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VOCABULARY**



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Lawless city

KARACHI's crime epidemic has robbed citizens of their freedom because the issue of safety is absent from the political debate. It does not help that the law enforcers suffer from a lack of understanding about the multiple factors that create offenders — from low conviction rates, unemployment and lack of education to record inflation. Recently, members of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce & Industry met the city's police chief and raised concerns over the uptick in violence, especially the surge in kidnappings for ransom, targeted killings and extortion, and their effect on the investment environment. There were the usual promises of clamping down on criminal elements; a committee, the police chief added, had been formed to look into these challenges.

Institutional crises in the criminal justice system — police, judiciary and jails — cannot be resolved through short-sighted strategies. The authorities need to work towards long-lasting crime-control solutions through structural reforms in all three components so that the rule of law and its execution are indiscriminate. The erstwhile provincial public safety and police complaints commission, a legislated watchdog body, has to be set in motion for an autonomous and authoritative police force, which, low on personnel, resources and clout, is playing second fiddle to the Sindh Rangers. Moreover, the CPLC, established in particularly turbulent times to serve as a bridge between citizens and police, should be strengthened with staff and rapid response mechanisms. Street crimes indicate deeper woes, such as our social justice deficit. Police and strategic arrangements — patrolling and CCTV cameras — are not enough. Safety structures require a holistic approach that does not rely on fear-inducing methods or firefighting modes. Time has proven that police encounters are as ineffective as they are illegal. When the value of life is so little and socioeconomic realities so harsh, complacency can force circumstances to take a darker turn.

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Unheard cries

IN the aftermath of the deployment of force against peaceful Baloch protesters in Islamabad, a critical question arises: what does the state owe to its citizens, especially those who have been marginalised for decades? The plight of the Baloch, embroiled in a struggle for recognition and justice, is a clarion call for immediate attention from the state. The ongoing movement in Balochistan, as highlighted by the Baloch activists, is not just a political issue; it is a humanitarian crisis. For over seven decades, the people of Balochistan have faced severe challenges, with peaceful protests considered a "sin", in the words of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances received 9,967 cases up to August 2023. Of

these, 2,708 are from Balochistan, reflecting a dire situation that the state can no longer afford to ignore. It is time for the state to realise that suppression is not a solution to ethnonationalist movements. The current uprising, characterised by its urban, middle class, and youth-led nature, and notably the inclusion of women, is a testament to a changing Balochistan. Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial tactics only deepen the schism and perpetuate a cycle of violence and mistrust. The protesters, united in their demand for an end to these injustices, represent a new political reality that cannot be ignored.

The state's response to these protests must be one of engagement, not suppression. Acknowledging and addressing their grievances is the first step towards healing Balochistan's wounds. It is imperative to engage with these young, educated voices and allow them to choose their representatives, as true democracy demands. The judiciary has a crucial role to play. The Supreme Court's declaration of enforced disappearances as a "crime against humanity" is a significant acknowledgment, but it requires more than just words. Judicial courage in addressing these issues head-on is essential for meaningful change. The state must also take steps to ensure transparency and accountability within its institutions. The continuation of enforced disappearances, despite the creation of commissions and task forces, indicates a failure to address the root causes of the crisis. The state must now abandon its outdated tactics and adopt a more inclusive, humane approach to governance. It must act swiftly to build bridges of trust and understanding. The longer it delays, the greater the risk of permanent alienation.

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Knockout punch?

FEARS that next month's general elections will be reduced to an undemocratic farce have gained traction with the seemingly wholesale rejection of PTI candidates at the scrutiny stage.

On Saturday, most of the former ruling party's big guns — as well as those allied with the PTI — were disallowed from running by the ECP, whereas former members of the PDM, and many others who dumped Imran Khan when the tide turned, were allowed to contest.

This shows a vindictiveness and partiality unbecoming of a neutral poll watchdog tasked with organising free and transparent elections.

While it was long expected that Mr Khan, after falling out with the powers that be, and particularly after the May 9 episode, would not be allowed to run, most of the PTI's first- and second-tier leadership hoping to contest, too, were barred from the polls.

This list includes Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Pervaiz Elahi, former National Assembly speaker Asad Qaiser, and others. Meanwhile, the Sindh-based Grand Democratic Alliance, which was at one time allied with the PTI, also faced rejection of some of its top leaders, while the BNP's Akhtar Mengal was similarly barred.

Cancelling a mainstream party through arrests and intimidation, and now technicalities at the pre-poll stage, flies in the face of democracy. The PTI has indeed made numerous mistakes in and out of power. And the May 9 events were definitely a dark point in Pakistan's history. But they did not take place in a vacuum.

Parties evolve and mature with time, and it should not be the job of unelected forces to 'punish' political parties. Moreover, as past precedent proves, state excesses have been unable to dent the popularity of parties.

The PPP faced the wrath of Gen Zia's martial law regime, yet went on to form three governments. The PML-N was on the wrong side of Gen Musharraf, yet returned to power in 2013. Similarly, the PTI enjoys a significant vote bank, and it must be left to the people's court to judge its performance.

There is still time to reverse course. The rejected candidates can appeal, and the tribunals have till Jan 10 to decide their cases. The tribunals should make decisions on merit; any coordinated effort to keep PTI and other candidates out will reek of bias.

If the electorate is convinced that pre-poll rigging is afoot, and the outcome is being managed by powerful quarters, it will hurt the legitimacy of elections as many voters will reject such a process and stay home on polling day.

Pakistan's salvation lies in the supremacy of the constitutional process and unhindered democracy. Any other route will only exacerbate the many problems that plague this country, and those who have perverted the democratic process will be responsible.

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Tourism numbers

SOME encouraging numbers have emerged with regard to Gilgit-Baltistan's tourism potential. The regional government says over 11,000 foreign climbers and tourists visited the area in 2023. These are said to be the highest figures of the past two decades. Separately, as reported, the UN's World Tourism Organisation has termed Pakistan the "best performing destination" for the first nine months of 2023. These are indeed positive developments for the country, which is endowed with breath-taking natural beauty and a rich historical legacy. And yet, unfortunately, Pakistan has

been unable to market itself to global tourists. As some tour operators have pointed out with reference to GB, foreign visitors' visa applications can often take several months to process, discouraging potential tourists from visiting Pakistan. In an age where countries issue visas on arrival, or provide painless e-visas within a few days, such bureaucratic hurdles on the part of officialdom are counterproductive, especially when the state wants to draw in more foreign tourists.

The fact is that in Pakistan, the state's efforts to attract tourists are paradoxical. On one end, the government launches campaigns such as 'Salam Pakistan' to market the country to potential visitors. On the other, the securitised, indeed paranoid, approach, which views all foreigners with suspicion, negates these efforts. The visa process, including security clearance, should be swift and transparent so that more people can visit this country, and contribute to the tourism economy. Aside from easing the visa procedure, infrastructure and security need to be worked on. People need decent accommodation that meets international standards, as well as reliable means of transport to explore the country. Moreover, the security situation needs vast improvements. Not many people will be willing to visit if militants lurk in the shadows. Sustainable tourism can indeed bring in foreign exchange and help create jobs for local communities if visas are simplified, and security and infrastructure improved.

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Covid resurgence?

AS the global community grapples with the possible resurgence of Covid-19, driven by the newly identified JN.1 sub-variant, Pakistan finds itself at a crucial juncture. The recent reports of rapid case increases in neighbouring India, with 10 deaths over two days, signal a clear warning. The time for pre-emptive action is now. The National Institute of Health reportedly plans on procuring 500,000 doses of Pfizer's updated Covid-19 vaccine, which is a commendable step by the government. This initiative, according to media reports, is particularly aimed at vaccinating high-risk groups and pilgrims before Haj. However, this is merely the first step in a series of necessary actions. Given the urgency of the matter, the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan must expedite the Emergency Use Authorisation for this new vaccine. While the vaccine has not received full approval from the US FDA, its emergency use has been authorised, which should be sufficient for Drap to act swiftly. Time is of the essence, and bureaucratic delays could cost lives. The WHO's report of a 52pc increase in Covid-19 cases globally in the last month, primarily due to JN.1, is concerning. Pakistan, fortunately, has not yet detected this sub-variant, but this should not be a reason for complacency. India offers a clear example of how quickly the situation can escalate.

Punjab's decision to initiate re-testing is a strategic move in this context. Early detection is key in preventing the spread of the virus. Other provinces should follow suit, ensuring that testing is accessible and widespread. Further, public health campaigns are essential to remind the populace about the importance of vaccination and adherence to safety measures like mask-wearing and social distancing. These campaigns should be culturally sensitive and linguistically diverse to ensure wide reach. Finally, the government must ensure the healthcare system is well-equipped with necessary resources, including an adequate supply of medical oxygen, personal protective equipment for healthcare workers, and critical care facilities. The government could also consider reviving the NCOC, which did its job remarkably well the first time round, for resource allocation when and if needed to enhance the efficiency of response measures. The country's response must be swift, scientifically informed, and decisively executed. With these steps, Pakistan can effectively manage and stay ahead of a possible Covid-19 resurgence.

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SBP's projections

THE State Bank Governor's Annual Report for FY2023 is "cautiously optimistic" about the economy. It projects headline price inflation to drop, the current account deficit to narrow, and GDP to expand during the ongoing fiscal year.

However, the report warns, this outlook hinges on the absence of adverse shocks stemming from geopolitical tensions, unforeseen climate events and unfavourable movements in global commodity prices.

That aside, the bank expects inflation to slow down to 20pc-22pc, the current account gap to narrow to 0.5pc-1.5pc of GDP, and the economy to grow by 2pc-3pc. The projected recovery is modest but still a source of comfort after a tumultuous year in which Pakistan barely avoided default.

"The economic landscape of Pakistan has faced unprecedented challenges throughout the fiscal year," the report notes, highlighting that political uncertainty was another factor impacting business and consumer sentiments, thus affecting economic activity.

The report asserts the "SBP's commitment to maintain price stability", highlighting the "crucial role of fiscal policy and effective administration in supporting stability". But, such assertions have featured in most previous SBP reports, including the bank's monetary policy statements, in the last few years.

There is no doubt about the core role of fiscal policy in our balance-of-payments crisis as well as escalating inflation — the bank cannot absolve itself of its own part. Its past projections have often proved wrong, and the SBP has been behind the curve when it comes to taming inflation and checking the dollar's flight.

It may be impossible to undo the past but with 2023 behind us, many want to know if our rulers have learnt their lesson and are prepared to meet the upcoming challenges. This year should see stabilisation. The new government, which will take office after the February polls, will have its work cut out.

The first and most crucial challenge for it would be to negotiate a bigger, medium-term IMF loan to stabilise the external sector and raise funds from other bilateral, multilateral and commercial creditors in order to build the country's foreign exchange reserves.

Such a deal will entail a series of difficult fiscal, governance and structural reforms. The question is: will a government taking office as a result of a tainted election and questionable mandate be able to execute the required reforms and make tough decisions? This year is going to be a defining one for Pakistan's future trajectory. Many countries have managed to turn their crises into opportunities for fixing their respective economies.

All our economic challenges, including the ongoing balance-of-payment crisis and shortage of foreign currency, can be fixed. We are at a crucial juncture from where we can turn either way: towards a brighter and prosperous future or total collapse. It is all in our own hands.

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Terrorism surge

WHILE Pakistan's leadership remains almost exclusively occupied in political machinations, militants and terrorist outfits have been spreading their vicious tentacles. Violence-related deaths, according to recently released statistics from two major security think tanks, shot to a six-year high in 2023 as the country lost hard-earned ground to inimical forces. Some 789 terror attacks and counter-terrorism operations resulted in more than 1,500 deaths in 2023, including close to 1,000 civilian and security forces lives lost. There were around as many injuries as the total number of fatalities. The state's failures seem particularly damning, considering that the trends had shown a persistent increase in violent incidents in the preceding two years as well. Despite the warning signs, the year 2023 saw a staggering 69pc increase in militant attacks over the previous year. The enemies of Pakistan operated with near impunity, striking 53 times per month on average in 2023, compared to 32 times per month a year earlier.

Among the provinces, KP and Balochistan were the hardest hit, with 84pc of the attacks taking place on their soil and accounting for 90pc of all deaths. Yet, considering the state's recent actions, one would be hard-pressed to find any intent to put out the fires raging there. Indeed, the state only seems to be stirring the pot further with its short-sighted refusal to deal patiently and amicably with two long-running protest campaigns in the two provinces — the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in KP and protests by relatives of missing persons in Balochistan — even though they have merely been demanding basic rights. Another deeply concerning fact that emerged from one of the reports was that banned terrorist outfits accounted for only 17pc of all terrorist attacks, which suggests that the spectrum of threats to Pakistani interests present on its soil is growing and needs to be mapped more thoroughly.

The released data shows that the target of militant and terrorist outfits' activities has remained focused on security forces, with the overwhelming proportion of deaths recorded being those of front-line security personnel. This should be a cause for great worry for decision-makers responsible for security, as the deepening fissures between the citizenry and the state owing to the sociopolitical instability roiling the country are ripe to be exploited by hostile elements. They must not be allowed to take advantage of it — but for that, the country's security apparatus will need to reprioritise and focus its energies on countering this grave threat. This will necessarily entail putting out the fires raging through the country amidst widespread public dissatisfaction with state policies, and resisting the urge to exert control with force. We seem to be passing through a sensitive period where any misstep may trigger long-lasting repercussions that could haunt us for years.

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Conduct unbecoming

CARETAKER Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar's remarks concerning the ongoing Baloch protest in Islamabad have stirred controversy. His comments, particularly striking given his own heritage, seem to undermine the very essence of the struggle faced by the people of his province, ie, Balochistan.

For instance, telling supporters of the protest to 'join the militants' oversimplifies the complexities of Balochistan's issues. Such statements risk alienating an entire populace that is already grappling with feelings of marginalisation.

It is crucial to recognise that the protest in Islamabad is a cry for help, a plea for the recovery of missing loved ones, and a stand against extrajudicial actions. The protesters are exercising their fundamental right to peacefully demand answers and justice.

Attempts to portray protesters and their supporters as sympathisers of militants is an unfair representation. This narrative not only undermines the legitimate grievances of the Baloch people but also potentially endangers the lives of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders who stand in solidarity with them.

Further, criticising the media and activists for 'misleading' the public and damaging the state, is a worrying indication of intolerance towards dissent and criticism. The role of the media and civil society in highlighting human rights issues is crucial in any democracy, and disparaging the protesters only serves to weaken the democratic fabric of the country.

It is imperative for all our leaders, especially those with a direct connection to troubled regions, to adopt a more empathetic, understanding, and constructive approach.

Dialogue, not alienation, is the key to resolving long-standing issues. The need of the hour is for our leadership to reassess their stance and strive towards building bridges, not widening schisms. The people of Balochistan deserve empathy, understanding, and, above all, a commitment to resolving their legitimate grievances. In the words of another prominent figure from Balochistan, Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, this country belongs to all of us.

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Rising inflation

It is becoming difficult to put the inflation genie back into the bottle. New price data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics shows that monthly inflation edged up to 29.7pc last month from 24.5pc a year ago and 29.2pc a month back, owing to the upward adjustment of fuel charges in electricity tariffs and the increase in essential kitchen items. The continuous upward swing in the short-term weekly price data had already indicated as much, with second-round effects coming into play as manufacturers and sellers passed on the increase in energy rates to consumers. The State Bank of Pakistan, too, had hinted at sticky inflation in its December monetary policy statement due to the gas price hike. Overall, year-over-year CPI inflation has spiked by nearly 29pc in the first half of the ongoing fiscal year, from 25pc in the corresponding period the previous year.

According to the SBP, IMF and the government, the pace of increase in prices would slow down in the second half of the fiscal year to June due to the 'high base effect' of the last fiscal year, falling demand, easing of supply constraints and plunging global commodity rates. Their projections for the annual inflation rate, however, vary widely between 21pc to almost 26pc. These estimates compare favourably with the headline inflation of 29.6pc, recorded during 2022-23. Nevertheless, the inflation outlook faces multiple risks, ranging from potential currency depreciation to an upswing in international commodity prices, to a further increase in energy prices, as noted by the bank. Hence, inflation expectations of both consumers and businesses remain elevated in spite of some improvement of late. The monthly CPI inflation average has persisted at over 20pc since January 2021 — or double the last 10-year average of slightly over 10pc, underscoring the unprecedented rise in the cost of living in three years. Constantly rising food, housing, energy and transportation prices have especially burdened low- and middle-income households as wages stagnated. More people are more food insecure today than they were three years ago, not just because of shortages but also owing to the erosion of purchasing power. With elections just a few weeks away, no party has announced their plans to fix the causes of and control price inflation. Perhaps they are as clueless as ever; or just don't care about the financial woes of ordinary people.

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Licence to teach

THE caretaker Sindh government has introduced Pakistan's first teaching licence test, a commendable step in elevating the standard of education in the province. The government has created 400 grade-16 elementary school teacher posts, mandating the licensing test for eligibility. The policy, approved last year, aims to attract talented individuals to teaching, a profession pivotal in shaping future generations. This mirrors practices in professions like medicine, reinforcing the notion that teaching, too, requires rigorous standards and continuous development. The Sukkur Institute of Business Administration's Testing Services is managing online applications until Jan 11, 2024, illustrating a structured approach.

However, while the introduction of teaching licences is a laudable step, it raises questions about implementation. The policy's success hinges on its execution, demanding a robust framework and collaboration among various stakeholders, including teachers' unions, education institutions, and the private sector. The policy necessitates prospective teachers to pass a licensing test, which means that teacher education programmes must adapt to meet these new standards. Also, the policy's impact on existing teachers, who can opt for the licensing exam to expedite promotions, must be carefully considered. The promise of higher pay scales for licensed teachers is an attractive incentive, potentially drawing more qualified candidates into the profession. Yet, the

challenge lies in ensuring that this policy doesn't merely become a bureaucratic hurdle but is a meaningful step towards elevating teaching standards. Continuous professional development — critical for licence renewal — must be a genuine pathway for teacher growth. Comprehensive teacher training, regular evaluation, stakeholder engagement, and technology integration will further solidify the impact. The policy, if executed well, could revolutionise Sindh's education system, setting a precedent for the rest of the country. Perhaps, then, the phrase 'those who can't do, teach' will no longer be slung at our educators.

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Bangladesh crackdown

WHILE Bangladesh will go to the polls on Sunday to elect a new government, it will not be much of a contest, as the ruling Awami League has made short work of the opposition. Sadly, Prime Minister Hasina Wajed's administration has managed to decimate all opposition forces, while also going after critical voices in the media and civil society. While Nobel laureate and globally acclaimed economist Muhammad Yunus has long been in the bad books of the AL, he was convicted on Monday for "violating labour laws" at his telecom firm. Dr Yunus, who faces over 100 cases, denies the charges, and many observers feel the conviction is the result of the banker's earlier political ambitions. Meanwhile, the crackdown on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main opposition force, has been relentless. The party's workers and supporters have been picked up by the thousands, while many are in hiding, fearful that the security apparatus will scoop them up. The BNP had called for a caretaker set-up to oversee the polls, and upon the government's rejection of the proposal the party decided to sit out the contest. Foreign governments as well as neutral observers, including UN officials, have raised concerns about the crackdown, but this has failed to have any effect on PM Wajed's administration.

The situation in Bangladesh is reflective of the larger threat to democracy in the region. We in Pakistan are, of course, familiar with the tactics being unleashed by the state in Bangladesh, and similar questions of legitimacy have been raised about our own electoral exercise next month. Meanwhile, India, which goes to the polls in a few months, is also suffering from a democratic deficit, as the BJP's majoritarian Hindutva juggernaut has repeatedly mauled the secular democratic ethos in that country. Coming back to Bangladesh, the country had begun to traverse the democratic path after a long period of military rule ended in the early 1990s. But sadly, as the AL's tussle with the BNP escalated over the decades, Bangladesh today is standing on the brink of turning into a one-party state. While it may be too late to salvage the upcoming election, Ms Wajed and her party need to reconsider their methods, as heavy-handed crackdowns on all opposition forces will retard the growth of Bangladeshi democracy in the long run, and increase fissures in society.

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Ephemeral hopes

It is unfortunate that even sincere efforts to build bridges between political parties have remained unable to achieve any real breakthrough thus far. On Tuesday, Senate Opposition Leader Dr Shahzad Wasim, who belongs to the PTI, once again made an overture to rival parties for a sit-down to discuss national issues and find common ground.

While this is a positive gesture considering the rank toxicity pervading the political atmosphere, it is unlikely to be taken seriously given how ephemeral similar efforts have proven in the past.

At this point, it seems unfair to lay the blame on any one leader: all of them are guilty of abandoning the ground rules of democratic politics in favour of a cut-throat competition to curry favour with unelected elements.

To make matters worse, several shortcuts to power seem readily available. The major parties have thus been disincentivised from engaging with each other and finding political solutions to political problems.

While the state stumbles all over as it begrudgingly marches towards a historic general election, the citizenry still seems to be holding on to some hope for a hard reset on Feb 8.

After the Sturm and Drang that defined most of 2022 and all of 2023, the people of Pakistan deserve some calm in this new year, which the upcoming election was hoped to deliver.

However, in the absence of a new political understanding, the window for opportunity is closing fast. There has been much moaning and groaning over the ongoing demise of Pakistani democracy, with various commentators laying the blame on the transgressions of some seemingly unaccountable forces, but the fact is that the politicians still do wield a considerable bit of power that they have simply refused to use to bail the country out of the mess it is in. They must realise that history will not absolve them of their neglect.

At some level, every reasonable politician knows that the current situation is not tenable. A deeply controversial election — as the upcoming one is shaping up to be — will not benefit any of the stakeholders, not even the party that ascends to power through it.

Without a legitimate government in Islamabad, the anxieties that have wreaked so much havoc over the last few years will continue to persist. The solution, as ever, lies in negotiating a way out and setting some ground rules for the upcoming election. There must be an immediate end to

political victimisation, and all politicians should be given a fair chance to compete for the public's mandate.

The doctrine of mutually assured destruction has no place in politics. For their own sakes, civilian leaders must learn to live, survive and thrive with each other. Instead of waiting for deliverance, they must find it together.

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Gathering storm?

ANY hopes that the new year would bring some stability to the Middle East have been quickly dashed. Instead, fears are growing that the volatile region's intertwined conflicts will explode into something much larger — and uglier.

The first week of 2024 has been marked by two pivotal acts of violence linked to the ongoing Israeli slaughter in Gaza, as well as the larger confrontation between Iran and the US-Israel combine. On Wednesday, the Iranian city of Kerman witnessed two bomb blasts near the tomb of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

Over 80 mourners who had gathered to mark the anniversary of Soleimani's assassination by the US in 2020 were killed in the Kerman atrocity. The bombings are amongst the highest mass-casualty attacks Iran has suffered in many years.

Only a day earlier, top Hamas leader Saleh Al Arouri, along with other colleagues, was assassinated in a missile strike in Beirut's Dahiyeh neighbourhood — a stronghold of Iran-backed Hezbollah.

It is unclear who is responsible for the Kerman blasts; terrorists belonging to the self-styled Islamic State group have struck Iranian targets in the past, while Israel has also carried out assassination campaigns against Iranian military and government figures.

Amongst these was the murder of a top Pasdaran commander in Syria late last year. With regard to the Arouri assassination, there is little doubt that Tel Aviv is responsible.

Israel usually maintains an air of ambiguity about its murderous foreign operations. But in the current circumstances, it would be playing with fire by trying to provoke its adversaries in Iran, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region into striking back.

If the Iranians or Hezbollah were to react to these attacks, Israel could play the victim card and draw its American protectors deeper into the Middle East quagmire.

The resultant conflict would shake the international order to its core. So far, both Tehran and Hezbollah have marked their responses with restraint. But it will be hard for them to maintain this posture if Israel continues with its provocative behaviour.

Though logic would dictate that de-confliction mechanisms be deployed immediately to bring down the temperature, the reality is that a larger conflict may not be a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’.

Of course, if Israel were to stop its genocidal campaign in the Gaza Strip, things could be controlled. But the extremists at the helm in Tel Aviv do not appear to be interested in this option, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has a vested interest in prolonging the conflict to escape domestic censure.

Washington’s policymakers must explain if they are okay with their Israeli allies setting the Middle East on fire; there are no signs yet they would rather work towards reining in Tel Aviv.

Published in Dawn, January 5th, 2024

Banning surveys

CITING its new Code of Conduct for media, the Election Commission of Pakistan earlier this week asked Pemra to prohibit TV channels from airing the results of opinion surveys, arguing that “these can influence the free choice of voters”. This appears to be an overly conservative view of what is otherwise a seemingly harmless enumeration exercise that is conducted widely around the world in the run-up to elections. Surveys are used to gauge public sentiment and predict the outcomes of different electoral contests. They not only provide election observers with a means to better evaluate results based on pre-existing data, but they also act as a safeguard against possible manipulation of the election process by providing a public reference point against which the freeness and fairness of the overall exercise can be judged after the polls. It defies understanding why the ECP would seek to prohibit them altogether instead of introducing measures to ensure that they are not misused.

Clause 12 of the ECP’s Code of Conduct states that traditional media, as well as social media influencers, should refrain from conducting entrance or exit polls “or any kind of survey” at “polling stations or constituency [sic]”. While the restriction on election day polling, especially at busy polling stations, is still understandable, it seems excessive to expand the restriction to entire constituencies and well before the election as well. Indeed, those inclined to take a more conspiratorial view have been saying that the ECP’s decision to ban surveys altogether is, in fact, aimed at suppressing mentions of the PTI’s popularity, which has proven rather resilient. Instead of banning, the ECP may consider issuing guidelines through which it may demand a greater degree of accuracy, technical rigour and more transparency regarding how each survey is

designed and conducted. Banning them outright will deny observers important reference material and also give rise to further controversy about an exercise whose fairness is already under debate.

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IS threat

IF the claim of the self-styled Islamic State group of involvement in Wednesday's Kerman bombings is to be believed, it shows that while the bloodthirsty terrorist group may be down, it definitely is not out. Nearly 90 people, who were observing a memorial for assassinated general Qassem Soleimani in the Iranian city on his death anniversary, perished in the atrocity. Though initially it was unclear who was responsible, a day after the attack IS said two of its fighters carried out the strike. This is not the first time IS has been involved in violent acts inside Iran, though the number of casualties is amongst the highest in decades. In 2022 the extremist outfit said it was involved in bombing a shrine in the city of Shiraz, while in 2017 it struck the Iranian parliament as well as the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini. Muslim states throughout the region should be wary of the possible resurgence of IS, because if the outfit is allowed to reorganise, the bloodcurdling violence it was involved in before it was cut down to size could revisit the Middle East. And considering the extreme geopolitical volatility the region is experiencing, IS could take advantage of the chaos to advance its grim aims.

Interestingly, IS and Israel happen to share the same list of 'targets', Iran being chief amongst them. IS had also been involved in massive bloodshed in Iraq and Syria, states that Israel has attacked in the past. In fact Tel Aviv continues to target Syria, in blatant disregard of the latter's sovereignty. Meanwhile Daesh, as IS is also known, has little interest in the Palestinian liberation struggle. Some Iranian commentators have gone as far as labelling IS a tool of Israel and the US to destabilise the region. While that may or may not be true, the terrorist group certainly shares the same foes as Tel Aviv. In fact Israeli intelligence officials have boasted they are active "from Gaza to Iran". Muslim states need to stay vigilant, and prevent the resurgence of IS in the Middle East and neighbouring regions, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. This can be done through intelligence sharing and busting transnational cells. Regional states should also keep an eye on malign Israeli activities, as Tel Aviv seeks to sow chaos on foreign soil to divert attention from the massacre in Gaza.

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Delay talk

WITH about a month remaining in the general elections, some in the Senate seem to have just woken up to the realisation that the polls are being held in winter and in an adverse security environment. On Friday afternoon, as TV channels broke the news of the passage of a Senate resolution seeking a further delay in polls, lingering fears about the fate of Pakistani democracy were once again thrown into sharp relief.

As the names of those who had tabled the proposition were flashed on screen, one was tempted to speculate, based on their past activities in the Senate, who the sponsors of their latest mischief might be.

As more details emerged, however, there was some comfort to be found in the fact that the resolution was the work of just a handful of lawmakers seemingly taking advantage of their peers' absence. It soon also emerged that arguments in favour of another delay had been forcefully rebutted by a PML-N senator, Afnanullah Khan.

With the Supreme Court firm in its determination to hold elections on February 8, and the PML-N too now publicly opposed to any further delays, we can continue to hope that the electoral process will continue moving forward despite such distractions and theatrics.

The less said about these senators' 'adventure', the better. The actions of a few bad apples have brought parliament into much disrepute over the last few years. The wilful abandonment of the Constitution — the source of all lawmakers' relevance and power — has the potential to destroy the entire edifice of the Pakistani political system.

It is beyond understanding why some continue to persist in this approach. While keeping with democratic norms, they must be identified and held to account for their repugnant actions — either by the people, exercising their right to do so through the ballot box, or by the parties and lawmakers who have elected them to the upper house.

Lastly, it must be said that Senator Afnanullah's speech inspired a fair bit of melancholy. It was both sad and satisfying to see a PML-N leader making the same arguments against delaying elections that had been made last year by many well-meaning citizens as they exhorted the PDM-led government and the ECP not to abandon the constitutional scheme on election timelines.

Those responsible had been repeatedly warned then that the precedent they were setting would one day cause them great regret. Time has proven that the warning was a prescient one.

After delaying the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab assembly elections on the pretext of inadequate security, the PML-N is now forced to argue that conditions were much worse during elections held in 2008 and 2013. It seems we have come full circle. One wonders what other lessons are in store in the days ahead.

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MQM vs MQM

WILL the ‘real’ MQM please stand up? Nearly eight years after incurring the establishment’s wrath following Altaf Hussain’s controversial 2016 speech and the violent aftermath, the MQM-L is back in Pakistan’s electoral fray. Eighty ‘independent’ candidates running for both National Assembly and provincial legislature seats have been announced by the London-based leadership, as part of the ‘Wafa parast’ banner. The pro-Altaf faction had boycotted the 2018 polls. Though the MQM-L was never officially banned, it had been in the establishment’s bad books until recently. Things, it appears, are changing as the powers that be concentrate their energies on other ‘errant’ parties. The move shows that Altaf Hussain is still a factor in urban Sindh’s politics, though none of his party’s factions can match the electoral strength — backed by a fair bit of violence — the united MQM displayed before the 2016 crackdown.

The MQM-P, which was forged from the Altaf-led party in 2016, will not be too happy about the development. The ‘Bahadurabad’ group, which has also taken the Farooq Sattar and PSP factions under its wing, reportedly under the ‘friendly advice’ of powerful quarters, witnessed a drubbing in the 2018 polls, as the PTI took the lion’s share of Karachi’s seats. Though Imran Khan’s party is on the back foot, the MQM-P may further see its vote bank reduced as the London faction still enjoys support in the Muttahida rank and file. Yet the Altaf faction’s return to electoral politics also evokes dark memories of the time when the MQM supremo ruled Karachi with an iron fist. Violence, strikes and chaos were the order of the day. Thursday’s polling will reveal which faction of the MQM gets more votes, though it is hoped that in the post-election period, the ‘bad old days’ do not return as the MQM-P and MQM-L share the same violent origins, and it remains to be seen whether they have shed their old ways.

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Shut out

AS Pakistan prepares for its 12th general elections, the glaringly low number of women candidates makes evident the deeply rooted gender disparity in the country. A look at the number of candidates vying for National Assembly seats is telling: among 5,112 candidates, only 313 are women. The Aurat Foundation’s recent complaint to the ECP spotlights this issue. According to the organisation, PPP, JI, ANP, TLP, JUI-F and BNP have fallen short of fielding at least 5pc female candidates on general seats. Even where women are nominated, they are often relegated to constituencies with slim winning chances, a tactic that tokenises rather than empowers female

political participation. The situation is grimmer in Kohistan where canvassing for and by women was declared un-Islamic by some local clerics. Although the decree was dismissed by another Kohistan cleric as a “political stunt” to benefit the JUI-F, the very fact that it was issued and the insistence that defying it would be “sinful” is indicative of the kinds of societal hurdles women face. Beyond candidacy, the plight of women voters in conservative areas like Dhurnal in Punjab is equally troubling. There, educated women have been forbidden by their menfolk to exercise their right to vote. The ECP’s authority to void polls in areas where women are barred from voting remains a theoretical deterrent, with little on-the-ground impact where such conservative norms prevail.

Empowering women in Pakistan’s political arena requires more than just legislative quotas. It necessitates a cultural shift that values women’s contributions in public life, encourages their participation as candidates and voters, and fundamentally rethinks their role in Pakistani society. For this to occur, the ECP, political parties and civil society must collaboratively work towards dismantling the barriers — such as regressive traditions, lack of education, and societal expectations regarding household responsibilities — that sidelines half of the country’s population. It must be realised that a woman’s perspective is essential to understand issues like reproductive rights, education, violence against women, and economic empowerment, which disproportionately affect women. Their insight is vital in crafting policies that address these challenges. With the nation standing on the brink of another electoral exercise, we must reflect on the long road ahead in achieving gender parity in politics. The future of a truly democratic and inclusive Pakistan depends on it.

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The day before

WITH political parties instructed yesterday to suspend their campaigns at the stroke of midnight, the ‘pre-poll’ part of election 2024 stands completed. All that is now left is for the votes to be cast and counted and for a winner to be declared.

It is slightly disconcerting how suddenly this election seems to have passed us by. The past two months already seem like a haze of court cases and stop-start political activity. For the longest time, one was unsure if polls would be held, and there were fears of another delay. It was not until about three weeks ago that campaigning began in earnest.

Initially, the jalsas and rallies were damp affairs. The energy, enthusiasm and richness one usually associates with elections in Pakistan remained missing. It felt as if everyone was merely going through the motions; that a commitment to the process was missing.

Much of this was due, perhaps, to the prevailing impression that it was not a fair fight. Out of the two parties that consistently polled among the top two that voters intended to support, one was not allowed to campaign.

Most of the attempts made by the PTI to mobilise were met with arrests and intimidation. Thereafter, it moved its activities online, where its innovations not only helped it survive, but may have also put it in a position to mount a real challenge.

The other party, the PML-N, only hit the road towards the tail-end of the campaigning period. Indeed, it seemed at one point that it would need a push to start participating, considering how disinterested its leaders were. To its credit, the PPP was the only national party that actually took campaigning seriously. It started much earlier than the others and was able to maintain its energy throughout.

Just as the momentum seemed to be picking up, however, time had to be called. Today, voters will discuss and debate their choices with their families, friends, neighbours and fellow citizens. Tomorrow, they will speak through the ballot box.

The PML-N seems to be in a comparatively strong position after its late burst of activity, and because it seems to have the backing of powerful forces within the state. It will be an uphill struggle for the PTI, which is contesting without its traditional symbol and wasn't able to canvass. Still, the party has shown spirit throughout, and it can pull off an upset if its voters mobilise.

The PPP may prove a dark horse in this race. Even with its support base outside Sindh having dwindled over the years, its deal-making abilities have often seen it beat the odds. It understands better than most how to get ahead. Who will prevail? Not long to go before we find out.

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Balochistan blasts

THE prologue to today's national polls has been a blood-soaked one. Yesterday, just a day before people were to cast their votes to elect the next government, two deadly blasts rocked Balochistan, causing almost 30 fatalities. In the first incident, a blast occurred outside an independent candidate's election office in Pishin; the second targeted a JUI-F election office in Qila Abdullah. Both towns are located in Balochistan's Pakhtun belt. In fact, Balochistan and KP have been hit the hardest by terrorist violence, which picked up pace as the polls drew nearer.

Several actors are involved in militancy, including religiously inspired groups such as the banned TTP and its offshoots, and Baloch separatist outfits. On Monday, 10 police personnel were martyred when militants struck a police station in KP's Dera Ismail Khan. Balochistan, meanwhile, has been rocked by dozens of grenade attacks across the province, targeting candidates and their supporters. Pakistan had already been dealing with a fresh wave of militancy, and poll-related violence has only worsened the precarious security situation. At one time, rumours were circulating that the polls might be put off, at least in the militancy-hit areas, as candidates were killed and political activities targeted. That did not come to pass, though the administration's crucial test remains today: to ensure violence-free polls.

While extremist groups have no truck with democracy, Baloch separatist outfits are doing the people of Balochistan no service by forcefully denying them the right to peacefully choose their representatives. It is essential that countrywide, candidates are able to campaign in a peaceful atmosphere, and people are able to cast their ballots without the fear of violence on polling day. While in past decades, violence occurred mostly between supporters of different parties, since at least the 2008 election cycle it has been militancy that has been playing a spoiler in the democratic process. Unfortunately, even this time around, while the caretaker administration has been more than active in areas beyond its brief, it has largely failed to perform one of its core tasks: ensuring a peaceful pre-poll atmosphere. The interim Balochistan chief minister has urged people not to be scared and to come out and vote today. That should be the message echoing loud and clear from the entire administrative set-up, assuring the people of Pakistan of a violence-free election day.

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People's voice

THERE is a hush today in the corridors of power. A higher force stirs. The time is at hand for the people of Pakistan to speak and for others, in nations near and far, to bear witness to their decision. This electoral cycle has been unlike any in recent memory.

At stake are not only the continuity and evolution of the country's crisis-ridden political system but also the foundations of its social contract. With the country at a crossroads, 128m voters have been handed the power to decide which path it should take forward. It is hoped that most will exercise it today in any one of the more than 92,000 polling stations nationwide.

Thousands are contesting for the 266 National Assembly seats, and thousands more for a seat in one of the provincial assemblies. By tonight, hopefully, we will know whom the voters have chosen to trust.

It is important that everyone make themselves heard. Our freedoms and choices may be limited, but the only lawful means to improve our lot is by voting in sound and capable leaders who are best suited to representing us in parliament. This right should not be foregone.

Exercising the vote is not merely a civic duty; it is an assertion of one's freedom, a declaration of agency, and a reaffirmation of one's belonging to this nation. We are fortunate to have this right, which has been earned through the sacrifices of generations past.

This election has been a silver lining throughout the tumult that has lately roiled Pakistan. For months, the people have been looking forward to having a say in who ought to be making executive decisions on their behalf. Despite many apprehensions, they have held on to the belief that their right to choose will make a difference. Today, as this right is exercised, the public's will must be respected by all without qualifications or limitations.

The ballot box is not merely a receptacle for pieces of paper. It is the crucible in which millions of Pakistanis place their aspirations, grievances and dreams as they renew their contract with the state. It is important that the state respects this trust and facilitates the exercise in every manner.

The tragic loss of life in Balochistan yesterday has cast a pall of gloom. As indicated in the editorial below, the state must take every measure to ensure citizens' security today and guarantee that the polling exercise will be held in a safe environment.

Given that they are being held after considerable delay, it is important that voters are able to participate freely in these elections, which must be concluded to the public's satisfaction. History awaits our people's verdict. The state should not falter or fail them in this defining moment.

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Election reflections

AND just like that, Election 2024 is over.

Lacklustre from the beginning, the exercise concluded with a whimper last evening. Amidst limited reporting due to the suspension of communication services, there were some reports of delays in the polling process and various violations of rules and the election code of conduct.

Thankfully, though, no major incidents of violence were reported and voting seems to have concluded in most places smoothly and uneventfully. It seems that all that remains now is the counting of votes and declaration of winners. As results trickle in overnight, we will learn how many chose to exercise their right to franchise on this historic occasion.

Till a clearer picture emerges, some reflections on the exercise: These elections had been critical for Pakistan for various important reasons. The country is mired in unprecedented economic and social challenges, which cannot be solved except by a stable government that enjoys strong public support for its decisions. Given its dependence on international assistance, it is also important for it to stabilise socially so that lenders and investors can feel safe about their decisions. With so many different forces pulling the country at its seams, it was almost good luck that a general election became due last year.

All that was needed was for the ECP to let candidates campaign without restrictions, prepare the grounds for a clean and non-controversial contest, assist the country's adult population in freely exercising their right to self-determination, conduct a transparent count of their ballots, and quietly and respectfully bow out.

As history will bear witness, it failed on almost all of those counts.

From repeatedly delaying the elections on one pretext or the other to failing to protect the legitimacy of its last act, it betrayed its mandate by organising an exercise that will be remembered for all the wrong reasons. It is difficult not to be disappointed: given the number of times the ECP hid behind the Constitution's 'free and fair' condition to justify putting them off 'till it was ready', one would have imagined the exercise, whenever it was eventually held, would be largely irreproachable.

Of course, the blame does not lie with the ECP alone.

The caretaker government and the entire machinery of the state are equally culpable in robbing it of its sanctity. Their actions worsened political polarisation, and they did not know when to stop. As a result, the exercise was doomed to controversy well before it began. It already seems clear that it will not provide any closure for the country's political crisis. Crisis and instability will likely continue to plague the nation, with dissent kept in check through the use of fear tactics. It is a shame that such a momentous opportunity has been so carelessly lost.

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Rushed restructuring

AS an elected government will take the reins in the next few weeks, it is pertinent to ask why the caretaker set-up is bulldozing the privatisation and restructuring of state-owned enterprises. The ECP had only a few days ago stopped the interim administration from overhauling the FBR, telling the caretakers to focus their energies on 'routine' matters. Similarly, the election watchdog had also stopped the interim government from going ahead with PIA's restructuring. Unfortunately, the caretakers have flouted the ECP's specific orders regarding the flag carrier, as on Tuesday the federal cabinet approved a plan to restructure PIA. The cabinet has also approved the privatisation of the First Women Bank.

What sort of message are the caretakers — who will return to their day jobs very soon — sending by defying the ECP? This sort of behaviour tells the common citizens that even those who are supposed to be guardians of the law flout it at will. Moreover, whether it is streamlining the tax machinery, or privatising SOEs, the question arises: what's the rush? The caretakers' mandate is limited to holding polls and running day-to-day affairs, and that mandate will expire soon. Why, then, is the interim set-up taking decisions that will have far-reaching consequences for the state and taxpayer? Even if one is to consider the (limited) powers granted to the caretakers by the last parliament in July 2023, the decisions the interim set-up is taking appear to be a 'creative' reinterpretation of these provisions, as the ECP has reminded the administration of its restricted role. There can be little doubt that loss-making SOEs, such as PIA, which haemorrhages hundreds of billions of rupees in losses, need to be privatised and that taxpayers cannot continue to bear the burden of these white elephants. A financial reckoning of SOEs is essential. But this job must be left to the incoming parliament, answerable to voters, and should not be rushed through.

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In the dark

IN blatant disregard of the sanctity of democracy, the caretaker government, abetted by a conspicuously passive ECP, suspended mobile and internet services on election day, citing security threats.

The move rendered thousands of voters clueless as to where their polling stations were, as the ECP's 8300 SMS service could only be operated on mobile networks. The decision not only defies court orders mandating uninterrupted internet connectivity during the polls, it raises a glaring question: how does snapping communication channels deter terrorism?

The rationale is mind-boggling.

Terrorism, which predates the internet, cannot be effectively combated with such indiscriminate shutdowns. Instead, these actions hinder critical communication among citizens and emergency services, potentially compromising rather than enhancing security. The decision is part of a broader pattern of behaviour by the caretakers and ECP that smacks of bias.

In the lead-up to the election, we witnessed what has been decried by some politicians as pre-poll rigging with PTI candidates harassed, detained, and prevented from filing nomination papers. The prime minister's admission in a foreign media interview that he could not guarantee free and fair elections undermines any remaining shreds of credibility.

Moreover, the chief election commissioner's attempt to distance himself and the ECP from the decision to suspend services, attributing it to law-enforcement agencies, is a feeble attempt to absolve himself of responsibility.

The ECP's role is not to be a passive observer but to actively ensure the integrity of the electoral process. Their failure to do so, and to protect the rights of citizens to freely express their will at the polls, is a betrayal of their mandate. The actions of the caretakers and the ECP have not only disenfranchised voters and compromised the electoral process but have also set a dangerous precedent for future polls.

Severing communications under the guise of security, the pre-election harassment of opposition candidates, and the flouting of court orders and democratic norms paint a picture of institutions that have lost sight of their basic duty. The caretaker government and ECP must be held accountable for violating the sacred trust of the people. Their actions stand in stark contrast to their raison d'être: holding fair and transparent polls.

The people deserve better; they deserve an unimpeded chance to shape their destinies through the ballot box, without the shadow of manipulation or coercion.

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Uniform crimes

WHILE misconduct in law enforcement is not unique to Pakistan, it would not be far-fetched to state that criminality in our police force is at record levels. As a result, people end up fearing the force rather than putting their faith in it. Disturbing reports reveal that even a safety measure — the campaign against unlicensed drivers — has been weaponised by the Punjab police. Lahore's traffic wardens are sending 50 to 100 young riders and drivers behind bars daily, including student motorcyclists carrying learners' licences and vehicle documents. Although the practice is a familiar one across the country, the detention of young and underage riders with hardened offenders, leaving them vulnerable to crime and abuse, is an aberrant aspect. Victims and their

parents also allege that the traffic police, in collusion with police stations and lawyers, take hefty amounts as fees for 'travel expenses'.

Clearly, gone are the days when bribes were the order of the day. The fact that police excesses have grown more toxic and harmful suggests a lack of accountability. Besides, activities like these promote mass disillusionment with law enforcers and the government as drives must have checks and balances to avoid abuse of power. The police hierarchy too has much to overhaul in order to build a force that serves and protects the citizenry as opposed to turning on it. Second, safety on roads can be maintained with fines, warnings, challans, impounding vehicles and issuing notices to residences of errant drivers. Third, along with these steps, there has to be scrutiny within the force and a zero-tolerance policy for criminal officers. Moreover, citizens' trust should be restored with a monitored helpline to register complaints against police corruption and high-handedness. Finally, the state has to decipher why police personnel indulge in blatant violation of authority to commit the same offences that they are meant to thwart. Or else, the black sheep will overshadow honest officers.

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Ill-prepared

THE Election Commission of Pakistan appears to be struggling in its preparation for the polls. After several revisions in the election schedule, postal ballot voting is the latest impediment to the electoral exercise. With fewer than two weeks remaining for voters to apply for postal ballots, the commission has failed to provide vital constituency information through its 8300 SMS service. In an era where electoral processes the world over are digitised for enhanced accessibility and transparency, the ECP's inability to update crucial details pertaining to national and provincial assembly constituencies, and their associated returning officers with whom the applications have to be filed, is a significant setback. This lapse affects over a million voters, including government officials, armed forces personnel, their families, persons with disabilities, and prisoners. These groups, often stationed or residing away from their constituencies, rely on postal ballots to exercise their right of franchise. The ECP's oversight, thus, disenfranchises a significant section of the electorate.

The commission's attempt to justify this lapse by linking it to the final publication of polling station lists is misleading. The information crucial for postal ballot voters — their constituency numbers — is determined by delimitation, independent of polling station locations. Furthermore, the timing of assigning additional responsibilities to Dr Syed Asif Hussain as the commission's secretary raises questions. The decision and the lack of its communication on the ECP's website or its media WhatsApp group, only adds to the prevailing uncertainty about the ECP's

preparedness and commitment to a fair electoral process. It is a reminder that the effectiveness of a democratic process is contingent not just on the people's participation but also on the competence and transparency of the institutions that facilitate it. As the deadline for postal ballot applications draws near, the ECP must act swiftly to rectify these deficiencies. It is imperative that the commission provides all necessary information to postal ballot voters at the earliest. The ECP must urgently come up with a comprehensive action plan to address the current state of disarray and resolve the systemic issues before the polls. Failure to do so would not only undermine the integrity of the electoral process but also reflect poorly on the ECP's role as a custodian of democracy in Pakistan.

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Maulana's mission

IF one of the main purposes of JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman's visit to Afghanistan was to convince the Afghan Taliban to rein in the banned TTP and prevent the terrorist group from using Afghan soil as a launchpad for anti-Pakistan activities, either the message did not get through, or the TTP are in no mood to listen.

The maulana received official protocol upon his arrival in Kabul and on Monday met the 'Islamic Emirate's' Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund. Incidentally, on the day the maulana was meeting the Taliban leadership, the TTP launched a murderous assault on policemen escorting polio vaccinators in Bajaur. At least six police personnel were martyred in the attack.

Mullah Akhund also brought up the issue of Afghan migrants' expulsion from Pakistan with the maulana, decrying the allegedly 'cruel' treatment meted out to his compatriots by this country.

Maulana Fazl, who was accompanied by a delegation, also had Pakistan's top diplomat in Kabul with him during his engagements, indicating that the JUI-F chief's visit has state sanction. According to media reports, Mullah Akhund assured the JUI-F chief that his government bore no malice towards Pakistan, while adding that they would not let Afghan soil be used against any country.

The Afghan Taliban have long denied that their country is being used by terrorist groups to target regional states, while Pakistan has firmly argued that the TTP have havens on the other side of the Durand Line.

While maulana sahib's efforts are welcome, questions arise about how effective these will prove to be in actually bringing down militancy. It should be remembered that in 2022, a delegation of Pakistani Deobandi ulema, led by Mufti Taqi Usmani, made a similar trip to Afghanistan and met both the Afghan Taliban as well as the TTP leadership.

While the Pakistani divines were received with great reverence in Afghanistan, their visit failed to dampen the TTP's appetite for violence against this country. Even if Maulana Fazl is able to convince the Afghan Taliban that controlling militancy is in Afghanistan's interest, will Kabul's rulers be able to rein in their ideological comrades in the TTP?

At the end of the day, both the Afghan Taliban and the TTP — though bound by ideology and worldview — are two different organisations, with separate leadership structures.

For the Taliban, the marching orders are received from the Kandahar-based Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, while the TTP has its own hierarchy. The Taliban can and should apply pressure on the TTP to stop attacking Pakistan.

But while some militants may be reverential to the clergy, ultimately they are free agents, and not bound by the usual rules of engagement. Therefore, the days ahead will tell if Maulana Fazl's mission has been a success.

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Scorching year

IN 2023, Earth hit an alarming milestone. The year, with a global average temperature of 14.98°C, was the hottest on record. This dire reality, confirmed by the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service, underscores an urgent call to action for humanity. Several factors contributed to this unprecedented global warming. The primary culprit remains the relentless increase in greenhouse gas emissions, particularly carbon dioxide and methane, which reached record atmospheric concentrations last year. The El Niño phenomenon, which typically heralds warmer temperatures globally, also played a significant role. Additionally, natural events like the underwater volcano eruption near Tonga, and reduced sulfur pollution from ships — which lowered the cooling effect of aerosols — contributed to high temperatures. The impacts have been profound and far-reaching. Record-low sea ice in Antarctica, devastating wildfires in Canada, and extreme heat across continents are just a few manifestations of this escalating crisis. These events are clear indicators of a rapidly changing climate system.

Moving forward, the path is clear. The first step must be a global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. According to the 2023 Emissions Gap Report, emissions must be cut by 42pc by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels — a target rapidly slipping from our grasp. In a silver lining, at the recently held COP28 climate summit, 27 countries pledged to the Buildings Breakthrough, and more than 60 countries joined the Global Cooling Pledge and Global Methane Pledge, to work towards this. Countries must transition to renewable energy sources, enhance

energy efficiency, and adopt sustainable practices across all sectors of the economy. Adaptation strategies are equally vital. Investing in resilient infrastructure, developing climate-smart agriculture, and conserving natural ecosystems are imperative to withstand the already certain impacts of climate change. The choices we make today will determine the liveability of our planet for generations. It's a responsibility we cannot afford to ignore.

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No ball

THE umpire wants the bat back at the crease. The Peshawar High Court has — for the second time — overturned the Election Commission's regrettable order stripping the PTI of its iconic election symbol ahead of the upcoming general election. The decision, delivered just in time, reverses one of the severest handicaps imposed on the PTI ahead of the upcoming elections. The ECP had argued that, based on alleged irregularities in the intraparty election held by the PTI last month, it was entitled to take the symbol from the party. However, the PHC ruled yesterday that this wasn't a good enough reason to deny a political party its primary means to collect votes on polling day. "The PTI is entitled to the election symbol strictly in terms of Sections 215 and 217 read with any other enabling provision of the Election Act, 2017 and Election Rules, 2017," the short order read, with the court further ruling that the ECP's earlier order was "illegal, without any lawful authority and of no legal effect".

It is worth pointing out that the ECP's decision to strip the bat would have rendered the PTI's candidates able to contest the elections due on Feb 8 as independents only. Such a severe penalty would kill any party's election prospects, especially since multiple candidates vie for the same party's ticket in most constituencies, and it is impossible for the parties' voters to know which of the people named on the ballot are being formally backed by their party in the absence of the familiar election symbol against anyone's name. In case enough voters are confused — which is quite likely, considering the variety of candidates on the ballot paper — this could mean the difference between a large victory and an overwhelming defeat. It seems the PHC took cognisance of the severity of these consequences while striking down the ECP's order in its latest ruling. As such, it is the correct decision. As was pointed out in the arguments in court over the matter, no party has ever been made to contest elections without its symbol except for under a dictatorship. It is a shame that matters came to this, but the court has thankfully ruled in favour of a fair contest. The PML-N, PTI and PPP now have a fight to win. It is time to kick off the campaigns in earnest.

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Musharraf's sentence

AT a time when the constitutional order in Pakistan is — yet again — facing a variety of threats, the Supreme Court has upheld military ruler Pervez Musharraf's death sentence.

The decision can serve as an inflection point where Pakistan's constitutional history and future are concerned, offering lessons for those willing to learn about the perils of veering from the democratic course, and respecting the country's basic law.

The general, who ruled over Pakistan for nearly a decade, was given the death sentence by a three-judge special court in 2019. A month later, the LHC had overturned the death sentence. The SC had last year taken up a set of appeals related to the case, and on Wednesday, the apex court set aside the LHC decision ruling that it was “not sustainable”.

Though this paper opposes the death penalty as a matter of principle, and it would have been better if the decision had come while the military strongman was still alive — Mr Musharraf passed away last year — the ramifications of the SC judgement are considerable, just as those of the special court's original sentence were.

Though some may say that the decision is an afterthought, and that it will not stop military interventions should the proponents of martial rule decide to go ahead with it, the decision is highly symbolic. Mr Musharraf was sentenced for imposing his second emergency in 2007, yet it is fair to ask why he wasn't punished for the 'original sin': the 1999 coup.

Rather than precipitating any clash of institutions, or targeting any individuals, the SC judgement should initiate a journey of soul-searching and self-reckoning within all pillars of the state, to see where we as a nation have gone wrong by abandoning the Constitution, and embracing autocratic tendencies.

Moreover, there should be an honest appraisal of history: Pervez Musharraf was not the first military strongman to rule Pakistan, though it is hoped he will be the last. Much before, in 1958, Iskander Mirza and Ayub Khan had thwarted Pakistan's democratic evolution by imposing this country's first martial law. Next, Yahya Khan's period of military rule led to the separation of East Pakistan.

The forays launched by Ziaul Haq on the constitutional order are also well-documented. But their lordships should also consider the role of their brother judges in propping up dictatorships. Many a learned jurist played a key role in validating military rule, guided by the dubious 'doctrine of necessity'.

Today, as Pakistan struggles with upholding the constitutional order, and protecting fundamental rights, all institutions need to review our chequered history — including the Musharraf period — and realise that national salvation lies only in all pillars of the state staying within their constitutional bounds, and working to stop any further adventurism.

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Raising urea prices

THE government's decision to raise the retail prices of urea by 5pc to recover the 'full cost' of imported fertiliser will burden the smallholder farmers, but not by much. Small price jolts don't matter, even though these may initially pinch small growers rather sharply, provided they are getting the right price for their produce. Under the ECC decision, a weighted average price for a mix of local and imported urea has been worked out through a basket price mechanism to recover Rs30bn in 2024 after both the Centre and provinces — barring Sindh — refused to shoulder the burden of subsidy. The latest urea price increase notwithstanding, the farmers will still be getting the chemical at nearly 35-40pc discount to the import price of Rs6,250 per 50kg bag. Under the arrangement with the industry, the urea manufacturers will lift 220,000 tonnes of fertiliser from the port according to their market share and sell it at the new prices, which is Rs160-171 per bag higher than the current retail rates. Since the new increase aims to recover the cost of imported urea, it shouldn't impact the producers' margins.

The authorities had ordered imports to bridge the domestic supply gap, which has already created a big black market in most parts of country. Consequently, the farmers, especially the smallholders, are forced to pay a minimum premium of Rs1,000 per bag on top of the market price. There have also been reports of acute urea shortages in some parts, with farmers queueing up for hours to purchase a few bags. Will the imports be enough to eradicate the black market? That is unlikely. According to some reports, a nexus between fertiliser producers and their distributors is largely responsible for the 'artificial shortages', which have been recurring year after year during the winter season when nitrogen is needed in larger quantities for wheat plant growth. Rather than controlling urea pricing, the authorities should focus on eliminating urea unavailability and the black market to provide relief to growers.

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Terror wave

A SPATE of deadly recent terrorist attacks illustrates the grim fact that unless the state takes comprehensive counterterrorism measures, the militancy-related bloodshed witnessed in 2023 is likely to continue in the new year.

Many of the attacks have targeted police personnel, particularly those tasked with guarding polio teams. The week began on a sombre note when at least seven policemen guarding vaccinators were martyred in Bajaur on Monday in an IED blast targeting their vehicle. On Tuesday, two police officers lost their lives in a reported gunfight with militants in Bannu. These personnel were also escorting polio teams.

Wednesday also witnessed significant bloodshed, as three law enforcers were martyred when a police post was attacked in Kohat, while two army men lost their lives in Lakki Marwat. On the same day an election candidate was gunned down in North Waziristan, while another hopeful survived an attack in Turbat.

In the aforementioned attacks, terrorists have struck both 'hard' targets, in the form of security personnel, as well as 'soft' ones, such as election hopefuls. They show just how vulnerable police personnel are, particularly those serving in areas of KP and Balochistan experiencing a renewed wave of terrorist violence.

As mentioned, 2023 was not a good year where terror-related casualties are concerned. According to figures compiled by a think tank, there were over 1,500 violence-linked fatalities last year from nearly 800 terror attacks.

It is particularly tragic that those protecting polio vaccinators have themselves come in the line of fire. This is not a new development; around a hundred people have been killed in polio-related incidents since 2012

A recalibration of the national CT strategy is long overdue, particularly in order to protect the lives of soldiers and police personnel serving on the front lines. While military personnel are relatively better equipped, police officers also need to be supplied safety gear that can help save lives.

Moreover, those protecting polio teams should be provided multi-layered security. While the state must keep using diplomatic channels to communicate to the Afghan Taliban that their soil cannot be used by forces inimical to Pakistan, internal efforts are equally necessary to flush out militants from our own territory.

Unless efforts to uproot militancy succeed, the next, and inevitable step, will require military operations that will displace communities, and require more sacrifices from security personnel and dedicated funds.

And as an election looms, candidates and voters in militancy-affected areas need security in order to freely campaign, and cast their ballots without fear, respectively. All security and intelligence agencies need to be on the same page, and together with the civil administration, the militant threat needs to be neutralised.

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Genocide case

SOUTH Africa's brave attempt to bring Israel to justice for its crimes against the people of Gaza must be lauded. Hearings at the International Court of Justice began on Thursday in the case Pretoria has brought against Tel Aviv for breaching the 1948 Genocide Convention.

Observers the world over have been crying out loudly that, in the aftermath of the Oct 7 events, Israel has unleashed nothing short of the 'final solution' upon the hapless people of Gaza in the name of destroying Hamas.

As a result, over 23,000 people have been butchered, including thousands of children, in one of the worst atrocities committed by a state against a civilian population in the modern age.

Certainly, with the siege, starvation, forced displacement, and bombardment of Gazans, Israel has proven through words and deeds that it seeks to eliminate the Palestinian people.

Its politicians and generals have used blood-curdling language to justify the slaughter of Palestinians, and have followed up these shocking threats with acts of barbaric violence.

And as the UN Security Council, OIC, Arab League and other multilateral fora have done nothing to stop the slaughter, it is hoped that proceedings at the ICJ can help bring about a ceasefire.

It is a matter of shame that no Arab or Muslim state lodged the case, leaving the task to South Africa.

Perhaps South Africa's own courageous struggle to dismantle the vile system of apartheid — one Israel seems to be replicating — prompted Pretoria to speak up for Palestine.

The Muslim and Arab states should now legally and morally support the South African effort. Pakistan and others have made positive statements in this respect.

The actual case may take years, but as an interim measure, the court can ask Israel to stop the bloodshed. Tel Aviv has dismissed the legal procedure, while its Western friends, specifically the US and UK, have criticised South Africa's move.

While any decision is not enforceable, a moral victory will have been won if Israel is held culpable of genocide. The Palestinians will be keeping an eye on The Hague to see if their lordships order an end to their nightmare, or if Israel succeeds in sabotaging the legal process.

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Attack on Yemen

THE situation in the Red Sea was already explosive. And with the Anglo-American attacks targeting the Houthi movement in Yemen on Thursday, the first shots in a long, ugly war have likely been fired. Soon after Israel launched its genocidal assault on Gaza following the Oct 7 Hamas raids, the Houthis had promised to block Israeli ships, or those linked to Tel Aviv, from passing through the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb strait in solidarity with Palestine. The Iran-aligned group then delivered on its promise, by raiding vessels and striking others with projectiles. This sent shockwaves throughout the global shipping industry, as the area in focus is a vital maritime corridor, and many leading firms decided to stay away from the Red Sea. In reaction to the Houthi moves, the US assembled a naval coalition of the willing to 'protect' maritime shipping, though this failed to deter the Yemeni group. Thursday's assault, in which several Yemeni targets were hit causing fatalities, is a major escalation, and the Houthis have vowed to hit back.

Though the blockade of maritime routes is problematic, the Houthis had said they would cease their actions if the war on Gaza ended. This obviously has not happened, and instead of pressing their Israeli allies to stop the bloodshed, America has put on an ugly display of military power, which has dialled up tensions in the region by several notches. Russia has called the strikes on Yemen "illegitimate", while Iran has also condemned them. Moreover, several pro-American Arab states have distanced themselves from the Anglo-US actions. From here we must prepare to enter the unknown. The world's mightiest military power has taken on a militia belonging to one of the globe's poorest states, that has held off the well-armed Saudi military for nine years. While the Houthis may be allied to Iran, they are masters of their own destiny, and their reaction to the aggression is likely to be unpredictable. One thing is certain: a quick return to the status quo ante in the Middle East is out of the question.

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Breathing space

THE approval of the first performance review under the \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement by the IMF's executive board, which unlocks the second tranche of \$700m in critical bailout funds, must help Pakistan somewhat shore up its dwindling foreign exchange reserves, deepen 'nascent economic

stability’, boost confidence of the nation’s foreign creditors, and ease the external debt repayment pressure. In short, it would extend the breathing space the short-term loan has afforded the economy for another few months. Its optimistic view on recent macroeconomic stability expressed in the press release issued after the board’s approval notwithstanding, the Fund has adjusted downwards its GDP growth projections for the present fiscal from the previous 2.5pc to 2pc, saying headline inflation will remain elevated despite dropping to 24pc from the last fiscal year’s reading of above 29pc. The current account deficit forecast has also been revised from 1.8pc to 1.6pc of GDP due to reduction in imports. Likewise, it expects the gross forex reserves to rise to \$9.1bn by the end of FY24.

Although the IMF board has reaffirmed that economic activity has stabilised in Pakistan and the macroeconomic conditions have generally improved, it did warn that the “outlook remains challenging, and the continued timely and consistent implementation of program policies remains critical, with no room for slippage”. It also reminded us to keep the promises we have made with the lender to secure its funds, saying Pakistan needs to strictly adhere to the fiscal targets while protecting social spending, ensure a market-determined exchange rate to absorb external shocks, and make progress on structural reforms to support stronger and more inclusive growth to navigate through the ongoing crisis and foster stability. The success of the current IMF programme is also crucial since the country needs to negotiate a bigger and longer funding facility from the lender soon after the new government is formed after the Feb 8 elections for addressing domestic and external balances and secure financing from other multilateral and bilateral partners, as well as commercial creditors in the medium term. The negotiations for the next IMF programme are not going to be easy, and will require the new political set-up to take politically unpopular decisions that successive governments have avoided until now.

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Shock exit

THE abrupt departure of a Supreme Court judge next in line to be chief justice — that too, in the midst of a period of unprecedented crisis — fills one with a deep sense of foreboding.

On Thursday, without warning, Justice Ijazul Ahsan tendered his resignation to the president, stating that he no longer wished to continue as a judge of the Supreme Court. A former judge and chief justice of the Lahore High Court, Justice Ahsan was slated to take over as top judge in October this year upon the retirement of the incumbent.

Instead, he chose to cut his career short just months earlier, in circumstances few seem to understand. His resignation followed the abrupt departure of another Supreme Court judge, the now-retired justice Mazahar Ali Akbar Naqvi; but though the latter’s resignation seemed logical

given the circumstances, Justice Ahsan's caught the legal community off-guard, with many describing it as a most unfortunate development.

There are those who believe that the departure of these two judges has finally purged the apex court of the influence of the so-called 'like-minded group'. On the other hand, there are those who believe these two judges have been punished over their jurisprudential leanings.

Wherever one may stand on this debate, there is no denying that the country's top forum for justice is experiencing an upheaval which may have direct consequences for the many crucial cases pending before it. In the interest of fairness, it must also be pointed out that it seems wrong to club Justices Ahsan and Naqvi together.

Justice Naqvi had been facing serious charges of misconduct and possible corruption at the time he chose to resign, while Justice Ahsan's hands were still clean. And, while fingers were pointed at Justice Ahsan in the past, for example in the Grand Hyatt case, most people seem to agree that he was otherwise a 'solid' judge.

Justice Ahsan was obviously unhappy with the manner in which the Supreme Court had been conducting its affairs, as evidenced in his opposition to the bench which heard appeals against the military trials judgment, as well as his criticism of the SJC's 'hasty' proceedings against Justice Naqvi. Considering he was part of the 'group of three' responsible for key decisions at the Supreme Court, efforts should have been made to convince him against resigning.

The turmoil within the court has the potential of making it a very controversial place. Many a chief justice has, in the past, played politics and/ or run the judiciary as an autocrat: making benches of their choice and sidelining judges who disagreed.

If the incumbent wants to stand apart from such antecedents, the Supreme Court should have an environment where different judges with different views feel equally welcome. A court which sidelines or silences dissent cannot be expected to do justice.

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Increased remittances

THE year-over-year upswing of 13.4pc in workers' remittances during December is indeed good news for a country scrambling for stability amidst a protracted balance of payments crisis. This had forced the state to contract the economy during the last financial year to stall a default as forex reserves drained quickly on burgeoning imports and drying capital inflows. But then the cash sent home by overseas Pakistanis historically increases during the winter holidays. The question is: will this trend hold over the second half of the current fiscal year? The market expects

remittances to post a growth in March-April due to the 'seasonal' effect during Ramazan and around Eid. However, market players believe that these inflows could shrink further during FY24 from last year when the tally dropped by a hefty \$4bn from the peak of more than \$31bn in FY22. Overall remittances during the first half of the present fiscal are already down by 6.8pc compared with the corresponding period last year and could plunge further.

While the crackdown against dollar smuggling to Afghanistan as well as illegal currency business by exchange companies has helped the government reduce volatility in the forex market, and stabilise and improve the exchange rate, it has failed to boost inflow of remittances. That underscores the limitations of such actions. Call it a grey market or a black market, there are signs of re-emergence of illegal dollar trade once again. It is because the real reasons behind this illegal trade haven't been addressed. On top of the list is the issue of under-invoicing by large retailers and commercial importers to save taxes. The discrepancies of over \$5bn in imports from China alone underline the gravity of the situation. The unannounced import restrictions are believed to have pushed under-invoicing in the last year or more. The other major reason for shrinking remittances is the current economic uncertainty, which has been aggravated by ongoing political instability. The market players believe that Pakistan has potential of doubling inflow of remittances. But this potential cannot be realised through short-term administrative measures. If Pakistan is to boost remittances, it will have to address the real issues that incentivise overseas Pakistanis to use non-banking or grey channels to send cash home.

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Bat and forth

IT was grave news to finish a dour day. The Supreme Court late Saturday upheld the Election Commission's deeply controversial decision to take the bat from the PTI. It is a judgment that already seems unlikely to be looked upon favourably in history.

Just days after it overturned a past Supreme Court ruling on lifetime disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) on the grounds that the bench that previously decided the matter had 'read into the Constitution' to conjure up a punishment that never existed, a three-member bench of the apex court under the incumbent chief justice seemingly endorsed a very similar transgression by the ECP.

Despite there being no explicit provision in the election rulebook which gives the ECP power to deny a political party its election symbol on the basis of a contested intraparty election, the ECP had gone ahead and done just that. Now, it can rest easy knowing it has the Supreme Court's stamp of approval.

Given the implications of the punishment imposed on the PTI, that too mere weeks before a general election is due to take place, most legal observers following the proceedings in the Supreme Court had agreed that for the top court to endorse the ECP decision would be tantamount to denying the public their constitutional right to vote for the parties and political leaders of their choice.

What the Supreme Court made of this line of reasoning will be clearer once the detailed order of the court is available to be perused in detail. Meanwhile, word will spread today: one of the most popular parties in the country has been knocked out of the elections by the Supreme Court based on a technicality

It will not be easy for the PTI support base to come to terms with the move. One also wonders what the general impact of this decision will be on how 'free and fair' the upcoming elections are publicly perceived to be.

It must be said that it was remarkable to observe the attention and importance given to the minutiae of the PTI's constitution during the hearing of this case. One wonders if the country would have been where it has been dragged to had the Election Commission given as much thought and consideration to the Constitution of Pakistan, whose explicit guidelines regarding the democratic process have been violated by it with such casual disregard on multiple occasions in the past year.

Lastly, one must also apportion some of the blame to the PTI's lawyers in the case, most of whom remained unable to argue the party's case effectively and succinctly before the court. At the moment, however, that seems beside the point. The party has bigger problems to ponder. Will it be able to survive this setback?

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Killer medicines

DYING from medicine is fatally frequent in Pakistan. The unbridled retailing of dubious drugs threatens to leave scores between life and death, yet the government seems indifferent. Last week, Drap seized a consignment from Thailand of pharmaceutical ingredients with high levels of impurities that cause life-threatening reactions – damaged heart, kidneys and nervous system. In 2022, the regulator confiscated many 'lifesaving medicines' without pharmaceutical components in Sindh. Weeks later, it discovered multiple fake drugs being sold under various trade names in Karachi. And last year saw two shocking scandals – 12 diabetes patients in Lahore, Kasur and Jhang lost their eyesight to eye injections and the Punjab government banned five cough syrups after a WHO alert. Such incidents are eerie reminders of the tragedy at the Punjab Institute of Cardiology over a decade ago, and bring about the sad realisation that lives are worth little.

What these mishaps expose is the state's unwillingness to tackle the havoc caused by spurious drugs. The blame also lies with Drap for slipshod monitoring and failure to curtail bogus medicine scams. It is not a tall order for the authority to clamp down on the rackets through warnings against stocking substandard medicines in pharmacies. Citizens must be made aware of how important it is to purchase medicines from reliable drugstores with qualified chemists. Repeated accidents also indicate that drug regulation requires large-scale restructuring and enforcement of accountability and drug controls in the pharma industry, aided by a certified drug manual for practitioners, chemists and consumers, thereby suppressing the counterfeit medicine business. Furthermore, private healthcare and safe, imported drugs are exclusive to a small section of the well-heeled. The poor have the singular option of state-run hospitals, which is why the quality of public health services and medicines available there have to be safeguarded by the government. Only active measures and regulations can save us from health catastrophes.

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Unseen crisis

DISTURBING figures have been released highlighting that 2,633 children were reported missing in 2023. As per the Roshni Helpline's numbers, although 1,942 of these were reunited with their families, 20 were found sexually abused and murdered. Children had fled their homes due to familial violence, communication gaps and societal pressures. The trend is particularly alarming among the 11 to 15-year-old age group. The state's existing frameworks, such as the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Act 2020, while commendable, require more robust enforcement. Civil society's role is equally crucial. Awareness campaigns and community engagement are essential for early detection and prevention. The issue also calls for a societal reevaluation of parenting. The increase in runaway cases due to domestic issues points to a need for parental education, community support systems, and accessible counselling. Schools should actively participate in programmes focusing on child safety and well-being.

The data, revealing regional variances with Sindh and Punjab reporting the highest number of cases, necessitates region-specific strategies. Moreover, considering that the majority of missing children are boys, targeted measures are imperative. The fact that 99pc of missing children come from the working class adds another layer of complexity, indicating that socio-economic factors play a significant role in this crisis. It highlights the need for targeted interventions in these communities, addressing issues like poverty, education, and access to social services. Alarmingly, 658 families await their children's return. The state's responsibility extends beyond legal reforms; it must also ensure effective implementation of child protection laws. This includes establishing a network for reporting and tracking missing children and equipping LEAs with the necessary tools and training. Moreover, community involvement in monitoring and reporting suspicious activities can significantly aid in early interventions. This, coupled with increased funding and support for organisations working on the ground, can make a substantial difference. A combined effort of the state, civil society, and communities is imperative to address this crisis effectively. It requires a collective awakening — a national movement that prioritises the safety of our youngest and most vulnerable. Let us remember that every child saved is a future preserved.

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Missing empathy

IN recent days, the missing persons' issue has attracted much back and forth between a group of determined protesters seeking the whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones, and a caretaker government that simply refuses to recognise their anguish as legitimate.

Amidst repeated attempts to gaslight the protesters and paint them as troublemakers, a fresh report submitted by the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances gives the lie to the state's position that it has been unfairly criticised.

In the report, requisitioned by the Supreme Court, the commission has conceded that merely seven per cent of the production orders issued by it have ever been complied with.

Considering that production orders are issued for individuals believed to be in state custody, it is no wonder that the vast majority of victims' families see the authorities as complicit in the disappearance of their loved ones.

Last week, an Islamabad High Court justice underlined once again that the higher authorities, including the prime minister and his cabinet, are responsible for ensuring the right to liberty of all Pakistani citizens.

He also expressed the hope that the officials directly responsible for disappearing citizens will one day be prosecuted. He made these remarks as protests were roiling Balochistan, where more people have reportedly been disappeared despite the massive spotlight shining on this issue.

Meanwhile in Islamabad, the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, led by Mahrang Baloch, continues to wait on the government in Islamabad, hoping it would make some attempt at rapprochement. Along with other BYC leaders, she remains camped outside the National Press Club, still knocking on the state's door, still hoping the Baloch will be welcomed in.

One hopes it won't be long. From the 'welcome' given to these protesters by the Islamabad police, the hurtful remarks made about their 'duplicity' by the caretaker prime minister, and a fresh insult from the Balochistan caretaker information minister, who on Wednesday accused the protesters of using their grief to get visas for other countries, the state has made a mess of the situation.

There has recently been a global outcry against the subjugation of historically disadvantaged people, and this seems like a particularly bad time for Pakistan to be presenting itself as a case study. One wonders what the state believes it stands to gain from such tactics.

The country is in turmoil: internal security is weakening, the political arena remains gripped in chaos, the economy is on the ventilator, and too many social groups seem unhappy about the state's oppressive policies towards them.

Given the breadth of challenges facing the country, those who have assumed responsibility for it must start putting out fires, not stirring up more trouble for future generations.

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Hundred days of hell

A HUNDRED days have passed since Israel launched its grotesque assault on Gaza, a blood-soaked rampage in which Palestinians have been butchered, forcibly evicted, and starved as ‘revenge’ for the Hamas attacks of Oct 7. In the words of one UN official, the violence has been “staining our shared humanity”. But clearly, many Western governments, as well as most leaders of the Muslim world, have shown they have no humanity. How else can one explain the cold silence, or lukewarm calls for ending Israel’s brutality? All this, as nearly 24,000 Gazans have been murdered by Israel’s barbaric war machine, while a famine-like situation persists in the besieged Strip, thanks to Israel’s blockade of Gaza. Moreover, due to the collapse of the healthcare system and sanitation facilities, the threat of the spread of diseases amongst the battered population is also high. Yet, despite such a humanitarian catastrophe, the US — Israel’s primary and most powerful backer — still considers ‘ceasefire’ a word to be shunned.

The chances of Israel achieving its stated goal — eliminating Hamas — are close to nil, while the ongoing operation has, till date, been a strategic and military failure for Tel Aviv. The only thing Israel has managed to ‘achieve’ in this period is the genocidal massacre of the Palestinian people. The UN, OIC and other multilateral bodies have collectively failed to stop the slaughter of Gazans, and the only hope of bringing Israel to justice is the genocide case South Africa has bravely brought to the ICJ against the Zionist regime. Yet hopes should not be too high on this count, as even if the court issues interim injunctions, who will enforce them, with the US firmly in Israel’s corner? Unless the international community finds the courage to stop further Israeli crimes, more bloodshed in Gaza, and a widening of the conflict to the rest of the Middle East, will be the likely outcome.

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Representation matters

THE ECP’s recent directive to political parties, mandating at least 5pc representation of women candidates on general seats as per Section 206 of Elections Act, 2017, brings to the fore a crucial question: why do our political parties strive to meet only the bare minimum when it comes to women’s representation in politics? The compliance deadline set by the ECP is a reminder of the systemic hurdles women face in Pakistani politics. It is not just about meeting a quota; it is about ensuring equal representation and participation in the democratic process. While parties like the PPP and PML-N claim to have exceeded this requirement, and the PTI, despite losing its electoral symbol, fielded 20 women out of 234 candidates, one wonders why the norm is to hover around the minimum threshold.

Representation matters. Women's perspectives and experiences are integral to the policymaking process, influencing decisions that affect the entire population. When political parties limit their female candidates to the bare minimum, they may be complying with a legal requirement, but are also perpetuating a system where women's voices are marginalised. The PPP's decision to field women in constituencies where they are likely to win is commendable, as is the presence of minority candidates like Saveera Parkash from Bannu. It is a step forward, showing a commitment to not just fulfilling a quota but also empowering women to win seats. Similarly, the PML-N's focus, under Maryam Nawaz's leadership, on women's participation in electoral politics is a positive sign. However, these efforts should be more than symbolic; they should be part of a larger strategy to encourage and support women in politics. The ECP's directive could have been more impactful had it been issued earlier, allowing parties to incorporate more female candidates in their planning. Yet, this does not absolve parties from the responsibility of proactively promoting women's political participation. As we move towards the general elections, political parties should ask themselves: why stop at 5pc? Why not aim for a more balanced representation? The narrative needs to shift from compliance to commitment — a commitment to gender equality, to empowering women, and to strengthening our democracy by ensuring it truly represents all segments of society. We must ensure that women's voices are not just heard, but echo powerfully in the halls of our democracy.

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On your mark

AFTER the Supreme Court's shock verdict depriving the PTI of its election symbol late Saturday, many observers have wryly questioned the need for having elections at all, given how neatly the field now appears to be set up. However, the show must go on.

By now, most of the parties, including the PTI, have issued lists of candidates to whom tickets have been awarded, and these hopefuls have very little time to canvass for votes. They must get going with their campaigns forthwith. The PML-N still seems considerably behind compared to the PPP, which has taken a head start as far as holding workers' meetings and jalsas is concerned.

The PTI, unfortunately, faces new, serious existential challenges after losing the bat. However, the party has displayed grit and determination thus far, and it is hoped, for the sake of Pakistani democracy, that it will manage to make the best of the hand it has been dealt.

The lesson that ought to have been learned in 2018 was that engineering results by interfering in the electoral process invariably has disastrous consequences. Those benefiting from such 'interventions' may reap short-term benefits, but without meaningful public support and the

legitimacy conferred by a fair election to strengthen their hand, they cannot expect to survive the pressures that come with executive power.

With this in mind, all political parties should collectively ask non-democratic forces to step away from the ring immediately.

It is well past time for them to assert their space in the country's power configuration and keep dominion over the political sphere — unless they wish to remain at the mercy of non-democratic forces in the years to come as well. The parties seem eager to out-compete each other; it would be a shame if they are not given a fair chance to do so on an equal footing from here on.

Meanwhile, it is deeply concerning that two fresh resolutions have been forwarded to the Senate to seek a delay in elections over weather and security concerns.

The caretaker government and the ECP must ensure that the commitment to holding general elections on Feb 8 is not derailed. These elections are key to restoring the political stability that Pakistan desperately needs.

Unfortunately, major controversies have dogged the polls from the very beginning, and there is now a dark pall over the entire exercise. The institutions responsible, especially the ECP, owe it to the nation to salvage what respectability they can for the exercise by ensuring, from now on, fool-proof security and the freedom to campaign for all candidates cleared to participate in the polls.

No candidate should fear appearing in public and putting their agenda before the people. Much damage has already been done. No more should be allowed.

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Torkham trade

CLOSURES at Torkham — the key crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan — have become all too frequent. In the latest development, the border crossing has been shut for transporters since Saturday, after the authorities reportedly called for Afghan transporters to acquire visas for entry to Pakistan. Pedestrian traffic at the border has not been affected. The Afghan Taliban administration has imposed similar restrictions for Pakistani transporters. Officials from both sides have been holding negotiations to end the deadlock, but thus far, there has been no success. Transporters and traders, meanwhile, complain their business is suffering due to the closure. There have been several such closures of late. In fact, Torkham remained closed to all traffic for more than a week last September after border forces clashed over the construction of an apparently illegal structure erected by the Afghan side.

The problem at Torkham can be viewed from the larger lens of poor Pak-Afghan ties. Though initially, there was a feeling that the new rulers in Kabul would provide Pakistan a friendly neighbour to the west, ties have been testy between Islamabad and the Taliban. Among the key reasons for this is Pakistan's assertion that TTP terrorists are finding shelter on Afghan soil. The Torkham closure is an extension of this mistrust. Pakistan has valid reasons to ask all those entering the country to provide travel documents, particularly from a security point of view. However, the process for border crossing, both for traders and other visitors, should be transparent and streamlined. Officials from both sides need to hammer out SOPs that ensure there are no more misunderstandings. While Pakistan is a key gateway for Afghan traders, this country also benefits from access to Afghanistan, and beyond to Central Asia. Therefore, a solution needs to be found through diplomatic channels so that trade traffic continues unhindered, and Pakistan's concerns are also addressed satisfactorily.

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Against labour

THE caretaker set-up's decision to invoke the Pakistan Essential Service (Maintenance) Act, 1952, for prohibiting union activities in the power sector was not its to make. With general elections just weeks away, the caretaker cabinet should have left the decision to the new elected government. That is not all. The reasons explaining the circumstances that led the current dispensation to make this decision do not add up. Justifying the decision, the government pointed out that an anti-theft drive set in motion by the power ministry some time back was underway and that it was being monitored daily. Therefore, it felt that it was "high time to check and constrain the activities of these unions; otherwise, this will take a heavy toll on the performance of the Discos as well as the finances of the federation". It is hard to see any logic in the decision, which, in fact, restricts the basic constitutional rights of power sector labour and other employees for a period of six months under the law.

This is not the first time the authorities have leaned on this law to clamp down on public sector employees. This law has frequently been invoked in recent years to curb labour union activities at PIA, the Utility Stores Corporation, etc. This is so in spite of the fact that the essential service law is to be invoked for the purpose of securing the defence or security of the country and for maintaining supplies or services related to the life of the community. How the restrictions imposed on the already weakened labour unions in the power industry are going to help achieve these objectives is beyond comprehension. Over the years, government policies and laws have severely emasculated labour organisations — both in the public and private sphere — in the country, and constrained the powers of labour unions, which are then unable to act as collective bargaining agents to secure better working conditions for the workers. Sadly, both the

government authorities and private employers view their workers as a part of the problem instead of the solution. This mentality needs to change. Indeed, the shifting complexion of the economy also demands a change in the role of the labour unions and organisations. Emerging economic challenges demand a collaborative approach, involving the government, people and the labour unions.

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Electoral maturity

IN the heated arena of Pakistani politics, the recent remarks by PML-N vice president Maryam Nawaz, calling the PTI a “terrorist” party, mark a regrettable nadir in the quality of political discourse.

This venomous labelling is not only a departure from the decorum expected of a leader of one of the country’s major political parties but also a reflection of a disturbing trend in the country’s political narrative. Historically, Pakistani politics has been marred by acrimonious exchanges and character assassinations.

The PTI, under Imran Khan’s leadership, has been a significant contributor to this culture. Throughout the PML-N’s tenure in government, PTI’s adeptness at social media engineering was often used to vilify and mock their political adversaries. This trend of slander and personal attacks persisted even after the PTI ascended to power, with opposition members, critics and members of the media frequently becoming targets of derogatory remarks.

However, Ms Nawaz’s use of such a term is not just another addition to this list of slurs; it is an alarming escalation. The term ‘terrorist’ is loaded with serious implications, especially in a country like Pakistan, which has long battled the scourge of terrorism. To use it so flippantly to describe a political opponent is to undermine the gravity of actual terrorism.

It is crucial to remember that while elections are transient, the rhetoric employed during campaigns can have lasting effects on the fabric of society. The kind of language used by Ms Nawaz — and other politicians — has the potential to deepen existing divisions, sow mistrust, and exacerbate tensions.

Furthermore, the party’s decision to post visuals on social media featuring Mr Khan with the tag “no more politics in the name of religion” borders on the dangerous.

In our country, where religious sentiment runs deep, such rhetoric can have severe, even life-threatening consequences. It is one thing to engage in political critique, and quite another to

weaponise religion in this manner, which, ironically, the PML-N itself appears to be doing. It is simply a red line that should never be crossed.

It is high time for all political parties to show restraint and rise above vicious name-calling and character assassination. Leaders must set an example, fostering a political culture grounded in respect, constructive debate, and tolerance for differing viewpoints.

Political opponents are just that: opponents, not enemies to be hated and eventually be vanquished. As we approach another election, politicians would do well to remember that while their primary goal may be to win votes, their responsibilities do not end there. They are also custodians of the nation's social harmony.

The language they use and the narratives they promote will shape not just the outcome of the elections, but also the nature of Pakistani society in the years to come.

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Keeping focus

WITH elections around the corner, there are understandable concerns regarding the safety of various candidates on the campaign trail as well as the general public participating in poll activities. Recent statistics on terrorism-related incidents and accounts from KP security officials paint a grim picture of the overall environment in the province. However, senior law-enforcement officials believe that the situation there is still 'manageable'. Everything must be done to ensure things remain that way, if not improve considerably. There is no denying that the institutions responsible for internal security have their task cut out for them: it is their duty to ensure peace despite all challenges. There have been repeated attempts to argue that elections ought to be postponed further due to the adverse security situation. However, Pakistan's law-enforcement and security agencies are adequately equipped to deal with all challenges, and will undoubtedly deliver if given the requisite resources and support from the government. Elections are a routine occurrence in any normal country. Seeking for them to be delayed because certain inimical forces could be planning to disrupt them seems more like a surrender than a responsible decision by a self-respecting state.

The enemies of Pakistan have repeatedly attempted to assert themselves during pivotal periods in its sociopolitical history. They must be shown once again that their evil designs do not dictate our lives. The 2008 elections had gone ahead under the shadow of far worse violence than what we are witnessing now. Over the years, much of the violence abated, thanks to the many sacrifices made by our brave soldiers, police forces and other security personnel. Consequently, the elections for 2013 and 2018 were held in progressively better conditions. There is no doubt that

terrorism-related incidents are once again on the rise, but we have persevered in the past amidst such adversity and must resolve to power ahead once again. Of course, this will require all front-line security forces to remain extra vigilant and be more proactive in identifying and neutralising threats. But, given Pakistan's extensive experience running counterterrorism operations and achieving a great degree of success in the war against terrorism, our security institutions are also much better equipped than they were in 2008. As long as they can keep their focus on domestic security, they are quite capable of turning the tables on any hostile elements.

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Iranian strikes

RELATIONS between Pakistan and Iran stand at a very delicate juncture after the latter struck targets inside Pakistani territory on Tuesday.

While Tehran has claimed it hit "strongholds" of the Jaish al-Adl terrorist group in the air strikes, Pakistan says two minors had lost their lives in the Panjgur attack.

On Monday, Iran had carried out similar strikes inside Iraq and Syria, hitting what it said were "spy headquarters" and "terrorist" bases in these states. The Foreign Office has reacted with a sternly worded statement, condemning this unjustifiable violation of Pakistani sovereignty and warning of "serious consequences".

Indeed, the attack, as it said, is "completely unacceptable" — and Tehran should take note. The situation is deteriorating rapidly, as on Wednesday Pakistan recalled its ambassador from Tehran and suspended all high-level bilateral visits. The Iranian envoy in Pakistan, currently in his home country, will also not be allowed to return to Islamabad.

The violation of Pakistani territory is totally indefensible; such unilateral actions — especially resulting in the loss of innocent lives — may do irreparable harm to bilateral ties.

The activity of militant groups on both sides of the border is one of the biggest irritants in the bilateral relationship, and Pakistan and Iran need to address this issue in a mature fashion to ensure the situation does not worsen further.

There were several terrorist attacks last year, with the last major incident occurring in December 2023, in which 11 Iranian law enforcers were killed in an ambush on a police station.

Iranian officials had claimed the assailants entered from Pakistan. Meanwhile there were also two attacks last year, apparently originating from Iran, in which several Pakistani troops were martyred.

Border security, particularly the elimination of safe spaces for terrorist groups, is an area both states must work on jointly, instead of pursuing unilateral actions. The immediate need is to prevent a rupture in ties. China, which enjoys cordial relations with both states, and has urged “both sides to exercise restraint”, can perhaps use its good offices to help resolve this sensitive matter.

Meanwhile, it is also true that various foreign actors would like to see a permanent break in Pakistan-Iran ties; the capitals of both countries must, therefore, prevent an escalation and work to restore calm.

After matters have cooled down, the mechanism that exists for border security management should be actively used to target militants threatening either state’s security through joint operations.

Under no circumstances should either state’s sovereignty be violated through unilateral actions. The Iranian authorities must particularly work to prevent a repeat of such attacks.

At a time when the fires of conflict threaten to consume the region, both sides must act with restraint and statesmanship to prevent this crisis from growing.

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Facing a whitewash?

THE start to the T20 World Cup year has been far from ideal for Pakistan. Having already lost the five-match series against New Zealand, with two games still to go, Shaheen Shah Afridi’s men face the prospect of a whitewash. They are now five games without a win in a T20 International, the run stretching back to last April. For Shaheen, it has been a tough beginning as captain. Pakistan bowlers, notably Haris Rauf, have bled runs, New Zealand making over 220 in two of the matches so far. Babar Azam made half-centuries in all the three matches played but Pakistan failed in their chase each time. With the World Cup in the US and Caribbean set to begin in June, and Pakistan grouped with India, Ireland, the US and Canada, the team needs to pull up its socks. For a start, it could win the last two matches against New Zealand.

However, it is easier said than done, especially with Finn Allen tearing into Pakistan’s bowling attack in every game. In the third game, he hit a record-tying 16 sixes and was particularly severe on Haris, in whose defence Shaheen referred to the small size of stadiums in New Zealand. But Pakistan’s once-feared pace attack, comprising the same bowlers with the exception of the injured Naseem Shah, is lacking bite. For the series, Babar was demoted from his opening slot but has continued to pile up the runs. Saim Ayub, the youngster who replaced him as opener, has only shown flashes. But the batters have faced challenges after the team’s bowlers have been hit

to all parts. Babar has not received support from the other end to drive Pakistan to victory, with the middle and lower order not contributing enough. Shaheen has said Pakistan are working in the matches before the World Cup — they also play a four-match series against England — to find the best combination. They need to find it soon.

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Nothing to celebrate

THE current account deficit is 'shrinking' and FDI inflows are 'increasing'. New economic data for the first half of FY24, published by the State Bank, shows that Pakistan posted a current account surplus of \$397m last month, for the second consecutive month, which has helped it contain the six-month deficit to \$831m, down from \$3.6bn during the same period in the last fiscal. Likewise, FDI inflows are reported to have jumped by 35pc to \$863m from \$640m in the same period. Indeed, these are welcome developments in these times of economic crises and pain. But how sustainable are these small mercies? Will they help the economy grow and create jobs, and end our balance-of-payments troubles? The improvement in the current account is primarily the outcome of the temporary 'emergency' measures being implemented by the government to restrict imports. The hike in export revenues and an upswing in home remittances and FDI in December helped the country pull off the surplus. Yet the upturn in these areas, though welcome, is negligible, and does not represent a steady trend.

The truth is that the economy is in the doldrums. The recent improvement, if we indeed see it as one, is an artificially constructed deviation from the normal, as our balance-of-payments woes are hardly far away from morphing into sovereign default. The economy contracted in the last fiscal year and growth projections for the ongoing one do not inspire much hope for the future. Exports are stagnating because of low productivity and reliance on one commodity, ie, textiles. Foreign investors here appear to have lost whatever little confidence they had and are departing. Local investors are not ready to invest either, at least not unless their ventures are subsidised. Remittances remain subdued. Poverty continues to rise, as does food insecurity. The population is growing rapidly, and the government has no money to provide education, clean drinking water, health facilities, or other public services. The world in general is done with our unwillingness to clean up our own house. It is frustrating to see the economic fortunes of a large country swing with the influx and exit of a couple of billion dollars from its economy. We have reached this point for a reason. We are here because our rent-seeking ruling elites are not invested in Pakistan's future.

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Bilateral breakdown

IN a shocking turn of events, Pakistan-Iran ties have hit rock bottom in a matter of days, sparked by Tehran's unprovoked strike in Panjgur.

On Tuesday, the caretaker prime minister and the Iranian foreign minister were exchanging pleasantries in Davos, while both navies were conducting joint drills in the Strait of Hormuz.

Later that day, Tehran would strike Pakistani territory in an unprecedented move, claiming to have hit anti-Iran terrorists. Pakistan insisted two children were killed in the ill-advised action. After downgrading diplomatic ties, Pakistan on Thursday struck Iranian territory.

According to ISPR, terrorists belonging to Baloch separatist outfits were neutralised in Operation Marg Bar Samachar near Saravan. Iran claims "foreign nationals" were killed in the Pakistani action.

The immediate need is to de-escalate matters, and prevent the conflict from spiralling further. While Iran's action in Panjgur was highly condemnable, both states must handle the fallout with care.

It is easy to dial up tensions, but this would not be in the interest of either country. There must be a frank discussion between both capitals about the common problem of militancy. Pakistan says Baloch separatists find shelter in Iran, while Tehran claims Baloch extremist groups such as Jaish al-Adl operate from this side of the border.

Over the years, both states have lost security men as well as civilians in border clashes and acts of terrorism, and a robust mechanism needs to be discussed in order to prevent the soil of either country from being used against the other.

Relations between Pakistan and Iran have been cordial since independence, and even after Iran took an ideological turn after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, matters did not deteriorate, despite Pakistan's closeness to the American and Saudi camp. While the current crisis is indeed a grave one, both sides can still row back and prevent further acrimony, if they choose to do so.

Admittedly, it will take time to rebuild trust, but neither state can afford hostility. For Pakistan, two borders — India and Afghanistan — remain tense; therefore, it is not in this country's interest to see hostilities break out at its frontier with Iran. Pakistan should seek iron-clad guarantees from the Iranian leadership that its territorial sovereignty will not be violated again.

Thereafter, diplomatic and security officials need to engage regularly to thwart the stratagems of violent non-state actors. Common friends, primarily China and Turkiye, have offered their services to mediate. Tehran and Islamabad should consider these offers positively.

Moreover, bilateral contacts need to be established at the highest levels in both states in order to build confidence and prevent a worsening of the situation. Malign forces would like to see this crisis explode; leaders in both capitals must ensure this does not happen.

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Poison in the air

CLEANING UP Pakistan's toxic air is a daunting task, and demands a holistic approach and comprehensive policy formulation. With large parts of the country, especially Punjab, engulfed by polluted air, and major cities topping the list of the ones with the most hazardous air in the world, we are facing a major public health disaster. That the situation is worsening with each passing year highlights the lack of seriousness on the part of the authorities to tackle the smog catastrophe, which, according to the CSO Fair Finance Pakistan, prematurely claims 128,000 lives every year, besides causing serious health complications. Public authorities have been slow to deal with the problem, and when they do, they tend to adopt temporary measures to appease an enraged public. Just a few weeks ago, the caretaker administration in Punjab got ahead of itself when it unsuccessfully 'attempted' to control smog in Lahore through artificial rain. Though the caretakers managed to buy some media publicity at the expense of taxpayers, the problem did not go away.

The other day, the provincial government said it was engaging Chinese environmental experts for suggestions to lessen the smog. The experts, the government said, had presented their preliminary report on the causes of smog in Lahore. But the identification of the reasons behind the persistence of the poisonous air quality is no longer the issue; the issue is how the authorities plan to combat it. Apparently, they are not yet prepared to recognise the futility of their isolated, Band-Aid solutions or learn from past mistakes. No wonder, the public authorities again plan to use cloud-seeding technology — or artificially induced rain — to control the smog problem in Lahore. They would have to go much beyond that. Unless a holistic anti-smog policy is formulated and executed to deal with the worsening air pollution, people in Punjab, and elsewhere in the country, will continue to choke on toxic air.

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External challenges

ALONG with fixing the economy and addressing the political polarisation, the new administration that takes charge after February's elections will also have to put Pakistan's external relations on track. The unfortunate truth is that ties with three out of our four neighbours are strained, and it

will take deft diplomacy to improve matters. Relations with India are the most complicated, and fixing these will be a time-consuming process. Bilateral ties with Afghanistan and Iran are also lukewarm and, in the case of the latter, have witnessed severe turbulence over the past few days. However, relations with both Kabul and Tehran can be mended relatively easily if we play our cards right, and if there is a reciprocal response from the other side. The positive signals emanating from Friday's National Security Committee meeting, the prime minister's comments, and the phone conversation between the Pakistani and Iranian foreign ministers indicate that ties are on the mend.

The relationship with India has been in deep freeze since August 2019. Elections are due in India in the next few months, and at this point, it appears that a BJP government will again run New Delhi. It remains to be seen whether the new Indian set-up will be willing to turn the page with Pakistan, or if toxicity will continue. The new administration in Islamabad should, however, extend a hand of friendship to New Delhi, without compromising on Pakistan's key concerns. As for Kabul, the Afghan Taliban are difficult customers; yet Pakistan has no option but to engage with them. The recent border closure at Torkham has shown that even administrative disputes can quickly spiral into bigger spats. The incoming administration should work to mend ties with Kabul and improve trade relations, while reiterating Pakistan's demand that terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil be reined in. With regard to Iran, before Tehran's provocative strikes in Panjgur, ties were cordial, though there was room for improvement. Luckily, sense has prevailed after the Iranian strike and Pakistan's retaliation, and matters are returning to normal. However, there can be no further infringement of this country's sovereignty. The incoming set-up cannot achieve internal stability and economic progress if there is tension on three frontiers. Furthermore, it is essential that Pakistan's foreign policy is fashioned and led by professional diplomats, who are well-versed in the nuances of international relations.

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What's the plan?

WHAT exactly are our political parties fighting for in the upcoming general elections? What are their plans?

What promises are they willing to make to their constituents, the vast majority of whom are expecting significant improvement in their social and economic conditions post-Feb 8?

Less than three weeks from polling day, it is strange that we still do not know.

The front runners in the race — the PTI, the PML-N and the PPP — have largely avoided providing details about how they plan to conduct their governments. The PPP has, admittedly, issued a 10-

point to-do list it has called a ‘manifesto’, but this can hardly be considered one given how lacking it is in details about how its ambitious promises are to be achieved.

Meanwhile, the PML-N has kept delaying the unveiling of its long-awaited manifesto, while the PTI made one abortive attempt before fresh challenges to its survival began consuming all its energies.

It cannot be argued that the parties haven’t had enough time to prepare. For starters, elections are being held around three months after they became due under the constitutional timeline. This means the parties got three additional months to work on their action plans.

Not only that, Pakistan’s economic troubles have been thoroughly dissected over the past year and a half, meaning each party’s policy tsars had more than enough time and material to come up with their proposals on how best to address them.

Lastly, considering how hard the entire state apparatus has been pushing for a political reset, one would have assumed that the parties being positioned to fill the vacuum — left after the PTI’s relegation to ‘non grata’ status — would have had some new ideas with which to rally public support to their side. Clearly, nobody seems to have taken much interest in doing their homework.

It seems that the parties are greatly underestimating the burden they will receive if they come to power. Considering the plethora of challenges being faced by the country, navigating the troubled waters Pakistan is in will not be an easy task.

Whichever party goes on to form the next government will face steep challenges during a period of painful social and economic adjustment.

In this context, it would have been helpful for voters, observers and commentators to have reference to some document against which they could judge each party’s suitability to govern at such a critical juncture in the country’s history.

Unfortunately, the bigger parties have chosen the ad hoc approach: get power first, decide what to do with it later. They ought to take a lesson from the Jamaat-i-Islami, which, despite its very modest prospects, seems to have expended considerable thought and effort on delineating what it can achieve if given executive power.

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A controversial legacy

THE oft-turbulent tenure of Zaka Ashraf as the country's cricket chief is over, with the Pakistan Cricket Board about to see its fourth change at the top in 13 months. On Friday, Mr Ashraf tendered his resignation as chairman of PCB's interim management committee two weeks before the latter's tenure was set to expire. Many critics have described his tenure as the worst period in PCB's history. Mr Ashraf was appointed chairman last June for four months, before being granted a three-month extension by the government to conduct PCB elections. He reportedly quit because he felt his hands were tied, with the Ministry of Inter-Provincial Coordination allowing the committee to manage only day-to-day affairs. With his resignation, the prime minister will appoint a new management committee. What happens to the appointments made by Mr Ashraf is not clear. There have been wholesale changes made by incoming PCB chiefs. Najam Sethi dismissed the team management and selection committee appointed by PCB chairman Ramiz Raja when he became the chief in December 2022. Mr Ashraf also sidelined the team management, albeit only recently, and changed the chief selector when he took the reins.

The Zaka Ashraf-led committee was under fire after the national team's underwhelming performance at last year's Asia Cup and the World Cup. Pakistan then suffered a 3-0 whitewash in the Test series against Australia and has lost four of the five matches in the ongoing Twenty20 series in New Zealand. There have been reports of discord within the team and Mr Ashraf's bitter relationship with former captain Babar Azam has been no secret. A conversation featuring Babar was leaked to the media by the outgoing chairman, while a recording also came to light exposing Mr Ashraf's move to force Babar to quit as all-format cricket captain. It is hoped that the new interim committee can quell the turbulence that Pakistan cricket has seen of late.

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Israeli intransigence

ONE of the key factors that has fuelled Palestinian rage over the past few decades is the consistent Israeli denial of a viable state for the Arabs on the land of their ancestors — land that was snatched from them through colonial intrigue. While Zionism's elders — Golda Meir, for example — said there was no such thing as a Palestinian people, their successors have upheld the policy of denying the Palestinians their land and dignity. In the latest iteration of this policy, coming in the midst of the merciless slaughter in Gaza, Benjamin Netanyahu has shot down the idea of a future Palestinian state. The Israeli prime minister said recently that after the conflict winds down, Tel Aviv would maintain control of territory marked for a Palestinian state. He was reacting to meek American requests that Israel consider the two-state solution. Mr Netanyahu further said he would pursue the slaughter in Gaza "until complete victory". Already, in just over 100 days,

Israel has butchered some 25,000 people in the Strip. One shudders to think what the Israeli vision of ‘total victory’ entails, but from the evidence available thus far, it appears to ominously resemble the ‘final solution’.

If Israel thinks it can beat the Palestinians into submission, it is mistaken. Denial of their rights, particularly their right to a state, will fuel further violence, as a new generation of Palestinians grows up to try and liberate the land grabbed from their forefathers. Even the two-state solution envisioned by the Oslo Accords — now buried in the rubble of Gaza and perhaps irretrievable in its original form — is unacceptable to Israeli hardliners, who seemingly want to devour all Arab land, from the river to the sea. The only just solution to this crisis is a viable Palestinian state, which Israeli extremists have sworn to resist. Meanwhile, on the ground in Gaza, the situation is truly hellish. In the words of a senior UN official visiting the Strip, the humanitarian situation is “terrible” with “pervasive fear”. The local people have been bombed, starved and besieged. Also, there is shocking evidence that Palestinian prisoners have been brutally tortured by the Israelis. Nearly eight decades ago, the Jews of Europe faced such conditions at the hands of Nazi Germany. Today, Israel is carrying out a similar massacre in Palestine.

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Olive branch?

DARE one hope? Imran Khan’s recent overture to “hold dialogue” surfaces as a beacon of potential reconciliation in a political landscape that has increasingly become fraught with venomous rhetoric and hardened stances. However, the ambiguity shrouding the intended recipients of this dialogue raises questions.

Historically, Mr Khan, as the leader of PTI, has taken an unyielding stance against engaging with other political factions — to the extent that he once said he could talk to the militant group TTP, but not “thieves”. Such history prompts us to ask: with whom does he now wish to converse, and what has brought about this sudden shift?

Mr Khan’s refusal to engage with other political entities despite their willingness to talk has been a hallmark of his political career. His rhetoric not only widened the chasm between the PTI and other parties but also contributed to a fragmented political environment. Such divisiveness is not something Pakistan can afford. Therefore, this newfound desire to initiate dialogue, albeit vague, must be cautiously welcomed, yet scrutinised for its authenticity and direction.

For the dialogue to serve the nation’s interest, it must be rooted in the spirit of democracy, involving the country’s political stakeholders. History has shown that stability and progress come from collaborative efforts among political entities, not from unilateral decisions or alignments

with non-political establishments. It is imperative for the incarcerated PTI chief to clarify that his call for dialogue is not a veiled attempt to negotiate with the establishment, but a genuine effort to bridge gaps with other political parties.

Labelling political opponents — who are simply that, and not enemies to be vanquished — as unworthy of dialogue has done little in the past to foster the environment crucial for democratic discourse. For the nation to move forward, it is essential that political leaders shed animosity and engage in constructive dialogue, prioritising national interest over personal or party agendas.

The onus is now on Mr Khan to elucidate his intentions. It is an opportunity for him to demonstrate statesmanship by extending an olive branch to his adversaries, paving the way to addressing together Pakistan's myriad challenges. The success of an offer for dialogue hinges on its inclusiveness and transparency. For the sake of the nation's democratic health, this dialogue — if it ever occurs — must not be an echo chamber but a platform for genuine engagement among all political stakeholders.

Meanwhile, Mr Khan's rivals, including the PPP and PML-N, must respond positively to any sincere overture on his part, rather than bind themselves to elements outside the political realm. Numerous examples establish that it is through dialogue, not discord, that nations forge paths to unity and strength. This nation is waiting for a new chapter of political maturity and inclusiveness to dawn.

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Vital step

THE establishment of Islamabad's first rape crisis cell at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences is a vital step forward in Pakistan's commitment to combating sexual violence. The collaborative effort by the ministries of health and law and justice, supported by international agencies, is a beacon of hope for countless silent sufferers. With this initiative, in line with the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, the agony of rape survivors is finally being addressed with the urgency it deserves. The cell's promise of offering comprehensive services, from FIR registration to medical examinations within six hours, is commendable. By ensuring confidentiality and swift medico-legal services, the cell is poised to restore some semblance of dignity to the survivors.

However, although a significant stride, it is merely the first step on a long journey. An average of 12 children face sexual abuse every day and over 63,000 cases of gender-based violence have been reported in the past three years. The establishment of such cells across districts is crucial, but equally important is fostering a societal environment where survivors feel safe to speak up. The suggestion of a 24/7 helpline or app by the health ministry secretary Iftikhar Ali Shallwani is

a step in the right direction, acknowledging the stigma attached to reporting rape. Moreover, his emphasis on preventive measures, like self-defence training in schools, is a proactive approach that needs to be integrated into the educational curriculum. The government's vision of enabling citizens, especially women, to traverse public spaces without fear is laudable. Yet, realising this vision necessitates not just institutional mechanisms but societal transformation. Awareness campaigns and stringent enforcement of the law are essential to uproot patriarchy and indifference. As the rape crisis cell becomes operational, it is good progress. However, let us remember that the real victory lies in a future where such cells are redundant, because respect, safety, and justice are not exceptions but the norm.

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The coming disaster

THE snowless winter in Indian-held Kashmir and neighbouring Ladakh is said to be unprecedented. It is the result of an extreme weather event that might significantly affect water availability in the Indus Basin system, which is the lifeline of Pakistan's agriculture and economy. Environmentalists have long been cautioning that the phenomenon of rapid global warming is soon going to cause severe water scarcity across the region, including in Pakistan, which is one of the world's 10 countries most affected by the impact of rapid climate change. The glaciers of the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges, a major source of water for Pakistan's rivers, are already receding at a fast pace because of rising temperatures. The snowless winter in the region could further affect the flow in connected river systems, bringing the day of reckoning ever closer, as snowmelt is a major source of river water in these parts. The reduced flows in the western rivers of the Indus Basin system, the Jhelum and Chenab, allotted to Pakistan under the World Bank-brokered water-sharing treaty with India and originating from or passing through the Indian-held Kashmir and Jammu region, will, owing to extreme weather events, likely increase tensions in the area, besides affecting farming in large swathes of our part of Punjab and in Sindh.

As temperatures increase, the glaciers will melt more quickly, and less snow will fall each year to replenish them. Though accelerating glacial melt could mean more water in the short term, as experts have pointed out, it will also increase long-term shortages. Among other things, that means a decrease in per capita water availability, an increase in variability in annual river flows, a reduction in the discharge into the sea and thus greater seawater intrusion, and other related issues. Over the last couple of decades, Pakistan has seen a rapid increase in extreme weather events, resulting in devastating floods, prolonged droughts in different parts of the country, urban flooding, heatwaves, and frequent forest fires. The changing climate has already increased food insecurity in the country and the coming water shortages are going to exacerbate the situation

unless urgent measures are taken to mitigate the adverse effects of shifting weather patterns and the challenges resulting from it. The future predicted by scientists and other experts is already here, and we have little time to waste.

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Subdued polls

THE extent of the damage that has been wrought on the credibility of the upcoming polls is evident in how muted electoral activities have been.

Barely three weeks before the day millions of Pakistanis are expected to head to polling stations to cast votes for parties of their choice, one still cannot tell that a general election is about to take place.

Two of the three major contenders, the PML-N and PPP, have been out canvassing in recent days, yet it seems as if their campaigns are travelling roadshows that pack up and leave with their leaders once the speeches are done and the loudspeakers fall silent.

Among the key leaders, Nawaz Sharif has appeared only briefly before the public for a short address, while Imran Khan remains confined away from the public's eye. Only Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has been travelling from city to city to shore up votes for the PPP.

It is a shame that a nation of 240m seems tuned out of the democratic process. Elections in Pakistan have traditionally been a riot of party colours and blaring anthems, raucous rallies and jumbo jalsas. Despite all the unpleasantness so far, one had still hoped that we would see a celebration of the country's rich social and political diversity as election day neared.

Instead, with the state constantly spoiling the mood with its ongoing, violent crackdown on one of the country's most popular parties, the citizenry is withdrawing from the process and appears comparably less enthusiastic than in previous years.

It also bears mentioning that the youth, who are at the forefront of ground-level campaigns run by parties, appear to be missing from the picture. Many likely do not want to risk the state's wrath, and their rivals have no real competition to fight against.

The weeks leading to elections are usually a busy time for printing presses, which produce the posters, pamphlets, flags, banners and all manner of related election paraphernalia that make Pakistani elections such a colourful affair.

Event management companies and smaller enterprises that rent out tents, chairs and sound systems also see a boost in business as political activities pick up and parties start rallying their supporters.

However, anecdotal accounts and media reports corroborate that these industries are experiencing much less than expected demand.

Meanwhile, many are turning to outlets that still offer them an opportunity to express themselves creatively and without restrictions. Social media platforms like X and TikTok have become new fronts in the war of political narratives. Given the trend, there are now fears that they, too, may be restricted closer to the polls.

All in all, it is a rather depressing state of affairs, attributable to the ECP’s failure to discharge its duties according to their intended spirit.

Published in Dawn, January 22nd, 2024

Once again, no Olympics

THE words of captain Ammad Butt after Pakistan’s loss to New Zealand on Sunday spoke volumes about the state of the national game in the country. The 3-2 reverse in the third-place match of the FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifiers tournament in Oman means Pakistan will not be competing at this year’s Paris Olympics — the third straight Games where the three-time gold medallists would be missing in action. With the top three finishers at the tournament set to book a berth at the Paris Games, Pakistan were eight minutes away from clinching a long-awaited return to the Olympics. Leading 2-1 till the 52nd minute, they conceded twice in the space of six minutes to see their dreams shattered. A distraught Ammad said the players were heartbroken but he also said they had given their all, before calling out the ‘injustice’ he and his charges had suffered. The Pakistan Hockey Federation’s miserable state of affairs under recently deposed president retired Brig Khalid Sajjad Khokhar, as well as its financial struggles, are no secret. Both the players and coaching staff have not received their allowances and contract salaries. The players should not be blamed. They did their best. One hockey commentator stated that Pakistan had given their best defensive performance in years. But it was not enough.

Serious steps are needed to restore Pakistan hockey to its former glory. They should start with sorting out matters pertaining to the PHF. Last month, Brig Khokhar was removed as PHF chief and the tug-of-war for control continues. Brig Khokhar had threatened to go to the International Hockey Federation and get PHF suspended. But the team management for the qualifiers was the

one appointed by Tariq Hussain Bugti, installed as PHF chief by the caretaker prime minister. Leadership woes have compounded the problems. Perhaps it would be best if sports management professionals, with a plan to revive hockey, take charge at the PHF.

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FBR reforms

THE caretaker government is reported to have ramped up the implementation of its plans to restructure the Federal Board of Revenue amidst growing opposition from within the FBR, as well as from major political parties. Media reports suggest that the interim finance minister, Dr Shamshad Akhtar, intends to implement the FBR reforms programme through a presidential ordinance before the end of this month — less than 10 days before the polls. According to some reports, she believes that the reforms would boost tax revenue collection from the existing 8.5pc to 15pc in a few years' time. On its part, the FBR bureaucracy is against the plan — which was approved by the military-backed Special Investment Facilitation Council earlier this month — for fear of losing its infinite privileges and having its discretionary powers reduced. The politicians are opposed to it on the grounds that the interim set-up does not have the mandate to execute policies that can have long-term and far-reaching consequences. Hence, they want to leave the decision about FBR reorganisation to the next elected government. While there can be no two opinions on the constitutional limits of the mandate of the interim set-up, the opposition from FBR officials seems to be motivated by selfish reasons.

Even if reports claiming that the establishment had intervened to bridge differences between the minister and top revenue officials are correct, it would be a bad move to implement such crucial reforms through an ordinance. There is no doubt about the urgency and importance of reorganising the Board, separating policy from tax collection, introducing technology and reducing the discretionary powers of FBR officials to make taxation equitable and fair, as well as boosting collection. But it is best to leave this job to the next elected parliament. Should the caretakers go ahead with it, the reforms would lose their legitimacy, and the new government might have to rescind them even before the execution of the plan. The concerns raised by both PML-N and PPP leaders regarding the plan are not misplaced. If Dr Akhtar wants the Board to be restructured, she must work more extensively on the blueprint of the reforms and leave the job of legislating and implementing it to the incoming dispensation. Once a policy gets mired in controversy, it is never easy to move ahead with it.

Published in Dawn, January 23rd, 2024

Our 'free' media

CARETAKER Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar told a CNBC interviewer during his recent trip to Davos that the media in Pakistan was “freer than in the West”, while arguing that Western media operates under far more regulations compared to the media in Pakistan.

Mr Kakar’s words brought to mind a similar statement made by former prime minister Imran Khan during his tenure, when he had made the same appraisal of press freedoms in Pakistan in response to a probing question by a foreign interviewer.

The answer had been as scandalising to practising journalists then as it is now. Taken without context, their words seemed to suggest that the relative lack of formal regulatory oversight gives Pakistani media some sort of qualitative edge. Anyone familiar with the country and its media landscape knows that this is clearly not the case.

The truth is that whenever the Pakistani media and working journalists have attempted to assert their freedoms in recent years, they have invariably been made to pay a very heavy price for it.

Starting from the days when Nawaz Sharif last fell out of favour with the establishment, powerful operators acting behind the scenes have used progressively coercive means to whip the media into lining up with their narratives. This publication is among those that were made to suffer the worst of such practices.

So weary have media practitioners now become of the sword constantly hanging above their necks that various journalists’ and media workers’ representative bodies resolved this past weekend to begin pushing back against it.

The Coalition for Free Media, as it is being called, is a welcome effort that had been long awaited. It is hoped it will be able to wrest back a modicum of the independence Pakistani media has been gradually deprived of over the last decade.

From high-profile abductions that have gone unquestioned to unresolved murders of journalists, the Pakistani media fraternity has suffered much in silence, while being forced to cede more and more control over editorial decision-making to unaccountable individuals.

Press ‘advisories’, a relic of the Zia era, now seem to be issued every week. Both overt and veiled threats are issued periodically, ensuring that few dare question the state’s diktats.

There is a growing realisation that protecting press freedoms is no longer a question of self-preservation or interest: it is clear that the Fourth Estate cannot continue to watch out for the public interest and fulfil its duty to speak truth to power if it allows itself to continue to be divided and exploited by a predatory state.

In this suffocating environment, more and more journalists and media practitioners are realising that their safety is in presenting a united front. More power to those leading the change.

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Ram temple

UPON the ruins of the 16th-century Babri Masjid, a gleaming new temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Ram has emerged in Ayodhya, consecrated on Monday by none other than the prime minister of India himself. Narendra Modi, accompanied by a cavalcade of Hindu divines, tycoons, celebrities and thousands of devotees, performed religious rituals at the site they believe to be the birthplace of Ram. In December 1992, a frenzied mob of kar sevaks tore down the mosque. What followed was large-scale communal violence which announced the muscular arrival of the Sangh Parivar as a national political force, and the steady marginalisation of Indian Muslims. More than a religious event, Monday's rituals marked the Sangh's victory rally, a clear message to all that Hindutva was here to stay.

In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid events, the Sangh has gone from strength to strength, while communalism has been integrated into the mainstream in modern India. During consecutive terms, Mr Modi has given Hindutva state sanction, while making life even more difficult for India's minorities. The Muslims' patriotism is constantly questioned, and their rights as equal citizens are under increasing threat. Moreover, the BJP has veered further to the right in the three decades since the Babri Masjid was desecrated. The current crop of national BJP leaders, especially the rabid priest that leads Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located, makes BJP's old hands such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani appear progressive. And more polarisation, and increasing doses of Hindutva, are likely to be in store as the BJP is again expected to return to power in elections due later this year. To foreign audiences, Mr Modi projects 'India shining', a 21st-century powerhouse. For the increasingly rightist domestic crowd, the Sangh is recreating the Bharat of yore, a 'pure' land, a Vedic superpower destined to lead the world. The Ram Mandir is an essential part of this worrying vision.

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Bilawal's politics

IN a series of recent political gatherings in Punjab, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has been advocating for the burial of the 'politics of vendetta' that has long scarred our political landscape. His appeals may resonate with voters who are weary of the never-ending political strife in the

country, but are, essentially, part of a poll strategy to shore up support for his own party that has lost its national moorings over the years, and is now confined to Sindh. The PPP chairman's overtures to PTI supporters, interspersed with his critical view of the PML-N's governance, underscore an astute realisation: the path to strengthening PPP's footing outside Sindh necessitates winning over to his side those who might be too demoralised to vote after the crackdown on the PTI. By positioning the PML-N as a common foe and publicly deploring the politics of division and hatred, Mr Bhutto-Zardari wants to be seen as steering his party towards constructive engagement. This strategy may appear politically shrewd at the moment, but will it work, given that the PPP was very much a part of the events that brought down the PTI government in 2022? In fact, Mr Bhutto-Zardari's censure of the PML-N's economic mismanagement and governance failures invites a reflective gaze upon the PPP's own tenures. It is imperative for his party to look inwards and address the critiques of its past administrations. Promises to establish a 'truth and reconciliation' forum and pledges to redirect resources towards the marginalised are all high-sounding. But given the PPP's long record of poor governance and political games — which, admittedly, all parties have played — it remains to be seen how many will be convinced by such rhetoric.

Indeed, as politicians embark upon the campaign trail, all of them would do well to introspect. Poor governance, the temptation for parties to exact their pound of flesh, and the resort to currying favour with those outside the political realm have increasingly come to dominate the landscape. The journey ahead should be one that aims to redefine Pakistani politics by scripting a pro-people narrative. The very fact that no major party has announced its election manifesto shows how far behind they are in that task. Poll strategies and soothing words may attract attention, but will not be enough to convince a tired electorate that is fast losing faith in politics.

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No excuse

HOW are senior government officials defending a nationwide internet outage citing "system installation issues" qualitatively any different from a student turning up to class empty-handed with the excuse that 'the dog ate my homework'?

Of course, both possibilities exist within the realm of things that can happen — a particularly hungry canine may make a morsel out of a child's homework, and 'system installation' may cause a timely outage right when an unofficially sanctioned political party is holding an online event.

However, in the course of our ordinary lives, such excuses are not usually taken without a healthy measure of incredulity. It is hoped, therefore, that Information Minister Murtaza Solangi, DG PTA

Ahmed Shamim Pirzada and FIA Cybercrime Director Ops Waqaruddin Syed will find it within themselves to quickly forgive those who have been doubting their sincerity.

For context, the three gentlemen had appeared before the media on Monday to explain that the most recent nationwide internet outage, which hit around the evening this past Saturday, had nothing to do with the online jalsa that had been arranged by the PTI around the same time and everything to do with the PTA's "software being upgraded".

These were Mr Pirzada's own words as he rubbished a question asking why each of the last three nationwide outages — Dec 17, Jan 7 and Jan 20 — had coincided so neatly with the PTI's pre-announced online events.

There seemed to be few buyers for the DG PTA's explanation, however, as tech rights advocates and digital experts continued to criticise the government for disrupting internet access for millions "on political grounds".

Perhaps the authorities would be better served if they provided more details of the hitherto unknown system uphaul and 'software upgrade' they are undergoing. On a more serious note, it was alarming that the government, in the same conference, reinforced fears that there may be further outages as elections draw nearer.

Setting aside the debate about why outages are taking place, cutting the public off from internet services violates constitutional rights and is likely to be held so if challenged in the courts. A relevant precedent exists in the Islamabad High Court's 2018 ruling on the suspension of mobile phone services.

Further, in the context of the upcoming polls, it is important that voters have access to any information that helps them exercise their political rights. Therefore, the matter must be looked into by the ECP too.

There is also the impact on the digital economy: each disruption causes billions in losses to businesses and individuals who rely on internet connectivity for their work. Given the severity of these consequences, it is strange that the PTA did not wish to appear more proactive about tackling the problem. No wonder doubts remain about its true intent.

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Missed opportunity

THE unfortunate winding up of the Baloch protesters' camp in Islamabad not only marks the end of a tenacious demonstration, it also symbolises the state's failure to engage constructively with its aggrieved citizens. For weeks, these protesters, braving harsh weather and persistent

harassment from law enforcement, sought not only to draw attention to enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in their province but also to appeal for dialogue and understanding. Many of the protesters were women and children demanding answers from the government about their 'missing' fathers, brothers or husbands. The lack of closure is a most cruel fate. But instead of empathy and engagement, they found themselves at the receiving end of batons and water cannons in freezing weather when they entered the capital of their own country, and as time went by, undue scrutiny, including from certain media workers who sought to question their loyalty.

The authorities' approach involving intimidation, profiling and labelling of peaceful demonstrators as 'terrorist sympathisers' is far from what a democratic society owes its long neglected citizens. It has wounded the spirit of the protesters, making them feel alienated and unheard in their own land. The National Press Club's controversial and later retracted letter added to the protesters' sense of betrayal, as it seemed to prioritise logistical conveniences over fundamental rights. The decision by the Baloch Yakjehti Committee to move the protest to Quetta is a testament to their commitment to their cause. However, it also reflects a missed opportunity for the state to bridge gaps and initiate a meaningful dialogue. The state must now introspect, engage these families, and most importantly, act to address their grievances. The path to reconciliation is fraught with challenges, but it is a journey the state must embark upon with a firm commitment to justice and equity. Only then can the wounds of the past begin to heal, and a future built on mutual respect be realised.

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GB discontent

DISCONTENT is brewing once again in Gilgit-Baltistan, where locals have been demonstrating for more than a month over various issues. Topping the list of their grievances is the rise in the price of subsidised wheat for the region. They are also agitating against lengthy power cuts and the Finance Act, 2023. Organised by the Awami Action Committee, protests have been held across the region, accompanied by strikes, as people brave the cold weather to draw the state's attention to their demands. The local people say that the region's geography does not make it suitable for sufficient wheat production, hence there is resistance every time the federal government seeks to reduce the subsidy, which has been in place since the Bhutto era. Protesters also say that extensive power outages are crippling life, particularly during the unforgiving winter. They are objecting to the Finance Act, 2023, as according to them, if taxes are to be imposed on the region, it should have representation in the National Assembly.

These protests in GB are not new. Yet, unfortunately, successive federal governments have not been able to resolve these problems satisfactorily; the region seems to be low on the priority list of those who rule this country. While it is true that the nation is facing an economic crisis, a workable solution needs to be found to the wheat subsidy issue, considering GB's specific conditions, while also keeping in mind the state's financial position. Lawmakers and civil society should be taken on board by the state to address this issue. Similarly, the problem of power cuts needs to be resolved, while the taxation issue is tied to the region's long-standing demands for provincial status. The state is hesitant to make GB a province, pending a final settlement of the Kashmir dispute with India. This can be addressed by increasing GB's autonomy and giving it a provisional voice in the national legislature short of full provincial status. It is, indeed, unfair for the centre to benefit from GB, and not pay heed to its people's legitimate demands. The state should engage the protesters and promise to look into their demands, while the next federal government should work on a long-term plan to address GB's problems. Ultimately, the vast region should not be run via remote control from Islamabad, but by an empowered local legislature.

Army duties

THE state cannot hold elections without the Pakistan Army. On Tuesday, the caretaker government formally approved the deployment of military and civil armed forces personnel at polling stations and sensitive constituencies "in order to maintain peace and security" during the upcoming general elections.

It is understood that these personnel will not only be deputed to guard polling stations on election day but also serve as a rapid reaction force in case any law-and-order situation arises.

The government is said to have approved the arrangement after receiving a summary recommending the same from the hitherto minister-less interior ministry, which cited a severe shortfall of available personnel.

The ECP had previously demanded the services of 275,000 troops from the interior ministry for election-related duties after learning that it was facing a shortage of more than 277,000 security officials, of which about 169,000 were needed in Punjab alone.

It is understandable why the ECP wants boots on the ground for the elections. Apart from various administrative and other reasons, there has been a surge in militant attacks targeting security forces in recent months, and the commission would not want anything untoward happening close to or on election day.

There has also been a recent spate of attacks targeting political leaders, mostly in KP, while there are multiple alerts regarding some politicians facing active threats. It is imperative for the state, in these conditions, to provide a secure environment for politicians and voters in the lead-up to and on election day.

However, the troops being deployed should be clearly instructed that their role is limited to providing security and ensuring peace. They must not, for whatever reason, enter polling stations or interfere in the voting and post-voting procedures. The controversies that arose after the 2018 polls must be avoided at all costs.

Finally, though Dr Gohar Ejaz was given the additional charge of caretaker interior minister last evening, it is worth asking what took the government so long to nominate him given that Dr Ejaz's predecessor, Sarfaraz Bugti, had resigned in December.

The government has been quite aware of the deteriorating security situation and has brought it up on various occasions and in different contexts; why, then, had it left the ministry responsible for law and order without a head for more than a month?

This was a rather reckless approach, given the serious challenges that have emerged, with the elections drawing nearer.

Dr Ejaz's new role will require much attention and energy from him as he tries to address various emergent security-related challenges; will he be able to do so, considering he is also holding several other important portfolios? It is a big ask: the responsibility for the safety of millions now lies with him.

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Hindutva violence

THE acts of violence and vandalism carried out by Hindu fanatics targeting India's Muslim community, linked to the opening of the Ram Mandir on the Babri Masjid site on Monday, are a worrying portent. They point to shrinking space for India's minorities in a country ruled by the Sangh Parivar, where their lives, property and dignity can be violated at any time. There had been fears that the event in Ayodhya, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi led the celebrations, would turbocharge zealots and lead to communal trouble, and many Muslims in the Uttar Pradesh town had sent their families to safer locales. As it turned out, these fears were well-founded. Violent events have been reported from UP, Maharashtra, Gujarat and other Indian states after the mandir opening. A mob of between 1,000 and 1,500 Hindu extremists stormed a Mughal-era mosque on Jan 22 in Agra and threatened those inside. Meanwhile, in Mumbai's suburbs, mobs

ransacked Muslim stores or any establishment not displaying saffron flags. Local reports indicate that police took no action, while in many instances, the law enforcers were reluctant to register FIRs against the rioters. Muslims were not the only community targeted by the Sangh's shock troops; individuals in Madhya Pradesh planted a saffron flag, inscribed with Hindu symbols, atop a church.

Such appalling incidents have become frequent during the BJP's decade-old rule over India. Hindu mobs, often chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' — the Sangh's war cry — or blasting offensive tunes terrorise Muslim neighbourhoods or show up outside mosques. The mandir opening — a divisive symbol of the Sangh's victory over Indian secularism — and the likely return of the BJP in this year's elections spells more trouble for Indian Muslims and other minorities. The question the international community should be asking is this: can India project an image of a rising global power, while also subjecting its minority communities to violence fuelled by mediaeval hatreds, and get away with it?

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Education crisis

WHILE private organisations have for long been raising the alarm over the national 'education emergency', the state's own figures, too, paint a grim picture. The recently released Pakistan Education Statistics 2021-22 report, compiled by the Pakistan Institute of Education, a government body, highlights considerable deficiencies where enrolment and educational infrastructure are concerned. The new administrations that take charge after next month's elections at the centre and in the provinces would do well to consult this report in order to improve educational outcomes. The most disturbing finding pertains to out-of-school children; the report says that over 26m youngsters fall within this category. As a percentage, this comes to 39pc of the children in the country. While this may be an improvement over past years — for example in 2016-17, 44pc of minors were not in school — the percentage of children not going to school remains unacceptably high. To put things in perspective, nearly 40pc of children in Pakistan today have no chance of acquiring a basic education, which translates to a life of exploitation and poverty as adults.

The status of the educational infrastructure is no less distressing. In an age where young minds — in states more concerned about their next generation — are being introduced to AI and robotics, only 15pc of schools in Balochistan have electricity. Lack of toilets is another problem in many schools. Meanwhile, the report says the teacher-student ratio in primary schools is 1:39. Experts are of the view that smaller class sizes, especially at the primary level, deliver far better results. The question is: which of the parties vying to rule Pakistan have a vision and a plan to

change this dismal scenario? And here, we do not mean rhetoric, but solid plans backed by research. The answer would be disconcerting. Perhaps aware of the crisis, President Arif Alvi reiterated the need for “out-of-the-box” solutions while addressing a World Education Day event on Wednesday. It is clear that Pakistan will never be able to change course unless it succeeds in educating all its children, and that too with the tools needed to compete in the global economy — not simply regurgitating ideology or outdated lessons. The mainstream parties must vow to address Pakistan’s educational deficiencies, and start the transformative process that can make us a member of the league of nations that values knowledge.

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Section 144 in Punjab

THE state is taking important measures to prevent violence ahead of the polls, but it must exercise restraint while balancing security needs and public rights.

On Wednesday, the Punjab caretaker government imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure in the province. According to the notification, for now, the carrying, display and firing of weapons, including licensed arms, has been prohibited for civilians.

These restrictions will remain in place till Feb 12 — three days after the general election — in order to “prevent disturbance of public peace and tranquillity”. As far as the imposition of Section 144 is restricted to ensuring no guns are brought to or used in public spaces, the measure must be appreciated.

However, the same law also gives officials broad powers to ban any activity if they declare it to be against the public interest. These powers should not be abused by leveraging them to administratively restrict the activities of any political party.

The upcoming election has already been marred by the state’s overenthusiastic abuse of power, and several miscarriages of justice have grossly skewed the playing field. Political campaigning has thus far been lacklustre because the people have started to believe that the election result has been pre-decided. There is a dire need to rectify this impression.

Instead of taking any measure that could further dampen the spirit of competition between the parties and candidates contesting the polls, the state should focus on providing equal opportunities to all candidates, be they independent or affiliated with a political party, to run their campaigns freely.

If security is a concern, then the provincial administrations must hold all stakeholders to the same standard and make clear their requirements for public gatherings. Ideally, given the

security situation, they should be working closely with all contestants and assisting them equitably in the planning of political events so that no untoward incident takes place.

It is unfortunate that those currently responsible for stewarding the country have so far disregarded all voices of reason. However, the old political parties should know that an election shorn of legitimacy will be an albatross around their necks.

With mere days remaining in the election, they still have time to collectively push for a fair contest. The country must be in a position to make a fresh start from Feb 9. This will not happen unless what remains of the contest is free, equitable and fair, and the citizenry, by and large, accepts the election and its results.

Our political leaders must let go of the belief that the solution to Pakistan's many crises lies in repeating the 2018 experiment with a different set of actors. Such mistakes cannot yield different results. To move forward, they must let go of the past — or else be doomed to repeat it.

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Childhood robbed

SOMBRE revelations have come forth from KP's inaugural Child Labour Survey 2022-23, necessitating immediate action. The survey uncovers that a staggering 922,314 children, constituting 11.1pc of the province's child population, are trapped in the clutches of labour. These children, rather than experiencing the joys of childhood, are ensnared in an alarming array of hazardous occupations. A substantial 73.8pc of these child labourers are found in perilous conditions, with their daily tasks ranging from handling hazardous tools and machinery to enduring gruelling hours and night shifts, not to mention harrowing instances of abuse. Child labour was found to pervade sectors like agriculture, forestry, fishing, and water collection. The roots of this issue are multifaceted, ranging from educational deficits in households to the direst poverty levels. It is most unfortunate that these children, instead of wielding pens and dreams, are burdened with toils that rob them of their childhood and potential.

The state must convert the findings of this survey into actionable strategies. Firstly, legislation aimed at eradicating child labour must be enforced stringently, coupled with a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance. Education, the most potent tool against child labour, needs an aggressive boost. Ensuring free, quality education for all children, especially in rural and marginalised communities, should be a priority. Further, addressing the root causes, such as poverty and illiteracy among households, is essential. Social safety nets like the Benazir Income Support Programme should be expanded to reach the most vulnerable families, discouraging them from sending their children to work. Additionally, international collaboration, as suggested

by stakeholders at the survey's unveiling, can provide the technical and financial support required for these initiatives. But the drive and commitment must come from within. Civil society, academia, and every stakeholder must rally together to eradicate child labour. The children of KP, and indeed of Pakistan, deserve a future where their potential is nurtured, not exploited.

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Indian subterfuge

OVER the past several months, a seedier side of Indian foreign policy — the extrajudicial murder of dissidents and perceived enemies in other countries — has been making headlines.

Authorities in Canada and the US had last year made public the involvement of Indian operatives in such dubious activities, while Pakistan has long complained of New Delhi's malign actions inside its borders. The Kulbhushan Jadhav case is perhaps the most famous of these instances, but there have been other such incidents.

On Thursday, Foreign Secretary Syrus Qazi told a press conference that the state had credible evidence of Indian involvement in extrajudicial killings in Pakistan. He specifically mentioned the murders last year of Mohammad Riaz in Rawalakot, Azad Kashmir, and Shahid Latif in Sialkot.

There had long been speculation that the two men — formerly associated with Kashmir-centric militant outfits — may have been targeted by the Indians, and Mr Qazi's briefing confirmed these suspicions. He also named the local suspects held for their involvement in the killings, while identifying by name Indian agents believed to have overseen these operations.

One of the Indian operatives was reportedly operating from a Gulf country. While New Delhi has been quick to denounce these claims, as the foreign secretary pointed out, some Indian mainstream and social media accounts had initially boasted about the killings as 'retribution'.

Firstly, no foreign actor can be allowed to violate Pakistan's territorial sovereignty by carrying out such illegal killings. If any state believes individuals in Pakistan have been involved in wrongdoing, diplomatic channels need to be used to resolve the issue. Gung-ho actions seemingly out of spy thrillers cannot be tolerated.

Secondly, the administration needs to be vigilant so that malign forces working for hostile states are not able to take the law into their own hands, and murder people at will on our soil.

While India may reply in sanctimonious terms to Pakistan's claims of involvement in cross-border assassinations, it will be unable to respond in similar fashion to Western states, such as the US, where an Indian citizen has been charged in a failed plot to kill a pro-Khalistan activist.

India must respect the rules of engagement and desist from destabilising other states, while its Western friends need to be more vocal about the former's illegal activities on foreign soil as this is not how responsible states behave.

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Changing times

FEW among the older generations seem to realise it now, but Pakistani politics has undergone a paradigm shift that has been little understood and sparsely commented upon. The proliferation of new mediums through which highly potent political narratives can be disseminated, shared, commented upon and augmented has brought about a sea change in how narrative battles are being and will be fought. Most of those who hold traditional power were oblivious as our politics was taking this evolutionary leap forward; meanwhile, Pakistan's largest demographic — its youth — experienced its political coming of age on social media. The authorities and strategic think tanks had woken up to the changing dynamics some years ago. However, they made the mistake of looking at it from the 'Fifth Generation Warfare' lens alone. The reality is far more complex, and is constantly being shaped by trends that rise and disappear quicker than they are being documented.

Take the PTI's success in dodging the overwhelming restrictions placed upon it, for example. Despite facing arrests, police crackdowns, censorship on traditional media, prohibitions on political gatherings, internet blockades, and the loss of its electoral symbol, the party has managed to remain competitive in the race for the Feb 8 election. From TikTok jalsas to live-streaming events on YouTube, AI-generated speeches to public 'spaces' on X, the party has consistently broken new ground while engaging a segment of the population traditionally considered jaded or disinterested in mainstream politics. It has managed to do so because it is perhaps the only political party that has proactively evolved for the digital age. Other parties have attempted to replicate its successes, but they seem well behind the curve. The state does not know what to do: threatening traditional media into subservience is easy and non-disruptive, choking the internet means severing the entire backbone of the modern economy.

Of course, social media right now is the Wild West of the internet. There is a mad rush with everyone attempting to seize a slice of the influence pie. It is also difficult to keep track of what is true, what is misinformation, and what is an outright lie. This poses serious risks that can and are causing unprecedented social instability. As users grow more aware, these risks will subside. One must also be careful in estimating any party's popularity or lack thereof based on its 'social media

numbers' alone. However, while it seems easy now to deride someone by saying 'they will only form their government on TikTok', for the generation of Pakistanis dreaming of life in the metaverse, social media is where all their information will eventually be produced and consumed. Therefore, other Pakistani political parties will have to catch up. Those which cannot will see their influence decline.

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Changing times

FEW among the older generations seem to realise it now, but Pakistani politics has undergone a paradigm shift that has been little understood and sparsely commented upon. The proliferation of new mediums through which highly potent political narratives can be disseminated, shared, commented upon and augmented has brought about a sea change in how narrative battles are being and will be fought. Most of those who hold traditional power were oblivious as our politics was taking this evolutionary leap forward; meanwhile, Pakistan's largest demographic — its youth — experienced its political coming of age on social media. The authorities and strategic think tanks had woken up to the changing dynamics some years ago. However, they made the mistake of looking at it from the 'Fifth Generation Warfare' lens alone. The reality is far more complex, and is constantly being shaped by trends that rise and disappear quicker than they are being documented.

Take the PTI's success in dodging the overwhelming restrictions placed upon it, for example. Despite facing arrests, police crackdowns, censorship on traditional media, prohibitions on political gatherings, internet blockades, and the loss of its electoral symbol, the party has managed to remain competitive in the race for the Feb 8 election. From TikTok jalsas to live-streaming events on YouTube, AI-generated speeches to public 'spaces' on X, the party has consistently broken new ground while engaging a segment of the population traditionally considered jaded or disinterested in mainstream politics. It has managed to do so because it is perhaps the only political party that has proactively evolved for the digital age. Other parties have attempted to replicate its successes, but they seem well behind the curve. The state does not know what to do: threatening traditional media into subservience is easy and non-disruptive, choking the internet means severing the entire backbone of the modern economy.

Of course, social media right now is the Wild West of the internet. There is a mad rush with everyone attempting to seize a slice of the influence pie. It is also difficult to keep track of what is true, what is misinformation, and what is an outright lie. This poses serious risks that can and are causing unprecedented social instability. As users grow more aware, these risks will subside. One must also be careful in estimating any party's popularity or lack thereof based on its 'social media

numbers' alone. However, while it seems easy now to deride someone by saying 'they will only form their government on TikTok', for the generation of Pakistanis dreaming of life in the metaverse, social media is where all their information will eventually be produced and consumed. Therefore, other Pakistani political parties will have to catch up. Those which cannot will see their influence decline.

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Women in chains

HOW will the state compensate for wrongs caused by primitive mindsets, particularly when men in conservative areas extinguish lives and ambitions of women with impunity? Kohistan is back in the news for the wrong reasons — a band of clerics, mostly from JUI-F, delivered a shocking fatwa declaring canvassing by and for women candidates an un-Islamic act. They believe that door-to-door campaigns by women are in violation of religious laws. It is a blow to what could be a historic moment for the region with three women contesting for the provincial assembly. Intimidation assumes another form in Khyber — three female nominees for general seats of the provincial assembly are on a controlled campaign trail due to tribal customs focusing mainly on women voters.

Oppression through decrees and traditions should worry the ECP. The electoral body has to demonstrate its commitment to the safety of vulnerable aspirants with strategies that, in this instance, include the men so that women are not silenced. It should take certain steps on a war footing, such as provide security for the female candidates to hit the campaign trail and begin a simultaneous awareness drive with religious scholars to enlighten the community about politics, its merits and the need for more female legislators in the administration. Moreover, the UN defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". Therefore, the fact that these applicants face potential dangers to their lives cannot be dodged by the authorities and ECP. Kohistan, remote and orthodox, has the lowest literacy rate in Pakistan, and equal representation is alien to its men. Education is the bedrock of enfranchisement and the most powerful tool for security.

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Partial justice

It is unfortunate that, on Friday, the International Court of Justice did not endorse South Africa's demand for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Gaza as it delivered a preliminary ruling on the genocide case brought against Israel.

While legal intricacies are important, stopping the butchery of Palestinians is a more pressing concern. However, the court has upped the moral pressure on Tel Aviv to end its amoral campaign against defenceless civilians in the besieged Strip, even though the Zionist state has no intention of doing so.

Importantly, the judges felt that South Africa's evidence supporting the genocide case against Israel could not be ruled out "prima facie". Furthermore, the bench ordered Tel Aviv to take all possible measures to prevent acts of genocide, prevent and punish those involved in the incitement of genocide, and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Israel has been given a month to report back to The Hague with regard to complying with these measures.

In his reaction, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has termed the order "outrageous" and vowed to continue fighting his "just war" in which some 26,000 people have been massacred. Earlier, he had boasted: "Nobody will stop us — not The Hague... ."

Meanwhile, the US that has lent its iron-clad support to Tel Aviv, which is responsible for a massacre that will go down in infamy, has said it continues to believe "allegations of genocide are unfounded". Though it may take the ICJ years to determine if, legally, Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide, in the popular view the murder of children, the collective punishment and starvation of an entire civilian population, and the ethnic cleansing of Gazans very much fit the definition of genocide. Other states have hailed the ICJ's order.

Where to from here? Most importantly, when will the slaughter of Gaza's people end? While the ICJ's rulings are binding, the court cannot enforce them. And as Israel's arrogant replies have proved, it has no intention of respecting the court's orders. This is a mockery of the very rules-based order the US, UK and other Western states have sworn to uphold.

In the past, these actors have bombed, or threatened to attack states that have, according to them, strayed from the 'rules-based order'. Will they take a similar line against Israel? Or will they continue to defend the indefensible? Kudos to South Africa for raising a voice for humanity and against barbarism, irrespective of religious and ethnic affiliations. It is hoped that when the court next meets, more concrete measures are proposed to end the bloodbath and that one day, those responsible for shedding the blood of innocents in Gaza are brought to justice, as are those who aided and abetted them. Published in Dawn, January 28th, 2024

Health is wealth

A RECENT World Economic Forum report has shed light on a crucial but often neglected aspect of societal progress — women’s health. According to the report *Closing the Women’s Health Gap: a \$1 trillion Opportunity to Improve Lives and Economies*, addressing the health disparities women face not only promises a leap towards gender equality but also unveils a pathway to economic prosperity. With women spending 25pc more of their lives in poor health compared to men, closing this gap is not just a moral imperative, but an economic necessity. Investing in women’s health promises a 1.7pc rise in per capita GDP and can turn every dollar put in into a threefold economic growth. In Pakistan, the urgency of this issue cannot be overstated. Pakistani women face a multitude of health challenges, exacerbated by limited access to quality healthcare, nutritional deficiencies, and societal norms that prioritise male health. The implications of these challenges are profound: they not only affect women’s quality of life, they also hamper their ability to participate fully in the workforce and, by extension, national economic development.

The initiative by the WEF to launch the Global Alliance for Women’s Health is a commendable step. For Pakistan, engaging with such global platforms can provide valuable insights and resources to tackle the health challenges Pakistani women face. The alliance’s focus on financing, science and innovation, and agenda-setting resonates with the approach needed to address health disparities in Pakistan. The findings of the report are a clarion call to action. Investing in women’s health transcends individual benefits — it is an investment in the very fabric of society. By prioritising women’s health, we can unlock potential, drive economic growth, and build a more equitable and prosperous future. As we stand at this critical juncture, the choice is ours: to continue the status quo or to recognise the link between women’s health and the nation’s wealth.

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Pension spending

THE Establishment Division’s opposition to federal pension reforms is unreasonable and aimed at obstructing their approval and implementation. The reforms aim to cut federal pension spending and contain its budgetary fallout by reducing benefits for existing pensioners as well as starting a funded contributory pension scheme for current government employees, in accordance with commitments made to multilateral lenders. The government seems to have largely completed its inter-ministerial consultations on the proposed amendments to the pension scheme, and its recommendations will soon be placed before the military-backed SIFC for a decision. It is obvious that the unsustainably expensive public ‘pay-as-you-go’ pension system is a major fiscal policy challenge for Pakistan after debt payments, as its burden is constantly rising. Overall federal pension spending has surged by a whopping 32pc to Rs801bn this year from Rs609bn in FY23 due

to new retirements and increased benefits. Military pensions have grown by 26pc from Rs447bn to Rs563bn — constituting nearly three quarters of the total federal pension expenditure. This is due to early retirements.

Pensions make up a huge chunk of the public sector wage bill. The cost of pensions nationally will be over Rs1.5tr that must be financed through the budget. The pension bill is expected to grow annually at 22-25pc per year for the next 35 years. Some people like the former KP finance minister Taimur Khan Jhagra, who introduced substantial pension reforms in his province, believe the country might not have money to pay anything to its existing or new pensioners 10 years from now if reforms are not introduced. Given the nature and magnitude of the coming crisis, it is frustrating to see the bureaucracy selfishly stall the execution of reforms introduced in the budget for the present fiscal year to protect its benefits. Over the years, public pensions in many countries have become less generous by limiting eligibility and moving towards defined contribution public pension programmes in which beneficiaries make routine, modest contributions over a stipulated period while in active service to qualify for sustained benefits post-retirement. The way our pensions are surging and eating into budgets that could have been spent on opening schools and hospitals or providing drinking water to people demands urgent action. If we don't act today, we will end up paying a much bigger cost for our inaction.

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Political decline

WITH elections just around the corner, there is no escaping the fact that for voters this year, the contest is once again less about choosing between competing ideologies and more about the personalities of the key leaders in the running.

The three leading parties — the PML-N, PPP and PTI — waited till days before the Feb 8 election to finally release their manifestos. Ideally, manifestos are issued months in advance, but this time voters and commentators were not given the time or opportunity to go over their parties' plans in detail, analyse the viability of the promises made, and debate them with their peers.

Not only that, a brief glance at the manifestos suggest that there is now very little that differentiates the parties' ideologically, barring their respective interests in putting either commerce and industry or the people or Islamic welfare and justice at the centre of their plans.

It is, of course, much easier to rally the masses with slogans like 'four legs good, two legs bad' than to expend intellectual effort on understanding what problems they face and formulating well-reasoned solutions to them within a defined ideological framework.

Unfortunately, the easy option is also the one which comes with added incentives in this age of social media which, though it has democratised access to and participation in political discourse, has also accelerated a decline in the intellectual quality of political debates.

With audience attention spans shrinking rapidly, party leaders no longer seem to be bothering with cumbersome political philosophies and are focusing more on buzzwords and soundbites that have the potential to 'go viral' on new mediums for mass communication. Sadly, a symptom of this gradual 'dumbing down' of politics is the culture of name-calling that has picked up in recent years.

People like to blame one party or the other for 'ruining the political culture' in Pakistan, but the truth is that what we have today was bound to happen because, over the years, most parties abandoned their ideologies for men and women of few qualities.

Thanks also to the repeated interference in the country's natural political development, political parties gradually abandoned their pursuit of ideologically defined pathways to progress to focus on the time-consuming task of survival and self-preservation. When such instincts take over, it is only natural for societies to devolve into baser versions of their selves.

Of course, some of the smaller parties have stuck to their ideological roots and continued with a more classical approach to politics; however, considering their limited impact on the broader political framework, their contributions to political culture, though commendable, have largely been negligible.

A course correction is needed; it must be added to the political stabilisation agenda for the post-election scenario.

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Presidential-style model

WITH the election clock ticking fast, the PTI has finally released its manifesto, promising radical constitutional reforms. Among them: a proposal to introduce a presidential-style system, advocating for the direct election of the prime minister, ostensibly to reduce the influence of "vested interests". This proposal is not only incongruent with the essence of parliamentary democracy it also portends a dangerous tilt towards a personality cult, reminiscent of political structures in Turkiye and Russia. In a parliamentary system, the prime minister is elected by the people's representatives, ensuring that the appointment reflects the collective will of the nation. The PTI's proposed shift to a direct election model usurps this fundamental principle, risking the

establishment of a hybrid regime that muddles the demarcation between a parliamentary and a presidential system. This approach is inherently flawed as it concentrates power in the hands of a single individual, undermining the role and authority of parliament.

The proposal seems to be a knee-jerk reaction to the challenges faced by the PTI during its tenure, compelling it to govern by ordinances, and reflects a deeper desire for a more centralised and individualistic form of rule. Moreover, the direct election of a premier does not guarantee that the most popular or capable leader will be chosen. The intricacies of direct elections, often infused by populist rhetoric and media portrayals, can lead to the election of individuals who may not necessarily enjoy the broad-based support essential for effective governance. In essence, the PTI's proposal to shift to a presidential-style system — under the guise of direct democracy — is a misguided attempt that risks undermining the very foundations of Pakistan's parliamentary democracy. It is imperative to ensure that power remains distributed and the prime minister is accountable to parliament, not solely to the electorate. This ensures a balanced and effective governance model, reflective of the collective will and diversity of the Pakistani populace.

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FIA notices

WITH its overzealous 'investigation' of an alleged "malicious social media campaign" against Supreme Court judges, the caretaker government has not only managed to embarrass itself but the superior judiciary as well. There had been an outcry over the weekend as several prominent journalists, including well-known reporters assigned to the Supreme Court beat, took to social media to share that they had been issued notices by the FIA under the draconian Peca Act, summoning them for questioning in relation to remarks they had made on social media. As outrage grew over what many saw as the interim government making a ham-fisted attempt to silence criticism of the Supreme Court's Jan 13 verdict in the PTI's election symbol case, the caretaker information minister appeared on TV on Sunday to deny that there was any 'witch-hunt' against journalists while he expounded on the limitations of free speech. The press conference was apparently prompted by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa taking suo motu notice of the matter on Saturday and fixing it for a hearing. Yesterday, while the court heard some of the parties affected, it quickly became clear that it wanted to distance itself from the government's actions.

It is most unfortunate that the two top forums representing the legal fraternity had earlier endorsed and even encouraged the interim government's plan to pursue critics despite several prominent lawyers strongly criticising the move. With the chief justice himself remarking on Monday, "If you feel that shutting down criticism of the Supreme Court benefits it, you are harming me", and making a clear distinction between criticism of the Supreme Court's decisions

and “provoking violence and spreading disturbance”, it is hoped that they will reconsider their position. It bears recalling that just last year, the Supreme Court, under its previous chief justice, had frequently encountered strong and similar criticism yet continued to exercise restraint. It was particularly disappointing to see those who had been quite vocal during the former chief justice’s tenure now falling over themselves to show they were more loyal than the king. It is encouraging that the new chief justice has reaffirmed a great degree of tolerance for critical voices and even welcomed them for holding up a mirror to the superior judiciary. As for the interim government, it really needs to examine its actions in the context of its constitutional responsibilities.

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Mending fences

FROM exchanging missile strikes two weeks ago to trading compliments, Pakistan and Iran have managed to handle a potentially explosive crisis in a mature fashion.

On Jan 16, Iran had bizarrely launched strikes on Panjgur hitting, what it said, were terrorists affiliated with the Jaish al-Adl outfit. Pakistan said two children died in the incident. Two days later, Pakistan replied to the violation of its sovereignty by striking targets in the Iranian town of Saravan neutralising, as per the state, several Baloch separatists.

But the acrimony seemed a thing of the past as caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani met his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in Islamabad on Monday, indicating that the crisis was now behind both states. It is also hoped that as relations improve, the brutal murder of nine Pakistani workers in Saravan on Saturday is fully probed.

Mr Amir-Abdollahian said both countries were “one nation” while observing that “third countries” were aiding militants in the common border area. Meanwhile, Mr Jilani said that a “high-level mechanism” was being established to oversee bilateral cooperation, while adding that liaison officers would be stationed in Turbat and Zahedan.

Indeed, this display of cooperation is a welcome change from the acrimonious exchanges that had threatened to scuttle bilateral ties. Both sides chose to handle the crisis with wisdom, as opposed to jingoistic nationalism. This should serve as a template to manage all future bilateral ties.

While the exchange of pleasantries makes for good optics, both Islamabad and Tehran need to get down to business and address the single biggest irritant that stands in the way of better ties: border security. Both sides have pledged to work for collective security, and these promises should be followed by action to secure their common border.

Whether it is religiously motivated militants working against Iran that allegedly find refuge in Pakistan, or Baloch separatists plotting against Pakistan on Iranian soil, both sides need to address the threats these non-state actors pose through mutual cooperation; under no circumstances should unilateral action be taken, as Iran did a few weeks ago.

The crisis was defused this time, but there is no guarantee that similar rational behaviour will prevail in the future. With regard to the killing of Pakistani workers, those involved in this heinous crime need to be identified and brought to justice, while Tehran should ensure security for all Pakistanis living in or visiting Iran.

A few weeks from now a new administration will take over in Islamabad, and it will be up to the new rulers to build on the points agreed to during the foreign ministers' meeting. Both sides should also be wary of inimical foreign actors working to destabilise the border areas in the hopes of souring the Pakistan-Iran relationship.

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Manifest cruelty

THE Israeli war on Gaza has exposed the hollow claims of many global actors regarding commitment to humanitarian values. Apparently, these values can be put in abeyance if the victims of Israeli state-sponsored terror are Palestinian civilians. As if the slaughter of over 26,000 Palestinians since Oct 7 were not enough — several Western states, led by the US, have faithfully stood by Israel as it committed these crimes, and blocked ceasefire attempts — now, many of Tel Aviv's foreign friends are doing their best to sabotage the UN's efforts to provide succour to the Gazans. After Israel accused 12 employees of UNRWA — the UN agency that provides education, healthcare and social services to Palestinian refugees — of complicity in the Oct 7 attacks, several states have stopped contributing funds to the body. These include the US, Britain and other European nations. The rush to judgement has come even before any proper investigation has been launched, although the UN says it has suspended the services of those accused, and has started a probe.

The move to defund UNRWA over unproven allegations is a manifestation of great cruelty on the part of states that have stopped payments. These states have no problem shipping arms and ammunition to Israel, which it uses to unleash unspeakable barbarity upon the civilians of Gaza. But the flimsiest of excuses is used to stop aid reaching a population that has been dazed by months of war and displacement. The UN secretary general has criticised the move, while Pakistan has similarly termed it “unjustifiable”. It would be naïve to expect Israel's hard-core supporters to display any empathy for Palestinian civilians. In such circumstances, the Muslim

world, which has been conspicuous by its silence during this brutal conflict, needs to step in and fill the funding gap. Particularly, those energy-rich Muslim states with billions of petrodollars in their bank accounts need to come to the aid of Gaza's people.

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SBP's monetary stance

THE State Bank of Pakistan has made a prudent decision by maintaining its key policy at 22pc given an uncertain inflation outlook, downward risks to the currency, and political volatility. Even though a semblance of economic stability has returned to the country under the short-term \$3bn IMF bailout programme, the situation remains erratic. In other words, the required prerequisites for a rate cut are not yet in place. For instance, the bank has increased its inflation projections for the current fiscal to 23-25pc from the earlier estimate of 20-22pc due to frequent and sizable adjustments in administered energy prices. In its monetary policy statement on Monday, the bank says the rise in energy prices has slowed down the pace of decline in inflation anticipated earlier, besides impeding a sustained decrease in inflation expectations. This is in spite of moderating food and core inflation in the past few months due to the tight monetary policy stance supported by ongoing fiscal consolidation, lower global commodity prices, and improved domestic crop output and supplies. It has also revised its target of containing medium-term inflation to 5-7pc by June 2025 to September 2025.

Then, a finance ministry report shows that Pakistan's fiscal deficit crossed 2.3pc of GDP, the highest in three years, in the first half of this fiscal year mainly owing to an almost 64pc surge in interest payments and defence spending over the last fiscal year, despite tight control over other expenditure, drastic cuts in the development budget, and increases in the tax and non-tax revenues. Likewise, the current account deficit during this period has declined by 77pc to \$0.8bn, and the exchange rate has appreciated. However, this external stability is achieved by slowing economic growth at the cost of jobs and imposing import curbs. Escalating tensions in the Red Sea region, which have recently led to a surge in global freight charges and are posing a risk to international trade and commodity prices, could prove to be a serious shock that the frail external recovery might not be able to deal with. The real interest rates remain positive

on a 12-month forward-looking basis, but the State Bank must resist every pressure and temptation to reverse the present monetary stance unless inflation falls below the current policy rate, for broader economic recovery, and external account and currency stability.

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Cipher case result

THE writing had been on the wall. Given how hastily the special court, appointed under the Official Secrets Act, had been proceeding in the cipher case trial, seemingly without regard for due process, a rushed verdict had been expected.

It was delivered yesterday, a week before the country heads to polls, with sentences of 10 years' imprisonment for both former prime minister Imran Khan and former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

Special Court Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain, who oversaw the proceedings inside Adiala Jail, read out the verdict even as the accused — now convicts — were protesting the denial of their trial rights.

It bears noting that the Islamabad High Court had ordered retrials of this same case on two previous occasions, noting each time glaring procedural irregularities in how it was being conducted. The third attempt doesn't seem to have gone differently, and many observers predict the higher courts may not be charitable towards the special court whenever the verdict goes into appeal.

Given the IHC's earlier rebukes, it is worth asking what the special court was seeking to accomplish by concluding the matter so hastily. Considering that the death penalty had been sought against both politicians, the situation called for far more restraint.

Instead, there were some bizarre developments over the weekend: the judge appointed state counsel for the defendants without their consent, and later reportedly denied the defendants their right to cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses. Meanwhile, the legal teams appointed by the two accused complained that they were repeatedly denied access to the proceedings.

To top it off, on Monday, the case was wrapped up at breakneck speed in a marathon session that ran till well into the night. Everything made it seem as if some kind of deadline had been set for the trial to be concluded and a verdict issued.

From Mr Khan waving a paper from the podium as he addressed a large political gathering, claiming that he had unearthed a conspiracy against his government, to his conviction for divulging state secrets, the cipher saga will be remembered as a sorry episode in our diplomatic, legal and political history.

A diplomatic faux pas was needlessly dragged into a political dispute. The immediate fallout saw already soured relations with the US deteriorate further, and for no meaningful purpose.

Politically, the conspiracy narrative proved less useful in bolstering public sympathy for the PTI than its political opponents' failure to manage the precarious economic situation they inherited from its ouster.

Lastly, whatever case there may have been against Mr Khan and Mr Qureshi, it was weakened irreparably by conducting the trial in haste. What good did any of it achieve? One can only marvel at the short-sightedness displayed by all actors in this sordid drama.

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