



# **DAWN**

# **EDITORIALS**

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# Who'll rule Punjab?

WITH the government at the centre on its way out, is PTI left with any tricks at all to prevent Punjab from falling into the lap of the opposition political parties? The PTI and its leader have already shown their 'trump card' in the province by letting go off their reclusive and unpopular Chief Minister Usman Buzdar and replacing him with the PML-Q's Pervaiz Elahi. The common view is that the prime minister played his hand a little too late, allowing the wily Chaudhries of Gujrat only limited time to manoeuvre a victory by bringing around the PTI's dissident provincial lawmakers — whose main demand pertaining to the removal of Mr Buzdar has been met — and luring some opposition MPAs, in order to achieve the required number of 186 to win the vote of confidence for Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi. The opinion, however, is divided on whether the PTI would have been in a better position in the province, and at the centre today had it ceded to the PML-Q's demands earlier. With Prime Minister Imran Khan's political fortunes declining fast and the exit of the MQM-P from the coalition in Islamabad finally sealing his fate, few believe he could have thwarted the opposition assault against his party's provincial government.

To give the Chaudhries credit for their tenacity, it must be acknowledged that they remain undaunted by the developments in the federal capital or the enormity of the task ahead. They have already stepped up their game by contacting PTI dissidents individually, as well as reaching out to their leader Jehangir Khan Tareen for the group's en masse support. The combined opposition is also not taking the challenge lightly, despite their confidence that the Tareen group will ultimately side with them in Punjab as at the centre. But will it? That the Tareen group holds the key to 7 Club Road, the official residence of chief minister, at least for now, means the support of its 17 MPAs remains crucial for forming a new government in Punjab. That is a challenge for both sides. Which side they will throw their weight behind is still not clear. It is also unclear if they will stay united as one, or if political compulsions and inducements from the Chaudhries or the opposition PML-N in return for their support, will force them to take their decisions individually. We will get some clarity on where Punjab is headed over the next few days.

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## PM's address

BY condemning in advance those who will be voting against him on Sunday as willing accomplices in an international conspiracy, Prime Minister Imran Khan has cemented his narrative for his upcoming election campaign. He knows that he is not going to survive, but, through a lengthy primetime address heavy on sermon and nationalist zeal, he has ensured that he will remain relevant to a broad cross-section of the electorate easily swayed by emotion and deeply invested in conspiracy theories.

He knows that publicly appealing to the better nature of his opponents is unlikely to win him any votes; yet, by premising his emotive appeal on upholding the dream of an independent Pakistan, he has cleverly framed going against him as akin to going against the founding fathers themselves. He has also, once again, built himself up as a lone fighter for Pakistan's cause — the only voice to stand against tyranny when American drones were raining death on Pakistani soil. Now, he tells his supporters, he is being targeted for not kneeling to foreign powers' demands to surrender Pakistan's sovereignty.

He has asked why he should be punished for wanting Pakistan to be treated as an equal and not a servile partner while painting his opponents as willing sell-outs because they are so compromised by their corrupt deeds. This is shrewd messaging, built on the trope of a lone warrior fighting against insurmountable odds and it is clear the embattled prime minister hopes to turn public sympathies to his side once he goes down in parliament.

With his campaign strategy set, one hopes that the prime minister will let go of his 'cable-gate' ploy. He has already made a highly irresponsible mistake by letting slip that the cable originated in America after being advised by all the officials who matter to tread with care.

The National Security Committee, after being apprised of the contents of the diplomatic cable in question, had issued a reasonably worded statement that ought to have mollified the indignant premier and given him a graceful way out of a serious diplomatic mess. The committee had also assured that Pakistan would

raise the matter through a “strong demarche”, “in keeping with diplomatic norms”. This is the sane, measured response one hoped to have initially seen.

It is worth asking why taking the letter to the NSC was not the first thing to have crossed the Foreign Office’s mind. If it was clear that a line had been crossed, why was this unveiled through a prop at a political event? Who advised the prime minister that this was the best strategy to take? The prime minister also owes it to the Pakistani people to reveal who he believes are the internal elements facilitating this alleged conspiracy against the country. It cannot only be the politicians at fault.

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## **No access to justice**

BY pardoning those suspected of involvement in her husband’s murder, Shireen Jokhio, in her simple but heartbreaking video message released on Wednesday, presented a piercing indictment of the country’s criminal justice system. Giving reasons for her pardoning the suspects, Ms Jokhio said she had four children and was unable to run from pillar to post to seek justice from the courts. Her decision, she said, was not based on greed, and that she had not been offered any financial compensation. She had wanted to fight the case but had been abandoned even by those close to her. There was no justice in Pakistan, Ms Jokhio lamented, and said that she had left matters to God. Activist Nazim Jokhio had been found murdered last November at PPP MPA Jam Awais’s farmhouse in Karachi. The autopsy report had revealed that the deceased, who had been allegedly kidnapped shortly after filming the illegal hunting of the houbara bustard, had been brutally tortured. The family also accused PPP MNA Jam Abdul Karim of involvement.

Though Ms Jokhio’s pardon is not legally binding, her distress underscores how difficult it is to ensure that justice is done, even in high-profile cases such as this one. Evidence of this lies in the words of the attorney general himself who said in 2020 that the criminal justice system tends to favour the perpetrators over the victims. It is no wonder that people who do not possess the resources to access strong legal counsel, when facing pressure from powerful elements, give up their

desire to seek justice for their loved ones or for themselves. Ms Jokhio's decision to pardon the perpetrators is simply a call of distress. Her helplessness in the face of many odds is what a large number of people, especially those without means, encounter. The challenges are myriad and range from political interference in the justice system, to shoddy investigation, unprofessional lawyers and an unsympathetic police force. The question is: who is ready to address these deficiencies?

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## **Industrial pollution**

THAT in a city like Karachi, which has about a dozen industrial areas of various sizes, only 170 units have their own waste treatment facilities is not only shocking, it is also embarrassing. Consequently, more than 90pc of the city's industrial, domestic and other solid waste is simply discharged into the sea. These disturbing facts were revealed by senior officials of the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency at an event held to consult stakeholders on the government's plan to build five combined effluent treatment plants in different industrial zones. The officials also revealed that legal action against violators of the Sindh Environmental Protection Act, 2014, had resulted in 149 convictions and the collection of Rs19.5m in fines. Even though Pakistan has not contributed much to global warming, it is one of the top 10 countries most impacted by climate change. A key reason is the extremely high levels of environmental pollution. Despite being a signatory to the London Convention and having several environment-related laws, Pakistani cities are routinely listed among the world's most polluted cities. It is clear that when it comes to hurting our own environment, we are our own worst enemies.

Shocking as this information is, what is ironic is the fact that it comes from the very government agency responsible for checking environmental pollution and taking legal action against violators. Sepa's role as environmental regulator has been questionable. Though there is some merit to Sepa's claims of being understaffed and underfunded, the very fact that the agency has been able to attain only 149 convictions — although hundreds of thousands of industries continue to violate the Environmental Protection Act — exposes its lack of will

and incompetence. Moreover, its involvement in, or disregard of, a number of development projects that have caused damage to the environs, such as the Malir Expressway, raises serious questions over its role as environmental watchdog. Instead of explaining how polluted Karachi is, why doesn't the agency put its head down and do its job?

Published in Dawn, April 2nd, 2022

## **Rocking the boat**

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan seems willing to go to any lengths in his determination to convert his looming defeat in Sunday's vote of no-confidence into a moment of political martyrdom.

As if the shock value of an international conspiracy to oust him was not enough, his close aides and Mr Khan himself have since doubled down with public statements that they fear an attempt on his life. This is a very grave claim if it is indeed based on incontrovertible facts, and the prime minister ought to share with the public exactly who the nefarious elements involved in this plot are. Otherwise, the more rational observers of the drama playing out in Islamabad would find it a little difficult to believe that Mr Khan is suddenly finding himself in graver and graver peril as the clock ticks down to his ouster from office.

One hopes that the prime minister is not simply trying to create panic among his supporters, many of whom have already issued passionate calls for rallies and demonstrations ahead of the Sunday vote. Making the most of his last days in office, the prime minister has played a shrewd hand by utilising both public and private media to hammer home his election narrative: surely there is little to be gained in having citizens take to the streets when the stage for the denouement has already been set in parliament.

Editorial: PM Imran has built himself up as a lone fighter for Pakistan's cause

The prime minister also needs to take a critical look at his decision to provoke the citizenry against a foreign country. He has milked the 'scandalous' diplomatic cable enough for purely political purposes and it is time he leaves the resolution

of this matter to the Foreign Office. It is understood that that was the recommendation of the National Security Committee as well after it reviewed the matter in detail.

Insinuating that there is something sinister in the way the diplomats of the foreign country in question are going about doing their jobs is a very dangerous line for the chief executive of a country to take. Diplomats from all countries routinely meet politicians, journalists and other notables. These interactions are meant to create social connections so that foreign representatives can learn as much as they can about the countries they are delegated to. If the prime minister has evidence of any misdoings during such interactions, this should be shared with the public.

It is, however, clear that despite his insistent messaging that an international conspiracy is behind what is transpiring in parliament, the national security establishment does not seem interested in taking any extraordinary action. That their stoic 'neutrality' continues to hold and the prime minister himself has not expressed any qualms about it is the biggest indicator that he knows his talk of the vote of no-confidence being a sinister plot against Pakistan is just hot air.

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## Tax revenues

THE 29pc growth in tax revenue collection by the FBR during the first three quarters of the present financial year to March from the last fiscal is encouraging. But is it enough? Or does it represent the country's true tax potential? A cursory look at the disintegrated tax data issued by the FBR for the period under review will confirm that the increased revenue collection does not show an improvement in tax compliance and enforcement. Nor does it give us hope that the FBR will succeed in achieving the enhanced tax target of over Rs6.1tr for the ongoing fiscal as agreed with the IMF in January. The bulk of Rs4.38tr collected so far — 52pc of the total tax revenue — has come from a massive jump in imports fuelled by spiking domestic demand due to the procyclical policies pursued by the government in the first half of the fiscal. Once imports started to slow down and taxes on purchases of petroleum products were slashed, the collection also began betraying signs of tapering in the last few months. Indirect taxes — GST,

customs duty, FED, etc — constituting almost two-thirds of the total collection are also a big question mark over the capacity and ability of the tax machinery to boost revenues. Even a large chunk of direct taxes (on incomes) is raked up by businesses that are required to withhold a percentage of their transactions for the FBR, or is gathered at the import stage.

Tax revenues are the main source of governments' spending capacity all over the world. Pakistan's failure to raise its tax-to-GDP ratio beyond 9pc to 12pc means that the government would have limited capability to invest in essential public services, and finance economic and social development. Little wonder then that successive governments have had no choice other than to take on debt to pay for their burgeoning expenditure and fund development in the country. Boosting tax revenues for public investments and improved service delivery has by far been the country's most fundamental challenge and a major cause of the economic troubles confronting us today. Yet no government has dared to fix the FBR to improve tax governance, compliance and enforcement for fear of a political backlash. Thus, Pakistan's tax administration remains one of the most corrupt, inequitable and inefficient in the world, in spite of several attempts to reform the system in the past. Expecting a sustainable economic turnaround without revamping the existing tax system and machinery makes no sense.

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## **Eyes on Islamabad**

A NEW chapter in the history of Pakistani democracy may be written by parliament today. Though a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister is not without precedent, today may mark the first time the National Assembly sends a government packing.

Before Prime Minister Imran Khan, Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz had, in 1989 and 2006, respectively, faced a test of their government's resilience. Unlike those two, however, Mr Khan — unless he springs a last-minute surprise which he has promised to — seems positioned to lose the vote. There are similarities, too, between the past and the present. Reprehensible and damaging precedents have been set once again by both opposition and government parties. Elected

leaders have again shown that they can shamelessly abandon both allies and principles in their pursuit of personal gains. Loyalties have again been bought and sold, greatly diminishing the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy in the eyes of the citizenry.

Editorial: The PM has made the most of his last days in office by playing a shrewd hand

As defeat looms, Mr Khan has made it clear he will not go gentle into the night. Determined to turn his ouster — if he remains unable to prevent it — into a moment of political martyrdom, Mr Khan has built up a combative narrative, melding religious beliefs with nationalistic fervour. He has framed his troubles as the result of an international conspiracy abetted by local actors, accusing PTI dissidents and opposition leaders of being ‘traitors’ for their alleged complicity in the plot.

This is a dangerous ploy, as it will provoke the sentiments of PTI’s charged up-supporters and may trigger violence in the streets. With the prime minister urging his electorate to turn out in large numbers before the vote to protest this ‘conspiracy’, matters can take a dangerous turn. There are fears that protesters may violently confront opposition and dissident MPs ahead of the vote. The opposition has already expressed concerns for the safety of those going to parliament today. One hopes sufficient preparations have been made to prevent matters from spiralling dangerously out of hand.

Meanwhile, the army chief seems to have chosen a questionable time to publicly break ranks with the PTI government. His statement at the Islamabad Security Dialogue on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is likely to rekindle civil-military tensions. His opinion reveals he stands considerably at odds with the PTI government on the matter. The army chief is entitled to his views, but it would have been better if they were expressed through policy formulated by the National Security Committee rather than before a public audience including foreign observers. This decision has only renewed doubts regarding the actual ‘neutrality’ of the establishment. With Pakistan on the verge of what may be a period of political turmoil, the public should not have been left feeling as if yet another public representative is being prematurely shown the door because they crossed the powers that be.

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## **Power in a few hands**

THE PML-N decision to nominate Hamza Shehbaz Sharif for the job of chief minister in Punjab is a bad idea given that the opposition political parties already propose to elect his father as the country's chief executive, should they succeed in toppling Imran Khan through a no-confidence vote. The move gives the impression that the Sharifs are reluctant to trust non-family leaders with their stronghold, despite their unmatched hold over the party in Punjab. It also underscores that kinship continues to play a large role in PML-N's politics. It isn't something that people are not familiar with. 'Dynastic politics' is deeply entrenched in the Pakistani feudal milieu. But the PML-N has taken this concept to the next level. Nawaz Sharif's refusal to give Pervaiz Elahi the top job in Punjab in 1997, in breach of a commitment, had led the Chaudhries of Gujrat to part ways with him when the Sharifs came under a cloud after Gen Pervez Musharraf's takeover. Indeed, the elder Sharif had appointed Ghulam Haider Wyne, whose loyalty and devotion to his leader and his family knew no bounds, as Punjab's chief minister in 1990; he, however, preferred to rule the province through his younger brother during his next two terms in Islamabad. Even at the centre, Mr Sharif had surrounded himself with relatives who occupied key positions.

It's not just the Sharifs — dynastic nominations and successions are a de facto phenomenon in every political and religious organisation, barring a few, since their leaders, and the latter's family members, are considered a much stronger brand than the organisations they head. Even Imran Khan's PTI, which promised to break such family enterprises and their dynastic hold, is centred around the person of its leader. Such an unchallenged hold of oligarchs on their parties is indicative of the lack of internal democracy within political organisations, which prevents the emergence of a non-family leadership. But times are changing. If social media posts are a sign, a number of PML-N followers have expressed their disgust over the decision to have Shehbaz Sharif as prime minister and his son as chief minister, saying there are many worthy leaders in the party who could have been entrusted with Punjab's top job. Though the opposition to the decision is muted for now, as the party is focused on snatching Punjab from the PTI, it could become louder sooner or later if the Sharifs continue to keep power within the family.

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# Sri Lanka crisis

EMERGENCY rule has been declared in the island nation of Sri Lanka after anti-government protests turned violent. Sri Lanka has been going through a severe economic crisis caused in some measure by a shortage of foreign exchange resulting in lengthy power cuts, price spirals and a shortage of essential items. Public anger boiled over as protesters stormed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's private residence in Colombo on Thursday and clashed with law enforcers. While the president said the move had been made "in the interests of public security", emergency rule severely limits civil rights, and gives sweeping powers to the state to detain citizens. There appear to be several factors behind the Sri Lankan economic meltdown. Amongst these has been the blow to the island's tourism-dependent economy caused by the 2019 Easter bombing as well as global travel restrictions because of Covid-19. But apart from these factors, public anger is also directed at the Rajapaksa family for its dominance of government and apparent economic mismanagement. For example, the president, prime minister, finance and irrigation ministers are all brothers, while the president's nephew is sports minister, thus adding to the public's criticism of the Rajapaksa clan.

It is hoped Sri Lanka is able to tide over the crisis and restore order and a semblance of economic stability. The crisis should serve as a warning to other states that rising fiscal challenges have within them the seeds of greater civil unrest, and if not managed will spiral out of control. Moreover, there is also a cautionary tale in the Sri Lankan crisis against dynastic rule. When members of one family dominate government and there is seemingly little transparency, people will rightly question such behaviour, especially when the bread lines start growing and the population does not have access to essentials. While restoring order is important, the Sri Lankan government should take the people into confidence and unveil a road map to economic stability, with the international community doing all possible to help the island emerge from the crisis.

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## Dealing with militants

IN two recent back-to-back attacks in the southern district of Tank and neighbouring South Waziristan tribal district, eight security personnel were martyred while several others were wounded. Both attacks were claimed by the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. Significantly, it was after a long time that the TTP, which had largely restricted its operations to guerilla-like hit-and-run tactics, sniping and roadside bombings, deployed multiple suicide bombers to attack the fort used by the paramilitary FC. These attacks show that the capacity of the Afghanistan-based terror outfit is far from diminished and that it can launch attacks whenever it pleases. This should be a cause of deep concern to the political and military authorities. Pakistan's security forces have done well to go after the sleeper cells, capturing and killing many militants in intelligence-based operations, but the TTP's presence in Afghanistan presents a huge challenge that will continue to test the resolve and capabilities of the security apparatus. It is evident that the overtures on the part of the state to negotiate with the militant network through the Afghan Taliban have not yielded the desired results. The authorities here made several attempts through tribal notables, and in some cases, even sent close family members to persuade militant leaders to return to give up their arms and return to a life of normality. While, reportedly, some leaders of the umbrella organisation had showed an interest in laying down their weapons and returning to Pakistan, others simply refused to listen — among them the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali. He is the leader of the terrorist organisation's largest Mehsud group which has been behind the attacks in the Mehsud hinterland as well as in the adjoining areas. There is little doubt that both these attacks were carried out by his group — and more can be expected.

For now, Pakistan appears to have few choices, especially given its relations with the hard-line regime in Kabul; a tactical operation to take out the TTP leadership in Afghanistan seems out of the question. Engaging with the militants is not an option either at this stage. The state's own history of negotiating with militants has been defined by failures and broken pledges, as terrorist groups have invariably returned to violence after striking a 'deal' with the authorities. It took large-scale military operations to clear the affected areas, but the militants are once more posing a threat. The TTP presented several demands — some of which were met, such as the release of some of its foot soldiers. But there are

other demands that impinge upon democratic freedoms, which cannot be accepted by the state. It seems that for now, the best course of action is keep up the pressure on the Afghan Taliban to not allow their country to be used as a launching pad for terrorists who are targeting this country, and for political and military authorities to arrive at a long-term plan to end militancy.

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## **Democracy subverted**

THE nation is stunned. Ahead of the vote of no-confidence, the prime minister had repeatedly hinted that he had a ‘trump card’ up his sleeve. There were indications all along that something might be amiss: even as political pundits and the media confidently predicted Mr Imran Khan’s defeat in the vote of no-confidence, he seemed unperturbed. No one could have guessed that his last ploy would involve having the democratic order burnt down by a democratically empowered party. With the parliamentary process pulverised on the orders of a leader who continues to hold it in deep contempt, Pakistan has been thrown into the dark abyss of a constitutional crisis. It seems, in retrospect, that the captain had planned to play this dastardly card all along. It came as a rude shock: it takes quite the fall for a self-proclaimed ‘fighter’ to display such unsportsmanlike behaviour. By tearing up the rules of the game instead of ‘playing till the last ball’, Mr Khan has dealt a fatal blow to constitutionalism and given rise to the strongest concerns yet that he may not be suited to hold public office within a democratic order.

Whatever happened in the National Assembly on Sunday violated all rules governing proceedings in the House, particularly those dealing with the motion of no-confidence. It was obviously staged: it was clear as the Assembly convened that the opposition had the numbers to oust the PM. Before the motion could be put to vote, however, the newly appointed law minister rose to record an ‘objection’ on the basis of Article 5 of the Constitution, which quite benignly states that “loyalty to the State is the basic duty of every citizen”. The deputy speaker — who had to chair the proceedings as the opposition had moved a motion of no-confidence against the speaker as well — accommodated the objection with indecent haste. Without a shred of proof that the motion had anything to do with the loyalty to the state of any of its movers, the deputy speaker dismissed the

motion on the grounds that it had contradicted Article 5. So tightly did he stick to a written script that he did not even bother replacing the speaker's name with his own as he issued the order to prorogue the session.

Before the nation could process the shock, the PM — who had been conveniently absent from the session — was on national television. In a pre-planned broadcast, he 'congratulated' the nation on the 'failure' of the motion of no-confidence and revealed that he had already written to the president to dissolve the Assembly so that fresh elections could be held. He had been constrained from playing this hand earlier as, constitutionally, he could not have dissolved the Assembly while a vote of no-confidence was pending against him. His request was, again with indecent haste, admitted by the president, who then promptly dismissed the National Assembly.

If Mr Khan's shocking decision to choose Pervaiz Elahi over his own loyalists for the Punjab chief minister slot appeared to be a departure from principles, his actions yesterday showed that he also lacks the mettle or patience to be the leader he aspires to be. He could have played the political game like a true sportsperson and still emerged stronger from the loss given the sharp narrative he had spun leading up to the vote. Instead, he chose to thrust the country into a constitutional crisis. The president, too, failed to act with wisdom: instead of looking into the constitutionality of the entire process, he acted as an Imran Khan loyalist and sullied his office with his partisan decision.

The matter is now for the Supreme Court to decide. Meanwhile, some factions seem quite eager to push the narrative that since a fresh election has already been announced, matters should be left to stand as they are. Since the ouster of the government and fresh leadership in parliament was what was desired by all political parties, so be it, they say. However, this line of argument must be resisted at all levels as it seeks to legitimise every unconstitutional measure taken to force this outcome. The Supreme Court will hopefully provide an adequate remedy for the wrong that has been done and remind all parties that there is only one path to holding any legitimate power, and it will always lie through the Constitution. Anything else would be unacceptable.

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He had been constrained from playing this hand earlier as, constitutionally, he could not have dissolved the Assembly while a vote of no-confidence was pending against him. His request was, again with indecent haste, admitted by the president, who then promptly dismissed the National Assembly.

If Mr Khan’s shocking decision to choose Pervaiz Elahi over his own loyalists for the Punjab chief minister slot appeared to be a departure from principles, his actions yesterday showed that he also lacks the mettle or patience to be the leader he aspires to be.

He could have played the political game like a true sportsman and still emerged stronger from the loss given the sharp narrative he had spun leading up to the vote. Instead, he chose to thrust the country into a constitutional crisis. The president, too, failed to act with wisdom: instead of looking into the constitutionality of the entire process, he acted as an Imran Khan loyalist and sullied his office with his partisan decision.

The matter is now for the Supreme Court to decide. Meanwhile, some factions seem quite eager to push the narrative that since a fresh election has already been announced, matters should be left to stand as they are. Since the ouster of the government and fresh leadership in parliament was what was desired by all political parties, so be it, they say.

However, this line of argument must be resisted at all levels as it seeks to legitimise every unconstitutional measure taken to force this outcome. The Supreme Court will hopefully provide an adequate remedy for the wrong that has been done and remind all parties that there is only one path to holding any legitimate power, and it will always lie through the Constitution. Anything else would be unacceptable.

# **Safe blood transfusion**

THE detection of serious blood-borne diseases — hepatitis B & C and HIV — in a number of haemophilic teenagers in Karachi yet again highlights the dire need for regulation of the healthcare sector in the country. The cases surfaced during a screening camp organised by the Haemophilia Welfare Society in collaboration with the Sindh government. Out of the 242 patients screened in the first couple of days, as many as 96 — or a staggering 40pc — tested positive for HIV and hepatitis B & C. Though all three viral illnesses are prevalent in Pakistan, with the country carrying the second-largest disease burden of hepatitis C globally, their detection in haemophiliacs, who often have to get blood transfusions, should be cause for great alarm. On the one hand, it indicates that a large number of blood banks resort to unsafe and substandard methods and kits for screening blood. On the other, the high number of blood-borne diseases casts doubt on the performance of the Sindh Blood Transfusion Authority and the provincial government's communicable diseases programme.

The prevalence of unsafe medical practices has been a long-standing problem in Pakistan, so much so that the WHO states that most hepatitis B & C patients contract the virus in clinics or hospitals. One case had surfaced in Islamabad in 2017, where two haemophilic siblings, aged seven and eight, had contracted HIV through blood transfusion at a private hospital. Similarly, who can forget the HIV/AIDS outbreak among children in Larkana, caused by the reuse of syringes by a careless, ill-informed and unscrupulous 'doctor'. The authorities need to wake up to the high human, financial, social and emotional cost of the absence of regulation of the health sector where unsafe medical practices proliferate. Not only should the government plan a robust campaign to crack down on and punish unqualified 'doctors' and quacks, errant nursing staff, dubious blood banks and other healthcare providers and services, it should also ensure that those infected because of clinical negligence receive free medical treatment.

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# Punjab crisis

WHAT happened during the briefest possible and disorderly session of the Punjab Assembly called to elect a new leader of the House on Sunday paled in comparison to what had taken place in Islamabad a little earlier. Still, it has left a deep scar on the country's fragile democracy. The intention of the government to call off the election in case the ruling PTI and its ally PML-Q couldn't muster the required support for their nominee had become obvious when the assembly bureaucracy locked the Press Gallery and evicted the journalists in an unprecedented move. The night before, the federal government had dismissed governor Chaudhry Sarwar to punish him for resisting the alleged "illegal and unconstitutional orders" of the prime minister and his cabinet members to help Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi get elected to the top office in Punjab. The postponement of the election clearly implies that the ruling PTI-PML-Q combine in Punjab has lost its majority in the House following the wholesale defection of its lawmakers to the other side. The desperation of the two allies also suggests that they may decide to again defer voting on Wednesday, should they not succeed in winning back the support of their disgruntled legislators by then or if they lose in the final headcount.

Political control of Punjab, the country's most populous province, is crucial for both sides for winning the upcoming national elections. The PTI-PML-Q alliance, it seems, is preparing to go to any lengths — from dissolving the assembly à la the National Assembly to imposing governor's rule in the province — to prevent Punjab's sliding into the lap of the opposition political parties. The blockade of a Lahore hotel — where the dissenting PTI lawmakers are being kept by the opposition ahead of the chief minister's election — by PTI workers, in response to a televised call by their party chief, is a clear sign of the shape of things to come in the province. With the country already plunged into a constitutional crisis, any adverse action to undermine the democratic process of election of the new chief minister of Punjab will only push the nation deeper into political chaos and further widen divisions in society. It is clear that the country is facing huge internal and external challenges, and that it is time to heal old wounds and keep away from inflicting new ones. Unfortunately, our politicians do not seem to care.

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# Traitor vs traitor

THE casual way in which epithets like ‘traitor’ and ‘treason’ are thrown about in our political discourse has, over time, greatly diminished the severity of the crimes they were meant to describe. Instead of being markers of absolute shame, as they were intended to be, their over-usage has rendered them little more than everyday slurs intended for people whose politics or ideas one may not agree with.

There was a time when these labels would be reserved for nationalist parties from smaller provinces, to be cynically slapped onto those who dared question the status quo. This labelling was done so that any voices critical of the state narrative would be kept out of mainstream political discourse. The PTM, a youth-led movement that has continued to agitate peacefully for the rights of the Pakhtun people despite being accused again and again of treachery, will be a familiar example.

The reprehensible habit of discrediting public representatives by questioning their loyalty to kin and country has now slipped into the mainstream. It will have lasting consequences on the health of our democracy if it is not checked immediately. The air has been thick with noxious allegations and counter-accusations of treachery since last week, triggered by the PTI spuriously accusing opposing parties of conspiring with foreign powers to bring its government down.

The line was crossed, however, when these same allegations — which have yet to be meaningfully substantiated — were used to invoke Article 5, imply that the vote of no-confidence was the product of disloyalty to the state, and ride roughshod over a simple parliamentary procedure. Not to be outdone, the opposition — stinging from the outgoing government’s devious (and likely unconstitutional) last-minute ploy — reacted with counter-accusations that the prime minister, deputy speaker and all others who aided the decision to throw out the motion of no-confidence had committed ‘high treason’ and should be tried under Article 6.

This is ridiculous hyperbole from both sides of the political divide. High treason is an unpardonable crime, punishable by death; the gravest offence a citizen can

commit against their country. Article 6, which defines an act of high treason under the Constitution, describes it as direct tampering with the Constitution itself, such as repealing or suspending it.

Misinterpreting or violating the Constitution is not 'high treason'. That our leaders level the charge at each other in such an offhand manner betrays both a lack of understanding of the law, as well as the fact that most simply do not comprehend that it exists to safeguard the supremacy and inviolability of the Constitution, which many of them seem to have little regard for. It is telling of how seriously our civilian leadership actually takes high treason if one considers the fact that they have never been able to bring to justice those anti-democratic elements who have actually committed the crime.

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## Yemen truce

THE Yemeni civil war — exacerbated by the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in March 2015 — has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of this impoverished country. Around 400,000 people have been killed in the conflict as per UN figures, mostly due to hunger and disease, while non-combatants have also perished in air strikes and bombings. Therefore, the reported truce between all warring parties in Yemen should be welcomed. The ceasefire came into effect on April 2 to mark the holy month of Ramazan and is supposed to last two months. The Yemeni government, supported by the Saudis, as well as the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who control the capital and large parts of the country, have both pledged to honour it, and it is hoped all sides stick to this pledge for the sake of the Yemeni people.

Of course in a complicated conflict like Yemen, which involves external players as well as local stakeholders, holding the truce will be a challenge. But this rare opportunity for peace must not be lost. The primary goal should be to ensure humanitarian aid gets to those who need it most, as around 30m Yemenis are said to be in need of assistance. Secondly, the cooling-off period must be used by all combatants to take stock of the situation. It should be realised that seven years of war have given nothing but crisis after crisis to the country, and it is time a negotiated settlement was reached to permanently bring peace to Yemen.

Without a fair power-sharing deal that allows all the country's tribes and confessional groups to participate in governance, long-lasting peace will not be possible in Yemen. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which are seen to be fighting a proxy war in Yemen, should use their influence with their respective Yemeni partners to ensure that the truce is successful, and that peace talks to encourage a negotiated settlement to the country's civil war are given fresh impetus.

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## Unequal justice

RECENT developments in the Nazim Jokhio murder case have raised serious concerns that some elements within the PPP-led Sindh government might be trying to influence the outcome of the investigation. According to reports, the Sindh Police have refused a request by the provincial home department to replace the investigation officer in the case with someone who is "competent, neutral and unbiased". This follows a video message by the murdered Nazim Jokhio's wife Shirin Jokhio, who 'pardoned' the accused as no one stood by her in her quest for justice. Jokhio's tortured body was found last November at the farmhouse of PPP MPA Jam Awais in Malir, Karachi. While the accused MPA surrendered to the police, another parliamentarian, MNA Abdul Karim Bijar, also accused of involvement in the murder, left the country soon after being booked in the case. He returned last week to obtain pre-arrest bail, after which he joined the National Assembly session that was supposed to vote on the no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan. Meanwhile, reports have surfaced that the chief complainant in the case, Afzal Jokhio, the brother of the deceased, has disclosed that the family might reach an out-of-court settlement with the accused through a jirga to be held later this week.

These events paint an unflattering picture of the PPP government in Sindh. Even as it rightly protests the PTI's violation of the Constitution in the National Assembly last Sunday, the PPP would do well to reflect on the larger principles of justice and equality that the same document upholds. Unfortunately, the Jokhio case follows an unfortunate pattern; there are many examples where PPP leaders have been involved in parallel justice forums like jirgas, where those accused of crime, and with links to the party, have obtained favourable results. In

fact, last year in July, a court in Dadu issued notices to several feudal lords, including former and present federal and provincial lawmakers of the PPP, for holding or presiding over illegal jirgas. Meanwhile, last month, scores of people demanded punishment for two PPP MPAs and others accused in a triple murder case. The PPP leadership in all sincerity cannot claim to be fighting for democracy while protecting black sheep in its own ranks. The party needs to prove that it stands for the rule of law by ensuring the strictest punishment for those of its members who harm the very people they are supposed to represent.

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## **Cable confusion**

THE loyalties of nearly 200 elected public representatives have been rendered suspect by a mysterious diplomatic cable from Washington yet we do not know exactly what its contents are. Meanwhile, the government has used the said cable to throw out the motion of no-confidence brought against the prime minister, dissolve the National Assembly and call fresh elections, not to mention built a potent new election strategy around it.

On the other hand, after spending last week heaping scorn on the 'foreign conspiracy' narrative, the opposition parties seem to now be struggling to come to terms with it. They have turned to the security establishment to validate their loyalty to the country, urging them to step into the fray and make public where they stand. The situation is rapidly spiralling out of hand and any continuing confusion over the cable's actual contents could do grave harm to national unity.

Editorial: How to solve the current political crisis

Regardless of whether the cable in question is 'genuine' or 'doctored', it does seem as if Mr Imran Khan may have taken the liberty to embellish the contents of it for political purposes, taking advantage of the fact that it is a secret document that cannot legally be shared publicly. When Mr Khan first spoke about it, he had described it as a "letter" containing "credible evidence" of an international conspiracy to topple his government. The claim was that foreign funding was being used to turn lawmakers' loyalties. It was also claimed at the same time that

the government had known for months that foreign conspirators were getting the opposition parties together, abetted by local ‘handlers’.

It later emerged that these ‘revelations’ were in fact claims based on a routine diplomatic cable that had referenced remarks made by a US state representative on the possible outcomes of a vote of no-confidence against Mr Khan and what they could mean for Pakistan. We do know that the language and tone of the communication were such that the National Security Committee termed it “blatant interference” in Pakistan’s internal affairs and recommended sending a strong message through diplomatic channels.

Apart from that, it did not seem there was any imminent threat to Pakistan’s national security. However, going by the self-righteous fury evident in Mr Khan’s recent speeches, one would think it is no longer contestable whether a foreign conspiracy is actually in play or if he has just made a mountain out of a foreign diplomat’s poorly chosen words.

With another global power now involved in the fracas, the matter needs to be settled firmly. It is time that the individuals responsible for ensuring Pakistan’s external security provide a fair and comprehensive assessment of whether our national security or sovereignty is really at risk. This assessment should include the severity and likelihood of any perceived ‘threats’ or ‘pressures’ we face, if any. The record must be set straight in the national interest.

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## **Economic uncertainty**

WITH the entire country in the grip of political chaos and virtually no government in place in Islamabad, Pakistan is headed towards a formidable economic crisis that would be difficult for the next administration to handle. New data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics is not encouraging: it shows that the country’s trade deficit has widened by 70pc to an all-time high of \$35.4bn in the nine-month period from July to March, causing the State Bank’s debt-based foreign exchange reserves to deplete to less than two months’ import cover. This is in spite of the nearly 25pc growth in exports, the impact of which is wiped out by a spike of around 49pc in imports. The latter is due to surging global energy and

food prices — a consequence of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Covid-related supply disruptions. The latest trade data underscores that the current account deficit may have widened to \$13bn in March, from \$12bn recorded in the preceding month. Trade and external account numbers show that the measures taken by the PTI government and central bank in order to bridge the twin trade and current account deficits in the last five to six months have mostly failed. These measures have included a significant hike in interest rates, the introduction of a hefty cash margin requirement for importing goods, and the curtailment of consumer financing.

It is feared that the external account may become more vulnerable as international creditors such as the IMF are suspending their funding because of the domestic political uncertainty and, arguably, the country's deteriorating ties with Western capitals, especially Washington. The prime minister's latest narrative that the US is behind a conspiracy to topple him with the help of the opposition is seen as a major reason behind the IMF's decision to stop its funding programme. In fact, we may see fragile State Bank reserves of \$11bn bleed further because of scheduled foreign debt and other payments, pushing the country to the brink of a possible default if immediate international 'help' from 'friendly' countries does not come soon. The rapidly weakening home currency is just a sign of the shape of things to come. Expecting the economy to recover, the external account to stabilise and foreign creditors to resume their funding in the present political conditions is foolish. In retrospect, the economic hardships suffered by people in the last three and half years in the hope of a better future have been for nothing.

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## **Grammy winner**

BEFORE she won a Grammy, musician Arooj Aftab was a household name in Pakistan for her song Mohabbat, which was on former US president Barack Obama's summer 2021 playlist. This is also the song that won Ms Aftab international acclaim over the weekend, as she received her first Grammy in the category of Best Global Performance. Though hardly a new name to avid music fans who have listened to her ever since she broke through the ranks of Pakistan's indie scene in the early 2000s, Ms Aftab was also nominated for the

Best New Artist category. Through this award, Ms Aftab has renewed interest in the blend of South Asian classical and other music genres. Her recognition by the global music community paves the way for other Pakistani musicians, and especially women, hoping to make their mark in the world. Ms Aftab has three albums to her credit, her meditative renditions breathing new life into ghazals and Sufi works. Though her work is heavily inspired by South Asian music, thanks to a childhood spent in Lahore, a touch of reggae and jazz demonstrate how music transcends boundaries.

In some ways, Ms Aftab's music is a reflection of her own diverse background. She was born in Saudi Arabia but spent her teenage years in Lahore making waves on the local indie music landscape. She went on to study jazz, music production and engineering at a prestigious institute in Boston. Her winning the Grammy award itself underscores the fact that cultures and societies are fluid and no number of barriers can stop people from assimilating and learning from each other. There are many who will not agree with her style of music — and that is okay. Her achievement, in fact, goes beyond personal preferences and perhaps should be viewed in the light of how the old melds with the new, and how musical traditions dovetail in a celebration of individual expression. In a world wracked by divisions, such music can have a powerful message.

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## **Punjab chaos**

THE brazen disregard exhibited by the PTI-PML-Q alliance for democratic norms in Punjab has plunged the province into a political and administrative crisis of grave proportions. Indeed, the turmoil in Punjab is seen as an extension of the chaos created by the PTI at the centre, where the party had disrupted the constitutional procedure of a no-confidence vote against Imran Khan, who then hastily asked the president to dissolve the National Assembly. The way the two partners have been trying to delay the election of a new leader of the House in the province, in a last-ditch effort to hold on to power, underscored that they had lost their majority in the provincial assembly. What the PTI-PML-Q combine has done in the last one week to constantly postpone the vote for election of the provincial chief executive shows they have no qualms about bulldozing all democratic principles in their bid to achieve narrow political objectives. Yet these

tactics have not helped the alliance, nor its candidate, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, for the top job in Punjab. It will not be incorrect to say that the continuous delay in the election has been more damaging to the alliance than its political opponents. The presence of around 200 lawmakers at the mock election conducted by the opposition parties in a hotel to elect Hamza Shehbaz as the new chief executive, after they were illegally denied access to the assembly building by the PTI-PML-Q leadership, pointed to the fast-depleting political fortunes of the ruling alliance in the province.

If the PTI and PML-Q ever had any chance of winning back their rebellious lawmakers or holding on to power in the province, it now seems to have vanished into thin air after the Supreme Court declaration of the National Assembly deputy Speaker's ruling, which cancelled the vote of no-confidence against the prime minister, illegal and unconstitutional. The restoration of the National Assembly and the expected passage of the no-trust motion on Saturday will deal the severest possible blow to both the PTI and PML-Q. There is every chance of more lawmakers defecting from the two parties to join the opposition both at the centre and in Punjab. With the next date for the election of the provincial chief executive set for April 16, the crisis in the province may linger a bit. But any more delaying tactics will earn Punjab's PTI-PML-Q combine further public humiliation and nothing else.

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## **Polythene bags**

POLYTHENE bags are such an essential part of life that no government ban or public awareness campaign has so far hurt their popularity. From disposing garbage to delivering food, single-use plastics are a 'necessity' one can't seem to do without. A report in this paper has lamented the prolific use of polythene bags in Islamabad, despite a ban on the manufacture of single-use plastics enforced in September 2019 by the Imran Khan government. This decision was emulated by the Sindh government in October 2019, while similar directives were issued by the Lahore High Court in February 2020. These were just some of the more recent attempts by the authorities to discourage the use of polythene bags; over the years, successive governments have made efforts to forbid their use, but have failed to go beyond issuing orders.



According to the Pakistan Plastic Manufacturers Association, some 55bn single-use plastics bags are used in the country every year. Some estimates suggest that the number may be as high as 100bn. That repeated bans have not worked is a tell-tale sign that the authorities find it difficult to enforce them for a host of reasons, ranging from the shortage of municipal staff needed to ensure that the orders are implemented to the unwillingness of the public that knows of no alternative. The latter point is an important one, and the authorities should realise that simply banning an item, even if it is hazardous to human and environmental health, is not enough and that effective substitutes must be introduced and promoted. So far, there appears to be no workable solution to this problem, as the large-scale production of paper bags would quickly consume whatever remains of the forests in the country. One way to deal with this problem would be to provide incentives to small businesses and restaurants to follow environment-friendly guidelines, and plastic manufacturers to set up recycling plants. This is a problem that requires an innovative solution rather than an ineffective ban.

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## **The reckoning**

Nothing more could have been hoped for from the highest court of the land. With one voice, the Supreme Court has ruled that the government's ploy to subvert the April 3 vote of no-confidence was 'unconstitutional' and all its subsequent decisions, therefore, without legal effect.

In doing so, the apex court has defeated a most egregious assault on the country's democratic order and reasserted itself as the custodian of the Constitution of Pakistan. It is hoped that the verdict, delivered just as matters seemed to be hurtling towards chaos, will be able to pull the country back from the precipice.

It could not have come sooner. Prime Minister Imran Khan's stubborn insistence on not letting his opponents have the satisfaction of voting him out had rendered Pakistan's entire democracy a farce. It will be worth remembering that this was a choice, not a compulsion.

Mr Khan had political options: there were many ways he could have gracefully bowed to political realities and thrown his energies into the next elections. Yet, in his obduracy, the prime minister showed the country he would think nothing of pushing it headfirst into a constitutional crisis if it meant getting his way.

The PTI's reckless decision to have a straightforward parliamentary procedure overruled on the pretext of Article 5 will be a shameful footnote in history. Indeed, after the Supreme Court's unsympathetic view on the matter, the PTI must introspect and ask whether it itself had been loyal enough to the Constitution when it wilfully ran roughshod over it for a narrow political goal.

The ensuing chaos has wreaked havoc on the economy. The dollar-rupee exchange rate has slipped amidst the uncertainty and there are serious concerns about the adequacy of the country's current foreign exchange reserves. Our foreign relations, too, have taken a severe beating due to the prime minister's insistence on creating an international fuss about a 'foreign conspiracy' the details of which he has so far been unable to share.

It is commendable that this Supreme Court chose to forge its own path, even though precedent could have afforded it another chance to take cover behind the doctrine of necessity. A dark history of judicial endorsements and quasi-endorsements of unconstitutional and extra-constitutional decisions had greatly dimmed the hopes of an unequivocal ruling on this matter, but this bench, led by the chief justice, has provided new hope for the future.

With the restoration of the National Assembly, the court has returned the power to decide the country's fate back to the Lower House. After the drubbing it has just received in court, the PTI would be wise to now stick to the rules and play the game to its logical end. If it finds it no longer has a graceful exit left to take, it only has itself to blame.

## **Covid risk**

WITH the National Command and Operation Centre wrapped up and more than 80pc of the eligible population vaccinated against Covid-19, the pandemic appears to be approaching its end in Pakistan. So, was there any need for KP to

extend the health emergency for another three months? In fact, it is a wise move and underscores a cautious approach, given that Covid-19 cases are still surging in China and the UK, among other countries. The NCOC was performing several functions, ranging from disease surveillance to providing institutional support to public and private health set-ups. With the NCOC no longer operational, all Covid-related matters once again rest on the shoulders of the federal and provincial governments. The KP government's pre-emptive decision to extend the emergency is perhaps grounded in the reasoning that in the event of a spike in cases, it would be easier to mobilise the required resources. In this, it has followed the advice of the WHO, which is against countries lifting all Covid-related restrictions. Last month, the global health body clearly stated that the pandemic was far from over and described the steep rise in cases in countries such as China and North Korea as just the "tip of the iceberg". The case of the UK is a cautionary tale: Prime Minister Boris Johnson lifted all Covid-related curbs in February, but a record number of cases of Omicron sub-variants are being reported across the country.

Meanwhile, Shanghai is in strict lockdown as the number of daily Covid cases has surpassed the peak in Wuhan where the virus originated. Shanghai officials describe the situation as "extremely grim". Cases are also rising sharply in the US, with 1,500 new cases a day being reported in New York. Given the situation abroad, health authorities in the other three provinces too should remain vigilant, while still conducting aggressive testing, and calling on all to be vaccinated or administered booster shots. The virulence of the infection may be dissipating, but it is still better to be safe than sorry.

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## **Endgame?**

ONCE again, the prime minister seems to have accepted the inevitability of his forced removal from office. Barring another ill-advised 'trump card' to disrupt or delay the vote of no-confidence, Mr Imran Khan is unlikely to remain chief executive today if proceedings in the National Assembly go according to the Supreme Court's directions. He seems to know it.

In a comparatively more subdued address to the nation late Friday, he attempted to reclaim some lost pride by glossing over his party's condemnable actions this past week, describing them as well-meaning attempts to protect national sovereignty. But though Mr Khan said he was disappointed in the Supreme Court's stern ruling on his party's shambolic attempt at dictating a way out of the no-trust crisis, it was encouraging that he, publicly at least, chose to accept the verdict rather than take a more confrontational approach. He would be wise to stick to that line.

His disappointment with the court for not considering the Washington cable and the 'foreign conspiracy' to oust him while arriving at its judgement was apparent, but he remained unable to substantiate these allegations with anything new, even if he was much more direct while talking about the cable in question.

It is understood that the government now plans to either show or read out the cable in parliament and call for a debate on it. It is likely that the National Assembly speaker will comply. However, it is hoped that the government will rely on the contents of the cable alone in its attempt to sway the House and that voting on the no-confidence motion itself will not be delayed any further.

It also bears noting that the PTI would be well within its rights to seek a review from the Supreme Court against the April 7 verdict and to challenge the court's decision to explicitly direct the NA speaker to hold a session under its terms and conditions. Again, however, this should not come to bear on the vote, which has already been much delayed.

Whether today or tomorrow, Mr Khan is likely to return to the people to start a campaign against what he has described in his late Friday address as an 'imported' government. This much is fair play. He is entitled to call for peaceful protests, as he has done. His call for countrywide demonstrations after Isha prayers on Sunday indicates that he has a plan for the next chapter of his political journey.

Perhaps it is due to the unusual events of this past week, but the prime minister's failure to say anything about what exactly he expects to happen in the National Assembly still gives one pause. Could it be that the PTI is still holding some

cards close to its chest? One only hopes that the party will desist from any further legal misadventures.

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## **Policy rate hike**

THE State Bank has taken its own sweet time to spring into action to avert the growing risks to the economy, which had for weeks been threatening to erupt into a full-fledged economic crisis. After holding the rate steady at 9.75pc since January, the bank had to finally raise its key policy rate by a hefty 250bps to 12.25pc following an emergency meeting on Thursday. The increase renders the real interest rates mildly positive (the policy rate minus the expected inflation) and, as the bank asserted in its monetary policy statement, it will help preserve external and price stability. But the central bank's inaction has already taken a big toll on both the nation's currency and its fragile foreign exchange reserves. The decision was announced hours before the Supreme Court, in a landmark ruling, declared the cancellation of a no-confidence vote against the prime minister and the subsequent dissolution of the National Assembly to be unconstitutional. It is hard to say whether it was the rate hike or the verdict that had a more positive impact on the rupee and the stock market the next morning. But the two seem to have worked in tandem.

The State Bank has cited numerous internal and international trends, including domestic political uncertainty, as factors that had necessitated a "strong and proactive policy response". While the bank's response to growing threats to external and price stability may be considered strong, it is certainly not proactive. If anything, the belated increase in the rates validates criticism that the bank is mostly behind the curve when it comes to using interest rates to tackle economic challenges. For example, it kept the lending rates unchanged last month, but sounded a note of caution that it could raise credit prices ahead of the next scheduled meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee. Obviously, the ambiguous decision created uncertainty in the market. Many saw it as the bank's reluctance to add to Prime Minister Imran Khan's troubles, although global and domestic economic trends demanded an immediate rate increase. Those who believe the latest monetary policy decision has been forced upon the bank by the widening gap between the policy rate of 9.75pc, the T-bill rate of 13.25pc and Kibor of

13.19pc, aren't altogether wrong. The 'absolute autonomy' granted to the State Bank was meant to free it from political influence. Clearly, it still remains subservient to the political authorities.

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## **Back to the pavilion**

AT one point late last night, it seemed as if all the pillars of the state were on course for a catastrophic collision. Calamity seemed ready to strike at the highest levels of the state. Even with his ouster a near certainty, Mr Imran Khan seemed more than willing to turn a simple parliamentary procedure into a farce by forcing the heads of the judiciary and military, along with the entire legislature, to play along to the 'last ball' of his tiresome ruse.

He was forced to finally let go just as the clock was about to run out on the day, allowing the opposition to finally have its say. And thus, in the early hours of Constitution Day, the PTI government fell not with a bang, but a whimper in the dead of the night.

When it emerged as the single largest party in the 2018 elections, the PTI had promised to be a breath of fresh air. Though political engineering and a faulty results transmission system had diminished the legitimacy of its victory, the country had been generally willing to give it a chance. However, the party almost immediately found itself falling short of its lofty ideals.

Due to its failure to secure a simple majority, it shook hands with non-democratic forces to make a claim on the federal government. If the party's leaders had believed that the compromise could be compensated by their achievements in office, they were soon to be let down by their inexperience. Within a year, the prime minister was scrambling to reshuffle his cabinet.

What was unfortunate was that instead of introspecting and compensating for its shortcomings, the PTI chose to go after the opposition instead. The strategy put off many who were expecting it to deliver real change. Meanwhile, it became increasingly reliant on the establishment for 'guidance' in key decision-making

areas. This ultimately proved fatal for it when the establishment decided they would no longer be providing any crutches for the government to stand on.

Though inexperience ultimately became its undoing, the PTI did also record some commendable achievements. Successful handling of the Covid pandemic, the multifaceted Ehsaas programme and a new public health insurance scheme made a positive difference in many citizens' lives. Many will remember the former prime minister for it. Therefore, even if Mr Khan's time in government is up, it would be unwise to write him off.

He has always been a ferocious challenger when in the opposition; a fighter who doggedly pursues his goals. His unrelenting zeal and sense of divine mission make him a formidable force in Pakistan's politics. One hopes, however, that his next avatar will have evolved from the vitriolic demagogue he has become. It is important for a true leader to unite the nation, not poison it with divisive narratives and corrosive politics. He would do well to recognise this.

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## **Safe for cricket**

A MERE six hours after Australia's historic tour of Pakistan got underway, with the opening Test in Rawalpindi, a bomb blast nearly 200km away in Peshawar threatened the very future of not only the cricket series but also the revival of the international game in the country. The suicide bombing took nearly 60 lives, raising alarm bells for the Australians, who since 1998 had not visited Pakistan due to security concerns. They had touched down in Pakistan to head-of-state-level security and protocol just five days earlier, becoming the first top Test-playing nation to play in the country since the attack on the Sri Lankan team in 2009. Australia, though, were undeterred. They came back to the Pindi Cricket Stadium the next morning for the second day of the Test, allaying fears of exiting, and would spend another month in Pakistan in which they completed the three-match Test series, a three-game ODI series and a one-off Twenty20. Even though the tour remained largely incident-free, it took place at a time when Pakistan was rife with political uncertainty, with the prime minister facing a no-confidence motion. Potential protests in Islamabad saw the PCB shift the ODI series and the T20 from Rawalpindi to Lahore, where Australia's first tour in

nearly a quarter of a century came to an end this week after a stopover in Karachi for the second Test.

It was the third Test in Lahore which Australia won to clinch the series 1-0. Pakistan then came back from a jarring defeat in the opening ODI to win the series 2-1, before Australia won the T20 in the last over of the game to cap a memorable tour. There were sparkling performances from both teams, with Pakistan skipper Babar Azam shining in all three formats. The biggest takeaway, though, is the fact that Pakistan proved it is a safe venue for international cricket. Hopefully, tours by England and New Zealand later this year, after both sides called off their series in the country in 2021, will help further burnish Pakistan's credentials.

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## **Hafiz Saeed sentenced**

IN Pakistan's ecosystem of religiously inspired militant groups, the Lashkar-e-Taiba/ Jamaatud Dawa brand was, until a few years ago, one of the biggest. It had the blessings of the establishment and was given free rein to operate in the country. Following 9/11, it was banned but continued to operate — until the 2008 Mumbai attacks, in which LeT was accused of having played a central role. Since that time, the state apparatus has banned the group's operations and maintained a close watch on its leadership, particularly its supremo Hafiz Saeed — albeit in a half-hearted manner.

On Friday, Hafiz Saeed was sentenced to 33 years in jail in two cases of terror financing. The sentence comes in the wake of pressure applied by the FATF on the state to 'do more' against militant actors. As compared to the more violent and unruly militant groups, Hafiz Saeed's operations have been tougher for the state to address, as he once enjoyed cordial relations with the powers that be. At one point, there were even attempts to mainstream LeT/JuD through the Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation, the outfit's humanitarian arm, as well as the Milli Muslim League political party.

His sentencing comes as a sombre reminder of the state's erstwhile policy of embracing militant groups. While 'good' militants like the LeT/JuD were



amenable to ‘suggestions’ from the establishment, the more virulent and sectarian actors actually declared war on Pakistan and still pose a major security risk to this country. In particular, the Punjabi Taliban — many of whom are disgruntled ex-members of pro-state jihadi groups — are a real security challenge, as are militant groups in the newly merged districts.

These groups have brought nothing but trouble — domestically, as well as in the context of Pakistan’s foreign relations. Locally, they have been instrumental in radicalising the population and increasing sectarian fissures in society. Internationally, they have brought disrepute to the country, with inimical states trying to have Pakistan branded as a sponsor of terrorism. Being retained on the FATF ‘grey list’ is also linked to these policies of old.

It is hoped the establishment has learned its lesson and will never again encourage jihadi actors — though its tolerance of Tehreek-i-Labbaik has not inspired confidence. Simply banning groups on paper is not enough; the militant infrastructure must be dismantled so that society can be deradicalised, and Pakistan does not have to face embarrassing accusations at the global level.

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## **Election preparations**

WITH the success of the no-confidence vote against the prime minister, the incoming government may not be in a hurry to hold elections. Nevertheless, the Election Commission of Pakistan needs to be fully prepared to hold polls within 90 days, if called upon to do so. This is by no means an easy task, given the numerous technical challenges that the ECP faces at the moment. For instance, the commission cannot realistically be expected to organise a fair election within the stipulated time frame, until the delimitation of constituencies, required by the law since the 2017 census was formally notified, is properly completed. The process had been delayed because the PTI government had told the ECP to wait as it wanted to hold a fresh ‘digital census’ ahead of the 2023 elections, which would have necessitated its own delimitation exercise. However, on Friday, the ECP decided to complete delimitation without waiting for the digital census.

Though, the PTI, which has momentum behind it, will wish for an immediate election on the basis of the old constituencies, as was done in the 2018 election, the circumstances are changed this time. There has been a change in the number of NA and PA seats for erstwhile Fata under the 26th Amendment, which will necessitate the redrawing of constituency boundaries for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Once the new constituencies are redrawn, all other constituencies will need to be reconfigured as well. There are other challenges too, the most significant of which pertain to the Elections Act of 2017, under which electronic voting machines and overseas voting were introduced. Both measures require significant investment of time and money to implement, and it is simply not realistic to expect this to be done within a 90-day period.

Quick decisions will need to be taken in order to ensure elections can be held in a timely manner. One of the major priorities should be to facilitate the ECP in carrying out the delimitation exercise and completing it within the shortest possible period. It is very important for the sake of political stability that parties also work together to strengthen the role and powers of the ECP to help improve the quality of the next elections. The commission has a critical role to play in ensuring polls do not fall prey to the same controversies and squabbles as previous ones have. The electoral process in neighbouring India — where close to a billion people vote in a staggered process yet no party ever ‘rejects’ the results — can perhaps provide the needed inspiration. It is also important for all political parties to reach an understanding that the mandate of the ECP has to be respected and its directives obeyed. The many violations of the election code in the past months, by politicians on both sides of the aisle, cannot be allowed to be repeated again.

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## **Cable rigmorole**

ONE of the most unfortunate elements of the political crisis that has led to the fall of the PTI government is the politicisation of diplomacy and the working of the Foreign Office by former prime minister Imran Khan.

The so-called cable controversy has not only cast a dark shadow over our important relationship with the United States, it has also made diplomats

vulnerable to unnecessary political exposure. Mr Khan, unfortunately, chose a disastrous course by inventing a threat where apparently none existed. This was substantiated by the fact that the National Security Committee, while objecting to the language of the letter, made no mention of any conspiracy by the US to oust Mr Khan from office.

Till his very last moments in office, Mr Khan kept insisting that he was a victim of this conspiracy, but it is now increasingly clear that he was basing his political narrative on what was a routine cable by Pakistan's then ambassador to the US, detailing the contents of his meeting with an American official.

in an attempt to fuel his political narrative, Mr Khan has done grievous damage to Pakistan's diplomacy and diplomats. His foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi cannot escape the blame. In fact, he should share the bulk of it. As the country's top diplomat, it was his responsibility to explain to Mr Khan the absolute folly of politicising the Foreign Office for his narrow interests.

Mr Qureshi should have ensured that he injected sanity into a needless controversy and protected not just the ministry he presided over but also the diplomats whose job it is to send honest and credible reports to the headquarters. Instead, Mr Qureshi did the opposite. He pushed this faulty and dangerous narrative and undermined his own ministry for narrow partisan advantages. It is unfortunate that the then prime minister and foreign minister compromised the country's vital interests, instead of protecting them.

It is hoped that they stand chastened and the right lessons have been learnt. It did not, however, help matters when opposition figures also jumped into the fray. It was inadvisable for PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz Sharif to wade into these muddy waters and make unsubstantiated allegations about the ambassador in the US being rushed off to another posting to keep him away from being questioned about his cable. He went abroad on a normal schedule and there was nothing improper about this. The new government should handle the matter with care.

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# **Khashoggi trial**

THE gruesome 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate had shocked observers across the world. Once close to the corridors of power in Riyadh, Khashoggi had run afoul of the Saudi establishment — particularly the kingdom's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman — after his criticism of the rulers started appearing in leading Western publications. The 2018 hit was therefore widely seen as carried out on the orders of the Saudi leadership; American intelligence had said as much (Khashoggi was a legal permanent resident of the US) while after the murder, Turkish President Erdogan had asserted that the plot to kill the journalist was linked to “the highest levels” of the Saudi government. Keeping all these developments in mind, Turkey's decision to suspend the trial of 26 Saudis and transfer the case to the kingdom means that Khashoggi's family may never get justice.

The Saudi justice system is notoriously opaque and the assumption that such a high-profile trial — in which the rulers are accused of masterminding a ghastly murder — will meet the requirements of due process is remote. A Saudi court had earlier announced jail terms for low-level operatives linked to the murder, though observers said that the trial lacked transparency. The sudden change of heart in Ankara may be linked to a desire by the Turkish leadership to improve ties with the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia. Turkey is facing major economic problems, and the decision to shift the trial may be a symbolic gesture designed to send the message that Ankara wants improved geopolitical and economic ties with Riyadh. However, political expediency should not interfere in the natural course of justice. As mentioned, it will be highly unlikely that the actual perpetrators will be punished in a trial conducted in Saudi courts. Moreover, the move sends a chilling message to dissidents and critics of the Saudi state that they are not safe anywhere, while the Turkish state has indicated that foreign relations take precedence over the delivery of justice.

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## New PM's challenge

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif's incoming coalition government has its work cut out for it. The new government is inheriting some daunting challenges from the get go. These include, but are not limited to, a worsening economic crisis, growing political turmoil, deteriorating relations with the Western powers, and the resurgence of militancy in some parts of the country.

On top of all this, we have no idea whether the ruling coalition that consists of disparate parties and groups, with often conflicting political and economic aims, will stick together until the elections are called. They may have achieved their common goal of ousting Imran Khan from power, but what is their long-term plan?

With the PTI quitting the National Assembly and pledging to build up strong public pressure on its successors for early elections in the country, it will not be all smooth sailing for the new administration.

Fixing the broken economy is probably the most formidable challenge facing Mr Sharif's cabinet, and he should place it on top of his agenda. The PTI had inherited a bad economy that it has left in far worse condition; ordinary people are grappling with elevated double-digit inflation, as well as wage and job losses, as macroeconomic indicators decline. The crisis of balance of payments is already back, after a short Covid-related respite, as much-needed multilateral assistance is on hold because of uncertain political conditions in the country. Elevated international commodity prices, particularly food and crude oil, are putting additional pressure on a frail external sector.

Improving the economy requires tough decisions, such as the immediate removal of the cap on electricity and petroleum prices and renegotiating a new loan with the IMF, which will be hard, if not impossible, without repairing diplomatic relations with the US and other Western powers.

Can the ruling coalition take these politically unpopular but vital decisions?

New elections are not very far off, and Imran Khan's PTI will be scrutinising and criticising every move of the new set-up. The populist announcements, like the 10pc raise in pay and pension of government employees and the provision of subsidised wheat flour, made by Shehbaz Sharif in his speech in the House, soon after his election as prime minister, are indicative of the extreme pressure he must be feeling.

With forbidding political and economic realities on one side and high public expectations on the other, the coalition government and its leader do not have too many options on the table as they get ready to deal with multiple crises, at least not at the moment. The enormity of the economic and foreign policy challenges demands a strong government, which is not encumbered by uncertainty over its future and has the public mandate to take tough and unpopular decisions. The wiser course would be to reform the electoral laws and move towards new elections at the earliest.

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## **Chilling tactics**

IT seems that some forces attempted to exploit the power vacuum during the absence of a government in Islamabad. In the early hours of Sunday, about a dozen unidentified men 'raided' the home of Arsalan Khalid, recently ousted prime minister Imran Khan's focal person on digital media. The 'raid', if it can be called that, happened shortly after Mr Khan was voted out of office. The intruders reportedly threatened Mr Khalid's family and seized their phones and laptops. Judging by the remarks of former SAPM Shahbaz Gill, it seems the party is aware of who ordered the raid and also that it was expecting it. It is telling that the PTI publicly addressed its concerns on the matter to the FIA, a civilian security agency.

This is a condemnable development. For too long, arbitrary raids, seizures and detentions have been employed as a tool of choice by elements within the state for 'objectives' that they may not otherwise be able to legally achieve. These extrajudicial actions have a chilling effect on voices critical of policies favoured by powerful factions within the state, not to mention they violate fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution. Clearly, whoever ordered the raid

wishes to keep Mr Khalid under their control. In the same context, it is strange that the FIA, which otherwise operates under the interior ministry, seems to have independently decided to place the names of five individuals considered close to Mr Khan on a 'stop-list', if a newspaper report is to be believed. Apart from Mr Khalid and Mr Gill, the former prime minister's principal secretary, the DG anti-corruption Punjab, and former DG FIA Punjab Zone II, who had been investigating now Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Punjab chief minister hopeful Hamza Shehbaz, have been barred from leaving the country, according to the report. It has not been forgotten that the PTI itself oversaw the suppression of critical voices and silencing of dissent through very similar means. It was wrong then as it is wrong now. The incoming government had taken the higher ground by assuring there would be no victimisation of political opponents; however, this clearly is not going to be enough. It is time for all parties which derive their legitimacy from the power of democracy to unanimously condemn and prevent such occurrences from happening again and again. The vicious cycle of the state silencing citizens and depriving them of their freedoms must stop.

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## Water shortage

FOR the past couple of weeks, news reports have been indicating an acute water shortage in the country. According to officials, water supplies in the past 10 days have been the lowest in the past five years — possibly more — as the water level in the two largest dams — Tarbela and Mangla — has been at dead level since February. The Tarbela Dam reached dead level on Feb 22, while the Mangla Dam has now reached less than 1pc of its total capacity. Consequently, the Kharif season has begun with at least a 40pc water shortage, giving rise to fears of a severe drought as the monsoons are still a couple of months away. The Sukkur and Kotri barrages, whose command areas are mainly dependent on the Tarbela Dam, have also reported more than a 40pc reduction in the volume of irrigation water. This month, a shortage of nearly 42pc and 37pc has been reported in Sindh's Nara and Rohri canals respectively, while a shortage of up to 53pc was recorded at Kotri.

According to officials, the crisis has been engendered by an unpredictable dry spell, which has resulted in 26pc less snowfall in the winter months and no rainfall since March. Moreover, despite the early onset of summer this year, snow hasn't melted at a comparable pace, because most of the snowfall took place at higher altitudes. This disturbing situation should not come as a surprise. Global bodies have been warning for some time that, by 2025, Pakistan would be facing a serious shortage of water on account of shifting rain patterns resulting from climate change, poor management of water resources and an outdated transmission infrastructure. The authorities need to realise that water scarcity is perhaps the foremost national challenge, costing the national exchequer nearly \$12bn a year and having grave implications for the country's overall food and economic security. The authorities need to immediately take stock of the situation and take swift measures to upgrade and manage the country's water distribution system while also finding innovative ways of storing groundwater.

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## **PTI's poor choice**

MR Imran Khan's political immaturity continues to get the better of him. By resigning from the National Assembly along with his entire party, he has left the field open for his political opponents to do as they please. This is bad politics.

The reason Mr Khan continues to hold any relevance in Pakistani democracy is that he was empowered for three-odd years by the same system he has just haughtily walked away from. It reflects poorly on the captain's otherwise fighting spirit: it is akin to him saying he simply will not play unless only he is allowed to bat.

It is understandable that Mr Khan's unceremonious ouster through a vote of no-confidence would have been a very bitter pill to swallow. Still, being deprived of government does not mean Mr Khan has also been relieved of all responsibility: he still has a major role to play, even if it requires him to sit on the opposition benches till preparations for the next general elections are complete. He has to make sure that the voices and interests of those who brought him and his party to power continue to be heard and safeguarded in the National Assembly, while the new government executes its legislative agenda. By suggesting that he will



be abandoning that responsibility, Mr Khan has done his constituents a great disservice.

There is no guarantee that en masse resignations will lead to an early election. The ECP has already told the Supreme Court that it cannot hold legal and fair general elections till a months-long delimitation exercise is first completed. If it holds by-elections instead on the vacated seats, what will the PTI do? Will it contest those seats again? If it wins them back, what changes? And if it wins them back and resigns again, what good will it have done except waste state resources?

Clearly, the decision has not been workshopped thoroughly. Yes, the PTI may want to ride the wave of support it is receiving, but it can agitate both on the streets and within parliament. There is no restriction on doing so and it will give the party even greater visibility.

Back in 2014, when PTI MNAs had submitted their resignations to the Assembly secretariat en masse, it had been other political parties that made it see reason and reconsider the decision.

Despite the acidity of everything that went on before April 10, it would be commendable if such efforts are made again. The optics are not good for the new coalition either when the Assembly hall is nearly half empty. Any legislative efforts it undertakes will lose political legitimacy if they are seen as serving a one-sided agenda. As in the past, there should be an honest attempt to bring all parties back to parliament so that the democratic system can continue with some stability.

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## **Another TTP attack**

IN yet another deadly attack, militants targeted a police van in Kulachi, Dera Ismail Khan, on Monday. Five policemen were martyred and four others wounded. Like many previous attacks, the outlawed TTP accepted responsibility for this incident too. More likely, the attack appears to have been carried out by the Gandapur group, previously associated with the banned Sipah-i-Sahaba and

Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, but which has been part of the TTP since 2001. This group has been active in the southern district of KP, carrying out attacks lately targeting the police. The law-enforcement agencies have also carried out successful intelligence-based operations recently, and killed some group members. Monday's attack, thus, appears to be in response to the IBOs. But the most disturbing aspect was the use of a rocket-propelled grenade that hit the van which caught fire, burning the policemen to death. This is probably the first time that militants have used an RPG in a settled district. It is, however, known that militants and criminals operating in Kulachi, an extremely backward area, parts of which have no administrative access, have been carrying such weapons. Reports coming from South Waziristan say that the Mehsud-led TTP launched another attack on a military post in Barmal tehsil on Tuesday, and there are indications that there might be some fatalities on our side.

These back-to-back incidents, which, unfortunately, have become a frequent phenomenon, are extremely disconcerting and alarming. The TTP, in a statement in March, had announced the launching of the so-called Al-Badr spring offensive, making it abundantly clear that its militants would target the security agencies and their associates. It is now also clear that no matter how many IBOs are conducted to bust and eliminate active and sleeper cells, unless Pakistan takes effective and practical steps to address the root of the problem, such attacks will continue, with far-reaching consequences. Pakistan has been urging the Afghan Taliban to live up to their word, rein in the TTP and other militant groups and stop them from using Afghan soil to launch attacks against a country that continues to be home to millions of Afghan refugees. The hard-line regime, however, has done nothing tangible in this regard. In fact, to the contrary, the TTP has been allowed to carry out fundraising activities in Afghanistan for what it calls a 'jihad' in Pakistan. It is time that Pakistan dropped diplomatic niceties and spoke openly and bluntly to the Afghan Taliban.

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## **Communalism shifts gear**

COMMUNAL violence against Muslims has flared up again in India. There's a method in the madness as usual. Important BJP-ruled states are coming up for assembly polls. Karnataka, where the hijab controversy has mutated into a BJP-

sponsored economic boycott of Muslims, and Madhya Pradesh, where recent violence has seen Muslim homes and properties being destroyed, face elections next year. BJP governments there were stolen from the Congress and its allies with induced defections. Therefore, the party is skating on thin ice in both. In Gujarat, where one person was killed in the police-backed violence, the BJP is preparing for elections later this year. Its numbers decreased in 2017 while the Congress had gained. The violence in opposition-ruled Jharkhand and West Bengal is about messaging to their neighbouring states such as Chhattisgarh and Meghalaya ahead of polls next year. Collectively, the bloodlust looks like a rehearsal for the 2024 general elections.

There's nothing new about communal violence playing a role in polarising Indian society. The change is the brazenness of the state where courts look least interested in addressing the sickness while the government signals its support to fascist consolidation with a deafening silence. In this sense Indian communalism has shifted gear. State power has become its open ally. The suggestion that Muslims triggered the violence by attacking Ram Navami processions is disingenuous. This is the period of Ramazan when Muslims fast and congregate at mosques in piety. Hindu and Muslim festivals have coincided all the time in India. Holi and Eid milan celebrations were often bracketed together for everyone to join in. A Sikh gurdwara in Dubai hosts the iftar for fasting Muslims where all are welcome. This syncretic celebration of India is, however, not a great help to the BJP's divisive agenda. Communalism is its meat and bread, even if it selectively projects preference for vegetarianism. The latest violence cannot be called Hindu-Muslim rioting. The upsurge is part of the state's attack on India's cultural mosaic with a sinister political intent.

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## **Economic crisis**

BY any definition, Pakistan's current economic situation is dire. Admittedly, the new coalition government is inheriting an economy encumbered with rising price inflation, widening fiscal and current account deficits and diminishing foreign currency reserves. It is also bedevilled by a volatile political environment.

Even if former finance minister Shaukat Tarin's contention that the PTI has left the economy in a better shape than it had inherited in 2018 is not rejected out of hand, the challenge of turning it around, or at least providing some relief to inflation-stricken citizens anytime soon, is a formidable one for the new set-up.

However, exaggerating the 'facts' will not help either. The estimates of the twin fiscal and current account deficits given by Miftah Ismail at his Tuesday presser are on the higher side. But then, we have seen this pattern before: every new government needlessly amplifies the economic crisis to discredit their predecessors.

In the present case, the current account deficit is growing but is unlikely to reach the \$20bn mark as claimed by Mr Ismail. The fiscal deficit is burgeoning, and may cross the previous government's estimates of slightly over 6pc of GDP. Yet it is an exaggeration to say it would increase to 10pc by the close of the current fiscal year. Reserves are down. Yet, as the State Bank says, Pakistan's external financing needs for the present fiscal are "fully met from identified sources".

The economy is in deep trouble, and indeed in a worse state than what the PTI had inherited; there is no denying these facts. The situation is complicated by the IMF decision to delay the \$1bn tranche due to the third tax amnesty given by the previous government to the wealthy, as well as political uncertainty in the country. China is taking its time to roll over its debt of nearly \$2.5bn as it waits for the political dust to settle. Once the IMF is back as expected, since Mr Ismail has promised to honour Islamabad's commitments to the lender, and China rolls over its loan, the reserves are likely to start rising.

The question is whether the new rulers have what it takes to fix the two major structural problems to sustainably revive the economy. That requires massive growth in taxes by expanding the taxpayers' base and eliminating exemptions to the powerful, as well as the privatisation of state enterprises, such as the Steel Mills and PIA, to reduce the gap between income and expenditure.

Further, governance and policy reforms are needed to substantially raise productivity for boosting exports and paying import bills. The coalition may not have much time to undertake all these fiscal and productivity reforms, but it can initiate changes to restructure the economy for a sustainable turnaround in the

longer term. One hopes it doesn't resort to populist moves ahead of the elections.

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## 'Proactive policing'

STUNG by public uproar over rising street crimes, Karachi police appears to be resorting to a 'quick fix' — encounter killings. Since the beginning of the year, there have been 254 alleged police encounters in the city, resulting in the death of 27 suspects and injuries to around 300. In March alone, there were no less than 96 such incidents, in which 11 suspects were killed and 125 wounded. When asked about the startling number of shootouts, the city police chief described it as "proactive policing" that involves collecting "CCTV footage, identification of the criminals and their hot chase to pre-empt" them from committing further offences. Some questions immediately arise: firstly, if these are genuine 'encounters', how many casualties have the cops suffered, and secondly, how many civilians have been caught in the crossfire? It is unlikely that casualties would only occur on the suspects' side unless the old modus operandi practised in the metropolis by infamous 'encounter specialist' Rao Anwar has once again been dusted off. In that instance, purported terrorism suspects were targeted in hundreds of 'encounters' overseen by the former SSP. However, the murder in January 2018 of aspiring model Naqeebullah Mehsud and three other innocent men lifted the veil on the sordid reality of what can happen when extrajudicial killings are normalised.

Sadly, the tacit acceptance of fake encounters to plug the loopholes in the judicial process — and no doubt, to dispense with the hard work of collecting prosecutable evidence — is widespread in the country as a whole. The result is a brutalised, trigger-happy law-enforcement apparatus that knows it can get away with murder. Punjab has been particularly notorious in this respect. In January 2019, a couple and their daughter along with a family friend were gunned down while travelling in their car near Sahiwal by the provincial counterterrorism police; the cops were acquitted by an anti-terrorism court. While the Karachi police is trying to gain the citizens' trust by tackling street crime, which is its responsibility, breaking the law in the attempt to do so is self-defeating and short-sighted. The expedient tactic inevitably corrupts the criminal justice system further by affording

the police impunity in their violation of fundamental rights to security of person and to due process. Extrajudicial killing is the shortest route to a scenario where even law-abiding citizens will have good reason to be afraid for their lives and property — from law enforcement itself.

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## Visas for pilgrims

THE arrival of over 2,000 Sikh pilgrims from India via the Wagah border to participate in the Baisakhi festival underscores Pakistan's commitment to not let its tense ties with New Delhi affect people's basic rights to visit places that are important to their religious beliefs. The same, however, cannot be said of the Indian government, which last month denied visas to Pakistani pilgrims hoping to visit the shrine of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer for the Sufi saint's urs. The decision to not grant visas came as a surprise since the Indian authorities had asked the religious affairs ministry here to complete the arrangements for the departure of pilgrims, who had arrived in Lahore from distant areas of the country. Expressing his dismay, the religious affairs minister, Noorul Haq Qadri, had termed this decision as a violation of the Pakistan-Indian Protocol on Visits to Religious Shrines 1974.

Whatever the reasons for India's last-minute U-turn, it is unfortunate that the people, who share a religious and cultural heritage, have to bear the brunt of political decisions taken by the governments. Over the past few years, diplomatic relations have hit a new low, resulting in a near suspension of people-to-people contact between India and Pakistan. While Pakistan has fulfilled its legal obligations of granting visas to pilgrims, as demonstrated by the yearly arrival of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs in the country via Kartarpur and Wagah to visit their holy sites, Pakistani citizens have been repeatedly denied this right by the Indian government. Both Pakistan and India are home to millions of divided families. They also share a religious and social heritage that is centuries old; India is home to Sufi shrines and iconic Muslim mosques, while Pakistan boasts some of the most revered Hindu and Sikh religious sites. Both neighbours, especially India, should work towards normalising ties and awarding visas to tourists visiting holy sites. Such a move would also help soften relations between the two neighbours in other areas.

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## **Army's step back**

WITH the political temperature at fever pitch, the DG ISPR's press conference yesterday will act as a cold press on some of the more worrisome narratives shoe-horned into our political discourse over the past few weeks.

Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar has made it quite clear that the security apparatus does not believe there is any imminent threat to national security or credible evidence of an international conspiracy through which Mr Imran Khan was ousted. Unless the PTI decides to counter with confrontation, the military's statement will deflate the alarmist narrative pushed by Mr Khan about Pakistan's sovereignty being compromised with the help of his political rivals.

Since Mr Khan's unceremonious ouster, the military has been on the receiving end of a barrage of criticism, both engineered and genuine. Its senior command's loyalty has been called into question through various trends on social media — "amplified", the DG ISPR says, by inimical forces seemingly looking to capitalise on Pakistan's internal turmoil. The onslaught seems to have forced the military's hand to go public with a counter-narrative.

With the establishment taking a position on Cablegate, the message to the ousted prime minister is quite clear: Mr Khan should modulate the strident tone taken by him in recent political speeches and avoid adding to tensions between the military and the citizenry.

Other 'clarifications' have also been provided, such as the assertion that the army never gave Mr Khan any 'options' in the lead-up to his ouster; only discussed the different scenarios he would face. The DG ISPR also rubbished reports that the army chief had met opposition leaders ahead of the vote, as well as a story that suggested that he had paid a tense visit to Mr Khan hours before the latter lost his government. The ISPR's strong assertion that the army chief is not seeking an extension and will retire in November also seems directed at countering public speculation on why the PTI government was sent packing.

The military has had a pernicious habit of political meddling throughout the brief and interrupted history of Pakistan's democracy — something the DG ISPR

indirectly acknowledged. For far too long, non-democratic forces have acted as spoilers and crippled the progress of parliamentary democracy either by using political parties against each other or directly subverting the political system.

It is high time that the space snatched away from democratic forces was returned to their hands. If the military's new policy is indeed the paradigm shift away from past practices as it is claimed to be, it should be proven with a complete withdrawal of the military from democratic processes as well as the dismantling of political cells in the intelligence apparatus which are used to manipulate the system from behind the scenes. The upcoming general election will be a litmus test for how long this new policy endures.

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## Vicious cycle

A PREDICTABLE 'cleaning of the Augean stables' is taking place at law-enforcement agencies — as is wont to happen each time a new government comes in. Just days after Shehbaz Sharif was sworn in as prime minister, his government removed the chief of the FIA's cybercrime wing Babar Bakht Qureshi who was involved in probing several cases linked with the erstwhile opposition. This follows on the heels of two other officers, one from the FIA and the other from the Anti-Corruption Establishment, being placed on the 'no-fly' list. One may be sure that others too will soon find themselves in hot water. The officials that have fallen from grace thus far were involved in investigations pertaining to an accountability court judge's video scandal, Asif Zardari's agricultural properties, money laundering allegations against the leadership of the PML-N, MQM and PPP, etc. NAB and FIA have both been pulled up more than once by the courts for the perceived bias in their modus operandi. In a July 2020 Supreme Court judgement, retired Justice Maqbool Baqar excoriated NAB for riding roughshod over fundamental rights while seemingly carrying out a political vendetta at the government's behest. The FIA also came under fire when its personnel arrested a media personality in February for allegedly slandering a PTI minister, with the Islamabad High Court chief justice asking Mr Qureshi whether the organisation considered itself above the law.



Are we now going to see the tables turned and these agencies being let loose on the PTI? Already, immediately after the successful no-confidence vote against Imran Khan, in fact even before a new prime minister was sworn in, the FIA placed several PTI members on the 'no-fly list' — which once again earned it a rebuke from the court. This vicious cycle must be broken now; the politicisation of what should be autonomous entities has profoundly damaged their credibility, shaken public trust in the rule of law, and reduced the noble concept of accountability to a hollow slogan. Until this culture changes, which seems like a remote possibility given the toxicity in the present political climate, law-enforcement personnel will not be able to deliver without the fear of getting penalised or transferred. Of course, abuse of power must be punished, but it must be punished whether the perpetrators belong to the opposition or the incumbent government; and both must be brought to justice strictly in accordance with the law.

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## **Sri Lanka meltdown**

THE economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka has deepened. The country's central bank has said that foreign debt repayment is "impossible", while market observers assert that default is "a certainty". Coupled with the economic meltdown are popular calls for the government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down, with protesters camping out in Colombo. The disaster had been unfolding over the past several weeks, amid crippling food and fuel shortages and doctors warning that the country was running out of essential medicines. Sri Lanka owes just over \$35bn to foreign creditors, while its financial woes have been compounded by a downturn in tourism traffic caused by Covid restrictions; the island is heavily dependent on foreign tourists for its economic stability. The country's financial predicament has dovetailed with a major political crisis; the whole cabinet recently resigned leaving the president and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa — both brothers — left to face the wrath of the public. Many critics feel the economic crisis has been exacerbated by mismanagement at the top, as numerous members of the Rajapaksa family held key posts in government. Though the prime minister has offered talks to resolve the crisis, the opposition is aiming for a vote of no-confidence.

The Sri Lankan government is due soon to start bailout talks with the IMF. It is hoped that the multilateral lender, as well as the country's foreign creditors, offers a plan that prioritises domestic economic stability. For now, helping provide affordable food, fuel and medicines to the people must be given precedence, while a longer-term plan to rescue the country from its debt trap needs to be hammered out. The Sri Lankan crisis should also serve as a warning to other developing states that economic mismanagement and political nepotism can give birth to major instability that can rattle the foundations of society. Fiscal probity, together with transparent governance, appears to be the only way of avoiding such calamities, while austerity and accountability need to begin at the top.

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## **Imran's choice**

IT could turn ugly tonight. With Mr Imran Khan all set to address the public at Karachi's Bagh-i-Jinnah later this evening, many will be watching to see how he reacts to the military's distancing of itself from him. The ousted prime minister is firmly in 'container mode'. The Wednesday jalsa in Peshawar will have given further validation to his plans to mobilise the electorate to push for early elections. Greeted there by a large, enthusiastic crowd, he delivered an aggressive speech targeting the new government and confronting the state, which has set the tone for how his campaign will proceed.

It has been commented earlier that Mr Khan has deployed a highly potent — and dangerous — narrative to carve a path for his return to power. This narrative has painted every individual, party or institution that goes against Mr Khan as unknowingly complicit in an international conspiracy at best, or an outright traitor at worst. It has sparked strong criticism of the military and judiciary — both of which featured prominently in the events leading to his ouster — not to mention an outpouring of vitriol and contempt for the new government. It is in this context that Mr Khan's reaction to the DG ISPR's statement will be closely watched. Though the military spokesman did say there were "no problems" with the PTI as such, he also publicly debunked many important talking points from the former prime minister's narrative. Mr Khan's more ardent supporters, many of whom seem to be quite averse to the military's position in the vote of no-confidence

episode, are not likely to take kindly to the DG ISPR's public rebuke. The mix of emotions and nationalist righteousness has led to a combustible situation.

With 123 PTI MNAs having hastily resigned from the Assembly, and the early approval of their resignations secured, thanks to the political sympathies of the acting NA speaker, Mr Khan has painted himself into a corner. He could have sat in the Assembly while agitating on the streets, but he has willingly sacrificed that option to build pressure for an early election — the only option he wants open for himself at the moment. To force that outcome, he will need to build enough pressure on the state that it capitulates to his demands. This pressure can either be built over time, or by intensifying his rhetoric. Option A will not be easy: emotions may be running high right now, but will Mr Khan be able to keep his supporters engaged for months if needed? Or will he go for Option B and push the public and the state towards confrontation, the opportunity for which has been presented to him on a silver platter? Given the worrisome lengths Mr Khan has displayed himself capable of going to, in order to hold on to power, the prospects are disquieting.

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## Ogra's advice

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif must have felt stuck between a rock and a hard place after Ogra recommended a massive increase in the prices of petroleum products for recovering the full import cost and exchange rate losses from consumers.

According to the estimates of the oil and gas regulator, the government is required to raise petrol prices by Rs21.30 a litre and diesel by above Rs83 a litre in order to recover the full costs from today. In case it also wants to recover the sales tax and the petroleum development levy on these products, Ogra has proposed a hike of Rs53.30 in petrol and up to Rs120 in diesel prices.

Who would intentionally opt to step on this landmine that PML-N leader Miftah Ismail referred to in his press conference earlier this week? Certainly not a new coalition that, though faced with an enormous economic crisis, has to contend with a formidable political foe. The big question now is: for how long can Prime

Minister Shehbaz Sharif delay defusing the landmine, which his predecessor left for him, by freezing petroleum and electricity rates for four months through June 30?

He can't afford to wait for too long, and would need to start deactivating it, even if gradually — unless he wants to allow a bloating budget deficit to spiral out of control by the end of the current financial year.

Thus, the decision to not hike petroleum prices at all is an ill-advised one.

Pakistan is facing a dire economic crisis and populist policies made under political pressure are certainly not going to help anyone in the long run — least of all the people benefiting from them. At the end of the day, the beneficiaries always end up paying back such subsidies in a harder way through more indirect levies or higher taxes and heavy cuts in public-sector spending on essential services, such as education, water supply and healthcare.

The gravity of the looming economic crisis demands that the new government take prudent, forward-looking policy decisions to put the country back on the trajectory of sustainable growth, even it wants to tread cautiously. However, the Shehbaz Sharif government does not have the option of letting things remain as they are or keep delaying tough decisions. If Mr Sharif continues with populist policies for fear of a backlash from the opposition PTI, he may leave the economy in far more dire straits than he inherited.

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Nefarious nexus

THE Nazim Jokhio murder case now joins the list of countless others where power and influence have more or less bought suspects and perpetrators freedom, while the poor and vulnerable are forced to mourn the loss of their loved ones, without being given justice. The names of PPP lawmakers — brothers MPA Jam Awais and MNA Abdul Karim Bijjar — and 11 others have been removed from the list of suspects in the final charge sheet for “want of evidence” after a two-month-long scrutiny of charges by the office of the Sindh prosecutor general. This is an abuse of government offices to influence the case.

Earlier, the Sindh government had requested the police to change the investigation officer in the case. All this flies in the face of the ruling party's claim of upholding the rule of law, basic human rights and supremacy of the Constitution. While the PPP leadership issued statements to condemn the murder and made the usual promises of bringing the perpetrators to justice, the attempts made to influence the case and the final 'surprise' sprung by the highest office in the province tasked with upholding the rule of law, tell a different story. It is utterly disgraceful and highly condemnable that consecutive attempts by higher officials of the Sindh government were successful in influencing the outcome of what is surely an open-and-shut case.

Jokhio's widow had already swallowed this bitter pill when in a video message earlier this month she declared she had pardoned the accused, claiming that there was no justice in Pakistan. Around the same time, the National Commission for Human Rights had also decided to intervene, saying that the family's sudden decision to drop the case was the result of the pressure mounted by the perpetrators' families and police. Indeed, the PPP leadership needs to dispel the impression that this abuse of law took place with their connivance by ensuring that due process is followed and that those responsible for the crime are punished accordingly.

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## **Lawmakers or lawbreakers?**

WHAT happened inside the Punjab Assembly on Saturday was nothing less than a brazen attack on the Constitution, besides being in contempt of the Lahore High Court's directions to the deputy speaker to hold a vote to elect a new leader of the House. Democracy can be noisy and messy. However, when PTI and PML-Q lawmakers abused, attacked and injured Deputy Speaker Dost Mohammad Mazari to keep him from carrying out his parliamentary and court-mandated responsibilities, they crossed all limits. It is not enough to condemn the unprecedented violence perpetrated by the PTI-PML-Q lawmakers; those involved should be given exemplary punishment. The shameful events, which included the alleged help provided to lawmakers by some assembly staffers to smuggle lotas and banners into the House, indicate that the violence was premeditated, and that the PTI, and the only ally it is now left with, in their

desperation, had planned to subvert the election process and delay the defeat of their candidate Chaudhry Pervez Elahi who was aiming for the top job in the province. In reaction, some PML-N members too lost their cool. Sadly, given the dangerous narrative that had been building up, disorder in the Punjab Assembly could not have been ruled out. And yet, no one could have anticipated the level of hooliganism that was on display.

The melee was an extension of the events we have seen in the National Assembly in recent days. Once the Constitution is disrespected, there is no end to it. Verbal abuse spewed on rivals at public meetings is now turning into physical violence. Social media hatred is spilling over into real life. And this is because of the extreme polarisation in society, which has resulted from the constant rants and abusive discourse perpetuated by politicians who are not prepared to respect the law or to accept a vote that goes against them. Fortunately, in the case of the Punjab Assembly, the deputy speaker was finally successful in holding the election, under strict police protection, as ordered by the court. PML-N's Hamza Shehbaz Sharif was elected the new chief minister of Punjab after the PTI-PML-Q combine decided to 'boycott' the vote when it realised that the system, and not individual whims, would prevail.

Having said that, some words of censure must be reserved for the new government. With Shehbaz Sharif ruling in Islamabad and his son in Pakistan's largest province, what kind of message is being conveyed to the public? Clearly, such concentration of power means that, even after three terms in government, the PML-N leadership is still not ready to repose its trust in party leaders who are not family members. That is exactly what their biggest rival in Punjab, the PTI, has been playing up in order to wean voters away from the Sharif fortress.

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## **PM, not CM**

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has declared that he intends to work at 'Pakistan speed' which is a reference to his famed 'Punjab speed', a term coined to describe his swift and efficient governance as chief minister of Punjab.

Since taking office, he has displayed signs that he means what he says. The PM has made Saturday a working day, changed office timings to 8 a.m., and earlier this week was inspecting the Metro project in Islamabad at 7 a.m.

Mr Sharif knows he has to compete with his own reputation and he does not have much time to do so. He also realises that his government needs to draw a sharp contrast with the previous one in terms of governance, performance and delivery.

If this translates into work on the ground, it can only be welcomed. However, a word of caution. There is a big difference between the job requirements of a chief minister and a prime minister.

Mr Sharif served as chief minister of Punjab for a decade and cemented his style of working in that capacity. Governance in the province is primarily project-based and requires efficient management skills in terms of concepts, timelines, budgets, executions and strict monitoring.

As chief minister, Mr Sharif used the bureaucracy efficiently for these purposes, while sidelining his cabinet. He was a one-man show and ensured he leveraged this to the maximum.

His penchant for working long hours and going deep into details ensured that the bureaucracy had to deliver on commitments and not indulge in needless delays and red tape. As prime minister though, he faces a different set of challenges. The federal government is more about policy than projects, and more about institutional coordination than one-man decision-making.

The PM will therefore need to place his speed, efficiency and penchant for hard work within a different framework. He will also need to adjust his working style in order to work through the cabinet instead of only through the bureaucracy.

In addition, he will need to curb his tendency to have his own way because at the centre he will be required to share policy space with the establishment and have important stakeholders such as autonomous bodies and donor agencies as well as the larger international community on his side.

As long as he retains his speed, focus and eye for detail while pivoting to a federal system, he should be able to deliver results.

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## **Momentous loss**

IT will be difficult to fill the vacuum left behind by Bilquis Edhi, who passed away on Friday. Aptly referred to as the ‘mother of Pakistan’, her love for all those who needed it knew no bounds. During six decades of selfless service, her foundation took in over 42,000 unwanted newborns left in cradles outside Edhi homes and centres across the country. Her plea not to kill babies but to leave them in the jhoola instead, defined her mission. This, however, constituted only a part of her work in a country where the poor and vulnerable are left to fend for themselves. In their hour of need, thousands turned to her for comfort and help, which she gave generously. One of the first nurses to have graduated from the Edhi hospital in Mithadar, Karachi, Bilquis Edhi managed all women- and children-related affairs at the Edhi centres, hospitals and orphanages, and personally scrutinised the credentials of couples who had approached her foundation to adopt a child. Today, there are countless parents in the country and abroad who have reason to be grateful to Bilquis Edhi for bringing joy to their lives. It is no wonder that her work earned her several awards. Last year, she was recognised as the “most impactful person” of the first 20 years of this century. She was already a recipient of the Hilal-i-Imtiaz, the Lenin Peace Prize, the Mother Teresa Memorial International Award for Social Justice and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service.

When her beloved husband Abdul Sattar Edhi — the “king without a crown” as Malala Yousafzai described him — passed away in 2016, her responsibilities increased. If Abdul Sattar Edhi was the soul of Pakistan, then Bilquis Edhi — who was exactly as old as the country itself — was the nation’s beating heart. The spirit of philanthropy is alive and well in the country, but for it to be channelled in a manner that it benefits all, the Edhi legacy should be a source of inspiration for hundreds of welfare groups.

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# Al Aqsa attack

THE appalling Israeli raid on the Al Aqsa mosque premises on Friday morning deserves to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Disturbing videos of the incident show Israeli security men inside the prayer halls of the sacred sanctuary, as worshippers try to protect themselves from the onslaught. Over 150 Palestinians were reportedly injured in the violence. This grim incident seems to be a repeat of the events of May 2021, when the Israelis stormed the mosque also during the holy month of Ramazan. Unfortunately, desecration of the mosque by Israeli security men and rabidly anti-Arab Zionists seems to have become a recurring feature. The latest raid comes amidst an uptick in deadly violence in the occupied territories, particularly the West Bank. Though the Israelis say they moved in to prevent Palestinians throwing stones at a Jewish holy site, tension at the site had been brewing for a while as extremist Jewish groups had been calling for raiding of the mosque during Passover.

The imam of Al Aqsa has described the brutal Israeli raid as a “premeditated and orchestrated attack” while the Palestinian presidency has termed it a “declaration of war”. Of course, passions around the sacred site should not be underestimated, because it was a provocative visit by late Israeli leader Ariel Sharon in 2000 that sparked the second Intifada. The main problem appears to be hard-line Jewish groups that stage aggressive visits to the holy sanctuary, especially during sensitive religious periods. Often shouting inflammatory anti-Muslim and anti-Arab slogans, the extremists are accompanied by Israeli police, and if the Palestinians react to the incitement, violence is the natural outcome. What creates an absolutely explosive situation is that many of these groups — with a number of them having supporters within the Israeli government — call for the destruction of Al Aqsa and the building of the ‘Third Temple’. These extremists must be reined in and official Israeli patronage of the provocative raids must end to prevent triggering a new cycle of violence.

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# **Toshakhana saga**

GIFTS sometimes come with a political price tag, and the change in government has opened a new chapter in the Toshakhana saga.

On Friday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif alleged that his predecessor, Imran Khan, had sold state gifts in Dubai worth Rs140m. The items, presented to him by rulers of foreign countries, reportedly included a wristwatch from the crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

Former information minister Fawad Chaudhry responded by saying that “selling one’s own assets is not a crime”.

Certainly, rulers, parliamentarians and officials do have the right to acquire state gifts stored in the Toshakhana — where they are required to be deposited if they exceed a certain value — after paying a percentage of their worth, but the matter is not so cut and dried.

Misuse of the privilege by undervaluing the items in question is far from uncommon. That was the crux of a reference filed by NAB in 2020 against former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Yousuf Raza Gilani and former president Asif Ali Zardari. Now the FIA is said to have begun investigating the alleged sale of a necklace, gifted to Mr Khan while he was premier, for Rs180m to a jeweller in Lahore in lieu of a token amount paid to the Toshakhana.

The situation is a rather neat illustration of the adage ‘people in glass houses should not throw stones’, and any inquiry into the disposal of state gifts during the former prime minister’s time in office must be fair and transparent so as to not come across as political retaliation.

That said, the PTI government had been unnecessarily cagey when asked to provide details of gifts presented to Mr Khan since 2018, resorting to the implausible argument that such disclosure would jeopardise international ties. Its insistence on keeping the information out of the public domain naturally gave rise to speculation that something was perhaps not quite kosher about how the Toshakhana was being managed.

To prove that was not the case, the PTI must cooperate fully with the investigation, which should also look into how the value of the gifts was determined before their sale to Mr Khan and perhaps others on reduced rates.

There is also the not unimportant matter of optics. How does it reflect on the former PM that after acquiring the items at a fraction of the price, he chose to sell them for profit while the nation had been asked to tighten its belt?

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## **Missing cabinet**

Seems that not everything is going swimmingly for the new coalition government. After days of speculation over who the new ministers in Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's cabinet will be, we still have no names. This is quite a concerning situation considering the immediacy of the economic, political and social crises the new government has to deal with.

Indeed, it would have been expected of the experienced hands that lead the parties in the new coalition government that they would have worked out the modalities of a smooth takeover from PTI as soon as it became clear that they had the numbers behind them.

It was known ahead of time that the economy, foreign policy, militancy and political challenges would be a priority for the incoming government and would require urgent steps to fix. It would have made sense, therefore, to have key individuals prepared to take up the relevant portfolios from the get-go, as the new set-up does not have time on its side. Instead, we now have a situation where, after nearly a week of the prime minister having taken his oath, two key coalition partners are sending signals that they may be less than eager to take responsibility for how the new government must proceed with implementing its agenda.

Meanwhile, the PTI, stinging from its unceremonious ouster from office, has been flexing its muscles with power shows in key urban support bases.

It is whipping up its supporters' emotions by painting the new regime as the proxy of a foreign power; a government whose every decision will be tainted by its alleged obeisance to external benefactors. It is raring to go after any unpopular decision the new government may be forced to take to rectify the economic imbalances it has been handed over. Cynically, ignoring their own culpability in offering an irrational and unsustainable subsidy on fuel and electricity, the former ministers of the PTI government are already telling supporters that the new government is about to drop a petrol bomb on their heads.

In such a scenario, the PML-N led government's hand ought to be strengthened by the parties that paved its way to power if the government is to survive. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif too needs to make quick decisions, even if they are difficult to take. He may be faced with the difficult task of keeping each of his political benefactors happy, but his foremost duty is to save the country from further economic and political turmoil.

He is widely regarded as an administrator who 'gets the work done', which is why many key stakeholders both within and outside the country are keeping a close eye on his ability to deliver. He must realise what is at stake if he remains unable for too long to put a team together to get the job done.

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## **Unnecessary protest**

IT is sad to see political discourse in the country and among the Pakistani diaspora sink to a level where the distinction between real political actors and harmless commentators becomes blurred. In this regard, the protest outside the house of former prime minister Imran Khan's ex-wife Jemima Goldsmith last Sunday, by activists of the PML-N, was a despicable affair that cast the entire party in a negative light. It was unbecoming of a politically experienced party like the PML-N to drag Ms Goldsmith and her children into what has long been a vitriolic relationship with the PTI. That former PML-N minister Abid Sher Ali, who gave the call for protesting outside the home of Ms Goldsmith, also used offensive language referencing Mr Khan's children was the meanest blow. Such a mindset reflects how low we have sunk and how a chauvinistic worldview, such as Mr Abid Sher Ali's apparently, continues to regard women and children as

legitimate targets of derision, harassment and vilification for their connections with men who are political adversaries.

This was a tit-for-tat move against some PTI workers' protest outside Avenfield House in London where PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif is reportedly staying with his sons. While Mr Sharif is a well-known political entity, and regarded by Mr Khan and his party as their archenemy, Ms Goldsmith is a private individual who happened to be married to Mr Khan at one point. Ms Goldsmith has hardly commented publicly on the country's political situation since Mr Khan's ouster; and even if her occasional tweets appear to be supportive of the PTI's narrative, she has the right, as a free individual, to express her opinion on any matter, including Pakistani politics. It is ironic that the PML-N, which is now in the driving seat, should resort to the same uncivilised behaviour that it justifiably accused the PTI of demonstrating. Political discourse in the country has become so vulgar and polarising, that it is hard to see common sense prevailing and parties pulling back from the brink.

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## **Fuel shortages**

IT is quite possible that we could be headed towards yet another fuel crisis as early as next month because of the severe cash crunch in the supply chain. For instance, the country's largest energy supplier PSO is struggling to manage oil supplies, owing to its increasing liquidity crisis as international oil suppliers demand hard currency from the cash-strapped state-run entity for fresh supplies as well as higher premiums on delayed payments. The premium for high-speed diesel supplies are reported to be fluctuating between \$8 and \$13 per tonne in recent weeks, up from \$2.5 or less a few months ago. With the balance sheet of the company in a state of shambles as power producers, gas utilities, and other public-sector concerns such as PIA hold back nearly Rs520bn they owe it, PSO is not in a position to pay approximately Rs265bn to its foreign LNG and petroleum product suppliers. Another sum of Rs42.5bn is payable to local refineries. Unless the government bails it out — and fast — the cash crunch will likely hamper its ability to arrange uninterrupted fuel supplies to meet the demand of different sectors of the economy.

Of late, oil marketing companies have also raised concerns over the delays in the payment of their price differential claims or subsidy that the previous government had promised to pick up when it froze the prices of petrol, diesel and other petroleum products for four months through June. The new set-up, which has decided to continue with the energy price freeze for now, despite an Ogra recommendation to raise the rates considerably in order to recover full import costs and exchange rate losses from consumers, is yet to earmark funds to pay the subsidy amount to the OMCs for the current month. In case the payment is not made in the next one week or so, private fuel suppliers, that have already cut down on their imports due to rising global oil prices, will not be in a position to bring cargoes in May. With cash flow constraints in the fuel supply chain aggravating due to stuck-up payments and rising international rates, energy price subsidies are becoming more and more unsustainable with each passing day. It may be a politically tough decision to make, but the new government must tackle the issue quickly. Fuel prices have to be raised given the fragile fiscal position of the country. The sooner it is done the better.

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## **Showing firmness**

KANDAHAR: Protesters shout slogans against alleged Pakistani action in Afghan territory, at the Martyrs' Square on Monday. The death toll from violent incidents in Khost and Kunar has jumped to at least 47, officials said, as Islamabad urged Kabul to act against militants launching attacks from Afghan soil.—AFP

THE inevitable has happened. Pakistan on Sunday condemned “terrorists operating with impunity from Afghan soil to carry out activities in Pakistan”.

This is the strongest possible public statement from Islamabad and a rebuke to the hard-line regime in Kabul, that has been conveniently looking the other way as the outlawed TTP continue to carry out ferocious attacks on Pakistani soil.

Pakistan's demand for “stern” Afghan action against the TTP comes amid reports of a significant increase in cross-border attacks. In the past week alone, the TTP carried out multiple attacks in North and South Waziristan districts and Dera Ismail Khan, resulting in the martyrdom of several soldiers and policemen. There were also reports, originating from Kabul, that spoke of Pakistan launching

retaliatory strikes on suspected TTP bases in Khost and Kunar provinces, though neither the ISPR nor the Foreign Office has confirmed them. One report from Kabul, however, did mention Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan having been summoned on the matter and given a *démarche*.

Islamabad's condemnation of the increase in terrorist activities from across the border and Kabul's protest over the alleged air strikes expose the friction between the two countries. Pakistan has been exercising maximum restraint since the Afghan Taliban took control of Kabul last August.

Contrary to their claims and Pakistan's optimism that the new regime would not allow Afghan soil to be used against any country, there has been a sharp uptick in attacks, all originating from Afghanistan. According to official figures, 119 Pakistani officers and soldiers laid down their lives while battling the scourge from mid-August till last month. This is simply shocking.

For too long, the US-led Western bloc considered the Afghan Taliban to be proxies furthering Islamabad's interests in Afghanistan. Indeed, there were many in Pakistan too who celebrated the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's' second ascension to power, including those who distanced themselves from the war on terror, saying it was not Pakistan's war. This was despite warnings that the TTP and the Islamic Emirate were, in fact, two faces of the same coin.

With Pakistan's casualties mounting in the renewed war against terrorism, that narrative has died down, or so it seems at the moment. Pakistan's open and blunt condemnation, and its demand that the Afghan Taliban contain the TTP, is one such indication. There is, however, no sign from across the border that Kabul is paying heed.

It is time that Pakistan used all available diplomatic and economic resources at its disposal to make it absolutely plain to Kabul that it cannot get away with allowing Afghanistan's territory to be used by militants to spread terrorism in the region. The pressure on the Afghan Taliban must be increased. Afghanistan's rulers must also be made to realise that they cannot absolve themselves of the responsibility of the attacks by asking Islamabad to engage with the Pakistani militants based in Afghanistan.

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# Confession delayed

IMRAN Khan's conscience seems to have woken up rather belatedly to reflect on his mistakes as chief executive. Days after an ignominious drumming out from the Prime Minister's Office, the former premier has displayed the first signs that he may yet be capable of displaying remorse.

In at least two private conversations, first with the PTI lawyers' forum and then with a select group of journalists, Mr Khan has communicated that he feels his government's relentless witch-hunt targeting Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa was a 'mistake'.

It cannot be said with certainty what prompted this admission of wrongdoing by the ousted prime minister, but it seems it came in response to him being told that a section of the judiciary had been deeply unhappy with his government over its decision to prosecute the respected judge over spurious allegations.

Mr Khan's admission seems to lack force and conviction, however.

Consider that he has twice complained publicly, to large crowds, of the 'deep hurt' caused to him by the simple act of the judiciary "opening its doors at midnight". On both occasions, he protested: "Had I committed a crime?" On the other hand, his modest penitence for the immense hurt — both reputational and emotional — caused to Justice Isa and his wife, Sarina Isa, has been done from behind closed doors.

Is it hubris that prevents Mr Khan from empathising with Justice Isa as an equal, or is it that he is simply oblivious to the pain caused to the widely respected judge? If he has not already done so, Mr Khan urgently needs to take stock of just how cruelly Justice Isa and his spouse were relentlessly berated and slandered as a result of the defective reference filed against them on the advice of the Prime Minister's Office. The two were forced to watch a reputation built upon years of service to the country dragged through the mud as sneering commentators and overzealous 'keyboard warriors' questioned their integrity and conduct.



Acknowledging his 'mistake' behind closed doors to a third party, therefore, is quite an inadequate salve for their wounded pride and mental suffering. If he really is interested in making amends, Mr Khan should at least consider delivering a clear apology publicly and encourage his supporters to do likewise.

Mr Khan would also do well to nurture his rekindled sense of decency by reflecting further on his general contempt for the legal and constitutional structures and norms underpinning Pakistan as a state.

Indeed, the country can only pin its hopes on upright judges such as Justice Qazi Faez Isa to uphold the rule of law when political leaders commit excesses of the kind that Mr Khan is held responsible for. Mr Khan's note of regret ought to give way to many more expressions of remorse.

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## **Balochistan protest**

THE BNP-M walkout on Monday from the National Assembly over the security forces' alleged firing on Baloch protesters in Chagai, that left several injured, underlines that the failing economy isn't the only problem the new government will have to confront during its short term in office. Dealing with the excesses of the security forces and intelligence agencies that have been operating in Balochistan for several years, as well as the resulting bitterness, is going to be a considerable challenge. The protest was staged against the fatal shooting last Thursday of a driver who informally transported goods to and from Afghanistan. Bloody incidents and rights abuses in Balochistan have been a regular feature for far too long. But the new set-up wasn't expecting such a situation to arise so soon. Nor had it anticipated the strong reaction from one of its coalition allies. BNP-M chief Akhtar Mengal had on Saturday given the government a fortnight to resolve the issue of the missing persons. Taking the floor on Monday, BNP-M lawmaker Agha Hassan Baloch didn't mince his words when he warned that it would be difficult for his party to be part of the set-up if the military operation continued in his province. Who can blame the party for not joining the Shehbaz Sharif cabinet? After all, this was also their main complaint against the previous PTI administration.

Credit goes to PML-N leader Khawaja Asif for acknowledging that excesses were being committed against the people of Balochistan. “We owe it to Balochistan to find a solution,” he said. Yet he was wrong in laying all the blame on his fellow politicians for creating a vacuum for the ‘institution’ to intervene. Indeed, the conditions in Balochistan are not normal by any standard. A low-intensity war with militants and insurgents, possibly sponsored by foreign powers, has been going on for long in parts of the province. But that doesn’t justify an undeclared war on the entire Baloch population, as has been alleged. If Mr Mengal and his party are seeking a solution to Balochistan’s grievances within the constitutional framework, despite the rough treatment meted out to them by the state, the larger parties should listen to them and stand by them rather than defend those who consider themselves above the law of the land and use brutal force against citizens. Matters might spiral out of control unless Balochistan’s festering wounds are addressed soon.

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## **Priyantha lynching case**

IN the long list of dark moments this country has seen, the lynching of Sri Lankan national Priyantha Kumara by a mob in Sialkot last December is among the worst. A mob of hundreds had surrounded the factory manager after spurious allegations of blasphemy had been raised, and in the gruesome spectacle that followed, he was tortured to death and his body set alight. The incident elicited revulsion at home and abroad as Pakistani society sought to question itself about how it had plunged to such depths. Monday’s sentencing in the case should bring some closure to the slain man’s family, as a number of culprits have been given the strongest penalty on the law books. An anti-terrorism court awarded capital punishment to six convicts while giving life terms to nine. Seventy-two others have been given jail terms of varying duration. While the culprits needed to pay heavily for their crime, it should be reiterated that this paper opposes the death penalty.

Though the justice system has wrapped up this key case within a reasonable period of time, the underlying factors that fuel mob mentality and extremism need to be addressed by society so that such an outrage is not repeated. Of course,

one of the key matters that needs to be addressed is a review of the blasphemy laws, as too often flimsy charges are used to settle personal scores, with deadly consequences. Moreover, perhaps due to the constant political upheavals in the country, the deradicalisation agenda set forth in the 20-point National Action Plan has been lost sight of. State and society need to revitalise the plan to wean the country away from extremism and barbarism of the sort witnessed in Sialkot. Also, as the ATC noted in the Priyantha Kumara case, had the local police moved in quickly, the tragedy could perhaps have been avoided. Therefore, in cases where blasphemy allegations are made, timely action by law enforcement can help defuse an explosive situation and save lives.

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## **Revisiting media laws**

WITH the new government setting about swiftly dismantling its predecessor's information policy, the sword hanging over the media's head seems a little less menacing.

On Tuesday, Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb announced that the Pakistan Media Development Authority — which, had the PTI government had its way, would have been armed with draconian powers to control the media — was being disbanded “in whatever shape or form it was working”. No black law, she declared, would henceforth be proposed or enacted to stifle the constitutionally protected right to freedom of expression. Ms Aurangzeb further said that the Digital Media Wing set up by the PTI government to disseminate official information on social media platforms would also be shuttered.

The move was welcomed by many who accused the DMW of instigating vicious trolling of the opposition as well as journalists, bloggers — in short, anyone expressing views critical of the party.

The assault on the right to freedom of speech in this country during the PTI's tenure was perhaps unprecedented for a civilian dispensation to engage in. But let there be no mistake — the PML-N has been no champion of free speech either.

In fact, the draft of a print media regulatory law that surfaced in 2017, during the party's previous stint in power, was so similar to the PTI's proposed PMDA law that it could have conceivably been authored by the same hand. It included measures such as publishing licences to be renewed annually, possibility of jail terms for journalists and publishers and raids on the offices of publications that were deemed to have violated the law in question. It was only an uproar in the media and civil society that forced the government to backtrack.

And how can one forget that the restrictive Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, is actually the PML-N's brainchild? Or that its government, when the draft was formulated, sidelined stakeholders despite promising to hold meaningful discussions with them and ultimately bulldozed through a bill that is a vehicle for unabashed censorship? That law was then 'improved' upon by the PTI government through an ordinance, bringing Pakistan even closer to the most repressive countries on the planet.

Earlier this month, the Islamabad High Court reclaimed to some extent the people's right to free speech stolen by successive governments. It struck down a part of Peca's Section 20, thereby excluding reputational damage as grounds for a criminal defamation charge, and declared the entire amendment ordinance as unconstitutional. However, there are still several landmines strewn across Peca that are not conducive to a healthy exchange of views.

Ms Aurangzeb has given assurances that Peca will be revisited in consultation with stakeholders, and this is to be welcomed. In such an exercise, misinformation and disinformation must be clearly defined, for they are very different things, and there must only be reasonable restrictions on free speech.

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## **Wayward priorities**

AFTER days of wrangling, the parties in the ruling coalition seem to have arrived at some sort of a settlement, albeit begrudgingly, allowing the new prime minister to finally induct his cabinet more than a week after he was sworn in. And what a cabinet it is. The long list makes for interesting reading, especially if one is to consider the novel predicament the new government is in. Practicality would

have demanded that the prime minister nominate a small group of experts to help him navigate the immediate crises he faces. Meanwhile, given his tenuous hold on power and the political turbulence triggered by Imran Khan's ouster, he ought to have directed immediate preparations for a general election. Expediency, however, seems to have prevailed with the lavishing of high offices on all and sundry, perhaps in an attempt to give some commonality of purpose to a group of politicians who otherwise struggle to see eye to eye.

There are two silver linings in the new cabinet. Miftah Ismail has been given the onerous and thankless task of running the finance ministry. He will be expected to use his experience to once again clean up the economic mess left by a predecessor. Similarly, Hina Rabbani Khar seems a well-considered choice as minister of state for foreign affairs. It is assumed her past experience will greatly benefit Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari if and when he takes over as foreign minister. Sadly, it is evident from the other appointments and continued bickering over posts that the ruling parties do not seem to have put much prior thought into finding common ground. The poorly conceived joint charter they issued days ahead of the PTI government's ouster had been the first indication that they may have over-focused their energies on securing the vote of no-confidence alone. Now that Mr Khan is gone, their seeming indecisiveness on how to proceed will not be excused for long. The new government does not have the time or political space to afford to proceed in disorderly fashion. It is unsettling that most of the parties which created it seem unwilling to acknowledge the immensity of the challenges they face. The economic and other consequences, were this collaborative project to prematurely self-abort, would be troubling to say the least. The new government needs to share what the road map to the next election looks like and what it plans to do in the meantime.

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## **Dadu tragedy**

THE local authorities must be made to answer for abandoning the residents of Faiz Mohammad Daryani Chandio village in Sindh's Dadu district as hell descended on them on Monday night. According to news reports, a fire erupted in the kitchen of a thatched house around 9 pm. Due to the dry weather and strong winds, the fire soon engulfed the entire village comprising around 70

thatched houses. It raged for about 12 hours during which time the residents repeatedly called the local administration for help. However, not only did the officials not respond, they also reportedly refused to send fire tenders as no government official had reached the affected area. It was only when the Sindh chief minister took notice and instructed the deputy commissioner to provide “all possible assistance and support” that a lone fire tender reached the village the next day. By then, nine children had perished and four others had received critical burn injuries. The fire also caused heavy financial damage to the villagers, most of whom are subsistence farmers. Besides all their personal belongings, most of their cattle and food stock was also reduced to ashes, rendering them without any means of sustenance. A similar fire was reported from Jalib Rind village where 50 houses and cattle were destroyed when the paddy grass caught fire.

It is clear that had the district or tehsil-level administration bothered to respond to the residents’ desperate calls sooner, the damage could have been limited. The callous and lackadaisical attitude of the local officials, who by their inaction wilfully endangered human lives, demonstrates a deep-rooted official apathy and ineptitude. Though the prime minister and the Sindh chief minister have promised assistance to the affected families, they should also ensure strict punishment for those officials who ignored the citizens’ cry for help. Moreover, as more reports surface of similar incidents in other areas of Dadu district, the authorities should at once ensure adequate fire-extinguishing arrangements at the district and tehsil levels.

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## **Investing in Earth**

PAKISTAN has often been described as a country gifted with diverse flora and fauna and rich alluvial plains. From magnificent peaks to roaring rivers to scenic beaches, it has indeed been blessed with abundant natural beauty. Sadly, what is also true is that those tasked with steering development in the country have damaged Pakistan’s natural ecosystems, instead of protecting them, and, in the process, have jeopardised wildlife habitats and the well-being of the people. By some estimates, Pakistan is the fourth most polluted country in the world, with the second-worst quality of air. The latter is especially disturbing: going by WHO guidelines, the average lifespan of Pakistan’s citizens is being shortened by at

least four years as air pollutants and irritants are being inhaled. The pollution crisis highlights the ineffectiveness of the existing environmental regulatory mechanisms and also the state's failure to implement the rules. It is appalling that in a city like Karachi, where there are about a dozen industrial zones of various sizes, only 170 units have their own waste treatment facilities. Such lack of foresight and the failure to understand the importance of sustainable development have raised questions about the ability of our policymakers to adapt short- and long-term economic growth goals to an eco-friendly vision so that the environment is given room to breathe. Already Pakistan is among the world's top 10 countries most affected by climate change — admittedly, due more to the practices of bigger polluters than its own. But this is all the more reason for it to adopt climate-friendly practices at home and try and lessen the impact of global emissions.

The matter is an urgent one, and must be addressed on a sustained basis. For starters, there is a need to intelligently modernise the decades-old brick-and-mortar development model so that it does not replace our natural surroundings and delicate ecosystems. Instead, small- and large-scale development projects should be carried out within a larger, sustainable framework across a range of sectors including water, health, energy and disaster-risk reduction. In other words, industrial and economic development should go hand in hand with the conservation of the natural environment. This is also in line with this year's theme — to invest in our planet — for Earth Day that is being observed today. Constant upgradation of environmental regulation mechanisms and bodies is also required. Pakistan cannot thrive economically or socially until it stops denigrating its natural ecology that sustains life as we know it.

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## **Assange's ordeal**

IT will be remembered as a major blow to advocates of freedom of the press. With UK courts clearing the path for the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the US, the fate of the maverick publisher and activist now rests in the hands of the British home secretary. The US has for long sought the custody of Mr Assange due to his central role in the publication, starting in 2010, of a series of deeply embarrassing classified documents and material that shed light

on American forces' excesses in Iraq, Afghanistan and the infamous Guántanamo Bay prison site. He also oversaw the release of a large volume of diplomatic cables, some containing damning revelations, from US consulates and embassies worldwide. Later, Mr Assange drew even more ire from US authorities for publishing in 2017 the largest leak of CIA documents in history, which detailed the spy agency's hacking and surveillance capabilities.

The war logs published by WikiLeaks greatly helped shape global opinion about US misconduct in foreign territories, especially when the so-called war on terror was at its peak. They galvanised calls for an end to torture and murder with impunity that was perpetrated by American soldiers. The WikiLeaks editor braved years of isolation and confinement for his defiance of the US, was the subject of kidnapping and assassination plots, and yet remained unwavering in his commitment to a free press. It is a shame that the UK seems to be facilitating and extending the punishment of an individual who has done as much as he has to lay bare the illicit doings of a military superpower as it bent and broke international law in pursuit of its narrow goals. With another war now raging in Europe, surely British authorities realise that press freedoms are essential to reporting on and thereby preventing further abuses by warring parties. Mr Assange has already spent more than a decade living without the freedoms afforded to ordinary citizens. His relentless punishment should now stop.

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## **Economic challenges**

PAKISTAN'S teetering economy is projected by the IMF to grow by 4pc this fiscal year through June, and slightly faster during the next. That is just about the only silver lining in the dark clouds of fiscal and external crises gathering over the nation's economic horizon.

The numbers for the twin fiscal and current account deficits and headline inflation don't look as 'promising' as the growth forecast. But do these projections matter when the economic future of 220m people is uncertain and the country faces daunting political and foreign policy challenges?



Indeed, we may come out of the immediate economic crisis — we always do temporarily. The IMF will restart its funding programme, hopefully sooner rather than later, although we will have to swallow many bitter pills — some now and others after the next budget — as indicated by the new finance minister, Miftah Ismail, in his press conference. Other multilateral lenders will follow IMF's lead.

Mr Ismail has already left for Washington to 'renegotiate' the programme and secure the stuck-up tranche of nearly \$1bn. Bilateral lenders are also expected to roll over their loans and 'safe' deposits that have been parked with the State Bank. Many of our problems will be taken care of by others before the next budget. But the question is whether the ruling class has what it takes to end our periodic 'boom-and-bust' cycles and put the economy on a sustainable growth trajectory to alleviate poverty and create jobs.

Expecting the incumbent coalition rulers to take tough decisions is asking too much from them. Fears of a political backlash have kept them from rolling back the unsustainable freeze that the PTI government had announced on energy prices, despite Mr Ismail's calling the move "totally ill-advised and illogical".

The IMF also wants the removal of this cap because the subsidy is deepening the fiscal crisis. It shows that the coalition will probably focus more on firefighting and managing short-term challenges in the months ahead, before a caretaker set-up takes over the reins to oversee the next elections. Nobody wants to ruin their electoral chances at a time when the new opposition is pressing for immediate elections.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's political parties do not have much of a record in executing long-term governance and economic reforms. If the economic experiments of the previous government teach us anything, it is that quick fixes don't work. If the economy is to be pulled out of the low growth rut it is currently stuck in, then tough choices will have to be made.

Even though the coalition government has a tight time frame to work in, it is just enough to set a long-term direction for the economy. Inaction, even for a brief period, is not an option for the incumbent administration or, for that matter, the next elected dispensation.

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# Mariupol capture

NEARLY two months after the Russian army invaded Ukraine, the first 'victory' of sorts has emerged for Moscow. According to reports, Russian forces have taken the industrial port of Mariupol, though thousands of Ukrainian fighters remain holed up inside a steel plant. The development comes after Russian troops were unable to completely take over Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, following stiff resistance from defenders. Though it was being presumed early on that Moscow would swiftly neutralise Ukrainian forces, the latter — aided by weapons shipped by their Western allies and defending familiar turf — have proven a tough nut to crack for Russia. Concerning the immediate situation in Mariupol, as per some media accounts, corpses have been left on the streets while the city's infrastructure has been pulverised by Russian bombardment as Moscow's foes have accused it of committing war crimes. Will Moscow ensure that civilians are not harmed and enemy combatants are treated as per international norms? It hardly seems likely.

Beyond Mariupol, the situation in Ukraine does not inspire confidence where a negotiated settlement to the crisis is concerned. Several rounds of peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv have been held, though none have borne fruit. The Kremlin says it has sent a fresh peace proposal to Kyiv; the Ukrainian side says it has received no such document. To prevent further civilian suffering, an immediate ceasefire needs to take effect. Moscow must realise that continuous military actions against its western neighbour will only compound human misery, while the Western supporters of Ukraine also need to adopt a less belligerent tone to help bring this conflict to an end. In the long run, the neutrality of Ukraine can perhaps help ensure peace, especially if Russia is assured that it will not be used as a Nato staging post. On the other hand, Moscow needs to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and stop treating it like a rogue province. But efforts to work out a long-term peace can only succeed if the guns fall silent, and negotiations are allowed to continue unimpeded.

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## Imran Khan's rallies

AFTER three massive rallies in Peshawar, Karachi and Lahore, Imran Khan has proven that he still commands significant respect. The sudden revival of his political fortunes was quite unexpected, and it goes to show how shrewdly he has played the political hand he was dealt.

The reaffirmation of his supporters' faith in him should give him enough confidence to proceed headlong into his campaign for early elections. As a leader, he ought to take this opportunity to turn a fresh page and rewrite his political destiny based on lessons learnt from his first stint in power. It is unfortunate that he, instead, continues to amplify a toxic narrative that risks turning the people of Pakistan against the state, its institutions and even themselves.

From between the lines of an angry speech, which has varied little from city to city, Mr Khan has demanded from the powers that be that they give him an early election. It is the only way, he says, to set right the wrong that he believes was done to him.

The call for a march on Islamabad, to be announced at a date of his choosing, is leverage for enforcing that demand. It remains to be seen how seriously and enthusiastically it is taken up by his supporters, if indeed matters come to that. However, it does have the potential to throw another spanner in the works for the new coalition government, which suddenly finds itself with everything to lose after walking itself into a political quagmire littered with economic landmines.

Still, Mr Khan must realise that the best-laid plans often go awry.

Dharnas and jalsas alone may not be enough to sway the umpire's finger, as they once did in 2014. His graph may be rising today, but political fortunes are fickle and subject to the vagaries of time. It would be prudent, therefore, that he finds a new tune to pipe for the people following him.

There has always been something distinctly Orwellian about Mr Khan's vision for a 'Naya Pakistan', but the heady mix of religion and hyper-nationalism he has

introduced in recent speeches takes it to another level. Granted that most among our political lot simply cannot resist appealing to our basest instincts when attempting to turn our loyalties against each other, but turning political differences with rival parties into grounds for hate and revulsion of the other is not only unnecessary; it is deplorable.

Mr Khan often describes Mohammad Ali Jinnah as his “only leader”, forgetting that it was statecraft and diplomacy that made Mr Jinnah ‘Quaid-i-Azam’. If Mr Khan wishes to emulate the Quaid, he needs something substantially more wholesome than a narrative that paints anyone who has ever disagreed with him as a traitor. He ought to rise above the politics of hate and adopt a narrative of inclusion and reconciliation instead.

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## **Dangerous IS-K**

THE Islamic State’s Khorasan chapter has struck again. The victims of its most recent attacks in Afghanistan are predominantly the Shia Hazaras. This week has seen a series of bombings across Afghanistan. First, there was a series of blasts, believed to have been carried out by the IS-K, that targeted a school in the Hazara neighbourhood of Dasht-i-Barchi in Kabul — the same area where bomb explosions last May killed 85 people, mostly female students. Tuesday’s school bombing was followed by two more blasts, one of them in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif where the detonation of a booby trap device placed inside a Hazara mosque left 11 dead and scores injured. The same day, a bomb targeted an Afghan Taliban military van carrying mechanics, killing six more. Yet another blast took place at a Sunni mosque in Kunduz yesterday in which over 30 people died. At the time of writing, there had been no claim of responsibility. The attacks on the Hazara mosque and the military van, meanwhile, were claimed by IS-K. There has been no formal word from Afghanistan’s rulers on IS-K’s claims. Indeed, the Afghan Taliban have been brushing aside concerns over the presence of the extremist group in Afghanistan, claiming to have overcome the problem through the summary executions of scores of IS-K suspects. But the recent attacks belie the Taliban claim. What is more troubling is that this past week, the IS-K also claimed to have launched a rocket attack on Uzbekistan from Afghanistan’s Balkh province that borders the Central Asian republic. The group

backed its claim by releasing images of the attack on a military base in Termez. Uzbekistan denied the attack.

IS-K's growing activities in the region — including Pakistan where the group struck a Shia mosque in Peshawar last month, killing over 60 worshippers — presents a clear and present danger. For too long, the Afghan Taliban had the sole monopoly on violence in Afghanistan. Not anymore. They have a rival, a shadowy challenger that is not only capable of perpetrating violence but also of demolishing the myth that all is well under the Taliban. Indeed, all is not well. Not only is the IS-K using Afghanistan to launch attacks inside and outside Afghanistan, the TTP too, have ratcheted up violence inside Pakistan, launching their attacks from neighbouring countries. Kabul's hard-line rulers must wake up to reality and become part of a regional framework to address terrorism. The time for denial is over.

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## **No conspiracy**

THE National Security Committee — the country's highest security forum — has now unequivocally stated that it does not believe there was an international conspiracy to dislodge Imran Khan from PM House. It has subsequently become clear that the former prime minister made selfish political use of a secret diplomatic communication to squeeze his way back into the running for the next general elections.

To protect his political interests, Mr Khan also engineered a series of controversies to try to discredit parliamentary processes, the judiciary as well as the security establishment for making the 'mistake' of not protecting his government from being ousted with a vote of no-confidence. He simultaneously cast aspersions on the loyalties of his political rivals while rebranding the PTI as the only party fighting to keep Pakistan's foreign policy independent from interference.

Rather than take stock of his party's less-than-stellar performance in its three-odd years in power, the PTI chief distracted both supporters and critics by stoking moral panic over a shadowy transnational plot to take down the Pakistani

government. One need only question why the PTI is frequently switching its narrative between 'conspiracy', 'interference' and 'establishment's mistake' to understand that it is a smokescreen. Its real purpose is to make sure there is an early election.

In all this, the efforts of Pakistan's erstwhile ambassador to the US stand vindicated. Two NSC meetings have confirmed that whatever he reported about his interaction with the senior US official did indeed provide cause for alarm. It is commendable that the ambassador immediately alerted the Foreign Office of the unnatural and undiplomatic language used by the US official during their interaction.

He also reportedly recommended that foreign ministry officials immediately take the matter up with both the US ambassador in Pakistan and the authorities in Washington to determine if what was discussed was indeed the official US position. The matter was serious enough that it has again been confirmed as 'blatant interference' in Pakistan's affairs by the NSC. The question then arises: what prevented then foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi from acting immediately on the ambassador's advice? Why did he take weeks to bring the matter to the NSC?

It is true that the US does indeed have a history of meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs both overtly and covertly. However, an act of interference is quite different from an act of conspiracy, and the NSC seems quite clear on this particular matter. As Pakistan's highest security forum, its assessment has weight and cannot be contested without counter-evidence.

It is unfortunate, however, that whatever it says is unlikely to have much of an impact on the PTI and its supporters. PTI's politics now seems to have moved to the 'post-truth' phase where inconvenient facts are not entertained and leaders take collective oaths of obedience from their emotionally charged followers.

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## **Politicians' misogyny**

IN the patriarchal and often perverse view of many Pakistani politicians, women are mere puppets whose use lies primarily in inflating their own egos and political point-scoring. The recent sexist remarks by former federal ministers Fawad Chaudhry and Moonis Elahi are proof of this tendency to objectify women in the pursuit of political interests. Former PTI minister Fawad Chaudhry recently described the new Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar as a “low-IQ woman” and as someone whose claim to fame lay in her personal accessories, including her handbag and sunglasses. Fortunately, Mr Chaudhry, was immediately called out for this truly appalling statement by social media users, including his own party’s supporters, who condemned his misogynistic behaviour and demanded that the former minister apologise. Indeed, using such offensive language for Pakistan’s first woman foreign minister — and one whose performance in office has been lauded — belittles his own standing as a senior member of the former government and his party.

Meanwhile, PML-Q’s Mr Elahi asked women MPAs to present his political opponent Punjab chief minister-elect Hamza Shehbaz with a vanity kit — associated with cosmetics. Such behaviour is uncouth and unbecoming of political leaders who are supposed to lead by example. It is troubling that over the years, this tendency has become even more entrenched in Pakistan’s national discourse, dragging the political conversation to a new low. From the character assassination of Benazir Bhutto by her political rivals, to Gen Pervez Musharraf’s insulting statements regarding rape survivors, to PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif’s remarks running down PTI’s women supporters, all political entities, it seems, have been guilty of denigrating the status of women in politics and society. Patriarchy and chauvinism run deep in Pakistani society. And when those who promise to rescue the country from its socioeconomic mess themselves possess regressive mindsets that are all too often reflected in crude language, we can only take their views on ‘progress’ with a pinch of salt. They should learn some manners.

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## **Punjab uncertainty**

POLITICAL uncertainty in Punjab deepened further on Saturday after a tweet by President Arif Alvi quashed reports that he was sending Senate chairman Sadiq Sanjrani to Lahore for swearing in Hamza Shehbaz as new chief minister a week after his election in a chaotic assembly session. The tweet says a summary received by him from the Prime Minister's Office regarding a court order asking him to nominate a representative to administer the oath to the chief minister-elect, was under his consideration "as per the Constitution". This suggests that he is in no mood to break the deadlock caused by the new Punjab governor's refusal to accept the 'legality' of Hamza Shehbaz's election to the top office. Governor Omer Sarfraz Cheema, who conveniently checked himself into a hospital earlier in the day, is delaying the oath-taking of the PML-N leader on one pretext or the other, despite an earlier Lahore High Court ruling that he was not "fulfilling his constitutional duty" because a "governor cannot refuse to administer oath". Consequently, Pakistan's most populous province has remained without a chief executive for over three weeks, and crucial decisions are being delayed at the expense of its 110m citizens because the people holding constitutional offices in Islamabad and Lahore have chosen to pursue party instructions, instead of following the law of the land.

Apparently, the president and governor are trying to buy some time for their party, which is waiting for the ECP to decide a reference seeking the disqualification of 26 PTI lawmakers who had voted for Hamza Shehbaz against their party nominee Parvez Elahi for the post. But sooner or later, they will have to follow the Constitution — willingly or unwillingly. Their deliberate disregard for the Constitution will, however, go down in the annals of Pakistan's chequered political history as a black spot. The political crisis spawned by one illegal action after the other by the PTI and its ally PML-Q, in their bid to cling to power by hook or by crook in Punjab, is unprecedented. The way the two parties had tried to initially delay the election of the chief minister, and later the violence they inflicted on the deputy speaker and their opponents on the day of the election, was enough to expose their disrespect towards democracy. And now the tactics they are using to delay the oath-taking is further damaging whatever democratic credentials they are left with. But they don't seem to care.

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## Right to travel

INTERIOR Minister Rana Sanaullah has said there are nearly 3,000 people on the Exit Control List and the government has now made a policy which has been approved by the federal cabinet which says that the names of people on the ECL will be deleted after a stipulated period if there is no concrete evidence to keep them barred from travel. The interior minister said that various other restrictions on travel for citizens are being reviewed as well, and people on such lists will also be taken off them if there is no reason to retain them. This is a welcome decision because it proactively addresses an issue that has festered over years at the expense of the citizens. Thousands of Pakistanis have suffered travel restrictions for reasons that carry very little weight. Often people end up on the ECL because they find themselves on the wrong side of the authorities, or if they become victims of political rivalries and persecution. Such are the ways of the government that once someone's name is added to the list it is extremely difficult to get it removed. As the interior minister acknowledged in his press conference last week, people have languished on this list for years without any recourse to justice. If the present government is successful in simplifying the procedure for the ECL, while adding the requisite checks and balances so that the list is not abused for political purposes, it would have done good service to the citizens of Pakistan.

However, this would require not just the changes made so far by the federal cabinet, but also stringent rules that make it difficult for the government of the day to slide back to the old days of political persecution. It might seem appropriate that Mr Sanaullah has made exceptions for those on the list who are wanted for serious crimes, but at the same time, it needs to be specified as clearly as possible why someone should be slapped with travel bans. The government should therefore swiftly complete this process of removing names from the ECL, and then inform the public about the status of various other 'stop lists' that exist and that curtail the fundamental right of the citizens to travel. It is time that all political parties agree not to abuse the ECL for their vested interests and to ensure that the reform undertaken now is sustained in the coming years.

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# Polio setback

WE were almost there. For over a whole year, 15 months to be exact, Pakistan remained polio-free. However, the surfacing of a wild poliovirus case in Bannu district has thrown a huge spanner in the works of national polio eradication efforts.

According to details, the National Institute of Health confirmed the presence of type-1 wild poliovirus in a 15-month-old boy who was paralysed. Meanwhile, earlier in the month, wild poliovirus was also detected in environmental samples from Bannu.

Before this, the only polio case had surfaced in Balochistan's Qilla Abdullah district in January last year. Since then and now, there had been zero cases of wild poliovirus whose presence in the environmental samples collected was also said to have been greatly reduced.

Interestingly, earlier in the year, WHO had advised the Pakistani health authorities to exercise caution and to not resort to complacency in their vaccination drives. According to the WHO, not detecting a single case of polio in an entire year did not necessarily mean that the virus had been eliminated in the country. The virus usually resurfaces when another high-transmission season begins.

It is understandable if polio officials and health workers who have worked hard and, along with the policemen protecting them, risked their lives to rid the country of this crippling disease should feel disheartened.

However, as WHO advised Pakistan's polio authorities, now is the time to "pull out all the stops to intensify our surveillance to actively search for the virus". This can either be done by attacking the remaining chains of local transmission, as suggested by the WHO, or actively searching for what Unicef says is a large number of missing children who were not being covered by the immunisation drives.

polio-free status is still eluding us but recent experience has shown that it is not impossible to achieve. The polio authorities, health workers and also the public should rally for one final push to exterminate the menace once and for all.

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## **Flawed perspective**

EVEN while accounting for rhetorical flourishes that are part and parcel of politics, former prime minister Imran Khan has often shown a muddled understanding of militancy in Pakistan. During his address at the Lahore rally on Thursday, he again either cherry-picked facts or misrepresented them entirely in an effort to push one of the central planks of his post ouster narrative — that his independent foreign policy views had fallen foul of Western interests. That, according to him, should be juxtaposed with the ‘slavish’ attitude shown to foreign powers by other Pakistani rulers.

From the podium, Mr Khan accused retired army chief Gen Pervez Musharraf of having sold Pakistanis in exchange for dollars, but among those he named, only Aimal Kasi was a local; all the others, including former Taliban ambassador Mullah Zareef and several Al Qaeda operatives, were foreign nationals. The PTI chief also brought up the violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty by the US in the Abbottabad operation against Osama bin Laden. While that is technically correct, Mr Khan has never expressed unease that the Al Qaeda supremo or other extremely dangerous militants such as Abu Zubaydah, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, etc were found to have been hiding in Pakistan in the first place. He also conveniently chooses to ignore the fact that their capture certainly prevented many more atrocities against innocent people. That is a curious omission, considering he has often referred — as he did again in Lahore — to the 80,000 Pakistanis who have paid with their lives for an ‘alien war’ brought to this country by previous governments and which destroyed erstwhile Fata in the bargain. The factors that sucked Pakistan into the ‘war on terror’ are complex and interwoven with historical and regional dimensions that Mr Khan’s simplistic cause-and-effect approach fails to appreciate. Moreover, for all his justifiable anguish over the human cost of the war, one suspects that he still tends to view violent extremists — those responsible for these deaths — as ‘misguided brethren’ that can be persuaded to live in peace.

At the Lahore rally, the PTI chief also accused previous governments of staying silent in the face of some 400 American drone strikes on Pakistani soil. The reality, however, is more nuanced. For one, both the PPP and PML-N governments are on record as having condemned the attacks multiple times. Certainly, leaked US embassy cables blew the lid off what actually turned out to be public posturing led by the military while the two countries had struck a tacit agreement on the drone strikes. In fact, the cables reveal that then army chief Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani wanted more drone back-up for Pakistan's own military operations against terrorists who were operating in Fata. Clarity on the causes of militancy and how to address it is of vital importance for a national leader.

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## **Attack on Chinese**

A NEW wave of terrorism has been unleashed in the country. While the attacks are mostly aimed at our border regions by religiously motivated terrorist groups based in Afghanistan, there are frequent reminders that Baloch militancy, too, is on the rise.

Yesterday's shocking suicide bombing that targeted a van carrying Chinese academics near the Confucius Institute in Karachi University was not the first time Baloch militants have attacked Chinese interests in the city.

In 2018, Karachi police foiled an attack by insurgents of the outlawed Balochistan Liberation Army on the Chinese consulate. Another attack, also claimed by the BLA, was similarly stymied in 2020 at the Pakistan Stock Exchange where the Chinese have major investments.

Both the attacks indicated that the militants' strategy was evolving as the attackers appeared ready to adopt fidayeen tactics. However, with the deployment of a woman suicide bomber, the BLA attack on the university premises has added yet another dimension. It was from the terrorists' point of view a far more effective attack than the previous two had been, as it killed at least three Chinese nationals.

As the clouds of terrorist violence in Karachi start to gather once more, it is time for law enforcement to assess their own capabilities — even if they had managed to thwart the two earlier attacks.

The Chinese are no stranger to attacks in other parts of the country either, where the development projects they have initiated are viewed with suspicion by many of the locals as well as militants. Because of this, security has been provided to them as it had been to those at the university yesterday.

The Chinese faculty were being escorted by Rangers personnel. The university itself has been under the paramilitary force's vigilance for decades now, on account of student violence. However, over time, the security system has become lax — otherwise, how could the suicide bomber, with her bag of explosives, have entered the university?

For years, the Baloch insurgency had been regarded as a low-intensity conflict. But this is no longer the case. The attacks are growing more audacious — as seen earlier this year when 10 soldiers lost their lives in an attack on an FC post in Kech. The militants' reach is also growing as an earlier attack in Lahore demonstrated.

Meanwhile, disparate Baloch militant groups are coming together in a bid to restructure the insurgency and beef up their numbers and fine-tune their tactics.

While issues such as the underdevelopment of Balochistan, the Baloch missing persons, and the military footprint stamped on large parts of the province must be addressed, these should not provide a pretext to whitewash such violence. Indeed, the nexus between poverty and violence runs deep. But that should not stop the mainstream Baloch nationalist parties from coming forward to roundly condemn such attacks, even as they continue to put pressure on the centre to ensure Balochistan's welfare.

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## Verdict delayed

YET again, a verdict on the PTI foreign funding case appears to have eluded us. Relieving the party of its objection to the Election Commission issuing a decision on the matter within a 30-day period, the Islamabad High Court has suspended an earlier order to this effect and asked the ECP to scrutinise other parties' accounts as well. An ECP scrutiny committee had taken six months longer than its set deadline to hand in its report of just one party's accounts: how long it will take to scrutinise the accounts of 17 other parties — both big and small, new and old — is anybody's guess. It is a shame that seven years are apparently not enough for a verdict on whether or not a political party received any prohibited foreign funding. Given its laborious struggle in the PTI's case, it is clear the ECP lacks the necessary expertise and financial and human resources to be able to undertake a task as complex and arduous as a comprehensive audit of each party's finances. Perhaps it is time that the task was either formally delegated to another state entity or all parties were required by law to submit professionally audited financial accounts for each year at their own expense.

It is a wonder why PTI continues to fight tooth and nail against the ECP when its own leaders claim with such conviction that they have done no wrong. The party could have done a great service and contributed to the country's democratic evolution by allowing greater transparency into its inner workings, setting an example for other parties to follow. The PTI has previously claimed it introduced the concept of political fundraising to Pakistan: what shame is there, then, in letting the details of supporters' contributions come to light? The PTI is right in demanding that it ought not to be targeted or singled out for the purposes of scrutiny, but given its public posturing and insistence on being recognised as the cleanest party in politics, it would have been better had it set the bar and then asked other parties to follow suit. It is important for the democratic health of our country that all political parties' financial dealings, including PPP and PML-N's, be brought to light. After accusing and counter-accusing each other of using money to influence the political process, it is strange our leaders have yet to arrive at that conclusion.

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# Long life for all

MANY of the country's health challenges can be easily tackled by fixing gaps in the preventive healthcare infrastructure. The poor management of the existing infrastructure for preventive and primary healthcare has contributed to Pakistan's high disease and mortality burden. In this regard, the link between Pakistan's ranking as the country with the third largest number of unvaccinated or under-vaccinated children in the world and its having one of the highest under-five child mortality rates is hard to miss. According to researchers, each year, almost 3m children in the country miss out on the entire course of vaccines they are required to have, even though the Expanded Programme of Immunisation offers free essential vaccination for children up to 15 months. It is estimated that more than 400,000 children under the age of five die of vaccine-preventable diseases. However, considering that 15pc of the country's population is under five years old, and the deaths in this age group account for 50pc of the total mortality rate in the country, the actual number of fatalities could be much higher. For example, every year pneumonia — a preventable disease for which a vaccine is offered by the EPI — claims the lives of more than 91,000 children under five years, according to Unicef. Between 17pc and 25pc of these deaths can be prevented by only improving routine vaccination coverage.

Experts around the world, and in Pakistan as well, are highlighting this very connection between routine vaccination and the high death and disease burden as part of the events being held to mark World Immunisation Week. In Pakistan's context, there is a need to improve and expand routine immunisation coverage. At present, EPI coverage stands at 76pc for children under two who have received the full dose of 11 vaccines offered under the programme. Though this a 10pc improvement over the past three years, coverage in Sindh and Balochistan remains below par. The authorities must take measures to plug these gaps so that thousands of young lives can be saved.

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# Oil shortages

AS the public braces itself for intensified power blackouts in the middle of a countrywide heatwave, reports of diesel shortages in several parts of Punjab, especially from its southern districts, continue to pour in each day. Farmers from Okara to Bahawalnagar to Rahim Yar Khan are running in desperation from one petrol pump to another to try and purchase diesel, with vehicles queuing up in long lines to fill up. Such reports are quite disconcerting as the unavailability of diesel can slow down the wheat harvest and delay cotton sowing in southern Punjab. Diesel shortages have already led farmers to stage demonstrations in different districts. A few reports suggest that some districts have been facing diesel shortages for a month but the authorities haven't done anything to address the situation, while oil marketing companies have either stopped or are providing fewer supplies to the pumps. Multiple factors are to blame for the ongoing diesel scarcity, including the increase in demand because of the wheat harvest, hoarding by pump owners in anticipation of the reversal of energy subsidies, and supply-side hiccups on account of lower imports.

Ogra, the oil and gas regulator, has, however, rubbished media reports of severe fuel shortages hitting parts of the province, and has claimed that adequate supplies of petrol and diesel are available in the country to cater to the demand of consumers. Likewise, the OMCs and refineries say that ample stocks of motor spirit and high-speed diesel are available and that more imports are on their way to Pakistan. Yet, they subtly point out that port congestion may delay the offloading of cargoes that are waiting for their turn at the Karachi port. There is no doubt that the mismanagement of the energy sector — its failure to procure enough fuel and ensure the maintenance of power plants — by the previous government is largely responsible for the current blackouts and shortages at the pumps. But this is no time to indulge in a blame game. The parties constituting the new coalition set-up knew very well the kind of mess they were going to inherit and should have doubled efforts to avert the crisis rather than waiting for it to worsen before moving in. Once the present crisis is brought under control, the government must start working on a long-term strategy to insulate the economy from international energy supply disruptions and elevated prices so that blackouts and fuel shortages can be prevented.

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## Missing teenager case

CLARITY eludes several aspects of the Dua Zehra case. The dilemma of not knowing which side to believe stems from hidden facts and contradictory descriptions of events. According to her parents, who claim that their daughter is 14 years old, Dua was 'kidnapped' on April 16 outside her home in Karachi's Shah Faisal Colony. But earlier this week, news surfaced that Dua had contracted a 'free-will marriage' with a 22-year-old student, Zaheer Ahmad. Dua's age in her nikahnama, dated April 17, was 18 years, according to the police, who recovered the couple from Okara and took them into protective custody. Apparently, the success of her parents' attempts to obtain her custody rests on their coming up with substantive proof that their daughter is as old as they say she is. The court has yet to be convinced that she is not of marriageable age as it allowed her to leave with her 'husband' when she refused to go to a shelter home.

Dua's case is not uncommon. There have been several instances of young girls asserting they have married of their own free will while their parents have claimed that they were abducted. This has been especially observed in the Hindu community in Sindh where parents have alleged forced conversion and marriage of their daughters. Blackmailing, coercion and child grooming have existed in all ages but with the growth of online platforms, taking advantage of impressionable young minds has become much easier. On the other hand, parents have also prevented, often forcibly, young women who are of age from marrying the man of their choice. However, it is the former category that is at more risk, as their unformed minds and emotions are exploited by criminal elements. Greater vigilance is required by parents as well as the state that must enforce the underage marriage laws, and punish all those who have abetted illegal marriages. Unfortunately, for all the laws that we have, child predators are still able to get away with their crimes.

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## **An unlikely profile**

TUESDAY's suicide bombing at the Karachi University may be the harbinger of a new and unexpected dimension in the dynamics of terrorism in Pakistan, particularly the Baloch insurgency.

It was appalling enough that a suicide bomber had targeted the faculty of the Confucius Institute on campus, killing three Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver on the spot. But the shock was further compounded when the identity of the attacker came to light. Less than an hour following the incident, the banned Baloch Liberation Army took to social media to claim responsibility and announce that the bomber was a woman named Shaari Baloch.

Details emerging later revealed her to be a highly educated mother of two young children, belonging to a well-established family and working as a school teacher in her native Turbat, Balochistan. Moreover, it appears that no one in her close family was missing or had ever been forcibly disappeared — all of which adds up to an unlikely profile for a suicide bomber. It does, however, suggest that the insurgency is evolving in a direction that makes it imperative for the authorities to revisit their approach to it.

Suicide attacks, which involve an implicit belief in a reward in the afterlife for the act of 'self-sacrifice', have almost always been the preserve of religious extremist groups, with some notable exceptions such as Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers. Much like the latter, the Baloch insurgency too is based on a secular ideology, and the KU bombing is among few such attacks perpetrated by the separatists.

The phenomenon of female suicide bombers is also rare in Pakistan, and except for the very first instance in the 1980s — the details of which remain unknown — three other such attacks, in 2010 and 2011, were claimed by the TTP. For a woman like Shaari Baloch to choose to go down this route despite her not disadvantageous circumstances is significant, and speaks to an increasing frustration in Baloch society.

Enforced disappearances, profiling of Baloch students at university campuses, the province's lack of agency over the proceeds of its natural resources, etc have

exacerbated the yawning deficit between the people and the state. That combined with increasing access to information via social media and deeper engagement in nationalist discourse has seen young Baloch become less reticent about expressing their anger and resentment, even in interactions with the military's senior leadership. It is a critical point in time.

That said, to attack soft targets is utterly reprehensible. And for teachers to be singled out, as happened in the latest instance, is all the more surprising given that the current insurgency is distinguished from its previous iterations by the fact that its support base largely comprises educated young Baloch.

For there to be any possibility of peaceful coexistence, the Baloch must shun such acts of senseless violence and the authorities reach out to them.

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## **No welfare cuts**

IT is unfortunate that regime changes in Pakistan are as disruptive as they tend to be.

Ideally, the transfer and takeover of state-run programmes and projects, especially those that concern public welfare, from one set of office-bearers to another shouldn't entail uncertainty over their operations and future. Yet, we have seen new governments time and again try to shut down, upend or totally gut even some of the better initiatives taken by their predecessors, often for completely political reasons. This is a great disservice to our people.

With the PTI government out and the new 'unity government' now in control, similar concerns have arisen regarding the future of the social uplift and common welfare projects started by the previous government.

Shortly before the PTI was voted out of power in the Assembly, there were reports that a number of hospitals had stopped providing services to patients wishing to avail their facilities through the health card scheme launched by the PTI government. Though the reason officially cited was non-payment of dues to

vendors, the uncertainty over whether the programme would be continued by the new government had invited a strong reaction from the public.

The facility covers a considerable range of medical and surgical procedures and insures each family to the limit of Rs1m each year, making improved healthcare much more accessible to a large segment of the population than it otherwise would be. It is, therefore, understandable why citizens want it retained and ideally even expanded to cover more of the population.

Similar apprehensions, even fake news, were shared widely on social media alleging that the new regime was moving to shut down the homeless shelters and soup kitchens started under the Ehsaas programme launched by the PTI government.

Setting aside the political goodwill these initiatives may have created for the former government, they have also had very tangible benefits, particularly for the most vulnerable segments of the population. These and similar initiatives should be continued by the new government as well as future governments.

Successive governments retain the right to expand or streamline the programmes however they feel is wise — something the new chief of BISP, Ms Shazia Marri, has spoken of — but the end goal should always be to increase the public good.

It is well understood that the new government does not have much fiscal space. In the circumstances, the temptation will be strong to forgo the welfare of those who may not be able to make much noise about it. However, it would be a grave mistake to disregard the needs of our most vulnerable sections of the population just as an economic storm gathers overhead.

The government must balance its books, but not at the expense of the vulnerable. Any uncertainty on this matter should be dispelled and the government must commit to continuing the social safety programmes already in place.

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# Credit squeeze

THE hefty increase of up to 129bps in the rates at which commercial banks lend money to the government through their purchases of T-bills underlines two major trends. First, it clearly signals that the market is anticipating yet another hike in the State Bank's policy rate later next month. Second, the cash-strapped government is left with fewer options to finance its swelling fiscal deficit as multilateral and bilateral foreign flows dry up. The banks' decision to hike their yields beyond what was being anticipated is informed by projections that price inflation will stay elevated in the near term, and the current account deficit may widen on the back of the global commodity super cycle and the likely repeal of the fiscally unsustainable energy subsidies as demanded by the IMF. With the spread between the T-bill yields and the SBP policy rate of 12.25pc extending up to 274bps, chances are that the bank will be forced to raise its key rates. Currently, matters are beginning to resemble the situation in December, when public debt targets were increasing, inflation was soaring and the market was demanding higher rates from its largest borrower — the government.

But the expectations of inflation are not the only driver of the latest hike in the price of government debt. That the government settled to pay a higher premium charged by the banks and collected more debt than it had actually targeted, betraying its desperation to finance its growing deficit, also encouraged the banks to raise their price. The new finance minister says that the fiscal deficit could surge to Rs6.4tr — or equal to 10pc of GDP — against the budgeted estimates of Rs3.9tr due to 'unbudgeted' energy subsidies and other expenditure. We don't have many options to force down T-bill yields or avoid raising interest rates, which will push the government's debt-servicing costs, affect private investment decisions, spike the expense of doing business and ultimately, further slow down growth. While the SBP can reverse this trend by injecting liquidity into the market through its purchasing of debt from the secondary market and increasing the duration of its injections to 63 days to fix the costs of banks, the government must quickly arrange adequate foreign funding to reduce its domestic borrowings in order to finance its budget. Additionally, the government needs to come clean on its plans to roll back energy subsidies in order to dilute inflation expectations.

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# Imran Khan & the media

EVER since he has begun pounding the pavement again, the ousted premier has taken to bemoaning what he describes as a “media blackout” against him. He repeated this at the PTI workers’ convention in Lahore on Wednesday, and tauntingly asked freedom of expression advocates why they had gone silent.

Only four channels, as far as Imran Khan is concerned, are giving him due coverage. Recently, in keeping with his current line of attack, he also accused the media of receiving foreign funding and conspiring to topple his government while “standing with the dacoits”.

It’s all smoke and mirrors where Mr Khan and the press are concerned. On the one hand, while he was the prime minister he said the media in Pakistan has more freedom than that in Britain. He has also, very rightly, described it as an important pillar of democracy whose duty is to raise awareness. At the same time, social media accounts linked to the ruling party instigated vicious trolling of independent-minded journalists; PTI ministers would single out reporters in press conferences to discredit and ridicule — all without a word of censure from Mr Khan.

Explainer: What is the govt's proposed media authority and why has it invited criticism?

The government contemplated bringing in a regulatory law so draconian that a military dictator would have flaunted it with pride. The proposed legislation was put on the back-burner only when the media and civil society erupted in anger, but the government nevertheless moved ahead on another front — to control cyberspace.

A presidential ordinance was issued to amend the already controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, which among other changes made defamation a non-bailable and non-cognisable offence.

Contrary to his sweeping statements about valuing the media’s role in ‘raising awareness’, Mr Khan it seems can only tolerate a pliant, unquestioning press that

acts in service of his agenda. This gaslighting must end. If the former PM has evidence to prove that journalists' loyalties have been bought by foreign powers, he should come out with it. Disinformation is condemnable, from wherever it emanates.

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## **Killer heatwave**

WITH scalding temperatures affecting many parts of the country, the climate change ministry has done well to issue a heatwave alert to all the provinces. Global bodies had warned of a long and harsh heatwave in the subcontinent, with average temperatures registering an increase of 6°C to 8°C. Rainfall figures too have dropped, with 62pc less rain so far this year. This has caused rivers and dams to practically run dry. Indeed, the early onset of summer has hit South Asia particularly hard this year, with millions in the throes of a heatwave in India as well. The problem for Pakistanis has been aggravated by prolonged power outages, especially in large parts of Punjab, while the early onset of summer has badly affected the wheat crop. With Nawabshah recording the hottest global temperature at 50°C in April, which is usually the tail-end of the spring season, it is clear that managing climate change's impact must become a priority. In its alert to the provincial authorities, the federal climate change ministry attributed the 'freak' heatwave to climate change and global warming, stating that such high temperatures pose a threat to human health and agricultural output. While Pakistan's contribution to the global phenomenon has been minimal, it has been one of the countries most affected by its adverse effects.

It is encouraging to see the climate change ministry coordinating with the provincial authorities on measures to cope with the hellish heatwave, that is bound to become a recurrent feature in the years ahead. However, the ministry should do more to provide technical assistance to provincial and local governments to enable them to adapt to new climate realities by taking measures such as creating more green spaces in cities and towns to provide shade and breathing room to citizens. Running an advertisement campaign in newspapers is not enough; the authorities should find creative ways to keep the citizens informed about the steps they can take to protect themselves and their homes from the effects of the heat.

# **Interest-free finance**

THE Federal Shariat Court's decision that the 'simple interest' charged on all kinds of financial transactions — domestic or international — was riba, and thus against the injunctions of Islam, is likely to have far-reaching implications for the nation's financial system and its dealings with the outside world. The court has given the government until the end of 2027 to convert the country's economy into one that is "equitable, asset-based, and risk-sharing" by prohibiting and eliminating interest in all its manifestations, in accordance with religious edicts. Deciding a long-pending case remanded to it by the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court in 2002 for reconsideration of its earlier 1992 judgement, in which the FSC held interest as repugnant to Islam, the court said that charging any sum, in any manner, over the principal amount of a loan or debt is riba, which is prohibited. The bench declared in its 298-page judgement that the prohibition was absolute and, therefore, riba should be eliminated. The court also held that any interest stipulated in government borrowings acquired from domestic or foreign sources was also riba and thus forbidden.

Finance Minister Miftah Ismail has welcomed the decision, stating that the government and State Bank will "carefully study this important decision and then seek guidance and clarification from the FSC about the process, steps and time frame to implement this decision". However, it is likely that the decision will be challenged by the banks — and quite possibly by the government itself — because of its potential impact on the national financial system and the country's financial integration with the rest of the world.

There is no doubt that the prohibition of riba is a crucial aspect of Islamic teachings. But some Muslim scholars believe that riba should not be equated with simple interest charged on modern financial transactions. Many think that the concept has not been properly understood, which has led to difficulties in the implementation of Islamic banking and finance in the country. Moreover, there are also questions regarding how far the FSC has complied with the Supreme Court directions to carry out, and make use of, thorough research at home and abroad, in reaching its decision. The FSC was required to undertake a comparative study of contemporary financial systems in Muslim countries around the world. It is important to review the system in other Muslim states as many



among the latter that are governed by Islamic law have found it difficult to completely do away with an interest-based financial system. That is because the 'shift' to an interest-free economy in a complex, modern financial system can be challenging, even if it is possible. Before we embark on this path, we must try to define riba correctly and carry out original research on the challenges we may face as we move towards what the FSC calls an interest- or riba-free economy.

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## **Moral decline**

THE shameful scenes witnessed on Thursday evening at the Masjid-i-Nabawi, one of Islam's holiest sites, would have been deeply upsetting to observers of the faith whose reverence for religious traditions is more than skin-deep.

As newly inducted Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his entourage of federal ministers made a pilgrimage to the mosque, they were accosted by a small crowd of uncouth pilgrims, believed to be of Pakistani origin, who heckled and harassed them with chants of "chor, chor". Videos of the deplorable incident, circulating widely on social media, show that some miscreants even tried to physically assault some members of the visiting group.

That this shocking display of boorish behaviour happened within the confines of a sanctified place, with utter disregard for the last resting place of the most revered icon of Islam, goes to show how far we have corrupted social etiquette and our sense of propriety.

Our 'leaders', who rant and rave while carelessly mixing religion and politics, have successfully demeaned both, leaving no difference between them for their followers. As a result, we are now seeing even houses of worship and spiritual contemplation being used to attack and humiliate political targets.

Editorial: Uncivilised politics

Though other political figures, including those from the PML-N, are also to blame for cheering on such incidents in the past, the PTI must take responsibility for this recent incident because of the spiteful rhetoric it has been encouraging against

its political rivals for some years now. Not only that, instead of roundly condemning the loutish behaviour on display, its leaders, even if they do issue half-hearted condemnations, seem to be acting as apologists for it by describing it as the public's expression of anger against the new government.

This is not to mention that the grounds for this contemptible act seem to have been laid by people like Sheikh Rashid, who, while addressing recent press conferences and PTI rallies, had suggested repeatedly that incidents like these would be happening. The effect on impressionable minds of such casual disregard for unacceptable behaviour is now manifest.

Anyone revelling in it must take a long hard look inside and ask whether their politics has now superseded religious traditions. The rapid decline in our moral and cultural values needs to be arrested and reversed with great urgency; otherwise, the regression in our social norms will render us a mob rather than a civilised nation.

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