

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of February 2019

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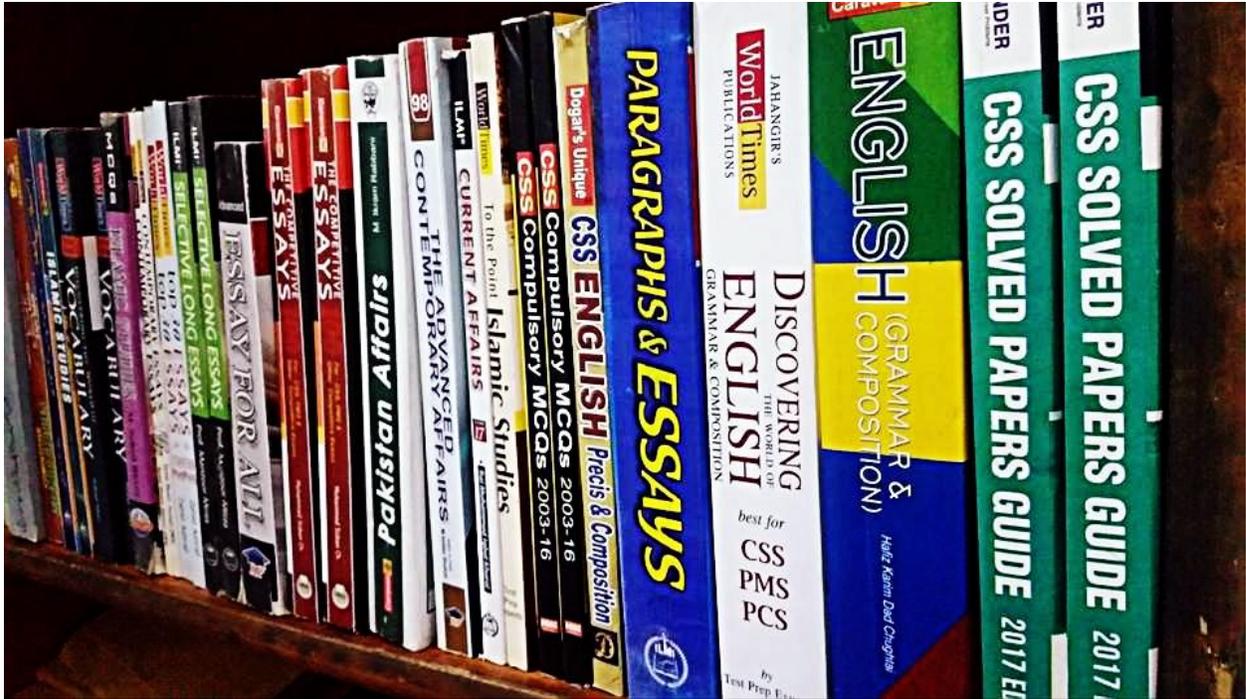
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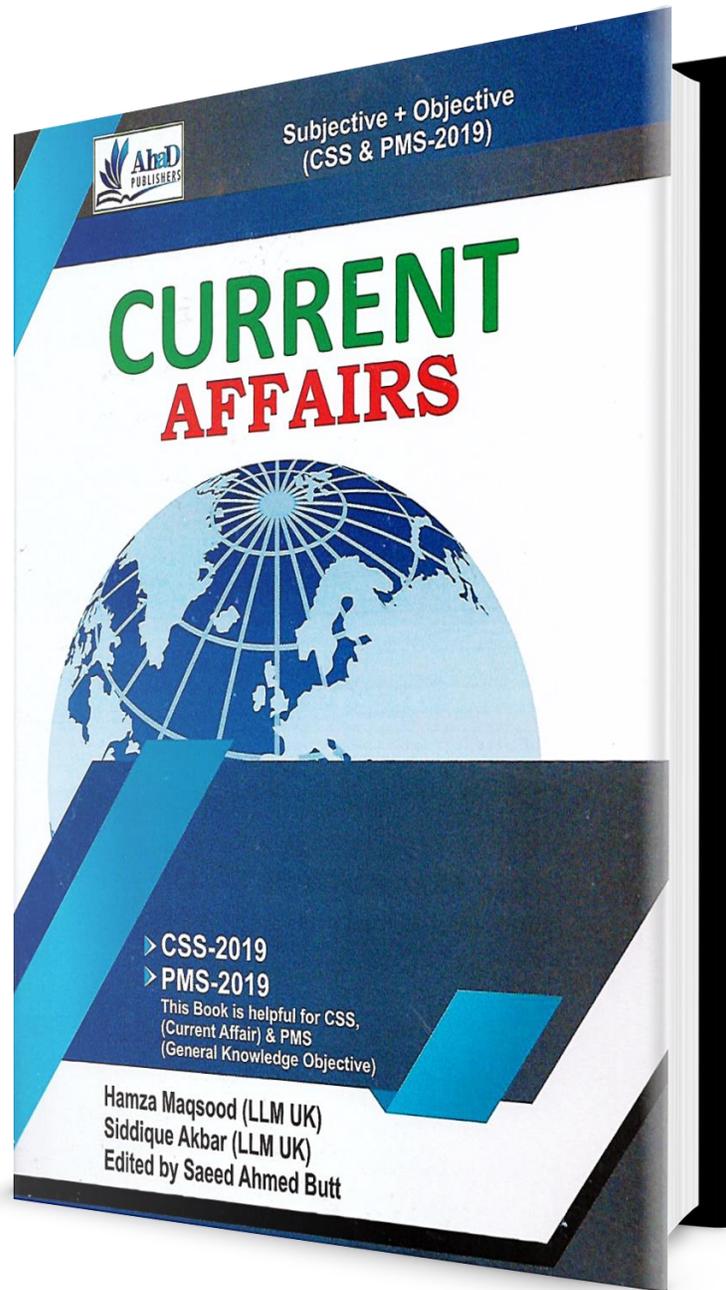
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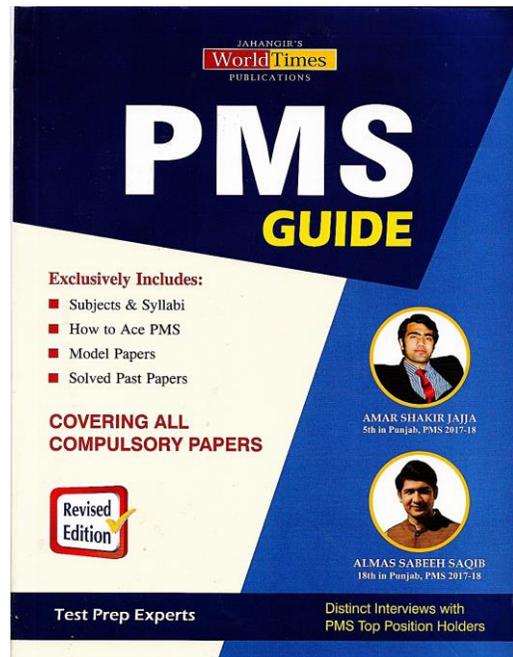
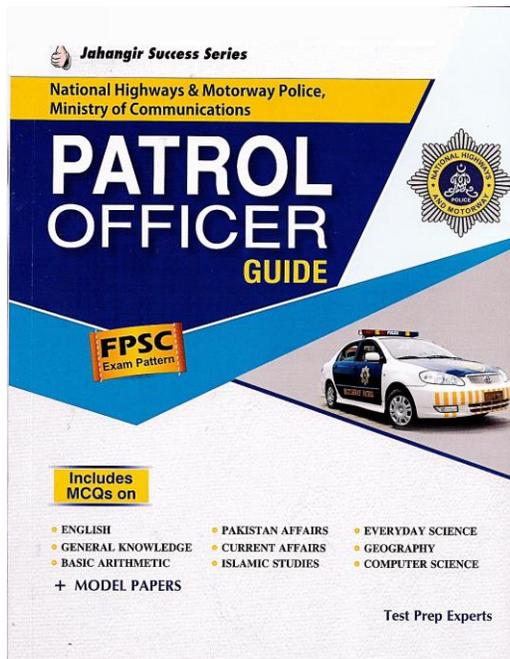
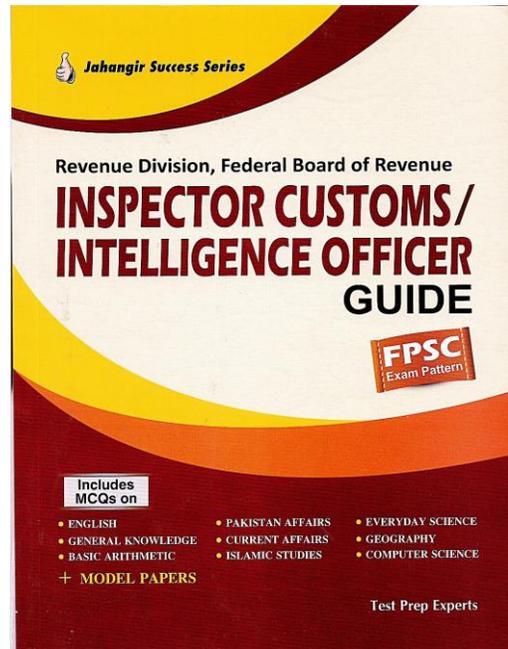
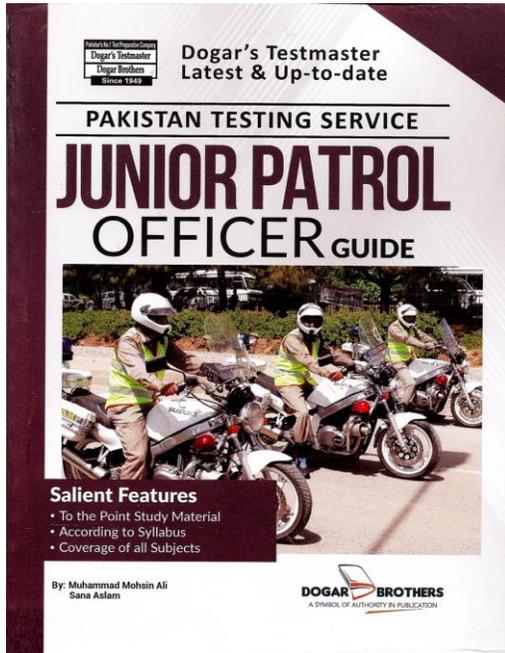
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Monetary policy statement

THE State Bank's recent monetary policy statement, and its attendant action of hiking the key discount rate by a quarter per cent, provides a cleverly nuanced insight into the state of the economy at the present moment. This is the halfway mark of the new government's first fiscal year, the crucial period when it has to capture the imagination of the public, establish its credibility in the eyes of its creditors and stakeholders in the economy, push through tough decisions and set a direction for economic and institutional reform. This is not an exhaustive list of course, because accompanying the list of expectations on the economic front, the government also has to set the tone in the political space and build its relationship with the other tiers of the state. In short, the moment has a big agenda, and given the serious economic pressures that the government inherited, there is also an added sense of urgency to find its footing and get on with the task of running the affairs of state.

So on this halfway point, what does the State Bank tell us about how the economy is faring? It rightly points out that there are "visible signs of deceleration in domestic demand", the crucial plank upon which the government's economic policy must be built, given the growing deficits on the fiscal and external accounts. It also rightly points out that this deceleration owes itself to "stabilisation measures implemented during the last twelve months", meaning if the government inherited an economy drifting towards crisis, it also inherited the policy direction through which it has sought to arrest this drift. It notes that the external deficit is narrowing, but still remains high despite the nearly \$4bn worth of support from "friendly countries", so much remains to be done and victory remains a far-off goal. Beyond this, the fiscal deficit "remains elevated" and core inflation is "persistently high" despite a near doubling of interest rates since January of 2018.

The result is that the economy continues to slow drastically, and the government is financing itself through massive printing of money, where borrowing from the State Bank jumped to Rs3.775tr between July 1 and Jan 18, "which is 4.3 times the amount borrowed during the same period last year". The fiscal deficit will remain elevated, the State Bank says, and "fiscal policy will have to be proactive" in the remaining months of the fiscal year. Even though the State Bank does not spell this out, it takes only a little common sense to note that this means an

emphasis on greater revenue mobilisation, something the government is shying away from. The picture is painted carefully, but it is unmistakable: the economy needs a firmer hand on the tiller, and the drift towards crisis has been temporarily arrested, but not reversed.

Two new provinces

ON Monday, the PML-N submitted a bill demanding an amendment to Article 1 of the Constitution which would support the creation of two new provinces: Bahawalpur, with its current administrative division, and South Punjab, which would comprise Dera Ghazi Khan and Multan. Additionally, the bill seeks changes to Article 51, which will make way for parliamentary representation for the two new provinces. The very next day, amongst accusations of opportunism and political point-scoring, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi claimed the party had presented the bill out of 'sincere intent' — and, instead, criticised the ruling PTI for not taking any steps towards fulfilling its pre-election promise. On paper, all three major political parties support the creation of a new province (or two). But we know that appearances are often deceptive in politics. While it is probably true that the PML-N brought up the issue of the South Punjab province at this point in time to build pressure on the PTI government — perhaps to entangle it in technicalities, or to remind the rulers of its own strength in upper and central Punjab — it is also true that the creation of a South Punjab province was on the PTI's 11-point agenda. Many among the region's then ruling class joined hands with the party ostensibly on the basis of this promise. For a while now, it seemed as if the PTI was backing out from its promise by bringing up impracticalities, but it has now reiterated its desire to create a single South Punjab, since the PML-N took on the issue in a grandiose manner.

While the two parties play politics, the Seraiki belt remains just as neglected on ground. Much of its population continues to live below the poverty line — with poor health, education and employment indicators. It is timely to remind readers that Pakistan was created by the provinces — not the other way around. For governance purposes, it makes sense to increase and empower the provinces. The creation of a new province for administrative purposes is the need of the hour, even if it is formed on the basis of ethnicity. This extends to the Hazara Division, which has long sought independence from greater KP on the basis of language and ethnicity, and has traditionally voted differently. Those with wisdom

will pay attention to those on the peripheries. Otherwise, resentment may grow towards the centre.

Ski tournament

THE PAF-hosted Karakoram International Alpine Ski Cup currently under way in the snowy area of Naltar is ample proof of what Pakistan has been missing out on all these years: an opportunity to host international competitions and draw in both goodwill and revenue.

Skiers from 13 countries — from Europe, Asia and Africa — are participating. The event clearly shows the immense potential Pakistan's north has when it comes to winter sports. In fact, Naltar, also hosted the country's first ice hockey match last December between the PAF and Gilgit-Baltistan Scouts.

This potential must be encouraged in every possible way, and winter sports facilities developed wherever possible.

In the past, there have been threats, such as the attack on the Malam Jabba ski resort. But with terrorism having been contained to a large extent, the focus must now be on attracting tourists.

No doubt, the government's recent move to grant visa on arrival to several countries and easing restrictions on movement will help in this regard. In encouraging winter sports — for both international and domestic enthusiasts — there will also be the added bonus of projecting Pakistan's 'soft' image, which for long has been tarnished as the country was seen as a hub of militancy.

The winter sports economy in many countries draws in billions in tourist revenue. It would be of benefit to our rulers to make a serious study of how potential can be developed and the local industry boosted and employment generated in areas where otherwise people know only hardship, especially in the harsh winter months.

Unfortunately, the failure to develop Pakistan's overall tourism prospects has been striking. In a country with both coast and mountains, there was much that could have been done to encourage sporting pursuits and further develop existing ones, such as mountaineering. This would attract both international and local tourists.

It is still not too late. Focusing on winter sports is a good start and the Naltar experience has been a positive one.

Hurriyat uproar

In the volatile world of Pakistan-India relations, often seemingly harmless incidents can be blown out of proportion, leaving any chances of dialogue and forward movement towards peace looking increasingly distant. And as it has been witnessed in the recent past, more often than not the right-wing BJP-led government in Delhi has torpedoed chances of peace with Pakistan thanks to its unreasonable attitude and rigidity.

On Thursday, it emerged that a phone call between Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and All Parties Hurriyat Conference leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq had been taken as an affront by India. Pakistan's high commissioner in Delhi was summoned by the Indian government and told that the phone call amounted to "interference in [India's] internal affairs".

Pakistan, in response, called up India's high commissioner to receive a protest over the reaction to the phone call.

It is difficult to understand how Delhi considers the conversation between Mr Qureshi and the Mirwaiz as an "attempt to undermine India's unity". Moreover, the Indian foreign secretary's language, alleging that this country "abets ... individuals associated with terrorism" is highly unacceptable and contrary to the facts, as the Mirwaiz is a moderate Kashmiri leader spearheading a peaceful political movement for the region's rights, and those involved in the armed struggle are indigenous fighters.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a negative pattern the Hindu nationalist BJP government is following. Previously, too, India has raised a hue and cry over meetings between Pakistani diplomats and Kashmiri leaders, going as far as to cancel scheduled bilateral talks, even though Pakistan's moral and political support for India-occupied Kashmir is unambiguous, and the issue is an internationally acknowledged dispute.

India under Mr Modi has made it clear that peace with Pakistan is not part of its priorities; meetings of Saarc have been scuttled due to Indian intransigence, while the bilateral talks process is in deep freeze. And while there seemed to be

some potential in Pakistan's offer to open the Kartarpur corridor, India's politicisation of the issue is dampening hopes of a breakthrough.

Considering the BJP's roots in the fanatical RSS — which has no love lost for Pakistan or Muslims — it is understandable that Mr Modi and his party would find excuses to avoid talking to Pakistan. And with national elections only a couple of months away, the BJP will not want to be seen as going 'soft' on Pakistan in order to please the saffron brigade and scoop up more votes.

However, this narrow, communal approach will do little to further peace in South Asia. Whatever issues Delhi has must be communicated to Pakistan through diplomatic channels, and only through sustained bilateral dialogue can mistrust give way to a constructive relationship.

It is hoped that after the Indian elections, whichever party takes power in Delhi will take a progressive approach towards Pakistan and restart the dialogue process in earnest so that peace can be achieved in this region.

Doing business

IN the next five years, the PTI government wants Pakistan to be in the list of the top 50 countries where it is easier to do business than elsewhere in the world. The target appears ambitious given Pakistan's current position at 136 among 190 economies ranked by the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index. Yet, many would say it is doable. The country has already successfully improved its rank by 11 points from 147 in 2017 because of reforms initiated three years back. However, the bureaucracy's anti-business bias and red tape could delay the execution of the required reforms. After all, the simplification of procedures and friendlier regulations will weaken officialdom's control over businesses and plug one of the most lucrative avenues of corruption.

The government is trying to remove snags hampering investment and industrial growth by tweaking policies and attempting to improve regulations to unshackle industry and attract investors to escalate economic growth. It has announced several fiscal and policy incentives that it expects will help revive investor confidence. Now it is focusing on creating a sustainable business-friendly regulatory environment to woo domestic and foreign investment, essential for long-term, rapid economic growth. Top trade and investment officials the other

day highlighted some of the measures they had executed or are going to implement in the next few months to make it easier for an investor to start a business or set up an industry. These measures include a decrease in the number of tax and other payments companies make to the government from 47 to 16, reduced interaction between state functionaries and businesspeople through the use of technology, launch of a one-window facility for registration of a company or property, automation of construction permits and the creation of dedicated offices to facilitate smooth business operations. Going forward, it plans to club together multiple federal and provincial taxes and levies into one to make it easier for firms to pay their government dues. Indeed, simpler laws, regulations and procedures are crucial for encouraging private investment. However, the government needs to give equal attention to improve factors of production if it wants to reverse the process of deindustrialisation and boost exports. For example, it should initiate projects to improve labour productivity, ensure availability of low-cost capital to the industry — especially the small and medium entrepreneurs — and develop efficient industrial estates with plug-and-play facility for investors.

T20 in Karachi

ON Jan 31, Dawn's front page included a photograph of West Indies women cricket team stand-in captain, Merissa Aguilera, and her Pakistani counterpart, Bismah Maroof, atop one of Karachi's decorated camels. Wearing the cricket uniforms of their respective countries, the two smiled for the camera while holding on to the T20 trophy, ahead of the three scheduled matches. It was a friendly and innocuous photograph, but meaningful in the current climate of normalcy returning to a city that had experienced severe bouts of violence not too long ago. In fact, security concerns were the reason West Indies' regular captain Stafanie Taylor decided to opt out of the tour. This is the first time in 15 years that the West Indies women's cricket team has toured Pakistan. Two of the matches, also aired on television, have already been played at Karachi. Even though the Pakistani team has lost the series, much has been gained for the city of Karachi, for women's sports in Pakistan, and for the return of international cricket to Pakistan. For too long, women's cricket has been ignored on an institutional and social level, in contrast to the great hype and capital surrounding men's cricket.

Since the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in 2009, when international teams decided to stop visiting Pakistan for security reasons, local cricket has suffered. It was amongst great fanfare that Zimbabwe toured Pakistan in 2015, followed by West Indies a couple of years later. The Pakistan Super League, which brings international players and coaches such as the legendary Viv Richards to Pakistan, was another win for the multitude of cricket fans in the country. The latest series also points to an improving law-and-order situation. And it shows that Karachi has the potential to become a sports hub once again. The provincial and federal governments should turn this into a mission from this point on.

Property: a welcome step

IT is an open secret in Pakistan's real estate market that between the transaction value and officially documented value of property, an enormous gap exists which hinders tax collection and allows black money transactions to flourish.

The FBR's announcement, therefore, that it is hiking up property valuation rates across the country further by an average of 15pc to 25pc is a welcome step in the journey to increasing tax revenue and limiting the injection of black money in the economy.

Effective immediately, the new property valuation rate stands at 60pc of the actual market value and is to be implemented in 21 major cities of the country.

The upward revision of official rates has been a long time coming. The previous government attempted to revise the rates in 2016 and was somewhat successful after negotiations with real estate stakeholders, but it put off notifying the second phase of revisions out of fear of a backlash in the run-up to the general election last summer.

As a result, property transactions have continued with glaring anomalies. There remains a massive discrepancy between what is sold or purchased and what is documented, much to the detriment of the government that is the ultimate loser in this scenario as stamp duty is paid on official rates.

By allowing this gap to exist, the government would not only be facilitating business for those who want to park untaxed, illegal wealth in real estate but also making it difficult to determine the true worth of the sector — thus losing out on

billions of rupees in tax revenue. Another entity at the losing end is the middle-class and upper-middle-class buyer, who is forced to confront high property prices determined by injections of undocumented wealth.

An important aspect of the fresh revision is also that it is in keeping with FATF's recommendations to track transactions in the property market in a bid to curb money laundering and terror financing.

It is then in the government's best interest — and very much in line with Prime Minister Imran Khan's promises to pursue tax evaders — to back the FBR's revised rates, even in the face of resistance or complaints of a downswing in property prices.

In the past, there has been immense pressure from stakeholders to take back such steps, as private housing authorities — even one as organised as the DHA — benefit from the inconsistency. The government must stay firm, as in this case, what is good for business is not necessarily good for the economy.

Aside from increasing tax revenue, in the long run the revised valuation rates are a step closer to bringing transparency in the property market which has become increasingly expensive and opaque.

Learning fests

THE three-day Adab Festival that concludes in Karachi today is a happy reminder that the avenues to learn and interact are widening. At one point, such literary and cultural festivals that were central to people's lives were put on hold as the free exchange of ideas was routinely shunned on one pretext or another. Indeed, the revival of the tradition — of literary meetings, lifestyle exhibitions and book fairs — over the years demonstrates the people's resolve to pursue their interests. Annual fairs and new ventures indicate that good progress is being achieved. The number of such events has multiplied and so good has been the latter's spread that ever newer centres, away from big cities such as Karachi and Lahore, are appearing on cultural calendars. Along the way, there has been an effort to improve the quality of content and to widen its scope to bring in newer subjects, some of which were not so easy to discuss when the literature and cultural mela arrived in the country a few years ago. As is the case with all such endeavours, there is a debate on just what should make up these occasions.

Criticism is bound to follow such a debate. On the other hand, those who have been steadfastly advancing the idea of promoting literary and cultural activities in the country can take a lot of satisfaction from the fact that not only have the numbers of people who look forward to such events been growing, but that the exposure to new ideas brings with it its own refinement of thought. Also, with the increasing number of such events, there is the inevitable pushing of the frontiers to take the discussion to new levels.

The organisers of these fairs are faced with a tough challenge. At the outset, they must show innovation when it comes to topics and their presentations to avoid being typecast. The format has to undergo constant revision and the attempted change in tone may not always go down well. The share of local content has been increasing over time too, and if channelled properly, could prove a boost to local literature. Unfortunately, in many cases, such festivals are seen as too focused on elite circles. This must change and intellectual pursuits must be encouraged for all. The media can play its role by spreading the message and giving as much attention to cultural events in smaller places as it does to the ones held in big cities.

Targeted killings

MEMORIES of violence past have begun casting a shadow over Pakistan's largest metropolis. After months of relative calm, targeted killings have taken place with disturbing frequency over the past few weeks in Karachi. The development was described to this newspaper by a senior counterterrorism official as evidence of a new 'underworld criminal group' in Karachi. The spate of violence began with the assassination of Ali Raza Abidi late last year, with the former MQM leader gunned down outside his home. A sectarian motive is one of the angles being considered for the as-yet-unsolved murder. Among some half-a-dozen targeted killings that have happened since then are that of a KDA official active in the Shia community, two Ahmadi brothers and a policeman. While it may be too early to claim that any of these were religiously motivated killings, this is the point at which the right kind of response from law enforcement can curb violence from spiralling out of control.

When the Rangers-led Operation Cleanup began in late 2013, Karachi was a cauldron of ethnic, sectarian and political rivalries — the wages of years of

disastrous policies that had sabotaged the interests of the city's residents for political gain. Militants affiliated with political parties, with the tacit support of their leadership, ran an underworld economy that thrived on the proceeds of extortion, kidnapping, bank robberies, etc. Not surprisingly, targeted killings also became the order of the day. Within a year or so, the operation to restore law and order in Karachi halved the incidence of major crimes; targeted killings were brought down by a whopping 80pc. Part of that had to do with many hard-core criminals escaping the dragnet and fleeing the city, even the country itself. It is difficult to say how much store one can set by the police version, but there is irrefutable evidence that some of those criminal elements are returning to their old hunting ground. They must not be allowed to spread terror in Karachi again.

Police reform

IT is ironic that a signature achievement of the PTI during the past five years while running Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is in danger of being watered down by the party itself.

The KP police during the PTI's first provincial government is the closest that Pakistan has come to having an independent police in any part of the country. Eschewing political interference, strengthening accountability mechanisms and enabling the provincial IG to exercise his authority to appoint and transfer officers on merit have resulted in a force that serves the people rather than its political masters.

The PTI chairman himself has reminded us of this time and again. However, with greater power, different priorities are beginning to assert themselves.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's new ToRs for a committee tasked with suggesting amendments to the KP Police Act, 2017, and to the Punjab Police Rules, indicate a shift towards rolling back the operational independence granted to the police. In fact, rather than any reference to enhancing that independence, the ToRs speak of a 'police for the government'.

Ominous signs of this changing approach came days after PTI took power at the centre. There was the overnight abrupt transfer of the Pakpattan DPO on orders that a Nacta inquiry concluded came from the new Punjab chief minister's office. Not long after that fiasco, the Islamabad IG was transferred, this time on the

prime minister's orders and again without giving any reason. When the highly regarded former IG KP, Nasir Durrani — whose services Mr Khan has often lauded — suddenly resigned as head of the Punjab Police Reforms Commission, it could only be surmised that it was for lack of confidence in the government's intentions.

If the PTI's campaign promises of reform in law enforcement along the lines of what it had achieved in KP have not quite unravelled, they have certainly lost their shine.

The police have long been an instrument of state oppression, whether it be to illegally seize land, facilitate criminal enterprises, assuage politicians' bruised egos by instituting false cases on their say-so, etc. Political interference in promotions, postings and transfers results in a 'police for the government', fuels corruption in the force, destroys internal discipline and demoralises upright, competent officers.

Some particularly heinous incidents recently have further tarnished the reputation of law-enforcement agencies and increased the clamour for reform. The premier has quite rightly also directed the committee to come up with amendments to prevent the gross abuse of power that can result in incidents like the Sahiwal killings. However, the answer to reining in an out-of-control police is not to clip their wings further but to replicate the KP reforms and improve on them.

The report of the Police Reforms Committee — which included some stellar names and was set up by retired chief justice Saqib Nisar — was launched last month; the PTI government should take direction from their recommendations.

Diaspora bond

IN a first initiative of its kind, Prime Minister Imran Khan's administration has launched a diaspora bond, Pakistan Banao Certificate, to tap into the foreign savings of Pakistani nationals living overseas as part of its plan to avert a balance-of-payments crisis. The offer will be valid for five months to June 30 and the government is hoping for an enthusiastic response from the targeted investors, particularly those based in North America, Britain and Europe with 'deep pockets'. But many think the project is unlikely to fetch the kind of cash the government is expecting it to generate. After all, only a tiny fraction of the 8.5m

Pakistanis living abroad contributed to the dam fund campaign the former chief justice had launched with so much fanfare to finance the Bhasha hydropower project. Critics say that the dam fund was rather naively modelled on how donations for welfare schemes are collected. The example of the money collected by the Shaukat Khanum Hospital is cited as Mr Khan's own, very successful project. These comparisons are, however, flawed because the expats, who send back \$20bn or almost 80pc of our total export revenues every year, got no exemptions on donating money for the dam as is the case with donations made to charity. Again, it would be foolish to compare the dam fund campaign wherein the Pakistani diaspora was called upon to pay for the scheme from their pockets and the dollar-denominated PBCs that offer a highly attractive return of 6.25pc and 6.75pc on three- and five-year maturities.

These are quite attractive bonds. The offered rates compare with coupons of 2.49pc and 2.88pc on US bonds, and 3.5pc and 4pc on Saudi papers of the same maturities. Moreover, the profit on the certificates will be tax-free and the buyers will get 1pc premium on final payment if encashed in Pakistani currency. Besides raising cash to support the deteriorating balance-of-payment situation, the government says the diaspora bond is just one of the many instruments it is developing to create investment opportunities for overseas Pakistanis. Two more financial instruments will be rolled out in the next few weeks and a \$500m fund is also planned under the Board of Investment. Thus, it is safe to assume that the diaspora bond will bring in a respectable amount even if the target is not met.

Wildlife trafficking

A WHOPPING 8,300kg of pangolin scales and 2,100kg of ivory tusks were seized by custom officials in Hong Kong. Packed inside a container from Nigeria and declared as frozen beef, this incident is just the latest of its kind, putting the spotlight back on the thriving black market for endangered animals and animal parts. Hong Kong and several Southeast Asian countries have become transit hubs or central stops in the facilitation of this underground industry, while the 'raw material' usually comes from Third World countries. Despite being declared illegal, there is a growing market for pangolin scales and ivory in mainland China and other parts of the world, where the local population of certain animals has been hunted to near extinction. In recent years, conservationists have expressed

concern over the internet and the dark web's role in aiding and abetting this criminal industry.

Pakistan, too, has seen the population of certain animals rapidly decrease over the years due to their demand in other countries as pets, food, medicine and decoration items. This includes the endangered Indian pangolin — a shy and gentle creature, popular for its meat and scales. Found in Sindh and Punjab, pangolin scales are removed with the use of boiling water, or the creature is starved to death and sold to dealers. Others are killed simply because they are perceived to be a threat by the local population. Turtles — particularly freshwater green turtles and black spotted turtles, found locally — are also captured and sold in large numbers in Southeast Asia and China. Last year, a report by TRAFFIC found that at least 10,321 live black-spotted turtles from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh were recovered in 53 seizures between April 2014 and March 2016. And just recently, 1,200kg of recovered turtle and pangolin meat were stolen from the Sindh Wildlife Department's office in Karachi. These losses are buried under more 'important' news items, but they spell disaster for our ecosystems.

Land scams galore

LAND scams may not wreak immediate and devastating havoc on the general populace as do terrorist attacks, but they are equally destructive in the long run to a people's sense of security and their faith in the system. An investigative report in this paper yesterday detailed a case of illegal land acquisition, in which the Airports Security Force has joined hands with a leading business group to develop ASF Arabia Vista — a 40-acre residential and commercial project in Karachi. This case illustrates particularly well the tactics uniformly applied to bulldoze civilian authorities who show any resistance — even if they do so for self-serving reasons — to this wholesale loot and plunder. Ultimately though, these land grabs, which are found across the country — although Karachi's pricey real estate is especially coveted — are the product of collusion between corrupt builders, their backers in the corridors of power, and a venal bureaucracy.

Proceedings at the Supreme Court are only just beginning to plumb the depths of this cesspool. After a year-long judicial process, the apex court's May 4, 2018 verdicts held that Bahria Town Ltd had acquired land for its projects in Karachi,

Rawalpindi and Islamabad through illegal means, and that the transfers were null and void. Hearings by a three-judge bench tasked with implementing the verdict are ongoing. There have been other promising developments. Last September, the principal accused in Lahore's Eden Housing Society scam, who happens to be a son-in-law of former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, was arrested from Dubai. Then in December, several revenue officials and builders were indicted by an accountability court in a case pertaining to the illegal transfer of 731 acres of prime state land to DHA City, Karachi.

While it is heartening that some light is being shone on its workings, the racket is deeply entrenched and enjoys the patronage of those unused to being called to account. NAB has shown inexplicable lethargy in investigating even flagrantly illegal real-estate projects. That was one of the reasons it took so long for the Supreme Court to arrive at its damning verdicts in the Bahria case; the other being that land regulatory authorities and various civil institutions deliberately stonewalled and misled the court. The rise of the middle class has fuelled runaway demand for residential accommodation and made construction big business. However, when regulatory bodies and development authorities become party to those business interests, those who have invested their hard-earned money into projects of dubious provenance can lose everything. Or at the very least, find themselves shortchanged. Sometimes rightful owners of land on the urban peripheries are deprived of it by force, or the threat of force, to make way for gated communities. The superior courts have made a promising start. They must ensure that everyone involved in this racket, including those who control it, is held culpable.

Atrocities in IHK

THERE couldn't have been a more apt prelude to Kashmir Day, observed in Pakistan on Feb 5 each year, than the images of the closed-down occupied valley in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit.

The land was on a lockdown to ensure smooth passage for the Indian prime minister, who was visiting to monitor development projects. Businesses were closed and internet services on the phone suspended. True to tradition, several well-known Kashmiri leaders were put under house arrest and hundreds of others also taken into custody in the run-up to the trip.

Srinagar presented the look of a city besieged by soldiers taking control of the roads.

Read more: Modi and Kashmir

Mr Modi was ultimately spotted waving emptily at imaginary crowds as he took a safe cruise through the famous Dal Lake.

Since there is no shortage of sane voices in the subcontinent, the tour has been squarely called out for its audacity. It has been dismissed as being the most artificial of its kind — the latest in the make-believe series of the BJP that seeks to show it is firmly in command in held Kashmir.

The party has tried all kinds of gimmicks to sell a soft image of itself on the subject. The cover of decency has repeatedly been blown away and the real, brutal face of oppression revealed.

With much help from the Modi government, the valley today is on fire with a movement that is recognised for its indigenous character and which continues to withstand fierce assaults by the occupying Indian forces.

Mr Modi has been busy trying to thwart the uprising that has assumed new proportions after the killing of freedom fighter Burhan Wani in 2016. However, the BJP government is taking desperate measures that are clearly doomed.

And if the frustration of the administration is reflected in the large number of civilian casualties in recent times, the fear is that with a general election looming in India, the ruling party will be seeking to play up its Hindutva philosophy all the more vociferously to get votes.

Also read: 'Fear rules Kashmir as BJP goes about realising its dream'

To make matters worse, the BJP has a greater urge to promote its narrow, faith-based messages in the face of a Congress that, as recent state elections prove, is resurgent in many parts of India.

The situation in JHK is bad enough, but the latter's example of how BJP wants to impose the state's will over all is an even bigger disaster for other regions.

Justice for Uzma

ON Jan 21, a report in this paper carried the story of a teenage girl found lifeless inside a drain in Lahore. She was identified as 16-year-old Uzma, who had been working as domestic help for a family in Iqbal Town. Protests erupted after her death, with family members accusing her employers of murdering and disposing of her body in the most shocking manner. Three women from the household confessed to the murder in front of the police and TV cameras. Displaying an unfathomable lack of shame, they stated that the child was beaten for simply taking a bite from the plate of the youngest daughter of the household — the ‘audacity’ of the child to forget her ‘lowly’ status in their eyes. That was her crime ie ‘tarnishing’ the food by touching it with her bare hands. A caste system may not exist in the law books, but it very much lives on inside such households. And Uzma is not the first or last victim of such a deeply diseased mindset that divides human beings into ‘pure’ and ‘impure’.

Two images of the child began circulating on mainstream and social media soon after. In the first, taken before she started working for the family, Uzma smiles self-consciously at the camera, her hair wrapped in a pink and black dupatta. In the second, the barely recognisable girl — dishevelled hair, bruised and starved — struggles to eat the food being offered to her, unable to even sit up straight. Now contrast this image with the photographs and videos purportedly of the daughters of that household which are also circulating on social media: crooning into the camera without a care in the world, taking selfies in their finest clothing, showing signs of a filtered existence, pampered and coddled since birth. Did the guardians of these girls not think someone else’s daughter was entitled to the same security and love?

Centre-province ties

IN a positive move, Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for closer centre-province coordination to fix patchy public services and a faltering economy. He expressed this desire at a meeting in Islamabad on Monday, which was attended by the chief executives of Punjab and KP where the PTI rules. It is unclear if the chief ministers of Sindh, controlled by the opposition PPP, and Balochistan, governed by a coalition led by his allies, deliberately stayed away or did not get

an invite. Again, although the Sindh governor was present at the launch of the federal health insurance scheme, the provincial government wasn't represented. Whatever the reason for this absence, greater efforts are required to bridge centre-province differences. Mr Khan touched on a crucial aspect of the relationship when he talked of improved coordination. As prime minister, it is also incumbent on him to not allow political differences to hamper united action on key issues if there is to be progress.

The task is difficult: the prime minister's suggestion for greater coordination has come at a time when there are concerns that the federation wants to take over provincial powers; for instance, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has said that the centre wanted to interfere in the province's collection of taxes on services and agricultural income. In fact, there are many who believe that there is an attempt to club together federal and provincial taxes and levies in one place to improve the ease of doing business. But the fact that the provinces have so far not been consulted can be construed as an attack on their autonomy.

Centre-province relations can be very complicated. In Pakistan, the highly centralised character of the federation has been a major factor behind decades of an acrimonious struggle for power between the two. That tug of war has continued even after the passage in parliament of the landmark 18th Amendment to the Constitution and finalisation of the seventh NFC award that attempted to balance these relations nine years back. Indeed, the friction between the centre and the provinces has escalated in recent months, not least because of certain federal actions like putting the Sindh chief minister on a no-fly list on alleged charges of involvement in fake bank accounts. The talk of undoing the 18th Amendment and plans to significantly cut the provincial share under the next NFC award aren't helping the cause of the federation, or mending centre-province relations. It is the job of the rulers to reach out to the provinces and if they have any reservations about the power-sharing formula under the 18th Amendment or the previous NFC award they should discuss these at the proper forums to avoid being seen as imposing their will on the provinces.

US-Russia treaty

ONE of the most dangerous aspects of the Cold War was the ever-present threat of nuclear conflict between the US and the Soviet Union.

Though both superpowers thankfully never actually had a nuclear exchange, there were a few close calls (eg the Cuban Missile Crisis) that highlighted the threat the weapons posed to world peace.

While the threat of nuclear war subsided considerably after the fall of the USSR, the current chaos in the international sphere has sparked fears that a renewed arms race between the US and Russia may be in the works. This is thanks in part to the haphazard policies of the Trump administration.

Explore: US calls for Russian, Chinese nuclear transparency

Last week, the US announced it was 'suspending' the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, negotiated with the Soviets in 1987, and would withdraw from it entirely in six months if Moscow continued with its 'violations' of the agreement. Russia has replied in kind, with the Kremlin saying it is also suspending the accord and considering a withdrawal from the pact.

Brinkmanship may well be the new normal in international politics. However, when this brinkmanship entails the possible use of nuclear weapons, the entire global community — as well as saner elements in Washington and Moscow — must step in to prevent sabre-rattling between these nuclear-armed foes deteriorating into something more sinister. Instead of jettisoning such treaties, they must be strengthened to prevent the menace of nuclear weapons from spreading.

As some experts have noticed, the US move may encourage China to ramp up its own weapons programme.

As it is, the world today is a very dangerous place; the last thing needed is a fresh arms race involving global nuclear powers.

Read more: Russia plans new missile systems

While US-Russia relations are going through a low phase, it would be a bad idea to return to the mutual hostility seen during the Cold War. Mr Trump's presidency

has been marked by the US withdrawing from a number of bilateral or multilateral deals — the Paris climate accord, the Iran nuclear deal, and now the treaty with Russia.

Washington is sending the message to the international community that it is fickle about honouring its global commitments and can withdraw from them anytime on the slightest pretext.

Read more: Nuclear chief says Iran exploring new process for uranium enrichment

In the interest of global stability, sane voices within the American establishment must provide better counsel to Mr Trump and advise him to work with the Russians towards saving the nuclear treaty, instead of pursuing the path of confrontation with Moscow.

Arman Loni's death

MYSTERY continues to shroud the sudden death of professor and activist leader Arman Loni in Loralai on Saturday.

Family and friends of the deceased allege that the police were responsible for killing Loni during a crackdown on a days-long sit-in, yet the police claim that a postmortem revealed no signs of injury. Days later, there is still no clarity on the circumstances of his death — which is threatening to stoke an already contentious issue.

Context is key. Against a backdrop in which several high-profile extrajudicial killings have cast a sustained spotlight on excessive force by state authorities, the risk of tensions spiralling out of control is high. Monday's strike in several areas across Balochistan — with its widespread support from political parties across ethnic lines and sections of society including traders and lawyers — is indicative of Loni's popular standing in civil society as well as how widespread the public disaffection is. The provincial chief minister took notice of Loni's death the very next day, perhaps in recognition of these delicate sociopolitical implications.

Concurrently, in the wake of a brutal attack on the DIG police complex in Loralai last week, vigilance on the part of law enforcement and the provincial government is understandably necessary.

Also read: Extrajudicial killings

However, in question here is not only the issue of whether or not Arman Loni was indeed a victim of police brutality, but the very nature of 'vigilance' being distorted by public servants to evade accountability and justify curtailing people's rights. Paranoid, overreaching measures taken in the interest of 'maintaining public order' are counterproductive. Thus, statements by the provincial home minister seeking to blame those who contest the official version of events (as it currently stands) while in the same breath promising a fair investigation will hardly serve to dispel such perceptions.

Loni's death demands an unbiased and transparent probe. But it also requires that the provincial and federal governments be responsive to the public's mood and work to de-escalate a potentially volatile situation.

Moscow talks

First row: Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, third from left, Taliban political chief Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, right, former national security adviser Mohammad Hanif Atmar and other participants of the "intra-Afghan" talks pray during their meeting in Moscow, Russia on Feb. 6, 2019. — AP

ANOTHER sign that the endgame to the seemingly endless conflict in Afghanistan may be near came on Tuesday as a host of Afghan factions — including the Afghan Taliban — met in Moscow to talk peace and reconciliation.

The meeting comes on the heels of marathon talks between the Taliban and the US in Doha that have been described as a breakthrough and the possible beginning of a negotiated peace that can bring stability to war-scarred Afghanistan. In fact, on Wednesday news outlets quoted a Taliban representative as saying that the American withdrawal had already started.

The fact is that the Americans, the Russians as well as the Chinese are all wooing the Taliban. After years of being on the fringes since the invasion of the

Americans and their allies ousted them from power, the Taliban are now gaining acceptance as legitimate stakeholders in the Afghan political process.

There are also signs that they are showing some flexibility. For example, in Moscow, members of the militia said they wanted an “inclusive Islamic system” in Afghanistan with a new constitution, while they also listened to Afghan women’s rights activists.

Read more: 'We never want to go back': Afghan women fear cost of peace under Taliban

This indicates a change as it was under the Taliban’s watch that women had been denied nearly all rights and freedoms.

Also in attendance in Moscow were a number of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s political opponents, as well as former president Hamid Karzai, against whose government the militia had fought a bloody insurgency.

But perhaps adhering to the maxim that in international relations and statecraft there are no permanent friends or enemies, all parties that attended the Moscow conclave are working to protect their permanent interests in Afghanistan.

They perhaps realise the fact that they will have to tolerate each other to do so, and eschew the way of the gun. It is also no small irony that the Afghan factions met in Moscow, considering the fact that the erstwhile Soviet Union was instrumental in destabilising Afghanistan.

Read more: Taliban demand new constitution for Afghanistan at rare talks in Russia

While the Doha and Moscow talks are good news, to ensure that negotiations result in a lasting peace, the Taliban should start talking to the government in Kabul. It is naive to imagine that decades of hostility will melt away after a few discussions in foreign lands.

However, the US, the Kabul government, the Taliban and all other Afghan factions need to agree on confidence-building measures that can help pave the way for peace and a sustainable political process.

A multiethnic democratic Afghanistan that protects the rights of all sects and ethnic groups is the objective here, with protection for women’s rights and a policy of not providing sanctuary to transnational militant movements.

After decades of war it will take time to heal the wounds of the Afghan people, but reconciliation is the only way forward for this battered land.

Standing committees

IT is a manifestation of the vicious tangle that Pakistani politics is that we are left hailing the accomplishment of a simple task by the speaker of the National Assembly. Mr Asad Qaiser on Tuesday finally wrapped up the formation of the standing and functional committees in the house, something that had been delayed for six months after the general election.

If we were to identify one hurdle in the functioning of these crucial parliamentary committees, it would have to be the disagreement on who should head the significant Public Accounts Committee. But this was not the only challenge that had to be overcome.

the basic problem is the polarisation that compels parliamentarians to hold every initiative of the other side in suspicion.

Indeed, the impression sometimes is that these lawmakers' energy is spent on scuttling the proceedings in the Assembly rather than on ensuring parliament's running in a disciplined, effective manner to benefit the people they represent.

Even now, when committee members have been announced, there may be objections and criticism about omissions of which a first reading of the list says there are plenty. But before that, in a typical atmosphere of mutual distrust, the establishment of these committees could well be interpreted by some as a result of a 'deal'.

This is very unfortunate for a democracy that is still searching for firm roots and it only helps those who see democracy as a failed model beyond repair.

Many big names have been excluded from the list of nominees to these committees. Mr Asif Ali Zardari, along with his party stalwarts Raja Pervaiz Ashraf and Khursheed Shah, have not been found worthy of sitting on any National Assembly committee.

Read more: Fazl says no more interested in Nawaz-Zardari patch-up

On the other hand, whereas the PPP officials pitched him to head the crucial committee on Kashmir, Mr Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has been named for the human rights committee, while Shahbaz Sharif has also won nomination to a couple of committees.

This could well indicate a bias for the official formula PTI spokespersons are often found to promote.

According to this formula, the current order under Prime Minister Imran Khan has no space for some 'infamous' old-timers, even when the political heirs to these unwanted politicians may be, willy-nilly, accommodated.

This in itself will agitate many minds, meaning that the National Assembly may continue to be a reflection of not unity but divisions in the country.

Contaminated water

THERE seems to be no end to Balochistan's water-related woes. Not only is its capital city experiencing some of the worst water shortages, a report in this paper has now shed light on the high levels of contamination in the water being used for growing vegetables there. Facing challenges of a growing population and insufficient infrastructure to support it, high levels of industrial and medical waste find their way into rainwater drains that farmers then use to water their produce — which eventually creeps into the local populace's diet. But there is limited research and data on the topic. Prof Zahoor Ahmad Bazai from Balochistan University conducted lab tests on seed germination and seedling growth of lettuce from three locations in the city and published a paper on his findings. He claims that farmers pay off the government authorities in order to continue with the unhygienic practice.

On the same day, another report in the paper carried a photograph of the visibly polluted Malir River in Karachi: vegetables were being grown on the banks of the river with sewage water. Sindh only recently inaugurated a province-wide food regulatory authority to maintain quality control, carry out lab tests and enforce the writ of law. But Balochistan does not have a food regulatory body yet, unlike the other provinces. Anecdotal evidence suggests there are also high levels of adulteration in milk, soft drinks, sweets and cooking oil. Yet these ill practices continue with no checks and balances. It is said time and again that Balochistan

is the most neglected province, to the point it seems to have become a complacently accepted reality. Where is the will of the provincial and federal ministers to change that? Where are the agitation and organisation and vision to improve? The prime minister of Pakistan has always placed health and health infrastructure high on his list of priorities — even before the general elections. The creation of a food inspection body in Balochistan is the need of the hour.

Faizabad dharna judgement

THE Supreme Court's verdict on the Faizabad dharna, delivered on Wednesday, is a searing indictment of state institutions and oversight authorities who have time and again failed the people of this country, either by exceeding their mandate or by abdicating their duty.

It was a judgement uncompromising in its insistence that people's fundamental rights as guaranteed by the Constitution must always be paramount; that authority is a sacred trust which must be exercised transparently; that no one is above the law.

Indeed, it is precisely what needs to be said at a time when democracy in many ways seems to be fraying in this country.

The Faizabad dharna took place in November 2017, and its repercussions continue to linger. For 20 days, life in Islamabad and Rawalpindi was paralysed as TLP protesters blocked the interchange between the two cities, inciting hatred, resorting to violence and urging insurrection against the sitting government. The entire country was transfixed by the chaos playing out on their television screens.

Explore: 10 major takeaways from SC's Faizabad sit-in judgement

But, as the apex court has implicitly recognised in its judgement, the Faizabad dharna did not take place in isolation.

This shameful episode was an event foretold, incubating since long in the many distortions of democratic principles.

It was the culmination of years of political engineering, manipulation of public opinion and the use of force to crush peaceful protests even as blatantly illegal, violent hate-mongers met no consequences.

Explore: The flames of bigotry

The ongoing suppression of the media, denounced in the verdict as “unconstitutional and illegal”, is part of the same playbook.

Underlying these time-tested machinations is a deep-seated contempt for the people, an indifference to their legitimate expectations of security and progress.

“When institutions stay within their designated constitutional boundaries and there is an effective system of check and balance, citizens stay safe and the state prospers. The trouble starts with self-proclaimed saviours,” reads the judgement.

The political class also has much to answer for. While successive governments have repeatedly kowtowed to anti-democratic forces in the hopes of weathering the inter-institutional power imbalance, opposition politicians have colluded with such elements to destabilise and bring down elected governments.

Read more: Where is the state's response to the siege of Islamabad by extremist religious parties?

By these short-sighted and self-serving tactics, they have ceded control over their right to freely exercise the mandate to rule the country if voted into government by the people.

Thus, when confronted with tricky, quasi-manufactured crises such as the TLP protest, they are unsure how to respond, losing further credibility in the process.

Towards the end, the judgement reminds us that Pakistan was achieved by “men and women of integrity, sincerity and good manners” and quotes the Quaid as saying he visualised Pakistan “to be based on the fundamental principles of democracy, not bureaucracy or autocracy or dictatorship”.

In essence, the highest court in the land has told us, resoundingly and memorably, that this country belongs to all of us.

Test case for NAB

IN a more developed democracy, the arrest of a minister for an official investigation into corruption allegations would have been a routine occurrence worthy of routine curiosity.

In Pakistan, the detention of senior provincial minister Aleem Khan is an issue which may help define the quality and capacity of our democratic order.

Do we finally have it in us to put under scrutiny those in power? Can we ask them to explain their doings? Can we, now at this stage of our difficult journey towards the rule of law, resist diversionary tactics and streams of thought to concentrate on the purely legal aspects of the case under discussion?

Mr Khan has been in the news for his rapid rise in business. While this in itself is no crime, his visit to the NAB offices had long been on the cards.

The allegations against him are serious and even in a system more biased in his favour, there would have been a few interrogations. Now that he has reached this critical point and a moment of reckoning the less the government politicises the issue, the greater it will be to the credit of the PTI dispensation.

There is talk of how the arrest of Mr Aleem Khan, which was followed by his resignation from the post of senior minister in Punjab, is some kind of a prelude and justification for action against an opposition bigwig.

Read more: Shahbaz Sharif no show at accountability hearing, to be indicted in Ashiyana case on Feb 18

This is just too basic and too transparent a scheme for even the simplest administration to attempt, and the PTI and its advisers are experienced enough to understand this.

The opposition as well as the media busily angling for any clues to discrimination may, consequently, want to ensure as best as they can that the suspect is investigated as thoroughly as would be any other Pakistani in his situation.

This is why it is as much a trial of NAB as it is of its latest celebrity guest.

The accountability bureau has to be mindful of the fact that the public's eyes are fixed on its workings and will be looking for any signs of slackness in the

performance of the bureau or of the latter's prejudice against the individual who is under probe.

There is an example being created here. In the interest of a quality system, let us try and make sure that the model is based on the principles of fairness and justice.

Cricket flop

THE Pakistan cricket team's lacklustre show in South Africa where they were whitewashed 0-3 in Tests besides losing the ODI and T20 series has dismayed our cricket-crazy nation and compelled the critics to call on the PCB to adopt urgent corrective measures.

Though the team's graph in international cricket in the past two years had remained quite impressive with wins in England, Ireland and Zimbabwe, it is now back to square one with successive defeats against New Zealand in the UAE and now South Africa, which have raised serious questions about Pakistan's ability to withstand quality opposition, especially in the longer version of Tests.

The truth is that at no point during the African Safari, except in a couple of ODIs which they won, did Sarfraz Ahmed's men look competitive enough or show resilience or even appeared like putting their act together to challenge the hosts.

Read more: Sarfraz Ahmed to captain Pakistan in World Cup 2019

Despite the talent, despite a bevy of coaches accompanying the team, despite substantial exposure, it was the same old story of embarrassing batting collapses, dropped catches and poor bowling while fans kept waiting for that moment of defining overseas triumph.

There is serious work to do with both bat and ball if fortunes are to change.

Green, fast-paced tracks ought to replace the featherbeds at home and in the UAE which have given a false feeling of superiority to the players.

thile many have seen through the façade, the board continues to gloat over the team's successes at 'home' which eventually leads to fiascos such as the one in South Africa.

The bowling, too, is one-dimensional. Pakistan need the tangibles as well as the intangibles to graduate from a good team to a great one.

Sound techniques, calm temperaments, unwavering attitudes, innate match awareness and a knack of winning the key moments are special qualities that define great teams and which Pakistan seem to lack.

With an average team age of under 30, they are young enough to start putting these qualities together if they are determined to turn things around before the World Cup in May.

Reluctance to talk

PAKISTAN and India have finally agreed on an itinerary of reciprocal visits to iron out details regarding the opening of the Kartarpur border for Sikh pilgrims. The visits are going to take place in March in the wake reminders and expressions of hope by peace-loving observers that the officials will be able to conclude the affair amicably and without too much hassle. These calls reflect concerns over the delay in finalising the details of an initiative that appeared within grasp when it was announced some time ago. It had been hailed as a crucial moment in history, a possible point of departure from old, enslaving positions. A few weeks later, it is quite remarkable how much effort has been put into proving just the opposite. Pakistan had been accused of not fully committing to talks in the past but now it is Pakistan which blames India for foot-dragging — and with reason. It is clear the Indians are not keen on expanding the Kartarpur opportunity. So often in the past, even the smallest thaw in Pakistan-India ties was followed by efforts to thwart progress. This approach is apparent in hawkish elements who oppose peace and clearly do not want too many thoughts of normal neighbourly ties collecting in impressionable minds on either side of the border.

Pakistan says it has been pushing hard for talks in recent weeks, but it has also predicted that the Indian side will not respond to the invitation positively. Only last Wednesday, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi reiterated the point in an exclusive interview with Sky News. Much of the interview, inevitably, was about the Kashmir cause and Mr Qureshi had little difficulty in highlighting it at a time when international concerns regarding the occupied valley have been rising as India continues to use violent force to silence the Kashmiri people demanding liberty. The minister quite rightly pointed out that the Kashmiris' alienation from

India had touched new levels and that the occupier forces were fighting a lost war.

It is the intensity of the war against a people long demanding their right to self-determination, the madness of it all, which lends instant credibility to Islamabad's explanation of why India is not ready to open a wide-ranging dialogue with Pakistan at this time and why Delhi is so eager to contain the effects of its agreement to open the Kartarpur border. Apparently, the mood in the ranks of the ruling party in Delhi is that a strong-arm image in occupied Kashmir will help it in garnering votes in India's general election due in a few months' time. Indeed, it is primarily the election that does not allow the Narendra Modi government to acknowledge that ultimately it is only dialogue that can resolve all problems. A worse advertisement for democracy is difficult to find.

Detained activists

ON Tuesday, over two dozen Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement activists were arrested by the police in Islamabad while gathered to protest the death of Arman Loni.

For over 24 hours, the whereabouts of one detainee, prominent rights activist Gulalai Ismail, was unknown to her family and legal counsel. A written order for her arrest was never produced, and under what charges the remaining activists are being detained is still unclear.

That Ms Ismail was eventually freed has much to do with the intervention of Prime Minister Imran Khan and Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari. However, for the government to truly disown this gross violation of civil liberties, it must not only insist on due process but demand that the police reveal under whose — if not the government's — orders this crackdown was sanctioned.

The government's legitimacy depends on its ability to take such unconstitutional adventurism to task. Citizens cannot be arbitrarily harassed and held in captivity by the state, nor can the latter's institutions be unaccountable to the people and their elected representatives.

In this regard, opposition parties must also account for their craven silence when the fundamental rights of others are trampled on, particularly while lamenting their own victimisation. Speaking out in defence of the marginalised and

vulnerable should never be contingent on political, commercial or personal expediency, but the primary responsibility of every agent of democracy.

Moreover, that this large-scale, highly visible police action could happen in the federal capital — in front of the National Press Club no less, where scores of media persons had already converged — without getting any TV channel coverage speaks volumes.

Indirect restrictions on the press notwithstanding, it demonstrates the extent to which broadcast media has allowed itself to abdicate its duty to inform the public of the unfettered, unvarnished truth. The truth so far: neither the press nor the public has been provided with any material evidence to support veiled and explicit claims that the PTM is anything other than an ethnic nationalist alliance non-violently demanding its constitutionally guaranteed rights — a phenomenon hardly novel to this country.

Those in violation of the law must be charged accordingly; however, mass round-ups and sweeping indictments of sedition and terrorism, if history is any guide, only serve to further polarise and destabilise national cohesion. Unity cannot be sustained by force but, as Dr Mazari has herself stated, by embracing diversity and dissent.

Gas crisis

GAS consumers, particularly domestic users, are suffering across the country, and not just because of the inflated bills that have been draining their pockets since the government decided to raise the fuel's price to exorbitant levels in October.

Take a look: The curious case of Pakistan's natural gas crisis

It is also low gas pressure that has made it near impossible for them to cook food or heat water. Both industrial and domestic consumers had complained of low pressure in most parts of the country and unannounced suspension of gas supplies in some areas in the last several weeks. But the two authorities in charge of supply and much more fail to acknowledge the problem.

The situation has worsened in recent days, forcing many factories in Karachi's industrial area and Punjab to close down in the wake of unannounced supply

cuts. In Karachi, a SITE official has claimed that 80pc to 90pc units have been shut in the last couple of days. In Punjab, the textile industry issued a press release on Thursday, regarding low pressure and a suspension in supply. CNG stations in Karachi have also been shut as SSGC is facing a shortage of 300mmcfcd in addition to the general low pressure.

The SNGPL blames the supply gaps on the increased consumption owing to low temperatures in Punjab and KP, as well as illegal compressors installed by both industrial and domestic consumers.

Low gas pressure has been a regular feature for the last many years due to a failure to fix the distribution system. But this year, the situation is pinching consumers more because of the cumulative impact of the steep price increase for domestic users and the pressure factor. This is in spite of the fact that honest consumers are paying to cover the gas distribution companies' losses on account of theft and inefficiencies.

When the prime minister removed the heads of the two utilities blaming them for shortages at the beginning of the winter, it was hoped his government would take effective steps to ensure smooth supplies. The measures are still awaited.

N-weapons race?

IN today's chaos-filled world, with crises aplenty, the threat of nuclear war has seemingly receded from the global list of imminent dangers to humanity. However, while one should not be alarmist, as a recent call from the Red Cross, and developments in US-Russia relations indicate, the threat very much exists and may be getting bigger. The Red Cross has called for a total ban on nuclear weapons, saying that states were disregarding their "long-standing nuclear disarmament obligations" and work was afoot to modernise national nuclear arsenals. The Red Cross's appeal is not without reason; over the past few weeks, the US and Russia have threatened to withdraw from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, negotiated between the Americans and the Soviets at the fag end of the Cold War, while more recently, both sides have said they may not renew the New START treaty, which will expire in 2021. Russian officials claim their US counterparts have refused to negotiate an extension.

While memories may be short, the world should never forget the devastation nuclear weapons have wrought. The brutal use of nukes by the US in Japan during the Second World War stands as perhaps the biggest reminder of the destructive capability of these cruel weapons. Thereafter, the Cold War was full of close calls where rival commanders mistakenly thought the other side was preparing for a nuclear strike. The most perilous moment was of course 1962's Cuban Missile Crisis. However, it was hoped that with the end of the Cold War the threat of nuclear apocalypse had receded. Yet as recent developments have indicated, rash decisions being made by the leaderships of some nuclear states may be pushing the world towards a new arms race. There is also a smug hypocrisy that members of the nuclear club have shown; while they are quick to point the finger at states that have more recently acquired nuclear weapons, they continue to build and update their arsenals. Moreover, states feel threatened when those in their neighbourhood acquire nukes. For example, Pakistan had legitimate concerns about its security when the Indians conducted their nuclear test in the mid-1970s, and it was arguably this threatening move that put this country on the nuclear path to preserve its own security. Also, while the Trump administration has attacked the Iran nuclear deal and accused the Islamic Republic of pursuing a weapons programme, there is a strange silence where Israel's suspected arsenal is concerned.

Instead of ripping up existing nuclear protocols, the US, Russia and other atomic powers must strengthen arms-reduction efforts and work to eventually rid the world of these abominable devices. Let the leaders of nuclear-armed states show statesmanship and eschew populist rhetoric where nukes are concerned, for using the nuclear card as a gimmick to boost nationalism and domestic popularity will only pave the way for disaster.

Asma's legacy

IT is exactly a year ago that one of the bravest daughters of Pakistan, Asma Jahangir, passed away suddenly and quietly.

A redoubtable defender of human rights and democratic values, champion of the downtrodden, and fierce opponent of repressive forces, she was, true to form, fighting the good fight to the end. Even today, indeed especially today, her voice is needed more than ever.

One may be sure that the ongoing campaign to silence rights activists, muzzle the media, and promote a narrow nationalism, would not have intimidated Asma one whit.

After all, she had been schooled in the politics of resistance very early; as a young woman she took on Gen Yahya Khan's martial law regime in order to have her activist father released from prison. She was a thorn in the side of the next military dictator too, fighting on the streets and in the courts his myriad misogynistic edicts and violations of people's rights, violations that characterise the ascendancy of anti-democratic forces.

Civilian governments were not insulated from her uncompromising sense of justice either. When the previous PML-N government criticised Bangladesh for executing two opposition politicians after "flawed trials", she promptly called out its double standards given its silence on the unfair trials in which Pakistan's own citizens were being sentenced to death — a reference, in part, to military courts.

Asma's courage and indomitable will aside, it was her sense of justice that must continue to inspire all those who seek a more equitable society.

Individual freedoms, she believed, must be protected at all costs. She was undeterred by labels of being a traitor to her religion and her country, the usual emotive tropes so beloved of bigots and hyper-nationalists. When the National Assembly, to its enduring shame, listened in silence while the then prime minister's son-in-law launched into vile invective against a persecuted religious minority, it was Asma who denounced him for his hate speech.

It was also Asma who represented MQM supremo Altaf Hussain after the Lahore High Court banned the media from covering the party's activities. In so doing, she was defending a basic tenet of democracy — freedom of speech — that everyone, including the MQM, is entitled to no matter what their politics.

On that principle she would not compromise, even while faced with angry denunciations from a section of her own fraternity. Asma spoke truth to power, and we must continue her legacy.

Accessibility in cities

IT is heartening to finally see disability rights being addressed by members of the federal cabinet and thus gaining traction in the national policymaking discourse. In a meeting last week, the prime minister took note of a significant barrier to enabling people with disabilities' inclusion in mainstream society — inaccessible public infrastructure. While there have been a few success stories in recent years in which access features were incorporated into public infrastructure projects, these interventions remain piecemeal and insufficient. By directing the CDA to ensure that buildings and public spaces in Islamabad meet the requirements of universal access, Prime Minister Imran Khan can set in motion a template for truly sustainable urban development that can be replicated across urban Pakistan.

Sustainable cities need urban plans and upgrades that reflect the needs of both current and future populations. Despite their poor enumeration in the 2017 census, virtually all development practitioners acknowledge that Pakistan's PWD population is significant, and expected to rise when factored with national health indicators and rising life expectancies. Women, children, the poor, the elderly and PWDs can only actively participate in public life if urban spaces are designed to facilitate their movement. People with mobility, visual and hearing impairments thus require public spaces features such as ramps, Braille signage, voice and sound alerts, spacious entrances and corridors, pedestrian-friendly roads, etc. Moreover, when made part of the initial planning phase, instead of retroactively introduced, such features are only a nominal part of construction costs. The hurdle, however, lies in implementation. For years, successive governments have periodically developed policies and laws aimed at the uplift of PWDs and other marginalised groups, only to have them rendered meaningless by the apathy of bureaucrats tasked with enforcement. The Accessibility Code of Pakistan, with its guidelines for designing and modifying built forms to meet international accessibility and safety standards, was introduced over 12 years ago. Can it finally be dusted off and effectively implemented?

Civil service reform

ON Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan returned to one of his favourite themes when he reiterated his commitment to depoliticising the bureaucracy, “insulating it from all kinds of political pressures”. His words signified the distance he has travelled since the spirit of reform first captured his imagination. Pre-election, Mr Khan wanted to set the system right, and reforms in the bureaucracy, which is at the centre of the system, is where his focus needed to be. However, as prime minister, Mr Khan has lately been attempting to convince civil servants that his is a government that bureaucrats can trust and work with. It is a fact that the PTI refrain about change had created new expectations that many knew would not be easy to meet. For the bureaucrats, it meant shifting allegiance from the PML-N to the PTI. Before elections, and immediately after, the bureaucracy was seen as part of the problem. This created a sense of insecurity and apprehension among the bureaucrats when their boss — the prime minister — demanded they be at their most efficient. But a new realisation is dawning: the government needs at least a working relationship with the bureaucrats. This has been relayed in the prime minister’s statements on the topic of late. His words are more measured, perhaps even tilted in favour of the civil servants, indicating how difficult it is for a new party and a new leader to enlist the trust of a bureaucracy politicised over the years. Government servants in crucial positions are not yet responding to the prime minister’s directions as he would like them to. This is surely frustrating for Mr Khan, who had promised people widespread reform.

The government constituted a task force under Dr Ishrat Husain who was asked to find ways of turning the civil service into a competent outfit. Mr Khan is in favour of restructuring and reforming the bureaucracy “to make it progressive and innovative”. But this could take a long time, and in the meantime, the government will have to make do with the civil service in its current form, even as attempts at transforming the system continue in the background.

It is no surprise that Mr Khan had to adjust his pre-power position to show that he is here to protect the bureaucracy from undue pressure. A convenient way has been to give assurances to the bureaucrats at the expense of the political class that is perceived as making unfair demands of the government servants. This is true to a large extent but the prime minister would do well to recognise and address one basic flaw, regardless of whether the person in charge of a situation

is a politician or a civil servant. This is the centralised structure of the bureaucracy. Reform must begin with efforts to decentralise authority in order to promote initiative and participation at all levels.

The long battle

WHAT seemed recently to be within grasp, ie the eradication of polio in Pakistan, has once again turned out to be an elusive dream. Pakistan is one of the last few polio-endemic countries in the world, along with Afghanistan (cross-border infiltration being one of the challenges) and Nigeria. But even as sporadic cases continued to be reported, they were primarily from the lower-income districts of Karachi, raising hopes that at least in much of the rest of the territory, the spread of the crippling disease had been contained. No longer. This week, it was discovered that samples collected from Faisalabad's Achkera pumping station tested positive for the virus, with the strain of the virus already circulating in Lahore. This returns Faisalabad to the list of districts affected by the malady, the reason apparently being a major decline in the rates of immunisation of children. A source privy to the immunisation campaign told this newspaper, as reported on Saturday, that according to a recent survey, on an average a 50pc drop was evident in the immunisation coverage in Faisalabad, and now traces of the poliovirus had been detected again after more than two years. It is believed by many medical experts that the Punjab government is not taking the issue as seriously as it ought to be, despite the dangers posed by three high-risk districts in the province: Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Dera Ghazi Khan.

There is an urgent need for Punjab — as well as all other parts of the country — to act with resolution and alacrity. The reality is also that they have to act in tandem. According to medical experts, the only route to the eradication of the poliovirus is herd immunisation, which means that every child in the country must be immunised within more or less the same time period so that the virus has nowhere to go to. The group immunised must include children who may have been vaccinated previously outside the EPI schedule. The challenges that the country's anti-polio drive has already faced have been formidable, ranging from the killings of vaccinators by militants to refusals (to vaccinate) by the parents and guardians of children due to a lack of understanding and a deeply damaging campaign led by religious elements. These challenges have now dissipated

somewhat, but the findings in Faisalabad are a setback. More interest on the part of state authorities is needed for the pursuit of the vital goal of eradication.

Khairpur attack

SINDH has always prided itself on maintaining interfaith harmony. But a number of incidents in recent years have challenged that perception, the latest being an arson attack on a temple in the town of Kumb in Khairpur district.

Last week, miscreants entered the Sham Sundar Shewa Mandli temple and set alight religious sculptures and holy books, including the Bhagavad Gita and Guru Granth Sahib. Prime Minister Imran Khan took notice of the incident and requested the Sindh government to find and prosecute the perpetrators.

Meanwhile, Sindh Governor Imran Ismail issued a statement calling the attack a “conspiracy to sabotage the interfaith harmony and religious concord in the province”.

While Sindh may indeed have less open bigotry than other parts of Pakistan, in recent years, the land of Sufi saints has had to grapple with the same rising extremism and religiosity that has gripped the rest of the nation.

Nearly the entire Hindu population of Pakistan lives in Sindh. One of the biggest laments remains the forced conversion of Hindu girls and women by Muslim men of influence — a practice that has been reported at length on these pages and that is perpetuated by certain seminaries.

Read more: The truth about forced conversions in Thar

Many Hindus in rural Sindh are also poor and disenfranchised, with limited access to social mobility. There is the added discrimination towards those belonging to the scheduled castes, from both Muslims and upper caste Hindus.

Anti-Hindu language is present in textbooks and popular culture across the country. It is sad to note that blasphemy cases disproportionately target those belonging to minority religions.

Minorities have every right to feel secure in their religious identity and within their places of worship as those belonging to the majority religion.

If respect is demanded for the majority faith, this courtesy must extend to the minority religions as well. That is basic human decency.

Anything less is hypocrisy at best, and discrimination at worst. Sindh must reclaim its reputation by disempowering all those that threaten its centuries-old peace.

The IMF again

AFTER the meeting between Prime Minister Imran Khan and the IMF managing director, Christine Lagarde, the country has moved a step closer to entering its 13th Fund programme since the 1980s, when the era of structural adjustment began.

Details are scant but the language used by the Fund and the government in their respective official statements following the meeting suggests that Pakistan will have to agree to some tough conditions in return for a bailout and the Fund's stamp of approval on the government's economic policies. The IMF's nod is essential to reopening access to international capital markets, among other things.

Mr Khan made the right decision to add his voice to the ongoing talks with the IMF.

Contact at the highest levels can impart valuable momentum to the talks that appeared to be dragging. Whatever vacillation and difference of opinion there may have been within the cabinet and among the advisers over the merits of approaching the IMF, these should now be put aside. Ms Lagarde's statement called for "decisive policies and a strong package of economic reforms" — something the larger policy community within the country has been calling for all along as well. Now that the call has been taken up at the level of the prime minister, there is an expectation of a clear and credible forward movement along this track.

Mr Khan himself said that his government will sign onto a programme of "deep structural reform", without elaborating what sort of reforms were discussed. What is known is that the Fund's emphasis is on the fiscal framework, and everything flows from that. This means bringing stability to the primary balance, or the difference between revenues and expenditures minus interest payments on debt.

The burden of the resultant adjustment will either fall on current expenditures — of which the largest part is defence outside of interest payments — or it will involve strong revenue measures, or a combination of the two. No wonder officials connected to the talks keep pointing out in off-the-record remarks that implementing the programme will involve ‘tough political choices’.

Without deep expenditure cuts, the burden will fall on revenue mobilisation; and from the size and pace of the adjustment being called for, it appears the programme will require a substantial hike in taxes in the short term. There is no escaping this reality now, so the biggest priority worth holding on to is to protect the poor and vulnerable from the impact of this adjustment. After that, the next big priority is to spread the burden by broadening the tax base. The PTI ran on a platform of profound change, and FBR reforms featured prominently in its manifesto as well as the prime minister’s maiden speech to the country. The time to deliver on that promise has arrived.

Revolution at 40

THIS month marks 40 years since the US-backed Shah was overthrown in Iran, to be replaced by a clergy-led combine that declared the end of the imperial order and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. For four decades, the ‘new’ Iran has weathered a number of storms, including wars, internal dissent and international isolation. Barely a year after the fall of the old order, the disastrous Iran-Iraq war was launched as Saddam Hussein — egged on by his Arab peers — attacked the Islamic Republic. That brutal conflict would drag on for nearly eight years. Iran managed to survive, while Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime would ultimately fall in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. The Iranian revolution essentially changed the calculus of the region; while in the pre-revolution days Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel were the triple pillars of the US-backed Middle East order, after the events of 1979, Washington and Tehran became implacable foes due to a variety of reasons. This hostility survives, as the Trump administration’s recent torpedoing of the Iran nuclear deal demonstrates. Regional temperatures also rose as Iran sought to ‘export’ its revolution. In many states, particularly in the Arab world, Shia Islamist groups were emboldened, which led to apprehension among Arab potentates and strongmen and sparked a proxy war of sorts, with sectarian overtones, across the Muslim world. Pakistan has also not been immune from this wave. Elsewhere, Hezbollah, the Lebanese group that

grew under Iranian patronage, has become one of Lebanon's most powerful political actors, and was instrumental in taking back Arab land from Israel on the battlefield.

However, while revolutionary Iran has flexed its muscle across the region — most recently playing a central role in backing up Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria — internally, it has faced accusations of suppressing dissent. The most perilous moment for the Islamic Republic came in 2009, with the Green Movement and the disputed presidential election. Interestingly, despite the flaws in Iran's hybrid clerical-democratic system, the country has held regular elections and has a greater degree of democracy compared to most of its Arab neighbours. Looking ahead, the state of Iran must listen to the wishes of its people. It may not be prepared to jettison its ideology — as some critics in the West hope for. But the Iranian establishment must work harder to deliver on the promise of freedom and justice that was its rallying cry against the Shah's oppressive regime.

Lahooti Melo

THE fourth Lahooti Melo took place over the weekend at the Sindh University in Jamshoro: a two-day festival of music, dance, poetry and discussion that was open to all. Originally envisioned as a meet-up for musicians by Saif Samejo of The Sketches — where up-and-coming musicians get opportunities to interact and learn from the more experienced names in the industry — the festival has expanded to include panel talks on contemporary issues with a large guest list including several prominent names in government, civil society, academia, journalism and entertainment. The guest list included activists and authors Amar Sindhu and Fouzia Saeed; musicians Hamza Akram Qawwal, Mughal-e-Funk and Rachel Viccaji; storytellers Tajdar Zaidi and Mohammed Hanif; and filmmakers Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Jami.

Keeping in mind the global discourse surrounding women's rights and safety — and a young woman's account of being assaulted by one of the guests at the Lahooti Melo last year — the talks this time around were focused on themes that affect girls and women: forced marriages, unwelcoming public spaces, and the #MeToo movement. Clearly, the issue of harassment is a topic nobody can ignore anymore; it affects men and women in every industry, although it has

surfaced most explosively in the entertainment industry here. The intentions of the organisers were surely noble — even if logistical issues at the event and the quality of many of the panel discussions left much to be desired. What can't be denied though is the importance of hosting such events outside the big cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. While these cities host several discussions, musical meets, theatre performances, concerts, food and literary festivals throughout the year, the smaller cities and towns tend to be overlooked. For a change, guests had to travel from Karachi to Jamshoro to attend a highly anticipated event. But what was most promising was the large attendance of students from different parts of Sindh. All cultural festivals are learning events after all.

Domestic violence

ONCE again, religious parties are creating hurdles in the passing of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Bill.

The bill was introduced in the provincial assembly early this week after being approved by the provincial cabinet in 2018.

The stated purpose of the bill is to prevent domestic violence against women and to protect them from sexual, psychological and economic abuse. If passed, women from KP or their guardians can file complaints to 10-member committees headed by district deputy commissioners, which will provide assistance to them.

Any person found guilty of abuse would be imprisoned for up to three months or fined up to Rs30,000 (or both) under the Pakistan Penal Code.

Undoubtedly, this will be a welcome move for the women of KP who deserve just as much security as their counterparts in other areas of the country. But whenever such laws are discussed, opposition voices are raised using the rhetoric of 'culture' and 'family'.

It was only last month that KP appointed its first provincial ombudsperson for sexual harassment, after much resistance from certain quarters.

In 2016, Punjab passed the Protection of Women Against Violence Bill, 2015. Over the years, Punjab has had the most instances of violence against women — or at least the most reported.

The law offers protection to women against a range of abhorrent crimes: domestic violence, emotional, economic and psychological abuse and cybercrime. Additionally, it provides protection, residence and/or monetary order in light of such offences.

Prior to this, Sindh had passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2013, and Balochistan passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2014. While these laws may have their deficiencies and loopholes, and are open to criticism and thus improvement, they are absolutely vital in recognising that violence against women is a crime in the eyes of the state.

Violence is another form of control, and there is no end to the many ways society attempts to ‘control’ women through judgement or coercion. Inherent to these notions of control are knee-jerk reactions and deep-seated fears of women gaining independence — and men subsequently losing their power over them — which somehow translates into the breaking up of families for some. This is simply untrue.

And if families are indeed being kept together through fear and violence, that is not a healthy environment for any member of the unit to be in, in the first place — least of all the most vulnerable member, who has to suffer just to fulfil someone else’s abstract ideals.

Such regressive attitudes infantilise adult women by casting doubt on their decision-making faculties, and are used as a tool to justify oppression.

All women citizens deserve a life free of intimidation, harassment and abuse both within and outside their homes. Domestic violence is not to be taken lightly.

Asghar Khan case

SOME historic injustices need redressal in order for a country to lay old ghosts to rest. It is well over 20 years since the late Asghar Khan filed a human rights petition based on retired Gen Naseerullah Babar's accusations that the ISI had purchased the loyalties of certain politicians to manipulate the 1990 general election. The allegations were confirmed by retired Gen Asad Durrani, former DG ISI, in an affidavit to the apex court. In it he admitted his role in the affair, named the other players and elaborated on how the scheme unfolded. Notwithstanding this shocking revelation, the case languished until 2012 when the Supreme Court handed down a landmark verdict that had the potential of redrawing the political and institutional landscape along democratic lines. Yet there has been no accountability thus far, either for those who administered the slush fund, nor its recipients. In a time of hyper accountability, the silence on this front has been deafening.

Of late however, the court seems to have resolved not to cut the investigating authorities any more slack. On Monday, it ordered the defence ministry to furnish a reply within four weeks about the implementation of its 2012 verdict. One wonders what is hindering law-enforcement agencies from bringing the case to trial as ordered by the apex court. After all, there is an on-the-record confession by one of the principal parties to the crime. Other prominent individuals, civilians all of them, have been convicted on far less. Imran Khan while on the campaign trail was vocal about the significance of the Asghar Khan case in unmasking the sordid reality behind the 1990 elections. Politically motivated though his contention was — meant to discredit Nawaz Sharif as one of the recipients of the intelligence agencies' largesse and its direct beneficiary — he must, as chief executive in a parliamentary democracy, throw his weight behind bringing the case to trial. The government should have been quick in asking the FIA to withdraw its unfathomable request to the Supreme Court to close the case because too much time had lapsed since the events in question. Instead, it was left to Asghar Khan's family to take a principled stand. Let us also not forget that the trail of evidence that led to Nawaz Sharif's political downfall dates back to around the same time as when the powers that be decided to thwart the right of the people to elect their representatives.

Women's ODI triumph

THE women cricket team's brilliant ODI series win over the West Indies has earned the players well-deserved admiration. The win, achieved against more skilled opponents ranked ahead of Pakistan in the ICC women's rankings, has not only helped the women in green to grow in confidence, it is also likely to strengthen their chances of qualifying directly for the 2021 World Cup. The best part of the series was the consistent performances turned in by the team's ace players including Sana Mir, Javeria Khan, Sidra Amin, Diana Beg and Nida Dar, all of whom batted and bowled superbly to keep the rivals at bay. More significantly, the victory has helped the women's team leapfrog more experienced outfits like Australia, England and the West Indies to be at par with India at 12 points in the ongoing ICC Women's Championship.

Unlike the men's team, that enjoys a revered status, the members of the national women's team are often seen struggling at the international level, exhibiting little vigour and bowing out of tournaments with unsatisfactory results. Their last-placed finish in the previous World Cup in 2017 in England, where they lost all their matches, brought them public ire while critics predicted a dark future for them. However, saner observers have long called for more support and exposure for the team, and the PCB is now taking note of this advice. The results are there for everyone to see. More matches against leading teams such as Australia and Bangladesh last year, better emoluments, qualified foreign coaches and the issuance of central contracts have buoyed the performance of the team which also won the last T20 in Karachi in style before accomplishing the ODI win in the UAE. There is, of course, a lot more the PCB needs to do to ensure a bright future for the women's team. Facilities at the grass-roots level, dedicated playing grounds and coaches, regular national-level tournaments and a group of sponsors are bound to take women's cricket in Pakistan to new heights

PSL begins

THE Pakistan Super League cricket carnival is all set to kick off in the UAE today with the launch of its fourth season. Six star-studded teams will be battling for supremacy and the bumper winner's purse of half a million dollars.

Indeed, the cash-rich PSL, which is the PCB's flagship event, has made great strides since its inception in 2016; it is ranked only behind the Indian Premier League in terms of popularity and scale among the many T20 leagues around the world.

Also read: Why PSL matters

The fact that the PSL has evolved into a global event after three seasons is beyond debate. With every season, the league has become bigger and better, attracting leading players from hosts Pakistan, West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, England, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and other nations, besides drawing in top sponsors, broadcasters and, of course, millions of fans.

Take the ultimate PSL 2019 quiz you can't ace in one go

Islamabad United, led by Mohammad Sami, will be defending its title in the PSL's fourth season which promises more competition than the last three editions put together. Though all six teams feature some fine players, the presence of South Africa's AB de Villiers, making his PSL debut for Lahore Qalandars, makes this contest a special one.

According to estimates, PSL viewership last season soared to nearly 120m around the world and is likely to go up. With as many as eight PSL games scheduled to be played in Pakistan this time, including the final in Karachi on March 17, the PCB's newly appointed chairman Ehsan Mani hopes to convince the ICC as well as foreign teams to resume international tours to Pakistan.

The PSL's rapidly rising graph is a far cry from its launch days four years ago when there had been serious misgivings about its viability. Given the PCB's unprofessionalism and poor working ways, not many were convinced about the league's future.

The purists who scoffed at T20 cricket said the league was a destructive venture that could spoil the techniques of players and alter their priorities, given the money involved, causing them to shun the Test format. The PSL's success has allayed such fears.

Take a look: 5 improvements Pakistan Super League 2019 could use

Having said that, the PSL has had its share of controversy. The nasty 'fixing' scam in 2017 involving four players jolted the league; stringent measures are needed to avoid a repeat of the incident.

The PCB, along with the managements of the six franchises, must also ensure that all foreign players feature in the eight games in Lahore and Karachi. Their abrupt pullout last year and in 2017 from matches in Pakistan was disappointing, and sent the wrong message to the international community about the country's security situation.

The PCB has also received flak for its inability to relocate the league completely in Pakistan. If this situation is reversed, the PSL's fifth edition could well prove to be Pakistan's way back into international cricket after 10 years of isolation at home.

Organ donation

IT is difficult to see the logic behind the Senate Standing Committee on Law and Justice allowing the Council of Islamic Ideology two months to comment on The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues (Amendment) Bill 2018 — which was passed thanks to the efforts of Senator Mian Ateeq Shaikh — thereby delaying its passage. Under the bill, Nadra will ask citizens if they wish to register as donors, and which organs they would like to donate, upon the creation of their CNICs. Since 2010, progressive politicians have been trying to legislate on organ donation, but there have been constant hurdles placed in their way. Prior to this, SIUT, Edhi Foundation and concerned individuals have been lobbying for such legislation for years. And now, when the bill has finally been vetted after a comprehensive debate, what is the point of further postponement?

While local religious scholars are divided on the issue, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has approved organ transplantation, and many Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran already practise it. But in Pakistan, the

basic lack of awareness and poor access to legal facilitation have led to the perpetuation of a thriving black market for organs — demanded by those desperate to live, and supplied by desperate poverty. Additionally, there is a lack of data on the topic. Instead of indulging in further deferments, the legislators should look into building awareness campaigns and facilitating proper data registration programmes. The media can and should be used to its full potential to promote the practice, particularly of cadaveric donation, where organs are donated by the deceased. Prominent public figures, celebrities and politicians should also openly support such initiatives, to ease some of the taboos and fears surrounding it. It is an open secret that many of the organ donors in Pakistan are bonded labourers, desperate to pay off their debts. There have been instances when police raids found donors locked up in suffocating apartments, trapped by an obligation they unwittingly signed up to in exchange for a few thousand rupees. With little to no rights, and in the absence of the law, such patients rarely receive post-operative care, and some die from complications. Facilitating legal and ethical organ donation will ease taboos, provide safety to donors, and save lives. At the end of the day, that is the entire point of organ donation — to save lives.

Who controls Karachi?

DESPITE being the nation's most populous city and the commercial heart of Pakistan, Karachi lacks a unified command structure that can provide the megacity direction and meet the metropolis's infrastructural and civic needs.

While there is an elected mayor, the local government lacks teeth; there's a constant tug of war over municipal powers between the provincial and city governments. On Tuesday, speaking to industrialists in the city's Korangi area, Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar said that he had administrative control over only 12pc of the metropolis. He blamed the "controversial" 2013 Sindh local government law for a lack of powers, and added that the provincial government had taken over control of several revenue-generating departments.

Karachi notebook: Is a 'Naya' Karachi possible?

It is also true that there are multiple landowning bodies in Karachi, which means that the KMC — while officially functioning as the city's municipality — doesn't have control over the entire metropolis.

While there is a degree of politicking between the PPP-controlled Sindh government and the MQM-dominated Karachi administration, it is a fact that major civic functions — water, sewerage, garbage collection — are not under the KMC's purview.

Explore: Karachi's dilemma

During the Musharraf era, local government setups had more powers — Niamatullah Khan's and Mustafa Kamal's respective periods as Karachi's mayor saw more receptive LGs and infrastructural work carried out across the city — but the PPP rolled back the system after taking power in Sindh in 2008.

What has resulted thereafter has been a significant drop in the performance of local bodies across Sindh. While there was criticism that Pervez Musharraf's local bodies system gave too much power to the third tier by bypassing the province, in the current situation the provincial government is acting like a glorified municipality, micromanaging civic duties and not doing a very good job of it.

The Sindh LG law can do with amendments; a new system needs to be envisaged that grants greater powers to municipal governments, while maintaining a supervisory role for the province to ensure checks and balances.

Hate speech

PERHAPS more than most countries, Pakistan knows full well the wages of extremism. Unlike mainstream media which has successfully, through self-regulation, controlled the dissemination of the kind of speech that promotes bigotry and violence, social media is a far more free-wheeling and unruly entity. The government's impending crackdown on extremist narratives on social media, announced on Wednesday, is an opportunity for the PTI government to show that it can distinguish between legitimate expression of political opinion and words that incite religious or ethnic hatred against individuals or communities. About a year before coming to power, Imran Khan had accused the PML-N government of abusing the cybercrime law when some PTI activists were arrested, and denounced their detention as being "unacceptable in a democracy". Several PTI legislators had also submitted a calling notice in the National Assembly seeking to discuss the "harassment of social media activists". Now that it is in power, the

party can demonstrate that these were not merely empty gestures made only to advance its own cause. The information minister has rightly mentioned the importance of dialogue to prevent violence. An exchange of opinions, expressed civilly, is the lifeblood of a dynamic society.

Curbing hate speech in various formats including social media is one of the 20 points that comprise the National Action Plan. The civil-military leadership which devised the blueprint recognised that kinetic action without social intervention was meaningless. Indeed, during the following year or so, a number of clerics were sentenced to prison for inciting violence and individuals found distributing extremist literature were also convicted. However, it was a sporadic and piecemeal effort. In early 2017, five bloggers were picked up and disappeared despite having been cleared by the Islamabad High Court of blasphemy charges. A Dawn investigation a few months later found that 41 banned groups were present on Facebook in the form of hundreds of pages, groups and individual user profiles.

If the PTI government has decided to take a more proactive approach in curbing extremist narratives, it must first define the parameters of what can be a loaded term. Many politicians and rights activists were opposed tooth and nail to the passage of the cybercrime bill (in its final form), apprehending that it would be liberally and arbitrarily applied to silence dissent and diversity of political opinion. Their fears may have not been misplaced. According to Twitter's biannual report, between January and June 2018, the government, headed by the PML-N at the time, reported an unprecedented 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. Can one hope that this standard was applied to clamp down on violent extremism rather than inconvenient political commentary? In any case, due process must be followed; there must be no midnight knocks and no shady abductions.

Sexual harassment

THIS week, the Supreme Court ordered the federal and provincial governments to simplify the process of registering sexual harassment complaints and to make the law 'stronger'.

Justice Sheikh Azmat Saeed issued the order after reading reports on the 'weakness' of the existing law.

A month ago, a meeting attended by the federal ombudsperson for sexual harassment, Kashmala Tariq, and organised by the Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell, discussed faults in the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010.

Some of the concerns raised were: the law and its title should be changed to encompass all women, and not limited to just the workplace; ombudspersons should have a legal background; there should be no cut-off date for filing a complaint; the law should be inclusive towards transgendered persons; and there should be a clearer definition of harassment.

There have been numerous articles pointing out these problems over the years, with some complaining of its vague language and of the narrow definition of what constitutes harassment.

During the meeting, it was brought up that while civil society groups thought the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010, need not be amended, the legal fraternity was of the view that it was in need of revisions before it could be implemented. But what was interesting about this meeting was when certain participants brought up the lack of accountability within the legal fraternity — their own workplace.

Under the law, the aggrieved party can approach the ombudsperson's office directly to register their complaint. The respected federal and provincial ombudspersons need to work with relevant institutions of the state machinery to process formal sexual harassment complaints in both the government and private sector; set up inquiry committees that report within 30 days, along with an additional seven days to implement their findings; ensure all workplaces have a clear code of conduct; and uphold public conduct for deterrence and awareness purposes.

While there may indeed be problems in the law and particularly in its wording — and criticism and debate is fair and should be ongoing as judicial officers and the larger society need to be sensitised to harassment in all its manifestations — this is not a reason to delay implementing the existing law.

Most workplaces currently do not have committees and notices in place. Their presence will protect many women who are simply trying to do their job.

Larkana killings

IN fragile societies such as ours, ethnic and sectarian issues have the potential to flare up. That is why the state, civil society and community leaders must stay alert and step in to cool tempers and handle a tense situation before it spirals out of control. Two unfortunate incidents in Sindh over the past few days have demonstrated just how fragile communal peace is and how tragedies can be exploited by parochial interests to fan the flames of hatred. Three labourers originally hailing from Bajaur, KP, were gunned down by unknown killers in Larkana on Wednesday. The Larkana killings follow on the heels of the murder of Irshad Ranjhani in Karachi last week. Ranjhani, a city leader of the Jeay Sindh Tehreek, was killed by Abdul Rahim Shah, a UC chairman belonging to the PML-N. Mr Shah has claimed Ranjhani was trying to mug him while police say the deceased had a criminal record. However, a video clip of a bloodied Ranjhani — who was denied immediate medical treatment — has gone viral and fired up passions. As the Sindh chief minister pointed out, some elements are trying to give an ethnic twist to the killing.

Prima facie, the Karachi and Larkana killings appear to be linked, by the fact that they are being exploited by vested interests to stir up ethnic trouble in Sindh. This is unfortunate. For several years, Sindh witnessed ethnic unrest in both its urban and rural parts. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, whose PPP rules Sindh, was quick to condemn the Larkana violence, while the chief minister also slammed the violence. Where the Ranjhani killing is concerned, the law must be allowed to take its course and the case should be investigated impartially to ensure justice is served. The authorities also need to track down those involved in the Larkana killings and punish them accordingly. Above all, the Sindh government and political elements must work to maintain communal harmony and prevent the spread of hateful invective.

Pulwama attack

FOLLOWING the militant attack in India-held Kashmir's Pulwama area on Thursday, tensions between India and Pakistan are once again running high.

Over 40 Indian paramilitary troops were killed in the attack, which has been claimed by the Jaish-e-Mohammad, a proscribed organisation. And once again, there are allegations from across the border — as there have been in previous such strikes where India's security personnel in occupied Kashmir have been targeted — that those who planned the attacks had links with the Pakistani state, a charge that Pakistan has vigorously denied. In fact, the Pakistan Foreign Office has condemned the attack, saying that it was “a matter of grave concern”.

After each such incident, the already strained ties between the two countries take a further hit, this time with Delhi vowing to work for “the complete isolation ... of Pakistan” from the international community, while withdrawing the MFN status for Pakistan. Both countries have summoned each other's envoys — India, to protest against what it sees as Pakistan's ‘role’ in the attack, and Pakistan to refute India's unproven allegations.

Unfortunately, this has become a never-ending cycle of blame games, rebuttals and denials — with no joint engagement to understand the cause of the violence. To Pakistan's credit, although it has vowed political, moral and diplomatic support for the Kashmiris, successive governments have at least attempted to reach out to India — several times — to engage in talks, but there has been no reciprocal gesture from Delhi, which has more often than not jumped to its own conclusions.

If there is solid evidence that non-state actors used this country's soil to target others, then the Indians must provide it and Pakistan must conduct investigations. But without such cooperation, it is unlikely that a solution will be found.

Importantly, the young suicide bomber in the Pulwama attack was a native of IJK. For many years now, India's increasingly strong-arm, brutal tactics in IJK have alienated the local population who have had no need of outside help to vent their anger and frustration. Young Kashmiris are taking up the gun and attacking symbols of the Indian establishment. They have been met with a hail of bullets but have not been deterred. There have been several instances of students,

academics and intellectuals choosing the path of armed struggle, mainly because they see no other way to resist the atrocities unleashed by the Indian military machine.

The fact remains that until Delhi backs down from its militarised approach to the Kashmir issue, the violence will continue. Brutality will only beget more violence. It is only through the path of negotiations involving Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris that the stand-off can be resolved. But for that India will have to shed its rigidity and recognise that Kashmir is indeed a disputed territory — a reality the international community affirms.

Memogate anti-climax

WHAT started out as a political firestorm has ended, eight years later, with a whimper as the Supreme Court on Thursday finally wrapped up the so-called Memogate affair. The case — which was built on the claim that elements in the Asif Zardari-led government sought Washington's help against the Pakistan Army — was concluded by Supreme Court Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa who poignantly wondered if the state, the Constitution, democracy and the armed forces were so fragile as to be shaken by a mere 'memo'. That none of the overzealous petitioners who pursued this case were present when the apex court delivered the order is ironic, as a recap of the events is dominated by flashbacks of a national frenzy around the allegedly treasonous memo which was exploited to deepen the civil-military divide. The court has rightly left it to the government to decide if it wants to proceed against Mr Husain Haqqani, who was accused of writing the memo to the then US military chief Adm Mike Mullen in which he allegedly sought US help to avert a possible overthrow of the civilian government by the military following the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. But the conclusion of this case presents an opportunity for self-reflection on several fronts: should the judiciary under Iftikhar Chaudhry have jumped to act as referee in the Memogate matter, when the government at the time had already announced a probe? Was it appropriate for Nawaz Sharif, who has since acknowledged his mistake, to use the memo as an opportunity to lead the charge and allege treason against the PPP government? After the passage of many years, was it the responsibility of then chief justice Saqib Nisar to revive the Memogate controversy using his powers of suo motu?

Despite the formation of a commission, court summons for civilian and military leaders, and breathless reporting by the media, the scandal did not achieve anything other than the sacking of an ambassador. At the heart of the issue lies the notion of the separation of powers, which divides the responsibility of the state between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary — a framework which continues to be murky for the state today. As Chief Justice Khosa noted at the conclusion of the hearing, nothing needs to be done by the court at this juncture. It is now — as it always was — a matter for the government to deliberate on.

Celebrating radio

BROADCASTERS around the world celebrated World Radio Day on Wednesday. In this age of information, the role of radio cannot be understated, as the medium continues to reach the highest number of people in even the most remote locations where the population may not have access to digital and electronic media, or is unable to read newspapers. Low-cost and easy to set up, radio is an effective, pro-poor means of communication, and its function is absolutely vital in healthy democracies. Additionally, in times of disaster management, radio can reach affectees when other means of communication fail. Originally created for wartime purposes, as is the case with many communication technologies, the radio found its way into households in the 1920, and became a popular medium for news and entertainment — long before the arrival of television. Formed only two decades after radio's advent, Pakistan has had a long and illustrious history with radio programming. It was on June 3, 1947, that the Quaid announced Pakistan's imminent arrival on All India Radio. On Aug 13, 1947, Zahur Azar broadcast that Pakistan would come into existence "on the stroke of 12, midnight". The next day, the newly created Radio Pakistan aired its first news bulletin.

In 1972, Radio Pakistan changed its name to the Pakistan Broadcasting Service. Over the years, a long list of legendary presenters, actors and musicians first came to the public's attention through radio. In 1947, Pakistan inherited three radio stations: Dhaka, Lahore, and Peshawar. Now, according to Pemra, there are 143 FM radio stations across the country, hosting a range of programmes for diverse audiences. Whether it's the office dweller driving to his or her workplace early in the morning, the solitary security guard trying to stay awake during his

late graveyard shift, or the millions of Pakistanis living in underrepresented parts of the country, in villages and small towns away from the eyes of power, radio has a special place in all our lives.

Three decades after Soviet exit

THIRTY years ago this month, the Red Army marched back through what was then Soviet Uzbekistan into the USSR after a ruinous nearly decade-long mission in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union had invaded its southern neighbour to bail out its comrades in Kabul in late 1979. However, the intervention was an unmitigated disaster, contributing to the fall of the Soviet empire and sucking in global players in what would become one of the epic confrontations of the Cold War. The Soviet invasion destabilised Afghanistan; the country has not been able to recoup since. Closer to home, it also changed Pakistan forever as this country — under Gen Zia's watch — became a key player in the so-called jihad, fuelled by American and Arab money. Regional geopolitics would never be the same while Pakistan's political, social and religious fabric would undergo changes that still reverberate.

As the Soviets left Afghanistan with a bloody nose, America and its allies celebrated. However, the mujahideen — a conglomerate of Afghan resistance fighters and warlords — instead of consolidating their gains and rebuilding their country, started an internecine struggle marked by more violence and unrest. In this picture, the Afghan Taliban, a hard-line though disciplined force, stepped in to fill the vacuum created by the feuding mujahideen and took Kabul in 1996. They, in turn, were sent packing by the American invasion following the Sept 11 attacks, and ever since, the history of Afghanistan has been a sad cycle of failed nation-building and recurring violence. Today, the Taliban are once more in a commanding position, with the Americans willing to talk directly to the militia and accept it as a stakeholder in Afghan politics.

The Soviets seemed to have jumped into the Afghan quagmire in a moment of imperial overreach. There has been much soul-searching in Russia over the years, and today, it is ironic that Moscow is hosting peace talks to bring the current phase of the Afghan conflict to a close. However, where Pakistan is concerned, has our ruling elite, especially the permanent establishment that really calls the shots in this country, learnt anything from the Soviet invasion and its aftermath? Pakistan became part of the Afghan jihad, serving as a base camp

for the Mujahideen. Yet, while the US soon walked away after avenging itself against the Soviets, this country was left to pick up the pieces. There is a need to acknowledge that seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan was a failed policy. If anything, instead of creating a pliant government to our west, it boomeranged and destabilised Pakistan itself. As the popular narrative goes, drugs, guns and refugees flooded Pakistan, while the jihadi culture of armed groups claiming legitimacy under the garb of faith is one of the most dangerous legacies of strategic depth. While the Russians contemplate, so should Pakistan about what was lost and what was gained in Afghanistan.

Probing investigators

DISTURBING reports quoting unnamed forensic experts that digital evidence of last month's Sahiwal shootings was tampered with, strengthen the impression that an ongoing probe into the deaths of four people by CTD officials will be riddled with flaws. As a result of the tampering, it is difficult to establish who ordered the shooting. Unfortunately, such manipulation is not unknown. Deliberately hiding or eliminating evidence — as in the washing down of the crime scene after Benazir Bhutto was killed — and delaying tactics seem to be a regular feature of our law enforcers' investigations. It is no surprise then that few believe that probes such as the one into the Sahiwal case will be conducted in a professional manner. There are a number of otherwise open-and-shut cases that turn out to be near impossible to crack. The public perception from the outset has been that the uniformed men will be saved by the authority they belong to, the Naqeebullah tragedy in Karachi last year being a case in point. A well-known police officer was nominated in that case, but to this day, the now-retired officer has not been indicted and is, in fact, on pre-trial bail.

Those who are calling for justice in the Sahiwal case cannot be under any illusions in a country where everything can be blamed on faulty police investigations. It is, or is made out to be, something that cannot be fought, let alone changed. Judges have held police investigators squarely responsible for lack of a proper trial. The media has cried itself hoarse over the loose and unreliable investigation system, all the while pointing fingers at the police. Just the other day, the federal information minister himself lamented how the law in the country was only for the weak, even though the direct target of his reference was the National Accountability Bureau and not the police. All this makes the

future even more ominous — indeed, the thought of those who are supposed to uphold and enforce the law turning out to have no resolve is deeply distressing. Given these factors, the trial of officers inspires little hope. The whole act of defence, the popular sentiment says, is as spurious as are our routine fake police encounters. The special protection extended to the law enforcers in extraordinary cases has to be reviewed before the system of police investigation itself can be seriously probed — and reformed.

Ms Omar's 'heresy'

A ROOKIE in America's political ring, Ilhan Omar, one of the first two Muslim women elected to Congress, beat a hasty retreat the other day when both Republicans and Democrats joined hands to flay her for what in America is considered heresy: she had lambasted Israel. Within hours of her criticism of the Jewish state over its treatment of the Palestinian people, Republicans and Democrats, including one of America's most powerful women, Nancy Pelosi, demanded an immediate apology for her "anti-Semitic tropes". Evidently, the Bachelor's degree that the immigrant from Somalia obtained in political science and international studies had taught her theory and not one of the fundamentals of American politics: Israel's criticism is synonymous with anti-Semitism. In her tweet, Ms Omar had supported the 'Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions' campaign, which demands Israel's adherence to international treaties and calls for its withdrawal from the occupied territories. Her tweet raised a storm when she said American politicians supported Israeli policies for monetary reasons. When someone asked if she could clarify who doled out the money, Ms Oman flashed a one-word tweet "AIPAC" — American-Israel Public Affairs Committee.

AIPAC is a dreadful moniker, whose very mention sends a chill down Congressmen's otherwise strong spines. A politician on the wrong side of the AIPAC has no chance of making it to Congress or to a state legislature. Once elected — as Ms Omar has been — an American lawmaker stands no chance of a re-election, unless he or she behaves. Quickly, the hijab-wearing Congresswoman realised she had grossly erred and thanked her critics for "educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes". She would have spared herself strictures and denied Israel loyalists yet another opportunity to display their servility if she had read a comment by one of America's leading journalists. Writing in NYT on the warm reception Israeli Prime Minister

Netanyahu received in Congress, Thomas Friedman said each of those standing ovations was “bought and paid for by the Israel lobby”.

Bearing false witness

FALSE testimony, or perjury, is a scourge of this country’s criminal justice system. Many an innocent has gone to the gallows or languished for years behind bars simply because someone lied in court. It is therefore heartening that Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa has taken up the eradication of perjury as one of the cornerstones of criminal justice reform. Shortly before taking up the mantle of chief justice, he had emphatically declared his intention to build a “dam against fake witnesses and false testimonies”. On Friday, while hearing an appeal in a murder case, he reiterated the point even more forcefully, saying that those found to have lied in court would be sentenced to prison and banned from bearing witness again.

Individuals who commit perjury are complicit in the miscarriage of justice; they corrupt the legal process whose very purpose is to uncover the truth. In a well-functioning justice system, bearing false witness attracts serious legal consequences which act as a deterrent. In Pakistan however, bearing false testimony is treated — even by many judges — as a quotidian detail in a corrupt, ruthless system. The lower courts are rife with touts offering to bear false witness for a price; in effect, the life of an accused can be in the hands of an individual who makes a living out of misleading the court. This is not for lack of a law against perjury. Under the Pakistan Penal Code, giving false testimony at any stage of a judicial proceeding makes one liable to seven years behind bars, while punishment for false testimony in a capital case can extend to life imprisonment. In the worst-case scenario, according to the law, where an innocent person has been executed on the basis of false evidence, the perjurer himself can be sentenced to death. Who can forget that Aasiya Bibi came perilously close to being executed on the basis of false testimony, which also robbed her of nine years of freedom? Ultimately, it was the glaring inconsistencies in eyewitness accounts that resulted in her acquittal by the Supreme Court bench, which also included Justice Khosa.

The reason perjury is so prevalent in the criminal justice system is because the law against it is so rarely enforced that it may as well not exist. In August 2018, it

came to light that the Sindh High Court and its subordinate courts had not prosecuted a single individual for perjury over the past three years. This must change. Of course, false testimony is not always purchased; sometimes it can be the result of witness intimidation, which is why witness protection must be made far more robust. Improved forensic facilities would also reduce the reliance on witnesses. In other words, perjury cannot be looked at in isolation: it is but one aspect of the interconnected, and rotten to the core, criminal justice system.

PAC U-turn

THE PTI and PML-N are once again at loggerheads over the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee. The issue — which was apparently resolved nearly two months earlier with the nomination of Shahbaz Sharif — has been reignited as the government announced some days ago that it is mulling legal ways to remove the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly as PAC chair. As expected, the opposition has responded to the PTI's change of heart by threatening to boycott parliament and disrupt the functioning of government. To intensify the debate, in a move deemed contrary to parliamentary practice, Federal Minister for Railways Sheikh Rashid has volunteered himself as a member of the committee.

That the PTI is digging in its heels over the issue comes as no surprise; after all, the PAC is an essential component of bringing transparency and accountability to the government's expenditure and legislation — a key theme during Imran Khan's election campaign. But then, the party's change of heart after the December announcement by the foreign minister, that the government would concede to the opposition's demand "in the larger interest of democracy", is puzzling. On the surface, senior government representatives say they have serious reservations against Mr Sharif using his PAC position as a shield against cases of corruption faced by him. But in the background, it appears that some of the prime minister's advisers are displeased with Mr Sharif's continued offensive during Assembly proceedings despite his nomination, a gesture the party considered a step towards establishing a working relationship. Whatever the justification may be, the reality is that parliamentary proceedings are the casualty of this bickering. As a result, the mini-budget revealed by the finance minister some weeks earlier still has not been passed, leaving the measures announced by the government on hold. In this scenario, a further escalation of already

simmering political tensions will only take attention away from parliament's utmost priority — that of lawmaking. The onus of ensuring that legislative function is not interrupted lies with the government. With Mr Sharif out on bail, the PTI's primary objection against his nomination no longer stands. Better sense must prevail. The relationship between the opposition and treasury benches is one that lasts for years; heckling in parliament is a trademark of our politics and battles must be carefully selected for continuity in a democracy that is still finding its feet

Balochistan drought

AT the end of last year, the Balochistan home minister announced the results of a province-wide survey undertaken by deputy commissioners in the province. Twenty out of the 33 districts in Pakistan's largest province were drought-stricken, he said, affecting around 109,000 families. This was not particularly shocking to hear: reports of severe water shortages in Balochistan and Sindh have been published in these pages regularly. Still, it confirmed the worst fears of many. There are already reports of climate-based migration taking place in the 'resource-rich' province and other parts of the country, with settled people adopting the way of nomads by moving to different parts of the province. Balochistan's predominately agriculture- and livestock-dependent economy has taken a severe hit. Groundwater has seeped to dangerously low levels due to the lack of rainfall and there is widespread, unregulated use of tube wells that draw water. Balochistan's chief minister has announced the setting up of emergency cells and distribution of relief goods on trucks, which is currently under way, but nowhere close to the size and scale required by the emergency situation, as pointed out by opposition members. Most recently, a mission team comprising members from WHO, WFP, International Children's Emergency Fund and FAO amongst others has assured the provincial government of assistance during these challenging times.

It is important to remember that the drought did not occur overnight. It was 10 years in the making, with the province receiving scant rainfall over the past decade. Fortunately, there has been some light rainfall this month, but policymakers cannot rely on nature's small blessings. While donor agencies and relief efforts can ease some of the hardships of the people in the short term, one hopes that policymakers are also implementing long-term solutions, and that their

words soon turn into actions. The people of Balochistan are dependent on the fulfilment of the government's promises.

Saudi prince's visit

DURING his two-day visit to Pakistan, the government rolled out the red carpet for the de facto ruler of the desert, kingdom Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

there was much pomp and circumstance as the prince was feted by the civilian and military elite of this country, while parts of the federal capital were under virtual lockdown to ensure the security of the visiting royal and his large retinue.

Take a look: What's the deal?

There were also welcome promises on the economic and social fronts, with MoUs worth \$20bn signed, the release of Pakistani prisoners in Saudi jails announced, as well as a request from Pakistan to ease the immigration procedure for Haj pilgrims.

The relationship between Islamabad and Riyadh is decades old. Pakistani manpower has helped transform the kingdom into what it is today, and in return, expatriates have sent millions of dollars home to support their families.

There is, of course, also a deep military connection, as Pakistan has committed troops for the kingdom's defence. In fact, as Saudi Arabia hosts Islam's two holiest cities, the common Pakistani has a soft spot for the kingdom. Indeed, the Saudi investment pledges at this time are welcome, as Pakistan is going through a severe economic crisis.

It is hoped the pledges materialise into mutually profitable ventures that contribute to this country's economic revival. The visit is also welcome at a time when India is threatening to isolate Pakistan internationally.

However, in international politics, there are rarely any free lunches. While this display of Saudi-Pakistani friendship deserves to be hailed, Pakistan must uphold its sovereignty and national interests in all dealings.

For example, this country, particularly its parliament, took a bold stand by refusing to be sucked into the Saudi-led Yemen war in 2015. While there were

consequences — Riyadh's attitude hardened towards this country — it can be argued that had Pakistan jumped into the Yemeni quagmire, it would have been a disaster of considerable proportions.

Similarly, while promising to stand by Saudi Arabia, this country's establishment should communicate to the rulers in Riyadh that it will not be a party to any anti-Iran projects.

Also read: 'Pakistan ready to play constructive role between Iran and Saudi Arabia,' Imran Khan tells Iran envoy

Diplomatic observers have pointed out that the Saudi crown prince is interested in creating a regional linkage involving the kingdom, Pakistan and other Asian states as part of his Vision 2030, besides expressing an interest in CPEC.

This would be a welcome move and could help smoothen relations with our eastern neighbour, especially if there are high economic stakes involved for all.

In the long term, Pakistan should look to deepen and broaden its cordial relations with Saudi Arabia. But this should not be done at the cost of our ties with other regional states.

Pakistan cannot afford to get involved in any regional power games, while it must also stay aloof from such adventures for the sake of sectarian harmony within its own borders.

Gas supply disruptions

THE government had promised a fairly smooth supply of gas to all consumers this winter. But gas shortages continue to frequently disrupt supplies across the country. The dismissal of the heads of the two publicly owned distribution companies for failing to 'forecast' shortages and managing the crisis that followed in December did not help improve the situation. The crisis reappeared this month as the gas companies were forced ever so often either to suspend or curtail supply to the industry, CNG stations and power producers in order to meet the increased demand from their domestic customers coping with colder weather in Punjab and KP. So many varying justifications were given by the distribution firms for the recurring shortages: increased seasonal demand from the domestic sector; delayed arrival and berthing of the LNG cargos; closure of the two LNG

regasification terminals for periodic maintenance; the use of illegal compressors; and so on. All these factors may have complicated the situation, but the fact remains that shortages recur because of the government's failure to assess the actual requirements for the winter and plan enough imports to cover the supply gap.

Gas shortages are not new to this country. But these have worsened with the passage of time, despite expensive LNG imports that began in 2015. With the domestic gas resources depleting by at least 5pc and demand growing by another 5pc annually according to official estimates, the supply gap is projected to widen to 4,000mmcf, or equivalent to current local production, by 2025. At present, the country faces a supply hole of up to 3,000mmcf when demand peaks during winter. A third of this is being met through LNG imports of around 1,000mmcf. Unless new gas fields are discovered and developed, Pakistan will need to import 30m to 35m metric tonnes of LNG a year to meet its increasing gas requirements driven by a growing economy, rising demand from the power and industry sectors, and expansion of the domestic distribution network. Given the government's frail financial position and the rent-seeking demands of industrial and commercial customers that its presence in the energy markets creates, it should deregulate the LNG sector, and let the market determine the quantity of gas, when to import it, and at what price to sell it. The same principle could be applied to the local gas and domestic customers at a later stage to control the heft and waste of the precious resource.

Snubbing the opposition

THERE appears to be no end to the PTI's bitter feelings for its political opponents and critics, a truth underscored by the government's steadfast commitment not to invite PML-N and PPP leaders to official engagements during the state visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

Government representatives spent the last few days vociferously defending the prime minister's decision. While the government's principal defence seems to be that prominent opposition leaders "don't deserve" to be invited to official functions as they face corruption cases, justifications of various hues were offered — including the excuse that there was not enough space in the banquet halls to accommodate everyone.

It is an unfortunate reality that our political leaders, both the new and the experienced, lack the maturity to handle such events.

Read more: Govt flayed for not inviting opposition to crown prince's reception

Not too long ago, during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to parliament, then prime minister Nawaz Sharif made a special effort to embarrass Imran Khan as he greeted the Chinese leader when he said, in Urdu, that perhaps Mr Khan should explain to Mr Jinping that his earlier scheduled visit to Pakistan was postponed due to the PTI sit-in.

Routine as it is, such tit-for-tat behaviour does not behove any prime minister — especially in the presence of world leaders and diplomatic delegations, as it lays bare our internal discord and disunity before the international community.

Prime Minister Khan should have set differences aside — even if it was just for this occasion — and fought against the impulse to settle political scores. Instead of fearing what impression such an invitation would give to his opponents, Mr Khan should have shifted his attention to what message would be sent to the world as it watched one of the most powerful leaders from the Middle East visit Pakistan.

It would serve the PTI well to remember that the visiting Saudi delegation were a guest of the state and not personal friends of Mr Khan. The state, which is represented by its elected representatives, should have displayed more tolerance.

PM's bold offer

AT a time when the roll of war drums is resonating at fever pitch from across the border, Prime Minister Imran Khan has made a sensible statement.

In a televised address, Mr Khan has extended a significant, unambiguous offer to India — that Pakistan is ready to cooperate in any investigation India wishes to undertake into its alleged role in the Pulwama attack, and that the state will act on intelligence against anyone carrying out attacks from Pakistani soil and treat such actors as 'enemies of Pakistan'. Mr Khan has also reiterated the importance of dialogue to resolve the Kashmir issue, calling on India to introspect and rethink

its policy of violence against the Kashmiri youth. In fact, the young local who carried out the attack was himself a victim.

At this critical juncture, there are important points for both the Pakistani and Indian leadership to consider.

For Delhi, which appears to be stuck in a rut and continues to blame Pakistan and rebuff dialogue, it would be practical to take up this offer and engage with Islamabad on the issue of Kashmir and cross-border militancy. Even as India objects to Pakistan's moral and political support to the Kashmir struggle, it must see the writing on the wall and acknowledge that — just as the US has realised in Afghanistan — there is no military solution to Kashmir.

Mr Khan's commitment to taking action against militant groups operating on our soil is a promising one which indeed appears to herald a 'naya Pakistan' considering Pakistan's previous association with groups accused by neighbouring countries of militancy. Islamabad should earnestly probe the involvement of the banned Jaish-e-Mohammad — that has been linked to this and past attacks in India-held Kashmir — and other members of militant groups proscribed in the country but that allegedly continue to operate under different names. Ultimately, both sides must understand that this battle will have to be fought diplomatically — through words and not weapons.

No doubt Pulwama is a huge tragedy for India. But the alarming rise of war hysteria in that country — propagated unabashedly by chest-thumping nationalist elements in the Narendra Modi-led government as well as the media and entertainment industries — must be stemmed before it morphs into an unstoppable monster.

Vicious anti-Pakistan attacks by Bollywood actors; cancellations of visits by Indian artists followed by churlish tweets; and blocking of Pakistani sports coverage are steps taken by big influencers to whip up a frenzied hatred in India for Pakistan. These acts trickle down and encourage average citizens to mete out vigilante justice and harass Kashmiri Muslims in India, where harrowing accounts are emerging of people living in fear.

India and Pakistan must collectively work towards engagement and rein in the forces that spew venom. Both must remember that even in times of discord between our governments, saner elements in the artist and sports communities have been the doves of peace.

SBP governor's remarks

THE State Bank Governor raised more than just a few eyebrows when he said at a private event that Pakistan's economy had come out of a financial crisis. To begin with, when exactly was the economy in the middle of a financial crisis? None of the monetary policy statements or the quarterly and annual reports released by the State Bank in the last six months gives any such indication. There were pressures all along, but a crisis can only be said to exist if large material disruptions to the workings of the financial market are seen. So the remarks beg another question: why is the State Bank governor going out of his way to clarify a question that never really existed?

The pressures on the economy through the growing current account deficit and the resultant depletion of reserves are indeed real; it is also true that the deficit has begun to shrink while the reserves have been buoyed by inflows from friendly countries. But the governor's remarks on these developments are out of sync with the message that official State Bank publications have been putting out all along, which is that reserves need to be built on more sustainable foundations, instead of one-off bilateral inflows. To use the language of January's monetary policy statement, "challenges to Pakistan's economy persist" despite the narrowing current account deficit. His remarks on the government's borrowing from the State Bank are also puzzling, given that in its official publications the central bank has pointed towards weak revenue collection saying "fiscal policy will have to be proactive and play a supportive role to generate conditions for stability and sustainable growth". For the State Bank governor today to claim that large-scale government borrowing from the State Bank does not present any major problem because an equal amount of debt has been retired from private banks flies in the face of what the Monetary Policy Committee said in January. After noting a sharp increase in government borrowing from the State Bank since July, and the net retirement of debt owed to private banks, the MPC said "[t]his financing will potentially have inflationary consequences in the future." It is fair to expect that the governor will do what he can to assuage the markets, but his remarks made at the private event seemed to be trying to assuage some other constituency instead.

Risky abortions

WITH limited sexual health awareness and poor access to contraception methods — and the pressures of large families to feed in times of inflation — many Pakistani women resort to secretive and unsafe abortions through self-induced or back-alley channels, risking their health in the process. Some die during their attempts to abort the unborn child. According to a report published in this paper yesterday, more than 2m women opt for abortion each year as a self-attempted method of ‘family planning’. While there is little legal clarity on the subject, many doctors refrain from carrying out abortions, citing religious beliefs. Shamefully, the majority of the illegally aborted fetuses are female. Many women are afraid of bringing daughters into the world, under pressure from their families, in-laws or husbands.

There is also something to be said about the failure of launching successful family planning schemes in this country by successive governments more than 50 years after the very first one during Gen Ayub’s rule. According to a Unicef announcement, 15,000 children were estimated to be born in Pakistan at the start of the new year. The population explosion is a strain on our resources and standard of living. But poor healthcare facilities, ignorance and taboos surrounding contraception and cultural myths about large families have never allowed proper family planning to take root in society. This also highlights a weakness in the state when it comes to reining in counter narratives that contradict or challenge its stated policies. Perhaps it is time to look to our neighbour to the west for inspiration. In Iran, the average family halved in size between 1988 and 1996, after the government launched a large-scale family planning operation: fatwas were issued, couples were made to attend contraception classes before marriage, contraceptives were distributed free of cost, along with increased access to sterilisation. To the east, Bangladesh was able to decrease its birth rate by using the mosque to spread the state’s message. The time for family planning is now.

CPEC allegations

WHEN Communications Minister Murad Saeed alleged in public remarks that there was corruption in the award of the contract to build the Sukkur-Multan motorway, he may not have known how large a matter he was inserting himself into.

That contract was part of CPEC and was awarded to the China State Construction Engineering Corporation after what the National Highway Authority chairman referred to as “controlled bidding”.

There were two other companies bidding for the contract, both Chinese. Construction work began in August 2016, and one section of the road — Multan to Shujabad — was inaugurated in May last year. It is scheduled to be completed by August this year, and is undoubtedly the single-largest road-building contract in the entire CPEC portfolio.

It is also the largest grant-funded project in CPEC, with a total cost of almost Rs300bn, 75pc of which is funded by foreign assistance, as per the details on the Planning Commission website. And to top it off, it is one of the oldest projects envisaged in the CPEC portfolio.

In short, the minister is touching upon a massive project, funded in significant part by Chinese money. It is well past the point of no return in its execution, and forms an important part of the central axis around which CPEC is said to revolve: overland connectivity from south to north.

Little wonder then that the minister’s allegations drew a furious response from the CSCEC, which is unusual for a Chinese company. In a strongly worded response, the company said it was “extremely shocked” at the “groundless allegations” that the minister made in public.

Given the enormity of what is being touched upon, and the fact that the project is backed by the guarantee of the government of Pakistan, the sentiments expressed are understandable.

If the minister has concrete evidence of corruption or any other wrongdoing in this project, he should have spent more time elaborating upon it in his public

remarks. A more professional approach would have been to first discuss the evidence (such as there may be) with the company before going public with it.

The company's response makes it seem like this was not done. If the minister can credibly establish that there has been corruption in the award of the contract, beyond superficial allegations, then it is imperative to follow up on them, catch those responsible, and hold them accountable.

But it is worthwhile to remember that the same project attracted similar allegations from opposition parties back in March last year, with nothing coming of the matter other than a virulent public spectacle. If there is any evidence of wrongdoing, action must be taken. But angry speeches and public allegations help neither the Pakistan-China bilateral cooperation, nor the fight against corruption at home.

Attack on Pasdaran

DUE to an unfortunate series of events, Pakistan finds itself in a tricky position.

While India is ratcheting up tensions in the aftermath of the Pulwama bombing, the targeting of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, also known as the Pasdaran, in Sistan-Baluchestan province that borders our own Balochistan a day before the incident in India-held Kashmir, has also led to Tehran pointing fingers in this direction.

A senior commander of the Pasdaran has said that the suicide bomber that targeted the Guards' bus was a Pakistani, as were two of the facilitators of the attack. While Pakistan has condemned the targeting of the Pasdaran, Tehran needs to refrain from hurling accusations against Pakistani authorities without solid proof. There needs to be an investigation involving both nations so that the perpetrators of this tragedy can be brought to justice. Iranian military commanders' talk of 'hot pursuit' inside Pakistan is totally unacceptable as this country's sovereignty must be respected.

It is a fact that cross-border attacks are amongst the biggest irritants standing in the way of better Islamabad-Tehran relations.

Indeed, Sistan-Baluchestan is often described as 'restive', as militant groups such as Jundallah and its successor Jaish al-Adl — that is believed to have

carried out the latest attack — have led a low-level insurgency against the Iranian government in the province, based on ethnic nationalism and sectarian jihadi rhetoric. What is problematic from this country's point of view is that these anti-Iran militants are believed to find shelter in the borderlands between Pakistan and its western neighbour. Therefore, from the standpoint of internal security and bilateral relations, it is in both countries' interest to work together to defeat such groups.

There are precedents that working together can produce positive results in the fight against militancy. For example, Pakistan helped recover a number of Iranian border guards kidnapped last year by Jaish al-Adl, while there have been high-level bilateral exchanges between the civilian and military top brass of both countries focusing on security. This is a volatile time for Pakistan and the entire region, with non-state actors playing a destabilising role where state-to-state relations are concerned. Therefore, defeating militancy requires a regional, coordinated approach.

Pakistan and Iran must use diplomatic channels to address this sensitive issue, and in particular, Iran should refrain from making accusations publicly. As has been proven in the past, cooperation can deliver the goods where the fight against militancy is concerned.

Needless controversy

JINGOISM and nationalistic hysteria can find sinister designs in even the most innocent of actions. This unfortunate tendency is illustrated by recent events surrounding the Mama Baby Care School in Karachi against the backdrop of the Pulwama attack in India-held Kashmir. A rumour that the school had played the Indian national anthem and that some of its students danced to it, created a furore on social media. The directorate of private institutions in Sindh promptly suspended the school's registration without giving it a chance to respond to its show-cause notice. It turned out that the school had organised an open day which aimed to educate the students about the cultures of different countries, one of which was India. And the 'anthem' was actually a popular Bollywood song — of the sort that are so popular at wedding functions in this country. A report in this paper on Tuesday quoted the school principal as saying that well-known

aspects of each country were showcased on the occasion; for India these being the Taj Mahal and its sports and film stars.

It is lamentable that we seem to have reduced ourselves to competing with India to see who can outdo the other in pettiness. Just a few days ago, cricket clubs across India reportedly took down portraits of Imran Khan. Does that change the reality that Mr Khan is considered one of the best cricketers in the world? In the same vein, should we keep our children ignorant of a culture practised by over a billion people? Is that not a disservice to our younger generation? Good sense should be able to distinguish between unpatriotic behaviour and the imparting of knowledge, or in competing in sporting events against each other. While this incident pales in comparison to the frenzied sabre-rattling across the border, it is nevertheless an overreaction. The Indian state's brutal oppression of the Kashmiri people is a fact; a school trying to give its students a well-rounded education should not become collateral damage.

Fields of red

THE Balochistan government recently announced its support for the Anti-Narcotics Force in its efforts to eliminate poppy cultivation and the illegal trade of non-medical opiates from the region, along with creating plans for setting up awareness and prevention programmes, and the rehabilitation of addicts in the province. Both Balochistan and KP have long struggled with the narcotics' scourge, particularly the use of heroin and opium, which has been exacerbated with the various wars and conflicts in bordering Afghanistan, the main supplier of opium, morphine and heroin in much of the world. Pakistan also sits uncomfortably on a major drug trade route that links it with Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, the Balkans and the EU states. According to an ANF representative, nearly half of all drugs produced in Afghanistan were smuggled through Balochistan to Iran and other countries along the route. Balochistan is strategically important, but it is also strategically vulnerable. This is something those who profit from the illicit trade are well aware of: vulnerabilities are easily exploited, and power vacuums filled anywhere a quick buck is to be made.

The first drug epidemic to hit the country was in the 1970s. By the end of the decade, the government decided to put a complete ban on both state-owned processing plants and illicit retail outlets for poppy production and distribution. By

2000, Pakistan was declared virtually poppy-free thanks to its efforts in implementing a 15-year programme, which also saw the country working alongside India under the UN agenda in the late 1990s. However, by 2001, poppy harvesting had become the main source of income for many local farmers. Perhaps it was due to the lack of vigilance and close monitoring by the government. Or it was due to an inability to offer a sustainable alternative means of livelihood to farmers who harvested the cash crop. Or perhaps it was linked to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which resulted in competition for resources in the power vacuum that was created, as well as distracting law enforcement because of the regional instability that followed. Most likely, it was a combination of all three. While the security situation has improved now, the government still needs to be able to provide an alternative cash crop for farmers that can prove to be profitable. Until the root causes are addressed, the malaise will keep returning, like a bad addiction.

No tax vision

IN a ceremony to give awards to the top taxpayers of the country, the prime minister spoke about his own cost-cutting efforts as well as berated former rulers for getting medical treatment abroad.

The one thing he did not do was offer a vision of how his government intended to broaden the tax base, and document the economy.

Simplifying tax forms and ceremonial awards for taxpayers is fine, since it will streamline the filing process and perhaps create a culture of respecting those who are paying their taxes. But it cannot be considered a vision for broadening the tax base.

Pakistan has one of the world's highest cash-to-bank deposit ratios, and the large cash-based undocumented economy thrives not because tax forms are too difficult to fill, but because there are ingrained rackets and severe mistrust of the tax authorities among undocumented players.

Overcoming these challenges requires a vision far more expansive than anything the government has offered thus far.

Simple encouragement to file returns or assuring people that their money will not be wasted now that we have a prime minister who claims to lead an

unostentatious life can be helpful in a symbolic way. But getting retail and wholesale trade — which accounts for half of the country's GDP and yet pays very little in taxes other than indirect taxes — to start documenting their transactions will require a far more sophisticated approach.

One of these approaches is the so-called Value Added Tax that other countries with large undocumented sectors have been able to use with some measure of success to document their economies.

Maintaining an active taxpayer list and creating an increasingly restrictive environment for non-filers is another way, but ongoing experience with this approach is showing that it is effective only when coupled with other incentives, and traders' incomes (to take one example) are still likely to evade capture through it.

The government needs to shed its political approach to every policy question. Symbolic moves like showing off one's simple lifestyle are not going to broaden the base of taxation.

Nor will pandering excessively to the business community do the trick. A vision would involve a structure of incentives and penalties in the shape of a larger policy. Given the state of the fiscal framework, data for which became available on the same day as the ceremony was held, it would seem the urgency to develop a strong policy thrust on the revenue side is increasingly becoming a priority.

The second quarter of the fiscal year actually saw a net decline in revenue collection from the corresponding period last year, which is highly anomalous especially in an environment of rising inflation. If this trend continues, the government will be forced to take some very unpleasant steps in the near future.

PTI's public quarrels

ANOTHER day, another public brawl for the PTI. This week, outspoken Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry exposed infighting within party ranks when he shared his unfavourable views on some of the prime minister's advisers. In a virtual showdown, adviser Naeem ul Haque and Mr Chaudhry — without naming each other — tweeted subtle criticisms of each other for a captivated audience, with one issuing a warning to the 'newcomer' and the other mocking his rival,

quoting a Ghalib couplet. This appears to be a running theme for members of the PTI and their coalition partners since they took the reins six months ago. Either due to bad luck or by design, reports of bitter tensions between members manage to make their way into the public realm. Examples include the time when Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid's dislike for Mr Chaudhry, whom he had lambasted for "having a picnic in London" when he was needed in the country, was caught on a mic before a presser; and when Moonis Elahi of the PML-Q, the PTI's coalition partner, didn't mince his words as he criticised Mr Chaudhry in a tweet, saying that "Imran Khan needs to discipline his children".

Less quarrelsome members of the government are eager to brush aside these spats as 'nothing extraordinary' — perhaps rightly so to some degree. After all, the issue of conflict within ruling parties and with coalition partners is the result of a power struggle not unique to the PTI, as evidenced by the grudges PML-N and PPP veterans had towards their respective governments. But what makes the PTI's quarrels distinctive is that ministers are not afraid to wash their dirty laundry in public, and unreservedly flail each other before all and sundry. While one could praise Imran Khan for the democratic disposition of this unbridled family of veterans and newcomers, it would be better for everyone if the prime minister put his house in order to inspire confidence and send a message to naysayers that all is well.

Ban on JuD

THE decision by the country's civilian and military leadership to take action against Jamaatud Dawa and its charity wing, Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation, is significant.

On Thursday, the National Security Committee, with the prime minister in the chair, took the decision, with the Prime Minister's Office later saying that the state cannot be allowed to "become hostage to extremism".

The JuD is of course an avatar of Lashkar-i-Taiba, one of the many jihadi groups that dot this country's landscape. However, making an announcement about the group's proscription is not enough; if the state has evidence of the outfit's involvement in militancy it should present the facts and pursue the legal course so that JuD's leadership can face justice.

As has been witnessed for nearly two decades now, the state moves to ban militant outfits, but, in very little time they are back, up and running, with new names and the entire structure of violence intact. For example, in 2002 the Musharraf regime banned a host of jihadi and sectarian groups, yet this effort had little practical effect because with a mere change of nomenclature, the groups continued to peddle hate and violence, making a mockery of the proscription.

Moreover, the establishment's attempts to 'mainstream' violent actors — eg presenting them as legitimate religious scholars or relaunching the jihadi lashkars as political parties — have also failed to steer these groups away from violence and hate. For example, a sectarian party has been repeatedly allowed to take part in general elections, but its senior leaders have failed to cease spewing venom.

History has shown that while low-level jihadi and sectarian party cadres perhaps can be deradicalised and mainstreamed, their leadership is committed to the ideology of violence and can only be silenced through the legal path. These parties' fundraising, communications and organisational systems must be targeted to put them out of business; imposing mere 'bans' is futile.

In the delicate post-Pulwama period, Prime Minister Imran Khan must be praised for saying that those who use this country's soil to attack others are enemies of Pakistan. The government has now started to take action. For instance, reports emerged on Friday that a key madressah associated with Jaish-e-Mohammad in Bahawalpur — another militant outfit accused of orchestrating cross-border attacks — was taken over by the Punjab government.

These moves indicate that the leadership has perhaps realised that taking half-baked steps against violent actors is dangerous for Pakistan's internal security, as well as its external relations. Now the elected leadership and the military establishment must take this campaign — as envisaged under NAP — to its logical conclusion by ensuring that non-state actors are not able to raise armed militias, and that those spewing hatred against other countries or spreading sectarian views are prosecuted.

It was unwise to allow these outfits to operate in the past, and efforts are needed to shut them down permanently.

Shrinking deficit

DATA released on Thursday showed that the dreaded current account deficit, responsible for draining Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves, has finally begun to shrink.

The government wasted no time in proclaiming the good news. More specifically, the data showed that between December and January, the deficit shrank by 47pc, which sounds like a large contraction; the finance minister claimed success on social media, saying that this was due to "decisive actions taken by the government".

The optimism is understandable, since the deficit rose to historic highs before the PTI took over, and has played no small part in undermining this country's macroeconomic stability. The government has had to move fast in order to arrest the decline in foreign exchange reserves that the current account deficit necessarily brought about, and much of its energy has been absorbed into the topping up of reserves through bilateral support and putting in place a set of policy actions to stem the growth of the deficit. So the first large contraction in the deficit will naturally evoke powerful sentiments from policymakers who have been involved in this work.

Sustainable Development: How far has Pakistan come and how far do we have to go?

But there are grounds for restraint. A closer look at the data reveals that nothing much has changed in the trade deficit picture, when the overall seven-month period is looked at.

This might be good news considering there is no deterioration, but not good enough to be celebrating. Much of the improvement in the current account deficit has come about because of a \$1bn decrease in the import of services, and the fact that a spike in remittances in the month of December has sustained itself in January as well.

The contraction is likely to sustain itself in the months ahead since it would appear that the bulk of the contribution to import growth was coming from CPEC-related machinery imports, which are now drawing to a close, and oil prices have remained at very low levels.

But the real reason to celebrate will come once exports start showing a spike much larger than what has been the case as per the January data, where they grew by 15pc over December. Given the scale of the devaluations and the subsidies for exporters, there should be a much faster increase under this head in the coming months. Until then, it would be better to adopt the wait-and-see approach.

Marghazar Zoo

GOING by the reports of the past few years, it appears that exotic animals are brought to the Marghazar Zoo in Islamabad for no other reason than a quick death — and a painless one isn't always guaranteed. At the end of last year and the beginning of the new year, six nilgais died over a period of 10 days, possibly from contracting a virus. According to a report published in this paper, there are no warm enclosures in the zoo to keep the animals during the night. In another report published on Jan 14, a white cockatoo died after injuring its beak. Last August, six deer were mauled by a wolf at an extension of the zoo. Over the past few years, Marghazar Zoo has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. Onlookers have pointed to the insufficient or bad quality of the food provided to the animals, the poor health of the latter, the small cages in which they are locked up — all in addition to the general apathy of the zoo staff.

The neglect of the zoo's solitary elephant, 33-year-old Kaavan, has also drawn international attention, and there is a #SaveKaavan hashtag on social media. The sensitive and sociable creature's partner, Saheli, died in 2012 from a leg infection at just 22 years of age. Since then, he is said to be distressed and showing signs of 'mental illness'. Representatives of an international animal rights organisation advised the government to put Kaavan in the care of an animal sanctuary, released of the chains that bind him. As a result of the public outcry, the climate change minister informed a Senate committee that she had requested the government to hand over administration of the zoo to the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board. While there are many compelling arguments against zoos, in countries like ours, zoos are an educational experience for children and a relatively low-cost recreation activity for families. But are a few hours of fun for humans worth a lifetime of suffering for animals?

FATF warning

THE sharp tone and unusual specificity of the remarks made by the Financial Action Task Force about Pakistan after the Paris meetings should be taken seriously by the government. Much of the language in the press release following the meetings is routine — listing the 10 areas in which outcomes are required, as well as pointing to the specific risks that Pakistan’s financial system faces. But in significant measures, there is new language in the public remarks that points towards a hardening of the stance taken by the global watchdog. In one place, for example, the remarks say that Pakistan “does not demonstrate a proper understanding of the TF [terror financing] risks posed by Da’esh, AQ, JuD, FiF, LeT, JeM, HQN and persons affiliated with the Taliban”. This is a striking sentence because it goes far beyond the language of the October 2018 meetings in clearly saying that the country “does not understand” the hazards it is facing, and goes on to make a long list of terrorist entities that present such a terror-financing risk.

The remarks end by pointing out the “limited progress” that has been made thus far, and “urges Pakistan to swiftly complete its action plan, particularly those with timelines of May 2019”. This language takes the message from FATF far beyond what was said in October, and even implies that further action could be taken as early as June if strong material progress is not made on the plan by May. There is little doubt that FATF is ratcheting up the pressure on Pakistan, and the focus is entirely on terror financing. Naming specific groups means action needs to be taken against them, and not of the sort we have seen over the years, which appears to be more cosmetic in nature and easily reversible.

Previous governments have struggled with the question of acting against those entities named by FATF and listed under UN Security Council Resolution 1267 as terrorist entities. Announcing a ban on a group is only the first step; this needs to be followed up with asset seizures and travel bans. This is the point at which genuine compliance can be said to begin. For the moment though, the government is struggling with the very first step of notifying a ban, let alone following it up with concrete steps to separate the leadership of these groups from their operations and assets. In the meantime, the country’s financial system faces further action from FATF, a step that would bring significant costs for the economy at a time when it is already gasping for air. It is surprising that, over the

years, hardly any seriousness of purpose has been in evidence when it comes to curtailing the terror-financing risks in Pakistan. But that attitude cannot continue any longer. The time to take forceful action has arrived.

Tax directory

IF humility was a characteristic usually associated with our legislators, one would imagine several of them being left red-faced by the latest tax directory of parliamentarians. With a few exceptions, most of them have paid income tax ludicrously out of proportion with their lavish lifestyles. Matters being as they are, however, any embarrassment on their part seems unlikely. Instead, the representatives of the hapless millions who live in this country will probably respond with denials and obfuscation if asked about their niggardly contributions to the national exchequer. The fifth iteration of the tax directory reveals that Prime Minister Imran Khan paid only Rs103,763 as income tax in the fiscal year ending 2017. That is 35pc less than the amount he paid the year before. A few days ago, at a tax award ceremony held to honour the top taxpayers in Pakistan, he declared those who pay the most taxes as the true VIPs of this country. Mr Khan is clearly not aspiring to this status. Meanwhile, former premier Nawaz Sharif's income tax payment trajectory is no less than fantastical. His tax payments show an astounding drop of 860pc in the year ending 2017 — ie from Rs2.524m the previous year to Rs263,173. However, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's tax payment saw a more than 16pc increase to Rs3.086m in 2017 from the year before.

Palatial mansions, luxury vehicles and foreign jaunts do not come cheap. One particular MNA's fondness for premium cigars, openly flaunted, probably exceeds what he pays in income tax every year. Moreover, thanks to social media, not to mention the penchant for self-publicity that most of these worthies demonstrate, their excesses are often recorded for posterity. The prime minister at the tax awards ceremony said that with only 1.7m people in a country of 210m filing taxes, the government is compelled to increase the burden of indirect taxes. He rightly described it as "unfair" that the prime minister was paying the same tax on various items as did a daily-wage labourer. However, while it is important to increase the number of income tax filers, it is equally important to ensure that declared, taxable income is commensurate with lifestyle. The prime minister has made accountability the cornerstone of his governance; in the interest of

transparency, the resident of the huge Banigala estate — and all the expenses its maintenance must entail — should explain how his yearly income tax worked out to less than Rs10,000 per month.

Dam fund disappointment

“If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces.”

Shakespeare’s immortal lines are perhaps a suitable analogy for former chief justice Saqib Nisar’s Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand Dam Fund, an initiative born out of a fantasy to ‘save Pakistan’.

At the Lahore Literary Festival, when Mr Nisar was asked what he proposes as the way forward for the construction of the dams, given the gap between the required amount — a whopping Rs1.5tr — and the modest Rs9.8bn collected, he responded by saying the understanding was that the funds would be used to create awareness, and not for the actual construction of the dams.

Read more: Fund donations never intended for building of dam, only for awareness: ex-CJP

This will likely come as a rude awakening to those who donated, both voluntarily and involuntarily — from institutions like the armed forces and private banks, to poorly funded organisations like Pakistan’s football federation.

At the height of the campaign it appeared as if everyone was making donations. As chief justice, Mr Nisar had even contemplated invoking Article 6, which relates to high treason, against critics of the fund.

As prime minister, Imran Khan, too, commended the judge for “doing what civilian leaders could not do”, encouraging pensioners and expats to pledge precious capital for the initiative.

But alas, despite all the populist slogans and promises, what was championed as the answer to Pakistan’s looming water crisis achieved nothing beyond an expensive, omnipresent campaign.

Those who contributed their savings under the impression that they were making a sacrifice for a national cause will be disappointed to learn that their money will,

in fact, not be used for the dams' construction, and that the fund they contributed to may never reach its goal.

The entire episode serves as a warning for leaders of institutions to avoid overstepping their domain and exploiting well-meaning citizens by promising something beyond their intellectual and financial capacity.

As it stands, the dams remain a pipe dream and a cautionary tale for citizens perpetually on the lookout for a saviour.

Education quality

GETTING children into school is one thing, educating them is quite another. The Annual Status of Education Report 2018, launched in Islamabad on Tuesday, shows that while there is an improvement in Pakistan's school enrolment rates, the students in its rural areas are appallingly behind in their levels of learning. The findings are based on a survey of 260,069 children between three and 16 years of age enrolled in public and private schools. For an overall snapshot, consider the following. Of the fifth graders surveyed in rural areas, 48pc cannot read a sentence in English and 44pc are unable to read a story in Urdu, Sindhi or Pashto from class 2 level textbooks. Forty-seven per cent of them cannot do two-digit division. Comparing how the provinces score today with the results in the 2016 report is an illuminating exercise. For example, Sindh and Balochistan remain where they were two years earlier in terms of the percentage of fifth graders unable to read a sentence in English from a class 2 level textbook, while Punjab, KP and Gilgit-Baltistan have shown improvement. Where reading a story in Urdu, Sindhi or Pashto is concerned, Balochistan, KP and GB have improved their scores, Punjab has remained static, while Sindh has actually regressed.

For decades, the abysmal level of school enrolment was the principal concern in Pakistan's education sector. A number of initiatives — particularly targeting girls of school-going age — were launched, such as providing basic facilities that were missing, linking school attendance with stipends or free ration, etc. These measures are to some extent bearing fruit, although access to secondary education for girls remains a huge challenge in some parts of the country for various socio-cultural reasons as well as resource constraints. Enrolment is of course only one aspect of Pakistan's 'education emergency'; it is, or should be, the means to getting a quality education. However, according to the Aser report,

“although students in Pakistan are expected to achieve nearly nine years of schooling, this equates to only 4.8 years of actual learning”. That places us behind our regional neighbours, including Afghanistan. Fortunately, better prospects await. Provinces have enhanced standards of teacher recruitment, and improved their training and salary structure. They must persevere on this path. While improvement in school infrastructure and management gives instant, visible results, it is the quality of education that will drive economic growth and determine the future of this nation.

The divide over Kashmir

THE voices that have been raised for peace amidst the din of war drums are worth heeding. Mercifully, these voices — on both sides of the Pakistan-India border — are less feeble than they used to be.

In the words of a former Indian spy chief, who evidently does not approve of the jingoism his country has resorted to after the Pulwama attack, the clamour for war following the Mumbai attack 10 years ago had been far louder. This may provide us with a measure of how people have progressed over the last decade.

Read: Pulwama attack

An era of free communication has, inevitably, provided new, thought-provoking information for the debate to be based on. A number of Pakistanis — including some in government — have echoed the line taken by former Indian spy chief A.S. Dulat that “war is not a picnic”. Many Indians also accept the Pakistani contention that the Pulwama suicide attack was carried out by a local Kashmiri youth in India-held Kashmir. The Kashmiri Muslims have reason enough to take on the Indian army’s might. Any other ideological influence that they may come under is of secondary importance.

Take a look: Fear engulfs Muslims living in occupied Kashmir after Pulwama attack

While jingoism on both sides must be responded to by those with an unshakeable desire for regional peace, the concerns over the calls for war remain in place. One fear relates to rumours which say that, away from the screen and the stage, a strategy is being drawn up somewhere by some adventurers who are not inclined to pass up the ‘opportunity’ for creating more

tension, without providing violent proof of their own existence. These thoughts are then lent credence by official statements that talk about military build-ups, action and retaliation. The resulting emotion in that divisive moment grips the public in both countries, drowning out the voices for peace, and war hysteria continues to escalate.

Meanwhile, it is in India's interest not to view the Pulwama attack, though spectacularly bloody, as a routine incident in a decades-old conflict. Perhaps the tendency to see such attacks in Kashmir as not unexpected is why the Mumbai incident seemed so much more violent, causing the war drums to beat louder a decade ago. There is a need for India to revisit its security policies in the occupied region, and to accept that the seething anger of Kashmiris does not need further prodding from outside elements.

The Pulwama attack killed nearly 50 Indian paramilitary personnel. But it was also an attack that once again underlined the great resentment in IJK against Indian forces that routinely humiliate, abuse and kill Kashmiris — old and young, men and women, boys and girls — with the full approval of New Delhi. It is this frustration that must be the focal point in any debate regarding the resolution of the long-standing Kashmir dispute.

Unless there is acknowledgement of that, Pulwama will not be the last tragedy of its kind in IJK.

Road accidents

ACCORDING to speakers at a Karachi University seminar, the port city has the fourth highest number of road-related accidents in the world. They further mentioned that the young were more susceptible to driving-related accidents, and that the average fatality age is 29 years. Some of the causes highlighted included: underage drivers, intoxicated drivers, speeding, and distractions caused by the use of mobile phones. Along with the tragic loss of life, Karachi suffers an estimated loss of Rs47.8bn annually from road traffic accidents. In a city of its size and scale, few pay attention to basic road safety laws and signs, resulting in a larger culture of carelessness, or perhaps recklessness. One of the worst accidents took place in the outskirts of the city when an overcrowded passenger bus crashed into an oil tanker in 2015. The driver was speeding on the wrong side of the lane. But it is not always the fault of the individual — the

city and its roads are poorly designed, the streets are insufficiently lit and the traffic lights are not working.

With the population explosion and lack of public transport, the number of vehicles has risen, and traffic congestion is a major issue facing residents. Karachi is also not a pedestrian-friendly city, with few walking lanes and long distances to cross, and many road accidents involve pedestrians. It is worth remembering that all these deaths are preventable; it just requires a little conscientiousness, some effort, and adopting a better civic sense. Many deaths of motorcyclists, for instance, can be avoided by wearing the helmets they are required to by law. In cars, those behind the wheel and in the passenger seat can be saved by simply remembering to wear their seatbelts. In recent times, traffic police have been seen to be more vigilant when it comes to enforcing these safety precautions, but it is not clear if these are being carried out on the scale they should be.

War rhetoric & reality

In the aftermath of the Pulwama incident, shrill lobbies on both sides of the border have started beating the drums of war. Particularly jarring are the armchair warriors of the media — especially on the Indian side — baying for the blood of the ‘other’.

There has also been a reprehensible effort to exploit the attack and work up anti-Kashmiri and anti-Muslim sentiments in India, predominantly by the storm troopers of Hindutva. But perhaps what is most worrisome is that ministers and members of the establishment on both sides are talking casually about war.

As saner minds in India and Pakistan have pointed out, “war is no picnic”, and a conflict will have devastating consequences for the entire subcontinent. Moreover, the Pulwama incident — gory as it was — was not a Mumbai-like militant attack targeting civilians. It was an indigenous reaction to India’s brutish tactics in held Kashmir, so laying the blame at Pakistan’s door will not make the core issue go away.

However, amidst the din of war, there are some sensible statements coming from the top leadership in Islamabad and Delhi. Over the weekend, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned an earlier conversation with Imran Khan in which he had made an offer to his counterpart to fight illiteracy and poverty

together. Mr Khan replied favourably on Sunday, once again asking the Indian side to provide “actionable intelligence”, if it had any, of Pakistani involvement in the Pulwama episode.

In such a tense atmosphere, India should take up Pakistan’s offer to “give peace a chance” as the alternatives to constructive dialogue are confrontation and yet more hostility.

While the respective leaders have done the right thing by toning down rhetoric, it is time this had a trickle-down effect on ministers and senior government functionaries indulging in war talk.

As three former foreign secretaries of Pakistan have written in this paper, war in the nuclear age is a catastrophic proposition.

Previous Pakistan-India wars were different affairs; this time both belligerents have powerful nuclear arsenals, which should be enough of a deterrent to convince both security establishments and their political counterparts to prefer negotiations to the battlefield.

The fact is that both states need to introspect and consider what steps can be taken internally to promote peace in the subcontinent.

In India’s case, Hindutva ideologues have infiltrated all levels of the state machinery; this has resulted in an increasingly rigid attitude towards Pakistan. Moreover, the Indian military’s brutal tactics in occupied Kashmir have fired up Kashmiri resistance, with the region’s disillusioned youth convinced that only armed struggle against India will help them secure their rights. But it is also true that Pakistan can take steps to send positive signals across the border. Among these can be speeding up the legal process to bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack to justice.

FIA on the hunt

IN a troubling and rapid development, the FIA has said that it has established a monitoring system through which it can keep an eye on social media accounts in order to identify and take action against those spreading hate speech or “anti-national” material. Even more worrying is the revelation that the FIA can act against individuals or groups allegedly circulating such material without waiting

for the filing of a formal complaint. In an admission that illustrates the authoritarian thinking behind this newly formed mechanism, the FIA director who announced these measures referred to posts on social media “maligning” the recent visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The move comes some 10 days after Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said a “crackdown” would be launched against such accounts — an incident which set off alarm bells among rights activists. This fresh announcement from the FIA reinforces earlier fears of a social media clampdown. The lack of clarity regarding specific offences and their related punishments, along with the ominous reference to the “maligning” of a foreign dignitary’s visit, is an indicator that this restriction may be used by the state as a tool to curb freedom of expression — specifically in relation to criticism of the state — a vital component of any democratic system. Without a clear definition of the term “hate speech” or of material which “negatively affects national interest”, the directive can be interpreted to legitimise a blackout of political opponents and critical voices on social media. Sadly, this is not the first government to announce a virtual crackdown using ambiguous terms. Former interior minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, too, had said that “unbridled freedom cannot be allowed” on social media, while at the same time saying that there would be no restrictions.

While governments have every right to take action against extremist groups spreading hate speech and inciting violence against the state or individuals online, they must be clear about the definitions and laws which govern these actions to avoid leaving open-ended terms which provide legal cover to a witch-hunt and allow the state to circumvent procedure. In an environment where stakeholders in mainstream media are decrying censorship and intimidation, it is social media which fulfils the important role of watchdog — a guardian which underpins accountability and transparency. Any attempt to silence critical voices on digital platforms will send a negative message to the world about the health of Pakistan’s democratic system, and play into the hands of anti-democratic forces.

Literary festivals

FOR a country with a literacy rate of only 58pc, Pakistan seems to host an abundance of literary festivals. The past few years can be described as being witness to the rise and rise of the literary festival — ironically at a time when reading habits even among the educated seem to be on the decline. Next month will see the ninth edition of the Karachi Literature Festival, which was the first event of its kind in the country, superseding all other such festivals. Prior to KLF, envisioned by Ameena Saiyid and Asif Farrukhi, there were only the occasional book fairs that were held by various publishing houses. Now, just two months into the new year, three festivals have already taken place. First, there was the first Adab Festival held at the Governor's House in Karachi. Then, there was the third Sindh Literature Festival, also in Karachi. Away from the port city, the seventh Lahore Literature Festival took place at Alhamra Arts Centre at the same time as SLF. Oxford University Press organises the Islamabad Literature Festival, in addition to the KLF. Quetta, too, saw its very first two-day literature festival in May 2018. Other events in Balochistan include a children's literary festival in Turbat and a book festival in Gwadar.

All these events are open to the public, are typically multilingual, and give the greater community a chance to interact with their favourite authors, intellectuals and artists. Question-and-answer panels allow them to have their voices, observations or apprehensions heard. Besides readers and writers, these events are welcomed by local publishing houses and booksellers to sell copies in an otherwise slow market. One just hopes that these festivals are actually conducive in promoting a love for language and literature, while instilling reading and debating habits, rather than simply dissolving into ineffective echo chambers. Even so, we're all better off with literature festivals than without them.

On the brink

IT is a wildly provocative and shockingly aggressive act — and the potential repercussions may extend to the hitherto unthinkable possibility of war itself between the two South Asian neighbours.

With good sense having failed to prevail in India, the whole region now stands on the threshold of the unknown. The aerial military incursion by India across the Line of Control and, allegedly, into KP in the early hours of Tuesday morning represents the crossing of a red line by India.

Set aside that there are duelling official Indian and Pakistani version of events of what occurred on Tuesday morning. Few, if any, facts are publicly established when there are claims and counter-claims of military action along the LoC. But India has claimed and Pakistan has acknowledged that Indian munitions fired by Indian aircraft fell on KP soil. That itself is a shocking violation of Pakistani sovereignty that India ought never to have contemplated.

The awful spectacle of the Indian state, overwhelming sections of its media and seemingly swathes of the population celebrating an attack on Pakistan suggests that much of India does not understand what it has potentially triggered. Rational, right-minded and sensible denizens in both countries would recognise that military action by one country against the other's sovereign territory would virtually eliminate the options for the other country — the necessity of a military response may become all but impossible to resist. But it is distressingly apparent that the Indian war lobby does not appreciate or have any regard for what the outcome of provoking Pakistan into militarily responding to India could be.

Yesterday, the National Security Council headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan pledged that Pakistan “shall respond at a time and place of its choosing”, an assertion that was reiterated by DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor in his news conference. Surely, any remotely rational Indian policymaker or public figure would have recognised that Pakistan would reserve the right to retaliate against an attack on this country's sovereign territory, but it does not appear that there are any rational Indian policymakers or public figures left.

Even as Pakistan reserves the unqualified right to defend itself against an unprovoked attack, the Pakistani state should urgently activate all diplomatic

channels to put meaningful pressure on India to resile from its aggressive stand against Pakistan and to immediately halt its policy of repression of the people of India-held Kashmir. The international community simply cannot stand by and watch as India sends this region hurtling towards conflict and worse.

Time and again, global and regional powers have recognised the potential of the Kashmir dispute to unravel into unthinkable conflict between India and Pakistan. Now it is India itself that has deliberately and forcefully dragged the region to the precipice of a historic conflict. The world must not allow India to bring destruction to a region of one-and-a-half billion people.

Respite for refugees

ON Monday, Prime Minister Imran Khan said he had issued instructions to the relevant authorities to allow registered Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan to open bank accounts here. This new policy would be a way of inducting the large number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan into the formal economy, he explained. Welcomed by international rights groups such as Amnesty and the UN refugee agency — and derided by some members of the opposition — Mr Khan's decision follows a statement he made last September, when he said he wanted to see all Bengalis and Afghans living here for more than four decades to be issued national identity cards and passports. Clearly, this issue is one that is close to the prime minister's heart. Pakistan is said to 'host' an estimated 2.4m registered and unregistered refugees from Afghanistan. To recognise those who have been living here for many decades, or were born in this country, is certainly the humane thing to do. Moreover, it is in accordance with the law.

Refugees with roots in Afghanistan have been welcomed in the country from the days of the Soviet invasion in 1979. But they have been simultaneously demonised and made scapegoats for many of the ills in our society, on both the state and societal level, even though those born in Pakistan consider it their home — and know of no other. With no place to call home, and no formal identification or citizenship rights, refugees are often the most vulnerable sections of society. They are kept out of the state apparatus and denied state healthcare and higher education. So while the voluntary repatriation of refugees to their country of origin should be the government's priority, this should not mean they face harassment, intimidation and threats. Often, refugees are openly

derided and spoken of with deep prejudice and contempt by those with power and even those without. But refugees are not parasites or security threats: they are human beings trying to survive callous policies and wars they had no say in deciding. In this globalised world, where markets reign supreme, few can ignore the immense suffering of those who live in Afghanistan, or look the other way instead of reflecting on their own role in creating the instability. Readers should remember the words of British-Somali poet, Warsan Shire: “Nobody leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark.”

Illegal housing schemes

ILLEGAL housing societies are a virus that infects all parts of Pakistan. Crumbling mechanisms of governance have emboldened rapacious elements and fuelled an ugly, and frequently violent, land-grabbing industry. Last October, a report furnished before a Supreme Court bench revealed that 5,492 housing societies in the country are unregistered, illegal or exist only on paper. On Friday, an audit report presented in the National Assembly noted that the Capital Development Authority in Islamabad had suffered a loss of Rs5,217.39bn on account of 109 illegal housing schemes in the ICT. The document was scathing in its criticism of the CDA saying it had allowed the area to become a haven for the land mafia and that it may as well change its master plan in an explicit acknowledgement of its inability to enforce land regulations. Even the upscale Banigala neighbourhood, in which prime minister’s 300-kanal estate is located, has been developed in violation of the city’s master plan.

Illegal housing societies and encroachments have been the subject of several recent court proceedings. The mighty Bahria Town has not been spared either. That can only be to the good of the citizens. Many of them, swayed by marketing gimmicks that promise a ‘Dubai-style’ standard of living, invest their hard-earned savings in such housing schemes only to find that they have been duped by unscrupulous builders in terms of construction quality and amenities. At times the location itself, such as on a floodplain or on reclaimed areas of natural channels, puts residents at peril. A burgeoning population has led to a surge in demand for housing; construction is a hugely lucrative business and profits can be multiplied hundred-fold if land is obtained without requisite payment of fees and taxes, or without obtaining NOCs, in collusion with corrupt bureaucrats. The state exchequer remains dry even as the pockets of builders and their cohorts overflow

with ill-gotten gains. There must be no leniency shown by the courts to those involved in this plunder.

Aiming for peace

A RESPONSE was pledged and retaliatory military action appears to have been taken. Once again, few facts have been indisputably established, though Pakistani authorities have claimed to have symbolically targeted unspecified targets in India using aircraft that did not cross the Line of Control or the international border. An Indian pilot is in Pakistani custody after his plane crashed in Azad Jammu and Kashmir during what appear to have been aerial skirmishes along the LoC. What, if anything, happens next is unknown. What should happen is crystal clear: India and Pakistan should immediately cease hostilities; the international community should urgently intervene diplomatically; and at all costs, war between India and Pakistan must be avoided. The military action taken yesterday by Pakistan was not an escalation, it was arguably a necessary and proportionate response after India bombed Pakistani territory a day earlier. India must resist initiating another round of military action and the world must counsel restraint to India. From here, the distance towards unthinkable conflict and destruction could be shorter than war strategists, planners and decision-makers in either country recognise.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Imran Khan reiterated his offer for dialogue, including on the issue of terrorism, with India. Meanwhile, DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor went to great lengths to stress that while Pakistan will respond if attacked, both national sentiment and the state are in favour of peace prevailing in the region. The message of the political and military leadership is humane, sensible and pragmatic. The people of Pakistan and the media have also emphasised that they reject war and want peace to prevail in the region. Has India really considered the potential effects of its war rhetoric and actions? Pakistan and India have fought four wars, three of which have centred on the disputed Kashmir region. Each of those wars has taken the lives of numerous soldiers and inflicted immense losses on the people of the two countries. As Prime Minister Khan himself said yesterday, the ongoing fight against militancy inside Pakistan has vividly demonstrated the terrible cost of war in terms of human suffering, casualties and death. An unreasonable and enraged India appears to have lost sight of the fact that war inflicts a great cost on both sides.

In the nuclear age, there could be mutual destruction on an incomprehensible scale if war breaks out. Whatever India's compulsions, what goal could possibly justify potentially turning swathes of this region into uninhabitable wastelands and killing soldiers and citizens in numbers that could dwarf the combined losses in the two world wars fought in the last century? India is enraged and unreasonable, Pakistan is aggrieved but resolute — and the world is rightly alarmed. The acute danger and risks of the current moment should not be underplayed. But there is always an alternative to war in this region; India must recognise that and reach for peace.

Judicial backlog

THE judicial system in this country is principally marked by delays and lack of service delivery, with cases dragging on for years (in some instances decades) before being decided. Indeed, these delays translate into a denial of justice to the citizen, as a functional and efficient judicial system is an essential component of any democratic order. Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa has taken cognisance of this malaise affecting Pakistan's justice system and promised to address the roots of the problem. Speaking during his maiden visit to Karachi after donning the robes of chief justice, Mr Khosa recently emphasised the need to reduce frequent adjournments in Sindh's courts, as well as called for the timely disposal of cases in the province. The chief justice also reiterated the need to discourage frivolous litigation.

The points highlighted by the chief justice during his Karachi visit are in line with the broader judicial vision he has for the country, which he had discussed in detail during the full-court reference for then outgoing chief justice Saqib Nisar last month. Mr Khosa had mentioned that there are around 1.9m cases pending in the country. Considering this astronomical figure, his remarks that he was in favour of building a "dam against undue and unnecessary delays in judicial determination of cases" and that he wants to "retire ... the debt of pending cases" are timely and welcome. While this country has in the recent past seen periods of judicial activism, it is unfortunate that the core duty of the courts — to deliver speedy justice to the citizenry — has been neglected. Therefore, it is hoped the chief justice's efforts to bring down this huge backlog bear fruit. He has offered numerous solutions to reduce the number of pending cases, centring on "structural and systemic changes" to the judicial system. Specifically, Chief

Justice Khosa has proposed a three-tier judicial system in the country, as opposed to the four-tier one in place, as well as doing away with special courts and giving their functions to the district judiciary. Indeed, these and the other propositions of the top judge may go a long way in reducing the burden of cases on the courts, if implemented in letter and spirit. Basic reform of Pakistan's judicial system would be a legacy worth pursuing and it is hoped the learned judges of the apex court and the provincial high courts lead the way by translating this vision into reality.

Protecting the Kalasha

THIS week, a dinner was held in the capital to commemorate the Kalasha community's Suri Jagek tradition being included on Unesco's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the first of its kind from Pakistan. Present at the dinner was Wazir Zada, the only member of the Kalasha community to become a member of the KP parliament. Suri Jagek is a meteorological and astronomical system based on the observation of the sun, moon, stars and shadows with regard to the local topography. It is used to help the community decide seasonal placements for agricultural and harvesting purposes, as well as plan religious ceremonies and festivals. Unesco initiated the list with the stated aim of protecting 'intangible cultural heritages' around the world and creating awareness of their significance. Being one of the oldest civilisations in the world, the Kalasha have held on to their indigenous practices and knowledge systems over the centuries, despite the onslaught of religiosity and modernity around them.

Their customs are indeed in need of protection. Last year, the National Commission for Human Rights took notice of incidents of the theft of stone tablets and tombstones containing inscriptions about Kalasha laws and traditions by locals for the purpose of building homes. And in 2014, the Pakistani Taliban released a chilling video calling for an open armed struggle against the minority community. Images of the Kalasha smiling in their brightly coloured attire are almost always used as promotional material for tourism purposes, or when the state and advertisement agencies wish to present the country's soft face to their desired audiences. But these are shallow and self-serving gestures, given the fact that Kalasha numbers have significantly declined over the years. Many say they live in fear, and there are reports of forced conversions taking place. One hopes that those in other parts of Pakistan, too, recognise the value of their

indigenous culture, and are able to see the beauty in preserving the diversity of this land for more than just photographic purposes.