

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June 2018

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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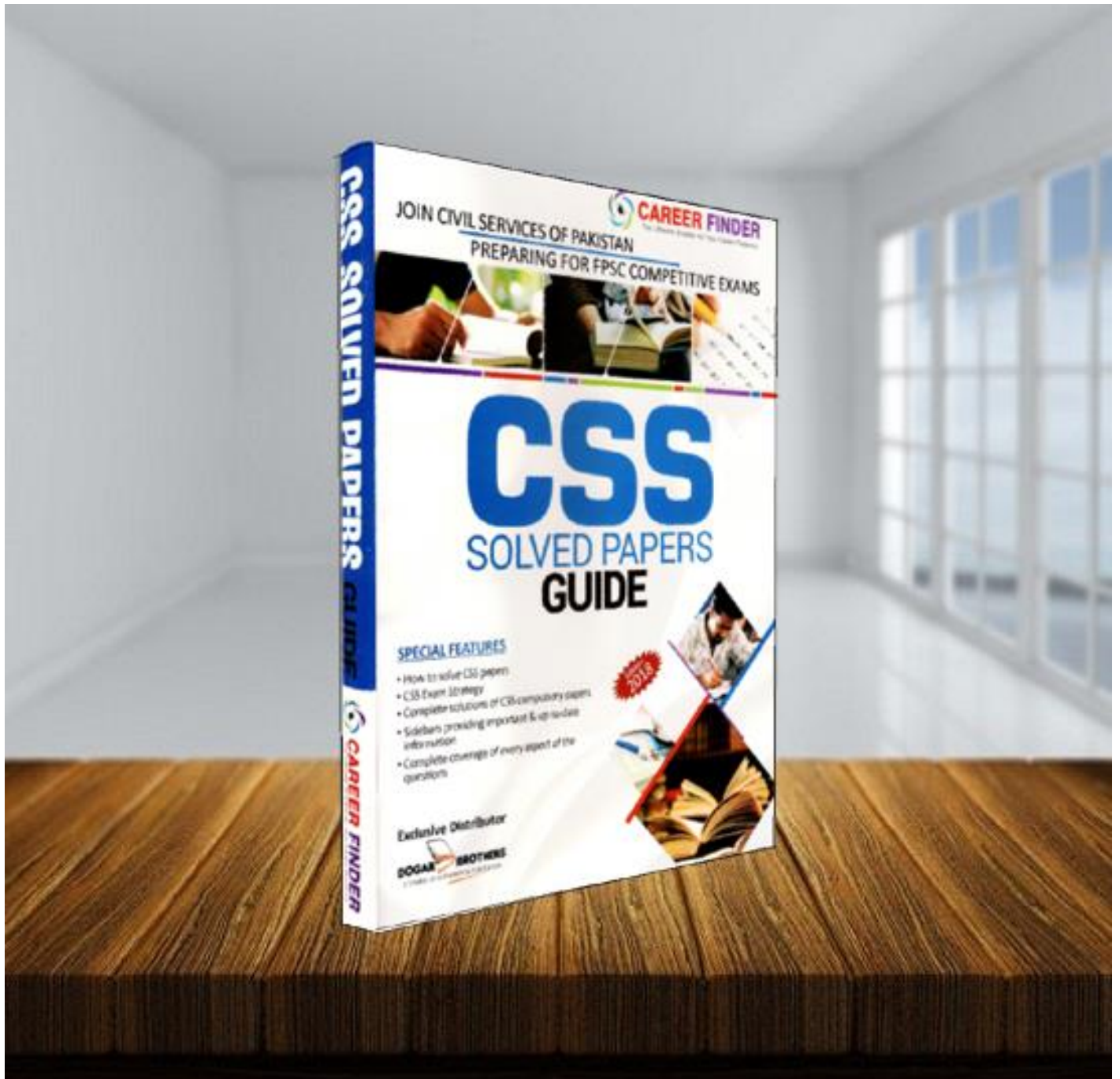
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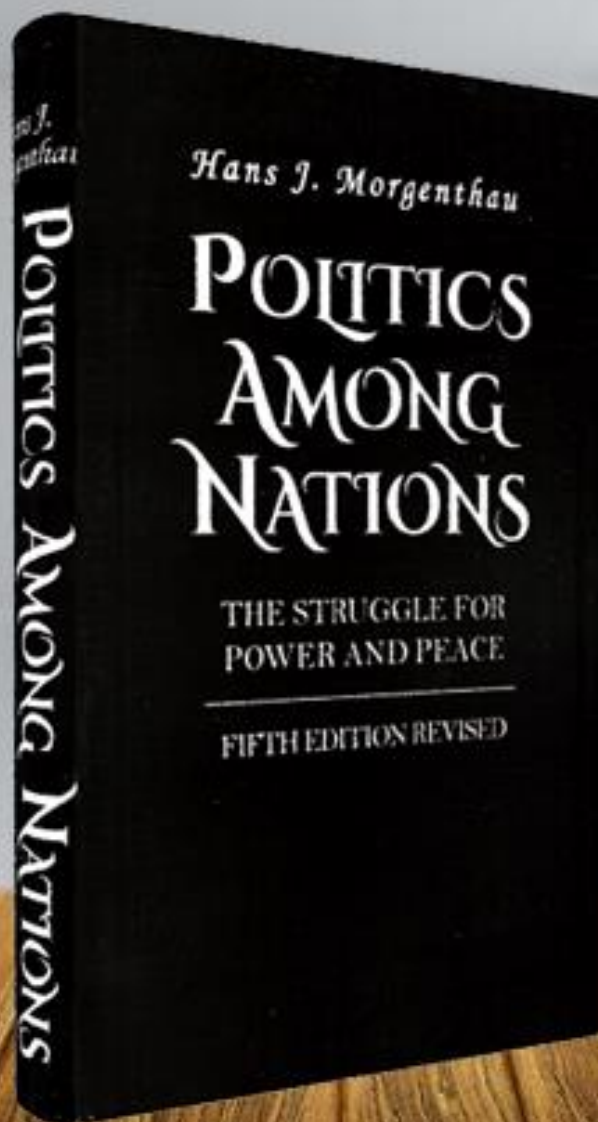
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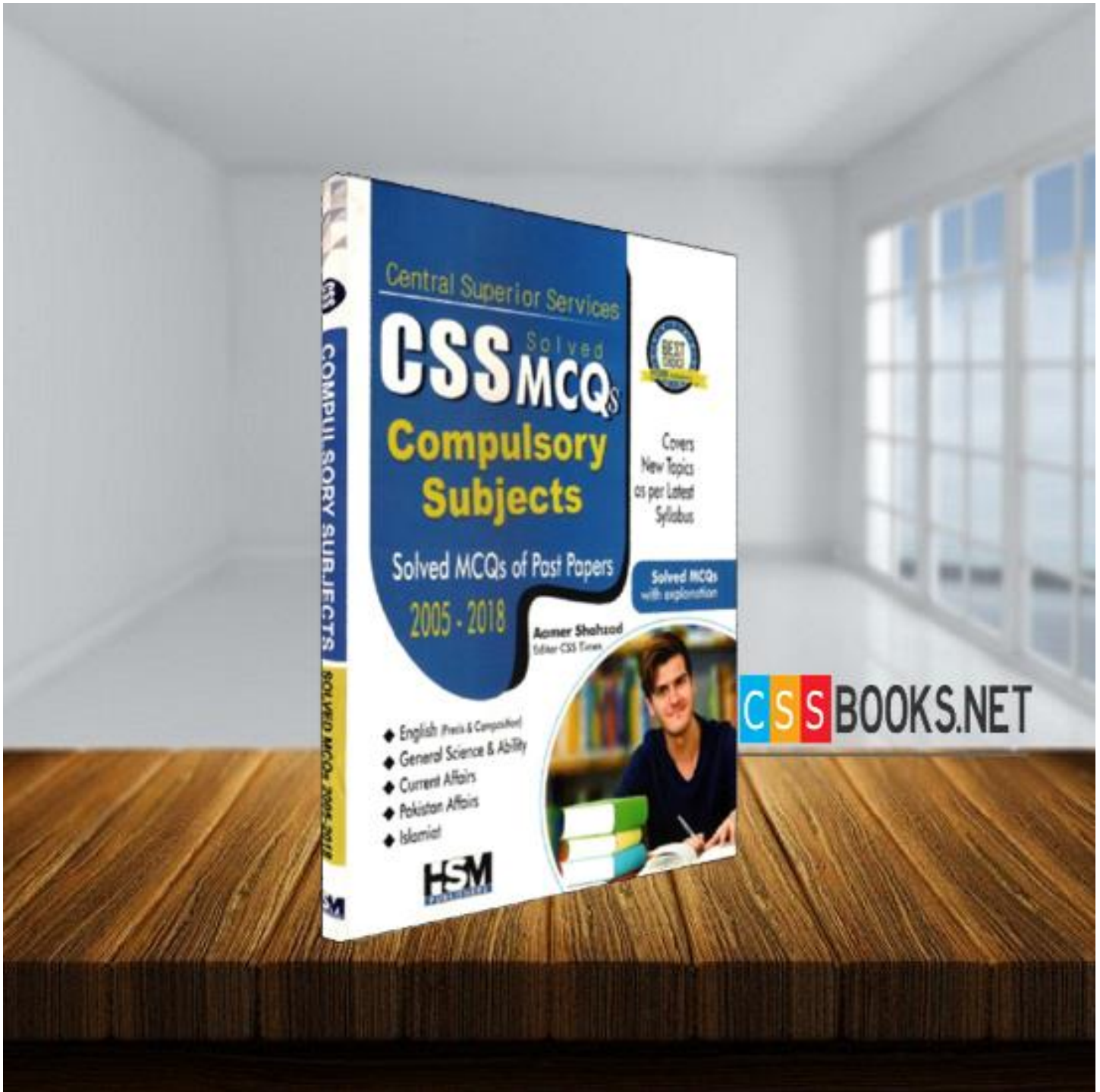
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On-time polls?

It is important that the general election be held on time, the caretaker administrations at the centre and in the provinces function smoothly, and a peaceful transition of power take place.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the very future of the democratic project in the country is dependent on an on-time election, uncontroversial caretaker set-ups and a peaceful transition after the general election.

So, it is with some despair and even alarm that several election-related conflicts that have broken out must be viewed.

Unsurprisingly, the Balochistan Assembly is leading the way in attempts to try and delay or perhaps even derail the general election.

A sudden and mysterious resolution moved in the Balochistan Assembly demanding that the general election be postponed has sent ripples across the political landscape.

Orchestrated by the same elements in the assembly that hijacked the PML-N party and installed a political outsider as chief minister of the province, the resolution in the assembly can be interpreted as an effort to pander to or follow the instructions of anti-democratic forces in the country.

The resolution must be dismissed by the ECP and disregarded by the country on account of its frivolous reasons.

An on-time election is of vastly greater national importance than the faux reasons offered in the resolution for postponement.

If the shenanigans in the Balochistan Assembly were somewhat predictable, the sudden reversal of the PTI in Punjab on its own nominee for caretaker chief minister, Nasir Khosa, whose name had been agreed to by the PML-N is mystifying and shocking.

While the PTI's reversal does not preclude a fresh agreement with the PML-N in Punjab and a caretaker chief minister is constitutionally guaranteed to be

installed within days of the dissolution of the Punjab Assembly, the inability of the PTI to provide a cogent or credible reason for upending the nomination will add to apprehensions about behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by anti-democratic forces.

he confused and uncertain political landscape has been further undermined by judicial intervention.

The issue of fresh delimitation of constituencies after the census had threatened to disrupt the election timeline, but it was hoped that controversy could eventually be avoided.

The judicial intervention may be necessary — it is quite possible that the rules for delimitation have not been followed in several constituencies — but it adds to the air of uncertainty.

It is necessary, then, for the delay in Punjab to be quickly resolved as a first step to putting the caretaker set-ups back on track.

Yesterday, the ECP announced the schedule for the upcoming elections while the National Assembly stood dissolved at midnight.

With bumps in the road expected between now and polling day, July 25, the political class should move swiftly to complete its constitutional duties and allow the caretaker administrations a relatively smooth beginning.

‘Irrefutable evidence’

WHAT has been an open secret for years has finally been acknowledged in more legal terms by the National Accountability Bureau.

In a statement issued on Wednesday after a meeting of its Karachi division, the federal anti-corruption body said there was “irrefutable evidence” that Bahria Town had illegally acquired land for its massive gated scheme in the city’s Malir district.

According to NAB’s findings, land officials all the way from the Malir Development Authority to the Sindh Building Control Authority and Board of Revenue had colluded with the powerful real estate developer to perpetrate the scam.

The Supreme Court on May 4 declared the procurement of land for three Bahria projects — including that in Karachi — null and void, and ordered NAB to complete its investigations and file references against the individuals involved within three months.

One would certainly hope that NAB, having sought the help of the Survey of Pakistan and the defence ministry to determine illegal transfer and swapping of land — a major aspect of the fraud — will be able to construct a case that will bring the guilty to justice.

Far too often in Pakistan, cases described as watertight by prosecuting authorities have been hobbled by missing pieces of evidence, weak chain of custody, witnesses that turn hostile, inadequate case preparation, etc when they come to court.

In corruption allegations involving Bahria Town Karachi, given the cast of enormously powerful and well-connected individuals who are stakeholders in a multibillion-rupee fortune, there will undoubtedly be pressure brought to bear on all those connected with the investigation.

Indeed, it is pertinent to ask why NAB has dragged its feet for so many years on investigating the blatantly suspicious modus operandi that allowed BTK to spread to its present colossal dimensions.

Why, despite multiple petitions against the developer and the compelling testimonies of the vicious harassment suffered by those directly affected by the project, has it taken a Supreme Court order to shake NAB out of its torpor? Be that as it may, the anti-corruption body once again has the opportunity to prove that it can, and will, expose this land scam in its entirety without fear or favour.

One may well argue that where a matter of public interest is concerned, this is a test case for DG NAB, retired Justice Javed Iqbal.

And those who have the interests of the public at heart will be watching the outcome very closely.

Child marriage in KP

IN Pakistan, enacting legislation to increase the minimum marriageable age to 18 years is an important first step towards eradicating child marriage by 2030 — the target set by the UN SDGs.

There is also an overwhelming need to address the underlying factors driving this harmful practice, which include economic deprivation.

This is the basis of a new study by a KP-based non-profit that found child marriage to be rampant in the province.

Focused on seven districts (Peshawar, Mardan, Mansehra, Shangla, Bannu, Swat and Dera Ismail Khan), the report noted that poverty, gender inequality, lack of access to education and employment, and misogynistic attitudes towards girls perpetuate child marriages and risky births.

While there are no short-term fixes, one solution for eliminating child marriage is to keep girls in schools.

Militant attacks on education that exacerbated girls' dropout rates in KP could likely have also contributed to early marriages.

With 21pc of girls married by 18 in Pakistan, the next set of elected provincial governments must prioritise implementation of child marriage laws.

On its part, after the polls, KP should enact legislation to punish families that marry off their underage children and individuals who officiate at such marriage ceremonies.

While such a provincial draft bill remains with the Council of Islamic Ideology, the authorities must not submit to the interpretation of conservative lobbies at the cost of young girls' lives.

The legal age for adulthood is 18 years — the age to vote and drive; the minimum marriageable age for girls must be the same across the country.

Taking Sindh's progressive child marriage legislation as a model, lawmakers should revise the federal Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, and the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2015, both determining the marriageable age for girls at 16 and 18 for boys.

It must be reiterated that ending this detrimental practice will have a positive effect on girls' educational progress, contribute to women having fewer children, and increase overall socioeconomic prosperity.

Parliament's tenure

ON May 31, the National Assembly ended its tenure to become the third consecutive parliament in the country — and only the second without a dictator at the helm — to complete its five-year term. This was quite a feat considering our chequered political history. However, a sobering thought remains: in all these decades, not one prime minister has completed his or her full term; in the last 10 years alone we have seen four prime ministers take office amid political turmoil. Shortly after the elections in 2013, that saw Nawaz Sharif take charge at the centre, danger loomed as D-Chowk in Islamabad became the venue of an extended siege. The PTI-led dharna demanded not only the removal of the prime minister, but also the dismissal of the government. In early 2016, the capital was once again brought to a standstill by supporters of Mumtaz Qadri who had assassinated Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. A few months later, the Panama leaks led to yet more calls for Mr Sharif to step down. Eventually, he was disqualified in a controversial Supreme Court decision last year.

Nevertheless, there is a silver lining. Despite the odds stacked against the survival of parliament — in the form of anti-democratic forces and the government's strained relations with both the military and the judiciary — the legislature did pull through. Indeed, one of its most prominent and positive moves came in the last days of its tenure when it approved the merger of Fata with KP province, removing a tyrannical remnant of our colonial past. The country may have been the victim of multiple coups during its 70 years, but even during military rule, elections, however flawed, were held — an example of the tribute that vice pays to virtue. With each election, the public did get a taste of the power of the vote — hopefully now it has developed an appetite for it. But that will only be ascertained at the ballot box — on July 25, and in subsequent elections — in an atmosphere that is free from intimidation and the manipulation that is often blamed on the security establishment, the judiciary, and on the disunited ranks of the politicians themselves.

True, our most recent parliament must be lauded for weathering many a storm. But it is lamentable that some of those who contributed to the impediments that the National Assembly encountered in its five-year journey were legislators who showed disrespect towards the august house that gave them the authority to represent the people by staying away and holding up the business of lawmaking. Indeed, for democracy to gain strength in Pakistan, legislators must carry out their parliamentary duties seriously, and contribute to a robust debate within the house on how best to empower the people they represent. It is only such perseverance that will keep the perennially lurking extra-constitutional forces at bay.

SC's course correction

A DAY after emphasising that disqualification of parliamentarians from public office should never be taken lightly, a three-member bench of the Supreme Court has overturned an Islamabad High Court decision barring PML-N leader Khawaja Asif from public office.

The Supreme Court has now cleared the way for Mr Asif to contest the upcoming general election. That should be welcomed.

First, however, the role of Khawaja Asif in helping create the controversy ought to be considered. Why was the then foreign minister, a senior leader of the PML-N and a politician with decades of public service behind him, in the employ of a foreign company that entitled him to a sizeable salary?

Whatever the motivations of Mr Asif's political opponent in moving the courts, surely there is no reasonable political or moral justification for his employment abroad.

Yet, the Islamabad High Court's judgement against Mr Asif was also flawed. The very fact that the high court acknowledged its concerns about deploying Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution against a politician but went ahead and did so anyway suggests that the superior judiciary must review its approach in matters that are clearly justiciable but that also have significant effects for national political stability.

Thankfully, the three-member bench of the Supreme Court led by Justice Umar Bandial has tried to correct course, drawing the judiciary away from unnecessary controversy and towards a rights-based, democracy-promoting, institution-strengthening interpretation of the law.

Certainly, in a court of law the specific facts of each case must be treated in accordance with the law as interpreted by the apex court.

However, clearly the next parliament must move to quickly address the unnecessary problems that qualification and disqualification criteria for MPs in the Constitution have created for those aspiring to elected public office.

The right to participate in the political process, as a voter or candidate, is a sacrosanct one that should only be restricted for the narrowest of reasons in situations where the facts are manifestly clear.

It is parliament's right to amend the Constitution and the Supreme Court's duty to interpret it. If parliament amends language in the Constitution open to unnecessarily wide interpretation and inserts fair and transparent criteria that promote the democratic project, the superior courts will surely abide by the changes.

What should be clear to all is that the current confusion is undesirable and unsustainable.

Forex troubles

THE spread between the value at which the rupee is traded in the interbank market versus its value in the open market has widened to Rs4, which is the highest it has been in recent memory. In normal times, the State Bank takes note when this spread goes above one rupee, and forces the exchange companies to narrow the gap. Most of the time this demand from the regulator is enough to force a rectification. But this time it does not appear to be working. Despite numerous such meetings between the exchange companies and the central bank, the spread has continued to widen, raising the spectre of black marketing and diversion of large-scale remittance inflows towards illegal hundi and hawala channels. If left unchecked, the widening spread could spur greater dollarisation of the economy, fuel speculation, and create massive distortions in the quantum of foreign exchange inflows.

In short, the large spread might be evidence of a low-intensity foreign exchange crisis that is under way. Based on market players' perceptions, the crisis appears to have two drivers. First is the continuing fall in the foreign exchange reserves that are currently just sufficient to cover a little over two months' imports. Any lower and the economy will be in the danger zone. The second driver is the approaching decision at FATF to 'grey list' Pakistan's financial sector for deficiencies in its anti-money laundering and countering of terror-financing framework. The State Bank has been putting in place a raft of regulations designed to curb illegal foreign exchange transactions, which is making the formal foreign exchange markets a more cumbersome place to do business for many. There is little that the State Bank can do to reverse either of these two drivers. But with the political government gone, the space for action available to the central bank has expanded, and restraining the growth of this spread ought to become a main priority, before it triggers any large-scale capital movements.

SC's welcome move

A JOLT to the electoral system and general election schedule has prompted a necessary and sensible reaction by the ECP, and the Supreme Court has in turn acted commendably to suspend the verdict of a single judge of the Lahore High Court that had threatened to derail at least the nomination phase of the poll schedule.

As has become apparent since the Lahore High Court judgement suddenly rocked the political landscape, there are plausible arguments for the nomination forms as amended by parliament passing legal and constitutional muster.

While there can be legitimate disagreements in constitutional and legal interpretations by various members of the superior judiciary, and the judiciary must never shirk from fulfilling its constitutional duties, what is troubling about the high court's intervention is that it disregarded the national disruption it would cause.

Surely, in an era of intense judicial activism, at least the possibility of forming a larger bench should have been considered for a step as drastic as directing the ECP to revise nomination forms that parliament had approved.

Or perhaps some other mechanism, such as inviting further opinion of legal experts or examining the practical effects of ordering a change to the forms on the eve of the opening of the short nomination phase, should have been considered.

With the approach of a historic general election, all state institutions and the political class too must be mindful of the need to promote the democratic project and showcase it as the only legitimate, constitutional form of government this country can have.

The insistent speculation that anti-democratic forces may seek to delay or cancel the general election is a political reality in the country. But the leaderships of all state institutions have publicly committed to ensuring an on-time election and the actions of those institutions should reflect those commitment.

Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has done the right thing in suspending the order and it is hoped that the Supreme Court's final decision will reflect the iron-clad commitment to democracy that he has pledged the superior judiciary will uphold.

If democracy is to prevail and elections are to be held on time, the political class must also reconsider its approach. The PTI's endorsement of the Lahore High Court order is an example of poor politics and rank opportunism.

The PTI distanced itself from the electoral reforms package legislated by parliament after the PML-N inserted a clause allowing Nawaz Sharif to be elected president of the party, but since the electoral reforms were approved, the PTI made no known public attempt to address the issue of changed nomination forms. Good faith and more principled politics are needed if democracy is to prevail.

Rao Anwar's trial

THE notorious 'encounter specialist' is clearly not losing any sleep over the fact that he is on trial for murder. Former SSP Malir Rao Anwar's conduct during the anti-terrorism court hearings into the extra-judicial murder of Naqeebullah Mehsud in Karachi early this year, speaks volumes about the dysfunctionality corroding the institutions of the state. Far from betraying any concern about the possible outcome of his trial, the one-time senior police official's apparent disregard for the court proceedings suggests that he is confident there will be no consequences. Nor has his star waned among members of his fraternity, many of whom salute him when he arrives for the hearings. Quite possibly, they too believe that this is but a temporary setback for one of the most 'well-connected' cops who, according to the police's own records, has allegedly ordered nearly 450 encounters.

Even for Pakistan, where certain individuals on the basis of their wealth and status, expect and receive preferential treatment, this is a particularly wretched example. Consider how, when he absconded in the aftermath of allegations that he was involved in Naqeebullah's murder, it took the former SSP two months to comply with the Supreme Court's repeated orders to surrender before the bench, a sad commentary on the state of Sindh's law-enforcement apparatus. Also, apparently no authority — military or civilian — was able to unearth him during this time, even though many of his alleged accomplices were nabbed. And unlike

these fellow co-accused who are behind bars, the disgraced cop continues to enjoy the comforts of his home, which has — conveniently and controversially — been declared a sub-jail on flimsy pretexts. Meanwhile, the trial proceedings are devolving into familiar delaying tactics, including the frequent absence of the investigation officer, reported threats against the prosecutor compelling him to stay away, etc. It is for the court to assert its authority and demonstrate unequivocally that the likes of Rao Anwar are not above the law. Certainly, the former SSP, like every other citizen of Pakistan, is entitled to due process — even if, assuming the allegations against him are correct, he has denied that right to many people — but if the evidence is compelling, Rao Anwar must be brought to justice. Too often as we know, powerful individuals in this country evade justice, even when they have committed crimes as serious as abrogating the Constitution. That impunity must end now.

Sexual harassment

FOR victims of sexual harassment, it is the fear of being disbelieved that stops many from reporting abuse. Recently however, energised by the global #MeToo movement, women are courageously taking to social media to expose the sheer scale of harassment in this country. About a week ago, more than 18 young students from Bahria College in Islamabad anonymously detailed on social media their experiences of harassment and abuse. The alleged perpetrator, a federal board-appointed examiner overseeing the college's biology exams, stands accused of physically molesting these young girls as their Facebook and Twitter testimonies revealed. On Saturday, another young woman posted on Twitter about an incident from 2016 when, according to her, the same examiner inappropriately touched her. Many of the girls who sat these exams over three days alleged they were groped, subjected to sexual innuendoes and threatened into silence by the examiner who was also accused of harassment at another school in 2014. More shockingly female teachers present in the laboratory warned students to remain silent or their grades would be impacted. Surely, the university must be held to account for its failure to report such behaviour immediately, given that it is responsible for the safety of students.

Unfortunately, sexual harassment in our schools and universities is not uncommon and many students have complained about offensive advances by teachers and professors. Probes should be conducted into such allegations, and

those found guilty punished by the education authorities so that others in positions of power in the academia are deterred. All academic institutes need unbiased inquiry committees to probe complaints so that victims are not discouraged from speaking out. Another alternative is to approach a provincial or the federal ombudsperson for protection against workplace harassment as they are legally mandated to investigate complaints of abuse and misconduct. After having to duck and dodge their way around men's bad behaviour for years, it is clear Pakistani women will no longer be silenced.

Foreign policy challenges

A coherent, well-formulated and popularly supported foreign policy is essential, especially in an age of globalisation when new and daunting challenges have emerged. Foreign policy cannot be seen in isolation, for it is only a reflection of a country's domestic policy.

The two are linked inextricably, as foreign policy cannot be effective and credible unless backed by a domestic policy that promotes harmony and good governance at home.

The preceding sentences are drawn from the PML-N's electoral manifesto in 2013. They make for sensible reading. But 'National Security and Foreign Policy' was only the 12th section in the PML-N manifesto of 14 parts.

And while the measures and initiatives the PML-N pledged to undertake were mostly non-controversial, attempting to assert itself in the national security and foreign policy domains proved disastrous for the PML-N government, and may have contributed to Nawaz Sharif's ouster.

In hindsight, the collision between the military-led establishment and the Sharif-led PML-N government may have been foretold in the party's election manifesto. "Pakistan today is at war within, while isolated abroad," the 2013 manifesto stated. "Consequently, a deep malaise afflicts the country; its social, economic and political schisms creating grave doubts and misgivings even in the minds of our friends."

In 2018, the challenges in the national security and foreign policy domains remain numerous and complex. But there are significant opportunities too. Whichever party or coalition takes charge of the federal government after the elections, the conduct of foreign policy will be fundamental to its success.

The internal dimension i.e. managing civil-military relations will perhaps be as important as the external dimension. Ultimately, much will depend on how Pakistan manages its ties with four countries: China, the US, Afghanistan and India.

China is central to Pakistan's medium-term economic future. As a maturing world power, its importance in regional security will grow.

With CPEC an original pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative, many of the early CPEC-related projects set to mature during the next parliament's term and Pakistan almost certainly needing external financial aid, the economic dimension of the relationship will need further attention.

In particular, the growing criticism that the PML-N government was unnecessarily secretive and opaque in agreements reached with China and that the commercial terms of many agreements may not be favourable to Pakistan need to be addressed.

Surely, given both states' commitment to strong bilateral ties, an economic rebalancing can be achieved in a constructive manner.

In addition, Pakistan should heed the well-meaning Chinese advice that the regional security environment be improved.

The Chinese examples of developing robust trade ties with India and not allowing the Doklam stand-off to derail ties are instructive.

The growing economic and military strength of South and West Asia and of regional countries should be seen as an opportunity for engagement for Pakistan just as China has done.

The deepening of Pakistan's ties with China contrasts poorly with the worsening of ties with the US. President Donald Trump has proved as disruptive as candidate Trump had promised, and in the case of Pakistan, there has been a downturn in ties.

America's so-called South Asia strategy announced in 2017 and Mr Trump's New Year Day tweet combined with the state here bristling at the tone and substance of some of the American accusations against it have caused ties to further deteriorate.

If there is to be improvement, it will almost certainly centre on Afghanistan. There Pakistan continues to have a historic opportunity to help put an end to what next year will be 40 years of near-continuous war.

The next government's focus should be to work with the military leadership to help achieve a political settlement in Kabul with the Afghan Taliban. Lasting stability in Afghanistan is the stated desired outcome for all actors and it is within the realm of possibility.

Finally, India.

Recent overtures by our military leadership should be taken seriously and the civilian government that takes charge after the election should move quickly to try and restore dialogue with India.

It is not clear if Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will easily accept a fresh Pakistani outreach to his government, but the logic of engagement and dialogue must eventually prevail.

All this will hopefully be reflected in the new manifestos. May the next government achieve more than its predecessors on the foreign policy front.

Education: 23m broken promises

Reforming the education sector will be a colossal challenge for the next governments at the centre and in the provinces, no matter what claims political parties make in their manifestos.

Some 23m children are out of school in Pakistan because governments have neglected education, even though free universal education from ages five to 16 years is a constitutional right.

Access to public schooling remains dependent on family income, geographical location and gender. Most children drop out by the age of nine; and girls from poor communities are least likely to attend school.

On top of this, Pakistan's gender enrolment gap is the widest in South Asia after Afghanistan. If this election is to change the status quo, voters should elect representatives for their commitment to education.

In 2013, political parties, including the PPP, PTI and PML-N identified education reform as improving learning abilities, reducing teacher absenteeism and eliminating gender disparities in schooling among other issues. But the reforms undertaken have been a drop in the ocean.

While the PML-N government increased enrolment, gave stipends to girls, and pioneered merit-based teacher recruitment in Punjab, it failed to offer education expertise and resources to other provinces.

Although a part of the coalition government in Balochistan, it abandoned educational reforms in a province where 1.89m children remain out of school.

In KP, the PTI's ambitious education policies showcased a first-time party's keen intentions. But the trajectory starting out with promises towards implementation remained thorny.

A new government should focus on policy implementation improving learning scores, enrolment and retention in a province where 51pc of girls remain out of school despite budgets higher than the UN recommended 20pc baseline.

Meanwhile, for too long, the PPP-led Sindh government's atrocious report card has needed attention, especially the concern of 'ghost' teachers and the wide gender gap.

In the 2018 manifestos, parties would do well to commit to bringing out-of-school children into the education system, indicating the duration, sustained reforms and budgets required to achieve the goal.

Only realistic goals and incentives are beneficial. Reforms vary countrywide which means policy consensus across party lines will provide opportunities to learn from best practices.

The major goals are to ensure that education is 4pc of GDP as stipulated by the UN, to improve resources for those students who gain the least, and to ensure schooling is not discontinued at any stage.

Replicating some successful public-private partnership school models seen in Punjab and Sindh can also be an election goal, as could regular reviews of district performances and ensuring accountability.

Nelson Mandela noted: “Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world.” Only parties with a vision can understand the truth of his words and work towards implementing their promises.

Economic visions

PML-N, PTI and PPP all included substantial discussions on the economy in their 2013 manifestos — but did they deliver?

Editorial Updated about 3 hours ago

ALL the three major political parties — the PML-N, PTI and the PPP — included substantial discussions on the economy in their 2013 manifestos.

The PPP preferred to focus on redistributive policies, or what it calls “equitable and inclusive growth”.

Where it did talk about growth, its focus was on small and medium enterprises, jobs, skills and agriculture.

Its focus on manufacturing was in the form of Special Economic Zones, or zones carved out of the national economy where a different set of policies would be applicable to encourage investment.

On trade, it said only that it would “build on creative currency swap agreements”.

The PML-N focused on macroeconomic indicators.

It pledged to cut the budget deficit and inflation, open markets for trade and raise the tax-to-GDP ratio to 15pc by the end of its term.

For industry, the party offered a set of incentives to boost exports and foreign investment, and pledged to broaden the export base beyond textiles to include IT products.

The PTI's manifesto highlighted stagnant growth rates in 2013, build-up of national debt, depleting foreign exchange reserves and the high fiscal deficit.

It also targeted a 6pc growth rate and pledged to reduce inflation (below 7pc) and raise investment to 21.4pc of GDP from 12pc in 2013.

Tax revenue, the manifesto promised, would rise to 15pc of GDP — the same commitment as the PML-N — while “welfare spending” would quadruple, and the fiscal deficit narrowed to 4.5pc of GDP.

The PML-N and PTI, despite the hostile politics between them, offered substantially similar economic visions in 2013 but different paths to achieving them.

Where the PML-N talked of incentives, the PTI pinned its delivery on tackling corruption, taking action against cartels, hoarders, speculators and power and fuel theft.

In short, where the vision presented by the PML-N aimed to provide incentives to promote growth and exports, the PTI's goal was to weed out behaviour and practices it felt were holding back the country's economic potential.

Beyond that, they converged on the same objectives.

Perhaps for this election, the parties can sharpen their focus on three specific, core dysfunctions that afflict Pakistan's economy.

These are the circular debt, the fiscal deficit and the external sector deficit (or the erosion of the economy's competitiveness versus other countries).

These dysfunctions lie at the heart of what ails the economy, and nothing can change until they are tackled in a sustainable way.

By now, all parties should have learnt that what was described as the ‘energy crisis’ in 2013 was far more than just a gap between the supply and demand for electricity.

It was also an inability to meet the power sector's growing costs, its upfront investment costs as well as its running costs.

Moreover, it was also the inability to grow and manage the power sector within the confines of a centralised power bureaucracy.

This is why all the megawatts on earth will not save us from what we call the 'power crisis' if deep-rooted reforms are not advanced in tandem.

The twin deficits — fiscal and external — are linked, and they have for decades sent our rulers on a search for big partners who were willing to subsidise our dysfunctions in return for a commitment to help advance their agenda in our own region.

This has worked to our detriment.

Outside of geopolitics, there is the International Monetary Fund.

This tendency of the economy to burn foreign exchange reserves within a few years, thereby forcing an approach to the IMF, has to end, and the only way it can is if we have a vision that targets the root cause — the economy.

For example, consider that all research on the question is now clear that a more open regional trade policy can play a vital role in improving the economy's capacity to accumulate foreign exchange reserves, yet powerful impediments remain in moving ahead in this direction.

When drawing up their manifestos, the parties should use the opportunity to reflect on how these three problems are interlinked, then make them the centrepiece of their electoral document.

Let each party promise to take the country out of the decades-old cycle of continuous depletion of foreign exchange reserves and reform the power system to make it able to sustain its own costs.

Military on polls

WITH rumour and speculation still swirling across the political landscape, a media briefing on Monday by DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor may have helped dispel doubts regarding any delay in the holding of the general elections. On behalf of the military leadership, Maj Gen Ghafoor congratulated the recently dissolved National Assembly on completing its term, expressed satisfaction that no electoral schedule — by-elections and the Senate polls — was delayed and reposed confidence in the ECP's ability to hold the upcoming poll on time. He also pledged that where appropriate and if requested by the ECP, the military could assist in the holding of elections. These remarks are welcome. While it is important that the constitutional separation of powers be formally adhered to, the continuing public silence of the military leadership at a time when political gossip and rumour suggest anti-democratic forces are active may have been more damaging. Now is the time for all state institutions and the political class to single-mindedly focus on the holding of an on-time, free and fair poll.

Yet, the briefing was not without controversy. Revealing that the military is tracking social media for external interference and alleged domestic mischief-making to undermine the state's national security priorities, the DG ISPR produced a web of 'anti-state' activity online. To be sure, the security apparatus ought to track activities by external actors or domestic militants who are seeking to undermine the Pakistani state. A long war against terrorism, militancy and extremism is being fought in nearly every part of the country. The influence of social media in shaping public opinion and the national discourse is undeniable. Only last week, the PTI reversed its decision on the selection of a caretaker chief minister of Punjab, citing social media feedback from the party base. Perhaps, it would have been more appropriate for the military leadership to have passed on to the government the intelligence it has gathered on propaganda online aimed at undermining national security priorities. If appropriate action is needed, it should be taken by the relevant, constitutionally empowered government department and not by an institution acting unilaterally.

Worrying too was the public identification of journalists, public figures and private citizens who are claimed to be involved, even unwittingly, in the dissemination of alleged anti-state propaganda. Across the world, the destabilising effects of social media, online propaganda and so-called fake news are being witnessed. In

more open societies and advanced democracies too, there is a growing recognition that unsuspecting publics are susceptible to manipulation by unscrupulous forces, ranging from the anti-democratic to anti-state. In Pakistan, the problems are magnified because of a difficult regional security environment, an underdeveloped state and socioeconomic, political and religious fault lines. Far better, then, that a multifaceted problem be addressed by an inclusive institution such as parliament. In August, the country will have a new parliament. The military's concerns should be conveyed to the next elected government and a cross-institutional approach developed to counter anti-state elements. At the same time, freedom of speech and association should be protected as one of the highest priorities of the next government.

Human rights promises

THE outgoing assembly has ended its tenure on a high note in terms of human rights legislation. Interestingly, this...

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THE outgoing assembly has ended its tenure on a high note in terms of human rights legislation. Interestingly, this pertained to an issue that none of the major political parties had even alluded to in their previous manifestos — the rights of transgenders.

In its wide-ranging scope, the recently enacted law belies the silence adopted on the subject by the political parties in their manifestos.

However, this final flourish cannot erase the fact that Pakistan fared poorly in its UN-mandated Universal Periodic Review earlier this year, largely on account of the rising incidence of enforced disappearances, a practice associated with some of the most brutal regimes in history.

Clearly, the political parties have not done enough to improve human rights, whether through fresh legislation or by implementing existing laws.

They have a chance to redeem themselves if they come to power through the elections on July 25. And their 2018 manifestos must provide the blueprint.

Of the three main political parties — the PML-N, PPP and PTI — only the PPP included a cursory mention of enforced disappearances in its previous manifesto.

This time around, in order to assert civilian authority over the functions of the state, political parties must put on record their refusal to countenance the deplorable practice, and spell out measures to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Such repudiation, however, must be accompanied by reforms in the criminal justice system, for what is enforced disappearance but an extreme violation of the right to due process?

The demands of national security should no longer be used as a tacit justification for enforced disappearances.

Instead of abdicating counter-terrorism responsibilities to the security establishment, as the PML-N government did in its last tenure, political parties should vow to establish democratic and parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services.

It is high time that rhetoric about speedy and inexpensive justice — and witness protection programmes — was translated into action.

After all, a law is only as good as its enforcement: the PPP-led Sindh government took three years to draft the rules of business for the witness protection law it passed in September 2013.

Also, a depoliticised, community-oriented police force is the people's right: the PPP and PML-N should take a leaf out of the PTI's book in its singular achievement on this score in KP.

No society can claim progress without ensuring women's equal participation in the political process. Reserved seats — election to which is dependent largely on male politicians — are no substitute for being directly elected, and a 10pc quota for women candidates on general seats must be on every party's agenda.

Equality in the public sphere is concomitant with equality in the private. However, only the PML-N in Punjab has so far followed anti-domestic violence legislation with practical measures such as women protection centres, etc.

Domestic violence did not even earn a mention in the PTI's previous manifesto. Hopefully no party will surrender to misogynistic 'cultural sensitivities' in 2018.

Another reality, one we have been confronted with far too often, is violence arising from bigotry and prejudice against the minorities.

In this, political parties have cravenly submitted to the bully pulpit of the religious lobby.

The PTI, under pressure from its minority partner in KP, the Jamaat-i-Islami, reintroduced ideologically biased language into textbooks.

The PPP has relegated to the back burner its law against forced conversions in Sindh, and no party has the courage to allude to even procedural change in the blasphemy law, the misuse of which causes disproportionate misery to minorities.

Will any party have the courage and integrity to address this most thorny of issues?

Children are also, for obvious reasons, deserving of special provisions to protect them. As the horrific Kasur child abuse case illustrates, we are doing far too little to protect our young people.

Political parties could even look to other countries for workable child abduction alert systems that could be replicated in Pakistan, aside from enforcing already existing laws.

Violence against child domestic workers too requires urgent redressal and must receive particular attention in the forthcoming election manifestos.

Raising the minimum age for marriage to 18 years in Sindh is a feather in the PPP's cap, but improvements in the juvenile justice system remain an unmet promise.

As to the differently abled, who perhaps have the least amount of social protections, the PTI's previous manifesto contained the most wide-ranging provisions to ensure not only their welfare but inclusivity as well, including their representation in the assemblies.

If ambitious, at least the party's words represent some understanding of the way in which people with disabilities have been marginalised in this society. The other parties must take a cue from the PTI's approach.

While high-flown rhetoric is often a feature of election manifestos, and can even serve as an acknowledgment of the issues that need addressing, parties should realistically assess what lies within their capabilities.

There is something to be said for them to append targeted, 'doable' measures to each subject in their manifestos. Exceeding one's promises will win voters the next time around; failing to meet them only leads to disenchantment — with the party and the democratic process.

Security for politicians

VIP CULTURE, VIP protocol and VIP security are all matters that ought to be reviewed. No doubt, there is much abuse of state resources by powerful individuals who see matters of protocol and security as issues of prestige and public reputation. Yet, there is a difference between necessary security and unnecessary protocol. In more developed systems of governance, the perks and privileges enjoyed by public officials are carefully vetted, clearly delineated and publicly known. In Pakistan, however, a complicit bureaucracy and a prestige-craving political leadership have often transgressed the limits of good sense and genuine security needs. The Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Saqib Nisar made a decision to wade into the complex issue of security provided by the state to high-profile individuals when it issued an order in April for the withdrawal of all state security provided without due authorisation to individuals across the country. Pursuing the matter and in advancement of what appears to be a drive against VIP culture, the Supreme Court has sought the return of official vehicles in the possession of unauthorised individuals and has declared that politicians should provide for their own security in the upcoming election campaign. The decision could have potentially troubling consequences.

True, the Supreme Court has unearthed massive abuse of expensive, high-maintenance official vehicles, and in the deployment of state security personnel. If that were not the case, dozens of vehicles would not have been recovered so quickly by government departments acting on court orders. It is common practice for public officials and political leaders to continue to use official vehicles and retain security personnel after their spell in office. But a blanket ban on state security protection for politicians ahead of elections is inadvisable. The last two

general elections alone are evidence of the significant threat that many political leaders and candidates face. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in the run-up to the 2008 polls continues to haunt this country's politics. In 2013, mainstream political parties seen as secular and progressive were viciously attacked, forcing them to curtail their campaigning. In 2018, the security establishment itself has warned of possible violence being used to try and destabilise the country; surely, attacking poll campaigns would be high on the list of actors seeking to unleash mayhem. Rather than a blanket ban nationally, a case-by-case approach by security professionals assisted by the caretaker governments may be considered. Free and fair elections are safe and secure elections.

Conserving the environment

THIS country's economy is heavily invested in agriculture. Simultaneously, Pakistan is ranked amongst those ...

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THIS country's economy is heavily invested in agriculture. Simultaneously, Pakistan is ranked amongst those nations that are at the very cusp of suffering the most adverse effects of climate change, pollution and the stripping of natural resources.

Given this state of affairs, it is remarkable that with an election coming up that shows all signs of being abrasively fought, environmental degradation, ecological conservation and sustainability aren't receiving much attention from even the major political parties.

There is a whole range of environmental challenges that they must highlight in their manifestos. Urgent issues include deforestation, rampant pollution and a looming water crisis that could result in drought-like conditions.

Already, one can feel the effects: losses in the agriculture sector, hunger and malnutrition, a growing healthcare burden, and the associated pressure on human — and hence national — productivity.

At the time of the last elections, these matters were already a cause for concern and were addressed in dedicated sections of the parties' 2013 agendas.

Unfortunately, outcomes have been sketchy.

The PML-N promised to insert the “right to food” as a fundamental constitutional right. It could be faulted for not having spelt out how this might be achieved, but that remains a moot point since the insertion was never made.

Similarly, while a federal Ministry of Climate Change was eventually set up, it remains a largely toothless entity involved in saving face in terms of Pakistan’s international environmental commitments.

In Sindh, meanwhile, the PPP’s good intentions of providing “clean drinking water for everyone” can only be summarily dismissed, while sufficient sewage treatment plants remain a dream: indeed, much of Karachi’s waste flows directly into the sea.

The PPP’s 2013 election manifesto promised to “curb the trafficking of endangered species”, but outcomes have been mixed, while the granting of permission to hunt the endangered houbara bustard remains condemnable.

Matters appear somewhat more encouraging in KP, where the PTI made fair progress towards its “billion-tree tsunami”; yet the ideals of zero waste and mass transit systems that would reduce air pollution, for example, have gone unmet.

At a rally at the end of April, PTI chief Imran Khan included the environment in his 11-point agenda and promised to plant 10m trees across the country, if elected.

He also said that the proper cleaning of rivers and canals would be ensured, while an “agricultural emergency” would be imposed to improve the farm sector.

On its part, the PML-N promises food security and improvements in the yields of staple crops to ensure the availability of essential food items for all, at affordable prices, as well as clean drinking water for each citizen — a goal also laid out in its 2013 manifesto, but which was never met although gains were made. The party also refers to the creation of dams and improving water conservancy.

It is essential, therefore, that environmental issues be given more importance by parties contesting the upcoming elections.

By many accounts, these may well be amongst the biggest challenges (outside the political area) facing Pakistan in the coming years.

Amongst the measures desperately needed are commitments in their manifestos to improving ambient air quality especially in urban areas, and slowing down urbanisation.

Similarly, Pakistan's forest cover stands at a mere 4pc of the total land mass, as against the global standard of 25pc.

But perhaps the first basic point that must be corrected is of policy: power for environmental management was devolved to the provinces under the 18th Amendment; that leaves little scope for the centre to lay down a minimum standard related to environmental factors.

This first step of cohesion on a pressing national concern would be a good show of commitment and could be a point in the 2018 manifestos.

Journalists' abductions

A DARK cloud has been descending over the local media landscape for some time now. In the early hours between Tuesday and Wednesday came the thunderclap journalists have long been dreading. Gul Bukhari, a columnist for The Nation, was abducted on her way to the Waqt TV station in Lahore. Asad Kharal, anchorperson at Bol TV, was also picked up in Lahore shortly afterwards and physically assaulted. In a small mercy, both were released after several hours, but there is no denying the chilling effect of such intimidatory tactics. Coming at the start of what is expected to be a highly contentious election season, such wanton disregard for the law to coerce the press is a dire indicator of the health of this country's democracy. Never mind one's politics or affiliations — Dawn makes no distinction — an attack on any journalist is an attack on us all. All media groups ought to unite behind a call to end the culture of impunity for such crimes.

In both cases, the assailants are unknown; will they ever be exposed and held to account? History tells us otherwise. Behind the black ink of journalism in Pakistan lies a palimpsest of a tale told in red. There is a reason Pakistan is one of the few countries to have featured every year on the Committee to Protect Journalists' Global Impunity Index since it began tracking unsolved murders 10 years ago. Of the scores of journalists and media workers murdered over the

years, in only three cases have the killers ever been convicted. Nor has there ever been any serious investigation into the disappearances of several online activists in early 2017. The police must take a more resolute and proactive stance on investigating and prosecuting crimes against the press and private citizens. While it is commendable that the chief justice of Pakistan has ordered an immediate report from the IGP Punjab on the Kharal case, it is hoped that the Bukhari case does not escape his august notice.

Justice for Khadija?

LAST year, a judicial magistrate sentenced law student Shah Husain to prison for seven years for stabbing 21-year-old fellow student Khadija Siddiqui. Stabbed 23 times, she was critically injured in the May 2016 attack. During the trial, both the motorcycle and the knife used were put forth, while the prosecution presented 14 witnesses to what the judge ruled counted as attempted murder “without any shadow of a minor doubt”. It is shocking, therefore, that this week, the Lahore High Court overturned the verdict. Acquitting the assailant, Justice Sardar Ahmed Naeem in a controversial judgement ruled the prosecution had “failed to prove guilt beyond reasonable doubt”. However, many will question whether this judgement provided coherent reasoning for the acquittal. Noting that Khadija stated the assailant had harassed her, it questions why she earlier wrote a letter asking him to marry her. Surely, she had the right to change her mind based on her perceptions. Perhaps the defence should have been asked whether rejecting the assailant had prompted the frenzied attack. The fact that Shah Hussain’s father belongs to the legal fraternity has also caused some to doubt judicial independence.

From the start, Ms Siddiqui has shown strength of character by remaining steadfast in her quest for justice. She now intends to challenge the verdict in the Supreme Court. Many have demanded justice for her on social media, expressing their concern at the verdict, and Chief Justice Saqib Nasir has done well to summon records of her case — although some would ask if justice is not served in Pakistan until it is vociferously demanded, and that too through media attention. Sadly, women’s access to justice in this country is already limited and patriarchal perceptions only ensure that far too often justice is not even-handed.

Right to health

HEALTH, the birthright of every Pakistani citizen to be protected by the state, has been held hostage to an ever-halting democratic process.

Even in times of democracy, political parties have demoted health to the periphery rather than maintaining it and scaling it up.

Instead of taking a holistic view, the focus has been on expensive and unnecessary specialist curative care provision, fragmented programmes, projects and institutes in the public, private and philanthropic sectors — all competing — and a duplication of efforts and commercialisation of the necessities in a poorly regulated private sector.

A comparison of the salient health features of the 2013 party manifestos shows that the PML-N demonstrated the most realistically planned health goals linked with outcomes, whilst in power.

Although its centralised approach was useful prior to devolution, building provincial-level capacity was required, with regulatory agencies to manage reforms and encourage local solutions.

Conversely, the PPP focused on principles rather than tangible outcomes — apparent in its subsequent performance in Sindh.

A lack of governance, poor referral-based health financing and questionable service delivery led to basic health needs largely remaining unmet.

In part, although the PTI health objectives echoed those of the PPP and PML-N, in practice rapid change was implemented, aligning social services to highlight gaps in health needs and potentially laying the ground for a ‘better’ health system by attracting motivated professionals.

Going forward, the 2018 manifestos should be a road map for new and previously enunciated health goals; they should describe what different types of healthcare services are in use and how usage will be measured.

In preparing their manifestos, the parties will have to keep the facts before them and address several concerns.

For instance, keeping in mind that private and philanthropic healthcare sectors also exist, what changes are being effected in the lives of beneficiaries using health services? Are these leading to an improved health status? When carrying out reforms in the public sector, it should be asked how much of a particular health service is being utilised and for what purpose.

Whether or not provision of services is giving the expected results should be regularly evaluated in a manner which seeks to find solutions for professionals rather than penalising their livelihoods.

When planning a new service it might a good idea for the government to consider what others (private and philanthropic entities) in the same area are doing and if they can be made complementary rather than competitive. This can only be achieved if regulatory measures are synchronised at the federal level.

There is also the question of what specific aspect of health in the community we are covering. Is a public-sector referral network available and being utilised to ensure that beneficiaries are also being referred for supplementary care provision? Are we utilising different professionals to cover all health aspects? What can we do to enable professionals to provide awareness within their communities? What is the basis of diagnostic tests, management and treatment in a community? Finally, are we doing disease surveillance? If so, what's the disease occurrence, burden, distribution and severity? How does one take action when new threatening cases go beyond the capacity of the service available?

Parties must pledging a coherent framework that utilises all the sectors to discuss the evolution of Pakistan's health systems in an inclusive manner ie broadening the scope to a systems-wide approach to develop a comprehensive health policy.

Caretaker CM debate

IT should have been the end of the particular controversy, but the selection appears to have deepened it. Punjab finally has a caretaker chief minister: Hasan Askari, a political commentator and retired academic. Nominated by the PTI and selected by the ECP after the PML-N and PTI failed to reach an agreement on the post, Mr Askari's appointment has been rejected by the PML-N. The PML-N's

contention is that Mr Askari is a partisan figure and his appointment as caretaker chief minister of Punjab has undermined the possibility of a free and fair election in the province. Given that Punjab is the principal battleground in the general election, fears of interference by the caretaker administration could cast doubt over the legitimacy of the election and the result. Yet, it appears that no side has acquitted itself well in the constitutional caretaker appointment process that should have been managed more prudently.

First, the PML-N ought to reconsider its campaign against Mr Askari. The fierce opposition his appointment has elicited from the party leadership does not appear to be grounded in the facts. The new caretaker chief minister has a decades-long public record that is academically sound and politically not hyper partisan. The PML-N has researched and unearthed some unfavourable comments made by him against the party, but these do not rise to automatic disqualification from a caretaker post that is by law apolitical. Still, the PTI's apparent disarray during the nomination process has surely contributed to the controversy. Mr Askari may not be a hyper partisan figure, but his nomination by the PTI can cast his criticisms of the PML-N in a new light. Perhaps Mr Askari could have considered rejecting his nomination by the PTI or selection by the ECP, but he did not consider either possibility. Now, the caretaker chief minister will have to conduct himself scrupulously in office to avoid attracting more criticism.

Pakistanis with disabilities

THAT Pakistan spearheaded a global resolution for access to assistive technologies, passed on Monday at the World Health Assembly, is a worthy achievement. People with disabilities, the elderly and chronically ill are all entitled to productive and dignified lives, made increasingly possible with the advent of AT such as mobility devices, prosthetics and communication aids. But local policymakers need not rest on this laurel, for their advocacy on the world stage belies failures at home. Despite ratification in 2011, Pakistan has thus far failed to enact laws based on the UN Convention on the Rights of PWDs. Our 2006 Accessibility Code, which outlines public infrastructure standards, lies dormant. So too does a 2002 national PWD policy, which among other things would have introduced inclusive education. Despite introducing Special CNICs some years

ago, Nadra's offices and procedures remain too onerous for PWDs, as do simple tasks like accessing public transport, banking services (despite State Bank circulars to this effect) or work opportunities (despite existing quotas) — even social welfare departments are typically inaccessible. The litany of disappointments is unending.

Our most recent failure was the serious undercounting of PWDs in the 2017 census (about 0.5pc of the total population, whereas WHO estimates it is more likely near 15pc). This, despite disability experts lobbying for years on the need to improve the methodology used in 1998 for enumeration of PWDs, is an immense setback for inclusive development. How do policymakers expect to pilot programmes on AT, or IT accessibility (as per the recently unveiled Digital Pakistan policy) without accurate data? One way of rectifying this is to conduct district-level sample studies to gain a better picture of Pakistan's disability rate. Equally important, however, is actually implementing some of the deliverables mentioned above.

LG challenge

IN the main, local governments are in existence in Pakistan for two reasons. One, the elected political class as a whole inserted a clause in the Constitution via the 18th Amendment requiring that LG systems be established in the provinces and calling for the devolution of “political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local governments” (Article 140A).

Two, the Supreme Court indefatigably pursued the matter of the provinces holding LG elections. The ambivalence of the major political parties to hold LG polls and meaningfully transfer power to LGs can be gauged from the relatively scant treatment of the subject in the 2013 manifestos.

The PPP and PML-N essentially glossed over the subject of LGs, while the PTI, which did go on to transfer significant responsibilities and powers to LGs in KP, pledged to hold LG elections within 100 days, a promise that was not kept.

In 2018, the challenges on the LG front remain significant.

Complicating the matter, though allowing for comparisons among the major political parties, is that the current LG systems were brought into existence by four different political governments in the four provinces.

If there is a transfer of power at the provincial level to a different political party or coalition following the 2018 general election, the future of local government in that province will depend on the provincial governing party's commitment to the democratic project.

Certainly, the PTI has demonstrated that it is head and shoulders above the other major parties in its commitment to meaningful reforms at the local level.

In KP, the LG system is, on paper and in practice so far, forward-thinking and innovative. The extension of franchise to the village and neighbourhood level, including the funnelling of significant powers and monies to village councils and neighbourhood councils, is unprecedented. Mandating that at least 30pc of the provincial development government be transferred to LGs is historic.

The execution of LGs in KP has not been without its problems. Monitoring the functioning of village and neighbourhood councils has proved difficult in practice; a relative lack of expertise and capacity at the local level has limited utilisation of LG powers and duties; and the provincial financial commission and LG commission have not been as active as they ought to be.

Yet, the problems pale in comparison to Punjab and Sindh, where LGs have arguably been structured to fail or certainly remain wholly dependent on the provincial set-ups.

Remarkably, lacunae in the Punjab and Sindh LG systems allow for Punjab to dissolve LGs by notification before the expiry of its term while the Sindh law does not automatically require the holding of the next LG polls after the completion of the current term.

Meanwhile, Balochistan may have been the first provincial government to hold a round of LG elections, but with overall governance structures in the province in a shambles and a security environment that is virtually inimical to civilian administration, there is little welcome news from there.

More positively, the very fact that LGs exist in all four provinces and each of the major political parties has experience with drafting and implementing LG systems suggests the general election could be an opportunity for the major political

parties to put forward improvements to the LG systems and for voters at the provincial level to demand improvements at the LG level.

The PTI is perhaps best positioned to carry the debate forward on LG; the positive LG example the party has set may encourage other parties to follow suit.

Mosques' closure

ACROSS Europe, over the past several years far-right governments have either taken power in a number of states, or are knocking at the gates. Though rightist forces are on the march in many parts of the world, and not just Europe, there are numerous factors fuelling this trend on the continent. These include the flood of refugees making a beeline for Europe, as well as militant attacks. These factors have heightened fear of the 'other', particularly the Muslim 'other', and Islamophobia has been rapidly gaining ground in such an environment. One example of state-backed efforts to counter 'radical' Islam emerged recently when Austria's right-wing government announced it was shutting down seven mosques and expelling a number of imams for links with "political Islam". In an ominous sign, the Austrian vice chancellor has said "this is just the beginning". Turkey, which supports many mosques in Austria, has termed the move "Islamophobic, racist and discriminatory".

Indeed in Europe and other mainly non-Muslim regions, radical elements have used mosques to spread extremist ideas. However, sweeping moves against places of worship without solid evidence are unacceptable. If European or other Western states have concrete evidence that a certain mosque is being used by extremist elements, they should proceed as per the law. But witch hunts against those peacefully practising their religion are not acceptable, especially given Europe's recent history and its flirtation with fascism. It is a fact that many in the far right have a problem with the Islamic faith itself, and not with radicalism. If Europe claims to respect diversity and fundamental rights, then it must stand up to such parochial moves against a certain faith or community. It is also true that the followers of all faiths are free to live as they wish in Europe. These values must be preserved while the rightist march must be checked.

Women's Fiction Prize

WINNING accolades at home and globally, Pakistani women's contribution to the arts, technology, science and sport, among other areas should be a matter of pride for the country. Last week, author Kamila Shamsie clinched the prestigious Women's Prize for Fiction, open to female writers from around the world, for her seventh novel, Home Fire. Acclaimed by judges for its mastery over theme and form, the novel tells "the story of our times", which is of a British Muslim family's connection to the militant Islamic State group. Ms Shamsie has ambitiously worked with themes such as identity, politics, loyalty and love in this novel. Moreover, as a London-based émigré writer, Ms Shamsie is well aware of what it means to be British (she has written about the travails of obtaining citizenship), especially at a time when the debate around identity and multiculturalism are overwhelming European politicians. The novel is a winner because it delves into such contemporary concerns with sympathy and understanding to humanise a political story.

While as a nation we should be swelling with pride at the achievements of our women, this important literary win reminds us that we often defer to patriarchy's damaging whims and accept as true ludicrous controversies to take a jab at successful women. Although feted abroad as the country's ambassadors, Oscar-winning filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Nobel Peace Prize winner and education activist Malala Yousafzai, for instance, are targeted viciously at home by certain right-wing elements. Surely, celebrating their strengths as cultural and education activists, and appreciating the many other women artists and writers documenting important stories of our times would motivate aspiring young people to follow their dreams.

Afghan ceasefire

IN a long, bloody, seemingly endless war, there have been few moments of hope. The major protagonists, including perhaps a large section of the Afghan Taliban, acknowledge that a political settlement is the only realistic path to eventual peace. Yet, all nascent efforts at realising peace in Afghanistan have quickly floundered. The common good and common sense have not been able to prevail until now. But an unexpected announcement of a ceasefire by the Afghan

government, followed by a similar ceasefire declaration, with some important caveats, by the Taliban, has once again opened a door to dialogue in the region. Certainly, there is reason to keep expectations in check. Following the Taliban's declaration of a ceasefire over Eid specifically against Afghan forces, there have been a number of attacks. While it is unclear if the latest attacks are the work of the Taliban leadership, splinter factions or the militant Islamic State group, it is clear that the mere possibility of dialogue will not automatically curb violence in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, it is important that the overtures from both Kabul and the Taliban leadership be recognised as a real opportunity to initiate a peace dialogue. What is particularly important about Kabul's declaration of a short ceasefire is that it appears to have been endorsed or encouraged by the US. With the Taliban having consistently held that dialogue with the US is necessary, but the administration of US President Donald Trump having seemingly rejected talks in favour of military pressure, the possibility of a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan had receded. But supportive comments by US officials regarding the ceasefire and intensive diplomacy with the Afghan government and Pakistan in recent weeks suggest that Kabul may have more space to engage the Taliban in dialogue going forward and the insurgent group's leadership may be encouraged to seek political engagement rather than just wage war on the battlefield.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains the same: encouraging dialogue inside Afghanistan while having Kabul and the US respond to some of Pakistan's legitimate concerns about violence inside Pakistan being planned and coordinated from Afghan soil. Thus far, those dual imperatives have not been managed satisfactorily, and Pakistan has rightly chafed at Afghan and US accusations and demands to do more without meaningful action being taken to address its legitimate security concerns. But it is highly encouraging that in the latest ceasefire announcements, the state here appears to have been proactive and seemingly used its influence in the service of positive diplomacy. That energy and purpose will help Pakistan because it demonstrates a willingness to participate in peaceful solutions in the region. Further intensive dialogue in the days ahead may help produce more positive developments in the region. A ceasefire, no matter how short to begin with, is an opportunity to achieve major diplomatic breakthroughs

Disability legislation

WHILE at long last Pakistan's tribal and transgender populations have been brought into the mainstream through legislative reform, one social group has still been left behind.

This was recently spotlighted at the launch of a report titled Bringing Disability in the Constitutional Net. Speaking at the event, the PPP's Farhatullah Babar underscored the need for political will to mainstream persons with disabilities.

Let us then examine our legislative scorecard in recent years.

There has been little to no progress since Pakistan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of PWDs in 2011. Though the 18th Amendment's passage offered a timely opportunity to overhaul the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981, most provincial governments — including Mr Babar's own party in Sindh — chose to enact the ordinance with minor changes. based on an outmoded approach, these laws frame PWDs as pitiful

victims in need of charity, not inclusion. But disability is not an issue that affects only a few; whether through birth, accident, illness or old age, it touches all of us.

Accounting for this, the CRPD defines 'disability' as "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder [PWDs'] full and effective participation in society".

It outlines a social model that requires nations to guarantee PWDs' rights through affirmative policies, and remove environmental and institutional barriers.

Two recent developments could make an argument for such legislation to be enacted at the federal level. One is the recently passed Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, a progressive law that extends to the whole of Pakistan.

Though it will likely require further provincial assent on devolved subjects for uniform service provision, it serves as a template for harmony between such future laws.

The second is the precedent set by the Supreme Court's judgement upholding the federal Industrial Relations Act, 2012. The court found that, though labour is

a provincial subject, Entry 32 of the Federal Legislative List enables the federal government to enact laws to implement international treaties (in IRA's case, several ILO conventions).

Thus, the CRPD could also be legislated at the national level, effectively ensuring conformity in defining disability, guaranteeing legal protection from discrimination, and providing a holistic, rights-based framework to guide the drafting of better laws and implementation mechanisms by the provinces.

Let us hope, then, that our next elected representatives are able to shed their benign apathy for decisive action.

Karachi's drains

KARACHI is a city ill prepared for rainfall, even in moderate amounts. So while citizens of the metropolis await the monsoon season with some anticipation, knowing that it will bring relief from the stifling heat, there is also the dread of the havoc wreaked by urban flooding. In this regard, it is welcome that the Supreme Court, during a hearing on Saturday, ordered Karachi's civic bodies to clean the city's storm-water drains and sewers within 30 days. It is a fact that clogged drains are amongst the main reasons Karachi experiences urban flooding every year. Many low-lying localities face major flooding while the city's thoroughfares turn into canals, with normal life paralysed. With the Met department forecasting pre-monsoon showers from the 15th of this month, the KMC and other bodies that run Karachi's civic affairs need to heed the court's orders without delay.

Ideally, the apex court should not be giving these instructions to the administration of the country's largest city; matters such as cleaning drains should be part of the civic bodies' routine duties. Unfortunately, the situation is complicated in Karachi. For one, there are multiple agencies that control land within the metropolis, so the matter of jurisdiction can arise. Secondly, the local government law in Sindh gives limited powers to municipal bodies, with the provincial administration micromanaging (or, rather, mismanaging) affairs. However, while such bottlenecks do exist, the civic agencies in Karachi cannot shy away from their duties and blame others. Cleaning drains and maintaining the city's infrastructure should be part of routine business for KMC, and state

institutions should not be required to shake the municipality into action. Some work has been done to de-silt drains, but keeping such channels clean and removing encroachments should be a round-the-year exercise. This would help reduce urban flooding.

Rupee depreciation

YET another surprise depreciation of the exchange rate jolted markets on Monday, with its effects lasting through the next day as the stock market came under heavy selling pressure. The decline of Rs4.4 to the US dollar saw the exchange rate land at Rs119.9 from Rs115.5 against the greenback by end of day Monday, not the largest single-day decline but appreciable nonetheless. The pressures leading up to the move had been accumulating relentlessly since March when the last such adjustment took place, and it was common knowledge that another round was due. What was not common knowledge, however, was the timing given that an interim government is in place. It makes sense though, that an interim government would take such a step, since what is principally required is to withdraw the political support that was propping up the rupee artificially over the years, and even through the current fiscal year that has seen four such events since July.

The episodic jolts that have rattled the economy since July through these marginal depreciations are now adding up to present a clearer picture. The revival of growth touted by the PML-N government as its signature achievement is no different from preceding growth spurts seen by the country, most recently in the Musharraf era, in that it was unsustainable. In both cases, what we saw was a short-term boom procured through large injections of foreign capital, whether through borrowing, aid or foreign investment, that depletes the reserves and weighs on the fiscal balance. In this case, the growth spurt was not even as massive or broad based as that of the Musharraf era. The government continued to cling to the hope that the spurt of Chinese investments that entered the country during its tenure would somehow breathe new strength into the external account, but this sounded increasingly like a futile expectation. The optimism fanned by the slight uptick in exports and remittances, upon which the then outgoing finance minister Miftah Ismail pegged high hopes, now seem so small next to the \$34bn trade deficit.

For now, it is enough to note that the cycle of boom and bust that has been the biggest legacy of our economic management for well over four decades, ever since the move towards an open and market-driven economy got under way, appears to just have completed one more revolution. The incoming government will inherit another bankrupt treasury, depleted reserves, and it will repeat the same mantra with which every government for decades now has begun its term: 'we inherited a broken economy.' The continued widening of the current account deficit is now ample proof that gunning for growth without reforms is a folly that must not be repeated. The next government must bear this in mind when embarking upon its ritual journey to the IMF at the start of its tenure.

Nawaz trial uncertainty

IS due process under threat or is justice being delayed? The political dimensions of a thrice-elected prime minister on trial for alleged corruption are obvious and undeniable.

That the individual on trial is effectively leader of the largest political party in the country and the trial appears to be reaching a conclusion just weeks ahead of a historic and fiercely competitive general election have significantly raised the political stakes.

Yet, the law exists to provide a fair and transparent path to justice and not be swayed by emotion or politics. An order by the Supreme Court requiring the accountability court to wrap up its work in one month has triggered a sequence of events that has left the conclusion of the trial in greater uncertainty than ever.

The lead lawyer of Mr Sharif, Khawaja Haris, has stepped down from the defence team citing an inability to work under an artificially imposed timeline, but the accountability court has now given Mr Sharif until next week to either convince Mr Haris to rejoin the Sharif legal team or hire a new lead counsel.

The accountability court judge has also attempted to dispel an impression that the Supreme Court had mandated that the accountability court work overtime and through weekends to complete its work.

If haste is discernible on one side, a case can be made that the other side is keen on delay. Conviction of Mr Sharif and his family members on the eve of the general election could derail the PML-N's election campaign, especially if Mr Sharif is immediately taken into custody.

It is possible that Mr Haris's exit from the defence team is simply an attempt to delay the trial proceedings, which the defence has effectively already achieved for at least a few days as the accountability court awaits Mr Haris rejoining the legal team or Mr Sharif finding a new lead lawyer.

However, an argument could also be made that the superior judiciary is unnecessarily allowing a perception to be created that it is in haste to have the accountability court complete the trial. Nawaz Sharif already stands disqualified from public and political office.

And regardless of the outcome in the accountability court, the trial will become a part of the country's political and legal history. It is very important then that not only justice be done, but that it is also seen to be done.

Educated militants

YET again, we have been reminded of how perilous are the recent gains in the fight against religious extremism. The Sindh police on Monday arrested three suspects in Karachi with alleged links to banned organisations. Two of them are educated individuals with post-graduate degrees. Among them is a faculty member at a public university in Dera Ismail Khan who had joined the TTP and participated in attacks on Nato and Pakistani security forces. The second man, an IT expert with an MBA from a prestigious institute in Karachi, was, according to police, assisting the militant Islamic State group with IT-related matters.

The militant from the educated middle class, a phrase that once seemed to be a contradiction in terms, no longer has the power to shock. Not after Faisal Shahzad — who had an MBA from a US university — tried to detonate a bomb in New York's Times Square; or after Saad Aziz, an IBA graduate, was convicted in the Safoora Goth carnage case. Some women have made it to this category as well, such as Naureen Leghari, a medical student who travelled to Syria and received training from IS. And this is far from an exhaustive list. Nevertheless,

after a hard-fought peace, the recent arrests reinforce concerns about the extent to which radicalisation has seeped into society. Last year, a few months after Mashal Khan's lynching by a mob of fellow students, the HEC directed university administrations to take measures to prevent their campuses from becoming breeding grounds for extremism, recognise signs of radicalisation among students, and offer them counselling opportunities. Militants from educated backgrounds can in some ways be more dangerous because even while they may need to connect with militant networks, they are often inclined towards 'lone wolf' attacks, and are, therefore, more difficult to detect. To completely excise such ideologies from society requires unflinching, consistent efforts, not the least of which is an intellectually stimulating academic environment where different worldviews can be freely debated and diversity of opinions is valued.

Not more than two seats

IT has become a lacuna that needs to be addressed. There may be political logic to the decision of party leaders to contest multiple seats in a general election. With the party system underdeveloped and an electorate that is perceived to respond to personalities, political leaders attempt to increase the appeal of their parties in different regions of the country by putting their names on multiple ballot papers. All major parties have resorted to the tactic at some point. However, a fracturing of the electorate and more pronounced regional politics in recent years appear to have convinced more parties and high-profile politicians to resort to the tactic of putting their name on multiple ballot papers across the country. The 2018 general election could witness an unprecedented number of such multiple-constituency candidates, though before the finalisation of ballots some political leaders may withdraw from races that they have tentatively agreed to take part in. Nevertheless, it is time for intervention.

The costs of one individual contesting multiple seats are significant. If more than one seat is won by a candidate, by-polls will necessarily have to be held soon after the general election. That is a waste of the ECP's resources both during the general election and after. Elections, even by-elections, cost money, require security and divert local administrations from their core duties. Surely, there must be a justification for allocating extra election-related resources where fewer resources would suffice were it not for the political extravagance of some party

leaders. Perhaps a case can be made for an individual to contest a maximum of two seats in a general election. Imran Khan, for example, may want to indicate that the PTI is a national party by standing for an election from Karachi in addition to a seat from Punjab or KP. Separately, Shahbaz Sharif or Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari may want to make their national electoral debuts by directly appealing to voters in two provinces. Such considerations are reasonable and the electoral system can accommodate them.

But there needs to be an upper limit on the number of seats an individual contests in a general election. Perhaps a two-seat rule can be considered by the next parliament and the ECP. At the National Assembly level, a candidate can be restricted to two contests, one each in two provinces of the candidate's choice. Alternatively, a candidate can be permitted to contest one MNA seat and one MPA seat. As the 2013 general election demonstrated, it is possible for different political parties and coalitions to win the election in the four provinces, and some politicians may prefer or need to return to the provincial tier of government. A maximum of two seats could strike the right balance between a political party's needs and the judicious use of election resources. A new rule is needed.

Kim-Trump summit

THE leafy environs of Singapore have just witnessed one of the most bizarre events in modern international relations: the summit between North Korean strongman Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump. It was particularly bizarre because, not too long ago, the two leaders were publicly trading insults like bickering schoolboys. However, in Singapore, both men put on their best statesman face and talked of peace. Mr Trump pledged to end the “very provocative” military exercises the US stages with South Korea while Mr Kim reaffirmed his commitment to the “complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula”. Peaceniks have hailed the meeting between the two erstwhile foes; indeed, talks are a much better alternative to the sabre-rattling both states have engaged in — in the recent past, both countries talked of destroying the other. So to pull back from the brink and talk peace can only be welcomed. However, international relations is rarely guided by optimism and good faith; cold, hard realpolitik is what actually rules relations between states. Therefore, the question emerges: beyond the picture-perfect moments in Singapore, what concrete steps

will Pyongyang and Washington take to end the stalemate permanently and bring peace to the two Koreas? Critics have said the joint statement released after the summit is short on details, but it is far too early to pass judgement on the long-term effects of the meeting.

Without doubt, both leaders — Mr Trump and Mr Kim — are unpredictable, particularly the US president. Here is a man known to tear up sovereign agreements (the Iran nuclear deal), alienate long-standing allies through his sound bites and tweets (the recent debacle following the G7 summit in Canada) and launch charm offensives against previously sworn foes (the case with North Korea). If Mr Trump can end the Cold War-era stalemate in Korea, history will remember him. However, it appears quite contradictory that while the US leader pursues peace with Pyongyang, he is on the path of war with Iran. Indeed, following the Singapore summit, Iranian officials have been warning their North Korean counterparts not to trust America. If Mr Trump is serious about his quest for world peace, he should press ahead with his efforts to end the Korean stalemate. Yet this must be coupled with an earnest engagement with Iran, based on mutual respect, to prevent a new conflict in the Middle East.

ECL violation

ONE set of rules for the rulers and their families and friends, another for the ordinary public — there is rightful anger and consternation across the country at the continuation of old ways to the detriment of the rule of law and the creation of a fair and just society. Yet, in the midst of wide-ranging efforts to try and curb VIP culture and flouting of the law, a peculiar case has emerged of inexplicable rule-bending and favouritism. Accompanying PTI supremo Imran Khan on a personal visit to Saudi Arabia was, among others, a PTI leader and reported friend of Mr Khan, Zulfiqar Bukhari. It is not unusual for the PTI boss to travel abroad and his latest trip was unlikely to have attracted any scrutiny were it not for the status of Mr Bukhari: his inclusion on the Exit Control List at the request of the National Accountability Bureau should have prevented him from travelling abroad. But after a short delay of the private flight out of the old Islamabad airport, Mr Bukhari was allowed to join Mr Khan and several others and leave for Saudi Arabia. A so-called one-time permission was officially given to Mr Bukhari.

Certainly, Mr Bukhari and anyone else on the ECL ought to have access to due process and should be able to challenge the inclusion of their name on the list if they believe they have been wrongfully added. The previous PML-N government attempted to streamline and clarify the rules governing the ECL and prevent widespread misuse of the system. Yet, it appears that Mr Bukhari himself broke the rules by securing a sudden and temporary exclusion from the ECL at a moment's notice. That Mr Khan was a part of the group of travellers has raised suspicions that the PTI boss may have sought and received a special favour for Mr Bukhari. The caretaker prime minister has rightly taken notice of the incident and sought an explanation from the interior ministry. Who permitted Mr Bukhari to travel and why?

Seven questions

THE additional note may prove to be of greater relevance in judicial history than the majority judgement. Justice Faez Isa of the Supreme Court has skilfully and precisely cut through the legal thicket that has become the court's special powers under Article 184(3) of the Constitution and the applicability of qualification and disqualification criteria for parliamentarians in Articles 62 and 63. Certainly, the majority judgements that have seen some high-profile politicians disqualified and others deemed eligible to contest elections are legally valid and constitute the law of the land. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of uncertainty among political parties, candidates, the legal community and the general public about what the sum of the judgements handed down so far amounts to in terms of legal principles, precedents and rules. For example, as Justice Isa has asked, "Does every nondisclosure or misdeclaration in the nomination form result in the disqualification of a candidate or only those whereby one has circumvented some inherent legal disability to participate in an election?" In layman's terms, Justice Isa is seeking clarity on whether trivial errors can result in disqualification.

Another important question is the apparent conflict between Article 225 of the Constitution, which requires that election disputes be settled by an appropriate tribunal as empowered by parliament, and Article 184(3), the Supreme Court's original jurisdiction to hear matters pertaining to violation of fundamental rights. Independent and renowned legal experts have questioned the wide use of the superior judiciary's suo motu powers and a case can be made for a review of

such powers to return them to narrower, less frequent usage. The benefit of Justice Isa's suggestion that the full court address seven questions he has set out is that if implemented, it could produce some much-needed clarity in what has quickly become a murky and confusing area of the law. Justice Isa's seventh and final question is perhaps the most significant for the law aiding or impeding national political stability: "if a candidate is disqualified on account of non-disclosure or misdeclaration, does such disqualification subsist only till the next elections or is it permanent?"

Disqualification for life has the twin effect of depriving a potential candidate of the right to contest elections forever and permanently denying a voter the right to choose his or her preferred candidate. In a democracy, those rights should never be denied unless the very highest quality of evidence is produced and the crime that a candidate is deemed guilty of is manifestly of a grave nature. The judicialisation of politics has and will continue to inflict a cost on democratic institutions. The judiciary should not be expected to stay away from certain matters simply because a decision can have political ramifications. But as Justice Isa's seven questions have made clear, the superior judiciary should strive to make interpretation of the law consistent and readily understood.

Women candidates

ACROSS the country, women candidates are poised to run in greater numbers for political office in the coming general election than previously. However, only if political parties unreservedly nominate and support competent women for winnable constituencies will the trend become a permanent feature of national politics. Challenged by various obstacles, including well-funded and highly electable male opponents, and with patriarchal dictates barring female candidature, mainstream parties must not succumb to right-wing pressure aimed at preventing women from becoming legislators. The PPP has awarded electoral tickets to a dozen women on general seats; the PML-N has nominated 11 women candidates, while the PTI has given 16 female contestants the go-ahead, including nine for provincial seats. In a welcome first, the PTI has also nominated a woman from Upper Dir, a constituency traditionally notorious for barring women voters. It has also nominated two women from Mansehra — but this has caused certain male party members to threaten protests. Though there is more energy

and momentum on the part of women who want to participate, independent candidates included, the question is whether that translates into more of them winning. Yes, but only if political parties invest in them. To begin with, parties must award electoral tickets to women for at least 5pc of the general seats as mandated by Election Act, 2017. Consider the results of the 2013 election. Of the 419 women contesting, most were new political entrants; 259 ran as independents and 160 were awarded party tickets. Of the 228 women legislators in the national and provincial assemblies, 205 were nominated on reserved seats; 21 women won after contesting; and two women were selected for non-Muslim seats. For political parties, then, to increase female electoral participation it makes sense to nominate experienced (reserve seat) legislators as aspiring electable candidates.

Meanwhile, gender quotas or reserved seats are a means of bringing female leadership into politics where women are otherwise excluded, shortening a process that could otherwise take generations. Incentivising women to enter mainstream politics, parties must support such female candidates who receive little financial support. To end, because partisan politics comes into play while allocating reserved seats (after the PML-N's list of reserved seats was announced recently, the party was accused of nepotism by women party members), political parties should refrain from nominating female relatives of loyalists. It would be much better for the democratic process if parties were to encourage deserving women politicians to run.

FIFA World Cup

THE FIFA World Cup, arguably the greatest sporting spectacle on earth, commenced in Russia on Thursday amid the customary fervour and excitement. Though only 32 countries compete in the quadrennial tournament, all countries get involved in the extravaganza in a manner that is both frenzied and deeply emotional. Hardly any other international sporting event has such a far-ranging social impact. For one full month, the world will be united under a single interest as high drama unfolds before millions of people, throwing up heroes, villains, controversies and, of course, the moolah that goes with it. Defending champions Germany along with Brazil start as favourites for the trophy with formidable teams like Spain, France and Argentina not far behind. However, the real shocker has been the failure of soccer giant Italy to qualify for the first time in 60

years. The four-time title winner lost to Sweden in the play-offs last year and bowed out to the dismay of millions around the world. Italy's place has been taken by debutant Iceland.

The craze for the game has endured, if not increased, in the last 84 years since the first official World Cup was hosted in Uruguay in 1930. Pakistan, too, has been bitten by the soccer bug and the euphoria has rapidly caught on with large screens being erected in major cities for live coverage of the event. Sadly, the 198th-ranked football nation will not be participating in the mega event, although Pakistan-made footballs — Telstar 18 — will be used in the World Cup matches. Pakistani footballs — manufactured in Sialkot — are rated among the best in the world and have been used during the past many World Cups, including the last one held in Brazil. But much more remains to be done, and sincere efforts are needed to lift the standards of the sport in the country. It is not enough for Pakistani football officials to arrive at international sporting events alone — they must have a national team to accompany.

Eid reflections

EID is a time of joy, to share festivities with family, friends and the less fortunate. While things are far from perfect in Pakistan on many fronts, we must at least be thankful that the country has not witnessed the savage militant violence that it had previously experienced in the run-up to and during many past Eids.

However, although we celebrate the occasion in a relatively peaceful atmosphere, millions of people across the world, especially in the Middle East, are not as fortunate, as they observe Eid in the shadow of war and displacement.

Whether it is Syria, Yemen or Palestine, people in these forsaken regions have had to put up with violence, hunger and dislocation for years and continue to do so.

The brutal Syrian civil war has been grinding on for over seven years. While levels of violence are down, life is far from normal in Syria. According to the UNHCR, over 5m people have fled the country since the war began, while more than 6m remain internally displaced.

The fact remains that until the Assad regime and the opposition can come to an understanding, the threat of war will remain, while militant groups such as the Islamic State will continue to use ungoverned spaces for their operations.

Meanwhile, the situation in Yemen is equally grim. The Saudi-led coalition has launched an attack to recapture the Hodeida port held by the Houthis. The coalition went ahead with the assault despite fears expressed by senior UN officials that any attack on the port would be “catastrophic” given that it is a key lifeline for aid to the Yemeni people.

Already one of the world’s poorest countries, the conflict has pushed Yemen to the brink through the targeting of civilians during warfare, as well as the spread of disease and hunger.

In Palestine, Eid celebrations would be similarly subdued, as many households are in mourning for their loved ones murdered by Israel during protests in Gaza.

Around 125 Palestinians are believed to have been killed by Tel Aviv, including children, as Gazans have been protesting for several weeks to return to their occupied homeland.

On Wednesday, the UN General Assembly through a resolution condemned Israel’s “excessive use of force” against the Palestinians.

Elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who fled violence in Myanmar are living in squalor in refugee camps in Bangladesh, while Afghanistan continues to be rocked by acts of violence as even after 17 years since the fall of the Afghan Taliban, peace has eluded that country.

In India-held Kashmir, New Delhi continues to use brute force against the civilian population. A complex web of geopolitical factors and internal problems are chiefly responsible for this sad situation across the Muslim world.

However, the inconvenient truth is that until Muslim states pledge to put their houses in order, millions will continue to live in peril.

Report on IHK

THE murder of Kashmir Rising editor, Shujaat Bukhari, is a direct consequence of the ruinous policies that have made India-held Kashmir a seething cauldron of rage and despair. At last, however, in the first-ever report by the UN's Office of the High Commission of Human Rights about the disputed region, the suffering of its people at the hands of the Indian government has found expression on the global stage, where it deserves the attention it has scarcely received from the rest of the world. The report, which calls for a high-level UN investigation, documents the grotesque human rights violations in IHK since 2016, when the murder of Burhan Wani by the Indian army triggered the latest uprising. Excessive force has resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries; use of pellet-firing shotguns has left many protesters with vision impairment. Other depredations include enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions — including of minors — torture, rape, etc. There is seemingly no end to the dehumanisation of the local population at the hands of a state determined to break them. The special laws in force in IHK enable this violence. As the report rightly notes, they allow the security forces to act with total impunity, and “jeopardise the right to remedy for victims” — in other words, it is a staggeringly unequal conflict.

Predictably, India has rejected the UN agency's findings out of hand as being “fallacious, tendentious and motivated”, a reaction that displays the same arrogance and myopia as that which drives its policies. While Pakistan too has come in for its share of criticism, the report implicitly concedes that the situation in Azad Kashmir bears little resemblance to the calamitous conditions in IHK. Certainly, the OHCHR was constrained by the lack of access to both sides of the Line of Control. However, it has relied upon material already in the public domain and accessed through right to information laws, and has used what it describes as a “reasonable grounds” standard of proof to arrive at its findings. The fact is, what has been transpiring in IHK has been documented by many of those living that reality every day; it is only that the world chose not to see it. For a country like India that aspires to a seat at the UN Security Council and similar decision-making bodies, the only befitting response to the report should be an unequivocal commitment to act on it.

Recognising trans rights

FOR most election hopefuls, the absence of more than two gender categories in the ECP's nomination papers would hardly invite notice, let alone criticism. But for trans Pakistanis — 13 of whom recently announced their intention of running in the 2018 general election — it is painfully indicative of a system that has long neglected them. While the ECP has attempted to rectify its mistake by asking the prospective candidates to write the letter 'C' to identify their non-binary gender, one might ask why such a lapse occurred in the first place. Pursuant to a series of Supreme Court rulings since 2009, and a recent federal law protecting transgender rights, the ECP is legally obligated to safeguard their fair and equal participation in the upcoming elections. Yet, it appears to have overlooked these, and the Peshawar High Court's instructions in February, to ensure their electoral inclusion, even in so much as a simple form.

What might appear to the majority as a slight oversight can lead to serious repercussions for a minority community. The PBS's negligence during the 2017 enumeration (again, despite the higher judiciary's interventions) resulted in a figure of only 10,418 trans people — a severe undercount according to many activists. Nadra's inability to proactively register trans citizens (less than 2,000 since 2012) has resulted in equally depressed electoral roll representation — only 1,456 registered trans voters. With no guarantee that barriers to inclusion, such as a lack of separate polling booths and adequately sensitised poll officials, is being addressed, the trans community is right to raise alarm over potential exclusion of even these few. It is not mere speculative hyperbole to warn of the dividends of such casual neglect; the All Pakistan Transgender Election Network has claimed that at least two trans people were unable to submit their nominations after facing assault and harassment. Thus, the failure of public bodies to affirmatively ensure trans rights amounts to tacit participation in their near total erasure from public life.

Regional ties after TTP chief's killing

THE reported death of TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah in a drone strike inside Afghanistan is an important development for the region and for ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

While previously, militant leaders have been pronounced dead only to emerge alive later, what lent credence to the report was that President Ashraf Ghani himself called Prime Minister Nasir-ul-Mulk and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa to convey the news.

Perhaps if the banned TTP announces the death of its leader or footage appears of his funeral, there will be greater certainty that a reign of terror has come to an end. Fazlullah would not be the first anti-state or TTP supreme leader killed by a US drone.

After the death of Nek Mohammad in what is believed to have been the first drone strike in Pakistan in 2004, US drones eliminated TTP supremo Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakeemullah Mehsud.

But the elimination of Fazlullah at this juncture in a drone strike may be the most significant of the battlefield decapitations of militant leaders yet.

It has long been apparent that reciprocity is key to moving forward a peace and dialogue process in the Pak-Afghan region.

While Pakistan has for several years now offered to help nudge the Afghan Taliban towards dialogue, the state has also demanded that Kabul and the US do more to curb the existence of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Fazlullah's presence inside Afghanistan had been widely presumed and neither the Afghan nor the US administration credibly denied the existence of TTP hideouts in the country.

While all militant sanctuaries are provocative, Fazlullah's presence on Afghan soil was especially damaging to the possibility of peace in the region because of the violence the TTP has wreaked on Pakistan.

The 'butcher of Swat' turned a picturesque and mostly peaceful region into killing fields. Fazlullah's ambitions were national and perhaps even regional.

Where fear once spread in 2009 that the Pakistani Taliban may overrun the federal capital, Fazlullah for a while appeared to be the militant leader who might deliver on that threat.

The attempted assassination of a young schoolgirl and education activist shocked much of the nation, but also sowed the seeds of division in parts of the country.

Malala Yousafzai is one of Pakistan's greatest citizens today, but pockets of resistance in the country to her magnificent message of peace and education for all are a legacy of the evil of Fazlullah and his militants and supporters.

The Army Public School attack in Peshawar in 2014 finally and irreversibly turned national sentiment wholly against the TTP.

Today, it appears that a fresh outreach by Gen Bajwa and the Pakistani state to Afghanistan may be producing results. It is sincerely hoped that peace in the region will eventually prevail.

Beyond Kalabagh dam

IT is a new era but our concepts are old. At its core, the problem is how Pakistan's policy elite is responding to the challenges thrown up by the severe water shortage afflicting the country this year. Water flows in the major rivers have nearly dried up, with the two major dams seeing negligible inflows during the crucial month of May and early June, when the sowing of the kharif crop gets under way. From across the country, especially Sindh, reports have poured in of water shortages so severe that they have ruined standing crops of sugar cane and vegetables, as well as severely disrupted cotton planting. Tussles over drinking water have been reported in various cities, and long lines of tankers at the hydrants can be seen in Karachi. Yet the only response from the policymakers is 'Kalabagh dam'. It seems our water bureaucracy is incapable of emerging from the early years of the implementation of the Indus Waters Treaty, from the 1960s till the 1970s. The only response they come up with to the changing climatic phenomena — from floods to drought-like conditions — to have hit Pakistan in recent years is more hydrological infrastructure.

Far more than the climate challenges themselves, it is this lack of imagination and openness to solutions beyond brick-and-mortar infrastructure that will do the most damage to the country's ability to adapt to a changing world. We desperately need to go beyond the debate on the Kalabagh dam, and shift the focus, with some urgency, to the software of water management. Reform of the water-pricing regime is critical, and no amount of additional water storage will help until this is undertaken. Conservation and the judicious use of water for farming are also important. Phasing out antiquated irrigation techniques in favour of newer, more efficient drip irrigation methods is crucial. So are reforms that encourage the use of solar tube wells. Beyond this lies a new world of technologies, such as using depleted water aquifers for storage instead of building more dams. With judicious utilisation and reformed pricing, accurate measurement of stream flows through telemetry, and a policy universe encouraging the adoption of efficient irrigation technologies, there is no reason why our debate should remain mired in the Kalabagh stalemate. It is time to move on from the early boom years of water infrastructure development.

Poor state of zoo

TO put at risk the lives and well-being of animals in order to score political points before an election is a particularly cruel gimmick, but how else can one interpret the findings of a committee looking into the recent deaths of several animals at Peshawar Zoo? According to its report, the facility's top management "due to poor operation mechanism" is squarely responsible for the distressing situation. Even though zoo authorities, not surprisingly, are reluctant to divulge exact figures, several species of deer, as well as a monkey, three leopard cubs and a number of birds are said to have died over the past few weeks. From interviews with several committee members, cited in a report in this newspaper, it seems that against a requirement of 250 employees, only 35 — many of them not even properly trained — are looking after 100 or so animals aside from numerous birds. Moreover, full-grown trees on the site were cut down and the 3,000 saplings planted in their stead left the enclosures exposed to the summer sun.

Clearly, these issues needed time to be properly addressed, and if the facility had opened as per schedule in December 2018, that could have been achieved. The size of the workforce and the quality of their training may have been

commensurate with their task, and the surroundings more conducive to the physical and mental well-being of captive wildlife. But, an election had to be won and, evidently, if a few animals died in the process, it was a gamble worth taking. This callous approach to animal welfare is sadly far too common. Let alone the dire conditions in other zoos, one can still recall the sight of a wretched caged tiger, and on occasion a lion, being paraded around in PML-N's rallies until that attracted too much negative publicity from animal rights activists. While all politicians on the campaign trail want to be seen as saviours of the people, it should not entail cruelty to our fellow creatures.

Culture of secrecy

THE frequent and flippant invocation of unspecified security threats in all manner of instances and situations has the potential of reducing a very serious concept to a derisive punchline or nothingness. More insidiously, such allegations can help create a climate in which the public's right to information is deliberately and unnecessarily curbed. A controversy that erupted over data on electoral rolls to be used in the upcoming general election has cast fresh light on a culture of unnecessary and potentially troubling secrecy in official quarters. The central allegation in the faux controversy is vague but can appear sinister: so-called leaks to the media of electoral rolls data suggest that information critical to a free and fair election can be or has been tampered with. The allegation, made by the ECP in a letter to Nadra that was made public by a recently removed senior official of Nadra, was quickly sucked into the political discourse, where it was turned into rumour and conspiracy about alleged attempted election rigging.

Can the public dissemination of electoral rolls data amount to a security threat or breach? Surely not. The electoral rolls are meant to be scrutinised by the public before they are finalised. That is how the ECP assembles up-to-date and comprehensive voter lists. Moreover, aggregate data on the electorate is of intrinsic public interest, with information on the number of women and non-Muslim voters, for example, used to help widen the net of registered voters. Perhaps the ECP could make an argument that Nadra is not authorised to release certain data, or that a violation of procedure and protocol occurred, but such missteps, if they do take place, hardly merit allegations of threats to national security and the sanctity of the electoral process. Most damagingly, the ECP

appears to have been unaware of an amendment to election laws that explicitly gives a candidate the right to request the election rolls to be used by the returning officers and presiding officers. Simply put, the ECP alleged a security threat where none is apparent and wantonly cast doubt on the integrity of the electoral process.

The problem is not limited to a few unnecessarily secrecy-prone ECP officials. Invoking national security is routine for officials who seek to shield the public from information the public ought to have access to. The reports of several important commissions have been withheld over the decades. Economic matters, population statistics and agreements with foreign states are frequently deemed too sensitive to be made public. The effects on scientific study, policy debates and informed decision-making are likely significant. But there is also the effect of the government and the state and its institutions making themselves unaccountable to the very people that they are meant to serve. A culture of secrecy is a culture of impunity. The state must shed its old habits.

Hindutva militancy

HINDU extremism in India is not a new phenomenon; India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi, himself was shot dead by a fanatic, Nathuram Godse, in 1948 for his perceived soft corner for Muslims. However, while in the early days after Independence Hindutva and its devotees remained on the fringes of Indian society, as the state espoused Nehruvian socialism and secularism, today the Sangh Parivar — the umbrella term used for all proponents of a Hindu rashtra or state — have captured state power. Indeed, all groups operating under this ideological umbrella have become more strident and aggressive, which has spelt trouble for India's minorities and more progressive citizens. The recent listing of the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the CIA World Factbook as "militant religious outfits" is a reflection of Hindutva's relentless march in India. Interestingly, while the two aforementioned groups have been classified under the banner of militancy, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh — their mother organisation — has been termed a "nationalist" outfit.

Although Hindutva bared its fangs in its first mass display of power during the Babri Masjid's demolition in 1992, since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014

the Hindutva brigade has been given a shot in the arm. Many high-ranking officials in the Indian state machinery, starting from the prime minister, are swayamsevaks, while some notoriously communal characters are in positions of power, such as Yogi Adityanath, the serving chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. The latter is known for his frequent anti-Muslim rants. Having such individuals in the corridors of power has had a trickle-down effect on the masses. The result has been lynching of Muslims over suspicions of eating or transporting beef, cracking down on 'love jihad' and a general tilt of Indian society towards the right. Of course, the rightward march is not a phenomenon limited to India; across the world hard-right movements are gaining power and finding their way into legislatures. We in Pakistan have also had our share of fanaticism. In India's case, the rapid saffronisation threatens the secular and democratic ethos India has cultivated over the decades. It is clear from the writings and utterances of Sangh Parivar ideologues that theirs is a fascist ideology that accepts no pluralism or diversity. If this is the path India wants to avoid, it needs to isolate hatemongers and assure its religious and caste minorities that they, too, are equal Indian citizens.

A misogynistic campaign

ELECTION campaigns are rarely civil, anywhere. But when a candidate uses the personal life of an opponent — whether man or woman — including a male candidate's association with the opposite gender to malign him, such a tactic crosses the line between uncivil and indecent, between what is acceptable and what is not.

Coming from the party of an individual who was appointed to the very apex of Pakistan's judicial system, that distinction is even more acute.

A candidate from the Justice and Democratic Party, which is headed by the former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, has filed a petition against Imran Khan's eligibility to stand as a candidate in the coming elections.

His objections, spelled out in salacious detail, are centred on a past relationship of the PTI leader.

In conservative societies like Pakistan, the concept of honour is used to control women's social behaviour, even to the point of violence against them.

Now Mr Chaudhry's party has picked up this misogynistic trait to discredit Mr Khan in the eyes of the electorate. Muckraking is not a substitute for campaigning; it merely illustrates a bankruptcy of ideas.

At the same time, the PTI chief himself has also reminded us of the extent to which misogyny and sexism permeate this society regardless of socioeconomic and educational background.

In a recent TV interview, he claimed that the Western concept of feminism has "degraded the role of a mother".

The statement is both asinine and offensive. It betrays a total lack of understanding about feminism, a concept that underlies many rights for women taken for granted today (or on which the ongoing struggle for women's rights is based).

For example, the acceptance of women's franchise, an important consideration for a party that likes to claim a huge female support base.

Moreover, Mr Khan's statement pedals hackneyed typecasting of women solely in terms of motherhood. Many hardworking women among his party would attest that it is possible to be a mother — a good one at that — and much else.

Failed coalition in IHK

A RADICAL experiment has ended in a somewhat predictable but nevertheless spectacular failure. With the decision by the BJP to withdraw from the coalition with the PDP in India-held Kashmir, the violence-torn region has been plunged into fresh political turmoil.

This may be the most dangerous phase yet. When the BJP and PDP formed their unlikely alliance in early 2015, the auguries were not good.

Some hopes were pinned on the aging Mufti Sayeed of the PDP moderating the policy preferences of a right-wing BJP national leadership and a so-called

common minimum programme, the coalition's governance agenda, delivering political stability and economic growth.

But few inside the coalition and virtually no one outside appeared to be convinced by the deal. The BJP's hawkish and communal electoral campaign helped deliver not just a hung assembly in IJK but an electorate that was sharply divided.

However, the roots of the problem lie much deeper than yet another failed governance experiment in IJK. The previous NC and Congress coalition in IJK had revealed a fundamental, insurmountable problem: Kashmir-based political parties cannot legitimately align with national Indian parties because the aspirations of the Kashmiri people cannot be reconciled with the demands of the federal Indian state.

There is real, deep-rooted and continuing resentment in IJK against the repressive role of the state of India in the region. Despotic laws and a suffocating security presence are inimical to the just and moral political demands of a local population.

While that has been true for decades, in more recent times the right-wing government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has demonstrated at virtually every step of the way that even when the language of the regime is moderate, its intentions as evidenced by actions on the ground are malign.

Indeed, the onset of direct rule in IJK has instantly given rise to informed analysis and political speculation that the Modi government is preparing to unleash a new round of terror in IJK, the reason ostensibly being the BJP's national aspirations in the Indian general election scheduled for next year.

In reality, there is a genuine and growing freedom movement in IJK that the Indian security apparatus will not be able to crush with force, mass incarcerations or political machinations.

A first-ever report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted the scale of the repression in IJK and the atrocities committed against a virtually defenceless population.

While Indian repression has undoubtedly contributed to a growing rebellion among the people of IJK, an enduring rejection of federal Indian policies and

practices towards the disputed region is what ensures that dissent survives and spreads.

India ought to recognise the inhumanity and folly of its approach to the disputed Kashmir region. In these days of great danger and turmoil, common sense and a calm approach must prevail.

Abraaj's downfall

THE rise of Abraaj is a story of daring investments and meteoric growth. Its downfall has been faster still. What took a little more than a decade to build is crashing down in less than 10 months. The fund grew from a small, family-run and family-invested enterprise in the early 2000s to a \$15bn investment vehicle largely on the back of shrewd, carefully calculated and very high-risk bets in some of the riskiest markets in the world. Its latest move into impact investing in health and education showed that its top management, led by the tireless Arif Naqvi, could see the future through the thickest fog. But the growth story, it turns out, was built on very delicate foundations. These foundations were a set of relationships that Abraaj built with investors and creditors over the years, delivering spectacular returns along the way to both. Investors and creditors are fickle birds, though, easily spooked and given to flight in a moment.

That is exactly what happened to Abraaj. What began as a dispute with one class of investors grew rapidly into what some reports called an 'investor revolt', and 'provisional liquidation'. Through it all, it is important to note that nowhere has the fund been the target of any government action, whether regulatory or law enforcement. It fell apart under the weight of its own relationships and commitments. Somewhere through the whole drama, a line has been floated that Abraaj's investments in K-Electric, Pakistan's largest integrated power utility in which the fund acquired a controlling stake 10 years ago, but from which it has struggled to effect its exit, was the reason for its downfall. This line must be resisted. The liquidity constraints created by the delays in the KE exit did not help the matter, but it is a far cry to suggest that they caused the difficulties that led to Abraaj's filing for liquidation. Those problems stemmed from a corporate culture of weak internal controls, lax regulatory oversight, and nontransparent jurisdiction in which Abraaj operated, as well as the somewhat imperious style that Mr Naqvi

is known to have adopted in his dealings with others. In other times, these might have been sources of strength for the fund, but in bad times they quickly became its weakness, and there ended its story.

Annual moon sighting

IN what has become a yearly occurrence, the festivities of Eidul Fitr in Pakistan were marred somewhat when much of KP celebrated Eid on Friday, a day earlier than the rest of the country, thanks to the 'sighting' of the moon by an unofficial committee based out of a Peshawar mosque. KP government officials, however, celebrated Eid with the rest of Pakistan on Saturday. As reported in this paper, some members of the KP zonal Ruet-i-Hilal committee have complained that the central Ruet body is usually dismissive of testimonies received from the province. While all testimonies should be considered and vetted, the fact remains that if our clerics paid more attention to scientific projections and proof to aid them in their quest to sight the new crescent, such yearly controversies could be avoided. In fact, while the sighting of the new moon for other Hijri months does not result in debate, detecting the Ramazan and Shawwal crescents seems to be perpetually mired in controversy.

The central Ruet-i-Hilal committee consists of clerics of various persuasions coming from different parts of Pakistan, and officials from the Met office assist the ulema in matters of moon sighting. Therefore, in theory there should be no controversy surrounding the exercise, and unless evidence emerges of serious error in spotting the new crescent, the central committee's decision should be accepted across the country. As mentioned earlier, in making their decision, clerics should pay more attention to scientific data pertaining to the birth of the moon and the likelihood of it being seen by the naked eye. In the present case, meteorologists said that while the new moon had been born on Thursday evening, there were slim chances of its visibility in Pakistan. Instead of turning moon sighting into a matter of ego, all parties must base their decision on logic, rationality and scientific proof coupled with religious requirements.

Moody's downgrade

IN what is likely to be the first in a string of ratings actions, Moody's has downgraded the outlook on Pakistan's credit rating from stable to negative.

The global rating agency gives "heightened external vulnerability risk" as the main reason, going on to say that "[f]oreign exchange reserves have fallen to low levels and, absent significant capital inflows, will not be replenished over the next 12-18 months".

The situation makes it difficult for the government to raise more foreign exchange through international bonds, which increases "government liquidity risks".

Although the agency reaffirmed Pakistan's rating of B3 in light of the "robust growth potential" of the economy, "supported by improvements in energy supply and physical infrastructure", it is now acting on the other side of the coin, which is "low revenue generation capacity" and "fragile external payments position".

For years now we have been told by the government to ignore the growing gaps on the external side and focus only on the revival of growth and investment, the new power generation enhancements and CPEC. Few bought this story in its entirety, but now it seems the weaknesses are catching up with growing ferocity.

The latest figures for the external account, released the same day Moody's announced its downgrade, show the current account deficit grew by 43 per cent in the first 11 months of the fiscal year.

The growth rate may be slowing down due to a rebound under way in exports, but on the same day Moody's reiterated what all other independent observers of the economy have been saying all along: "While Moody's assumes continued strong growth in exports, this will not be enough to narrow the trade gap."

Something needs to change drastically. This is especially true considering large repayments obligations are looming, and many CPEC-related payment obligations are starting to kick in.

Once again, on the same day as the data release and rating action by Moody's, the lead representative of all 21 private power producers in Pakistan told the Senate that due to Rs16 billion in unpaid bills to the Sahiwal coal project, Chinese investors were becoming jittery about Pakistan, and "the consortiums

are This is precisely what those who had been warning about the associated costs of these CPEC power projects were referring to all along, and now that these projects have begun commercial operations, the costs are only going to ramp up.

These include payments for power purchase, as well as debt service and repatriation of profits, both of which hit the fiscal and external accounts that are the principal weaknesses in the macroeconomic framework.

The challenges are now set to mount rapidly, and there is a growing urgency for this state of transition to pass quickly and a new government to establish itself. Time is of the essence.

US' isolationist mode

UNDER Donald Trump, what were up till now fringe positions of the American hard right are now becoming part of Washington's official policy. The latest in this series of moves is the US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council, a multilateral body formed to monitor human rights abuses amongst the global body's member states. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, used characteristically undiplomatic language while criticising the body, terming it "a cesspool of political bias". And the main reason for such a harsh appraisal? According to Ambassador Haley, the UN body displays "unending hostility towards Israel". US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used equally strong terms to denounce the council, terming it "a protector of human rights abuses". While most US allies were critical of the withdrawal from the human rights council, Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu was overjoyed, gleefully welcoming the "courageous decision" in a tweet. Not too long before that, Mr Trump rowed back from his policy to separate migrant children from their parents trying to illegally enter the US. This decision was only reversed after an uproar in the US over the issue. Indeed, for a state that swears by fundamental rights, these actions are unbecoming and need to be reconsidered.

The Trumpian agenda seems to be one of isolation from the global community, with limited engagement with countries the US president approves of. The withdrawal from the UN council is only the latest in a long list of American

decisions that have caused outrage in the global community. The tearing up of the Iran deal; the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the moving of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem all seem part of a pattern to redirect American policy towards an uncharted course. The reason for Washington leaving the UN rights council is also ironic; while states should not be singled out, it is a fact that Israel's human rights record is abysmal, especially with regard to its treatment of Palestinians. Here is a state that claims to be a democracy, yet launches murderous campaigns against civilians, including children. So for the global community to censure Israel on its behaviour is the least that can be done. But America under Trump has shown that it is drifting in an extreme direction, where foreign and domestic policies are drafted not on the basis of rationality, but whim and impulse.

Dual nationality

IT is an emotional topic and has some roots in a narrow constitutional exclusion that the superior judiciary has interpreted as an absolute bar, but it is an issue that deserves closer examination. The law as interpreted by the Supreme Court bars the elected representatives of the people, in parliament, the provincial assemblies and the presidency, from holding dual nationality. While the law does permit Pakistani citizens to also be citizens of certain other countries, the weight of public and official opinion appears to have shifted against elected representatives holding citizenship of a second country. The general argument against the people's representatives holding dual nationality is public perception and official suspicion. According to this, the honour of representing the people must only be afforded to someone with absolute and undivided loyalty to the country, while the nature of elected representation means that sometimes issues of national security have to be dealt with. Therefore, the elected representatives of the people of Pakistan must only hold citizenship of Pakistan.

Indeed, the general argument can be and is being extended to all public officials, elected or unelected, in legislative assemblies or anywhere else in the state apparatus. A re-think is needed. Against the emotive argument of perceptions of loyalty and the blanket suspicion of threats to national security can be set the real-world experience of the last decade of democracy. In what episode or incident over two full parliamentary terms can it categorically be stated that dual

nationality would have impeded an elected representative from performing his or her duties? The vast majority of an elected representative's responsibilities are public and open to scrutiny. Pakistan has a large diaspora and is integrated with much of the outside world. Dual nationals should not be demonised. If they seek to serve the people of Pakistan, they should be allowed to do so by the law, although an exception can be made in the case of cabinet ministers who are required to take an oath of secrecy.

Bureaucracy changes

THE reshuffle is portrayed as a necessary act, and it may well be given the politicisation of the bureaucracy and the police. But it is apparent that positive change is needed in the long term.

The current system is unwieldy, disruptive and, in certain respects, nonsensical. Caretaker governments have been deemed politically and constitutionally necessary because political governments, even in caretaker mode ahead of a general election, are seen as hostile actors against the free and fair conduct of elections.

However, here, the instruments for the much-feared political interference are believed to be the bureaucracy and the police.

Therefore, after caretaker governments are sworn in, it has been deemed imperative to reshuffle not just the leaderships of the bureaucracy and police across the provinces, but to transfer and swap the middle tiers too. As that latter process is now being carried out by the caretaker setups, the scale of disruption is becoming clearer.

Certainly, the caretaker governments are not primarily to blame. Were they not to undertake a wholesale reshuffling and changing of bureaucracy and police, they would be accused of political partisanship.

Still, there is a great cost to the swapping around of administrators and police officers. The police and local administrations are required to aid the ECP in the conduct of free and fair elections, but the time frame is patently unreasonable.

The election is scheduled for a month from now, so the transfers and reassignments under way in Punjab and KP, for example, will give district officials no more than two or three weeks to familiarise themselves with their areas of responsibilities while preparing to aid the ECP in the monumental task of holding simultaneous provincial and parliamentary polls. If lapses or failures occur and are detected, the fairness of the election may be called into question.

The solution — to the extent that one can be identified in a complex environment at the intersection of law, politics and public administration — is the systematic depoliticisation and long-term reform of the bureaucracy and the police.

It should be noted that while the erstwhile PTI-led government in KP often highlighted its reformist credentials, neither the police nor the bureaucracy in the province was improved to the extent that transfers in the services ahead of the polls could be deemed unnecessary.

Even after 10 years of democratic transition and two full terms of assemblies across the provinces and the centre, there has been little by way of commitment to and implementation of administrative reforms by the major political parties.

Worryingly, the caretaker setups themselves have been accused of partisanship and nontransparent decision-making, potentially rendering the constitutional solution to political interference in elections less effective.

Instead of institutionalising massive reshuffles and transfers, the country's political leadership needs to turn its attention towards police and bureaucratic reforms.

Amnesty deadline

WITH the deadline to avail the amnesty scheme only days away, pressure is mounting on the government to grant an extension keeping in mind the many complications that have marked the scheme's progress. One thing that the calls for this extension clearly show is that there is broad and active interest in benefiting from it, since those with tax-evaded wealth abroad are now facing the prospect of automatic sharing of data set to begin on Sept 1. Those asking for an extension point to the fact that the scheme was announced very late in the

government's term, so its implementation was left to an interim administration. After that, it was marred by delays in converting the ordinance into an act of parliament, followed by the wait for the Supreme Court's nod. Then there was the month of fasting during which the pace of work slowed down, and the Eid holidays also took up valuable time. Thus far the government has been resisting the pressure and insisting that there will be no extension. Their argument is that being an interim government they lack the mandate to take such a decision.

The government's desire to exercise a limited mandate is laudable. Granting an extension will require a new presidential ordinance since the date is written into the law. Though such an ordinance can be issued overnight, a debate is required on whether this action under an interim setup would constitute a policy shift or just an administrative modification. Demanding extensions is an ingrained part of our culture and must be phased out. Even now, there is ample time for people to come forward and begin the process. The scheme thus far has managed to elicit substantial interest, and announcing a decision to extend the deadline at this point risks breaking much of the momentum driving it. There is also an argument to be made that the recoveries made under the scheme should be booked in the current fiscal year, which ends on June 30, and extending the deadline throws off the fiscal numbers for this year. But having acknowledged all this, it is still important for the government to not paint itself into a corner. Closer to the deadline, if the scheme appears to be productive, and more interest remains, the option to announce an extension should be retained for the sake of pragmatism. Until then, people should operate on the assumption that the deadline stands.

Heritage in danger

WHAT had for a long time seemed inevitable, finally appears set to pass. The Lahore Fort and the city's historic Shalamar Gardens are to be placed on the World Heritage in Danger list of the World Heritage Committee. The organisation is scheduled to meet at Manama in Bahrain from June 24 to July 4, and the inclusion of these two Pakistani sites follows proposals by the World Heritage and the ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring mission to this end. The two sites are considered to be at risk because of the construction of Lahore's Orange Line Metro train system (which will pass through the front of the south entrance of the Shalamar Gardens), as are other historic places in the city. Months ago, the

Supreme Court of Pakistan gave the opinion that the metro line construction would have an irreversible impact on the values relating to the artistic and aesthetic accomplishments exemplified by the fort and the gardens, but the city administration chose to press ahead after offering sops to conservationists. At the World Heritage Committee's 40th and 41st sessions, the WHC and ICOMOS had already proposed that the two properties in question be placed on the list of endangered heritage.

The Orange Line project has invited a lot of censure on the grounds of conservation and heritage protection, and the administration's response has been a great deal less than exemplary. There have been prevarications and obfuscations, and assurances of care that have at times appeared merely cosmetic, resulting in the widespread belief that the city managers are, in their haste to produce works of 'development', prepared to pay any and every cost. This perception must be altered, and it can only be done by those pacing the corridors of power. Development is essential for the growth of Pakistan's towns and cities, in fact for the entire country; but if it is not underpinned by an affinity to past history and glory, it will prove to be a mere chimera.

The militancy threat

THERE have been numerous successes in the long fight against militancy and the country is undeniably more stable and secure than it was just a few years ago. But two events in recent days have indicated that past and present achievements will not automatically guarantee continuing and future success in the long war.

The killing of several militants in South Waziristan, who according to security officials allegedly returned to Pakistan from Afghanistan along with other recently returning refugees, has underlined the difficulty of fully securing a region where a major military operation was carried out nearly a decade ago.

Meanwhile, the banned TTP in exile quickly identifying and seemingly arriving at a consensus for a new leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, has underlined that the mere elimination of a senior militant leader will not necessarily lead to an unravelling of the group.

Indeed, the Pakistani security and intelligence apparatus will need to be on the highest alert in the days and weeks ahead. New militant leaderships often need to demonstrate a willingness and ability to launch terrorist attacks and the case of the current TTP head may be no different.

The upcoming general election and what is expected to be frenetic campaigning in the final weeks ahead of the election will surely be the target of militants.

The challenge for the state to hold elections in a climate relatively free from the threat of militant violence will be immense. But the accumulated experience of a decade of regularly scheduled elections, counter-insurgency campaigns and counterterrorism operations ought to help the state in providing stability and security.

It is hoped that the ECP and the caretaker governments will work closely and effectively with political parties to coordinate election-related activities. Mutual cooperation is in everyone's interest.

The path to addressing the longer-term threat that the TTP presents is clear. Reciprocal steps between Pakistan and the Afghan government, supported by the US in particular, for regional peace and stability are needed.

The US has helped Pakistan by eliminating several successive Pakistani militant chiefs in drone strikes, but it has been inconsistent in its policies in the region and has put too much of an onus on this country to 'do more' at all times.

A short-lived Afghan Taliban ceasefire at the end of Ramazan, however, illuminated the possibilities of peace in Afghanistan. The memorable images of Afghan government officials and security personnel embracing members of the Afghan Taliban demonstrated, albeit briefly, that a better future for Afghanistan is within grasp.

Pakistan and Afghanistan must continue to search together for an end to the wars that have so decimated this region.

Revisiting Peca

ALMOST two years since the controversial Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act was passed, some of its ramifications with regard to cybercrime investigation are now coming to light. In a recent meeting before the Senate Standing Committee on IT and Telecommunications, the director of the FIA's cybercrime wing, the investigative authority designated under Peca, revealed that his agency is operating seriously below capacity — it currently has only 10 experts to investigate over 2,600 ongoing cases of reported cybercrimes. Just as troubling is the admission that the rules and procedures by which the FIA is to conduct its work have yet to be established, which may not only lead to potential violations of individual rights, but also make room for acquittals of genuine offenders caused by poor investigative procedures. This is not the first time the FIA has voiced its need for funding and resources to effectively enforce Peca — yet the same government, which so cavalierly rushed the act into force without addressing its many lacunae, apparently lost its motivation once it reached the point of implementation.

The fallout from this has been twofold: that of capacity and mandate. The obvious lack of capacity in human and IT resources means that such crimes against private entities, ie businesses and individuals, are on the rise and virtually unchecked. The FIA acknowledged this too, when it was stated that most complainants, especially women, are reluctant to follow through and cooperate with investigations. Though there have been a handful of breakthroughs in cases of online offences against women and children, it is clear that the agency does not yet engender much confidence among vulnerable victims. Its limited capacity is further strained when legal definitions of cybercrimes are so vague as to beget the impossible task of attempting to police vast swathes of internet usage. Given that its mandate under Peca is stretched beyond reasonable limits, strengthening the cybercrime wing without narrowing the law's parameters would be an exercise in futility. The corollary of this is what many critics of Peca have warned of: that it could be misused to target innocent people. We have likely witnessed some of this misdirection of the FIA's efforts already; recall recent moral panics caused by a rash of alleged crimes against national security and religion in recent years, and how many were found baseless upon investigation. Until Peca is reformed, there is no hope of a better outcome.

Preventing IHL violations

A RECENT report by the International Committee of the Red Cross has highlighted how, over the past decade and a half, the number of “non-international armed conflicts” around the world has not only increased, but also how there are often more than just two parties involved in the hostilities. One of the main pillars of the International Humanitarian Law developed by the ICRC lies in making a distinction between civilians and combatants; the factors leading to the violation of this principle form the basis of the new report. The findings

show how shifting alliances in such conflicts can endanger civilian status. The first of its kind survey highlights that there isn’t really a challenge in identifying civilians despite the apparently complex ground realities.

The problem isn’t new; historically, developed invading nations have projected themselves as respecting the distinction between non-combatants (or civilians) and combatants. In actuality, this is far from the truth, with informal norms leading to subjective moral judgements that label non-combatants as ‘innocent’ or ‘guilty’. The psycho-sociological aspects of conflict, such as the influence of the groups involved, integration within the hierarchy etc can have an impact on the culture of restraint adopted by the armed forces. This environment, along with other factors such social, religious, or community ties, can lead to state armed forces targeting civilians who are either unwittingly or unwillingly contributing to the enemy’s war efforts. The report suggests that talking to armed groups, combatants and civilians exerts positive influences on all sides. It is important that IHL be made a part of local legal frameworks. State armed forces should be trained to uphold IHL; with effective sanctions imposed on those who fail to obey the humanitarian code. Meanwhile, there is a need to specify all measures that will safeguard the rights of civilians as part of a larger strategy.

Electoral tensions

ITH the process of political parties finalising tickets for the general election nearly complete, the campaign season is set to begin in earnest.

Less than a month from now, Pakistan will witness a historic poll, a democratic dividend that has eluded this country for all of its history, but that is set to take place in an environment of continuing political uncertainty.

Much, then, will depend on how well the ECP manages the process between now and polling day and how willing the major political parties are to adhere to democratic norms in the crucial weeks ahead.

Unhappily, the political parties themselves have created unnecessary suspense and discord over the process of ticket allocation.

While ticket allocation is crucial, the disproportionate time and attention devoted to the matter are disappointing.

Contrast the frenzied focus on ticket allocation with the near total absence of political interest in the drawing up and presentation of party manifestos.

Surely, the democratic process will not be strengthened if old habits are not shed in favour of new, modern practices.

The economy, for example, is in a perilous state, seemingly headed towards another trough in the boom-and-bust cycle that has characterised economic growth in the country for many decades.

Whichever party or coalition of parties comes to power in August, the state of the economy will force itself to the top of the list of the incoming government's priorities.

However, other than boilerplate statements about sustaining growth, cutting debt and putting the country's external accounts in order, no meaningful roadmap to economic stability has been presented by any party as yet.

The PML-N is predictably in denial about the economic risks that it has propelled the country towards; the PPP seems to have learned no lessons from its economically disastrous stint in power between 2008 and 2013; and the PTI is

presenting itself as the option of true change while relying on old faces to win power.

With the major political parties seemingly locked in a familiar electoral fight, much will depend on how firmly the ECP is able to guide the campaign and polling processes.

If, as appears to be the case, the major political parties are hunkering down for a fierce, and potentially dirty, electoral fight, the ECP must be willing to use its enhanced powers to keep campaigns free from conflict and ensure that polling day is managed smoothly, and there is no intimidation or violence.

Perhaps the ECP should invite the national and local leaderships of political parties for advice on how the ECP expects the campaigns to be conducted and polling to be carried out.

A calm, fair and firm administrative hand is needed to steer the final stages of the electoral process. The country needs and the electorate deserves a competitive but fair election.

Anguish without end

THE anguish of the families of the missing people was there for all to see on Sunday at the Supreme Court's Karachi registry. Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar was hearing dozens of petitions filed by the relatives of those who have been missing for months, allegedly abducted by law-enforcement agencies. A large number of people, many of them women, carrying placards with pictures of their loved ones and demanding their recovery, gathered outside the court building. While in the courtroom for the hearing, several of them broke down in tears and in their emotionally charged state, levelled accusations against the law-enforcement officials that were present. While expressing sympathy for the petitioners, the chief justice told them to maintain the decorum of the court and adopt a more considered stance about what could have befallen their relatives. He also ordered law-enforcement agencies to set up a special cell to investigate the cases and proceed accordingly.

The superior judiciary has on several occasions taken notice of the flagrant violation of fundamental rights that are part and parcel of the phenomenon of enforced disappearance — even though the issue raises uncomfortable questions about the impunity with which certain elements of the state operate. Former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, in particular, was — at least for a time — considerably proactive in his efforts to bring the alleged perpetrators to task, even summoning members of the security establishment to court. Revelations have emerged over the past few years about detention centres where suspected militants have been confined for months, sometimes years, without their families knowing what had become of them. Several such individuals were in a terrible physical condition when they were finally produced; some, it is known, did not survive the treatment they were meted out while in captivity. That, and the length of time that many have been missing for, should put to rest any theories about them having met with accidents or been kidnapped out of enmity. In fact, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, although proving completely ineffectual in holding anyone accountable for the practice, has done well to document the cases; it has even traced the whereabouts of some of the missing. What then, is the point of a special cell dedicated to replicating the commission's work? Would it not be more result-oriented for the ColoED to be sufficiently empowered and resourced so that it can fulfil its mandate?

Behind the wheel, at last

ON Sunday, Saudi Arabia finally ended its ignominious status of being the last country in the world to prohibit women from driving. As the stroke of midnight heralded the repeal of this unofficial but long-enforced ban, many women immediately took to the streets — for the first time, behind the wheel — as passersby cheered and police officers proffered flowers. In a country where, despite some modest easing of restrictions, women are still forced to rely on the goodwill of their male guardians to exercise any kind of agency, such images are immensely resonant. Yet, while the move is arguably one of the most socially consequential reforms introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it is still open to question to what extent it will engender women's emancipation in the kingdom. The material ramifications are obvious — Bloomberg estimates the

dividends of this move alone may rake in \$90bn by 2030, and the empowerment of women through economic participation is widely acknowledged — but navigating the social implications for the conservative kingdom is far more fraught.

As is typically the case with any women's rights issue, even in the West, the process of lifting the ban has been highly contentious. Perhaps in an effort to satiate the resentments of its more regressive traditionalists, the state recently cracked down on many of the prominent campaigners of the movement to let women drive. At least eight are still detained, and liable to face charges in counter-terrorism courts for their peaceful dissent. Their incarcerations are thus a stain on the 'modernised' image of Saudi Arabia the crown prince would like to project. While he deserves a measure of credit for giving his female subjects permission to drive, the decades-long struggle of such activists is what truly enabled this moment. As the upheavals of the Arab Spring made clear, the power of the privileged is not inviolable. It would be unwise for Saudi authorities to resist the unstoppable force of a people determined to be the drivers of their own destinies.

Targeting Dawn

AN adversarial relationship between a free media and the state and public officials it seeks to cover is necessary and desirable in a democratic polity. In Pakistan, which has had long spells of undemocratic rule, such a relationship has often veered towards outright threats and violence against the media.

Today, as the country prepares to hold an unprecedented third consecutive on-schedule general election, there is a disturbing reality that confronts Dawn and its staff. Since late 2016, though with renewed and greater intensity since May 2018, the paper has been under attack in a wide-ranging and seemingly coordinated manner that includes its distribution being stopped in several areas.

While it has faced many strong challenges in the past, and will continue to do so with fortitude today, a campaign of disinformation, libel and slander, hate and virtual incitement to violence against Dawn and its staff has necessitated placing certain matters on the record.

One of the casualties of civil-military discord and strife in this country has been a free media that has embraced constitutional civilian supremacy. The publication of an article in this newspaper on Oct 6, 2016, 'Act against militants or face international isolation, civilians tell military', opened a new chapter of threats and intimidation against Dawn.

Following an unjustified state-led backlash, the newspaper pledged to cooperate with the authorities as required by the law, but defended the journalistic ethic of protecting one's sources. Dawn's editor and the reporter appeared separately before a government-constituted committee, comprising members of the civil and military intelligence, and were subjected to invasive, at times unacceptable, questioning for, cumulatively, many hours.

The effects of that insidious campaign against Dawn were continuing when the publication of a fully on-the-record interview with former prime minister Nawaz Sharif last month brought a round of new, intensified attacks against the newspaper. The seemingly retaliatory measures taken against Dawn in recent weeks have been deeply alarming and should concern all free-thinking and democratic citizens of the country.

It appears that elements within or sections of the state do not believe they have a duty to uphold the Constitution and the freedoms it guarantees. Article 19 of the Constitution is explicit: "Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press."

The "reasonable restrictions" that Article 19 permits are well understood by a free and responsible media and have been consistently interpreted by the superior judiciary.

Dawn, like all free, independent media organisations, has never argued that it does not make journalistic mistakes and errors in editorial judgement. It considers itself accountable to its readers and fully submits itself to the law and Constitution. It welcomes dialogue with all state institutions. But it cannot be expected to abandon its commitment to practising free and fair journalism. Nor can Dawn accept its staff being exposed to threats of physical harm.

The highest authorities must take note and intervene appropriately.

Gas price increase

IT is no secret that gas prices need to be sharply revised upward across the country but successive governments have been reluctant to advance the matter due to the deep political ramifications associated with it. Gas is the most important fuel in Pakistan's economy, and its pricing regime today is a vast, sprawling patchwork of different rates set for different consumers through administrative means. For decades, it has been pointed out by many experts as well as donor agencies that without major gas pricing reforms that give market forces a greater role, further investment in the gas sector — whether upstream or in transmission and distribution — will be difficult to arrange. In fact, without that investment, Pakistan's gas sector has descended into greater inefficiencies, with mounting losses, politically determined expansion plans, and industrial groups wrangling hard around the politics of the 'merit order list' as well as pricing.

It is against this backdrop that the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority has forwarded its recent price determinations, seeking an average 46pc price increase for gas in the country, to the interim government. The idea is right, but there are two problems. First, this is a huge policy decision and must be taken by an elected government, not an interim one. Despite the difficulties that elected governments face in implementing the price reforms required in the gas sector, it would be a mistake to try and advance such an important policy via the caretaker setup. Second, the reasons behind Ogra's move are entirely the wrong ones. Gas pricing reforms must be advanced with a view to inculcating the judicious use of the fuel, encouraging future investment, and weaning industry off its addiction to cheap, subsidised gas as the source of its profits. They should not be advanced to pay for the inefficiencies of public-sector gas utilities, to meet their revenue requirements or underwrite their growing losses. This is why an interim government cannot be trusted to oversee such a large exercise — its short stint in power means it is more likely to be misled by the bureaucracy to tie the country to a pricing regime that has long-lasting implications for the future of the economy. Whatever difficulties elected dispensations may face when it comes to carrying out gas pricing reforms, seeking shortcuts carries greater risks and must be avoided.

Erdogan's victory

AFTER 15 years in power, both as prime minister and president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is set to start a new term as president following his party's election victory on Sunday. Securing just over 52pc of the vote, the veteran politician survived a challenge mounted by the opposition CHP. While Turkey indeed has come a long way under Mr Erdogan and the AKP's watch, these successes should not lead to a democratically elected autocracy, as the Turkish leader is set to assume a more powerful presidency, with the office of prime minister eliminated. By and large, the vote was fair and the turnout was high (over 80pc), though some observers said there were a few attacks on opposition candidates. As stated, Mr Erdogan will now occupy an even more powerful presidency, approved in a referendum last year; this concentration of powers is worrying and Turkey's democratic gains must be preserved and strengthened under the new government.

Both internally and externally, Mr Erdogan faces numerous challenges. For example, his vow to go after the Kurdish PKK in Iraq and Syria will certainly not go down well with Turkey's own Kurds. Moreover, the previous AKP-led government's crackdown on opponents and those suspected to be linked to cleric Fethullah Gulen was a troubling development. Opponents of the government must be free to organise and express themselves, within constitutional bounds, and should not be subjected to a witch hunt. Turkey's economic situation is also fragile, while the war in Syria next door is far from over. These complications require an inclusive approach from the new government. Whether it is the Kurds or political opponents, the new government in Ankara must take all segments of society along and tolerate differences. This will strengthen Turkish democracy and block the path of quarters trying to grab power in an extra-constitutional manner, as was witnessed during the botched coup of 2016.

Biased accountability

THE National Accountability Bureau denies there is ongoing politicisation of accountability in the country or that the timing of some of its recent actions is related to the upcoming general election. The NAB leadership will have to work harder to dispel the growing concerns and suspicions. To be clear, NAB cannot be expected to and should not halt its operations simply because an election is imminent. The cause of accountability is year-round and no elected representative or aspirant to elected office should expect the law to be suspended just because an election is about to take place. What is troubling about some of NAB's recent actions, however, is that taken together they suggest a focus on the PML-N specifically and appear to involve unnecessarily harsh tactics. While all parties tend to view any action against their leaderships as politically motivated, and try and use the court of public opinion to escape lawful prosecution, prima facie a case of bias against the PML-N can be made.

Certainly, as an elected government both at the centre and in Punjab, the PML-N had the largest role in governance over the past five years. Remarkably, though perhaps predictably, there are no known instances of the PML-N itself initiating an inquiry and taking action against any party member or leader alleged to be involved in corruption and the misuse of public monies. The PML-N would have the country and the public believe that no official or politician associated with one of Pakistan's largest political parties, and a party clearly dominant in Punjab, has been involved in any form of corruption or misuse of public office. Nevertheless, it is NAB's responsibility to ensure that the rules and procedures are scrupulously adhered to at all times, and the cause of accountability both remain and be perceived as apolitical. Arresting a PML-N ticket holder simply at the stage that an investigation has been opened is surely excessive. Similarly, activating international channels to try and seek the forcible return of Sharif family members to Pakistan is strangely timed.

Indeed, the NAB leadership does not seem to understand that it may be harming the longer-term cause of accountability by taking actions that allow the PML-N to credibly allege bias. A politicised accountability process is what the country's major political parties have used as an excuse time and again to delay the introduction of a comprehensive accountability regime. Moreover, with the PML-N asserting that the party is being subjected to targeted accountability, the

sympathy factor may play a role in some voters' decision in whom to vote for — surely something that NAB does not want to be associated with. Perhaps NAB should desist from showy public statements and actions in the weeks ahead and prepare for the post-election accountability scenario.

Pakistan's first blind judge

THEY say that justice is blind — that is, impartial and objective — and that all citizens stand equal before the law. But people with disabilities, like other marginalised groups, know all too well the distance between this ideal and their reality. Yousaf Saleem, who was sworn in as the country's first visually impaired civil judge on Tuesday, is an exception by virtue of being exceptional. Blind since birth, this young man not only successfully overcame the social and environmental barriers that hinder PWDs from living a full and productive life, but also won a gold medal in his LLB Honours programme, and met all the requirements and aced the written exam to become a civil judge. All that stood in his way were the ableist prejudices of the interview panel, who disqualified him for no other reason than his disability. It was only when the media spotlighted his case, prompting the chief justice of Pakistan's notice, that this final hurdle was overcome.

It is certain that Mr Saleem will be an effective and sagacious officer of the court, proficient as he is in going above and beyond the bar set by and for mainstream (read: non-disabled) society, which places too high a burden on PWDs to prove their worth. But PWDs shouldn't have to serve as inspirations for the public to get equal treatment. In a country that has mandatory PWD employment quotas for both public and private sectors, disability discrimination is not only morally indefensible but also in breach of the law. Ignorance is no excuse; employers must educate themselves on how to provide reasonable accommodations to PWDs instead of dismissing their capabilities. That we are neither committed to taking preventative measures to reduce the disability incidence rate, nor dedicated to enabling PWDs to live and work among us, is a peculiar contradiction. As a society, it is we who lack a certain kind of vision — the ability to imagine a more inclusive, and ergo humane, Pakistan.

Bahria's appeal

CHIEF Justice Saqib Nisar on Tuesday rightly alluded to a basic principle of integrity: no amount of apparent 'charity' that is the fruit of ill-gotten gains can negate the dishonesty from which it springs. The chief justice said as much while hearing a review petition by Bahria Town against the verdict pronounced on May 4 by the Supreme Court, which held the real estate developer guilty of illegally acquiring thousands of acres of land to establish a mammoth housing scheme in Karachi's Malir district. The judgement struck down the transfer as null and void and banned Bahria from selling any plot, built-up unit, apartment, etc in the project. According to a conservative estimate spelled out in the verdict itself, the value of the land alone is such that Bahria's net earnings from a mere 4,241 acres in the project add up to an eye-watering Rs225bn. NAB has since also weighed in, saying it has "irrefutable evidence" of the massive land grab. During Tuesday's hearing, Chief Justice Nisar took issue with the fact that Bahria had opened a separate bank account to collect outstanding dues for the project; the verdict had directed the court's additional registrar to open a special account where such payments could be deposited. Yesterday, he sent the review to a five member Supreme Court bench.

The real estate developer's violation of the apex court's orders is a measure of the impunity with which it believes it can operate. To justify fraud and deceit on the grounds of bringing 'development' to the country is a perverse argument. Pakistan cannot be transformed into a "first world country" if there is no rule of law, no accountability for the privileged, and no protection for the marginalised. Among the latter in the Bahria Town Karachi case are indigenous communities who have resided for generations in Malir, earning their living from rain-fed agriculture and livestock farming. Many of them have been pressured and intimidated into surrendering their land. Certainly, those who invest in such projects have legitimate aspirations. But this is where the role of the media as a watchdog for the public interest comes in, a role that it has, with a few exceptions, woefully relinquished where Bahria is concerned. The Supreme Court on May 4 handed down two other separate and equally searing judgements pertaining to Bahria's projects in Murree and Rawalpindi. One hopes the apex court ensures that those verdicts too are respected.

FATF's unwelcome action

IT is no secret that Pakistan was on its way to the Financial Action Task Force's so-called grey list, but now, after its inclusion, a number of observations must be noted.

First, it should be a priority for the Pakistani leadership, which is currently in an indeterminate state with an interim government looking after affairs, to do everything possible to get off the list as soon as possible.

It would be a mistake to minimise the impact of FATF's move, even though Pakistan was previously on the list for three years until 2015 when it was conditionally removed from it.

Being put on the list again may not necessarily mean a drastic step as some have imagined it to be, but the country is already in a fragile state vis-à-vis the stability of its external sector and its rapidly dwindling foreign exchange reserves.

Raising capital and arranging badly needed inflows will be complicated after this development, which is sure to raise the cost of future money.

Second, it must be pointed out that FATF has made a mistake by taking this step at a time when an interim government is in power in the country.

The timing will burnish the impression that the global financial watchdog is responding to geopolitical considerations of other powers, notably those of the US and India, by putting an interim government in the impossible position of answering for policy matters that it does not have a mandate for.

The sheer opacity of FATF's decision-making process does not help matters either. Vague terms have left it impossible to know exactly what steps Pakistan is being asked to implement through its action plan.

Third, it is important for the civil and military leadership in Pakistan to understand that business as usual is no longer working.

Ordinary citizens, as well as Pakistan's armed forces, have given tremendous sacrifices in the fight against militant groups. However, more needs to be done to eliminate militancy.

There is little point in passing the laws and regulatory measures required by FATF to shield the country's financial system from terror financing if groups and individuals known to have been involved in terrorist activity, and designated by the UN as such, are free to roam, organise, solicit funding and get involved in electoral politics.

Passing the laws and other subordinate legislation is only the low-hanging fruit on the path to compliance with global concerns when it comes to the misuse of Pakistan's financial system by terrorist groups.

Generating higher numbers of prosecutions and convictions for terror-financing and money-laundering offences must go hand in hand with sustained action against designated entities.

Meanwhile, international bodies must also recognise Pakistan's successes and help it in its fight against militancy.

New blow for PML-N

THE scrutiny of electoral papers has in the past often resulted in an overzealous application of the law. The effect was to undermine certainty about which candidates were eligible to contest elections and disrupt the campaign process in the run-up to polls. It had been hoped that a decade of elected governments and significant reform of the electoral process would help produce a consistent and fair interpretation of the law and rules. Unhappily, that does not appear to be the case, and yet another general election is being unnecessarily drawn into controversy. The disqualification for life of former prime minister and PML-N leader Shahid Khaqan Abbasi by an appellate tribunal in the Rawalpindi registry of the Lahore High Court has delivered another jolt to the PML-N. A PTI candidate, Fawad Chaudhry, the party spokesperson, was also disqualified for life by the same appellate tribunal, but the ruling against Mr Chaudhry was suspended on appeal yesterday. Meanwhile, the PML-N's poll campaign suffered yet another blow yesterday when the party's outspoken candidate from Shakargarh, Daniyal Aziz, was convicted of contempt of court by the Supreme Court and rendered ineligible to contest elections for at least five years.

While all political parties have a tendency to cry foul and allege there is a conspiracy against the party to prevent it from succeeding in a general election, it does appear that the PML-N is at the very least suffering a spell of unusually bad luck in the run-up to the election. Decision after decision is going against the party and its candidates, even if individual decisions may have some basis in the law. In the case of Mr Abbasi, however, it is difficult to discern what precedent or legal logic the appellate tribunal intended to follow. The Supreme Court's recent jurisprudence on the applicability of Article 62(1)(f) and lifetime disqualification under the article have yet to be consistently understood by independent legal analysts, prompting Justice Faez Isa of the Supreme Court to draw up seven questions that in his opinion ought to be considered by the full court. Where sensible caution ought to have prevailed, the appellate tribunal of the Lahore High Court appears to have embraced an astonishing judicial activism. Surely, while the law must be applied without fear or favour, the tribunals should consider the implications of sweeping declarations. A fairer process is needed for all candidates.

Iranian nuclear plant

EVER since the US, under the Trump presidency, unilaterally withdrew from the multilaterally negotiated Iran nuclear deal in May, great uncertainty has followed, with many fearing that Washington is now on the path to a fully fledged confrontation with Iran. Much bluster and warlike threats coming from US officials, including the president, secretary of state and ambassador to the UN, have elicited matching responses from Iranian establishment figures, and it is feared the war of words may escalate further. On Wednesday, Iran announced that it had reopened a nuclear plant in Isfahan to process uranium. The IAEA says it had been informed of Iran's intentions to restart nuclear work, although the reopening of the plant does not violate the deal.

The move from Tehran should be seen in perspective; it is an indication from the Islamic Republic that if it is pushed to the wall through sanctions and threats, it may also walk away from the nuclear deal. The European co-signatories are trying to keep the agreement alive. However, American warnings of punitive actions against those who do business with Iran have caused major global corporations to announce they are cancelling plans to engage with Tehran. The

Iranian economy is not in good shape; this week saw protests launched by merchants in reaction to Iran's moribund financial state, in particular the plummeting value of the rial. If US sanctions kick in with full force and strangulate Iran's economy by penalising all those who do business with the country, there is little doubt Tehran will leave the deal. To prevent further deterioration of the situation, attempts to salvage the pact must be allowed to succeed. However, considering that the hawks in Washington are looking for a confrontation, negotiations and diplomacy may not succeed. And with Iran's Israeli and Gulf Arab nemeses egging the Americans on, chances of a new crisis appear to be very real.

Judicial reforms

IT is a welcome and frank admission that could set the right precedent for all institutions, many of which are loath to admit any fault or shortcoming on their part.

On Thursday, Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar observed during a hearing that the superior judiciary had been unable to reform the judicial institution. The judicial activism of Chief Justice Nisar in recent times has drawn a mixed reaction, but it has also helped shine a spotlight on the enduring deficiencies of the justice system in the country.

Without doubt, the judicial process needs significant reform, and a process must begin of not just identifying the flaws and problems in the justice system but recommending sensible and implementable solutions.

Indeed, the judicial activism of the superior judiciary has helped expose the many deficiencies in the overall judicial system: a well-functioning system that provides justice at the grass roots should not require high court and Supreme Court judges to arbitrarily intervene on behalf of petitioners and litigants.

Yet, if sensible reforms are to be suggested and implemented, the legal community will need to address tensions between the lower and superior judiciary, and the bar and bench too.

A hard-hitting resolution passed by the Karachi Bar Association ostensibly in protest against Chief Justice Nisar's alleged disparagement of an additional district judge in Sindh has laid bare acute tensions in the legal community. It is possible to interpret the tension as the inevitable result of an activist court that is seeking to put right much in a flawed judicial system.

But the superior judiciary may want to reflect on the growing criticism directed at it from many independent quarters. While disruption can be good for moribund institutions, the many interventions that superior court judges have made in recent times have created a decidedly mixed record.

While populism can be one measure of judicial success — and by that measure, the current superior judiciary would appear to be doing tremendously well — the judicial institution the world over has been built on clear rules, good laws and sound precedent.

The most effective judiciaries are in jurisdictions where the apex courts consistently interpret the law and coordinate their efforts with the executive and the legislature. At the very top, the judicial institution is neither flashy nor arbitrary. It is apparent that the superior judiciary in Pakistan, not least Chief Justice Nisar, is keen to deliver a better quality of justice to the people of Pakistan.

What is lacking, if the superior judiciary will permit a positive-minded critique of recent events, is a systematic plan and consistency of action. The unfortunate episode with a lower court judge in Sindh could be a turning point for all concerned. While its authority must be respected, it is advisable that the apex court approach its interventions and the task of reforms more cautiously.

Off the watch list

THERE may be a lawful reason or explanation for the move, but none has been publicly provided so far. Furthermore, it is not clear why a caretaker government should intervene in what is manifestly a policy area best left to an elected government. The chief of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, Ahmed Ludhianvi, has been removed from the Fourth Schedule by the caretaker Punjab government. As a result of his removal from the terror watch list, a freeze on the

ASWJ leader's assets will be lifted, travel restrictions will be withdrawn and, presumably, he will be allowed to campaign on behalf of ASWJ candidates in the upcoming election. It was already remarkable that several ASWJ candidates, including Aurangzeb Farooqui, president of the group but a candidate of the Rah-i-Haq Party, had been cleared to contest the general election. Now, it appears a banned party and its leadership can look forward to influencing the election in several constituencies across the country. Why has this become possible? Certainly, the law must be applied fairly and transparently. The preferred method of the state to use ad hoc and temporary measures against some banned militant outfits invariably runs into legal trouble. The courts cannot be faulted for applying the law and abiding by due process.

The questions, then, are mostly for the executive. Surely, at a minimum, a group accused by the state itself of involvement in militancy and spreading sectarian hatred should be required to publicly renounce violence and hate speech before any individuals associated with it can be considered poll candidates. But nothing of the sort appears to have been attempted with the ASWJ, and the group does not seem to be under any pressure to abide by the normal rules of electoral politics. If the ASWJ is suddenly finding itself the beneficiary of inexplicably generous treatment by the state, other proscribed groups and individuals on watch lists will surely seek similar treatment. What could be the logic behind such moves at a time when the country once again faces the strictures of being on the FATF grey list? It is also highly unusual for a caretaker administration to concern itself with such matters. Neither the elected governments that recently completed their terms nor the courts had seen fit to intervene in the matter, so why the quick action by the caretakers? More transparency, and common sense, is urgently needed.

Imran's Pakpattan visit

AS campaign season shifts into high gear, the mudslinging between and against candidates can be expected to get quite intense. A brief dose of what may lie ahead was witnessed on Thursday, when a video of the visit of PTI chief Imran Khan — accompanied by his wife — to the shrine of Baba Farid Ganjshakar in Pakpattan went viral and sparked a feeding frenzy on electronic and social media. The debate was over the fact that Mr Khan and his spouse knelt down

and kissed the doorsill of the saint's tomb, one of the most revered Chishty dargahs in the subcontinent. Many TV anchors and clerics were quick to pass judgement, condemning the move as a violation of religious edicts, with some saying the former cricketer was unfit for leadership. It must be said that religious issues are solely between man and his Maker, and should not be dragged into politics. While much may be fair in elections, politicians' personal and family lives, along with their religious beliefs and practices, should not be the subject of public discussion. Mr Khan has a right to express his religious beliefs freely, and it is not acceptable for others to condemn him, or any other politician, on confessional matters.

Visits to dargahs are a part of this region's culture; from the common man to prime ministers, many flock to pirs, shrines and holy men as part of their religious convictions. In fact, the tradition of kings and rulers seeking the blessings of Sufi saints in South Asia is centuries old. In Pakistan's context, Benazir Bhutto was known to visit pirs, while Asif Zardari is also said to have consulted a holy man while in the presidency. The Sharifs, too, often pay homage at Data Darbar in Lahore. Therefore, there is nothing strange about a politician visiting a shrine. Whether the various practices witnessed at shrines are orthodox or heterodox is a matter for theologians to discuss; they should not become part of campaign rhetoric.