

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of December 2018

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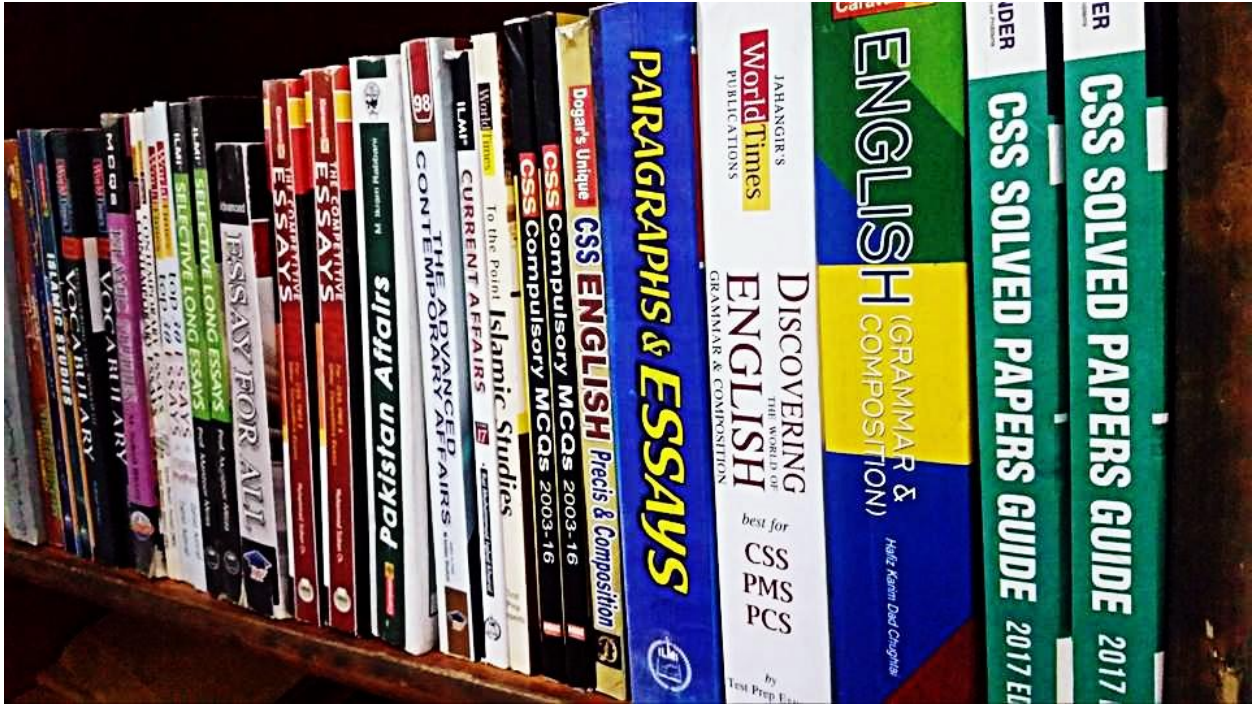
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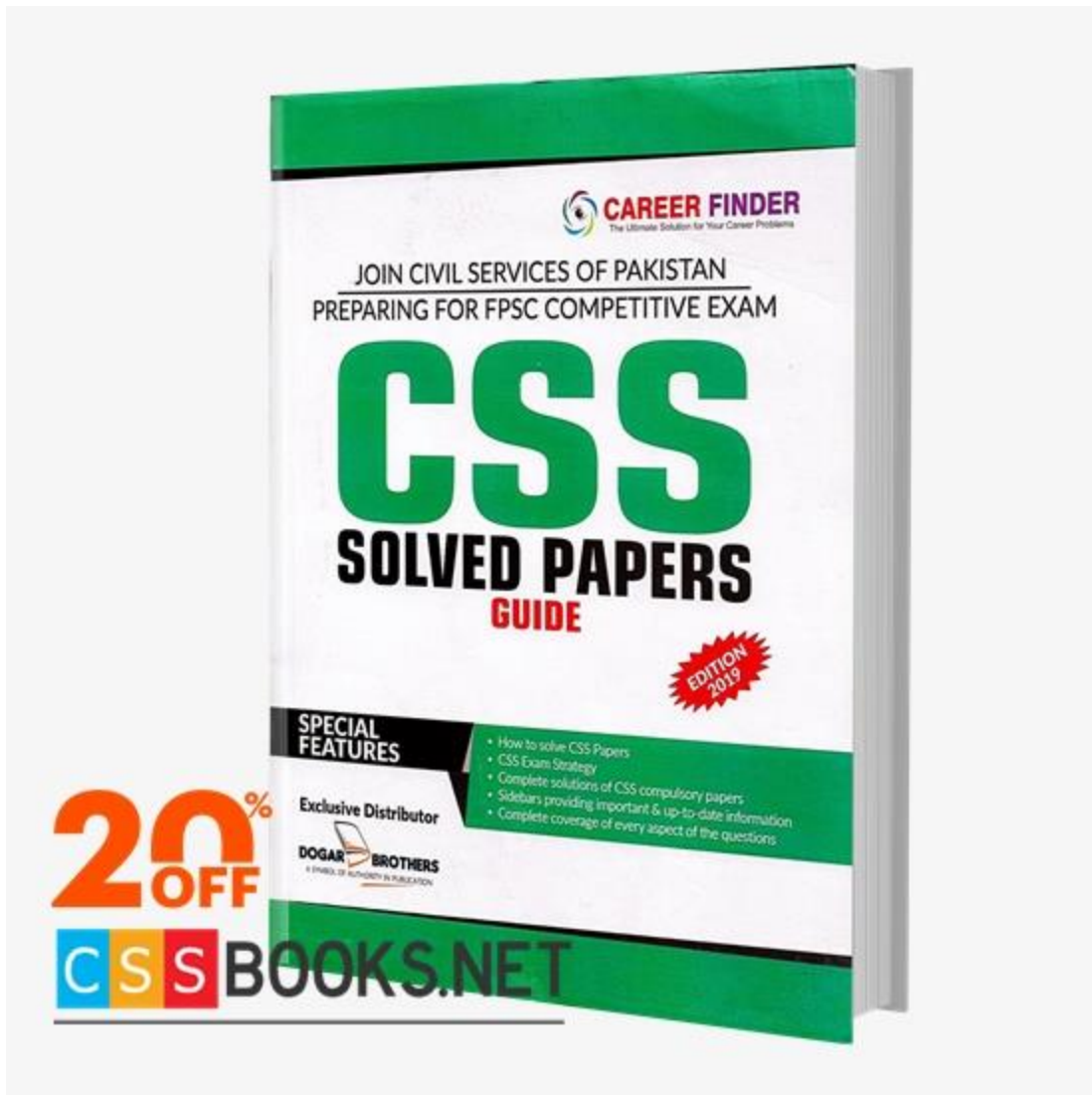
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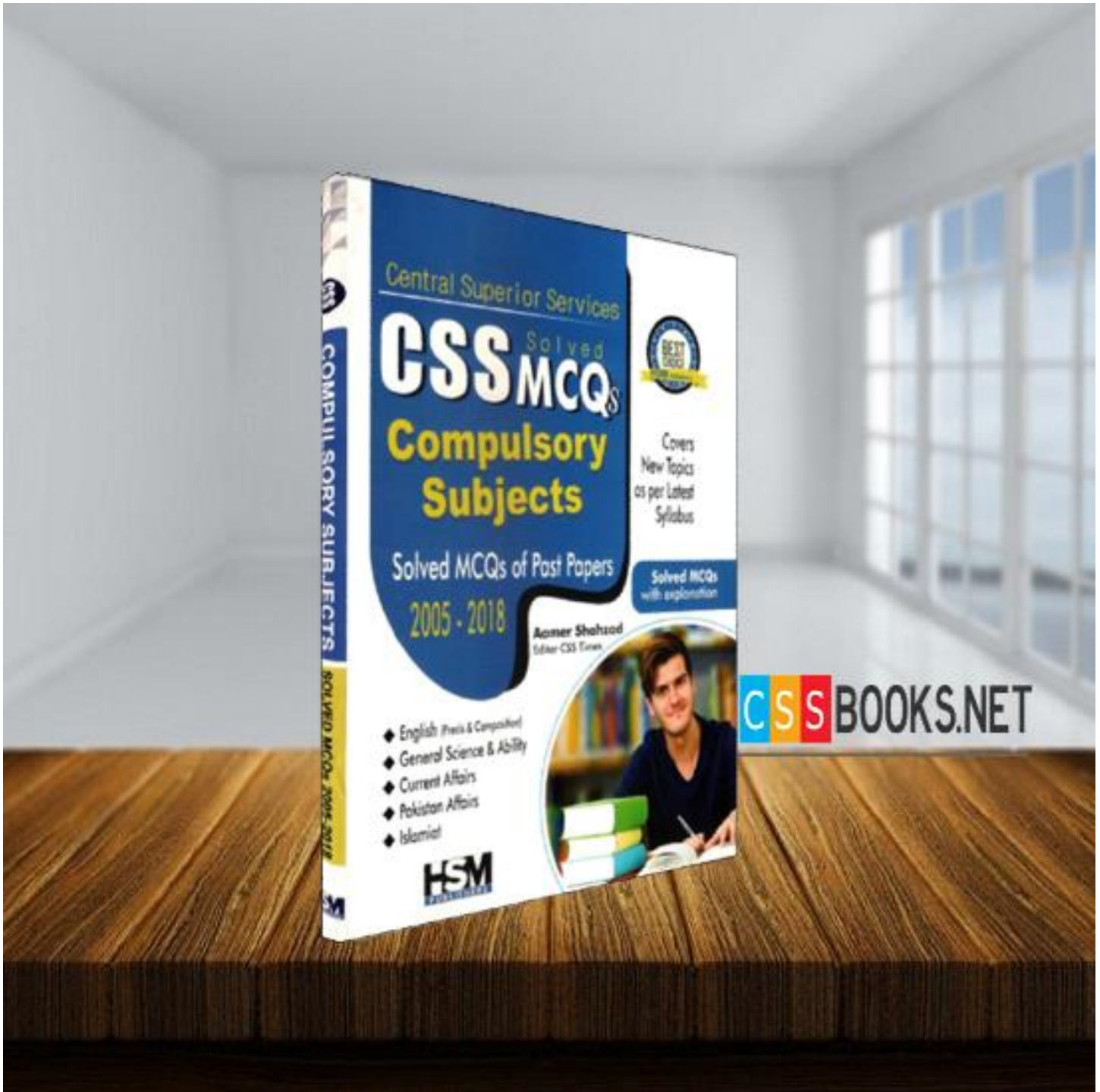


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Market volatility concerns

THERE is no reason to panic following the sharp bout of volatility that swept financial markets on Friday, but there are strong grounds for concern.

The rupee saw the largest single-day plunge it has experienced in almost a decade, and even though by the close of trade it had regained some of the ground lost, the simple fact that such volatility occurred is a strong indicator that the economy is burdened with growing pressures that need to be dissipated urgently before they develop into a full-blown financial crisis.

Markets were not helped by Finance Minister Asad Umar's announcement the day before that his government was in "no rush" to approach the IMF for a bailout in the face of the country's rapidly dwindling reserves.

And his news conference in the middle of one of the most volatile days for the exchange rate did little to address those concerns. In his remarks, he pointed out that indicators in the external sector — remittances, foreign investment and exports — all showed a gradual return to health and the current account deficit was shrinking.

He also underlined his government's efforts to stabilise the economy in the medium term, and used the occasion to announce a reduction of Rs2 in the price of petrol and diesel.

Absent from his remarks was any clear sense of how the reserves are to be strengthened in the short term, which is a question of overriding urgency at the moment. If the government is in no hurry to approach the IMF, the market wants to know whether it is in any rush to arrange an alternative supply of dollars. Thus far, all that has been on display is immense indecision, with talk of a Fund programme today, followed by disparaging remarks for those asking for a Fund programme tomorrow.

The mixed signals and the inability of the government to decide firmly on a road forward are at the heart of the problem.

The day ended on a note of extreme caution from the State Bank of Pakistan, that poured cold water on the finance minister's words by sharply hiking interest

rates by 150 basis points, the single largest hike since the cycle of monetary tightening began.

Such a step would not have been necessary if the economy had genuinely turned the corner, as Mr Umar had asserted only hours earlier. In its monetary policy statement, the central bank spoke of “rising inflation, an elevated fiscal deficit and low foreign exchange reserves” as the “near-term challenges” facing the economy.

With borrowing from the State Bank sharply on the rise, and a near-historic jump in the first-quarter fiscal deficit, the government may be facing a potential blowout if a sharp adjustment is not undertaken rapidly, regardless of the improvement in the external-sector indicators. The time to act has unambiguously arrived, yet we still await an action plan.

World AIDS Day

TODAY marks World AIDS Day. The scientific community’s understanding of the virus has come a long way since the 1980s, when fear and panic regarding this ‘new’ epidemic spread across the world. With medical advancements, much of the mystery surrounding the disease and its origins has dissolved. An HIV diagnosis is not the sounding of the death knell it once was, and treatment is available at various stages of the illness. But despite the progress (there has been a decline in new viruses in 69 countries), there is still a long way to go before we meet UNAIDS’ 90-90-90 targets. New infections had been reported in at least 50 countries in 2017: they doubled in Central Asia and Eastern Europe; while North Africa and the Middle East showed a 25pc increase. In Pakistan, the numbers of new cases of infection are also rising. According to the National AIDS Control Programme, 6,200 people have died from HIV/AIDS since 1994. A report in this paper yesterday mentioned that the number of HIV-infected patients in Balochistan had swollen to over 5,000. On Nov 27, another report mentioned that 22 out of the 889 new HIV-positive cases reported in Sindh had succumbed to the disease in the past six months. These are harrowing figures in this day and age.

HIV/AIDS came back into the national discourse last year when Kot Imrana and its surrounding villages in Sargodha reported that 37 people tested positive for the virus. Months later, some 100 more were diagnosed after being screened by health department officials. Reports stated that a staggering 869 people were diagnosed in the past 10 years in four districts of Sargodha. Authorities believe the disease spread via used syringes. This medical malpractice is just one of many reasons for the spread of blood-borne diseases, including Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C, in the population. Others include the use of unsterilised medical tools in hospitals and dental clinics, unsafe blood transfusions, contaminated razor blades used by street barbers, and a migrant labour force open to commercial sex. A lack of awareness leads to unsafe sexual practice, or the use of poor-quality protection. Taboos around sexual practices and health are a major hindrance in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Harmful myths stigmatise carriers: sufferers are perceived as 'sinners' and socially ostracised at a time they need the most support. We need to start talking.

Has the PPP evolved?

THE PPP could very well have been two or three or more parties. This perception was reinforced recently on the occasion of its 52nd foundation day and the launch of a book by party activist Iqbal Yousuf on the PPP's five decades of existence. The feeling that the party's ethos has varied, depending on who has headed it at various points, is almost permanent. Resultantly, there is often a need to specify which PPP is under discussion — the one that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto formed with great skill, or the one that Benazir Bhutto led? Or in many estimates the least stirring of them, ie the party that has been under the command of Asif Ali Zardari — now with his son Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari — since Ms Bhutto's violent exit from the scene in December 2007? Further, these periods are divided into smaller units on the basis of a particular policy or approach the party may have adopted. For instance, there will be many who would want to differentiate between a PPP that Benazir Bhutto led, along with her mother Nusrat Bhutto, immediately after the coup against her father in 1977, and the PPP that she commanded in later years.

The switch from resistance to reconciliation might have been a very natural one for whoever was leading the party at the time. But it did have some image-changing effects on the PPP; ever since, there have been sections longing for a revival of the old party consisting of workers who were remembered with great reverence at the recent book launch. This is the jiyala 'trap' that the ultimate PPP fans have set up for their own entanglement. Maybe the party has tried and is still trying to expand its national presence beyond Sindh. But it has yet to find a path that would allow it to proceed in a way that it is perceived as an entity which has evolved and is no longer dependent on the hero worship of its stalwarts and their sacrifices.

Renegotiating LNG

PETROLEUM Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan needs to understand that a hornet's nest is stirred up every time the government publicly talks about its intention to renegotiate the terms of the long-term supply contract for LNG. Not only are the LNG suppliers left in the lurch, Pakistan's credit standing in LNG markets is also impacted, and industry and other stakeholders in the country's gas sector are rattled over the implications of a protracted dispute between the government and its international partners. Further, foreign investors become wary because they see the repeat of an age-old pattern that scares them more than any law-and-order situation in the country ie a government refusing to honour the commitments made by its predecessor. No economy worth its name can function if after every few years the clock is set back to zero, and all commitments are off.

Nothing is stopping the petroleum minister from undertaking a full review of the LNG long-term supply contract by himself, and perhaps even seeking legal opinion from reputable law firms with vast experience in such matters, as well as approaching consultants who can provide a cross-country study and guidance on how global LNG markets operate. And it would certainly be worth his while to also speak to those from the previous government who were involved in negotiating the contract in the first place. But giving indeterminate statements in public, like he did during his news conference on Friday and airing general reservations about some of the terms contained in the contract send the wrong signals. Such acts are more likely to be perceived as vindictive politics by key

stakeholders, and history tells us that the conflicts that ensue usually do more harm than good to the country.

So if there is an intention to examine and renegotiate the terms of the LNG long-term supply contract, the minister would be well advised to tread with extreme caution, and ensure that whatever reservations he has about the contract are water-tight before going public with them. Many of the reservations that have been aired regarding the contract with Qatar have not stood up to scrutiny thus far, so it is all the more important that action not be initiated until a clear forward course is identified. What the country does not need at this juncture is yet another international arbitration case. Governments in Pakistan have a record of taking lightly the international commitments they have made, as in the Reko Diq and Karkey cases, as well as the first LNG deal which was nearly struck in 2006 but was shot down due to reckless handling and judicial action based on ill-informed reservations. A repeat of past mistakes in dealing with commitments made to foreign investors or other international partners must be avoided.

Acreege unknown

ONLY those with an absolute belief in the power of money and connections — and the impunity that goes with it — could conduct themselves in the manner as do some real-estate developers in this country. Multibillion-rupee fortunes have been built on illegally obtained land, often by unleashing local police against indigenous populations and manipulating records, all with no questions asked. On Thursday, evidence of this lack of transparency was emphatically underscored when the Supreme Court found itself at a loss to gauge the exact size of Bahria Town's humongous gated community coming up in Karachi. With three different claims emerging during the proceedings, Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, who is heading the bench formed to monitor the implementation of the court's damning May 4 judgement against three Bahria projects, described the issue as the "greatest mystery in Pakistan".

That such a fundamental aspect of the country's largest housing project remains undetermined speaks to a complete failure of governance and accountability mechanisms. Why was Bahria Town Karachi allowed to expand unchecked thus far in the first place? Why was no action taken against the Sindh government

functionaries who colluded to smooth the way for the real-estate developer by violating the Supreme Court order of November 2012 that banned the allotment or transfer of any state land in the province? The wholesale plunder of land in the suburbs of Karachi had been in evidence since years, but NAB continued to drag its feet until prodded in no uncertain terms by the Supreme Court in its May 4 judgement. Not surprisingly, it did not take the federal accountability body long to 'discover' that thousands of acres had been illegally acquired by the developer. An investigation carried out by Dawn over two years ago found that Bahria Town even back then had staked its 'claim' to at least 22,000 acres of land in Karachi's Malir district. However, while not as massive as Bahria Town Karachi, there are many housing projects of dubious provenance all across the country: a forensic audit ordered by the Supreme Court found no less than 5,492 such illegal schemes. This free-for-all that exists in the land sector must end, with consequences for everyone involved — politicians, establishment figures, developers, bureaucrats and, last but not least, the coercive elements that provide the muscle. The public should not be duped into investing their hard-earned money in a criminal enterprise where their interests count for nothing.

Kasur's tragedy

SOMETHING is rotten in Kasur. A stone's throw from Takht-i-Lahore, and once better known for being the burial ground of Bulleh Shah, or as the birthplace of Madam Noor Jahan, the district's identity is now marred with shameful instances of wide-scale sexual abuse of children. This week, police arrested four people for purchasing minor girls for prostitution. The episode brings back unpleasant memories of August 2015, when an extensive paedophile ring was unearthed in Kasur. Hundreds of videos of sexual abuse against almost 300 children surfaced. Under the influence of drugs and threatened with violence, the children were forced to perform sexual acts on adult men. The footage was then sold in the market, or used to blackmail families. The horrific reality only came to the public's attention after a clash between protesting parents and the police. The protesters complained about the police's apathy and intimidation threats, despite several FIRs lodged. It was only after media and social media outrage that the then prime minister took notice, and arrests were made. But the patron of this ring was alleged to be an MPA from his own party, who is said to have protected the gang

and financed their bail. The heinous crimes against the children were largely forgotten.

But then came the news of the brutal rape and murder of young Zainab, which led to nationwide protests, many ostensibly led by opposition parties. Her alleged killer was arrested and later hanged. Politicians and the public patted themselves on the back. Case closed? No. Zainab's photograph was plastered everywhere, but there are innumerable stories buried in shame, guilt, and fear. These are the invisible victims. Beyond the incompetency of criminal investigation authorities, beyond the corruption, indifference or even collaboration of the men in power, the rot goes much deeper. The sexual abuse of children — whether within the house, while in the care of family and friends, or outside at the hands of strangers — is more common than we care to admit. Conversations have to begin at home.

Little progress on missing persons

MISSING persons are a stain on the country, and for too long not enough has been done to address the matter. So it is welcome that President Arif Alvi has claimed that the prime minister, army chief and the judiciary are in discussion to address the matter of missing persons. On the day President Alvi made the claim, data from the commission of inquiry on enforced disappearances revealed that 318 new cases of alleged missing persons have been reported to the commission since August. That troubling number indicates that the problem of missing persons is an ongoing and severe issue and that elements within the state apparatus are continuing to abuse their powers and authority. The PTI's interest in the matter of missing persons has been a positive surprise, with the party's political alliance with the BNP-M in Balochistan seemingly driving the federal government to do more to resolve what has become an intractable issue.

The resolution of the missing persons issue is fundamentally linked to the establishment of the rule of law in the country and the state being held to account for unlawful actions against citizens. The long fight against militancy is Pakistan's own war, and terrorism, militancy and violent extremism are very real problems. But the state must work in a lawful manner at all times. Counter-insurgency and counterterrorism campaigns are in very different stages than they were a decade or even a few years ago. Detention centres in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been

formalised and given lawful protection. The Constitution has twice been distorted to create and extend the life of military courts for civilian terrorism suspects. While there can never be a justification for citizens to be disappeared in the name of national security or fighting militancy and terrorism, the present time is a particularly shocking moment for 318 individuals to have been reported missing to the inquiry commission in the span of just a few months. What is the need for the abhorrent practice?

The Islamabad High Court has helped point the state in the right direction with its historic decision on missing persons: accountability and direct responsibility for elements within the state allegedly involved in the practice of missing persons. The PTI government too has set a welcome precedent by appointing a vocal human rights minister who has already spoken repeatedly about the need to address the problem of missing persons. President Alvi has shown courage in speaking on an issue that is of concern in all units of the federation. But there is need for real progress to be demonstrated. One sign would be a decline in new complaints being logged. Another would be for a satisfactory resolution of more existing complaints. As human rights activists have suggested, missing persons complaints are often handled inappropriately. The state can and must do better; all citizens of the country deserve their full rights.

Interest rate hike

THE markets were undoubtedly taken aback on Friday when the State Bank announced a hike of 150 basis points in the key policy discount rate.

All expectations in the run-up to the announcement had hovered between 50 and 100bps, and it would be fair to say that hardly anybody expected a jump this big.

This is the single-largest hike in the key interest rate since the cycle of monetary tightening began in January this year. What makes the rate hike even more interesting is the volatile backdrop provided by the currency markets while the board meeting was under way and the decision under discussion.

It is a curious coincidence that the silent supports provided to the exchange rate were withdrawn on the very morning the board was to sit down to discuss the rate hike, and the markets gyrated as a background score to the discussions.

It is difficult to know how these two events might be connected, but there is one obvious link: an overvalued exchange rate necessarily calls for higher interest, else the economy risks running aground.

We may never know for certain whether or not the two events — the rate hike and the rupee depreciation — were directly linked. But we know that speculative forces have been stoked by both events.

The markets have seen that the dollar can find buyers even at Rs145, and the business community now knows that interest rates might well be venturing deeper into double-digit territory in 2019.

Both cases work against a favourable investment environment.

As such, these events will serve as brakes on the growth rate, and play their part in fulfilling the very forecast that the State Bank itself advanced in the monetary policy statement — that the economy is set to see a “notable moderation” in the remaining months of the fiscal year.

These are the beginnings of a large-scale stabilisation exercise that the government has to undertake sooner or later, and the deeper implications for growth and investment are now acquiring sharper focus.

The path forward, therefore, needs to also become clearer in the weeks ahead, as the combined impact of further depreciations and rate hikes could well trigger the very speculative forces that the bank is trying to contain.

These gyrations are not healthy and an unambiguous course of action needs to come into view soon.

Inensitive police force

IN a shocking development on Friday, police in Lahore lost every sense of propriety as they showed to the media photographs of two young women who, according to the law enforcers, had been arrested in a ‘raid’ on charges of ‘immoral activities’. There are several points worthy of outrage in this action. First, the women were arrested from private premises, the very implication of which is that outsiders may not enter without reasonable grounds of suspicion of

sufficiently illegal activities to warrant the intrusion — and then, too, in the normal course of things, a judicial mandate is required. Second, in making public the images and information, the police in effect condemned as ‘guilty’ persons who may for whatever reason have come under suspicion, but who had not even been formally accused of a crime, let alone convicted after a probe and trial. The worst transgression committed by the authorities, though, was that unlike what ought to be the norm in such sensitive situations, the women were not allowed to cover their faces, and thus their identity and distress have fallen into the public realm even before an investigation has been conducted. In a patriarchal and gender-discriminatory society such as ours, it would be an understatement to say that this mishandling may well ruin the lives of these young women, as well as of their families.

After the furore, the police command has distanced itself and provided several protestations about gender equality being a central tenet of the force. An inquiry has been ordered and action against the policemen responsible for the outrage promised. Nevertheless, the fact remains that for the two young women, the damage done to their reputation and self-esteem is perhaps irreversible. Further, gender prejudices are entrenched in our police force, particularly in the rank and file. This is not the first time an incident such as this has occurred. The police high command must purge the force of such gender-insensitive attitudes.

Action against TLP

BELATEDLY, the state may be proceeding to hold accountable the party leadership and some of its supporters for the violence and terror that they unleashed on the country more than a month ago.

According to Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry, the PTI government is moving towards having the leadership of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan and individuals involved in violence during the days-long protests that paralysed the country in late October and early November put on trial on an assortment of treason, sedition and terrorism-related charges. The trials will, according to the information minister, be held in anti-terrorism courts in the relevant jurisdictions across the country.

It remains to be seen if the government intends to follow through on what the information minister has asserted, but if it does it would lay down an important marker for lawful discourse and protest in the country.

The protests were a historic debacle for the state and more than a month since the country has tried to return to normality, the shocking nature and brazenness of the TLP rhetoric has not faded.

So direct and categorical was the violence-inciting narrative against the government, the judiciary and the military leadership by the TLP leaders that the lawful sentencing of the latter and their violent supporters is a sine qua non for the re-establishment of the rule of law in the country.

Unhappily, elements within the religious establishment in the country are seeking to shield the TLP leaders from lawful action by the state in the name of so-called religious harmony. Several clerics led by Mufti Muneebur Rehman, who heads the Tanzeem-ul-Madaris Ahle Sunnat and the Ruet-i-Hilal Committee, held a news conference on Sunday to demand that the government not take action against the TLP's Khadim Rizvi and Afzal Qadri.

But what the religious leaders argued was necessary for religious harmony and peace in the country would amount to the state being blackmailed by violent extremists in the name of religion. There exist laws in the country against incitement to violence and attempts to spread religious hatred. If the language and actions of the TLP leaders and some of their supporters do not meet the criteria of unlawful incitement to violence and attempts to spread religious hatred, then what else possibly could?

Arguably, the one-sided politics of appeasement that the state has used — seemingly allowing those threatening violence and spreading intolerance in the name of religion free rein, while taking oppressive action against those demanding constitutionally protected rights — has created distortions in both state and society that now threaten to devour everyone.

Similarly, the dharna culture that has developed and been tacitly supported by elements within the state in recent years has turned political protests into deadly affairs.

The shocking events in the country after the acquittal of Aasia Bibi by the Supreme Court must never be allowed to take place again.

Disenfranchising voters

THE Election Commission of Pakistan once again finds itself mired in controversy.

As reported in Dawn on Sunday, an ECP official has said that the votes of some 15m people in Pakistan enrolled in areas other than the addresses shown on their CNICs will be shifted to the 'permanent' addresses on these documents by the commission.

Reportedly, this will be done if these individuals 'fail to decide' where they want to be registered as voters by the deadline of Dec 31.

According to the source, quoting Section 27 of the Elections Act, a person shall be deemed to be a resident of a certain electoral area if his permanent or temporary address — the two provisions on the CNICs — lies in the said area.

While simple on the surface, the implications here are deeply problematic, especially in a country with rates of internal migration as high as Pakistan's.

Most obviously, there is the issue that millions of people live in places that are not listed on their CNICs; given the time and effort required to have such official documents changed or updated, it comes as no surprise that these citizens end up not having the information on their CNICs modified as needed, even when they live at what Nadra refers to as a 'third' address.

Changing the area of their vote to the permanent addresses listed with Nadra means in effect disenfranchising these estimated 15m citizens, with the onus of blame being laid on them given the looming Dec 31 deadline.

The fact is that these millions are all citizens of Pakistan, and are in addition registered voters, and where they happen to be when elections are called ought to be absolutely immaterial as long as the central requirement of holding a CNIC is met.

Is Nadra prepared for the chaos that would occur if millions of people across the country rushed to have their documents changed? Or are voters expected to travel back to the places listed as their permanent residences to vote once the deadline has expired?

In addition, there is an irony to be found here. The ECP has been looking into providing voting rights to overseas Pakistanis, and working out the means to facilitate this as much as possible in this exercise.

Contrast this with the domestic CNIC address issue, and the picture that emerges is one of total dichotomy.

The ECP should not be seen as facilitating one group of people while disenfranchising another.

Arbitrary control list

RECENTLY, two members of the National Assembly were offloaded from a UAE-bound flight and barred from leaving the country. Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir from North Waziristan are just the latest names to be placed on the long Exit Control List. No clear explanation was given, though later it was said that an FIR had been registered against the two lawmakers earlier for making 'anti-state' speeches in a public meeting in Swabi, which they deny. On Sunday, Mr Dawar told the media that he and Mr Wazir had been on their way to attend a festival in the UAE when they were stopped by the authorities. So what was the point of publicly humiliating two sitting MNAs? The speaker of the National Assembly needs to take note of the incident; clearer explanations are needed. This incident follows the unlawful detention of Pakhtun activist Gulalai Ismail, who was also placed on the ECL. In the absence of transparency, acts like these can appear arbitrary especially when such travel bans are ignored in the case of some other individuals.

Since its introduction in 1981 by the Zia dictatorship, via an amendment to the Constitution, the ECL has been increasingly viewed as a political tool to victimise, inconvenience and cause psychological distress to those who don't toe the line, or to settle personal scores. The primary purpose of the ECL was to restrict the movement of those alleged to have committed financial fraud, but this objective seems to have lost all meaning considering the blatant misuse and overuse of the ECL. In 2015, the then interior minister had announced there were more than 8,000 names on the list, out of which some 7,500 had been there for decades. Some of the individuals listed are not even alive anymore. The Exit from Pakistan

(Control) Ordinance states that the government has no obligation to give the individual an opportunity to show cause. This contradicts the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. A revision of the ECL is the need of the hour.

Khalilzad's visit

THE focus rightly should be on ending the war, not the petulant tweets of the US commander-in-chief or the wrong-headed policies that have turned Afghanistan into a country of perpetual war.

After the gratuitous and self-defeating remarks against Pakistan by President Donald Trump, his administration appears to have immediately realised the error in his approach and likely convinced him to sign a letter drafted by more experienced hands in the administration.

Now Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for Afghan reconciliation, has visited Pakistan and likely discussed further steps to nudge forward an incipient peace process.

While Pakistan-US meetings are often followed by boilerplate official statements, it is in the days and weeks after that the results of the meetings are usually known.

A previous visit by Mr Khalilzad to Pakistan was followed by the release of Mullah Baradar, a former senior and well-respected leader of the Afghan Taliban, who had been in Pakistani custody since 2010.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: furthering the prospects of a political settlement in Afghanistan with the Taliban, while seeking the Afghan government's cooperation to help end anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries across the border.

And when necessary, the leadership here must continue to respond cautiously and moderately, if baited deliberately or inadvertently by the US president.

Obnoxious as Mr Trump's outbursts against Pakistan have been, it appears that he is still seeking to pull the US out of the war in Afghanistan — which is where the focus should be.

Indeed, Mr Trump may be the first of three presidents who have presided over the US-led war in Afghanistan with a realistic opportunity to end the war.

The political dynamics in the US and the direction of the war in Afghanistan could help create the circumstances to end a conflict that has brought untold misery to the Afghan people.

It is unlikely that a meaningful reset in ties between Pakistan and the US is possible anytime soon, but it is welcome that the statement released by the Prime Minister's Office after a meeting between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Mr Khalilzad specifically mentioned increasing bilateral engagement in areas such as trade, investment, education, health and social-sector development.

Pakistan's ties with America this century effectively have been about the war in Afghanistan and US security concerns that the superpower has wanted Pakistan to address.

There was a brief spell in which other aspects of the bilateral relationship were given precedence, but the Kerry-Lugar aid and assistance to the civilian side of the state were undermined by many events.

In setting the foreign-policy direction of his government, Mr Khan should pay heed to countries beyond the few he has emphasised relations with so far.

The US and the EU are vital trading partners and Pakistan needs good relations with many power centres.

Politics of adjustment

JUDGING from the remarks that he made at the South Asia Economic Summit in Islamabad on Tuesday, it appears that Finance Minister Asad Umar is coming under immense pressure from within his own party in the aftermath of a second large devaluation of the rupee, and an equally big hike in interest rates. He tried to assure those attending the event — and undoubtedly his intended audience extended beyond the people seated before him — that there is 'no financial crisis' in Pakistan any longer. He pointed to an improvement in economic indicators, such as remittances and exports, and argued that the economy had

turned the corner and was now getting ready to emerge from the extreme stresses and strains it had been under when his government assumed power. The message sounds odd and discordant given what is happening in the markets, as well as the state of the economy as painted by the State Bank only a few days earlier, which spoke of deeper imbalances beyond just the external. There may not be a financial crisis at the moment, but it is entirely premature to declare victory.

It is normal for an economic adjustment of this sort to generate political strains and test the popularity of any incumbent government. We have seen governments in the past tread fearfully down this path for the same reason, and now signs of trepidation and outright denial are emerging from this government too. In the days to come, politics will only heat up further, since we are far from the end of the cycle of adjustment. The finance minister needs to stay on message here, and prepare the country for the pain that is to come. For their part, his colleagues in government need to show some of that patience that they are asking the people of Pakistan to demonstrate towards them. It is far too soon in the game to start developing second thoughts about the finance minister himself (as speculation in sections of the media seems to suggest is happening). Changing course or the finance minister at this stage will signal tremendous weakness and a lack of clarity at the top levels of government, and the prime minister needs to play a firmer hand when talking about the steps his government has to take to restore stability to the economy. The coming days will bring many more tests. Let us hope the government can muster more patience and realism when facing up to them.

Tax for better health

THE government's recent decision to impose a tax on cigarettes and sugar-sweetened beverages is a much-needed step towards protecting society's right to a healthy life. Regardless of the cost to the public exchequer, there is no defence for the state or administration turning its back on those in need of healthcare, and governments are well within their right to discourage activities that will clearly lead to healthcare crises. In dozens of countries, special taxes — often called a 'sin tax' — are imposed on the purchase of several goods, the

excessive consumption of which would inevitably lead to an added healthcare burden on the state, and illness or infirmity in society. Such goods include, but are not limited to, sugar-sweetened beverages, excessively salty or otherwise unhealthy foods, alcohol, and most glaringly, tobacco. Most often the funds gathered from these taxes are channelled into the public healthcare infrastructure.

Explaining the decision to impose a sin tax on tobacco and sugar-sweetened beverages at a conference in Islamabad, the federal health minister said that the move was in line with the PTI government's commitment to raising the health budget. It goes without saying that the tax should be imposed as soon as possible. While exact data on the healthcare burden imposed by the consumption of excessive sugar in the country is unavailable, the damaging health effects of this national habit are well known. Meanwhile, the numbers for smoking are perhaps better documented. For instance, some 1,500 young men and women start smoking every day in Pakistan — a shocking figure for a country where incomes are generally low. Imposing extra taxes on the price of a commodity that damages health may help in controlling a scourge that costs thousands of lives and millions of rupees in healthcare expenses each year. Pakistan need not be a 'nanny state', but there can be little to contradict the argument that the government must intervene if it wants a healthy population.

The civilian 'page'

THE 'same-page' mantra has returned with force as the PTI-led federal government struggles to find its feet and deal with multiple crises, but it is not clear yet if all sides recognise that the 'same page' must be civilian-led both in form and substance. Seemingly compounding the problem are off-the-cuff remarks by Prime Minister Imran Khan. After a period of severe civil-military and inter-institutional strife, it is perhaps welcome that the leaderships of the federal government, the military and the superior judiciary are keen to work together in the pursuit of peace, progress and prosperity. But each of the three power centres must be mindful of their constitutional responsibilities and the limits thereof. In recent days, Prime Minister Khan has spoken effusively of inter-institutional harmony and cooperation. While such cooperation is entirely

welcome where constitutionally appropriate, at moments Mr Khan's comments have appeared to resemble those made by a junior partner thankful for a helping hand and pat on the back by other institutions.

Imran Khan is the prime minister and chief executive of Pakistan. It is through the elected office of prime minister that executive power at the federal level flows. Mr Khan appeared to have recognised the need for him to assert his constitutional authority and prerogatives when he declared that he makes the decisions and institutions support him. But there is the reality of an imbalance in power between the civilian and military sides of the state and of an intrusive superior judiciary. Those realities have combined to reduce the space for civilian governance in the country. Mr Khan will not recover that space simply by making verbal declarations; the prime minister will need to demonstrate a decision-making and policy-setting capacity that he has not so far. Certainly, the struggle for civilian supremacy is decades-old and will not be corrected by any single government, including the present one. But the starting point is surely civilian governments that are keen to fill the entire constitutional space that ruling circles have under the elected, democratic scheme of government.

If Mr Khan must be more assertive in substance and form, the leaderships of other institutions ought to reconsider their hyper visibility and excessive public comments. Perhaps the DG ISPR wanted to distance the military leadership from Prime Minister Khan's claim that the military has endorsed the PTI manifesto, but the news conference on Thursday ventured into topics far and wide. The policy pronouncements made could surely have been avoided. Similarly, necessary as population control measures may be, it was an uncomfortable sight for judicial purists and democrats to see a sitting prime minister and the chief justice of the Supreme Court share a stage and heap praise on one another. Institutional harmony is necessary and welcome, but it must remain constitutionally appropriate at all times.

Trade with India

AS both Pakistan and India continue to trade barbs and engage in a Twitter war, a powerful reality in their equation sits like a silent spectator. It has been said before, and has been repeated once more, that both countries have far more to

gain from cooperating and working with one another than they do from being rivals. The World Bank has just estimated that the full trade potential between the two regional rivals is around \$37bn, whereas the actual trade volume is closer to \$2bn — much below potential. The news comes in a report on the promise of regional trade in South Asia released on Wednesday, and casts the actual state of the relationship between the various countries in the region in sharp relief. Pakistan has a total trade potential of more than \$39bn with all countries of the region according to the report, but the figure for the actual regional trade volume is just \$5bn.

This is a yawning gap, and filling it would need a sound roadmap for Pakistan as well as its neighbours to define their future course. Each country has its role to play in making this happen. Pakistan, for one, can make headway in allowing economic issues to play a greater role in its foreign policy, and allowing its domestic economic policy to be weaned off its addiction to donor-driven inflows and geopolitical rents. But some of the impediments to normalising trade ties that are identified in the report require attention from the Indian side. Chief among these is the resort to nontariff barriers that India is notorious for, using these not only against Pakistan but all countries of the world. Also significant, according to the report, is the lack of trust between the governments of both countries, and the absence of contact between the people of both countries means there is hardly the sort of mutual trust that is necessary for a trade relationship to thrive. The authors suggest an incremental approach towards building this trust, and steps like the opening of the Kartarpur corridor are an example of what the path ahead should look like. But for trust to thrive, the leaderships of both countries need to pull back from the strident rhetoric that they have been employing against each other ever since the corridor was opened. Perhaps the trade potential that sits silently between them can be some inducement towards this end.

Fight against TB

DESPITE being eliminated or drastically reduced in several high-income countries — largely due to the prevalence of advanced antibiotics and greater living standards — tuberculosis continues to remain one of the main causes of death in the developing world. An estimated 1.5m people die from the bacterial

infection each year; TB is also one of the oldest recorded diseases in history. Pakistan has the fifth highest rate of TB in the world. It is estimated that around 430,000 people, including 15,000 children, contract the airborne illness in the country each year, while around 70,000 die from it. The germ is contracted by inhalation, through the throat and nose, or in rarer cases, ingestion. Symptoms can include a prolonged cough, coughing up blood, chest pain, shortness of breath, weight loss, fever, fatigue and night sweats. It is important to remember that the illness is both preventable and curable. However, while the BCG vaccine, usually administered to infants, does decrease chances of contracting TB, the amount of knowledge around the illness, and the media attention and public health awareness campaigns focusing on the illness remain much lower than for other diseases such as polio and HIV/AIDS.

In September this year, at a first of its kind event, world leaders met at the UN General Assembly to making tuberculosis a disease of the past. They pledged to increase overall global investments to \$13bn annually by 2022. This week, the World Health Organisation has also extended its help to end tuberculosis in Pakistan and offered technical support to the Punjab TB Control Programme. Meanwhile, the National Health Services reaffirmed its commitment to ending tuberculosis by 2030 — one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. But it also revealed that a shocking 140,000 patients continue to be missed each year by routine surveillance. Another new challenge is the threat of multidrug-resistant TB, which occurs when patients stop taking their medication before their course has been completed. Lack of access to adequate healthcare services and pervading stigma prevent patients from getting the help they need.

Missing roadmap

THE wide-ranging questions covered familiar topics, but the scattershot responses were a missed opportunity.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Prime Minister Imran Khan had an opportunity to present his government's point of view to policymakers in the US and offer them a path ahead in a difficult region encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Instead, the prime minister chose to focus on grievance, the past and his own flawed understanding of the war in Afghanistan and the fight against militancy and terrorism inside Pakistan.

When asked, “Do you think Pakistan’s relationship with the US should warm up?” Prime Minister Khan could only offer: “Who would not want to be friends with a superpower?”

Earlier in the interview, Mr Khan did suggest that Pakistan wants a trade-based, multidimensional relationship with the US similar to the Pakistan-China relationship, but the prime minister did not elaborate on how Pakistan and the US could move beyond the security-centric ties the two countries have had since 9/11. Indeed, he did not offer anything substantive on resolving the core security issues either.

Perhaps more worrying is that Mr Khan suggested that his government is still not clear on what path it will take to steer the country out of a balance-of-payments crisis and ballooning fiscal deficit.

“We have two scenarios: one with the IMF and one without,” Mr Khan said in response to a question whether ongoing negotiations with the IMF will be successful.

If Mr Khan was intentionally ambivalent to try and gain an advantage with the IMF during negotiations it would perhaps be understandable.

But the markets have already shown skittishness at what has appeared to be indecision on the federal government’s part and could inflict further punishment if it is interpreted that negotiations with the IMF have reached an impasse.

The prime minister also said that the sums of recent aid committed by the UAE and China are confidential because those countries have demanded they be kept confidential. That flatly contradicts Mr Khan’s long-standing demand for more transparency in fiscal and international dealings.

Mr Khan has a commendable openness towards the media, both national and international.

In recent days, the prime minister has given several interviews and answered numerous questions. But Mr Khan must understand that his interactions with the

media are evaluated in circles far and wide, not merely in the moment and by individuals he is directly speaking to.

The country needs policy direction and firm leadership to guide it through yet another phase of multidimensional crisis.

The self-imposed 100-day marker has now passed and there will be less room for error and excuse going forward. Instead of grievance, the prime minister should focus on what needs to be done at present.

Many of the government's current problems are inherited; it should not add to that list by missteps of its own.

Exchange rate blues

IT was never going to be an easy promise to live up to, but since the government has committed itself to ensuring the independence of the central bank, it must now learn to not only accept the consequences of the decisions made by the regulator, but also to listen to critical feedback from it. The State Bank performs many functions besides curating the exchange rate. It decides monetary policy and provides regular synoptic snapshots of the state of the economy through its monetary policy statements, as well as its quarterly and annual reports. It also performs a supervisory function for all commercial banks to ensure that systemic risks are kept at bay. The discharge of these functions automatically brings the State Bank into contact with political authorities — for example, in the event of the State Bank's assessment of the economy differing in important ways from the government's, or if a politically connected individual is denied a banking licence, or if requests for borrowing from the State Bank are not entertained as expeditiously as the politicians would like them to be.

In fact, there are numerous instances where the State Bank's responsibilities have had direct political consequences. It is for this reason that the law calls for an independent central bank, so it can carry on its business without fear of a political backlash. This independence is vital to the normal functioning of our financial system, and it is required to ensure that large swathes of the financial sector do not descend into racketeering. Yet, this independence has always been contested. Past governments decided they could not live with an independent

bank making exchange rate and interest rate decisions on its own, and sought to limit this autonomy by placing pliant individuals from among their own circle of associates in the position of governor. The PTI was right to say it would end this practice, but having made that commitment, now finds itself dealing with the consequences. The recent exchange rate depreciation and interest rate hike have riled the business community and some powerful quarters within the ruling party as well. The prime minister himself has gone on record to ask for a “mechanism” to make exchange rate decisions “so we can provide our input”. This is a step backward from his commitment to strengthen institutions. The finance minister must help his party colleagues understand this.

Shafiuddin Ashraf

IN the passing of Shafiuddin Ashraf, the media community has lost a committed and outspoken trade unionist who played a major role in journalists’ struggle for their economic and professional rights. In the 1970s, Ashraf, who witnessed brutality in his formative years in East Pakistan, migrated to Karachi where he pursued a law degree. He joined the media industry, which he deemed as the perfect alternative career for bolstering the cause of the oppressed. In his early days at Dawn, where Ashraf was mentored by seasoned trade unionist Abdul Qudoos Sheikh, general secretary of the Pakistan Herald Workers Union, Ashraf’s lucidity in interpreting the country’s labour laws and his determination to improve the working conditions of media workers endeared him to one and all. In the years to come, he would prove himself a worthy successor to Abdul Qudoos, all the time upholding the strong traditions of trade unionism set by iconic individuals such as the founder of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, Minhaj Burna, and the fearless Nisar Osmani.

Assuming charge as chairman of the All Pakistan Newspaper Employees Confederation in the latter half of his distinguished career, Ashraf’s efforts to reduce the economic exploitation of employees by media owners and his fearless criticism of successive governments for curbing the freedom of expression earned him countrywide acclaim and recognition. Tributes have been pouring in from all quarters for Ashraf as people from all walks of life, be it his colleagues, politicians, labour leaders, social workers or artists, term his demise a huge loss

for the struggle of the media community. Ashraf's achievements and integrity will be a source of inspiration for all those associated with trade unions or who wish to tread that thorny path. He set new benchmarks with his unflinching commitment to his cause and his solidarity with the people even towards the end. In essence, Shafiuddin Ashraf was the people's representative in his lifetime and remains so after his death.

Squabbling within cabinet

IT is somewhere between open warfare and stealthy attacks, but the squabbling between federal cabinet members and PTI leaders at the centre and in Punjab ought to be discouraged by Prime Minister Imran Khan — if the prime minister wants to focus on his governance and reforms agenda.

Yet another news cycle has been consumed by infighting among PTI ministers, with Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid caught on a hot mic claiming that he had been offered the information portfolio by Prime Minister Khan, who Mr Rashid suggested is unhappy with the performance of Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry.

In this age of social media, the information minister, who is travelling abroad, wasted no time in taking to Twitter to hit back. The information minister suggested that vested interests were trying to oust him.

Neither Mr Rashid nor Mr Chaudhry is a stranger to controversy, but their spat is part of a worrying trend where PTI leaders — if they are not fighting with the opposition — are fighting among themselves.

Surely, whatever the bruising style of politics that Prime Minister Khan may prefer, he ought to recognise that too many unnecessary and self-inflicted political distractions have the potential to derail the PTI's governance and reforms agenda — even before the party can turn its attention to the centrepiece of its campaign promises.

Before Mr Rashid's and Mr Chaudhry's sniping at each, there have been rumours of a rift between Finance Minister Asad Umar and Jahangir Tareen, leader of a powerful faction in the PTI.

And before that, there was an allegedly leaked video recording of a conversation among the Punjab Assembly Speaker Pervaiz Elahi and several PTI leaders, who were complaining about the alleged interference in the provincial government's affairs by Governor Muhammad Sarwar.

Certainly, the PTI is not the first ruling party to experience internal divisions and Mr Khan's is not the first federal cabinet to have sniping and squabbling.

Indeed, a culture of more open debate and cabinet members and party leaders emboldened to critique each other's job performance could help improve governance. But there is a difference between constructive debate and the wilful undermining of colleagues.

Prime Minister Khan is unquestionably the leader of his party and the dominant figure in government. There is no likely scenario in which his orders to cabinet members will be openly and repeatedly defied.

The collective responsibility of the cabinet requires that dissent be expressed internally and decisions taken by the cabinet be backed by all its members. The PTI can do better.

People bomb

THE problem may take as much time to resolve as the nearly 2m currently pending court cases in Pakistan, but there's no disputing the views of the country's top judge about our runaway population.

At a symposium in Islamabad, Justice Saqib Nisar observed that Pakistan's population growth rate is potentially the "most disastrous issue" facing this nation and a "menace" that has barely been addressed for the last six decades.

The problem, as he spelled out, is a simple one of supply and demand, with dwindling resources unable to cater to an increasing number of mouths to feed.

Read: Family planning may be our last hope

Prime Minister Imran Khan, on the same occasion, emphasised that curbing the population growth was a priority for his government and one it had already begun

working on. He recalled the effectiveness of family planning TV campaigns in the 1960s in keeping the numbers down.

One wonders what successive governments in our history were thinking when, at the cost of the people's future, they put family planning on the back burner, acquiescing to preposterous right-wing propaganda linking the issue with promoting 'obscenity'.

The Pakistani youth bulge: a ticking time bomb

When mentioned at all, 'family planning' became 'population welfare', and the message was so watered down and sanitised as to be scarcely comprehensible to its target audience.

In fact, the prime minister's remark at a public forum about the delivery of contraceptives being a problem in dealing with controlling population growth was a refreshing dose of plain speaking; we cannot afford to beat about the bush anymore.

Climate change is well under way, and Pakistan is one of 10 countries most vulnerable to global warming.

Mr Khan rightly pointed out at the symposium that the clergy in Iran and Bangladesh plays an active role in their countries' extremely successful population control campaigns. There are NGOs in Pakistan already engaging with local clerics on this score but a far bigger, more holistic, government-owned initiative is needed.

This is a complex issue that touches upon many aspects; and one of the most significant is the status of women. The less empowered a woman, the less likely she is to have any say in the frequency or spacing of pregnancies — and Pakistan consistently features at the bottom of the annual gender gap index.

A nightmare scenario looms on the horizon; the longer we delay the critical task of population control, the more extended and harsh will be the fallout.

Thalassaemia risk

A LARGE part of what troubles the healthcare sector in Pakistan is the lack of consistency. One reminder of this was the shelving of the Prevention of Thalassaemia Major project in KP. Launched in 2005, it was a signal initiative to address a vital health issue through raising awareness about the not uncommon genetic haemoglobin disorder. Unfortunately, the initiative was put to an end by the provincial health department in 2012, bringing to a halt what success had been in sight. Now, as per a report in this newspaper on Friday, cases of the blood disease are increasing. In Peshawar's Lady Reading hospital alone, reportedly, more than 8,000 pints of blood have been transfused this year to children with thalassaemia, while other hospitals and healthcare facilities in the province are facing a similar situation. According to the Pakistan Paediatrics Association, some 8pc of the province's population suffers from thalassaemia minor, while there are 30,000 thalassaemia major patients. It is evident that for the families of the patients, the challenge of arranging blood donations is huge, to say nothing of the trauma experienced by the sufferers themselves.

While the project was ongoing, some 5,000 people were screened for the illness and plans were under way to extend the facility to the entire vulnerable population. The KP government had announced that the initiative would become one of the regular programmes of its health department, but with its abrupt curtailment, the numbers of sufferers is climbing high. The healthcare intervention is sorely in need of revival, and the administration's moribund policies of redress. But even more urgently needed is a large-scale awareness campaign — not just in KP but across the country — about the causes and risks of thalassaemia. In a country such as Pakistan, where marriage between relatives is not just accepted but welcomed, the vulnerability to genetic disorders is compounded. Pakistan would do well to study the preventative strategies employed successfully by other countries to contain the scourge of thalassaemia.

Tax headaches and FBR

FACED with a revenue shortfall in excess of Rs100bn, the government is reportedly hunting for ideas on raising new taxes through which to bridge the fiscal deficit. The amount is almost 10pc of the total revenue collected in the first quarter of the fiscal year. It makes for a large shortfall, creating a deficit equal to or larger than 1.4pc of GDP (the reported figure from July to September). It is not unusual for new governments to run a large deficit in the first quarter, and there have been examples in the recent past. Nevertheless, at present levels, the figure is on the higher side in view of first-quarter deficits of the past 10 years. Perhaps FY2011 was the only time when it was higher, and that was the first year when the effects of allocations under the new NFC award were setting in. At one go, the first-quarter provincial share in federal revenues had more than doubled.

Thus far, the government has been focused on finding the resources with which to plug a yawning deficit on the external account, but its attention must surely now turn to also include the fiscal deficit. Reports say that the matter has acquired enough urgency to be elevated to the level of the prime minister, who has been briefed by officials of the Federal Board of Revenue about the reasons behind the sharp shortfall, and measures have been suggested to arrest it. The shortfall has also prompted a significant reshuffle in the FBR. The new tax measures include, according to the same reports, reforming the mechanism for taxing petrol and diesel so that tax is levied as an absolute amount rather than a percentage of the price, with an attempt to restore taxes on mobile phone cards.

What is important in all this is that whatever short-term measures are adopted, they must not be regressive, nor should they increase the burden on compliant taxpayers. The temptation to squeeze those within the tax net is always strong, and comes almost as a reflex action to FBR officials. It is for this reason that the government needs to be on its guard against such advice. Likewise, regressive taxes tend to be the most elastic and offer the path of least resistance to the tax bureaucracy, which is notorious for its corruption and laziness. The government has promised change, with an emphasis on the tax machinery. The PTI manifesto promises deep FBR reforms to change the structure and face of the organisation, and the prime minister reiterated that commitment in his maiden speech to the nation, in which he promised to begin his agenda for change with

the FBR. Clearly, the time to start work on the promise has now arrived, even if navigating the space between higher revenues and social justice can prove to be a tightrope act.

PAC impasse

THE deadlock appears closer to being broken, but it will need common sense and goodwill from both sides.

The paralysis at the heart of the new parliament is a dispute between the PTI and the opposition over the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee in the National Assembly.

Quite sensibly, a parliamentary norm in this latest era of elected governments is for the PAC chairmanship to be given to the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly.

However, the PTI regards virtually all decisions taken and norms established by the PPP and PML-N to be suspicious or corrupt, and so it does not consider itself bound by parliamentary norms set by its predecessors.

In the current instance, the PTI has objected to the handing over of the chairmanship to Shahbaz Sharif because he is, firstly, under investigation by NAB, and secondly, Mr Sharif would initially chair a PAC that would be examining spending by the previous PML-N government.

But the PTI's intransigence has had predictable consequences, with the opposition threatening to boycott all parliamentary committees, which has effectively prevented the speaker from notifying committees in the new Assembly.

That in turn has frozen all legislative work as bills cannot be debated in the relevant committees before being sent to the full house for a vote.

There is a possibility that the PML-N and PTI may compromise by nominating a senior leader of the PML-N other than Shahbaz Sharif as PAC chairman.

While that would break the recent parliamentary norm, it would also break the impasse between the government and opposition.

If acceptable to the PML-N, and if the PTI is able to rise above its unfortunate habit of quarrelling with the opposition at every turn, parliament would have an opportunity to resume its core legislative duties.

Indeed, the strong opposition reaction to Prime Minister Imran Khan's suggestion that the PTI seek to legislate by presidential ordinance ought to have made clear to the federal government that a quick resolution of the parliamentary committee impasse is in the government's own interest.

If handled with political maturity, the PTI's reforms and legislative agenda could find opposition support inside parliament.

Sensible legislation that promotes the public interest and helps introduce structural reforms is unlikely to be rejected by the opposition merely because it is PTI's legislation.

The PTI must seek to advance its legislative agenda soon.

History in ruins

IN an effort to draw attention to one of the oldest and most neglected historical sites — Mehrgarh in Balochistan — a rally was organised in Quetta the other day. Participants had a few broad demands: they requested the site be given the same importance and official state protection as other historical sites in Pakistan, such as the Indus Valley and Harappa civilisations, and that measures be taken to facilitate visits from students and tourists alike. Despite being a precursor to the aforementioned civilisations, and one of the earliest sites with evidence of farming and herding in the world, very little work has been done on it. The site was first discovered by French archaeologists, with the help of the Department of Archaeology, in 1974. A team led by Jean François and Catherine Jarrige worked on the site — coming across bodies, silverware and kitchen utensils as they dug up the earth.

Unfortunately, tribal feuds between the Rind and Raisani clans, following a local body election during the Zia years, led to a rising body count on both sides, and it also effectively closed off the area to outsiders as work came to a halt. There has been sporadic work since then, which picked up again in 1997 and concluded at the end of the millennium. But much of the treasures dug up were shipped out of the country. The local museum is a picture of neglect. The second cause for the site's decay is its proximity to the Bolan River. Like all civilisations, Mehrgarh was born on the banks of a once-great river. Now, rainfall and seasonal flooding from the river has gradually eroded the ruins. Balochistan offers much scope for archaeology and history enthusiasts. But just as the province is neglected politically, so too is its history. In Pakistan, unfortunately, there is apathy towards our ancient history, especially the pre-Islamic past. A little wisdom and understanding will make it clear that ruins translate to riches. But who's listening?

Cabinet review

IT is a good idea, but perhaps its time has not come as yet. With a new session of the National Assembly set to begin, Prime Minister Imran Khan convened the federal cabinet for a marathon session of ministerial performance audits. The performance of more than two dozen ministries was assessed, and it was indicated that another quarterly review will be undertaken before yet another cabinet reshuffle around the six-month mark. That slightly longer horizon is perhaps more reasonable than demanding that ministers show the desired results in their first three months in office. Not much is known about what the yardsticks were and how Mr Khan assessed his cabinet colleagues, but a review as vast as 26 ministries in a single day will inevitably be superficial. Perhaps the prime minister intended to signal to the public that he is a different kind of prime minister, and to his cabinet colleagues that 'business as usual' will not be tolerated. On both counts, a clearer picture should emerge in three months' time. What Mr Khan ought to be aware of is that other governments have attempted to introduce some discipline and systematic accountability to the functioning of the cabinet, but none succeeded.

In the previous PML-N government, first Nawaz Sharif and then Shahid Khaqan Abbasi made a show, at least initially, of demanding more from their cabinets. Mr

Sharif also announced performance audits of ministers after the first year of his last spell as prime minister, but the fanfare quickly died down, and he did not shuffle his cabinet until his ouster from office. And while Mr Abbasi held cabinet meetings regularly and adopted a more inclusive approach towards decision-making, there were few tangible gains when it came to ministerial accountability. Indeed, the most high profile departure from Mr Abbasi's cabinet — that of then finance minister Ishaq Dar — was a result of pressure from NAB and the courts. Certainly, Mr Abbasi's tenure was marked by deep national political turmoil and the threat of imprisonment of Mr Sharif, but true cabinet accountability is very difficult to enforce in most circumstances.

Prime Minister Khan may also want to consider the effect of drawing further attention and work away from parliament. The very start of a new session of the National Assembly on Monday was rendered uncertain by the marathon cabinet meeting that the prime minister was holding. With parliamentary committees yet to be formed, the presence of ministers in parliament is even more important than usual, if parliament is to have even a semblance of oversight activity. Mr Khan's cabinet selections are his prerogative, but the government's performance needs to be examined in parliament too. The prime minister is the chief executive, but parliament ought to be the focal point of democratic activity.

CPEC and Balochistan

THE cabinet of the provincial government of Balochistan is right to feel outraged at the findings of the Planning and Development Department's CPEC-related cell, which show that the province has received a miniscule share of the total investment committed under the corridor's bouquet of projects. And even those projects that were committed have seen no measurable progress over the past five years.

Not only that, two of the largest projects supposedly under the CPEC umbrella (Quetta Mass Transit and PAT feeder to Quetta water supply) are going to be financed by the provincial government's own resources.

Take a look: The road out of Gwadar

It is worth recalling that Lahore's Orange Line train was a high priority CPEC project. In fact, the findings of the CPEC cell, which spent weeks in the field and in poring through the paperwork to generate a snapshot of where the province stands in the overall execution of CPEC, are nothing short of scandalous.

CPEC: Hopes and fears as China comes to Gwadar

For example, none of the roads that are part of the so-called 'western alignment' have seen any work, whereas another set of roads — the N85 highway running from Gwadar to Panjgur to Quetta — has been shown on the CPEC website as part of the western alignment, even though it was never a part of the CPEC road system.

The findings also show that the power deficit of the province remains at 700MW, despite the additional power generation capacity that has come online around the country since the early harvest projects of CPEC were commissioned.

Exclusive: CPEC master plan revealed

All this and more should rightly be a source of extreme consternation for the provincial authorities, who now have an obligation to double down and make a special case for their province and its fair right to the resources that are bundled under CPEC.

Islamabad is abuzz with activity these days as the government prepares for the forthcoming 8th Joint Cooperation Committee meeting that will begin on Dec 20 in Beijing. This is the time for the provincial authorities from Quetta to demand actual, measurable resources for the province.

Some argue that the province has low population density and therefore has lower entitlement to the country's resources. This argument may be correct up to a point, but the dismally low allocations for Balochistan cannot be justified in this way.

The provincial authorities now need to take their grievances to Islamabad, and ensure that they are programmed properly into whatever agenda the government will be carrying to Beijing next week

Crimes of war

IN a year that witnessed an unprecedented groundswell of testimonies from survivors of sexual violence across the globe, the joint Nobel Peace Prize winners for 2018 shed light on the lack of justice for the countless victims of rape in conflict zones. In their emotionally charged acceptance speeches, Nadia Murad, an Iraqi-Yazidi rights activist and survivor of sexual slavery under the militant Islamic State group, and Dr Denis Mukwege, a Congolese gynaecologist committed to treating victims of sexual assault in his home country, called upon the world community to do more to protect girls and women from wartime sexual assault. Far from offering comforting platitudes, their speeches served as searing indictments of the indifference of powerful actors to hold perpetrators of such brutality to account.

Their lack of cause for celebration is not without reason. While rape and other forms of sexual violence have been used as weapons of war throughout human history, it is only in the last two decades that the international community has grown to recognise that such acts can constitute deliberate war crimes, crimes against humanity, and constitutive acts of ethnic cleansing or genocide. And though such instruments being encoded in international and national laws are significant steps in prosecuting such crimes, they will remain ineffective so long as current mindsets regarding the sexual abuse of women remain. Whether in peacetime or during conflict, it is the victim of sexual violence — not the perpetrator — who is more often than not stigmatised and penalised by her community. Until nations provide an unequivocal path to justice for victims of wartime sexual violence, including all the necessary resources to repair and rebuild their shattered lives, women's bodies will continue to be used as a frontline for waging war. In the years ahead, the hope is that the clarion call of brave human rights campaigners such as Ms Murad and Dr Mukwege is honoured by acting to end impunity for wartime rape.

Partial accountability

THE veneer has all but disappeared and what remains is an age-old practice that undermines public trust in the state and the elected order. NAB has struck again. This time, two more figures belonging to the PML-N — former federal minister for railways Saad Rafique and his brother Salman — have been taken into NAB custody. The NAB action became possible after the Lahore High Court dismissed the brothers' pleas for bail. The arrest coming just a day before a by-election on a Punjab Assembly seat vacated by Saad Rafique, who has returned to the National Assembly after winning a by-election in the Lahore constituency won by Imran Khan in the general election. The arrests of the Rafique brothers have been sought by NAB in a high-profile misuse of power and corruption case involving a housing scheme that is allegedly controlled by the brothers. At this stage, it remains unclear what proof the anti-graft watchdog has amassed against the brothers.

As NAB continues its anti-corruption crusade with great verve and enthusiasm, it has become increasingly apparent that the accountability body's political focus is primarily on one party, with a second opposition party also drawing some attention. To the extent that the PML-N was the governing party in Punjab over the last decade and governed at the centre for the last five years, it is inevitable that NAB would have the PML-N under a microscope. No reasonable political and governance observer in the country would suggest that corruption is not a serious national issue. But there is also an unarguable pattern of NAB conduct that suggests a political focus on the PML-N and the PPP — which goes beyond NAB's legal mandate. Indeed, at this stage, it appears that PML-N leaders who are strong critics of the government or outspoken about interference in politics by anti-democratic elements in the state quickly find themselves under NAB inquiry and even arrest.

Perhaps most troubling are the tactics being used by NAB. In the PML-N or the PPP, there is no political figure who has rejected the possibility of being investigated or has strived to evade scrutiny. In fact, several opposition leaders have termed the NAB investigations against them as a badge of honour, and have cooperated with NAB and the courts as required by the law. But NAB continues to use draconian tactics such as arresting individuals even during the investigation phase. The crimes opposition figures are accused of are serious,

but the law does not require immediate and prolonged detention during the investigation phase. It is highly unusual to arrest individuals who are cooperating with investigators as required by the law. The more NAB resorts to aggressive, authoritarian tactics, the less validity and public acceptance the institution will have.

Religious freedom list

LISTS drawn up by individual states — rather than credible multilateral organisations or INGOs — always run the risk of being termed biased and designed to push a political agenda, pillorying geopolitical rivals, and looking the other way where bad behaviour of friends is concerned.

The same can be said for the US list of those states Washington terms violators of religious freedom. As announced by the American secretary of state on Tuesday, Pakistan has been added to this unenviable list “for having engaged in or tolerated systematic... violations of religious freedom”.

One look at those states mentioned on the list — Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, China — shows that apart from the Saudis, all the countries are geopolitical rivals of the US.

Hence, it is fair to ask how unbiased this listing is, what methodology was used, etc. It should also be mentioned that, especially under Donald Trump’s watch, the US itself has become a less welcoming place for ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Muslims, as the alt right and far right have gained ground.

Also, some major US allies, such as India and Israel, have been left off the list, even though the saffron brigade has been making life difficult for minorities in India under Narendra Modi’s watch, while Israel has been abusing the rights of Palestinian Muslims for the past seven decades.

The Foreign Office has rejected Washington’s “unilateral and politically motivated pronouncement”. For Pakistan, it is essential that a knee-jerk reaction is avoided.

While political considerations may well be behind the listing, there is little doubt that much more can be done to make this country a more welcoming place for

religious minorities. For example, while Aasia Bibi may have been acquitted, she is still not a 'free' citizen.

To avoid getting placed on such lists, we need to make improvements on the legal plane, as well as on a societal level, to create an atmosphere of tolerance and communal harmony.

The FO should engage with Washington and ask the State Department for further clarification regarding what can be done to remove this country from the list.

The US should also realise that, instead of tarring states in this manner, it should engage on the diplomatic level to address any concerns it may have.

Washington and Islamabad must coordinate on the issue of religious freedom instead of indulging in an ugly exchange of public mud-slinging.

A hurdle removed

FINALLY, there seems to be a ray of hope for the Karachi Circular Railway, with the main hurdle between the decades-old plan and its implementation being removed.

On Tuesday, heavy earth-moving machinery began demolishing unauthorised constructions on the KCR land and faced little resistance from the dispossessed.

The Japanese had walked away in frustration on this very issue. Like many other international aid agencies and consortiums, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency had committed itself to everything the KCR needed for its revival — technical help and financial aid — and received approval from the Pakistani side.

Its plan included a circular railway that also ran partly underground and a bit elevated. All they wanted was the removal of encroachments that had developed over the KCR land after it was wound up in the 1970s.

The variety of encroachments is bewildering: shops, eateries, auto workshops, butchers' kiosks and bustling furniture markets.

Because they had been there for decades, their owners had developed ownership syndromes and were unwilling to give up what became prime land.

For political reasons, provincial governments didn't feel like annoying their voters and looked the other way.

However, let's note, one key factor in the KCR imbroglio was the absence of political will.

If the political leadership were determined to give a comfortable mass transit system to one of the world's biggest cities, the encroachments could have been removed.

Thanks to the Supreme Court, the KCR tracks — in some cases lying buried under tonnes of debris and earth — will soon be available for what they were meant for.

But this is not the end of the story. A greater challenge lies before the federal and provincial governments, since the KCR is now part of CPEC.

Involving as it does Islamabad, the PPP-run Sindh government and Pakistan's CPEC partner, the KCR project requires trilateral cooperation.

Hopefully, technical problems will not lead to bureaucratic bickering, and further delaying the completion of what is indeed a vital component of urban life.

Impasse resolved

BETTER sense has prevailed, a welcome decision has been taken, and now the current parliament should quickly turn to its core legislative and oversight responsibilities.

The impasse in parliament has been broken with the PTI government bowing to parliamentary norms and agreeing to install Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

According to media reports, the PML-N has agreed to form a sub-committee that will examine expenditures by the previous PML-N federal government,

separating Mr Sharif from scrutiny of public spending by the party that he is now the president of.

Also read: PAC impasse

It is a sensible compromise and it had been mooted early on, but Prime Minister Imran Khan was heedless of parliamentary norms and wrongly viewed necessary parliamentary cooperation with the opposition as a sign of collusion with previous political governments that he fiercely opposed.

Nevertheless, now that Mr Khan has acquiesced and the PML-N has accepted the compromise of a PAC sub-committee, parliament must quickly turn to notifying National Assembly committees and the government should take up its legislative and reforms agenda.

If parliament is to take up its core legislative and oversight responsibilities, there will need to be a change in approach to parliament by both the government and the opposition.

While the PAC chairmanship impasse prevented most parliamentary work from being taken up over the past four months, it has also been apparent that the opposition is all too willing to disrupt parliamentary proceedings by staging frequent walkouts.

Certainly, the onus for keeping proceedings on track is on the treasury benches, but the numbers in the current National Assembly have given the opposition significant clout — by staging walkouts and pointing out the lack of quorum, the opposition can virtually disrupt proceedings at will. That ought to change going forward, unless they are compelling reasons for the opposition to protest.

On the government's part, a change in attitude is needed. The bruising style of politics seemingly preferred by Prime Minister Khan and the overheated rhetoric PTI ministers and parliamentarians frequently use have combined to create an ill-advised and unsavoury atmosphere inside parliament. There is a need for the PTI to ratchet down the political tensions inside and outside parliament.

Finally, if parliament is to be more effective, it will need better stewardship by the custodians of the two houses. Speaker of the National Assembly Asad Qaiser has commendably sought to break the impasse in the PAC, but he has yet to stamp his authority on the National Assembly. A firm but fair hand is needed in the speaker's role if parliament is to be kept on track.

All civilian political sides ought to keep front and centre the goal of strengthening parliament.

A strengthened, effective, well-functioning parliament will go some way to increasing the space for civilians in the constitutional, democratic framework.

Curbs on media

AFTER some uncertainty engendered by contrary messages in the first few months of its tenure, the PTI government's intentions towards the media are becoming more apparent. And it is a disheartening scenario for anyone who believes in the freedom of the press and the people's right to information. According to reports, the Voice of America's Urdu and Pashto websites have been blocked in Pakistan. While the Pashto website had been blocked some months back, the Urdu one too has become inaccessible since last week. The ban, according to a VoA official, came on the heels of coverage by the international news organisation of a rally by the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in KP. The VoA's English website quotes Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry as saying that the action was taken on account of "false and prejudiced reporting" by the news source, which he alleged was promoting a single narrative while ignoring the many positive developments in the country.

Nothing could be further from the PTI government's announcement early in its tenure that it had lifted censorship from state-run media outlets; that implied promise of a state willing to brook a free media has clearly proved to be a false dawn. In fact, the information minister's statement is one that the most repressive regimes in the world use as justification to silence public debate, strangle independent thought, and impose a one-dimensional worldview upon their people. It is deeply unfortunate that a government that claims to have come into power through elections they have won fair and square, with the will of the people exercising their right of franchise, could resort to such blatant censorship. The media is rightly seen as a pillar of democracy; what else but a free press can act as a watchdog of the public interest? Instead, the media is being pushed to the wall, and journalists who dare ask inconvenient questions, who refuse to be silent in the face of injustice, are demonised as being anti-state. A government that truly wants to do its duty by the people should welcome scrutiny of its

processes and decisions, for in their absence, corruption and abuse of power would inevitably thrive. Propaganda — or what is perceived to be propaganda — is undesirable from wherever it emanates, but it must be countered through well-reasoned argument rather than paranoia worthy of a totalitarian state. That does more harm to the country's image than anything else.

Hockey disaster

PAKISTAN hockey has reached a dead end. The national team's winless streak at the Hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar, India saw them crashing out in the pre-quarters — which is perhaps the final straw for a game that has experienced an ignominious downward spiral for nearly two decades now. Pakistan's ill-fated campaign at the mega event, though, has not stirred the relevant quarters, despite the pre-tournament bragging by the Pakistan Hockey Federation officials, which tells us that spectators, sponsors and broadcasters alike are discerning. For long, a string of inconsistent and pathetic performances by the national team have brought the game at a crossroads in Pakistan. However, quite obviously, for the mandarins who run hockey, the priorities lay elsewhere.

The harsh truth is that Pakistan hockey has been reduced to being a game of musical chairs, where the prolific Olympians of yesteryear have taken turns to deprive it of its former glory and funds alike. Corruption, nepotism, maladministration, absence of vision and a preponderance of power plays have been key factors in the decline of a game Pakistan so brilliantly dominated from the late 1960s to mid 1990s. Quite regretfully, instead of putting together the best-possible combinations, working out strategies and ironing out players' deficiencies, especially for competitive tournaments like the World Cup and the Asian Games, the administrators have been focussing on extending their multiple terms at the office while the governments, too, have continued to turn a blind eye. That has resulted in debilitating infrastructure, lack of stars, substandard coaches, an illogical domestic calendar, dwindling sponsorship money and an ever-shrinking national circuit. The hockey team, after having returned empty handed yet again, must now negotiate a long and arduous qualification process for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Among the many challenges at hand for Imran Khan's newly-elected regime, one of the stiffest will be to put the game of hockey

back on the right track by adopting revolutionary measures to revive the fortunes of this historic sport.

Gas crisis

THE prime minister did the right thing by intervening directly when the gas crisis spread in the country earlier this week, crippling industry and disrupting traffic across Punjab and Sindh. But he could have waited till the crisis was over to launch an inquiry into allegations against the top management of the gas distribution companies. That announcement did not need to be made at the very peak of the crisis because it fuelled a sense of panic amongst the staff of the gas companies precisely at a time when their energies needed to be focused on resolving the situation. Once supplies were restored and normalcy returned, there would have been ample time for initiating inquiries.

The petroleum minister set the standard for evading responsibility and scapegoating the companies that fall directly under his authority. He told the prime minister that the senior management of these companies provided him with incorrect information about the demand in winter and the operational status of some parts of the distribution grid. Yet the inquiry committee consists of precisely those people who for years have been drawing up gas demand projections in winter. It beggars belief how the government believes that such an inquiry committee will furnish the answers they seek, unless their response to the crisis is nothing more than finding heads to roll.

The government's response to the crisis appears to be driven by panic and scapegoating and blaming instead of fixing the problem first. Having now constituted the committee, the government should perhaps use this opportunity to look at the kinds of policy reforms that the gas sector is in urgent need of. It should also take seriously the complaints from Sindh that the Constitution's Article 158 — which gives priority access to gas to those provinces where it is being produced — is being violated. Beyond that, pricing as well as governance reforms are badly required across the sector, especially as imported LNG is all set to play a bigger role. Transmission and distribution losses are mounting, the public companies are riddled with maintenance issues, liquidity problems, financial mismanagement and much more. It is a matter of concern that they

keep asking for the Unaccounted for Gases target to be raised, and that the gas pricing structure gives them a fixed return no matter what their performance. Short, sharp crises of supply during the winter months are now becoming routine in the gas sector, and last year we saw a similar episode during which SSGC cut off supplies to K-Electric and tried to cite the absence of a gas purchase agreement as the reason. Clearly, shortages are growing, and without pricing and governance reform, the deficits will continue to trigger more such episodes. This crisis, as well as the inquiry, provide, an excellent opportunity to launch an effort at comprehensive reform.

Cut in school fee

FOR some time now, the judiciary has been expressing its concern over the fee charged by private schools. On Thursday, the Supreme Court ordered the slashing of school fee by 20pc, and directed the private educational institutions to refund 50pc of the fee charged for the summer vacations. The court was hearing a suo motu case, and directed the FBR chairman to scrutinise the tax records and accounts of private schools. During the proceedings, some audit reports had been presented before the bench, showing that surprisingly large monthly salaries were being paid to directors of certain schools, arguably at the expense of hapless parents. A judge on the bench observed that “Our intention is [...] to ensure that private schools impart quality education for an affordable fee.”

There is more than one argument here. First, as the chief justice referred to it, is the question of the ‘business of education’. It has been observed that through many tiers of the private education system, institutions can behave like cartels; while theoretically parents can always refuse to enrol their children in one or the other establishment, in reality the difference in fee structure may not be all that much when compared to another school offering the same quality — often poor — of education. Yet, under the capitalist strain of thought, should private businesses be stopped from charging whatever they like for whatever quality of services they provide? Second, as aggrieved customers have been pointing out for a couple of years now, the law can set caps on fees, but this is often not practicable given that institutions can simply charge sums under other heads. But the most important question is, why has private schooling become such a

booming business? The answer lies in the fact that the state has abdicated all responsibility when it comes to the provision of affordable and quality public-sector education to Pakistan's children. Even as the population has grown, no commensurate increase has been witnessed in the number of public-sector educational institutions in the country. Added to this is the fact that standards in public schools have fallen so much over the years that they do little to inspire the confidence of parents who then enrol their children in private schools. If the state plans to curtail this business of education, it will need to revive its own moribund educational institutions.

Yemen peace talks

AFTER several days of parleys in Sweden, the principal belligerents in the Yemeni civil war — the Aden-based government and the Houthi rebels that control Sana'a — have, under UN auspices, decided to call a truce and end hostilities in the key port of Hodeidah.

Moreover, 'humanitarian corridors' may also be opened to allow access to the city of Taiz. For the beleaguered people of Yemen, though the truce may not spell the end of this disastrous war, the agreement does hold out the hope that such small steps may eventually lead to a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Yemen war a 'living hell' for children: Unicef

For over three years, the Yemeni people have had to deal with death, disease and starvation, much of it caused by the ruinous Saudi-led and Western-backed campaign to push back the Iran-allied Houthis.

Hodeidah is important as much of the aid meant for Yemenis flows through it. It is hoped that both sides will honour the truce and allow humanitarian aid and supplies to freely reach those who need it most.

Moreover, the external actors who support their respective Yemeni proxies must make an extra effort to prevent a flare-up.

The lesson that has emerged from the peace talks in Sweden is that a peaceful end to this crisis lies with the Yemeni protagonists themselves.

The global community and regional states should use their influence to facilitate a negotiated settlement, rather than fan the flames of war. Though it may sound trite, only a Yemeni-led, Yemeni-owned solution can work.

However, those external actors who have played a key role in destroying the country through a devastating war and cruel blockade should now reach into their deep pockets and give generously to rebuild Yemen and rehabilitate its people. The Gulf Arabs must play a leading role in financing Yemen's reconstruction.

As for the Houthis and their foes, the Yemeni government, the world will be watching them closely to see whether the Hodeidah truce can be expanded into a wider countrywide peace.

Revisiting 1971

IT is a date which will live in subcontinental infamy: Dec 16, 1971. On this day, the dream of Partition was violently broken and the new, independent country of Bangladesh was born. Pakistan has suffered greatly in more recent times: the Taliban insurgency was the greatest existential threat to state and society since the secession of Bangladesh; and a fifth Balochistan insurgency may be low level in intensity, but is still the longest running in history. Yet, 1971 and the events leading up to it were a cataclysm of incomparable proportions for undivided Pakistan. And perhaps most dispiritingly for modern-era, post-1971 secession Pakistan, there has been a continuing effort to shield the public from the unvarnished, authenticated truths of the war of secession and a wilful failure to apply the lessons of that devastating conflict to Balochistan and the erstwhile tribal districts that have witnessed terrible violence in the first two decades of the 21st century.

If the 1971 war and the events leading up to it are to be widely understood in Pakistan, it is necessary that the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report be fully declassified by the state. Indeed, before and since assuming public high office, Prime Minister Imran Khan has stressed the need for greater transparency and the people's right to information. Mr Khan could make a signal contribution to national history by fully declassifying the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report and also making public more recent reports such as that of the Abbottabad

Commission. All successful, progressive, people-oriented democracies fearlessly examine national failures and debacles, and no matter the wrenching conclusions, strive to learn from them and apply their lessons to avoid or resolve future conflicts. Certainly, India played a role in the secession of Bangladesh and there was an information war of sorts that was also fought at the time. But outright propaganda and facile explanations ought not to contaminate a deeper understanding of a complex set of factors that led to the loss of one half of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.

Unquestionably, East Pakistan was unfairly treated by West Pakistan for much of the quarter century that the two wings were part of the same country. The reluctance of the political and military leadership in present-day Pakistan to abide by the results of the 1970 general election also helped accelerate the crisis. And while arguably Mujibur Rahman and his supporters could have done more to seek a non-violent political settlement after the general election, the stubbornness of West Pakistan's leaders more than matched that in the eastern wing. Without the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report and serious, fair-minded scholarship, it is not easy to make a historically accurate assessment. But this much is clear: lessons from the past ought to be learned if the conflicts of the present are to be durably resolved.

Moody's and Fitch

TWO separate credit rating agencies have released their assessments of Pakistan's economy in back-to-back releases, and they are both saying more or less the same thing: despite some steps taken by the government, the economy continues to drift towards crisis.

Contrary to the assertion of the finance minister that Pakistan is now in the clear regarding its external financing requirements, both agencies point to rising external debt and falling foreign exchange reserves as the key threats to the economy.

Both agencies see the growth rate falling between 4.2pc and 4.7pc this year, and both agree that an improved security environment and infrastructure investments made by the previous governments will support growth in the medium term.

They also praise the government's ambitious reform agenda, but point to significant "implementation challenges", effectively saying that making good on promises will be a lot more difficult. Moody's reaffirmed the country's rating but Fitch actually downgraded it by one notch.

Fitch also explicitly says an IMF programme will help the government's chances of improving its rating, because it would help unlock financial inflows from multilateral lenders and global capital markets.

Despite the government's best efforts to put a positive spin on its efforts to stabilise the markets thus far, it seems the markets remain sceptical and that far more action is going to be required in the weeks and months to come.

It seems the government developed cold feet at the very outset of the stabilisation programme, and is counting far too much on help from a few 'friendly countries', instead of taking a cold hard look at the policy reforms required to put the economy on a sustainable footing.

The ratings agencies, the debt markets and the State Bank all seem to be pointing towards the need for further stabilisation, and all seem to be asking about some sort of policy direction or a transformative vision for the economy.

Friendly countries can pull the economy from the brink for the moment, but they cannot advance reforms in a way that would ensure it does not fall back into the abyss. Only the government can do that.

Unfortunately for the latter, there is no painless and easy road towards achieving this objective. The road of reform is hard, but it must be walked if the PTI is to deliver on any of its commitments.

Brutal teachers

THE video footage of young children being beaten in a madressah in Hyderabad has justifiably drawn condemnation. The perpetrator, a religious studies teacher who is also a police employee, has been arrested since the circulation of the video on social media. He was discovered beating his young charges for skipping classes by a citizen with a camera. The severity of the punishment can be

gauged by the anguish writ large on the face of one of the young students who was lashed by his teacher. The apparent calmness with which the teacher in the video is beating his young charges and his curt response to the admonishing calls for him to stop are nothing short of chilling; they indicate that for him it is perhaps a routine exercise in disciplining children. Is it any wonder that the young boys sent to such a place of learning would want to stay away?

The teacher's sense of security is eerie — it is the kind that is often on display when those accused of administering corporal punishment are confronted. The ultimate responsibility lies with the law enforcers. But, whereas the police and other members of the prosecution team must play their due role in curbing such punishment, others must also do their bit. Quite often, cruel teachers have the permission of the parents of young students to use methods that would be unacceptable in any civilised society. This is perhaps one of the reasons why society is hardly bothered about giving the issue much thought, let alone trying to address it. Such attitudes weaken the case for reform after the initial flurry of emotional statements. This recorded instance in the Hyderabad madressah must not be allowed to fade from memory. It should mark the start of a campaign for rooting out punishment in schools by giving perpetrators the message that the state will not tolerate their brutality towards young children under any circumstances, and that they, and not their young charges, will be severely dealt with for their actions.

War on vox populi

GIVEN the hopes engendered by a decade of uninterrupted civilian rule in Pakistan, the reality is all the more sobering.

Behind the veneer of democracy, what we are witnessing today is a steady erosion of the values that define a system based on the will of the people.

The latest manifestation of this pattern was revealed on Thursday in Twitter's biannual report.

According to the document, between January and June 2018, the government reported 3,004 profiles to the social networking site for allegedly "inciting

violence” and “spreading hate material”, and sent requests seeking the removal of 243 accounts.

By contrast, during the six months immediately preceding, it reported only 674 accounts to Twitter and made 75 removal requests.

The unprecedented volume of such actions so far this year means Pakistan ranks third highest globally in the number of accounts which were either reported or were the subject of requests for removal in 2018.

That Russia and Turkey, hardly bastions of individual liberty, precede us on this list is an indication of the direction in which we are headed.

Certainly, hate speech or incitement to violence cannot be condoned and is rightly regulated.

However, there is a clear and indisputable difference between actions that protect the fundamental rights of the people, and those that aim to insulate state institutions from accountability.

There has been for some time a relentless campaign to muzzle diversity of political opinion in Pakistan, specifically opinion that strays across red lines and from the approved narrative.

Individuals and organisations deemed not compliant enough are vilified as being ‘anti-state’, a catchphrase beloved of sundry despotic regimes.

Thousands of people, even bloggers, have been disappeared; some remain missing years later.

The media has a stark choice: comply or be prepared to see its revenue streams dry up.

Recalcitrant journalists are subjected to physical violence, arrests on flimsy pretexts, etc.

The war on information and independent thought has now apparently expanded to include Twitter users as well.

The PTI government has not even attempted to distance itself from such autocratic measures; indeed, it has embraced them with gusto.

Its ministers have justified the blocking of news websites, glossed over the throttling of the media and ignored continued abductions of people.

Nor did the government address the prolonged and unexplained uncertainty over the status of INGOs in Pakistan.

Scores of them have been finally forced to wrap up their partnerships with NGOs providing essential services to local communities.

Such is the paranoia prevailing at the moment that it disregards people's needs, and resorts to sowing confusion as an instrument of control.

However, the people of Pakistan, by their very history and ethnic diversity, cannot be straitjacketed into a one-size-fits-all concept of nationalism.

Any appearance of conformity, even if achieved, will be deceptive and fleeting.

This country cannot afford another experiment in social engineering.

Education emergency

A REPORT in this paper on Saturday highlighted the problems of a government school in a village in Swat district. At the severely understaffed Malok Abad Primary School in Mingora, some 700 boys are crammed into six classrooms, while younger students are made to study out in the open — in the courtyard or the rooftop — as infrastructure damaged in the 2005 earthquake still sits unrepaired. Two teachers rotate between four classrooms. And there are no toilets. This is the same district that made international headlines a decade ago when the TTP took control and banned girls' education — one of its first casualties in its war against the state. This is the same district where Malala Yousafzai, today the global face for girl's education in the world, lived and went to school. And yet, years after the state regained its territory and militancy was pushed back — and despite increased funding by the previous (and current) KP government, as well as the introduction of technological innovation such as the biometric system to increase teacher and student attendance — public education in KP remains in dire straits. The challenges of a young and rising population add to the burden, as there are simply not enough resources to accommodate

everyone. By some estimates, Pakistan's population would have swollen to 240m by 2030. And while it may be unfair to paint all government schools with the same broad brush, lumping them into one entity, the school in Mingora does present something of a microcosm for the state of government schools in the country: underfunded, ill-planned and understaffed.

Another recent report states that 1,800 state-run primary, middle and high schools in Balochistan have been found to be nonfunctional. Another 2,200 schools are without shelter and 5,000 primary schools across Balochistan are being run by single teachers. In Sindh, the provincial education department informed the Sindh High Court that 11,850 primary schools out of 38,132 in the public sector could possibly be declared 'not viable' after a proposed assessment of low- and no-enrolment schools is conducted. This is just the data on the state of primary schools — secondary and high schools are even scarcer. While politicians bicker amongst themselves, indulging in either a short-sighted blame game or self-praise, the state of public education continues to remain one of the most neglected sectors in the country.

New airport woes

MONTHS after the new Islamabad international airport was inaugurated, the transport and other infrastructure at the airport continues to be a problem, in particular inconveniencing many of the staff and workers who rely on public transport for commuting to and from the premises. A report in this newspaper has revealed that with the metro bus route to the airport still under construction, transport authorities have been unable to persuade private bus operators to run their buses on two routes between the airport and Rawalpindi. Transporters have not only balked at the special rates that would be applicable on the two bus routes, but have also complained of a lack of parking space at the new airport. It would appear that the previous PML-N government was in such haste to inaugurate the new airport before the end of its term that it did not take into consideration even basic issues, eg how the staff and workers in the airport would be able to commute to their workplace.

The transport woes in the new airport are arguably symptomatic of a broader approach to development and mega infrastructure projects that often ignore the

needs of middle- and working-class individuals. The new Islamabad airport is branded as a symbol of 21st-century Pakistan and is meant to leave behind the reputation of the previous airport as one of the most passenger unfriendly in the world. But the transport needs of the very people that the new airport depends on to function and run smoothly have not been catered for. Meanwhile, anti-encroachment drives in various parts of the country have suddenly uprooted small businesses and in some cases destroyed homes, often in the name of allegedly visually improving neighbourhoods without heed to economic costs. Surely, the federal, provincial and local governments can and must do better.

Never-ending brutality in IHK

THE killings were brutal, unacceptable and violated international law, but at this stage ought they be termed shocking? Such is the calculated brutality and political mindlessness in India-held Kashmir that the further escalation of violence — security forces shooting live ammunition into protesters at the site of an alleged encounter with Kashmiri fighters resulting in the deaths of at least seven civilians — cannot be regarded as a criminal aberration or a sudden catastrophe. It is much more.

Indeed, the strong reaction by the OIC has indicated that the killings in the Pulwama district of IHK could have rippling consequences across the international community.

As reported in the Indian media itself, five of the at least seven civilians killed by Indian security forces on Saturday were teenagers; the other two were in their late 20s and reported to be the sole breadwinners of their families.

The tragedy of youths killed, maimed, injured, disappeared, tortured and arbitrarily detained in IHK is known to anyone willing to observe India's numerous and repressive policies in IHK.

But is it not time for the international community to take a genuine interest in what is being done in India-occupied Kashmir in the name of security, and to hold the security forces and government of India to account?

Until now, the world community has largely been willing to ignore the plight of the people in IHK.

When the Pakistani state attempts to draw attention to the violence and repression, it is often met with scepticism and questions about this country's own human rights record. But that is whataboutism of the highest order.

Kashmir is a disputed region and recognised as such by the UN; Pakistan has a legitimate interest in what happens in the whole of the Kashmir region.

Moreover, while problems do exist inside Pakistan and are often highlighted by the media and political class here, the state-led repression in IHK is undeniable; has escalated; and appears to be an attempt to change political realities in the disputed region through state-led violence.

The international community must take note not just of the recent violence in IHK, but the overall pattern of illegal control that the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted to extend in the disputed region.

True, India is a rising economic power with enormous amounts of defence and infrastructure expenditure. International powers both big and small are drawn to new markets for their products, and India is a market that they cannot afford to ignore. But at what cost?

The international order championed by Western powers and most developed countries is ostensibly rooted in human and political rights that India's appalling actions in IHK are actively negating.

The world's attention must turn towards the violence India is perpetrating in IHK. The international community has leverage with India; it must use it as a moral imperative at this time.

Stabilisation measures

THE last few days have seen a flurry of news reports about Pakistan's ongoing talks with the IMF. In the latest such report, the finance minister has confirmed that a document of economic and financial policies for stabilisation measures has been drawn up and sent to the Fund. This news is welcome.

The confirmation comes only days before the Fund breaks for Christmas and New Year, so it seems like the government has rushed to get its side of the commitments in before that happens, probably to ensure that the request for a programme can be placed before the board in a meeting scheduled in mid-January.

If all goes smoothly, Pakistan could be on its 13th Fund programme in the opening months of 2019, which is nothing to celebrate but that still provides the government a chance to fulfil its promise to make this the country's last IMF programme.

What is new in this case are the specific performance benchmarks on revenue generation, according to early reports.

Past IMF programmes have stipulated a fiscal deficit ceiling and left it up to the government to decide whether to comply via expenditure cuts or revenue increases.

This time round, it seems the Fund wants to see specific improvements in revenue generation, and if early reports are true, then the government has a steep hill to climb to raise taxes by 2.5pc of GDP over the course of the programme.

There is little doubt that Pakistan needs to elevate its tax-to-GDP ratio, but now that it appears that the government will be bound specifically to this commitment, it bears repeating that the best way to accomplish this is by broadening the tax base and encouraging a culture of compliance, rather than simply squeezing those already within the net.

In the months to come, should the government embark upon the steep climb it has committed to the IMF, there will be temptation to resort to gimmickry to increase the burden on compliant taxpayers. Broadening the tax base is easier said than done, and the three previous governments all met with substantial failure on this front (a few partial successes notwithstanding).

The PTI government has promised that it will succeed where everybody else failed, and tax reform provides the perfect ground upon which to demonstrate its commitment to this promise.

Polio: another blow

IT was supposed to be polio's final stand. Anti-polio campaigners were optimistic that this winter's drive — the final door-to-door anti-polio vaccination campaign of the year — would also be the last in eradicating the virus from Pakistan once and for all. The prime minister restated his commitment to a polio-free Pakistan in a meeting on Nov 9 with provincial chief ministers, chief secretaries and members of the military in attendance. Starting from Dec 10, the countrywide campaign kicked off with the aim of administering drops to 38.72m children under the age of five — 19.2m in Punjab, 8.9m in Sindh, 6.8m in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2.53m in Balochistan, 0.347m in Islamabad, 0.237m in Gilgit-Baltistan, and 0.7m in Azad Kashmir. The campaign was in coordination with Afghanistan to ensure children on the move between the borders were also administered drops.

But then came the news of the death of an infant in Haripur. She had been given polio drops on Nov 30. According to an inquiry report, she died of pneumonia on Dec 2, but a social media campaign blaming polio vaccines for the child's demise had already taken off. Owing to the widely shared propaganda, there has now been a reported 25pc increase in vaccine refusals in Islamabad alone. Shockingly, many of the refusals came from educated, middle-class households. Once again, efforts to eradicate polio have been hampered by sinister disinformation campaigns and the paranoia of uninformed minds. Not only does it risk the health and well-being of other children, it also points to another disturbing trend in our society (or perhaps all modern, technologically driven societies): the spread of fake news and disinformation. It is disheartening to note that despite all the progress made over the years, despite all the attempts at educating the public, and despite all the lives of polio workers and security personnel tragically lost in the state's efforts to eradicate polio, we are still far from reaching the goal of a polio-free Pakistan.

Educating girls

A RECENT report from the seven districts that make up former Fata presented a grim picture of the state of girls' education in KP. Nearly 79pc of girls drop out in the early years, while 50pc drop out in the middle and secondary years.

The neglected region is only now being 'mainstreamed' with the KP merger, so perhaps these figures are not particularly shocking. And while it certainly adds to the burden of a rising population and out-of-school children in the province, the lack of investment in girl's education isn't a KP-specific problem.

'Shall I feed my daughter or educate her?': The abysmal state of girls' education in Pakistan

Article 25-A of the Constitution makes it clear that the government has to provide free education to all children from the age of five to 16. But many continue to be overlooked by the state.

While the private sector and public-private initiatives provide education in areas and to people the state cannot reach, there is a significant percentage that still gets left out. According to HRW, nearly 32pc of primary-school-age girls are out of school, and only 13pc are still in school by ninth grade.

Education: 23m broken promises

There are several reasons for this, all interconnected. While education and textbooks may be free of cost, there are other expenses such as admission fees, school bags, uniforms, shoes, stationery, etc. In households with several children, the added costs overburden poor families. Private school, even if 'low cost', are out of the question for this group.

Explore: Why attempts to reform Pakistani education fail

The second issue is transport. Schools are often at a long walking distance, and parents may not be able to afford rickshaws to pick and drop their children.

While the vast majority of public schools in Pakistan are at the primary level, secondary schools are at even greater distances. So even if they complete primary education, they are unable to study further due to logistical constraints.

Linked to the issue of transport is safety. Parents cannot always accompany children, and when the girl child hits puberty or begins to 'look' mature, she (rightly) fears harassment and abduction. Tied to these fears are notions of 'honour', but these are often a cover for legitimate security threats or attempts at masking poverty.

Another reason for losing interest in education is the presence of apathetic teachers, who may turn a blind eye to bullying or administer corporal punishment and be guilty of discrimination.

Girls, especially the eldest daughters, are kept behind to help out with household chores or take care of younger siblings. Seen as an economic 'burden' or just another mouth to feed, they are then married off and forced to be mothers when they are still children themselves.

When parents see educated family members unable to get jobs in an insecure market, they are less likely to invest in education for their daughters. The cycle of ignorance continues.

Meddling in US polls

TWO reports commissioned by the US Senate Intelligence Committee have revealed the extent to which Russia attempted to interfere in and influence the result of the 2016 US presidential election. The reports, drawn up by private cybersecurity firms, claim that Russia used every major social media platform to launch in effect a propaganda war meant to sway the election in favour of then Republican candidate Donald Trump and against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. The presumption is that Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted the hawkish Ms Clinton defeated and an untested, inexperienced Mr Trump in the US presidency so as to allow Russia to continue with its expansionist policies. While it may never be known to what extent the Russian online propaganda affected votes cast by Americans, the fact that Mr Trump eked out an electoral college victory winning a handful of states by a total of a mere tens of thousands among more than 130m votes cast nationwide suggests that the propaganda war may have had a decisive effect.

At least two points need to be made here. First, while the Russian interference must be condemned as unlawful, the so-called hacking of the US election is a high-tech version of what big powers have done in many parts of the world for generations. Indeed, as commentators on the Trump-friendly Fox News have often pointed out in defence of Mr Trump's victory, it is the US itself that for generations has interfered in elections abroad and perpetrated regime change in the name of national security in far-flung areas of the world. Perhaps as the US has awakened to the democratic threat that misuse of social media platforms can pose, it will reconsider its own conduct abroad. Second, the weaknesses that Russia has exploited to manipulate public sentiment abroad rightly call for a re-examination of how global social media platforms function, but the flaws that Russia has exposed and used should not become a reason for imposing anti-democratic and anti-freedom-of-expression curbs in countries across the world. True, the internet has revolutionised how individuals access and consume information, including political speech, and the liberating ideals of social media platforms have exposed problems both in how the mega tech companies operate and how societies can be manipulated. But the answer must not be automatic and regressive censorship or state control. Indeed, now that the US is animated about the Russian threat, progressive solutions may be forthcoming.

Rogue security guards

FOOTAGE from outside Parliament House on Monday showed Samaa TV cameraman Syed Wajid Ali lying prone on the ground, having been pushed by one of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's personal guards as his cavalcade was exiting the premises. What followed was gruesome and entirely without restraint, with a guard ruthlessly rushing to kick the already incapacitated cameraman in the face, in what could have proved to be a fatal injury. And while senior leaders of the PML-N were quick to offer apologies and guarantees that those responsible would be punished, Mr Sharif qualified his earlier statement yesterday by claiming that the cameraman had 'hit' a member of his security detail first — never mind that this could have easily happened by accident as the crowd of media workers converged on his vehicle — insinuating that this was somehow a mitigating factor for such a violent reaction.

Mr Sharif's ambivalence, though disappointing, is hardly surprising; it is deeply indicative of the sense of entitlement with which this country's political and economic elites navigate public spaces, cloistered by the personal security they either extract from public resources or procure through private means. The spectacle of private security protocols running roughshod on the streets, brandishing their weapons in order to grant their patrons the petty privilege of bypassing traffic is depressingly commonplace. And, often, it is those shouting the loudest against this form of VIP culture who are the first to embrace it if their own fortunes improve. When it comes to enabling the predatory behaviour of arms of hire, there are many levels of responsibility, but ultimately, it is the elite-biased state that is accountable for cultivating a climate of 'might is right'. By failing to guarantee the majority of the population the right of public safety, it has allowed the worst impulses of private armed guards to flourish — at the cost of rendering ordinary citizens even more insecure. The appalling assault in Islamabad requires more than due process — it demands reflection.

PM's 'welfare state'

THE context in which the idea has been mooted most recently is revealing. Prime Minister Imran Khan's call to establish a welfare state is a laudable enough ambition. A modern, progressive, people-oriented state is surely the direction in which the country ought to be headed. Yet, Mr Khan's latest call for the establishment of a welfare state came in a meeting with a PTI MNA, Riaz Fatyana, who has earned the ire of the PTI rank and file for appearing to defend Saad Rafique, the PML-N leader ensnared in a NAB inquiry. Seemingly to demonstrate his continuing confidence and trust in Mr Fatyana, the prime minister has ordered him to draft a parliamentary bill that will make Pakistan a welfare state. Perhaps the prime minister was hoping to kill two birds with one stone: express confidence in a PTI parliamentarian under attack from within the party and kick-start the PTI's legislative agenda with a populist bill. If so, that is the prime minister's prerogative — but it still leaves unanswered the contours of the welfare state that Mr Khan wants implemented in Pakistan.

The prime minister, as reported in the media, has sought representation of all segments of society in parliament and improvements in the agriculture sector. To

the extent that Mr Khan has envisaged representation of disadvantaged groups, for example, labour or agricultural workers, in parliament, it could help shake up the parliamentary status quo. A welfare state, however, goes far beyond ideas for improving the agricultural sector. Indeed, most political ideas for improving the agricultural sector have involved inefficient subsidies and tax breaks that do little to help the poorest and most vulnerable individuals in the sector. In a meeting with PTI MNAs from D.G. Khan division on Tuesday, Mr Khan repeated his call for the creation of a welfare state, but this time referenced the abundant natural resources in the country. Perhaps Mr Khan ought to consider a more structured approach to the creation of a welfare state.

At a minimum, a welfare state is about the provision of basic health, education and justice. It can quickly be expanded to take into account adequate housing, mass transport networks and income support. Within the constitutional structure of Pakistan, even a barebones welfare state would cover responsibilities by all three tiers of government. And every service has a cost — the critical other side of basic service delivery being the state's ability to fund those services. It is welcome that even rhetorically a prime minister is concerned with the plight of all Pakistanis, especially the most vulnerable. But if Mr Khan intends to translate his rhetoric into delivery, a more purposeful approach to governance and reforms is needed. More often than not, a government that seeks to do too much ends up achieving little.

Death penalty

HUMAN rights campaigners couldn't believe their ears in the early hours of Tuesday. News got out that, along with 121 other countries, Pakistan voted in favour of a resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty at the UN General Assembly Plenary Session in New York on Monday. The remaining 35 countries voted against the resolution, while 32 others abstained. Along with Dominica, Libya and Malaysia, Amnesty reported that Pakistan had changed its vote from 2016. But all hopes of a miraculously changed position were dashed only a few hours later when the Foreign Office issued a statement saying that the UN had made a 'mistake', and Pakistan was, in fact, one of the countries that had voted against the resolution. Pakistan's ambassador to the UN also tweeted

a clarification: “In accordance with its consistent policy, voted against the General Assembly resolution calling for a moratorium on execution, with a view to abolishing the death penalty. The vote was inaccurately recorded due to a technical hitch. The record has been put straight with the UN.”

Regardless of who should be blamed for the ‘technical error’, Pakistan has made a bigger mistake by voting against the resolution, playing with the lives of thousands on death row. Pakistan hands out the highest form of punishment for 27 offences. Since 2004, over 4,500 people have been sentenced to death by hanging in the country. Save for the period between 2008 and 2013 (barring one execution in 2012), when a moratorium on the death penalty existed, hundreds have been placed on the death list because of the collective failure of state and society. Since the lifting of the moratorium, Pakistan has carried out almost 500 executions. These are largely nameless, faceless people in the public consciousness, condemned for crimes they may or may not have committed. The criminal justice system — in particular the military courts that lack any semblance of transparency — is not without grave faults. Flawed investigations as apparent in contradictory reports, ‘confessions’ obtained under duress and unsubstantiated evidence are just a few aspects of the defects inherent in the system. Crucially, it is the poor, who have no choice but to depend on substandard legal defence, that are made to inordinately suffer at the hands of this imperfect system that creates more victims in the name of ‘peace and justice’. Capital punishment is irrevocable and has no place in any society. It must be abolished.

Back to Basant

HOPES for the resumption of the Basant festival have been revived — though with strings attached. The Punjab chief minister is out to prove his mettle and has, through his culture minister, unveiled plans to organise Basant in Lahore in the second week of February. At the same time, the provincial government has set up a committee that will come up with an effective strategy on how to deal with the (negative) fallout of the kite-flying contests. The enthusiasts will be waiting for a green signal from the committee before they go into preparation mode at full throttle. The festival had been on hold for the last decade or so. Having viciously been opposed in the name of religion and prudish values, the

ban came in the wake of death and injury caused by the strings of the kites. Ever since, there have been efforts, including legal cases by supporters of a free, flourishing culture, to somehow get the festival back. Each winter, the debate has picked up and conjured up all kinds of scenarios about how the festival can be restored to the inhabitants of Lahore, and to all others who had come to celebrate the event in their own neighbourhoods on days of their choice.

Meanwhile, despite extended debates on the subject, no solution was found to the injuries, sometimes fatal, caused by the string thought by many to be essential to the kite-flying contests. In the event, it deprived the enthusiasts of the festival of Basant. And not just that; a total ban on kite-flying in Punjab was also imposed. Even now, amid all the happy sentiments regarding the possible return of the festival, a word of caution is thrown in about how it could all turn out to be a disaster. A successful holding of the Basant festival could surely bring some distinction to a government that is striving to establish its own identity against the legacy of the long rule by the PML-N that preceded it.

Pulling out of Syria — & Afghanistan?

IT may be the right decision made for the wrong reason and executed in the wrong way. The reality of Donald Trump's presidency may be stranger than fiction, but Mr Trump's latest sudden decision — to immediately withdraw all US troops from Syria — may be a case of reverse wag the dog.

Besieged at home by an avalanche of investigations and convictions of key aides who served during Mr Trump's campaign for the presidency, the US leader took his own administration by surprise by tweeting that the American military campaign in Syria has ended.

In doing so, Mr Trump, who campaigned on a militarily strong but isolationist foreign policy, may be trying to appease his political base, which is roiled by lack of progress on building a wall along the US border with Mexico and sundry other crises that his presidency has been embroiled in.

Explore: Game changer or not? A year of America's Afghan plan

Nevertheless, the decision to withdraw precipitously from Syria is likely to have far-reaching consequences — and may even impact the ongoing incipient dialogue process in Afghanistan.

The effects of Mr Trump's shock decision to withdraw all US troops from Syria will likely increase the anxiety of the Afghan government and that of regional and international actors.

While the US president appeared to want to project strength in the fight against the militant Islamic State group — perhaps in part to differentiate himself from his predecessor Barack Obama's policy — a centrepiece of the Trump campaign was to end the wasteful wars that the US was fighting abroad. And while the US president was persuaded early on to maintain and slightly increase the US military presence in Afghanistan, it has long been apparent that Mr Trump has no interest in or appetite for prolonged military engagement in Afghanistan on his presidential watch.

That impatience has appeared to manifest itself in intensive American diplomacy in recent months to directly engage the Afghan Taliban in preliminary talks that could pave the way for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan.

Yet, as the most recent talks in the UAE this week have demonstrated, the Afghan Taliban are resistant to engaging with the Afghan government and are seeking the maximum concessions from the Americans, such as prisoner releases and a withdrawal timetable for foreign troops, without necessarily offering much in return.

For Pakistan, the challenge has long been to nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table for what must ultimately be an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process. But Mr Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria could have the effect of persuading the Taliban that they simply need to stall a little while longer before Mr Trump reaches the same impatient conclusion in Afghanistan.

A president who often seems disconnected from the policies of the rest of his administration is a perplexing scenario for the world to navigate, but Pakistan ought to remain focused on the goal of a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan.

‘No-fly’ lists

THE Exit Control List has a chequered history in this country. Though it is supposed to be a legal tool to prevent individuals suspected of committing crimes from fleeing Pakistan, it has far too often been used as an ugly stick to beat political opponents and critics of the government with and to prevent them from freely travelling abroad. However, it has recently emerged that apart from the ECL, there are other lists too that have been designed to prevent people from leaving the country. One of these is the FIA’s Provisional National Identification List; the existence of the list came to light during a meeting of the Senate standing committee on human rights on Wednesday. The new list, created 10 months ago as per FIA officials, is designed to ‘bypass’ the ECL. In fact, the PNIL was used to prevent two MNAs — Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir — from flying to the UAE recently. Apart from the PNIL, there are other lists, senators were told, used by the security apparatus to restrict people’s movement, including the Red List, Black List and the Watch List.

Clearly, there is some justification for no-fly lists; for example, those accused of grave crimes can be prevented from leaving the country. However, this does not mean that the state should have carte blanche to put whoever it feels on its no-fly lists. As Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari stated at the Senate committee meeting, “the PNIL is arbitrary, cloak-and-dagger, and opaque”. Indeed, there should be one list to prevent suspects from fleeing abroad, and the process of placement on it ought to be transparent and open to appeal. It is ironic that in many cases extremists and hatemongers are allowed to travel abroad, while the freedom to travel for lawmakers and human rights activists is curtailed on flimsy grounds. The federal government should do away with these multiple no-fly lists, and make a very strong case legally if a citizen is to be stopped from flying out for criminal reasons. For too long, the ECL has been misused by the powers that be. Now, it seems that newer and more opaque lists are also in existence. If the PTI-led government is serious about its mantra of ‘change’, then these arbitrary methods of preventing people from travelling freely without just cause must be done away with.

Drug-addicted students

WHERE there's smoke there's fire, but not necessarily a blazing inferno. One can scarcely deny that drugs are a growing menace in our society, especially among the youth, but Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Afridi's words at a recent event were overly alarmist. It was at the launch ceremony in Islamabad of a child rights training programme for the police that he said 75pc of female students and 45pc of male students in the federal capital are addicted to drugs, including crystal meth — commonly known as ice. Such an allegation strains credulity, and it was irresponsible of the minister to breezily throw out numbers without offering any evidence to back up his claim. Surely the gravity of the situation could have been credibly conveyed without trying to stoke panic. In fact, it may even make many parents think twice before sending their girls for higher education, lest they fall victim to such vices. There are already multiple challenges to arresting the female high school dropout rate in the country without adding more to the list.

That said, Mr Afridi's contention that there must be a mass awareness programme for parents to recognise the symptoms of addiction in their children is an essential aspect of what must be a multifaceted approach to addressing this social evil. Not so however, was the Sindh government's hare-brained idea earlier this year to institute mandatory drug testing for students in the province. The issue would be much more effectively tackled by cracking down on drug supply lines and, crucially, by weeding out the many law-enforcement personnel at every level who have a stake in the proceeds of this criminal racket. Young people everywhere are generally impulsive, angst-ridden and impressionable, easy targets for anyone trying to sell them a few hours of trippy escape. This is where families and educational institutes can work together to prevent students from dabbling in drugs in the first place, and to offer counselling for those wanting to break the habit.

Overpopulation: the cost of illiteracy

IT was a statement that, in the context of its direct implications, should set off alarm bells. On Thursday, in a written reply to the Senate, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training Shafqat Mahmood said that the national literacy rate had dropped from 60 to 58pc in the span of two years, a figure that is only better than Afghanistan's in this region. Unesco's Global Education Monitoring Report data, meanwhile, recorded female adult illiteracy at 63pc in 2017. The minister attributed the decrease in overall literacy to Pakistan's burgeoning population growth, which vastly outpaces the limited resources of a public education system in crisis, with approximately 25m children currently out of school. Experts have estimated that, left unchecked, Pakistan's population could grow by as much as another 30pc by 2030.

That other Muslim countries, such as Bangladesh and Iran, have successfully brought their populations' growth under control and boast significantly higher literacy rates than Pakistan, despite serious economic challenges, demonstrates that these issues have much more to do with policymakers' continuous abdication of responsibility in terms of human development. The divergent human development paths Pakistan and Bangladesh have taken since 1971 has resulted in the latter now having considerably improved social indicators, despite once being commonly associated with poverty and overpopulation. This it accomplished with early and consistent interventions, such as introducing a large-scale health worker programme, decades prior to Pakistan doing so, and public-awareness campaigns on family planning across mass media platforms. On the other hand, Pakistan's Lady Health Workers, the first point of access for reproductive health services for many underprivileged women since the 1990s, are faltering under the pressure of heavy workloads, limited resources and poor salaries. Meanwhile, efforts to promote family planning by advertising contraceptives on electronic media are consistently obstructed under the guise of 'public decency'.

The fact that Bangladesh managed to achieve almost universal primary school net enrolment by 2015, and gender parity in access to both primary and secondary education, is a significant reason why its population planning measures have succeeded. It is well established that there is a causal relationship between a girl who goes to school, even for a short while, and having

fewer children in her lifetime than a girl who doesn't. Women's empowerment in general, and girls' education in particular, is key to resolving the socioeconomic strain caused by overpopulation, and ensuring that basic service provision can rise to and keep pace with the population's needs. So, while the federal education minister's proposal to boost adult literacy is commendable, it pales in comparison to the need for women to have a proportional stake in decision-making — in family planning at the personal level, and in policy planning at the political level.

Circular debt

IT looks like debt is not the only thing that is circular in the power sector. History there also keeps going round and round in circles. The PPP government in 2009 undertook a large-scale retirement of the circular debt in its early days, in order to keep the turbines whirring, and the PML-N government began its term with one large, epic-scale retirement of all accumulated arrears in the power sector as well. Now we hear that the PTI government is similarly planning to raise up to Rs200bn through a Sukuk bond in order to retire at least a portion of the circular debt so as to avoid a potential liquidity-related shutdown. As previously, there is little alternative and the government has shown some innovative thinking in deciding upon a Sukuk issuance against assets of the distribution companies. And as before, the lurking danger is that the same circular debt will be back in a year, or perhaps two.

By now, arrears are not the only thing accumulating in the power sector. The weight of the evidence that these episodic retirements of the circular debt have little effect is also increasing. When we embarked upon this road earlier, it was with the Term Finance Certificates launched in 2009 under the stewardship of Shaukat Tarin, then finance minister. The amount was Rs89bn. Then came a swap of these TFCs with treasury bills, valued at around Rs170bn. Along the way, there were miscellaneous injections of liquidity from the budget, some valued at Rs40bn, some less. The PML-N managed to locate Rs482bn in one go from various government accounts to settle all outstanding payments at once, and did it before the end of FY2013, so the impact on the deficit was left on the previous government's outgoing year. On this basis, it was able to misleadingly

claim that it had brought the deficit down from almost 8pc of GDP to around 5pc. Regardless, by the time the party left office though, the circular debt was larger than it was when it had assumed power. Without carrying out the needed reforms, particularly in the governance of the power sector, such exercises are nothing more than palliative measures. The challenge before the PTI is clearly to bring about this reform, something the party has promised very confidently in its manifesto and in its campaign. That is when the real change will come into view.

Domestic child labour

ON Thursday, the Lahore High Court ordered the Punjab government to implement the Domestic Workers Bill, 2018, which criminalises the employment of children under the age of 15 as domestic help. Additionally, this new legislature states that the domestic workforce shall not work over the mandatory eight hours a day, except out of free will, or be paid overtime for their labour. It enforces employers to provide a 'dignified' work environment, keeping in mind workers' health and safety concerns. It forbids the use of the word 'servant' as a reference to domestic staff. And amongst several other rights and benefits, it guarantees sick and maternity leave; 10 days' paid leave for festive holidays; injury benefit; disablement pension; and survivor's pension. Subjects also have to fill out a formal letter outlining the terms and conditions of employment (including the nature of work and amount of wages) which will be sent to an inspector with jurisdiction over a specified area. No domestic worker shall be required to carry out any work other than what is specifically mentioned in the letter of employment. If anyone is caught 'employing' a child under the age of 15, they will be punished with a fine that ranges between Rs10,000 and Rs50,000, as well as a prison sentence if they are employing children under the age of 12.

The court had first ordered the government to legislate on the rights of domestic workers in 2015, but it was not followed through. If passed, the law will be the first of its kind to formalise this large, 'invisible' workforce. So far, domestic labour has fallen under the category of informal work. In the absence of clear laws, domestic workers, largely constituting women and children, were at the mercy of their employer's temperament. If finally passed by the Punjab Assembly, it will be

a major win for labour rights in the country, and help steer Pakistan in the direction of a more equitable, just and compassionate society.

Real accountability

AS the accountability net appears to tighten around the leaderships of the PML-N and the PPP, the parties are signalling that they may come together to put pressure on the PTI-led federal and provincial governments.

While a combined opposition may still be some way off, it remains the prerogative of political parties to come together on a common platform. Yet, what is it that the PPP and PML-N are agitating for? It is fairly obvious that the accountability process being carried out in the country at the moment is highly selective. While the PPP and PML-N were ruling parties over the past decade and true accountability will inevitably focus on the conduct of those who have held high office, no reasonable political observer would suggest that the ongoing accountability drive is not politically tainted.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and the federal government have not done themselves or the cause of accountability any favours by forcefully backing the current accountability drive — the PTI's fervent support for NAB, for example, has created an unfortunate impression of collusion between the government and the ostensibly independent accountability body.

Nevertheless, the PPP and PML-N approach until now has been mostly reactive and will do little to move the democratic project forward. The whiff of partisan accountability may be strong at the moment, but it also remains true that neither the PPP nor the PML-N did much to create a fair, independent and strong accountability mechanism during their last stints in office. In 10 years of elected governments, not one recognisable figure from the ranks of the PML-N or PPP were identified and punished for corruption in office by the parties themselves.

If some of the allegations of corruption are wildly exaggerated, it is also improbable in the extreme that no minister or high party official belonging to the two parties has indulged in illegal conduct or financial corruption. Ultimately, just as the constitutional disqualification clauses introduced by dictator Ziaul Haq have been weaponised against the very political parties that failed to modify or

remove these during the 18th Amendment process, the failure of the previous two governments to overhaul the process of accountability has allowed a deeply flawed accountability system to be used in a targeted manner.

Perhaps the PPP and PML-N ought to consider tabling in parliament meaningful reforms of the accountability system. The PTI government is likely to try and move ahead with its legislative agenda soon, which will require cooperation from the combined opposition. Surely, if the PPP and PML-N present sensible reforms that further the cause of accountability rather than merely shield all politicians, the PTI government would have to consider them.

A parliament in which both the government and the opposition can come together and legislate on issues of pressing national importance would be a victory for democracy itself.

SP Dawar's murder

IT is difficult to comprehend the need for such secrecy over the investigation into the abduction and murder of SP Tahir Dawar, head of Peshawar police's rural circle. Surely, the terrible fate meted out to a senior police officer at the forefront of the battle against extremism deserves to be investigated threadbare, transparently and vigorously, and the perpetrators held to account. However, despite the prime minister ordering an immediate inquiry after Mr Dawar's broken body was discovered in Afghanistan, the government now appears to be more interested in maintaining a veil of mystery over the matter. The perceived inaction has prompted some parliamentarians and rights activists to ask questions about the state's motives. On Wednesday, after urging by opposition legislators, the KP government agreed to hold an in-camera briefing for provincial lawmakers. However, no date has yet been announced.

The police official's family members sounded the alarm over his possible kidnapping from Islamabad on Oct 26, which was when they lost contact with him. Despite this, a government spokesman two days later scoffed at reports of foul play, insisting he was 'safe and sound' in Peshawar. For a senior law-enforcement official who had had multiple encounters with terrorism, had even survived a suicide attack, and for whom the battle against violent extremists was

a deeply personal one, Mr Dawar's life was always in danger. The government should have treated his family's apprehensions with the seriousness they merited. Subsequent events added to the confusion; the law-enforcement official's body was discovered just across the Torkham border with Afghanistan and attempts to bring him back home triggered a diplomatic row — reasons for which were never properly explained — between Pakistan and its neighbour. Mr Dawar's brother rejected the seven-member JIT formed to investigate the killing, on the grounds that the incident involved two countries and an international team should probe the matter. It is also well known that the slain official had expressed his support for currently unpopular political causes. Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Afridi did not help matters by saying that the case was "too sensitive" to comment on. The KP government's proposal to hold an in-camera briefing will only fuel further speculation. Such briefings are not infrequent. However, they almost always involve larger issues of national security, such as the one given to parliamentarians by the military leadership following the US raid in Abbottabad in May 2011 — not the murder of a single individual.

University official's death

THERE are a number of questions surrounding Mian Javed Ahmed's death on Friday.

The former CEO of the University of Sargodha's Lahore campus died of sudden cardiac arrest in jail; he was in detention in connection with a NAB investigation. Mr Ahmed's family has claimed he was not taken to hospital by the jail staff despite complaining of ill health on Friday morning.

There has also been an outcry after pictures of the university official's body in chains and handcuffs made it to the social and then mainstream media.

The Punjab chief minister has ordered an inquiry into the incident while NAB claims "it did not have a role" in Mr Ahmed's death.

Indeed, NAB and the Punjab jail authorities need to explain what happened in this case. In particular, answers need to be furnished regarding why Mr Ahmed's body was in chains and handcuffs.

The death of the university official in custody also raises questions about the general treatment of prisoners or those under trial in Pakistan. While at this time all we can say is that negligence by the authorities concerned may have contributed to Mr Ahmed's health condition, the truth is that the state gives scant respect to the rights of individuals undergoing trial or those already convicted.

Death in custody is not uncommon here; only last month there was an incident in which a man facing a NAB hearing died in jail. Sometimes such deaths occur due to brutal methods inflicted by the law enforcers, at other times, it is neglect of detainees' health or inhuman conditions in lock-ups and jails that causes fatalities.

While there is often talk of reforming the criminal justice system, this task will remain incomplete until those in custody are treated in a humane manner, and their fundamental rights are fully respected.

it is incumbent on the concerned provincial and federal authorities to investigate such deaths and to ensure that prisoners are not deprived of their rights.

Crisis in tribal districts

WHILE the cut and thrust of politics continues to dominate the national discourse, a very real constitutional crisis has erupted in the settled tribal districts of KP, the region known as Fata until the 25th Amendment to the Constitution. In late October, the Peshawar High Court declared unconstitutional the Fata Interim Governance Regulation and gave the KP government until Nov 30 to establish a judicial system in the region formerly known as Fata that is fully separate from the executive. The FIGR allowed political agents and deputy political agents renamed as district commissioners and deputy district commissioners to wield judicial powers and decide civil and criminal cases, a fact that the high court objected to because it violates the constitutional separation of powers. With the FIGR struck down by the Peshawar High Court but the KP government appealing to the Supreme Court for its restoration for a transition period of at least five years, since Dec 1 there has been a judicial and administrative vacuum in the settled tribal districts. Commissioners and deputy commissioners stand stripped

of their judicial and administrative authority and are effectively operating on the goodwill of the people of settled tribal districts.

The judicial and administrative crisis in the districts surely merits attention at the earliest by the Supreme Court, which must now decide the KP government's appeal against the high court's declaration that the FIGR is unconstitutional. If the court's deadline for establishing a functional and independent judicial system in the settled tribal districts within 30 days was unrealistic, the FIGR itself appears to have been poorly thought out. And arguably the architects of the 25th Amendment themselves erred in failing to provide for an adequate transition: while the FCR certainly needed to be abolished, the gap between the mainstream judicial system in the provinces and the political agent-led system in Fata was so large that a meaningful transition period was all but necessary. A few months from the passage of the 25th Amendment, a complex set of constitutional, juridical and administrative problems have mired that historic success in deep controversy.

Seemingly compounding the problem is a power struggle in KP, with the PTI government riven with factions and Chief Minister Mahmood Khan struggling to impose his authority. The merger of Fata and KP is certainly a complex, gargantuan task, but the PTI's inexperience guiding the executive elsewhere in the country does not hold true in KP. Arguably, having led the KP government for the past five years, the PTI was best placed to deliver quick and meaningful results in the newly merged province. Perhaps Prime Minister Imran Khan will need to intervene and bring some much-needed direction and purpose in the functioning of the KP government, too.

Peshawar BRT

WORK on the highly anticipated Peshawar Bus Rapid Transit project was supposed to have come to an end in July 2018. This was then postponed to September. Now it has been announced that all construction will (hopefully) conclude on March 23, 2019. With the general elections looming at the time, and political pressure building on the provincial government to perform, the project was initiated in haste by the PTI in October 2017. The 26km-long route that runs from Chamkani till Hayatabad was supposed to compete with Lahore's mass

transit infrastructure, but it keeps undergoing changes and delays, with its timeline for completion constantly lengthening. Additionally, the loan of Rs49bn taken from the Asian Development Bank has now risen to over Rs68bn. The project has suffered from what is evidently a clear case of mismanagement, poor planning and political hubris. The initial design proved to be flawed, as the constructors apparently did not take Peshawar's cityscape into consideration. Consequently, the design has thus far seen 11 changes and more are expected. Some previous construction was also demolished to make way for the new infrastructure. The Peshawar High Court has repeatedly asked the government to expedite matters, as many residents have been inconvenienced by the work being carried out on the historic Grand Trunk Road, the city's main artery and economic lifeline, and the already developed, upscale Hayatabad residency.

The Environment Protection Agency has also expressed its concerns, since construction on the site has led to increased dust and pollution in the air. Earlier this month, Peshawar's chief traffic officer wrote a letter to the Peshawar Development Authority director general asking for medical treatment for some 400 traffic wardens suffering from pulmonary and eye problems. Environmental concerns are further exacerbated by the fact that centuries-old trees along the GT Road and the traditionally green Hayatabad locality have been razed to make way for the project. According to the PDA, around 25,000 trees have been cut down. But perhaps the most relevant question is: when all the work is complete and we have the finished project before us, will its presence actually fix Peshawar's traffic problems or exacerbate it? When the chief secretary was summoned at a hearing by the Peshawar High Court and asked if he could give assurances that the project would benefit the residents and not inconvenience them further, he said he could not. That's not a very promising thought.

Extremism in India

IT would not be hyperbole to say that much of the world is facing a right-wing ascendancy. From Europe to America, xenophobia is on the rise. It goes without saying that this is a malaise that affects our own region as well. A recent reminder of this came on Friday in India, when Bollywood senior Naseeruddin Shah was castigated by right-wing elements for remarks that would in saner

times have been considered perfectly reasonable. He had been slated to inaugurate the fifth edition of the Ajmer Literature Festival, as well as participate in a session on his book. Speaking as a “worried Indian” — to use his words — he expressed in a video interview with Karwan-e-Mohabbat India his discomfort about the direction in which the Indian polity was headed, referring to his anxiety over lynchings in his country. This was a reference to the recent violence ignited by the discovery of the death of a cow. A police officer was killed by a mob. “The death of a cow has more significance than that of a police officer,” remarked the veteran actor, also expressing his concern for his children in these intolerant times. His words sparked off protests by hard-liners, including the youth wing of the ruling BJP that burned posters of the festival carrying the actor’s image, demanding that he apologise. As it all escalated, the festival organisers called off his event and cancelled his keynote address, saying that while the police had been summoned, it would be safer for the actor to refrain from coming to the venue.

This sort of situation has in recent years become a worrying trope in India’s reality. If stars ranging from Karan Johar to Priyanka Chopra to, now, Naseeruddin Shah, are made to back down to this extent, the plight of the common citizen can only be imagined. As a ‘secular’ country that prides itself on being the world’s ‘largest democracy’, India needs to curb its worst instincts.

Gender inequality

PAKISTAN is the second worst country to be a woman when it comes to gender equality, declares a recent World Economic Forum report. Ranking 148 out of 149 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2018 — which incorporated the latest statistics from international organisations along with a survey of executives to look into education, health, economic opportunity and political empowerment — the number of women holding managerial positions is one of the lowest. Other low-performing countries include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It was also the lowest-ranked country in South Asia, as it closed 55pc of its overall gender gap, compared to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka that closed just over 72pc and nearly 68pc of their overall gender gap. While the country made some progress in wage equality and the education attainment sub-index, it ranked 146 in economic

participation and opportunity, and 145 in health and survival. In terms of political empowerment, the country was positioned at 97.

The report was received with scepticism, especially given that Pakistan was ranked even lower than countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where women are less visible in the workforce and public life. While one can certainly question the report's methodology and findings, the government should not outright dismiss the findings, given that the country consistently performs poorly in international reports and indices when it comes to women's rights and empowerment. A few months ago, a gender audit by the Women's Action for Better Workplaces found that Pakistan's labour laws do not create an enabling working environment for women. Additionally, sexual harassment and regressive cultural attitudes keep them from performing to their full potential or out of the workforce entirely. Another UN report from earlier this year found that 4.9m women between the ages of 19 and 49 years were disadvantaged in four SDG-related dimensions, including health. It found that around 48pc of women and girls between the ages 15 and 49 have no say in decisions about their own health, with those in rural areas being particularly disadvantaged. Women are nearly half the population and make up a large chunk of the labour, especially invisible labour and in the informal sector, in both rural and urban settings. But their participation is not equal to their numbers. While Pakistan has made many strides over the years, and has many female citizens to look up to and take pride in, much more needs to be done.

Plight of minorities

AS Christmas is celebrated today around the world and in Pakistan, it is worth reflecting on this country's chequered record regarding its religious minorities, including but not restricted to the Christian community.

Arguably, one of the biggest stories this year was the acquittal of Aasia Bibi — who spent years in jail on allegations of blasphemy — by the Supreme Court.

There is reason for hope in the fact that the judgement was announced in difficult times, but there is also the reality that the verdict was followed by a right-wing backlash from some sections of society.

Read more: Pakistan rejects 'politically motivated' listing as violator of religious freedoms by US

Indeed, Mr Jinnah's words — that carry special significance on the occasion of his birthday today — that Pakistanis are free to go to their respective places of worship, and that religion has “nothing to do with the business of the state”, have yet to translate into a secure reality for the minorities.

The truth is that minorities in Pakistan do not feel safe as society has moved far from the intentions of its founding father, and the state has done little to rein in those who spew venom on adherents of a faith not their own. It has simply stood by as various minority communities have for years been relentlessly targeted by hardline groups.

Whether it is the Christians of Gojra, the Hazaras of Balochistan, the Hindus in Sindh, or the Kalasha people of Chitral, despite all the laws on the books Pakistan has proved a formidable environment.

Read more: Target killing of Hazaras

The only hope lies in the stringent implementation of the law, where those that harass and threaten beleaguered communities are pursued and successfully prosecuted.

This was envisioned as a country where minorities have exactly the same rights as the majority population. It will not do to target religious differences that have for centuries made this region unique. The dark clouds under which Pakistan's religious minorities labour are a reality that will require much effort to dispel. It is time to return to Mr Jinnah's vision.

Scrutiny or victimisation?

IF the accused ought to comply with the law at each stage of the legal process against them, the law needs to be fair, just and transparent. In the wake of a second conviction, and one acquittal, of PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, a familiar set of questions has been raised. Most importantly, is the law as applied to Mr Sharif the same law that would be applied to other individuals? Certainly, as

reiterated many times in these columns, and among independent political observers, as a three-term prime minister and a pre-eminent civilian political leader in the country, Mr Sharif ought to submit to a greater degree of scrutiny than the average citizen. But at what point does more scrutiny turn into political victimisation? Perhaps the worst aspect of the trial and conviction of Mr Sharif is that it has allowed the PML-N to claim ongoing political victimisation, as opposed to the inability to provide an explanation in a court of law that is at the least politically acceptable.

Surely, Mr Sharif's failure to provide an adequate explanation of the wealth that his family has accumulated is troubling. At a minimum, a thrice-elected prime minister of the country ought to be able to hold himself to a higher standard of evidence than the average citizen. But the allegations against Mr Sharif and his family erupted in the public domain more than two and a half years ago, with the exposure of the so-called Panama Papers. Those papers and that leak may have caused a political earthquake in Pakistan and several other countries, but it was imperative that the legal process that followed fiercely abided by the rules and processes laid down. Instead, the allegations took on a political reality, with the assumption that what was alleged by political opponents was legally true. The disservice has been to the accountability process in the country.

A lawful and transparent accountability process would go beyond targeting members of all parties and allow for a fair application of due process and other rules that apply to investigations and trial. The PTI government may be pleased with the conviction of a major political opponent — and the possibility of another major opponent, PPP boss Asif Zardari — being either disqualified or imprisoned. But the willingness of the PTI to accept credit for the incarceration of and investigation against political opponents risks tainting the political process in the country. For a decade, neither the PPP nor the PML-N introduced or appeared interested in a meaningful political accountability process. The fact that the leaders of those two parties are now ensnared in serious accountability problems may be a result of that inaction. Yet whatever the failures of the past, it ought to not excuse ongoing failures and inadequacies. Better sense on all sides ought to prevail.

IMF talks

THERE are indications that the government's ongoing talks with the IMF for a bailout may be heading towards an impasse.

What is clearer is that, whether the talks stall or not, the rulers are moving towards a sharp adjustment that will require them to raise taxes and cut current expenditures, possibly necessitating a reduction in the size of government, and an effort to at least partially roll back some of its provincial transfers under the NFC award.

Steep political costs are involved, and time for making a decision is running out. The billions of dollars borrowed from 'friendly countries' to shore up the balance of payments might delay the decision, but there is no escaping the tough choices that lie ahead.

At the moment, it seems that the government has procured some time, thanks to the deposits from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with word going around of further support from China. It intends to use the time to try and give a boost to exports and remittances and engineer an improvement in the external account.

But the headwinds should not be underestimated. Boosting exports through subsidy payments on gas carries a trade-off that the government may not be able to afford for much longer. And while continued depreciations of the exchange rate may produce a short-lived boost in exports, it will elevate the size of the external debt, and make imports more expensive.

In short, turning around the external sector using only tools such as the exchange rate and subsidies can be a self-defeating policy — it can never be a substitute for sound reforms.

The sense of comfort created by the billions in deposits from friendly countries, which are landing in the State Bank, must not give rise to complacency.

The government really has no other choice but to undertake a sharp adjustment in the fiscal accounts, follow up with painful reforms to stem the bleeding in the state-owned enterprises, and reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio. It must realise that there is no shortcut, and there is no easy way of doing this.

More than ever before, the urgent need for a clear policy direction is now upon us, while the government gives the appearance of still being stuck in campaign mode.

It is important that populist promises now be curtailed, and the focus shift towards addressing the growing fiscal and external imbalances in the country.

Personal data protection

THE FIA's claim, published in this paper on Monday, that the bank at the heart of the probe initiated in October into fraudulent online transactions is trying to 'hide' details of the security breach would hardly be surprising if proven true. It is important to acknowledge that the bank did officially register a complaint with the FIA last month, and the agency's own role in spreading undue panic regarding the scale of the attack. However, as seen with other hacking scandals — such as that of the ride-hailing service Careem earlier this year, or multiple incidents involving the social media giant Facebook over the years, which have only recently come to light — commercial entities are notoriously reticent about offering timely disclosures of data breaches to consumers, or cooperating with external probes into their security breaches, in order to safeguard their own interests. Since the matter came to light, notably absent from public policy discussion is the need to fix the fundamental vulnerabilities of Pakistan's digital landscape — the most significant of which is that there is still no law governing how citizens' personal data is collected, stored, and used.

Citizens are thus left exposed, with no legal safeguards compelling companies to be more transparent if and when personal data is stolen. The draft Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018, introduced in the final days of the federal caretaker government, needs to be tabled in parliament and debated. Though its passage will go a long way in bolstering consumer protection and improving digital security, there are limitations in its current form that must be addressed. Personal data, for example, is currently defined only with regard to commercial transactions, and does not include information held by public bodies, or biometric and genetic data. Data sharing and cooperation with regard to multiple territorial jurisdictions also need to be fleshed out. Pakistan needs a robust,

comprehensive data protection law that addresses not just the need of the hour, but also the challenges of an increasingly digital age.

Trial by JIT

THE Joint Investigation Team report in the so-called fake bank accounts case against PPP boss Asif Zardari has ostensibly revealed spectacular and irrefutable evidence against Mr Zardari and his financial partners. Perhaps the allegations in the report are true.

But — and this is essential from the point of view of fair and equal justice — it is imperative that whatever the allegations against Mr Zardari and his financial partners, they be proved in a fair, judicially transparent manner.

According to much media coverage of the alleged conduct of Mr Zardari and the companies said to be connected to him, the PPP boss is already guilty of the worst sort of white-collar crimes and corruption imaginable.

Once again, perhaps Mr Zardari and others in his circle have committed such crimes. But for now, the claims against Mr Zardari are allegations that have to be supported by judicially tested incontrovertible evidence.

A worrying aspect of the state's behaviour towards Mr Zardari and others in his alleged circle of financial misconduct is that the accountability process against them so far has resembled the misbegotten approach in the attempted accountability of other people's representatives.

The dramatic manner in which the JIT report was revealed in court, and before that the selective leak of contents of the report in sections of the media, could be interpreted as attempts to conduct a media trial and prejudge the outcome of the eventual trials of Mr Zardari and his alleged business partners.

In this era of apparent trial by JIT — PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif was declared ineligible for public office on the basis of controversial evidence unearthed by another JIT ordered by the Supreme Court — the normal process of investigation appears to have been short-circuited and circumvented.

While financial crimes are notoriously difficult to accumulate evidence of and successfully prosecute, the state's overreliance on ad hoc JITs, whose very composition could suggest an anti-civilian, anti-politician bias, is a troubling trend.

Surely, in the presence of a hyperactive NAB and a federal government that has repeatedly vowed to give investigators and prosecutors whatever resources they need to effectively fight corruption, there ought to be no need for controversial, ad hoc JITs.

Just as difficult to explain is why not all JITs are treated equally. For example, the JIT formed to probe the activities of Rao Anwar has not resulted in action against the disgraced policeman.

It appears that while there is a fast track for JITs of certain relevance, a go-slow approach is visible in the case of other JITs.

The problem with such trends emerging is that not only does it not provide equal treatment by the state to all being probed, but the investigations against the political class also appear to become tainted.

There is an undeniable need for meaningful and across-the-board accountability in the country. But the JIT route is a flawed approach and should be reconsidered.

Karachi bleeds

DARKNESS has once again engulfed the city of lights.

Former MQM MNA Syed Ali Raza Abidi's assassination outside his home in Karachi has led to an outpouring of grief, as memories of the worst years for Karachi return, when bomb blasts, targeted killings, gang warfare, sectarian murders and crime had become the norm. CCTV footage showed two men speeding towards his car as he was entering his home, firing several rounds at him. He had no security on him.

The killing is an ugly reminder of how uncertain and brief peace can be in Pakistan's economic hub.

In the past few years, the city had slowly bounced back to life. On the same day that Abidi was shot dead, the 1990s rock group Junoon were playing at a long-awaited reunion concert. There has been a return of concerts and festivals for the public that had increasingly become more comfortable staying out late. There was even talk of holding international sport events in Karachi. In the last year and a half, there were practically no citywide shutdowns. Much of the fear that had become a permanent part of the lives of Karachiites had dissolved. But preceding Abidi's assassination, two PSP activists had been shot dead in an armed attack on the party's office on Sunday. The police said that around a dozen gunmen on six motorcycles had opened fire on the office before fleeing. Several arrests of MQM-L affiliates have been made recently.

In the chaos that makes up Karachi's political landscape, with various groups competing for power and resources, it is unlikely we will ever know the full truth of who was behind these killings. But the resurgence of violence in recent times is troubling, especially after a period of peace and what had seemed to be a return to normalcy. It was just last month that the Chinese consulate in Karachi was attacked, resulting in fatalities.

Together, these incidents suggest that the danger is not over and that various groups — sectarian, ethnic and political — may still be trying to make a comeback in order to destabilise the city once again. This must be prevented by the law enforcers, and before those charged with the task of maintaining peace in the city begin to celebrate, a much bigger exercise is required to nab elements that are eager to restart the cycle of violence.

New province

THE government has taken the extraordinary step of holding a meeting of the Punjab cabinet in Bahawalpur. Scheduled for Dec 29, the southern Punjab venue of the meeting has sent minds racing in different directions in search of motives — despite the typically laidback explanation given by Chief Minister Usman Buzdar's administration. Officially speaking, there is nothing odd about taking your cabinet sauntering into the countryside even when weather buffs and political pundits advise against unnecessary travel undertaken without proper direction. But outside the official book of polite excuses and simplified reasons,

speculation abounds. After all, this is about southern Punjab. To begin with, this ministerial get-together in Bahawalpur is yet more proof that the PTI government is keen on shifting the focus away from Lahore to long-neglected areas from where the PTI secured so many seats in the general election, leading to the formation of the party's governments in Punjab and Islamabad.

The first piece of evidence showing the intent of prioritising the woes of southern Punjab was provided when Sardar Buzdar was appointed Punjab chief minister. Since then, a lot has been discussed about these districts in the context of fast-paced development; indeed, the creation of the promised province has featured prominently in serious discussions. The choice of Bahawalpur for the cabinet meeting could well be part of an effort to bring closer two views on the need for dividing the country's biggest province into smaller units. There is currently a campaign that calls for the restoration of the old Bahawalpur province, just as demands for a Seraiki province, probably with Multan as its capital, get louder. There are important individuals from the Bahawalpur area, including lawmakers, who obviously believe that their interests can be best served in a restored Bahawalpur province. They will take a lot of convincing to agree on a province dominated by Multan. There have to be long deliberations on the subject to avoid dire repercussions later. It will be in the interest of common sense if the Bahawalpur cabinet meeting helps to take that discussion forward.

Exiting Afghanistan

THE beginning of US failure in Afghanistan has been attributed to various decisions in recent history.

Abandoning Afghanistan after the Soviets were defeated, waging war in Afghanistan in response to 9/11 and allowing itself to be distracted by a disastrous war of choice in Afghanistan are some of the well-known reasons offered for US failure in that country.

But another less-discussed aspect may be the true reason for ultimate military failure in Afghanistan which appears imminent: the decision to exclude the Afghan Taliban from the Bonn Conference, where the contours of the current

dispensation in Afghanistan were decided. Instead of a durable political settlement, the seeds of a near two-decades-old war were sown.

Read more: 'We will do what is best for our people, our interests': PM Khan fires back after Trump tweets

The naïveté and inability to grasp nuances in Afghanistan that the US has displayed has severely, and perhaps irreversibly, affected its ability to help craft a stable and secure future for Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban, unlike Al Qaeda and later the TTP and now IS, were a nationalist force with no known transnational agenda.

Now, as the US appears to be attempting to fashion a hasty exit after a prolonged stay, the US may create yet more problems for the region.

A withdrawal without a peace settlement would risk not just plunging Afghanistan into chaos but could also have disastrous effects across the region.

Read more: Pentagon opposes Trump's troop withdrawal plan

With US President Donald Trump often appearing to be at odds with his own administration, it is not known to what extent the president's notorious reliance on instinct can or will be offset by serious thinking amongst his advisers.

Moreover, adding to the confusion is that the US national security establishment and military leadership appear wedded to the idea of permanent war if they cannot win the war, which they have fought to a bloody stalemate at best.

If there has been one unifying element among all internal and external actors in Afghanistan, it is that IS should not be allowed to expand in the country. But President Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw US troops from Syria that have been fighting IS indicates that even the spectre of the militant group in Afghanistan may not be enough to compel rational US decision-making in Afghanistan.

Read more: 'Appeasement does not work with US': Shireen Mazari claps back at Trump over tirade against Pakistan

How likely is it that, as a Pentagon report this week has asserted, reintegration of Taliban fighters will take place if the fighters and Taliban leadership believe that they may be on the verge of outright victory?

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: helping achieve an Afghan peace settlement that has the support of internal and external powers.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's intensive shuttle diplomacy is visible, but it is not clear to what extent Pakistan has a plan or ability to help achieve a region-wide desire for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the foreign minister should share news on his efforts with the country.

Gas supply decisions

IN taking on the issues of gas supply and pricing, the prime minister has touched upon a sensitive and important economic issue. Much hangs in the balance as the PTI government takes its first steps towards managing what are recurrent problems in the gas sector: continued supply through the winter, pricing and demand forecasts, as well as managing LNG imports. As per the handout issued after a meeting on Wednesday, it would appear that the discussion careened all over the place, from furnace oil off-takes to gas pricing in an era of growing gas imports. All these issues are tied, and given the nature of the oil and gas sector, small decisions made today can send large shockwaves through the economy months later. In taking up these issues, the prime minister and his government have a difficult task to accomplish, and it will take much thought and subtle and careful policy balance to make this happen. It will not happen through angry directives, aggressive inquiries and continued talk of 'mafias' and 'lobbies'.

The quandary surrounding fuel and the power sector is simple. Power production has to shift towards import LNG since it is cheaper, cleaner and more efficient, and ample capacity has been installed around the country. But as this shift happens, the refineries find themselves in a quandary because demand for furnace oil plummets, and none of Pakistan's refineries have deep cracking capacity; their production process necessarily has almost 30pc furnace oil as its output. There is no other use for this furnace oil other than power generation. As power shifts to LNG, inventories of furnace oil pile up until the refineries have to shut down operations impacting production of all other fuels like petrol, diesel, jet fuel and associated gas as well. The problem crops up in the winter because there is lower demand for power, and some power plants have to be shut down.

The other problem in the oil and gas sector is now well known: import RLNG is almost twice the cost of domestic gas, and the government is having a hard time persuading industry to shift to LNG for fuel needs. Yet there is no alternative to LNG either. The problem is simple to understand, but the solution will need careful policy acumen. It is time for the PTI government to start shoring up its credentials in this area too, now.

Sanctuaries for the poor

RECENTLY, Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a visit to a renovated shelter for the homeless in the capital city, which provides men and women a roof over their head, as well as free meals. Additionally, he directed the Islamabad administration to provide a free shuttle service to labourers, so that they could move to and from their places of work to the shelter. The Red Crescent has also offered to provide doctors. The prime minister's visit follows a one-day trip to Peshawar, where he inaugurated another 105-bed shelter, with separate facilities for women and persons with disabilities. Prior to that, last month he laid the foundation stone for a shelter in Lahore, which would house 93 men and 27 women when operational. Four more shelter homes are to be constructed in different localities, including Data Darbar, Badami Bagh and Thokar Niaz Baig. The government had also set up temporary tents containing mattresses for those who are usually found sleeping on the pavements of the Walled City, to be able to cope with the winter chill.

Undoubtedly, all these are heartwarming gestures, and something close to Mr Khan's heart. These shelters are perhaps seen as the building blocks of the welfare state he envisions, and that has been promised by the PTI government; on their own, they are welcome sanctuaries for the most vulnerable sections of society. Many might see these actions as short-term charitable acts that do not address systemic faults or provide long-term solutions for poverty reduction. While the usefulness of the shelters cannot be denied, these observers too have a valid point. The broader issues linked to the challenge of providing shelter for the homeless must also be focused on, such as the implementation of welfare policies and the provision of low-income housing — promises made by

successive governments. Housing and poverty reduction are, after all, fundamental rights, and deserve priority attention from the authorities.

Meaningful accountability

A DRAMATICALLY revealed JIT report has led to a dramatic decision by the PTI government to place 172 individuals named in the so-called 'fake accounts' case on the Exit Control List and the government's decision has been thoroughly denounced by the PPP.

Amidst all the drama, what appears to have been forgotten by all sides are the legal minutiae, due process and the democratic process.

Also read: [Across-the-board accountability](#)

The PTI government has responded to the unveiling of the Supreme Court-ordered JIT report as if the report is a conclusive finding of fact, a judicial verdict that has proved the guilt of senior PPP leaders and their alleged business partners.

Meanwhile, the PPP has responded as though the whole affair is purely politically motivated and that all the allegations have no merits whatsoever — which at this admittedly preliminary stage appears unlikely.

A judicial matter appears to have been quickly politicised by the PTI and the PPP, and so, for the sake of the judicial process and politics, the next steps in the judicial process ought to be expedited, while keeping in mind the requirements of due process and fairness.

Among the many PPP complaints, perhaps the one with the greatest resonance is the federal government's decision to include the name of Chief Minister of Sindh Murad Ali Shah in the ECL. In adding a serving chief minister to the ECL, is the federal government implying that it considers Mr Shah to be a flight risk?

To begin with, many details of the JIT report had been reported in sections of the media well before the report was revealed in the Supreme Court. Neither at that time, nor at the present, has the Sindh chief minister shown an unwillingness to cooperate with the law as he is required to.

Indeed, if Mr Shah were to flee abroad, it could trigger a constitutional crisis in Sindh and leave the PPP in a lurch — an improbable choice for a chief minister whose party chairman and co-chairman have also been included in the ECL.

Mr Shah is certainly not above the law, and he ought to be given no undue personal considerations. But the office of the chief minister is a constitutional office and it must be treated respectfully. Surely, the federal government ought to have considered the implications of its actions when moving against the chief executive of one of the federating units.

Perhaps both the PPP and PTI can see or hope to gain an advantage in the high-stakes brinkmanship they are engaging in at the moment. The politics of accusations and recriminations can suit political parties in a divided polity. But the allegations against the PPP leadership need to be resolved in the judicial arena.

From the investigation and trial phases, to the elemental aspects of the judicial process, for accountability to be meaningful and durable, it must be fair and transparent.

Auto sector troubles

THE automobile sector in Pakistan is seeing some amount of turbulence, in part driven by the reality of new entrants into what has been one of the most protected segments of Pakistan's manufacturing economy, and in part driven by the cyclical downturn in the economy that has impacted every business across the board. So, recently, when auto vendors complained that their sector is on the cusp of a "recession" and almost 12,000 jobs have been lost and another 50,000 jobs are on the line, the claims merit a closer examination to discern the causes at play. If a closer examination reveals that the crunch being experienced by the vendors is due to changes sweeping the sector as new entrants prepare to enter the field, then we can say it is normal change and part of a healthy competition that the sector has to prepare itself for. But if it is true that the auto sector has been especially hard-hit due to the economic downturn, then there could be a case for calling in the vendors to ask them what policy directions they recommend to rectify the situation.

But as it turns out, neither of these courses of action may be necessary because a closer examination of the data reveals that the claims made by the vendors are largely false. They assert, for example, that production of automobiles has declined by 35 per cent and that of motorbikes by 30pc. What is odd is that auto assemblers themselves are not raising any such alarm. And their own data shows that, far from falling, the production of automobiles and motorbikes has actually surged from last year. In the tractors segment, there is indeed a steep downturn in sales, and the causes are worth inquiring after. But there is something odd about the calls for help coming out of the auto sector. The vendors are crying themselves hoarse while the assemblers are quiet. This shows that there could be some cause besides a downturn sweeping of the sector that is at play. Perhaps the requirement to forbid sales to non-filers of tax returns is a root cause, but sales have not plunged by nearly as much to suggest this. Or perhaps vendors are having a hard time adapting to the shifting realities opened up by new auto policy. In responding to their SOS, the government ought to examine their claims carefully.

Rwandan genocide

IN 1994, the world stood by and watched as one of the worst genocides in modern times unfolded in Rwanda. In a span of 100 days, an estimated 800,000 people — largely belonging to the Tutsi ethnic minority — were slaughtered in cold blood. The killings were sparked after a plane carrying Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana and his Belgian bodyguards was shot down. This week, old wounds were reopened when French judges dropped an inquiry into the missile attack. Several people close to current President Paul Kagame (who was the leader of a Tutsi rebel group at the time) were charged in the inquiry. On the other hand, the Rwandan government has placed blame on France for collusion in the genocide by supporting the Hutu regime and training its militia, in its scramble for power in post-independence Africa. Relations between the two nations have suffered over the past 24 years for the handling of the probe.

The world must remember what preceded — and, in fact, allowed — such mass-scale killings to take place, where neighbours, friends and family members turned against one another overnight. As a result of the malicious divide-and-rule

policies of former colonial powers, extensive campaigns that dehumanised the ethnic minority, perceived to be unfairly privileged by the powerful, were carried out. Wide-scale propaganda was distributed, which created the perception of Tutsis being an internal and external threat. Throughout the world, much of the current political landscape is made up of populist leaders who have risen to power by vocalising or creating fear and paranoia around ethnic or religious minority groups, who are then viewed with great suspicion or blamed for the ills the majority faces. Rwanda has rebuilt itself over the years, enjoying communal harmony through efforts at reconciliation. It is a case study in how it is necessary to forgive in order to move on from great violence and suffering, but it is disastrous to forget what led to it.

The elephant in PPP's room

LEGALLY under siege, Asif Zardari is politically on the attack.

According to the political narrative that the PPP boss and his supporters are attempting to craft, Mr Zardari's political and alleged financial empire are under attack because elements within the state are threatened by the party's policies and politics.

But while there may be some truth to the PPP's allegations, there is now firmly lodged in the party's living room a rather large elephant: the JIT report that was ordered by the Supreme Court and which has become the basis for Mr Zardari and numerous of his political and alleged financial partners being placed on the Exit Control List.

The JIT report may not be the same as facts proved in a court of law, but the report has certainly created a problem of political standing and perhaps even legitimacy for Mr Zardari and the PPP that he unquestionably dominates. Mr Zardari and the PPP leadership must address the specific allegations against them in the JIT report.

The JIT report covers a vast number of alleged corrupt business practices and ostensibly confirms what has been politically apparent for a number of years.

From mills to factories and land deals to bank loans, the JIT report has tied Mr Zardari to an empire of financial corruption on a staggering scale.

If Mr Zardari denies, for example, that his family has ties to the Bahria property empire, then surely the wildly lucrative projects that Bahria has won in Sindh can be audited by an independent third party.

After all, if the JIT report is not to be trusted because of the implicit political bias of its authors, the deals it has flagged can surely be audited by credible financial investigators.

Similarly, if certain banks have not been used to lend enormous sums of money to entities and individuals who did produce adequate collateral according to the prevailing rules, then the loans ought to be proved to have been properly made and adequately secured.

The many rackets and several figures identified in the JIT have long been speculated about in the political arena.

It is Mr Zardari's right to fight the allegations against him in the judicial arena and he must be given the same due process and rights that the law and Constitution guarantee to all citizens.

But in the court of public opinion and the political arena, Mr Zardari will need to do more than just dismiss the allegations against him as wild conspiracy. Indeed, from a democratic perspective, the foundations of the elected order in the country could be weakened further if serious allegations of financial fraud and corruption are simply shrugged off politically.

The public has a right to choose its leaders, but the leaders have a duty to the public to be transparent about their financial affairs. Mr Zardari must do more.

Pressure on the press

THE Press Council of Pakistan has spoken with a clarity that should bring the matter to an end. In its general council meeting, the PCP unanimously rejected the official idea of a new regulatory body named the 'Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority'.

It has asked the government to work for press freedom, not control. It has been observed that the PCP has been quite efficient in dealing with issues related to the professional conduct of newspapers and the journalists working for them, there being always room for improvement.

The message coming out was that newspapers — which have always resisted subtle and open calls by various governments to cooperate — will never allow a system of checks and balances run under the government since it could lead to undue pressure placed on journalism and be a tool for the government to punish those who ‘fall out of line’.

A statement issued by the PCP after its latest meeting has challenged the position of the information ministry that has been adamant about reinventing the system to suit the government’s own policies on how to manage the media.

The statement said, “The Council has been validly constituted” and its general meeting held on Dec 28, as well as the one on Sept 17, are legal. It countered the position adopted by the information ministry by reiterating that the “decisions taken and resolutions passed in both meetings are legal, valid and in accordance with the law”.

The resolution passed on Friday asserted the PCP’s “exclusive authority to nominate members of its choice”.

It pointed out that “the information ministry had no right to object to the council’s constitution and its decision” — the tone reflecting just how tenuous the government’s relationship with the media is. In its goal-setting initial weeks, the PTI has taken to talking tough with many of those it has come in contact with.

That period where it had to provide a general note about its intent and intensity has long been registered. It will be wasting its energy by insisting on doing tasks that inherently do not fall in the government’s domain and which should be left to the groups with the right and expertise to attempt them.

A government-controlled body to run the affairs of newspapers is not in sync with the modern concepts of rule. Power is often about having the strength to resist certain temptations.

Prisoner accord

IN an encouraging move, Pakistan and the UK have signed an amended transfer agreement that will allow leeway for convicted persons in either country the opportunity to be transferred to their home countries.

The reasoning is that this will allow such offenders to serve out their sentences closer to home, and prepare them for reintegration into their communities upon their release from prison.

Signed by Interior Secretary Azam Suleman Khan and the UK High Commissioner in Pakistan Thomas Drew on Thursday, the agreement had been approved in principle during UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid's visit to this country in September.

It restores and updates a previous agreement between both countries and includes strengthened assurances that all transferred convicts will serve out their full sentences before being released.

That refers to the revelation in 2015 that a number of convicts who had been brought to Pakistan from jails in other countries had managed to secure their release in connivance with crooked government officials, after which this country put on hold such agreements.

Now that the agreement is in place again between the two countries, it can be hoped that a number of convicts will benefit.

More significant, however, is the fact that this country feels that it is now in a position to offer assurances that convicts will indeed serve out their terms, and that the rules of international and domestic law will be adhered to.

That said, the prison system here remains far from satisfactory, with endemic issues such as overcrowding, corruption and nepotism.

It has not been unknown for convicted criminals to continue spearheading operations from within their cells, or having access to prohibited items including mobile phones.

If Pakistan hopes to bring back to its own prisons persons that have been handed sentences in other countries, it would provide even more reason to reform its jail system.

Without this, any agreement such as the one signed with the UK becomes fairly meaningless.

FIA's incredible request

BOTH decision and timing are scarcely believable and will surely give more ammunition to those quarters denouncing the current accountability drive as purely politically motivated. The federal government must quickly clarify its position and ask the FIA to withdraw its request that the Supreme Court close the Asghar Khan case for lack of evidence and because too much time has elapsed since the events surrounding the rigging of the general election in 1990. The FIA's findings are startling and deeply incongruous with efforts elsewhere at the moment to track down financial corruption and misuse of state resources. Indeed, the Asghar Khan case was and, barring the FIA's ill-conceived decision to try and have the issue brought to a premature close, is a judicial matter that has the potential to alter the judicial, political and institutional landscapes of the country for the better. The deeply controversial and as yet unresolved events surrounding the general election held earlier this year have grimly underlined that the democratic project in the country remains very much a work in progress.

A satisfactory resolution of the Asghar Khan case is necessary because until the country fully confronts its political past, it will not be able to move decisively towards a better democratic future. When he was an outside opposition figure, Prime Minister Imran Khan grasped the importance of the Asghar Khan case and has numerous times gone on the record to demand that the case be pursued to its logical conclusion. Prime Minister Khan has embraced the idea of U-turns in office to much criticism, but surely if the PTI government seeks the immediate closure of the Asghar Khan case, it would mark an indefensible reversal. Perhaps the prime minister ought to consider how a decision to seek a premature end to the Asghar Khan case will reflect on the PTI's aggressive support for accountability elsewhere. The very FIA that is seemingly unable to trace basic information required in the Asghar Khan case will likely be tasked with a

monumental investigation of the alleged financial empire of PPP boss Asif Zardari. The foreign properties that led to the political downfall of Nawaz Sharif are traced back to the same era as the events chronicled in the Asghar Khan case.

It will be difficult to escape allegations of dual standards of justice when an elected prime minister can be removed from office and sent to jail, while a senior military figure, former ISI chief retired Gen Asad Durrani, who has candidly admitted to running a scheme to bribe politicians and steal an election, remains unprosecuted. And since Nawaz Sharif was the primary beneficiary of the stolen election in 1990, it would be deeply ironic that his arch rival, Prime Minister Khan, would in effect be exonerating -Mr Sharif to help shield other individuals. The Asghar Khan case must not be buried.

Economic direction?

ONE has to look harder and harder to discern the economic message and direction of the government. Initially, the rulers argued that strengthening institutions and aggressively pursuing corruption was the way to fix the economy. The crux of this vision was putting the right people in positions of authority in the state-owned enterprises and regulatory bodies. That took a hit when the appointments of the PIA and PTA chairmen were announced. Then we had the vision of shoring up our reserves, and we saw the IMF being approached and multiple visits to foreign capitals being undertaken in search of a billion here and a billion there to help plug the current account deficit. Along the way, we have heard of an export-led growth push as well as ramped-up import substitution industrialisation. Meanwhile, the prime minister enjoys dwelling at length on foreign investors' interest in Pakistan and pointing out the ongoing work on special economic zones for the Chinese and a large commitment from Saudi Arabia to invest in Pakistan's oil and gas sector.

All this is fine except for the fact that we take one direction today and another tomorrow, depending on what happens to be foremost in the minds of the people one is talking to. The fact that export-led growth and import substitution industrialisation pull the policy framework in different directions does not come up. Nor do the apprehensions of domestic investors — and those foreign

investors who already have stakes in Pakistan — concerning the terms being offered to the Chinese to invite them into the SEZs get much quarter. At the end, what we have is a haphazard pattern of economic firefighting, where whoever manages to get an audience with the prime minister is likely to walk out of the room with a bouquet of commitments on subsidies and incentives. One example is the gas price equalisation subsidy just released by the government for the so-called export-oriented sectors. Another is the reduction of taxes on fuel prices, especially at a time when the government is struggling to control a growing fiscal deficit. As industry reels from gas shortages, absorbing the implications of the exchange rate depreciation and continuous interest rate hikes, we are now bracing for the announcement of yet another money bill. This ad hocism, and endless sugarcoating of the numbers, must end soon.

Yemen's mass misery

YEMEN is a big humanitarian disaster the world's conscience seems indifferent to. The dimensions of human misery are multiplying, but still there is no sign that any of the parties involved in this bloodletting are ready to realise the criminality of their actions and call off this debilitating and senseless war. Statistics vary, but, according to one American think tank, the total military and civilian casualties stand at about 60,000. Over 70pc of the population faces starvation, cholera is rampant and nearly 400,000 children are at risk. Who is responsible is of no consequence, for all sides must share the blame for turning the Arab world's poorest country into a charnel house. Saudi Arabia and Iran are guilty of widening what basically was an internal political problem that began with the Arab Spring in 2015. More than three years later, neither seems in sight of victory.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who orchestrated greater Saudi involvement in Yemen, went wrong in his belief that the use of US-backed air power would end the war in weeks. Instead, the Iran-supported Houthis have fought back to deny him victory. All that his air force has done is to add to the civilian death toll by bombing mosques, weddings and funerals, the yearly cost for Riyadh being \$50bn. The relative cost for Iran is negligible. Obviously, for Iran and for the Saudi-led Sunni states, backed by Western powers, geopolitical aims

are more important than the Yemeni people. Saudi Arabia, America, Britain and France do not want an Iranian presence in the strategic Red Sea region and, like Iran, seem hell-bent on pursuing their geopolitical aims whatever the human cost. It is unfortunate that the Arab League and the dysfunctional OIC have failed to stir themselves to negotiate peace. It should be to their shame that peace talks with an agenda limited to Hodeida port are held in Stockholm rather than in Cairo, Ankara or Islamabad.