigilance and policing of the highest order.

If it was the cases of serial rape of children and alleged child pornography rackets that drew attention to Kasur, the focus must remain there until a better system to tackle the menace of crime is in place. Public concerns have been met with assurances and some practical steps such as a bigger presence of the Child Protection Bureau in the district. The model police the prime minister envisaged, however, are yet to arrive. The material and human resources which were to be provided for a better functioning of the 20 Kasur police stations are stuck up somewhere on the way, one major reason being the constant reshuffling in provincial police ranks. A request by Kasur for 87 sub-inspectors and assistant sub-inspectors was refused by other districts. They said they could hardly spare any officers when they had not enough to effectively see to their own operations. For the prime minister's model to take shape, resources will have to be created and groomed afresh.

## **A draconian law**

UNDER Narendra Modi's watch, there is little doubt that the country is being transformed into a Hindu *rashtra*, where minority communities are relegated to the margins of society, if accepted at all.

For with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill by the Lok Sabha on Tuesday, the BJP-led government in New Delhi has sent another signal — loud and clear — that Muslims are not welcome in Modi's India.

Under the law, which still has to pass through India's upper house, non-Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh will be able to acquire Indian citizenship more easily.

Hindu nationalist supporters of the controversial bill have said the law will allow minorities 'persecuted' in these countries to find refuge in India. However, this move is hardly inspired by humanitarian concerns and smacks of Islamophobia and communalism.

The BJP seems very concerned about non-Muslim communities in South Asia, yet it is doing all it can to make the lives of Indian Muslims miserable.

This is only the latest in a series of moves the Indian government — now firmly carrying out the agenda of the Sangh Parivar — has made to marginalise and exclude Muslims from mainstream India.

The government has stood by as barbarians have hunted down and lynched Muslims suspected of transporting or eating beef; the annulment of India-held Kashmir's special status is also part of this sinister agenda.

Moreover, a new 'citizenship register', under which people have to prove their antecedents, and already being enforced in Assam, may be used to cancel the citizenship of Indian Muslims if the BJP has its way.

Many sections of Indian society have criticised these moves, particularly the new citizenship bill, for contravening India's supposedly secular character.

However the BJP, power drunk and with the support of far-right Hindu groups, knows that it can bulldoze these laws through parliament in the hope of achieving its dream of a Hindu India.

For India's Muslims, these are troubling times.

People whose roots lie in India and who have lived in that land for centuries may now be declared aliens if the shock troops of Hindutva have their way.

With these ominous moves, the BJP is paving the way for making millions of Indian Muslims stateless — outsiders in their own land.

It seems the RSS ideologues that are running India, who are huge fans of Israel and whose ideological forefathers were smitten by Europe's 20th-century fascists, are now employing the 'best practices' of both influences to do away with India's Muslims.

These condemnable actions should be noted by countries around the world.

There have always been forces in India struggling to remove the veneer of secularism that previous dispensations there sought to promote. With the BJP's rise to power, it seems that the communal beast has been set free.

## Sporting success

PAKISTAN'S impressive showing at the 13th South Asian Games in Nepal, where the national sports contingent has won more than 130 medals, has done much to lift the pall of gloom that had descended on the country's sports scene for the past decade and a half. The question has been asked many times: what went wrong in a nation that had in previous years enjoyed tremendous success in cricket, hockey, squash, snooker, boxing, athletics and table tennis? Sports in the country has witnessed regression, controversy and abysmal campaigns, especially at mega events such as the Olympics, Asian Games, World Cups, Commonwealth Games, etc at least since the start of the millennium. But the latest edition of the South Asian Games has showcased Pakistan's potential, with the country's sportspersons collecting a handsome share of medals in the martial arts, shooting, weightlifting, wrestling, swimming, athletics, squash, javelin throw, boxing, etc. Led by the brilliant Arshad Nadeem who won the men's javelin throw to qualify directly for the 2020 Olympics, Pakistan's men and women athletes have consistently performed well in Kathmandu to prove that the country is brimming with outstanding talent

Having said that, neither the government, nor the parent sports bodies, nor the private sector can take the credit. The government has been completely oblivious to the sporting woes of athletes and players in the country, and has done nothing to establish financial support or create a conducive environment or robust infrastructure. In fact, parent bodies such as the Pakistan Olympics Association and Pakistan Sports Board have been embroiled in ugly tussles which have harmed sports in the country. Pakistan's demographics point to an advantage that is waiting to be tapped. There is a huge young population whose energy and ambition can be channelled towards sporting accomplishments. But sadly, there have been no long-term training programmes to groom sportspersons for national or international events, simply because the momentum for any long-term programme to reach fruition is often stymied by power struggles, corruption and nepotism. Regrettably, the private sector too has focused all its resources and energies on promoting cricket which has also been experiencing a downward spiral of late. To break the logjam, a transformational agenda has to emerge. Of course, there are no quick fixes, and reforms could take a decade to show results. But with the right people at the helm, Pakistan's ambition to become a sporting nation could be put back on track.

## **Reviving student unions**

ON Monday, Sindh took another decisive step towards restoring normality on its campuses. In a move to revive student unions that had been banned during the Zia era, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's cabinet has cleared the draft of the Sindh Students Union Act, 2019, for further input by stakeholders. The law, which came about as a consequence of a resolution in the Sindh Assembly in November, is extremely important not just for the province but for the whole country. The prolonged clamour for reviving unions has turned into a strong slogan in recent times. The pressure to deliver has been that much greater on political parties and politicians known for their vows and promises to live by the tenets of democracy. The PPP government in Sindh might realise now that true success and vindication in this case lies not just in the restoration of the unions but in a revival that leads to the establishment of empowered elected units on campuses that are capable of playing an effective role on behalf of the student community.

But even as it seeks to promote the active participation of students on the threshold of adulthood, the draft tries to curb some aspects of campus life. True, some caution is always advisable in all endeavours. But in this instance, the proposed restrictions go beyond what is reasonable, to a point where they threaten to defeat the very purpose of having a union. The desire expressed in the original draft to keep the students away from politics may have been dictated by bad experiences of the past, but it is akin to a suggestion which allows enthusiasts to have a Basant festival without kite-flying. The idea is to expose young, educated souls to all manner of opinion and thought to help them gain a mature perspective on how to go about living their lives. The Sindh Students Union Act, 2019, needs quite a lot of rethinking before it can pass the test.

## **Change at the top**

THE PTI government, that is often asked to turn words into deeds, is out to fix the bureaucracy. It has given unprecedented powers to the Central Selection Board that promotes senior civil servants

In the changed equation, the CSB has 30 discretionary marks which can make or break a promotion. The Civil Servants Promotion (BPS-18 to BPS-21) Rules, 2019, set a minimum of 60 marks for promotion for BS-18, 65 for BS-19, 70 for BS-20 and 75 for BS-21.

Earlier, the CSB had just 15 marks to use at its discretion. The new formula has 40 marks reserved for the annual confidential reports and 30 for professional courses as against the previous ratio of 50 marks for ACRs, 35 for professional courses and 15 for the CSB.

As pointed out in this paper yesterday, "...under the recently notified rules, an officer despite getting 90pc marks in the heads of ACR and professional courses could not get a promotion without obtaining 70-80pc marks from the CSB". The move will be seen in the context of the constant complaints the prime minister and his team make about an unresponsive bureaucracy.

The PTI government has, time and again, been frustrated by what it sees as a bureaucracy trained by and still beholden in some ways to its predecessor, the PML-N.

Bureaucratic reshuffles have come at a frequency that creates serious doubts about the stability of the government, which is now well into its second year in power.

The new criteria for promoting senior civil servants will definitely give the rulers that much more room to appoint officers of their choice to crucial posts. But at first glance, it is too one-dimensional a move to be taken as a defining moment in Pakistan's history of the top bureaucracy.

For instance, it is all very well for a board to gauge the competence and integrity of an officer awaiting promotion, but how do the reformers plan to address the issue of political patronage and victimisation that so often dictates a bureaucrat's career?

Also, since there is no system in place which would force the superseded officers to quit the service, how will the government deal with the long-standing problem of low morale among those not deemed fit for promotion?

Although not on the same scale as some previous efforts to take control of the bureaucracy, this change in rules for promotion will still be seen as a continuation of attempts made by rulers in the past.

Gen Ayub Khan allowed induction into the civil bureaucracy from the military, while Z.A. Bhutto unsuccessfully tried to reinvent the bureaucracy by introducing the infamous lateral service system.

Gen Ziaul Haq then opened the gates of uninterrupted induction into the civil bureaucracy. The effort at reform could fizzle out fast if it doesn't resolve the problems arising out of inductions from outside and personal likes and dislikes.

## **Media curbs**

IN a disturbing move, the federal cabinet has decided to impose curbs on the media coverage of convicts and absconders. In this regard, Prime Minister Imran Khan has tasked Law Minister Farogh Naseem to sit with the Pemra chairman and finalise the draft of a law to enact such curbs. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information Firdous Ashiq Awan told journalists "those convicts and absconders who looted public money are glorified in the media as they frequently come on TV and claim to be innocent and criticise the government and its policies". It is clear that she is referring to the opposition leaders and more specifically to Nawaz Sharif, his children and possibly former finance minister Ishaq Dar.

Let it be said that the government is treading down the wrong path. There is now a clear pattern to its hostile attitude towards the media, and this is reflecting time and again in its actions. It was only recently that the government had floated the ill-advised idea of establishing media courts aimed at passing swift judgements against the media while bypassing the regular courts. This latest decision also amounts to gagging the media and undermining its prerogative to cover what it wants, when it wants and who it wants. If this were not troublesome enough, the law under consideration smacks of partisan politics as it is intended to squeeze political opponents. On the face of it, the reasoning behind this suggested law does not have much to do with the rights of the citizens, or benefits to them, but rather to target selected individuals in order to derive political benefit from such actions. This in itself is wrong, but what makes it doubly so is undermining the media while persecuting the opposition. Here's what the PTI government is repeatedly failing to understand: it cannot browbeat a media that has faced such pressures for decades under all regimes including military ones. The PTI may be new to power but the media is not new to persecution. By taking such ill-thought-

out decisions, the PTI government is only exposing its mal-intent and amateurish understanding of the role of media in a democratic society. The prime minister should heed some sane counsel before his government stumbles down a slippery slope. When personal vengeance becomes official policy, prepare for long-lasting damage to society. That is one kind of preparation that Pakistan should be spared.

## **Rao Anwar's listing**

RAO Anwar is a man whose reputation precedes him. The former police officer, known infamously as an 'encounter specialist', is accused of involvement in nearly 200 phoney encounters, in which around 400 people have reportedly died. The most high-profile case he is accused of being involved in is the murder of Naqeebullah Mehsud — a young aspiring model hailing from the erstwhile tribal areas — and three other individuals in the outskirts of Karachi in January 2018. Naqeeb and the others were gunned down after they were falsely accused of being militants. Rao Anwar and several other former policemen are currently facing trial in the case. However on Tuesday, the ex-police officer earned another dubious badge of honour; Rao Anwar has been listed by the US treasury department as a 'global violator of rights' for reportedly being "responsible for staging numerous fake encounters". If this listing is endorsed by the UN, Pakistan will need to seize Rao Anwar's assets.

The listing can only be welcomed as the former policeman appears to be untouchable in this country. Linked to some of the most powerful players in Pakistan, he has been granted special treatment, given VIP protocol and has had his house declared a sub-jail, despite being accused in a high-profile murder case. Meanwhile, the trial in the Naqeeb case drags on, with witnesses reportedly facing intimidation. It is hoped that with the recent listing, the state is prodded into action to speed up the trial so that justice can be served. Sadly, Mohammed Khan, Naqeeb's father, passed away earlier this month without seeing the killers of his son punished. Rogue cops such as Rao Anwar are far too common in Pakistan, with fake encounters being the 'easy' way out in a broken criminal justice system. Along with reform of the justice system, it is essential that those who perpetuate the culture of extrajudicial killings in this country are brought to justice to ensure that these dreadful tactics are abandoned by law enforcers, and the rule of law reigns supreme.



# Violent lawyers

WHAT else could be more damning evidence of a society teetering on the edge of anarchy than when those sworn to uphold the law violate it in a manner that is considered a crime even in times of war?

On Wednesday, hundreds of lawyers stormed the Punjab Institute of Cardiology in Lahore after videos emerged on social media showing certain doctors from the hospital mocking the black coats over an ongoing dispute between the two sides.

And this was no spontaneous violence, condemnable as even that would have been.

This was a pre-planned assault, with the mob — some of its members carrying sticks and guns — descending upon the hospital en masse, determined to wreak havoc.

The outcome will forever remain a blot on the legal community.

Rampaging through the country's largest cardiac facility, the attackers destroyed furniture and equipment — including ventilators — smashed window panes, and damaged cars. They also forced their way into the emergency department, terrorising and manhandling the medical staff and patients' attendants who were forced to flee leaving the critically ill behind. At least three patients died during the mayhem. The police finally managed to control the situation after a prolonged face-off during which they baton-charged the mob and fired tear gas shells.

There have been numerous incidents in recent years where the legal community has displayed utter contempt for the law.

Ironically enough, it may have been the lawyers' movement from 2007 to 2009 — considered a prime example of effective civil resistance — that sowed the seeds for the out-and-out thuggery increasingly on display by the black coats. For it seems that the movement's success in achieving its objective — the restoration of then Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry — instilled in some lawyers a taste for confrontation coupled with a certain hubris in which there is no room for dissent.

Vicious brawls have broken out on court premises between opposing advocates; courtrooms have been ransacked; and in late 2017, a crowd of lawyers vandalised a new judicial complex.

The bench, too, is often a direct target of the black coats' ire. Members of the judiciary have been held hostage inside their courtrooms, intimidated during proceedings, and threatened with physical violence. Wednesday's rampage, however, plumbs new lows in its complete disregard for the basic norms of humanity.

Of course, the majority of lawyers are not cut from the same cloth, and many of them have roundly condemned their compatriots for their abhorrent actions. Nevertheless, there are among them sufficient numbers of such disorderly individuals as to bring the entire fraternity into disrepute.

So far, FIRs have been filed against over 250 advocates involved in the episode. Not only should they be proceeded against under the law that they have so shamefully trampled on, but the Pakistan Bar Council must strip them of their licences. Such lawyers do not belong in any courtroom.

## **Gujarat inquiry**

VENTRILOQUISTS are adept at throwing their voices into puppets and mannequins. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his controversial home minister, Amit Shah, have mastered the art of making the judges investigating their alleged roles in riots and mayhem say what they would want them to say. The argument of the five-member Supreme Court bench hearing the Ayodhya land dispute case recently, for example, was leading to a clear critique of right-wing Hindu groups and their actions to illegally occupy and destroy the Babri Masjid. But even without a shred of material evidence to support its conclusion, the court suddenly upturned its own logic and assigned the disputed land to those it accused of illegal acts.

The latest evidence that Mr Modi holds critical sections of the judiciary in his thrall is revealed in the second part of the Nanavati-Mehta Commission of inquiry tabled this week in the Gujarat assembly. The commission was probing the Godhra train inferno on Feb 27, 2002, and Mr Modi's possible role in the anti-Muslim violence let loose after that. The first part of the report released several

years ago related to the burning of the train coach in which 59 Hindu volunteers perished. The report had called it a premeditated act of killing by Muslims in Godhra against compelling arguments that it was an accident. The second part of the report was prompted by a curious circumstance. The initial mandate of the commission related to the train tragedy alone. After the Manmohan Singh government unexpectedly came to power in 2004, Mr Modi, as chief minister of Gujarat, widened the scope of the inquiry to comment on his own role in the communal violence that followed. The move cleverly pre-empted an imminent step by the Singh government to instal its own investigation into the chief minister's role. "There is no evidence to show that these attacks were either inspired or instigated or abetted by any minister of the (Gujarat) state," Mr Modi's handpicked commission said in its report, which runs to over 1,500 pages. It is heartening that the bevy of clean chits to Mr Modi and his assorted aides in grievous acts of commission and omission have not gone unchallenged. And as long as these noble voices remain firm and resolute, there is always hope that the darkness stalking Indian democracy will lift and the judiciary sequester itself from the ventriloquist's lure.

## **Auto sector slowdown**

AUTOMOBILE companies here have been reeling from contracting demand for several months now. The slowdown in the automobile industry is widespread and has affected every segment. But it is more conspicuous in the case of car assemblers who are compelled to reduce the number of shifts, shut down their plants for the better part of each month, and end jobs or furlough employees to save fixed costs. Overall, car sales have plunged 44pc during the first five months of the current fiscal from a year ago. The demand for some variants has dipped up to 75pc in spite of 'special offers and substantial price discounts' announced by companies to clear their growing inventories. The impact on local suppliers of parts to the manufacturers is much more devastating. Though no reliable data is available, the vendors are reported to have abolished at least 50,000 jobs since July.

The industry, especially the three Japanese car assemblers who have monopolised the domestic market for over three decades, blame the massive rise in their prices on the steep currency devaluation, spiking leasing costs owing to higher interest rates and imposing new taxes in the current budget. The trend

is in line with the ongoing contraction in manufactured output in the country because of fiscal and monetary policies aimed at stabilising the economy and bridging the current account deficit by discouraging imports. Nevertheless, the automobile industry is in a bad state. Fiscal and monetary policies may have contributed a lot to the unprecedented decline in sales, but car assemblers must also share the blame for their current situation. The currency depreciation has laid bare their failure to localise their cars as they have done in India as well as exposed their dependence on imports, despite enjoying substantially large tariff protections for decades. There is a need for the government to help the industry and protect jobs. But its support should not be unconditional. The assemblers must agree to achieve maximum localisation in a specified period of time in exchange for such support.

## **Dam fund again**

FROM the remarks made by a few judges of the Supreme Court, it seems that interest in the dam fund might be revived all over again.

The fund was originally set up in July 2018, ostensibly to collect funds for the Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand dams, and the website of the Supreme Court specifically solicited donations in the name of the construction of these reservoirs. A few months later, the newly elected Prime Minister Imran Khan added his voice to the call for donations, especially urging overseas Pakistanis to contribute to the effort to raise funds via voluntary donations for an infrastructure building enterprise that was slated to cost upward of Rs1.4tr for the Diamer-Bhasha dam alone.

To date, a little over Rs11bn has been collected, mostly from domestic contributions, and many of those made by deducting the pay of salaried people, including within the armed forces. Since the retirement of chief justice Saqib Nisar, who had launched the venture with much zeal, all parties lost interest in the fund and donations petered out to nearly zero.

In its detailed judgement on the dam fund case, the court had specifically written that the funds would not be used for any purpose other than paying for the construction of the dam — something that is expected to take a decade, if indeed the venture ever reaches that stage. So the National Bank made arrangements for placement of the funds in treasury bills until then.

Read: Supreme Court directs SBP to 'remove obstacles' so overseas Pakistanis can contribute to dam fund

Now the court wants to know why the donations have halted, and particularly why overseas Pakistanis have not deposited larger sums. State Bank data shows that of the Rs11.75bn collected thus far, only Rs1.7bn appear to be from overseas Pakistanis. It seems that the impression, going by the court's questions, is that overseas Pakistanis are facing hurdles in transferring funds into the accounts where donations can be accepted. So the State Bank has been ordered to take appropriate action to remove these hurdles, whatever they may be.

It needs to be repeated once again that the entire project is not only a futile attempt, but completely off the mark when it comes to the question of infrastructure finance.

The dam fund is now a confused and haphazard exercise that has done more harm than good by absorbing too much of the state's attention as well as giving the people the questionable impression that the government will use their donations for funding the dams.

It is high time to wrap the whole thing up, and consider placing the funds collected thus far into the construction of small dams in Balochistan instead. That way at least the spirit under which the donations were sought, and commitments made, can be lived up to. It is evident that the venture should never have been launched in the first place.

## **Sindh IGP's letter**

ONE major obstacle standing in the way of police reform in Pakistan is political interference in the affairs of the force. It is routine for political bosses to remove or transfer 'undesirable' officers, who may not be toeing the party line, and replace them with more pliant policemen. Though this may serve the petty short-term interests of the political elite, it has a negative impact on effective policing, and demoralises those in the force who are determined to carry out their duties as responsible public servants. Sindh has in the past witnessed tussles between the provincial administration and the police's top brass; the case of former IG A.D. Khowaja is a high-profile example of this, becoming a cause célèbre with civil society. The matter went to the Supreme Court, which dismissed the Sindh

government's appeal against the provincial high court's order that allowed Mr Khowaja to continue as IGP. In recent days, it appears as if another confrontation may be brewing in Sindh, pitting the current IG Kaleem Imam against the provincial administration. In a letter to the Sindh chief secretary, as reported in this paper on Thursday, Mr Imam urged the provincial government to "respect the spirit of the judgements ... and let this office play its due role in ... transfer and postings of police officers serving in the province".

The background to the letter is to be found in some recent shuffling of officers in Karachi and Shikarpur by the Sindh administration, apparently without consulting the provincial police chief. In the letter, Mr Imam said he learnt of the transfers through "media reports" and that such "sudden and unplanned" moves demoralised the police force and undermined the command of the IG. The IG has a point here. While the chief minister is the highest elected office holder in the province and needs to ensure that checks and balances are maintained in the departments under him, abrupt transfers and postings are, indeed, counterproductive and need to be avoided. Moreover, going over the head of the province's top police official sends the wrong message and harms departmental discipline. Officers must be given security of tenure and the assurance that there will be no political meddling in their work. If any complaints arise against the conduct of officers, these should be handled as per standard operating procedures. The Sindh government needs to establish a more professional working relationship with the provincial police hierarchy and avoid micromanagement.

## **Chill in global warming**

GLOBALLY, they are many who warm up to leaders who vow to guard their flock against 'outside influences', while for others it is getting increasingly difficult to fight back against the xenophobic values being promoted by these ultra-conservative politicians. Unfortunately, right-wing tendencies are on the rise across the world, not least in Donald Trump's America where the president's aversion to a collective response to global challenges is well-known. Lately, he has ducked a supposed missile from the Time magazine which has dared to mock the president of the United States by declaring a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist named Greta Thunberg as its Person of the Year. Criticising the magazine's choice, Mr Trump tweeted, "So ridiculous. Greta must work on her

Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill”, leading to an indirect though humorous riposte from Greta who simply changed her Twitter bio to accommodate Mr Trump’s concerns. The US president has previously attacked the young activist as well — when she spoke in anger at the UN, lambasting the international community for not doing enough to address the effects of climate change.

It was inevitable that President Trump would pour cold water on the celebrations in the award winner’s camp, leaving many journalists to write caustic editorial notes — for perhaps that is the only resistance they can put up against polluters who are responsible for changing climate patterns across the globe. There are also many who, with some justification, oppose the idea of students taking a break from their education — as Greta Thunberg is doing — in order to raise awareness about a problem that ought to be handled jointly by all governments. After all, that is the more sensible strategy for saving the planet. Had Mr Trump been guided by saner counsel, he could perhaps have seen the larger picture of the dangers the world faces as temperatures grow hotter and the snows melt. Sadly, he chose the wrong battle.

## Unrepentant lawyers

ONE would have imagined that our ‘upholders of the law’ would have felt profound revulsion at the actions of their compatriots on Wednesday when a mob of black coats stormed the Punjab Institute of Cardiology in Lahore. Not only were hospital staff beaten and lifesaving hospital equipment destroyed, but some critically ill patients died during the shameful episode, possibly as a direct result of the mayhem.

However, most lawyers — with certain exceptions — and bar associations have doubled down on the brazen disregard for the norms of decency and the law itself, demanding that the lawyers arrested for running amok like members of a street gang be released immediately.

In keeping with this belligerent stance, the nationwide strike call issued by several bar associations was enforced on Friday through threats and intimidation against those reluctant to participate. Sadly, aside from Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, even many of those who condemned the violence did so in muted language, citing ‘provocation’ on the part of certain PIC doctors against the

lawyers as a mitigating factor. This amounts to defending the indefensible. Under no circumstances can an attack on a hospital be justified.

That said, it is also a fact that many doctors in this country have repeatedly dishonoured their oath, a dereliction of duty that can mean the difference between life and death. A glance at some recent incidents suffices to illustrate the point.

Earlier this year, doctors and paramedics in Balochistan went on strike for no less than 50 days during which OPDs in the province's government-run hospitals remained closed. A month-long strike by doctors in Punjab ended in November only when the Lahore High Court issued an order to the effect.

In September, violent clashes broke out in Peshawar between the police and doctors protesting over a controversial piece of legislation. The rampage at the PIC too began with thuggish behaviour by medical professionals at the hospital.

There have even been occasions when medics have boycotted emergency services. Those at the receiving end are the hapless citizens of this country who cannot afford private health facilities; often, they travel long distances from under-resourced rural areas in search of medical attention in urban centres, only to find shuttered OPDs.

There can be justifiable reasons for doctors to protest, such as insufficient pay at government hospitals, but they should make their case without causing hardship to patients and their families.

For their part, provincial authorities and local administrations must deal swiftly and fairly with incipient disputes and simmering discontent. Eroding mechanisms of arbitration and justice have left this society increasingly prone to knee-jerk reactions and vigilante 'justice'.

Disturbingly, lawyers today are among the most disorderly segment of the population. Senior advocates have demanded a judicial inquiry into Wednesday's attack, which is fair enough. But is this crop of lawyers prepared to accept its findings?



## **Polio resurgence**

ON Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan inaugurated a three-day polio immunisation drive in the capital city. Starting from Dec 16, approximately 39.6m children under the age of five will be administered anti-polio drops by a 260,000-strong vaccination team. In a short speech, the prime minister noted that it was a matter of “shame” for Pakistan to be one of only two countries in the world that still suffer from outbreaks of the virus. He also honoured the memory of all those workers who had lost their lives in the struggle to ensure a better future for the nation’s children. Despite the risk to their lives, vaccine teams continue their duties on the ground, braving harsh winters and hostile terrains to reach their targets. Not too long ago, it seemed like the country was on its way to joining the long list of nations that have been declared polio-free over the years. In 2017, Pakistan recorded only eight new cases of polio, which was a commendable achievement, considering thousands of new cases used to be registered in the 1990s. In 2018, that figure rose slightly to 12.

But 2019 has not been a good year for anti-polio efforts. There were a few instances of attacks on polio teams, which led to the death of two security officials and one polio worker in April. The refusal rates also remained high due to the malicious spread of disinformation about the vaccine on social and mainstream media. And then last month, The Guardian’s investigation into Pakistan’s polio programme resulted in the state minister of health admitting that there was indeed a re-emergence of the vaccine-derived P2 virus in the population. He said that seven children had contracted this P2 strain of the polio virus, which was believed to have been eradicated from the country five years ago. There are now more than 100 new cases of the polio virus in the country, with over 70 of them in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the most recent instance, two cases from Sindh and one from KP have been detected. At this rate, it is sad to note the likelihood of yet more polio cases as we prepare for the new year. Whatever the challenges may be — and indeed, there are many — the polio eradication effort’s eventual failure or success will rest on the shoulders of the current prime minister.

## **UK election result**

AFTER weeks of campaigning and predictions, the UK general election is over and the results are astounding: an overwhelming majority for the Conservative party led by Boris Johnson, and a harrowing defeat for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour. The Tories are set to form a majority government with a total of 365 seats — a historic success which the party has not witnessed since Margaret Thatcher won in 1987. With a majority of 80 seats, the Conservative party has made gains in Labour heartlands across northern England and Wales. The election, which saw voters deviate from a focus on traditional concerns, was a vote on Brexit — Mr Johnson's message of 'let's get Brexit done' clearly resonated far and wide, despite serious doubts over his integrity. As for Labour, its seismic defeat calls for much introspection. Mr Corbyn has announced he won't be leading the party in a future election — a decision many will welcome, given how divisive a figure he had become in this poll. The party has to reconcile itself to the voters' decision to reject Mr Corbyn's style of politics and engage in a rebuilding campaign.

Mr Johnson is now well-placed to fast-track his Brexit promise. With no obstacles ahead, his pledge to leave the EU on Jan 31, 2020, will become a reality as he now has the parliamentary majority to push through the required legislation. While Mr Johnson is clear on the departure, he will soon have to begin negotiating an ambitious set of trade agreements with the EU which will have to be ratified before the post-Brexit transition period ends in just over a year on Dec 31, 2020. Although Brexit fatigue and a lack of clarity on the future of the UK's relationship with the EU may have prompted many voters to side with the Tories in this election, the debate is far from over; focusing on the tedious technicalities of the legislation that will govern the Britain's future trade ties is something that Mr Johnson and his party will now have to do.

## **Money with no name**

THE tax authorities have lately apprehended close to Rs25bn that have been transferred between various locations within the country by parties that otherwise have no known sources of income.

A pattern has emerged through these actions, in which vast sums of money can be seen moving between Karachi, Quetta and Malakand in nine specific bank accounts.

Read: FBR unearths Rs20bn illegal bank transfer, withdrawal scam in KP

Tax officials are reluctant to discuss the case on record, but have confirmed that the transactions are an example of ‘smurfing’, a term used to describe actions that seek to disguise the beneficial ownership of money.

When the authorities moved to examine the identity of the people in whose names the accounts have been opened, they found that no record of them exists with the tax authorities. Yet vast sums could be transacted through their accounts.

The episode shows the hazards of a vast cash economy and the undocumented sector in which our financial system has to operate.

As the authorities pursue the people involved, they will likely find themselves falling deeper down a rabbit hole that could possibly even connect with funds that relate to illicit activity or terrorism. At that point, dilemmas multiply and the complexity of enforcement actions also increases.

As the source of the funds is revealed in more detail, it could bring other law-enforcement bodies apart from the tax authorities, into the picture, perhaps even triggering a terror-financing alarm. At the moment, though, the matter is purely an issue of tax enforcement.

Such actions present a deep dilemma, or powerful trade-off, for the authorities.

The more they rely on enforcement actions to track and trace such funds — that have escaped the tax net or have been derived from or are meant to advance illicit activity including terrorism — the more their actions choke the financial system.

Additionally, given the ease with which alternative channels can be found for remitting money within the country outside of the formal financial system, greater enforcement today can simply mean more money staying outside the financial system altogether.

In part, it is this dynamic that has led us to a situation where currency in circulation today has grown massively since the government began clamping down on the use of the financial system by the non-filers of tax returns.

Five years ago, the total cash in circulation in the economy was about one-third of the total amount of deposits held by the banks. Today, that ratio has risen to 43pc, a very large figure for five years only.

The complexity of the task ought to be self-evident.

The government must arrest the growth of the cash economy, while simultaneously safeguarding the financial system from bad money. And it will take more than enforcement actions to make this happen.

## **Plight of Rohingya**

EARLIER this week, the International Court of Justice heard accusations against Myanmar for breaching the 1948 genocide convention through its military that left no stone unturned in its efforts to uproot, torture and massacre the Rohingya community in the country's Rakhine state. The ICJ took up the matter after Gambia filed a case on behalf of a number of countries. The three-day hearing began with a 30-minute speech by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in which she defended the military that had kept her under house arrest for several years. She called the case against Myanmar "incomplete and incorrect", stating that the violence in Rakhine state had been triggered by an armed insurgency that dated back centuries. Ms Suu Kyi — who has been declared complicit by the UN in the targeted violence against the Rohingya community in 2017 that resulted in their mass exodus to Bangladesh — admitted that disproportionate force might have been used at times, and said that if the soldiers were found guilty they would be held responsible. What was striking in her speech, however, was the complete omission of the word 'Rohingya' when referring to the violence-hit community. The name came up only once when Ms Suu Kyi called out the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army for attacking government forces.

It appears that Ms Suu Kyi has completed her transformation from a human rights icon to a leader complicit in crimes described by the UN as having "genocidal intent". Meanwhile, the ICJ has also said that its prosecutors were

granted permission to investigate the alleged crimes against the Rohingya. Though the investigation and verdict may take years, the process itself reflects global concern over the crimes against humanity committed by Myanmar's armed forces. It is in such international realisation that the hopes of the beleaguered community reside. Let's hope that due process results in justice for the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who have suffered in the worst possible way for no fault of their own.

## **Development slide**

THE Human Development Index 2019, released by UNDP last week, should cause alarm in government circles. Pakistan has dropped to the 152nd spot, ranking below other South Asian countries. In fact, its overall development score is 13pc below the South Asian average. The report gives a disturbing view of Pakistan's myriad development challenges, indicating that the country's poor score was due to its high infant mortality figures, a low rate of enrolment and retention of children in schools, and high gender inequality in households, schools and health sectors. The extent of this inequality can be gauged from the UNDP's multidimensional poverty index: out of 541m poor people in all of South Asia, 75m alone live in Pakistan. Even more astounding is the fact that out of these 75m poor people, 40m are children. In effect this means that every third child in the country is poor. Similarly, huge gaps in gender inequality stymie the country's progress on development. According to the report, 11pc of girls in South Asia are poor and not in school. However, in Pakistan's case the number is as high as 27pc. Moreover, around 23pc of children aged up to four experience intra-household inequality in terms of nutrition in South Asia; again, in the case of Pakistan the figure is more than 33pc.

Other development challenges are evident as well and include the high maternal mortality rate, stunting in children and low literacy rates — all well-known. However, this report sheds light on important connections between various development indicators that give a more comprehensive picture of the many weak links which have hampered development in this country for decades now. Terms such as 'youth bulge', 'poverty-stricken people' and 'out-of-school children' are used abundantly in the political and development discourse, but often our solutions to complicated development issues lack depth, and our understanding of the existing linkages leaves much to be desired. For example,

poor learning outcomes in schoolchildren cannot be tackled without addressing rampant malnutrition in pregnant women and children below the age of five. Similarly, malnutrition is also strongly linked to disease outbreaks such as measles. The authorities in Pakistan need a perception shift vis-à-vis development issues and available or applicable solutions. One can only hope that the new report, which is useful for future policymaking, is noted by Pakistani leaders and leads to alterations in the existing remedies for the betterment of the population.

## An evil law

NARENDRA Modi and his Hindutva-infused dispensation, by singling out India's Muslims and laying the groundwork for legal discrimination against the community, are playing with fire. A new law — the Citizenship Amendment Act — passed by the Indian parliament last week, has sparked a storm of protest across India. As per the law, non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh will now be put on the fast track to Indian citizenship if they face 'persecution' in their countries of origin. Coupled with this clearly prejudicial legislation is another, equally sinister scheme up the Modi regime's sleeve: the National Register of Citizens. This is basically a plan designed to make India's people prove their nationality, through documentary evidence or otherwise, or else be left off the citizenship rolls. This dubious experiment has already been tried in the state of Assam, and nearly 2m people have been stripped of their citizenship. As critics point out, this is a weapon — disguised in legal language — to permanently disenfranchise India's Muslims.

The reactions to the BJP-led government's moves have been intense. Protests on Monday entered their fifth day, with demonstrations in Delhi, along with several of India's metros. On Sunday, the police savagely smothered a demonstration by students in Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia university; footage doing the rounds on mainstream and social media shows Indian security men using brute force against protesting students. But it is not just India's Muslims that are up in arms over the BJP's moves. Hindus in Assam, for example, have taken to the streets as they fear the new citizenship law will open the floodgates for Bangladeshi Hindus to enter their state and alter the demographic balance. Protests have roiled other north-eastern states for similar reasons, and several people have reportedly been killed. Modi had called for calm on Monday, yet this

appeal rings hollow as the Indian prime minister and his ideological comrades are primarily responsible for this mess.

Considering the far-reaching consequences of the BJP government's moves, it is essential that the international community speaks up and censures India's blatantly anti-Muslim moves. While there have been muted condemnations from the US and others (a UN official called the CAA 'discriminatory') much more forceful criticism is required. The US, EU and India's trading partners — many of whom are self-proclaimed standard bearers of human rights — must openly condemn Delhi's Islamophobic behaviour. The proposed citizenship register has sent a chill through India's Muslim community, while there are credible reports that the central government is building a number of detention centres, apparently to house those whose nationality New Delhi cancels. Though claiming to be a secular democracy, India's rulers, many of them card-carrying RSS members, are actually aping the grim methodologies of the Third Reich. But is this surprising, considering that the leading lights of the Sangh Parivar were unabashed admirers of European fascism?

## The \$5bn question

IT was common knowledge at the time when Pakistan began receiving billions of dollars in 'deposits' from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that this money was little more than short-term relief.

In those days, Pakistan was running a current account deficit of almost \$1bn per month, so every billion borrowed was barely enough to get it through the month.

Then came the oil facility, the detailed workings of which are a bit unclear since it is not known how the oil imports coming under it are booked, and how the payables accumulating on the other hand are being recorded in the country's accounts.

Certainly, the country's debt figures do not seem to include purchases made under this facility. But by now the amount that has been borrowed, and digested in the bowels of the economy's dysfunctions, has crossed \$5bn, and word is circulating that the government is interested in converting this outstanding amount into a loan.

This is where things stand at the moment. The funds originally arrived as a one-year deposit, the first of which has already matured and been rolled over.

The IMF demanded that the government get guarantees from all those who extended these reserve extension facilities, as they are referred to, so that they would agree to a rollover upon maturity.

That included the Chinese who had similarly been approached for such support. Now that the time has come to start those rollovers, and for the new government to undertake its diplomatic outreach efforts, we learn that important linkages might exist between the loans and the diplomacy.

There could scarcely be a better illustration of how the economy's inability to pay its bills — whether on the external or fiscal side — ends up entangling the country in the geopolitical priorities of its lenders.

This has been Pakistan's story for decades. It is one of the biggest reasons why we found ourselves on the front lines of a superpower's war, not once but twice. It is the reason why we keep returning to the IMF for a bailout every four or five years.

And it is the reason why our country has never really had an independent foreign policy, because those who stand on crutches cannot walk their own path; they must be led by others. The real cost of that borrowing binge from last year is now coming into sharper relief.

## **Climate failure**

THE lack of seriousness displayed by the larger countries at the conclusion of the COP25 in Madrid proves that the next generation — their concerns aptly represented by the young activist Greta Thunberg — has every right to be angry at world leaders for not doing enough to slow down the catastrophic impact of climate change. Even UN Secretary General António Guterres described the final declaration passed at the end of the climate conference as “disappointing”. He asserted: “The international community lost an important opportunity to show increased ambition on mitigation, adaptation and finance to tackle the climate crisis.” According to reports, bigger countries, including the US, Brazil, China, Australia and Saudi Arabia, refrained from pledging bold steps to mitigate the global temperature rise by cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions, a pivotal



step towards slowing down the increase. Hence the participants of the summit were only able to pass a feeble declaration calling for “urgent action” — a cliché of sorts that has become synonymous with the conversation around climate change, in the absence of any concrete steps. The lacklustre response is especially worrying because the Madrid talks were expected to gauge the progress on targets of the Paris Climate Accord, 2015, the most important ones relating to cutting down carbon emissions. However, the resistance by bigger countries means that the progress on reducing emissions could either be stymied or even reversed, while more vulnerable countries including Pakistan and the Philippines continue to pay the ultimate price.

On the other hand, EU countries last week signed the Green Deal in Brussels, aimed at zero carbon emissions by 2050. Whether or not efforts made under this agreement are enough to soften the devastating impact of the global temperature rise remains to be seen. A recent report by the World Meteorological Organisation contains revelations of how close we are to witnessing our own extinction as a civilisation. The world does not need more promises, as Greta Thunberg said at the UN. It needs action, and it needs it now.

## **Extension verdict**

THE 42-page detailed Supreme Court verdict has provided further clarity in the imbroglia surrounding the extension of the army chief's tenure. Its short order on Nov 28 had granted Gen Qamar Bajwa a six-month extension and directed parliament to enact within that time necessary legislation regulating the terms and conditions of the office of COAS. The judgement announced on Monday holds that failure to comply will mean the incumbent army chief would stand retired from the time his tenure ended in November. Once again, the court expressed incredulity that there exists no provision in the law for extending the army's chief tenure. In his additional note, Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa pointed out that the office of the COAS is “powerful ... in ways more than one” and that “unbridled power or position, like unstructured discretion, is dangerous”.

The PTI government and parliament must consider the situation carefully. After all, the outcome will have profound implications, not only for civilian supremacy, but for the military itself. Tenure extensions sanctioned by parliament would

acquire a legitimacy that could upend a promotion process that should be marked by transparency and predictability. The Supreme Court has in its verdict sagaciously observed that “...in strengthening institutions, nations prosper”. Indeed, Imran Khan had himself taken the same position when it came to the extension of then COAS Gen Ashfaq Kayani during the PPP government. And yet, a few weeks ago, Mr Khan remarked during an interview that he had decided to give Gen Bajwa an extension soon after assuming office. That gave the unfortunate impression that factors other than the “regional security environment” — the official reason given for the extension — accounted for the prime minister having made up his mind so prematurely. Perhaps Mr Khan should consider the views of the other principal character in this saga, the army chief himself — or at least, his views as articulated by the military’s public relations arm. The ISPR has more than once asserted that the COAS was reluctant to accept an extension. Even after the spectacle that the government made of itself in its handling of the issue, the ISPR assured the public that it was not Gen Bajwa but the government that was hell-bent on having him continue to head the army. That may well be the case: one would hope that every military official considers the interests of his country and his institution above those of his own.

## Cyberwars

CONTEMPORARY propagandists seem to understand one ancient truism better than others: ‘all warfare is based on deception’. Battles for winning the minds of people are increasingly fought in cyberspace, but the underlying motive behind propaganda has remained unchanged over the centuries. Today, undiscerning ‘consumers’ of news often believe whatever they stumble upon, particularly if it confirms an existing bias, without bothering to do a background check on the authenticity or credibility of the source. Luckily, there are a few organisations that act as watchdogs, helping us distinguish the real from the ‘fake news’ in the sea of information. On Monday, the Brussels-based not-for-profit EU DisinfoLab published a startling report on its unearthing of 265 ‘fake news’ websites that were promoted by a handful of ‘fake NGOs’ and ‘fake think tanks’ — all linked to a single, controversial Indian company. This network predominantly propagated an anti-Pakistan agenda to decision-makers in the EU and US. While the discovery of such propagandistic, and often blatantly plagiaristic, websites is not all that unexpected, what stands out is just how far this particular network went to create the illusion of authenticity — and just how easily so many, presumably

intelligent, people fell for it. Even more worrying is the shameless exploitation of very real human rights abuses faced by marginalised groups to further jingoistic arguments and claims of superiority on the other side.

Earlier this month, this paper had published an article that looked into how the majority of Twitter hashtags were manufactured by coordinated groups in an attempt to deceive the public about genuine support for certain causes, individuals or institutions. And last year, Science published its findings on the largest-ever study on fake news, which examined the behaviour of Twitter users. Confirming the worst, they found a much greater proclivity in humans for sharing false information over the truth, particularly when it came to political news. That is not an encouraging reality to live with.

## **PM's bad diplomacy**

IN perhaps the umpteenth U-turn of his prime ministerial career, Imran Khan has decided not to attend the Kuala Lumpur summit hosted by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

The pretext, provided by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi to journalists yesterday, was that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had reservations about the meeting and Pakistan was playing a role in addressing them. However, he said, since these concerns could not be addressed within the time that was available, Pakistan was stepping back from the summit.

The concerns apparently revolved around two questions: first, would the summit divide the ummah; and second, was it an effort to create an organisation parallel to the OIC. He said Pakistan would continue its efforts to bridge these gaps.

That may be so, but the fact is that Pakistan has already painted itself into a corner and cut a sorry figure.

Prime Minister Khan's urge to play the mediator may be a noble one but the course of action he has taken should have been thought out better. The divisions between blocs of Muslim countries are no secret and neither are those issues that are sources of disagreement.

If Mr Khan thought he could successfully manage a diplomatic tightrope act between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side and Malaysia and Turkey on the

other, then he should have acted on a well-crafted plan that allowed for such diplomatic finesse. Yet he had jumped the gun at the UN General Assembly session in New York where he made plans with prime ministers Mahathir Mohamad and Recep Tayyip Erdogan for joint collaborations in various fields including launching a channel together.

Why were the ramifications of these diplomatic initiatives not considered then? Why were the reactions of countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE not factored into this policy? Why did Mr Khan accept the invitation to attend the Malaysian summit before understanding how this would be perceived by the leadership of the Gulf countries?

As a result of its amateurish diplomatic manoeuvres, Pakistan has placed itself between a rock and a hard place. It has in the process alienated both sides without gaining anything in return except a red face. This despite the personal investment that Mr Khan had made in reaching out to the leaderships of these countries.

Pakistan should learn the right diplomatic lessons from this debacle.

We may harbour noble intentions about playing a role as mediator in various conflicts but, as this foreign policy faux pas has shown, greater thinking is needed about the costs and benefits of such ambitious adventures.

It will now take some delicate diplomacy to smooth ruffled feathers and mend fences that were needlessly fractured.

It may also be an opportune time for the Prime Minister's Office to start relying more on advice from professionals in the Foreign Office and less on whims and fancies.

## **Musharraf verdict**

THE verdict in the treason case against retired Gen Pervez Musharraf marks a seismic shift in Pakistan's history. It was thus far inconceivable that any military dictator this country has ever known would be convicted of high treason, as defined in Article 6 of the same Constitution that he had abrogated or held in abeyance.

After a trial that lasted nearly six years, the special court set up to hear the case has unanimously found the former army chief guilty of the offence; Mr Musharraf had suspended the Constitution on Nov 3, 2007, when he imposed emergency in the country.

In a decision announced on Tuesday, the bench awarded him the death penalty, with one judge dissenting. The reaction, as expected with an issue of such consequence and given the implications pertaining to institutional equilibrium, has ranged from exultation to outrage.

However, whether one agrees or not with a verdict that has — at the very least — huge symbolic significance for all concerned, some of the more excessive sentiments on display are troubling. After all, the bench that arrived at the decision was no inconsequential forum. It comprised three superior court judges who are part of the same judiciary often lauded for its resurgent independence, such as when it disqualified a sitting prime minister not too long ago.

Ironically, this sense of autonomy is often seen as having taken root in the very circumstances that led to Mr Musharraf imposing the emergency in 2007 — specifically, the legal challenges to his re-election as president that were being heard by the Supreme Court then.

Some might see this as the wheel having come full circle. Judicial independence cuts both ways, depending on where one is standing; therein lies its majesty. And while Dawn has always opposed the death penalty under any circumstances, this is hardly the end of the road for the former military dictator. There are legal remedies available to him as part of his constitutionally protected right to due process. His lawyers, and the PTI government, have already announced they will appeal the special court's decision.

We may be in uncharted territory in terms of specifics, but this is yet another critical juncture for the one-step-forward-two-steps-back democratic process in this country.

The situation calls for restraint and sober reflection from all quarters rather than parochial chest-thumping. A court of law has held an individual accountable for his actions, which is as it should be; legal certainty and predictability in the administration of justice is necessary for a well-ordered society. The judgement has not smeared any institution; rather it affords an opportunity for the latter to distance itself from the extra-constitutional actions of an individual.

Fighting for one's country does not preclude the commission of treachery. If that were so, two senior uniformed officials would not have been court-martialled and convicted on charges of espionage earlier this year.

## **Protect the poor**

IN the middle of an intense austerity drive, it is important to ask who is looking after the interests of the poor. In a democratic dispensation, the pain and anguish of the people gets channelled upward into the corridors of power through the elected representatives. But at the moment, much of the government is being run by people who are not elected, the finance division being one of the biggest examples. It is the seat of today's austerity agenda, and where the purse strings are being controlled with meticulous care for the interests of the country's billionaires and textile barons, its bankers and creditors, its high officialdom and their perks. Through it all one must ask, who is looking out for the poor?

One person who evidently has the interests of the poor weighing on his mind is the prime minister. In part this is because, despite the divided opinion regarding his often controversial politics, his conversation — and previous actions such as building a free cancer hospital — has indicated an interest in the welfare of the poor. In equal part it may be because his popularity is precious to him, as it would be to any politician. Of late, the prime minister has been talking of soup kitchens and shelter for the hungry and homeless, especially in this chilly winter. He has also detailed plans for providing housing to low-income segments where the country's real estate market is largely in the throes of elite capture, as well as emphasised greater social service delivery through the databases built up by the Benazir Income Support Programme, which now form the foundation of the PTI's expanded Ehsaas programme. Unfortunately, there are not many in this government who can credibly be seen to have the interests of the poor at heart — beyond spouting the usual political rhetoric that is. It is, therefore, important that the finance division learn to work more closely with the prime minister to ensure that austerity is targeted in a way that makes the burden fall more on those who can bear it the most, and that the resources necessary to make these programmes successful are not cut. Today, we can see, for example, that the shelters announced with some fanfare recently are struggling for resources to be able to operate. It is the job of the finance team to ensure that this is rectified immediately.

## **Expired vaccines**

AS if the vicious resurgence of cases and renewed attacks on vaccination teams were not enough, the anti-polio campaign in the past few months has also had to contend with serious doubts arising over the competence of the past and present leadership of the polio programme. In the latest scandal, between 50 and 60 children were administered expired oral vaccine in Dhoke Budhal village in Rawalpindi district. Thankfully, no adverse effect of the expired vaccine has been reported so far; however, the ongoing immunisation drive appears to have suffered as parents in nearby areas have begun to refuse vaccination for their children. Though the responsibility of this incident was quickly fixed with the suspension of two district health officials, while two committees are also looking into the matter, the effect of this critical lapse in management will be far-reaching and damaging to the larger campaign against polio. This incident is especially shocking given that at least seven P2 polio virus cases that emerged last month were also attributed to years-old vaccine that had not been destroyed.

In the current case, national polio officials cite WHO as saying that the expired OPV was harmless; they have also said that SOPs have been devised for issuing new vaccines. But why had they not done so earlier? Moreover, why in a campaign that has global donors and local and international oversight, was the polio vaccine not being collected and destroyed before it was due to expire, according to recognised procedures? Under the present health dispensation, it appears that all the progress made towards the eradication of the crippling disease has been drastically reversed. A total of eight polio cases had been reported in 2017 and 12 in 2018, but the number has shockingly risen to over 100 this year. This steep surge, combined with reports of criminal negligence in the immunisation programme, is a clarion call for some solid structural changes in the management of the polio programme. The children of this country should not have to pay the price of official incompetence.

## **Descent into medievalism**

IF the sentence of capital punishment in Tuesday's short order came as a jolt, the detailed verdict that held former army chief Gen Pervez Musharraf guilty of treason was nothing short of a judicial bombshell.

The tone of the verdict that was released yesterday was horrifying in places — and indicated a troubling descent into medievalism. Have we really become so brutalised as a society that we can order the corpse of a convict who dies before he is executed to be dragged to a public square and strung up for three days?

Two of the three judges on the special court bench had found Mr Musharraf guilty and sentenced him to death — a punishment that this paper deplores under any circumstances. And it was one of them, Justice Waqar Seth, who spelt out the graphic punishment.

It is to be hoped that this minority view does not obscure the underlying significance of the judgement — ie it is for the first time in this country that a former army chief has been found guilty of high treason. Critically, the 2-1 verdict had raised some other serious constitutional questions, including on the role of those who had aided Mr Musharraf in his Nov 3, 2007, misadventure. One hopes that the tone of the judgement will not obscure these relevant aspects.

Taking their cue from a meeting between the prime minister and the incumbent army chief, both the ISPR and the government's ministers have weighed in on the matter. The government has decided to approach the Supreme Judicial Council for the removal of Justice Seth on the grounds that he is 'unfit' to be a judge, and is to separately file an appeal against the verdict in the Supreme Court. That is its right.

On his part, rising to the defence of his institution, a visibly emotional DG ISPR criticised the verdict's language, saying that it went against 'humanity and religion', a point that many would have endorsed.

In this troubling atmosphere, it is time for all institutions to take a step back in order to avoid a head-on collision. The government will be pursuing the matter legally, which is the correct thing to do. The prime minister's advice of restraint is timely and must be followed, instead of government ministers and institutions targeting the judiciary that safeguards the Constitution.

The judgement, notwithstanding its disturbing language in places, forms the basis for a frank and robust debate on the direction in which Pakistani democracy is headed and on whether there is a need for course correction.

Equally important is a discussion on Pakistani society and how it can avoid the minefields of the tribal, anachronistic mores that lie in its path to progress.



Without introspection, the country will continue to slide towards anarchy, a situation that anti-state elements will be only too keen to exploit.

## **Mind the gap**

THE founder of this nation once said: “No nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men.” Seventy-two years later, Pakistan still has a long way to go when it comes to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for half its population. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2020, the country is one of the most inequitable societies for women to live in. Ranking 151 out of 153 countries, just above war-torn Yemen and Iraq, the country also had the lowest ranking in the entire South Asian region. In comparison, Bangladesh performed significantly better at 50; Nepal stood at 101; followed by Sri Lanka at 102; and neighbouring India at 112. While many of the countries listed improved with time when it came to ensuring women’s equal status — the authors of the report link this welcome progress to the higher participation of women in politics — Pakistan did not. In 2006, it was placed at 112 out of 115 countries. And last year, it was ranked 148 out of 149 countries.

To measure inequality, the survey examines the difference between men and women in their participation and access to health, education, the economy and politics. When it comes to economic participation, Pakistan is all the way down at 150. For health and survival indicators, it is just as poor at 149; for education, the country is placed at 143; and finally, when it comes to political empowerment, Pakistan performs slightly better at 93. Some of the findings are a bit surprising, given Pakistani women’s role in the running of a largely agrarian economy, but this may be due to the informal status of the sector and the fact that a lot of women’s labour goes unrecognised. What cuts through and links all these disparate fields is the perpetuation of a patriarchal culture and the lower status of women in society. It seems that despite more awareness and mobilisation for women’s rights — and despite the passage of many progressive laws, thanks to the efforts of women parliamentarians over the years — the large majority of women do not see the change in their lives. As rightfully noted in the report, and by the nation’s founder all those years ago, the equal status of women is inseparable from a country’s economic and social progress.

## **Harmful substances**

THE Sindh Assembly has finally taken the much-awaited step of making the sale, purchase and manufacture of gutka and mainpuri illegal and punishable by law. The move is, indeed, laudable. However, it remains to be seen whether the government is able to enforce the new law in letter and spirit, saving millions of people from the clutches of dangerous diseases such as mouth cancer. Under the Sindh Prohibition of Preparation, Manufacturing, Storage, Sale and Use of Gutka and Mainpuri Bill, 2019, all aspects — from the import, export and manufacturing to the buying and selling of gutka and mainpuri — have been made punishable by law. Though the provincial government has in the past imposed temporary bans on the sale and purchase of this noxious substance (the Sindh High Court in August this year had also imposed a ban on its sale and manufacture), it is for the first time that this effort is being codified into a comprehensive law. Under the bill, even owning and operating a space or machinery for the processing of gutka and mainpuri are prohibited. All offences under this bill are cognisable, non-bailable and non-compoundable, punishable by up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs200,000. Only the purchase of gutka and mainpuri has been made a non-cognisable, bailable and compoundable offence, with punishment of up to one month's imprisonment, and Rs5,000 payable as fine.

One remarkable feature of the new bill are the powers awarded to police officers (starting from the rank of sub-inspectors) for searching a wide range of premises — places accessible to the public such as shops and vehicles — and detaining those in possession of these toxic substances. However, the bill also provides a safeguard against the misuse of these powers by law-enforcement officers by according punishment of up to three years in prison and a fine of up to Rs300,000 for “vexatious entry, search, seizure or arrest”. The passage of this law is only the first step in the attempt to eliminate such harmful substances; the real test lies in the government's own resolve.

## **Tumult in India**

OVER the past week, Hindutva backed by the brute force of the state has bared its fangs in India.

Hundreds have taken to the streets to protest the BJP-led government's ill-planned moves of passing the Citizenship Amendment Act — which allows only non-Muslim refugees from some of India's neighbouring states to apply for citizenship — and the introduction of the National Register of Citizens, widely seen as a fig leaf for stripping Indian Muslims of citizenship.

Clearly, there is an Islamophobic agenda behind these diabolical moves by the Modi clique, which is why India's Muslims as well as conscientious citizens from other communities are protesting. Violence continued on Friday; at least 13 people have been killed in various cities so far, while hundreds have been temporarily detained as the state tries to put a lid on the protests. Curfew has also been enforced in certain areas, while the internet has been shut down in many cities.

While the Sangh Parivar was largely shunned in the post-independence era, because M.K. Gandhi's assassin was an ideological child of the RSS, in today's India, the storm troopers of Hindutva control the levers of state.

It is no surprise then that ever since coming to power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to remake India in the image of the Sangh — a Hindu rashtra to be built on the model of a fabled Vedic golden age.

In this programme, there is no place for minorities, specifically India's Muslims, hence the legal efforts to disenfranchise the community.

However, though the Sangh ideologues are trying their best to label Indian Muslims as 'outsiders', history points to another reality. Islam has existed in the subcontinent for over a millennium, while Muslims have been living in what is now India for centuries. That should remove any lingering doubts about the right of India's Muslims to citizenship of that country. No bigoted law can be allowed to deprive them of their identity and dispossess them from the land of their ancestors.

As India drops the facade of a secular democracy and champions the politics of hyper-nationalism, the international community needs to speak up.

Under the Modi regime, Muslims have been lynched by vigilante mobs on suspicions of consuming or transporting beef and the world has kept silent. Under the BJP dispensation, India-held Kashmir has been under lockdown for months and its people held prisoner, but the world has looked away.

Now, as New Delhi lights the fires of communalism by disenfranchising millions of Muslim citizens, will the international community still keep silent?

Moreover, questions of identity and citizenship are best left to academics to discuss.

If zealots — guided by imagined histories — are put in charge of such sensitive matters, and worse, given the legal powers to decide who is and who is not a citizen, disaster is sure to ensue.

## Gas price hike

THE government needs to carefully consider the determination by Ogra that a new round of gas price increases is required. The trade-offs involved are powerful and the decision requires careful consideration. The price increase is being sought mainly to help meet the costs of the two gas distribution companies, unlike instances when capital costs and future investment plans were also part of the proposed price hike. So long as the price hike is not entertained, both companies — the SSGC and SNGPL — will have reason to argue that they are operating under severe liquidity constraints, and their line ministry will be burdened with all manner of complaints, such as rising line losses due to lack of maintenance and poor recoveries. On the other hand, if the price hike is entertained expeditiously, it will drive inflation at a time when the monthly average is already rising faster than expected. The burden on the common citizenry is already very high; further increases in inflation will also negatively impact the interest rate environment at a time when the business community is keenly anticipating a rate cut before the summer of 2020.

The trade-off is there not only in the case of gas but also power prices, where the government is being urged by its donors to move more decisively to cut the circular debt, principally by passing the cost of this onto the consumers through the tariff. Much of the donor funding hangs in the balance as the government weighs its options. The decision is an important one and it must be informed by as diverse a set of interests as possible before it is notified. It would be a mistake to leave this up to the finance ministry alone, since it is more likely to take a narrow view of the matter, with the fiscal balance and the foreign exchange reserves as primary drivers of the decision. The impact on the larger citizenry and the economy needs to be factored in as well. It will be argued by the finance

team that there are few alternatives beyond simple tariff hikes in both cases — gas and power — but somebody in the room needs to point out that the inefficiencies of the public distribution companies are at the heart of the problem, and that cost should not be passed onto consumers. How the government approaches this issue will reveal much about the quality of its decision-making while under pressure.

## Chunian case

EARLIER this week, an anti-terrorism court in Lahore handed down the death penalty to Sohail Shahzad, who was convicted for kidnapping, raping and killing eight-year-old Faizan. The victim had gone missing with three other young boys in mid-September in Chunian, Kasur district. While this newspaper does not endorse capital punishment, the investigation of the case could serve as an example for law-enforcement officials who are dealing with such cases in other parts of the country. However, this small victory should not give the authorities reason for complacency. The move to reform the district police in Kasur should not lose steam and police officers must remain vigilant. The repeated instances of gruesome cases of child sexual abuse from the same area, combined with a list of 3,000 ‘bad characters’ — with suspected links to sexual crimes — prepared by the district police, means that there could be scores of other abused children in need of help but who remain silent. It should be remembered that though this particular case has reached its conclusion, promised steps such as the revival of child protection bureaus remain unfulfilled as do the pledges of additional material and human resources for the district police.

Similarly, the authorities, and society would do well constantly remind themselves that catching and awarding capital punishment to a child rapist-cum-killer does not necessarily guarantee a safe future for other children in the country. Instead, it is necessary to break our silence on the subject — unless there is a sustained discussion, sexual abuse cases will be ‘normalised’ as part of the societal makeup, and the perpetrators will strike again and again. According to the NGO Sahil, some 1,300 cases of child sexual abuse have been recorded across the country in the first six months of this year alone, but given the culture of silence around the subject these may be only a fraction of the actual number of incidents. This troubling fact alone should galvanise our law enforcers to crack down on the criminals.

## Unwise support

IT is difficult to disagree with former Supreme Court chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa's blunt words on the eve of his retirement on Friday. A malicious campaign, he contended, had been launched to malign the judiciary in the wake of the special court's verdict declaring retired Gen Pervez Musharraf guilty of high treason.

Much ugliness has indeed been spewed in public over the past few days against the third pillar of the state, including veiled accusations that it is playing into the hands of those seeking to sow internal discord.

Between the lines, one can also perceive a 'promise' of things to come if institutional reserves of 'restraint' run dry. Even the attorney general, an officer of the court himself, has not held back from adding to the toxicity. It is an entirely needless and manufactured crisis — but one that can still be defused without disastrous consequences.

For that to happen, however, the security establishment must view the former military dictator's conviction through a more detached lens, and in a historical context. Its deep displeasure over the conviction was clear from the very outset — in the ISPR statement professing "pain and anguish" — even before the detailed verdict came out, which was then also excoriated in a belligerent presser by the DG ISPR.

Justice Waqar Ahmed Seth's macabre proviso in an otherwise well-reasoned opinion has provided a red herring with which to obfuscate the operative parts of the judgement. The fact is: Mr Musharraf has been convicted under Article 6, which defines abrogating, subverting, suspending or holding in abeyance the Constitution as high treason.

These actions, as we are sadly too aware, are also part of the coup-makers' handbook. By unwisely conflating the individual with the institution in the present case, is the security establishment by extension also declaring its support for military dictators Ziaul Haq and Ayub Khan who usurped power from elected governments, and Yahya Khan who oversaw the breakup of the country? If, as the DG ISPR said, "the country comes first and the institution second," this is the time to demonstrate that.

For its part, the judiciary has travelled a long way from validating extra-constitutional acts on the pretext of 'doctrine of necessity', first employed in 1954 by then chief justice Mohammed Munir. In 2011, Iftikhar Chaudhry, chief justice at the time, vowed the judiciary would no longer endorse military takeovers, and the special court's verdict can be seen as an emphatic reassertion of that pledge.

Even parliament, despite brief, interrupted periods of civilian rule, has shown a latent capacity to understand the real issues that confront us; for instance, the importance of greater provincial autonomy.

Our security establishment must reflect upon its constitutionally mandated role. The country is best served by respect for institutional boundaries: that is the path towards people-centric rather than security-centric policies.

True national interest lies in strengthening democracy, with security considerations the bulwark, rather than the centrepiece, in this objective.

## **Bancassurance scams**

THE SECP has done the right thing by starting an inquiry into the aggressive selling of bancassurance products. For too many years, banks have been misleading the people into buying these products that are hybrids of insurance and savings instruments, with the promise of large returns and insurance cover as well. The hybrid products come in various packages, sometimes for children's education, sometimes as a retirement plan, etc. They involve a partnership between insurance companies and banks, making it easy for both to evade responsibility once the client invariably discovers that the product is not really what it was made out to be during the sales process. Banks have set high targets for each branch for the sale of these products, and the staff in these branches can get aggressive in trying to close the deal, sometimes even resorting to emotional blackmail or subtle 'threats'. Sales practices that are clearly misleading have been used by sales staff to get customers to sign the forms needed to apply for these products. Typically, the sales staff will target older clients who are willing to trust the brand name of the bank they are dealing with. In many cases, the trust that customers place in their financial institution is manipulated to build a market for these products.

It is high time this practice was ended because the manner in which these products have been pushed onto customers amounts to a scam. Customers who have already been taken in by a sales pitch for a product need to be made aware that they are entitled to a full refund of the money that they have placed. It is important to push awareness of this basic fact because banks and insurance companies do their best to conceal it from their customers. The SECP should open a portal where customers who feel they were misled into buying one of these products can register their complaint and seek the regulator's help in getting a full refund of their money. There is nothing wrong with financial institutions partnering to offer novel products for their customers, but tighter regulations are needed to ensure that such offerings carry genuine benefits for the customer, that misleading sales practices are not used to push them, and that the terms are clearly laid out in the product brochures rather than contained in the fine print of the contracts.

## **Rights and respect**

THROUGHOUT the world, sanitation workers perform some of the most vital services that make daily living possible for everyone else. But in Pakistan, they continue to be the most marginalised, overlooked and ill-treated workforce. Born into their 'roles' by virtue of a cruel caste system — which may not exist on paper, but continues to be perpetuated in the minds of the people and employees — most sanitation workers use their bare bodies to collect and clean up filth underground, away from the eyes of polite society. And they often do so without any protective equipment, shoes or clothing, making them susceptible to a host of diseases and injuries. Since they 'inherit' their occupation, as if this is just what they are 'supposed' to do, most do not receive any formal training. In August, 30-year-old Rafiq Masih died while he was cleaning a storm-water drain in Landhi, Karachi, while his colleagues fell unconscious from inhaling toxic fumes. Earlier, in 2017, 28-year-old Irfan Masih was rushed to a government hospital in Umerkot after inhaling poisonous fumes. He tragically died after being refused treatment by doctors at the Umerkot Civil Hospital because he was deemed 'unclean'. Like Rafiq and Irfan, many other workers continue to die due to society's collective neglect and prejudice.

At a recent press conference in Karachi, activists bemoaned the poor treatment and lack of rights suffered by sanitation workers. They demanded that the



government regularise their jobs, as many had been working on a contract basis for years, and grant them safety equipment and health insurance. They also highlighted how two recent laws — the National Sanitation Policy 2016 and the Sindh Sanitation Policy 2017 — did not take the workers into the fold and resultantly made no mention of them. As mentioned by the activists, it is imperative that the voices of sanitation workers be heard. They have been rendered invisible for far too long. Their struggle is not just for rights, but respect at a very basic level.

## **KL Summit fallout**

THE dangers of lack of proper planning and foresight at the state level, especially in sensitive matters of foreign affairs, have become apparent in the fiasco that resulted when Pakistan absented itself from the Kuala Lumpur Summit, which wrapped up on Saturday.

The moot was touted as a forum to discuss the “state of affairs of the Muslim Ummah” and Dr Mahathir Mohamad, one of the architects of the summit, explicitly said the conclave was not a replacement for the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

This is the fifth edition of the summit and the 2019 meeting was given an additional boost as Dr Mahathir, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Imran Khan had sought to make the forum a proactive one, along with other Muslim leaders, to discuss the state of affairs in the lands of Islam.

However, Pakistan’s abrupt withdrawal from the summit caused diplomatic embarrassment.

This was compounded by revelations by Mr Erdogan on Friday that the Saudis asked Pakistan to withdraw or else face the expulsion of Pakistani expatriates from the kingdom as well as the withdrawal of Saudi funds deposited in this country. The Saudi embassy in Islamabad has termed these comments “fake news”.

As we have stated previously in these columns, proper homework should have been done before committing Pakistan to the summit.

Withdrawing from the moot at the last minute, after Prime Minister Imran Khan made a dash to Saudi Arabia, did little to lift our international image. This reflects bad form and a lack of planning at the top.

Surely, there are experienced hands at the Foreign Office as well as retired veteran diplomats and other experts in international relations who could have been consulted to weigh the pros and cons of attending the summit before making a policy decision. Pakistan at one time enjoyed great prestige in the Islamic bloc; today, this reputation risks being tarnished if thoughtless actions such as the KL Summit debacle are repeated. Perhaps some damage control can be done by organising a conclave in Pakistan to discuss the Muslim world's problems.

As for the OIC secretary general's contention that events such as the KL Summit "are not in the interest of [the] Islamic nation", this position is highly debatable.

It can be asked what — over the decades — has the OIC done to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestinians, the Kashmiris, the Rohingya and other persecuted Muslim groups suffering from oppression. The bloc has been known for paralysis and grandiose, hollow statements more than for taking action.

The fact is Riyadh was wary of the KL moot where its geopolitical rivals — Turkey, Iran, Qatar — participated as equals.

If the OIC is incapable of addressing the issues of the world's Muslims, from terrorism to disease to illiteracy, then other forums are bound to arise to tackle these problems.

## **Climate perils**

PAKISTAN is one of the 10 countries most affected by the changing climate. The impact of the latter is showing up in different forms — erratic weather patterns, reduction in the availability of water per capita, melting glaciers, rapid desertification of fertile cultivable land, floods, and so on. The slow policy response to the climate challenge by successive governments means the changes are taking a heavy toll on agriculture and threatening food security. Take the example of the cotton crop. The overall cotton output has dropped by more than a quarter in the last one decade at the cost of the farmers' well-being, textile exports, and farm and factory jobs. This year again, the unusual heavy

rains caused a lot of damage to the cotton plants just as they were fruiting. Naturally, the crop output fell far short of the targeted 15m bales. This will have significant consequences for the government's efforts to reduce the trade deficit as the industry will be forced to double its cotton exports this year to meet its consumption requirements for exports. According to some estimates, the imports could cost the economy anywhere in the range of \$2bn and \$3bn during the present fiscal year, depending on the quantity of fibre to be imported.

The erratic weather patterns mean that the country's food security will also be hit as changing climate poses serious challenges. Immediate policy intervention is required for dealing with the emerging conditions. Experts believe the new climatic patterns are likely to shorten harvest periods, increase the risk of pest attacks and disease, and reduce overall productivity. The situation calls for heavy public and private investments in new seed varieties that can cope with the changing weather patterns, especially frequent heatwaves and dry spells. Moreover, training farmers to conserve water and providing them with access to timely weather information as well as encouraging the use of laser levelling is required. The promotion of the use of digital technology can be an effective way of combating weather changes and protecting agriculture. Countries across the world are inventing new technologies, and encouraging innovation and adoption of efficient practices to make agriculture efficient in order to overcome the challenges being posed to productivity by erratic weather conditions. With the country's population estimated to grow by around 50pc in the next 30 years, it is high time we started using smart technologies to enable our farms to keep feeding us and to grow raw material for our industry.

## A dog's life

A STRAY dog's life is nasty, brutish and short. To counter the growing incidence of dog bites and thus quell public outrage, the Sindh government directed the municipal authorities to revive a campaign to cull stray dogs in September. The order followed the death of child in Larkana who had contracted rabies from an infected dog. The heartbreaking video of the mother holding her child as he gasped for breath was widely shared and caused mass outrage. Earlier this month, a young boy passed away three weeks after being mauled by six dogs in Larkana. And this Thursday, six children were attacked by a pack of dogs on their way to school in Sukkur. At a recent hearing, the Sukkur High Court was

informed that a total of 34,700 dogs have been killed across the province. Such extreme measures may receive the support of large sections of the public, particularly pedestrians who cannot afford the luxury of a car, but they are not a solution. Rather, they are indicative of reactionary, short-term thinking that ends up creating a bigger problem. Authorities have been carrying out dog culling drives for many years — whether by shooting or poisoning the animals — and yet their population only keeps increasing, as do the number of attacks on humans.

There are alternatives that are not only humane, but far more effective. Firstly, stray dogs are loyal to the places that sustain them, and so are mostly found living near garbage dumps. Sindh has had a problem with garbage collection, and the stray dog population can be combated through sustained cleanliness drives in residential areas. Secondly, while it may be more expensive and time-consuming, the success of the Trap-Neuter-Return programmes cannot be understated. In October, the Indus Hospital launched the Rabies Free Programme which administers vaccines and oversees sterilisation of stray dogs. While still limited in its scope, such programmes are performing an essential service and must receive all the support they can get.

## **Cavalier approach to parliament**

THE PPP has warned the government against what it describes as an attempt to paralyse the Senate since the upper house has not been called into session for a significant period of time. PPP parliamentary leader Sherry Rehman told journalists that the Senate had not met for 108 days in any formal, full session and this was an unprecedented gap in the history of the upper house. She pointed out that as per Article 61 of the Constitution, the Senate was required to meet for no less than 110 days in a parliamentary year.

Ms Rehman has a valid point. The government's reluctance to call the Senate in session is reflective of its overall attitude towards parliament. This attitude crystallised in the early days of this government when the opposition started giving a tough time to Prime Minister Imran Khan and the treasury benches on the floor of the house.

In response, the government too adopted a hard-line stance, as a result of which parliamentary proceedings saw little else except shouting matches and mutually

amplified acrimony. It wasn't that a working relationship between the government and the opposition broke down in parliament; it was never built in the first place.

The PTI, new to power at the centre, found it impossible to transition from the mindset and approach it had acquired during its opposition years, and opted, therefore, to be combative rather than accommodative — which governments are supposed to be traditionally.

Hence, the business of legislation fell victim to confrontation and conflict that marred the proceedings of both houses. The government then decided to legislate through presidential ordinances, in a move to bypass the opposition. Since it does not have a majority in the upper house, it has been shying away from summoning the Senate.

Democracy is not supposed to work like this. Parliaments all over the world experience turbulence and verbal duels but they continue to legislate on the basis of a working relationship between the government and the opposition.

In our case, the ruling PTI has refused to internalise this basic lesson in running a parliament. Such a negative attitude will now be put to severe test when parliament comes around to legislating on the issue of the extension of the army chief as ordered by the Supreme Court.

This legislation requires deep and serious consultation, constant engagement and an exchange of ideas as well as appreciation of the nuances involved in drafting such a bill. This is a tall order for a parliament that has struggled to hold a meaningful and civil debate since it came into being last year.

The government should, therefore, take the initiative to cool down the temperatures on the floor of both houses, reach out to the other side and start to take the National Assembly and Senate seriously.

## **Historic win**

PAKISTAN'S emphatic Test win over Sri Lanka at Karachi's National Stadium on Monday has proved to be historic in many ways. More importantly, it has signalled a turnaround for the home team after a dismal year of cricket. The two-match series marked the return of Test cricket to the country after a terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in March 2009 had put paid to

international tours to Pakistan. The return of the game proved to be a rejuvenating factor for the Pakistan side that put up a sterling show to outplay the rivals by 263 runs and win the series 1-0. The earlier Test played in Rawalpindi had ended in a stalemate because of rain. For Pakistan's 11 players, it was for the first time that they appeared in a Test match in Karachi — and they simply shone in front of the home crowd. It was akin to making their Test debuts all over again, and the electrifying feeling was clearly translated in their game. The very team, give or take a couple of players, that had stumbled in Australia and succumbed to successive inning defeats in Brisbane and Adelaide, sprung back to life to turn in a memorable performance. Everything came together for Pakistan in the Karachi Test that was only the second occasion in the annals of the game when the top four batsmen of a team all scored centuries. The previous such instance was in 2007 when India pulled off the feat against Bangladesh in Mirpur. The bowlers, too, fired in unison, rattling the strong Sri Lankan batting order, while the fielders took some fine catches. The sheer brilliance of skill and application displayed by opener Abid Ali, who launched his career by scoring successive hundreds in the two Tests, and the blossoming of pace twins Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah especially stood out.

Having said that, the team still has a long way to go to establish itself as a world-class outfit. Home and away are two different things for any cricket team — in between lies a wide gulf to be bridged. Weather conditions, pitches, etc can vary from country to country. These pose challenges that the players, selectors and coaches are well aware of and must tackle. Whether or not the current team has the training and spirit to overturn its dismal overseas record of 2019 is a million-dollar question. But the signs of improvement are encouraging.

## **Junaid Hafeez**

FOR six long years, a gifted academic named Junaid Hafeez languished in solitary confinement inside the Multan Central Jail. The Fulbright scholar had returned to the Bahauddin Zakariya University to teach students how to think about the big questions in 2011.

He was passionate about poetry, prose and playwriting and wished to inculcate the same in his students. However, he was arrested under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code after some allegedly blasphemous comments were

attributed to him in 2013. One year later, the sole attorney brave enough to take up his case was gunned down in cold blood inside his office.

In a climate of extreme fear, Hafeez could never receive a fair trial. His parents implored the previous chief justice to look into their son's case, as his mental and physical health was deteriorating inside the tiny prison cell. According to the Centre for Social Justice, over 1,500 citizens have been charged with blasphemy between 1987 and 2017.

While no one has been executed by the state, enraged lynch mobs have killed scores on the basis of mere accusation. Hafeez was not even safe inside his prison, as other prisoners had repeatedly attempted to take his life.

This week, a district and sessions court handed Hafeez the death sentence. A story that had begun differently morphed into a tragedy. But the story is not over yet. His defence attorney has said they will file for an appeal.

In the past, the higher courts have overturned the judgements of the lower courts — most prominently in the case of Aasia Bibi, who was sentenced to death by a Sheikhpura court. Years later, she was acquitted by the Supreme Court in a landmark judgement.

It is to be hoped that the superior judiciary will intervene this time as well. It is also time for Pakistan's government to ensure the blasphemy law is not misused any longer to settle personal vendettas and professional jealousies, or target the most vulnerable communities.

## **Flawed accountability**

AHSAN Iqbal has become the latest casualty of the farce being carried out in the name of accountability. The PML-N leader was arrested by NAB on Thursday for alleged corruption in the Narowal Sports City project.

In recent weeks, the comparatively reticent politician had grown increasingly critical about the PTI government's performance on various fronts; last week, he expressed unequivocal support for the verdict against retired Gen Pervez Musharraf, the only senior leader from his party to do so. An accountability court yesterday granted NAB 13-day physical remand of Mr Iqbal.

One would have to be bereft of all reason not to see this accountability season for the political witch-hunt that it is. Even though NAB claims to be an independent body, its actions manifest none of the impartiality that true independence demands. Almost without exception, only opposition figures appear to be in its cross hairs — Nawaz Sharif, Shahbaz Sharif, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Asif Zardari and Faryal Talpur, to name but a few.

Even where investigations have been launched into any individual or project associated with the PTI, NAB has been lackadaisical in pursuing them. Consider the Malam Jabba and Peshawar BRT projects in KP; the accountability body says that references are prepared and ready to be filed. However, contrary to the alacrity on display in the case of opposition leaders, NAB has yet to take action against the alleged perpetrators. It has not even challenged the Supreme Court's stay order, issued over a year ago, on further inquiry into the BRT project.

The pattern smacks of an institution acting as an instrument of oppression in the government's hands. It should be a matter of embarrassment for the country's premier accountability body that virtually all those it has taken into custody have obtained bail — most recently the PML-N's Miftah Ismail; the superior courts have also, more than once, questioned NAB's competence and intentions.

Nevertheless, although NAB's credibility may be in tatters, and Bilawal Bhutto's angst understandable, the PPP chairman should not defy the summons by a statutory body to appear before it.

Unfortunately, the PPP and PML-N have been hoist by their own petard. Had they not, during their time at the centre, been so keen to ensure that NAB serve as a means to maintain pressure on the opposition, they could have improved the law under which it functions.

The NAB law gives its chairman the power to have the accused arrested at any stage of the investigation. That provision has been used to humiliate political rivals — as well as bureaucrats and sundry individuals — sully their reputations and deprive them of their liberty for extended periods even as the 'investigation' proceeds at a snail's pace.

History is once again repeating itself, and given the cyclical nature of politics in this country, the PTI may one day rue its decision to go down this path.



## **A.Q. Khan's petition**

FOR many years, the case of nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan has remained a mystery despite the dramatic events surrounding his 2004 confession that he was involved in international nuclear proliferation. Dr Khan has now filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking enforcement of his fundamental rights including freedom to travel across the country. Since his house arrest in 2004, his movements have remained severely restricted, and apparently he cannot move around and attend social or academic functions within the country without the prior approval of the security authorities. "This act of the security authorities is illegal since no such order has been conveyed to me warranting the treatment being meted out to me now," he complained in the petition, adding that it was his fundamental right to move freely throughout the country and meet anyone individually or in an assembly.

Since Dr Khan's confession on TV during the Musharraf era, he has been kept in protective custody. While much about that episode still remains unknown, what is well established is that Pakistan suffered tremendously because of Dr Khan's self-confessed activities. The country was accused of being an irresponsible nuclear power and doubts were raised in the West about Pakistan's capacity and capability to protect and safeguard its nuclear arsenal. In the wake of this episode, Pakistan took a number of steps to upgrade its structure and improve security protocols and over the years it has managed to remove all doubts about the safety of its nuclear programme. These upgraded safety and security protocols are now recognised as fulfilling all international standards. But the case of Dr Khan needs some sort of closure. The petition filed in the Supreme Court will provide the case some traction in the public discourse, but lack of information about what really happened back then will make it difficult for the court to come to some substantive conclusion, especially if much of what transpired remains classified information. The government will have to be more candid before the court regarding his nuclear activities; otherwise it should explain why it is restricting Dr Khan's movements. The fundamental rights aspect dealing with the nuclear scientist's freedom of movement could be reviewed once security concerns have been adequately addressed. Pakistan has learnt the right lessons from the unfortunate episode, taken corrective measures and moved on. In this spirit, Dr Qadeer's petition might deserve some relief.

## **Khashoggi sentence**

THE grisly murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate last year caused shock and revulsion around the world, with questions raised globally about Riyadh's much-trumpeted reforms, spearheaded by powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Khashoggi, once close to the corridors of power in Saudi Arabia, had started writing more critical pieces, especially in the influential Western press, and many feel he was silenced for his work. There was an outcry across the globe, with calls for the killers to be punished — particularly repulsive was the fashion in which Khashoggi had been butchered, the gory details made public through media leaks. His remains have yet to be found. On Monday, Saudi officials announced that five suspects had been sentenced to death in the case. However, considering the highly opaque nature of the Saudi justice system, and the fact that some key suspects have been let off, there are justifiable questions about the transparency and legal merit of the trial.

The primary criticism of the Saudi sentence stems from the fact that the court found the diabolical act was “not premeditated”. In the words of Agnes Callamard, the UN investigator looking into the murder, the sentence is a “mockery”; the report she had authored earlier this year had clearly stated that the crime was a “brutal and premeditated killing, planned and perpetrated” by those in power in Riyadh. However, it seems that the powers that be in the kingdom have sought to deflect blame by implicating low-ranking operatives. For example, Saud Al-Qahtani, a government apparatchik with reportedly a direct line to the crown prince, and who American intelligence agencies believe was the mastermind of the Khashoggi hit, was not even charged by Saudi prosecutors. If the Saudis want to convince the world that they are serious about bringing Jamal Khashoggi's killers to justice, they need to open up to international scrutiny the process through which his alleged killers were convicted, even if this implicates those in high places in Riyadh.

## **Mass transit woes**

AFFORDABLE public transport and roads form the backbone of any economy. Not only do such fundamental services lead to an increase in productivity, they

tend to act as equalisers in societies seeped in class and gender inequalities. There are also environmental and public health benefits of having fewer private vehicles on the roads, leading to a reduction in carbon emissions and congestion. But despite all these economic, social and environmental arguments for greater investment in public transport — and despite the reality of an ever-expanding population — the sector has been largely neglected in Pakistan. While Punjab has been able to develop proficient urban transit systems — primarily in the cities of Lahore and Multan — the other provinces have lagged behind. And time and again, we have seen how development projects and the provision of necessary services come to a halt with interruptions in governance. For instance, the Islamabad metro bus service was supposed to extend to the New Islamabad International Airport, but this plan has been put on hold since the PTI government came to power.

There is petty politics, and then there is political hubris, which is perhaps best illustrated in the case of the Peshawar Bus Rapid Transit project. The ambitious venture was announced one year before the general elections. However, from the beginning, the Peshawar BRT has been mired in controversy. Over two years and several design changes later, billions of rupees have been borrowed, hundreds of trees hacked, and there is still no sign of the project nearing its completion. The mismanagement of funds has also led to accusations of corruption, with the Peshawar High Court directing the FIA to carry out investigations.

Then there is the tragedy of Karachi. Residents of the metropolis had been told they would have their own mass transit system as part of a plan conceived by the Japan International Cooperation Agency in 2012. Seven years later, however, the plan is a non-starter, and the city is still waiting for even one of those four colour-coded bus routes to be completed, or the defunct Karachi Circular Railway to be revived. Instead, the roads that were dug up to make way for the Green Line have been abandoned midway. Despite housing over 14m people and opening its doors to people from all over the country and beyond, and despite millions of dollars pouring in from foreign donors, it is nothing short of a travesty that the city does not have a single decent public transport system running, even with the federal government stepping in. The ever-enterprising private sector — ride-hailing services, rickshaws, buses — have rushed in to fill the gap, but many cannot afford the daily commuting expenses. Unfortunately, the country's

economic powerhouse remains an afterthought to its leaders, especially the provincial government.

## **Afghan children**

“PEACE is more difficult than war,” said Abbas Stanikzai, the Afghan Taliban’s top negotiator, in an interview with the BBC in February this year. The war in Afghanistan has dragged on for so many years that one tends to forget what is actually at stake: the future of the country’s children. A new Unicef report titled *Preserving Hope in Afghanistan: Protecting children in the world’s most lethal conflict* is a timely reminder of the ultimate cost of the 40-year-old conflict. The report sheds light on the extent of the adversities suffered by millions of Afghan children simply because they have been born and raised in a country which has been described as “the world’s worst killing field”. According to the report, on average, as many as nine children in Afghanistan were killed or maimed every day in 2019 — a year termed as particularly deadly for the country’s young ones “even by Afghanistan’s grim standards”. It reveals that at least 6,500 children died while 15,000 were injured between 2009 and 2018. The recent surge in suicide attacks and clashes between pro- and anti-government forces have raised the rate of child casualties by 11pc in the outgoing year.

The report also calls out all parties involved in the conflict for failing in their duty to protect Afghanistan’s children from the ugly consequences of war. However, conflict-related violence is not the only factor preventing Afghan children’s right to be able to lead normal lives. Severe malnutrition, an indirect effect of the prolonged war, affects as many as 600,000 children under the age of five. Similarly, the country’s shattered infrastructure has kept at least 3.7m children away from schools, while at least 30pc of children are engaged in labour to support their families. The report states that nearly 4m Afghan children need some form of humanitarian assistance to help alleviate their difficulties. In her statement released with the report, Unicef’s executive director Henrietta Fore said: “Children, their families and communities suffer the horrific consequences of conflict each and every day. Those same children are desperate to grow up, go to school, learn skills and build a future for themselves.” As the negotiations between the Taliban, and the US governments resume to look at the possibility of ending the long war, there may be reason to hope that the children of

Afghanistan will have a chance to experience a life of peace, as opposed to their present existence of hardship and fear.

## **Press freedom in 2019**

BY all appearances, the significant decline in journalist killings around the world this year — the lowest level it has been in 20 years — is an encouraging development. However, as highlighted in a recent statement by the International Press Institute, this is little more than a hollow victory when seen in the context of emerging trends in the news media today.

The IPI has expressed concerns that the drop in the number of journalists murdered in 2019 — 47 killings, as compared to 79 the year before — is, in fact, likely the direct result of an increasing use of non-lethal intimidatory tactics to attack independent journalists.

Arrests and newsroom raids from countries with authoritarian governments such as Egypt and Turkey to ostensibly open democracies such as Australia; populist rhetoric and vilification campaigns against journalists in Brazil, Pakistan and the Philippines; oppressive laws enacted in the name of national security but abused to suppress information in Nigeria and Singapore — these are just some of ways in which press censorship has evolved.

The current global press crisis should alarm all those who seek free and open societies, as it is also a manifestation of the deeper danger to democracy.

The very tools by which polities can be empowered to hold their leaders accountable — media platforms, justice systems and access to more data than ever before — have been weaponised by the latter to strong-arm the press into subservience. And this campaign does not stop at targeting journalism alone.

In Pakistan, one need only witness how such tactics are being extended to harass and undermine NGO workers, rights activists, academics and vulnerable minority groups — even relatively powerful individuals such as members of the judiciary and the political opposition. Going into 2020, matters are unlikely to improve. If this authoritarian ascent is to be arrested, it will require every ounce of resolve from today's embattled journalists to lead the way for others — to read, write and resist.

## **PPP's disappointing trajectory**

GRANTED permission by the Lahore High Court to observe Benazir Bhutto's death anniversary at the site of her assassination, PPP leaders, including party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, are set to honour the memory of their late leader at Liaquat Bagh, Rawalpindi, for the first time.

The aim of the party, which was earlier refused permission by the local administration to hold a rally at Liaquat Bagh, is to create some heat and light that can revive its bleak political fortunes ever since the PPP received a drubbing in the 2013 elections.

Today will mark a moment of remembrance for the party but also one of reflection.

There is much to reflect on for a party that has gone from a truly national symbol of resistance to a regional outfit of acquiescence. The slide has been gradual and painful.

From the fiery nationalism of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to the fierce defiance of Benazir Bhutto to the wily pragmatism of Asif Ali Zardari, and now the unsteady aggression of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the PPP has seen and endured it all.

Today, however, the rank and file of the party — that battled with tyrants and wrestled with the establishment — is fighting for relevance.

Reduced to its stronghold of Sindh, the party today is wandering in the political wilderness in search of a message, a slogan, an electorate and some traction. So far it has found very little.

The reasons are not hard to fathom.

Decades of self-flagellation with whips of corruption and ill-governance have left the party politically bloodied and weakened. It continues to be haunted by its own demons of ineptitude that are continually fed fat on a diet of gross mismanagement and lack of performance in the one province that it rules. The most ominous part of this tragic story is that the PPP does not seem to have learnt any lessons.

Does the leadership realise that it has almost been wiped out from its former stronghold of Punjab, and that it has been reduced to a negligible presence in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa?

Even in Sindh, it may be surviving on borrowed time as it has failed miserably to ensure good governance.

If the party leaders understand these grim realities, they are definitely not making any serious, focused and deliberate attempt to tackle the challenges they face.

Democracy is still fragile in Pakistan which needs leaders that raise a voice for progressive ideals and liberal values.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari may have shown that he is not reluctant to take firm positions on delicate matters but his task is to also transform the party by giving it direction that can help it regain the trust of a disillusioned vote bank. This requires more than fiery speeches. Let him show what he can deliver in Sindh and the voter will judge him for that.

## **BISP tumult**

THE Benazir Income Support Programme that began in 2008 with the aim to provide cash support to the poorest of the poor households across Pakistan has entered another round of controversy as its newest leadership has taken action to remove more than 820,000 people from the rolls of its beneficiaries. The programme had attracted adverse attention throughout the decade in which it has been operational, with one army chief even going to the extent of describing the funds dispersed through it as a “waste”. The fact that the programme has survived, and in fact grown over this time period, shows the robustness of the original design. Now, under the leadership of Sania Nishtar, a technocrat from international NGOs, it has taken the controversial step of excluding a huge number of beneficiaries from the rolls. Ms Nishtar is surrounded in the cabinet by those who would prefer to turn the programme into some form of political handout, and one of the complaints that they are directing at Ms Nishtar is that under her leadership, the programme is benefiting their political opponents.

Ms Nishtar deserves all the support that she can get. The BISP must not become a regime for handing out goodies to those who vote for certain politicians. If they feel that the handouts are ‘benefiting their opponents’, they need to find some

other way of delivering to their constituents rather than creating a back door for them to get onto the beneficiary rolls of the country's largest social support programme. But at the same time, Ms Nishtar needs to avoid creating the impression that she is moving to scan the rolls to exclude beneficiaries simply for the sake of saving money. After thanking her cabinet colleagues following the deletion of more than 820,000 names, she also mentioned the fact that up to Rs16bn of government money would be saved as a result. That must not be the purpose of her leadership and the exercise she has just completed. It is now imperative for her to find an equal number of new and deserving beneficiaries and add them to the rolls. Equally important, transparency in the criteria for being excluded from the programme is necessary to avoid a situation where a government disqualifies beneficiaries on technical grounds for the sake of saving money. Allocations, coverage, reach and targeting need to be increased, not decreased. That is the first and foremost task.

## Young hero

“THE teenage years of the Twenty-First Century are nearly over,” reads the UN year-end review of the past decade, before it goes on to name Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai as the ‘Teenager of the Decade’ for her work for the cause of girls’ education. At 21, Malala may not be a teenager anymore, but she has been using her voice and pen to speak out against tyranny for a decade, since she was an 11-year-old child: blogging for the BBC, or visiting different parts of Pakistan with her father to talk about the situation in Swat and her inability to pursue an education under the Pakistani Taliban’s brutal rule. At that time, the militant group had captured Swat Valley under the command of Mullah Fazlullah. He campaigned ferociously against the education of girls and destroyed several schools. In 2012, the Taliban attempted to silence Malala with a single bullet as she was making her way back from school in a van — an attack which also injured two other girls. Luckily, Malala survived the attempt to kill her and went on to be celebrated as a global icon focusing on girls’ education around the world.

In 2013, on her 16th birthday, Malala spoke eloquently at the UN. In 2014, she became co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17. And in 2017, she was admitted to the University of Oxford. Despite her colossal achievements on the global stage, many at home continue to slander her, particularly on social media, due to their own deep-rooted misogyny, envy, suspicion and ignorance.



Those who write disgraceful comments from behind the comfort of their computer screens could probably never muster the courage to speak as eloquently as she did as a child, and they seem to forget that when this country was in the grip of terrorism, schools were continuously targeted. Now as a young woman, Malala continues to campaign for the right to education, which is especially important considering that two-thirds of the world's illiterate population is comprised of women.

## **Laudable Saudi move**

COMING at the end of a year that has held quite a few shocks for Pakistani diplomacy, the news that Saudi Arabia is planning to convene a meeting of Muslim foreign ministers exclusively on the Kashmir issue deserves to be welcomed.

But some of the diplomatic jolts need to be recalled.

In March, the UAE invited the Indian external affairs minister to a meeting of foreign ministers of the OIC, without considering the opinion of Pakistan, an OIC founding member. Then following Aug 5, when India's Hindutva government headed by Narendra Modi abrogated the special status of India-held Kashmir, there was no criticism of the move from the Arab side; those who condemned it included Malaysia and Turkey.

While the Arab stance reflected adversely on the acumen of Pakistan's diplomats, it also underlined the cumulative mindset the Arab world has developed towards Muslims from other parts of the world. This mindset is one of indifference towards non-Arab Muslims even when they are victims of state brutality, as in occupied Kashmir and Myanmar.

Islamabad's grief over Riyadh's passivity was the greater because of the esteem in which Pakistan holds the Saudi leadership which is regarded as the Guardian of the Two Holy Places. For that reason, Riyadh's reaction to Mr Modi's criminality came as a blow to Pakistanis. The media quoted official Saudi sources as saying that Riyadh wanted "the concerned parties in Jammu and Kashmir to maintain peace, and take into account the interests of the people of the region". Noting that Saudi Arabia was following "the current situation" in Jammu and

Kashmir, it called for “a peaceful settlement in accordance with the international resolutions”.

While Riyadh, thus, walked a tightrope, Dubai’s response did it no credit whatsoever, for it said that Mr Modi’s Aug 5 action was “not a unique incident” in India’s history and that it was that country’s “internal matter”.

Against this background, the report that Saudi Arabia intends to call an OIC foreign ministers’ moot devoted exclusively to Kashmir comes as a breath of fresh air.

This can be called the most positive outcome of Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan’s one-day visit to Islamabad.

The Saudi initiative could be interpreted in two ways: either it is a move to placate Pakistan, especially after Riyadh put pressure on Islamabad to distance itself from the Kuala Lumpur Summit, or it shows a genuine Saudi interest in the plight of the Kashmiris who early next week will complete five months of the lockdown in their homeland which has been described as “an open-air prison”.

No date or venue has yet been notified for the planned OIC conference, but let us hope it is held at the earliest and that Qatar and Iran — both Saudi rivals — are also, as they should be, invited to make it a proper gathering of Muslim countries.

## **Power tariff hikes**

THE decision by Nepra, the power-sector regulator, to apply yet another hike in the price of power is a reminder that the pricing regime in the power sector is in dire need of reform, and more importantly, the right kind of reform. The wrong kind of reform would simply allow all accumulated costs of the inefficiency and lack of competence witnessed in public-sector power distribution companies to simply be passed on to the consumers through some sort of automatic price adjustment. The right kind of reform would structure the incentives for all operators in the power sector — from generators to distribution companies — to compete for the best kind of energy and serve up some top-notch products to their customers. At the moment, what we have is a system where the power tariff is notified by the government and the fuel cost is allowed to be passed through directly by Nepra.

In the most recent case, Nepra has allowed an increase of Rs1.56 per unit through the fuel cost adjustment only for the month of October. So far, this is fairly standard fare, though there is no doubt that the impact on people's bills will be substantial. It is standard fare because the fuel cost is, in the parlance of the power sector, a 'pass through item', meaning it is one of those elements in the cost build-up of electricity that is directly passed on to the consumers. Since one quarter of the power that was generated in October was from imported LNG, the higher cost of this fuel compared to that of local gas or hydel power would pass through automatically. The result is that an additional Rs14bn will be raised through bills to be issued next month. This is normal practice in our power system and such monthly fuel cost adjustments happen all the time. But the thing to note is the sheer inefficiency within this system. Electricity is a product that is bought and sold in milliseconds, and monthly fuel cost adjustments or quarterly tariff adjustments, or even line item breakdowns in the cost, sounds like an antiquated system today, as the second decade of the 21st century approaches its end. At this point in time, the government has embarked on a far-reaching power sector reform plan that includes pricing reform as well as potential privatisation. This is also the time to implement the right kind of pricing reform.

## **Age of superstition**

AS people from around the world tried to catch a glimpse of the solar eclipse, some families in Karachi made their way to the coastline in the early hours of Thursday. They believed the rare astronomical occurrence held curative powers for their loved ones who suffered from disabilities. In the newspapers, photographs of children with disabilities buried in sand up to their necks, as parents looked on and comforted them, only highlighted the desperation of a people trying to find meaning in their suffering and clutching on to whatever hope they could find in a world that often seems out of their control. Similar accounts of children with disabilities being buried neck-deep in sand during the solar eclipse were reported in India. Despite scientific advancements and greater understanding of mental and physical impairments, many in South Asia continue to be governed by superstition and take advice from fake spiritual healers masquerading as divine middlemen on earth. A great deal of cruelty is inflicted on those who fall out of the norms of conformist societies in the name of curing them. For instance, in September, a five-year-old child was hospitalised after being beaten by a spiritual healer in Sargodha. The boy's mother had taken him

to the 'pir', hoping he would expel the jinns she believed possessed her son. Earlier, in June, another 'pir' in Sheikhpura was arrested after raping a woman who had approached him to remove what she imagined was a curse.

Unfortunately, scientific thinking has not taken root in our societies, and it continues to be one of the most neglected disciplines in the country. There is a distressing lack of curiosity and attempts at trying to understand and study the world and natural phenomena as it is, without muddying it with ideology. After all, this is a country where a nuclear engineer once proposed 'harnessing the power of jinns' to solve Pakistan's energy crisis. Regrettably, instead of demanding evidence, we look for easy answers.

## **Clipping NAB's wings**

THE latest attempt to try and redefine the powers of the National Accountability Bureau, and the manner in which it was done, shows that the aggressive 'accountability drive' the PTI launched when it came to power is now in its dying throes.

The redefinition is actually an attempt at a surgical clipping away of the bureau's powers to even begin an inquiry — let alone investigate, detain and prosecute — wealthy businessmen in particular. The change is being made through a presidential ordinance, as the government does not seem to be able to muster the numbers in parliament to pass legislation — not least because of this very same 'accountability drive'.

The approval and announcement of the ordinance itself was marred by confusion as whole clauses asked for by the powerful secretaries' group of the bureaucracy were jettisoned from the final text before promulgation, but communicated to the media nonetheless.

What will emerge from the confusion once the dust settles is a compromise within a compromise. NAB's powers had to be clipped because the bureau's monumental incompetence and overweening ambition had caused it to cast its net far wider than it could manage.

But the ordinance has created a double standard, and may well have let the cat out of the bag in the process. All matters related to taxes as well as transactions that do not involve holders of public office will no longer be within NAB's remit;

instead, they will be dealt with by the numerous institutions that already exist for the purpose, such as the FBR, FIA and the accountability courts.

Also, when pursuing cases where the allegation is ‘misuse of authority’ by a public office holder, the bureau will need to prove that there was some material benefit that the accused gained from this alleged ‘misuse of authority’, rather than turning the allegation into the crime itself.

A number of critical questions arise. For one, why can’t there be one across-the-board standard by which to activate the powers of NAB, whether for private or public individuals and transactions? Second, what will the fallout be of these changes on the countless NAB cases already under way, or in appeal, including those in which public office holders are implicated?

Clearly, the ‘aggressive accountability drive’ launched by the government last year has hit its limits and is now being rolled back, leaving behind lacunae and unanswered questions. What this episode teaches us is that, ultimately, accountability is about the writ of the state. If its writ is weak, the weakness will be exploited by all manner of people, whether public or private, for personal gain, and no effort to create new authorities and carve out special laws will fill that void. Perhaps it is time to shut down NAB and focus on strengthening the writ of the state across the board.

## **Militant cell**

A FEW days ago, the Punjab counterterrorism force and a military intelligence agency smashed a ‘media cell’ of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent in Gujranwala. The cell was being used by the militant group to plan and finance its terrorist operations, and communicate and propagate its message through social media tools. The group, which was being watched by the two agencies for quite some time, had recently relocated to the city from Karachi to avoid action against its operators. The raiding team has arrested five trained members of the group and recovered a large number of laptops carrying encrypted data for communication with senior leaders based in Afghanistan, mobile phones and files containing banned content, cash, suicide jackets, explosives and weapons. The action has helped the authorities avert an attack by the militant organisation against law-enforcement agencies in Punjab. This action against AQIS is being

referred to as the most significant development against militants operating out of Punjab in the last two years.

The action taken against militant groups under the National Action Plan during the last few years has made them halt their terror activities. But a couple of recent incidents in Lahore — whose coverage in the media was apparently suppressed by the authorities — demonstrate that the pause could be temporary. The latest action against AQIS underscores the reality that militant groups may be down but are still not out. That eliminates any room, if indeed it exists, for complacency on the part of the agencies tasked with eradicating militancy and terrorist financing in the country. Their job has become even more important after the placement of Pakistan on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force. At the last FATF plenary, Pakistan narrowly escaped being blacklisted, which would have meant depressing consequences for its economic future. The FATF has warned that Pakistan could be downgraded further in February unless it makes significant progress on meeting the global anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing standards. The IMF has again cautioned that Pakistan's failure to implement global AML/CTF standards could cause the promised capital inflows to freeze up and jeopardise the Fund's current programme. Pakistan can avoid this hazard only by effectively and swiftly plugging holes in the country's AML/CTF regime, taking action against the militants, and producing enough evidence to have them convicted in a court of law. The sooner the government acknowledges the challenges publicly, the better it will be for the country.

## **Home-based workers**

AT a recent discussion held at the Karachi Press Club, speakers representing the Home-based Women Workers Federation complained about the blatant exploitation faced by those in this informal sector. They noted that the sector is growing each year as factory work is increasingly outsourced to home-based workers, often on a piece-rate system, and yet there has been no change in their lives or the nature of their work. Despite being one of the largest workforces that contributes immensely to Pakistan's economy, they continue to suffer poor wages and mistreatment at the hands of middlemen and contractors. For years, they had little negotiating power and virtually no social safety net. Many reported developing physical impairments and health complications from the painstakingly

detailed work they engage in, which consumed many hours of their day, in addition to their daily household chores. Additionally, the perceived lower status of women also means they get paid less than their male counterparts for the same amount of work. Unfortunately, women's labour continues to be overlooked, especially when it is restricted to the home. And yet, many have no choice but to be confined within the four walls of their homes as their mobility is often limited in patriarchal cultures. The informal nature of the work also results in home-based workers receiving help from other members of the family living in the house. This can include their children, who should be in school, pursuing their right to an education.

Thanks to the decade-long tireless efforts of the workers, the Sindh Home-based Workers Act was passed in 2018 — but its rules of business are yet to be finalised. As articulated by the speakers at the conference, this needs to be done on an urgent basis to ensure the workers receive their due rights. And while legislation is a necessary first step in ensuring rights, the government must see to it that it is implemented on ground. There can be no progress until half the population is counted as an equal stakeholder in every aspect of life.

## **Development in the tribal districts**

IF the Punjab government is struggling with governance issues, it appears the KP administration is not far behind.

Read: Over half of KP uplift funds released in three months unutilised

A recent report in this newspaper says the government departments have utilised only 0.4pc of the Rs83bn development outlay for the merged districts in the first six months of the current fiscal year.

After the latest review of the development portfolio, KP Chief Minister Mahmood Khan conveyed his displeasure to the 13 departments responsible for this poor show.

The breakdown of the funds spent on development projects, and more importantly, funds not spent at all, paints a dismal picture of the performance of yet another provincial government headed by the PTI.

When it comes to making speeches and commitments about mainstreaming these districts, politicians have been falling over each other to solemnly pledge revolutionary changes. The reality, however, tells another story.

The hefty sum of Rs83bn is a good start because the region has long been neglected and is in dire need of uplift.

After the money is allocated comes the real challenge of skill, capacity and commitment: how to spend it effectively, efficiently and transparently. It is here that the provincial government of the PTI has been falling short repeatedly.

The unfinished BRT project is just one, albeit the most visible and expensive, illustration of the poor governance skills that PTI leaders have displayed in KP.

This mismanagement and poor performance comes at a steep cost for both citizens and the state. The uplift of the merged districts should have been accorded the highest priority by the top leadership of the province.

However, the situation as illustrated by the overwhelmingly unspent amount of the allocated budget puts this steep cost in even sharper focus.

After all, it is not because of any shortage of funds that the provincial government has been unable to address the districts' need for functioning schools, colleges, hospitals, roads, clean drinking water and many other essential services. What is sadly missing are the will, capacity and the correct list of priorities to get this work done for the people.

In the final analysis, this lack of performance shows the entire government in a bad light. This should be of concern to Prime Minister Imran Khan because these districts have been politically integrated after a long and arduous process. They, in fact, present a challenge to the centre as well as to the province: fulfil all the promises made and bring the fruits of development into the region or risk losing credibility and face. There is much riding on the project to mainstream the tribal districts, and it would be a shame if the PTI leadership fell short of the task at hand.



## Police body cams

EXCEPT perhaps for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where it fares comparatively better, the police force in the eyes of the public consistently ranks among the least trustworthy institutions. It is a regrettably well-earned reputation, given the incidence of violence against peaceful demonstrators, custodial torture, fake encounters, etc. Sindh's law enforcers are now turning to technology to bridge this citizen-police trust deficit. On the cards is a surveillance project that would require cops on patrol duty, deputed for snap-checking and deployed at check posts, to wear body cameras for the purpose of accountability. Any transgression on their part will be on the record; for that matter, so will unjustifiable resistance by the members of the public to lawful and reasonable requests by the police. The first consignment of 100 body cams manufactured by a local high-tech company should be on its way after a deal with the firm is finalised. Further down the line, the project is to include monitoring of all police stations in Sindh.

Evidence from developed countries illustrates the important role that body cams can play in determining police culpability in instances where they are alleged to have used unlawful tactics against citizens. However, the rot in the Sindh police involves fundamental, systemic issues that have little to do with technology. It is the mindset of the police, and the government, that is problematic. Cops are trained to function as an oppressive colonial force meant to control the population rather than uphold the law. They are also expected by the government to function as its handmaiden. This politicisation corrupts the force and demoralises capable officers by rewarding loyalty to the powers that be rather than competence and integrity in serving the public. About two years ago, the Sindh government was engaged in a concerted effort — ultimately thwarted by the Supreme Court — to have then provincial IGP A.D Khowaja replaced with a more 'malleable' police chief. This year, the provincial dispensation enacted a new law transferring administrative powers back to the government. A few weeks ago, the present IG, Syed Kaleem Imam, wrote to the chief secretary Sindh — another federal appointee like himself — to complain about recent transfers and postings of senior police officials made by the provincial government without consulting him, and thereby undermining his command. Empowering the police to act without fear or favour, and setting up credible oversight mechanisms, is the route to real reform. Gadgets are merely window dressing.

## **Polio mess**

THE outgoing year has proved a devastating one for the anti-polio campaign. As 2019 progressed, reports about the number of polio cases and the mismanagement of the campaign itself went from bad to worse. At least 119 cases have been reported so far, making the previous year's tally of 12 look almost paltry by comparison. What is also unnerving are the reports of the large number of children who were missed in the vaccination drives. Health authorities in Sindh have revealed that out of the 9m children targeted in the recent polio drive earlier in the month, some 297,000 children were not vaccinated against the crippling disease. The highest number of children who were not administered the vaccine were from Larkana division, followed by Hyderabad division, Shaheed Benazirabad and then Mirpurkhas. Though the number of children may not seem that high given the target of 9m, there are reasons why the matter should still be of concern. The first is that polio officials in Sindh had claimed at the conclusion of the immunisation drive that they had achieved '101pc coverage'. In fact, this puzzling assertion was not limited to Sindh; even the Ministry of National Health Services claimed that 99pc children under the age of five had been immunised across the country in the latest vaccination drive.

The other reason is the constant emergence of new polio cases from Sindh and KP, even in winter that is usually seen as the low-transmission season. Immunisation drives carried out in the colder months are important for building up herd immunity in children, which is more difficult to achieve during the summer. The fact that polio cases keep emerging is a sign that immunisation drives carried out earlier in the year may also have missed their intended targets. The battle against polio is long and Pakistan has just begun its struggle anew. Perhaps it is time to review our anti-polio efforts and make them more transparent and credible for the collective benefit of millions of children across the country.

## **Economy in 2020**

THE incoming year will be a decisive one for the economy. The stabilisation that saw a tortured start in 2019 is set to continue, but optimists in the market are anticipating an end to the chokehold of high interest rates and the aggressive

taxation drive sometime in the early months of 2020. The growth rate has plummeted while forecasts say the economy should register a growth rate of between 2.5pc to 3.5pc by the end of the fiscal year. Manufacturing has hit one of its lowest ebbs ever, except perhaps for the years immediately following the great crash of 2008, while private investment and business confidence have also been lacklustre. Even as the economy chokes under the stabilisation measures adopted out of necessity by the government in 2019, the incoming year presents some promise of change.

The prime minister has already begun promising a shift in the focus of economic management away from stabilisation towards growth. In multiple forums over the past few weeks, he has declared the economy stable and the time to move towards growth to now be imminent. These words are partially responsible for fuelling a sense of optimism among certain sections of the business community about the new year. If interest rates are to be reduced and the level of government spending, especially on development projects with strong linkages across various sectors of the economy, picks up, a return to growth and re-inflation of aggregate demand can spur economic activities quickly. Interestingly however, the prime minister's finance adviser is a little more circumspect when talking about transitioning to growth, but even he is promising greater dedication of fiscal resources to encourage export-oriented sectors.

Still, a lot depends on how the fiscal numbers turn out and how stable the reserve accumulation that has taken place thus far remains. Business groups are asking when growth will return, whereas the government must ask itself whether we are in a position to afford growth at the moment. The fiscal numbers seem to be improving, even if largely on the back of excruciating expenditure cuts, and reserves had only in recent months reversed a long trend of continuous declines. But if there's a sudden move to apply the accelerator at this point and reignite domestic demand, the deflation of which is the core aspect of the ongoing stabilisation programme, the same deficits could reappear again. Instead of keeping the focus on growth, the government should present 2020 as the year of reform and outline in detail its plans for the state-owned enterprises, the power sector and the future of administered pricing regimes as well as the overhaul of the regulators to ensure a competitive playing field going forward. More than raw growth, let 2020 be the year the country arrests and reverses the steady erosion of its productivity. That would make for a very happy new year indeed.

## **Bustard business**

ACCORDING to findings by the Houbara Bustard Commission, the internationally protected migratory bird's population has dropped noticeably in the past three years in Punjab. Each winter, flocks of houbara bustards descend from Central Asia on the deserts and plains of Pakistan, but their population has been diminishing due to excessive hunting carried out largely by dignitaries from the Middle East. In a single 10-day hunting trip, up to 100 birds are allowed to be killed, but this figure is reportedly exceeded frequently. Consequently, the houbara bustard is placed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List. In March, the Lahore High Court had directed the commission to investigate whether the continued hunting of the endangered species was being carried out in a sustainable manner, or if new and stricter conservation policies needed to be initiated to protect their population. For instance, in order to conserve the mountain-dwelling national animal of Pakistan, the markhor, the government issues limited trophy hunting permits each year. Since an outright blanket ban would not prove sustainable, four hunting permits are annually auctioned, and the large sum of money collected is then distributed amongst the local population, with a smaller portion going to the wildlife department. This has helped reduce the illegal hunting of the majestic animal, hunted for its body parts, while simultaneously benefiting the local population. When it comes to the houbara bustard, except for a small increase noted in the Rajanpur-Rojhan area, the findings of the recent report point to how the excessive hunting of the endangered species has negatively impacted its status. While there have been reports of some conservation efforts being carried out, with captured birds being released into the wild by officials from the UAE, clearly these have not been enough to reverse the damage caused over the years.

The issue is also fairly politicised, and often becomes a matter of national sovereignty versus foreign policy compulsions. When the current prime minister was in the opposition, he requested his government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to not lift the ban on the hunting of houbara bustards. In 2015, the Supreme Court had placed a ban on the hunting of the houbara bustard, but this was lifted the following year. Yet just last week, special permits were handed to the royal family of Bahrain to hunt the bird in the next hunting season.

## **Bangladesh series**

THE Bangladesh cricket team's tour of Pakistan, scheduled to commence from Jan 15, is now facing uncertainty after their cricket board, the BCB, offered to play just three T20s in Pakistan while asking for the two-Test series to be shifted to a neutral venue.

This recent shift in Bangladesh's stance has clearly upset the Pakistan Cricket Board which has now asked the BCB to explain the reasons for its reluctance to fulfil its obligation under the International Cricket Council's Future Tours Programme.

The PCB has every right to ask Bangladesh about its non-committal approach, especially after Test cricket returned to Pakistan this month when a full-strength team from Sri Lanka played two Tests in the country, ending a decade-long barren stretch for Pakistan.

The visitors commended the PCB and praised the government for making excellent security arrangements. The incident-free series against Sri Lanka is already beginning to have its impact, with several international teams, including South Africa, England and Australia, now in talks with the PCB for future tours.

The BCB's stance is thus odd, especially considering that Bangladesh's under-16 team visited Rawalpindi early this year while its women's squad also played matches in Lahore following a high-powered visit by a security delegation to Pakistan. The BCB's chief executive was recently quoted as saying that Bangladesh has to take into account the views of its players and members of team management prior to giving the go-ahead for a Test series.

But the fact is that the security situation has improved after Pakistan's sustained crackdown on militants, and as the Sri Lankan tour showed, extra care has been taken to ensure the safety of international players. The PCB is still in negotiations with the BCB and is hopeful of a positive outcome.

Besides, the series is also part of the ICC World Test Championship, so the international board is a stakeholder and should make efforts to convince Bangladesh to fulfil its commitment which will be a boost for the game's future in the region.