

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June 2019

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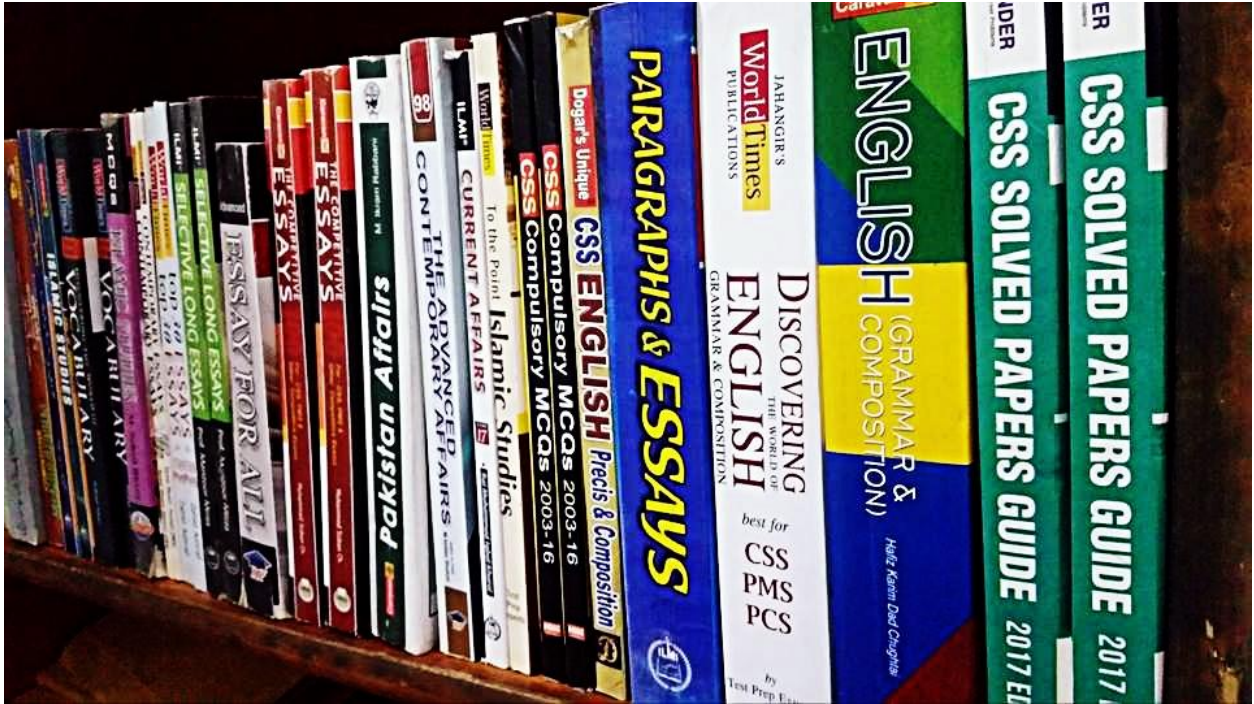
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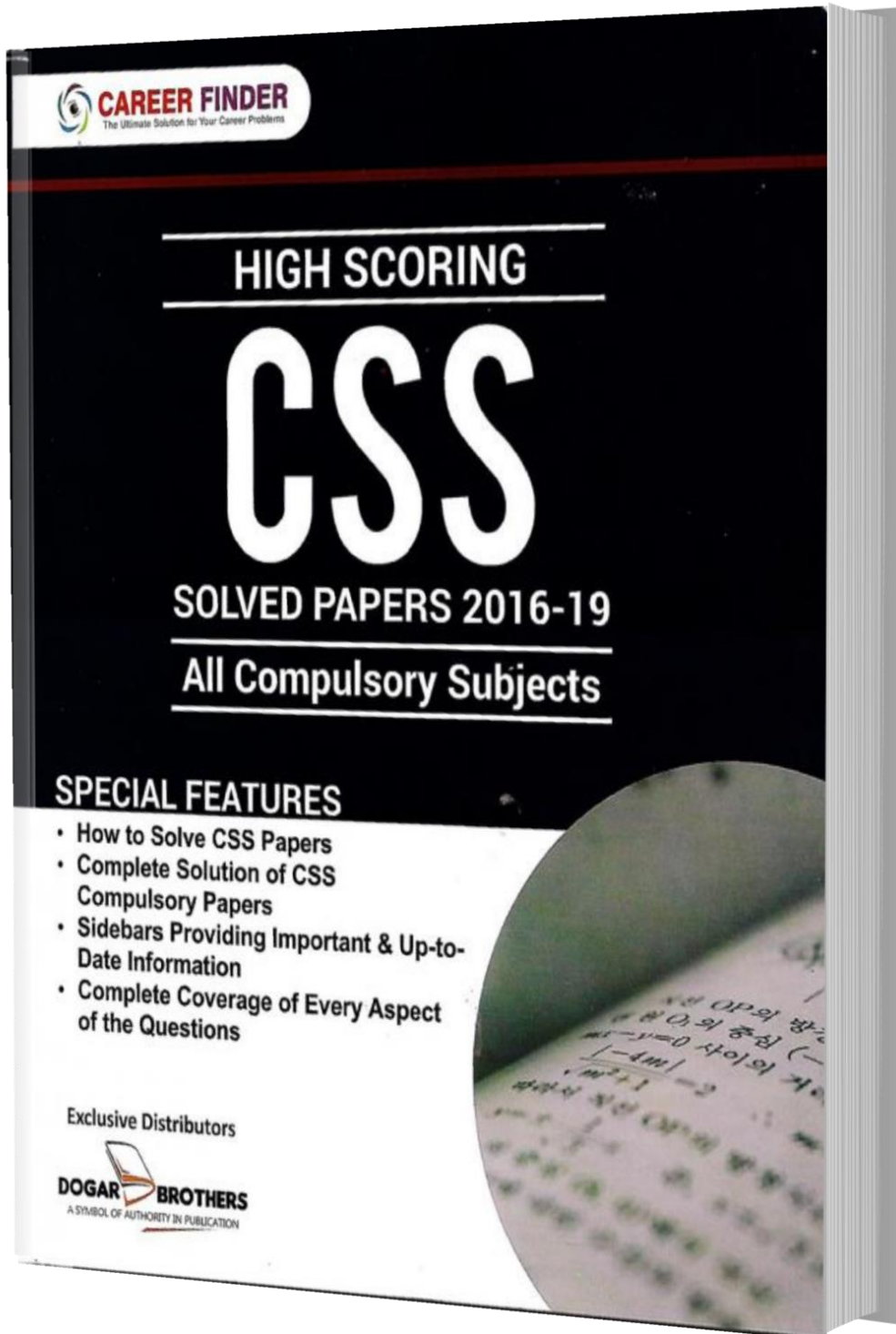
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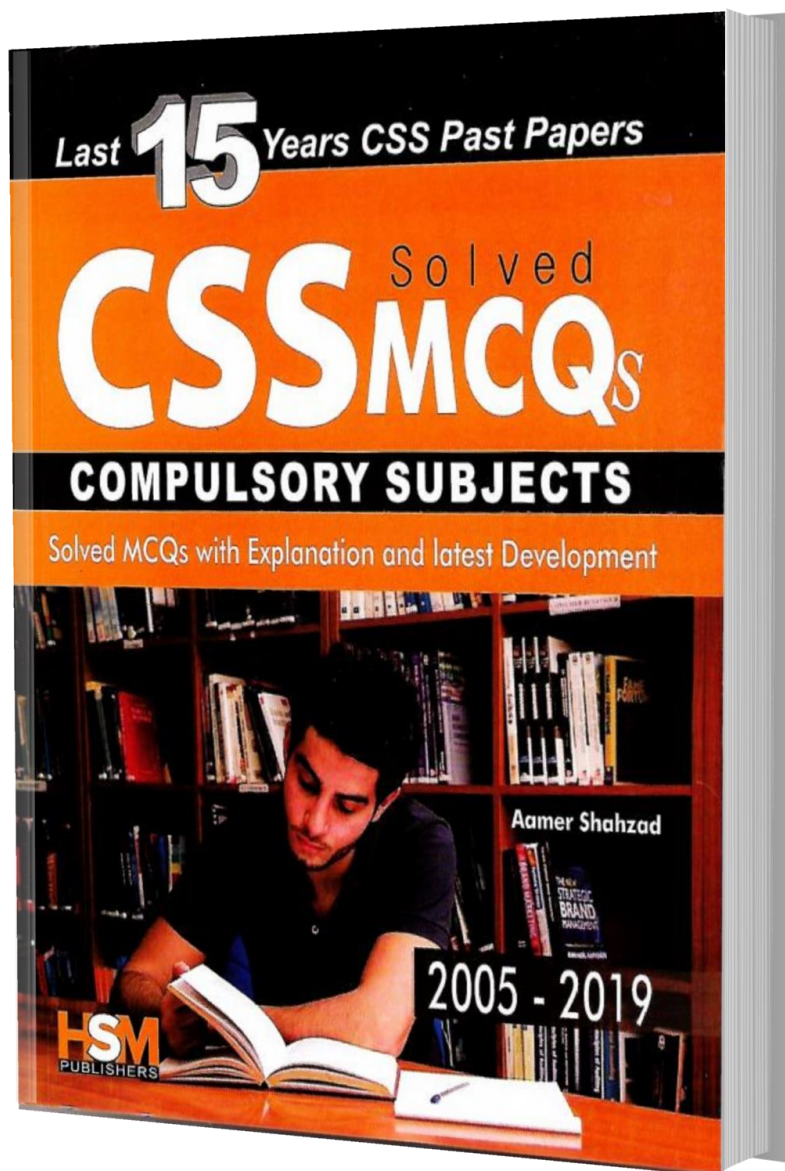
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Value of dissent

JUSTICE Maqbool Baqar has raised some pertinent points in favour of provincial autonomy at a time when the basic rule that empowers the provinces is coming increasingly under attack. The honourable justice was one of the Supreme Court judges who had heard the case which culminated in the Sindh government having to hand over three hospitals in Karachi to the centre. In his dissenting note, the judge has remarked that the distribution of legislative powers between the federation and the provinces are the spirit and soul of federalism. He says that provincial autonomy is at the core of this understanding and that the Constitution cannot be interpreted “in a manner that encroaches upon” the provinces’ space. He has also asserted that what is dissent today may be law tomorrow. It is a clear-headed ruling and a blueprint to make relevant arguments in an era in which judicial digression is not uncommon.

There is resistance in Justice Baqar’s note to any adventurers seeking the abrupt cancellation of clauses in the Constitution which provide for provincial autonomy. His arguments act as a timely counter to the controversial view that supports the reversal of certain constitutional clauses and predicts a coup against the existing system in favour of a more centralised dispensation. Perhaps his observations may not appear strictly legal in the conservative sense, but they are a much-needed riposte to those in the habit of overreaching their mandate and advising others on how they must and must not go about doing their jobs. A favourite target of such free and frequent advice are the politicians, including parliamentarians, who are told to discard their own experiences and experiments in governance and accept the diktats imposed on them. Little respect is paid to the hard work that went into the building of consensus on the 18th Amendment.

The note rightly points out that “the state’s obligation with regard to fundamental rights is ... to be fulfilled and discharged by all tiers of the government and all organs of the state as per their power, authority, obligation, and competence, strictly as prescribed under the Constitution”. This reinforces the foundations of the country. It would be hard to believe that a government which asserts its right to rule at the centre, and that boasts of having created a truly empowered local-tier system in KP and Punjab, can justify not standing with those who claim provincial autonomy as of right.

Surely, it is not unaware of what is essential in terms of the structure of autonomy. How can we have power at the top and at the bottom and leave the middle tier deprived? Such an approach would come across as an attempt to discredit the system that Justice Baqar and many other Constitution-abiding Pakistanis are eager to build on and preserve.

Modi & Kashmir

WITH Narendra Modi back in the prime ministerial saddle, legitimate questions have arisen about how the Indian leadership is likely to handle the simmering discontent in India-held Kashmir.

After all, Mr Modi's previous stint in power witnessed a brutal approach, with a militarised response to Kashmiris' yearning for freedom and dignity.

In fact, the radical Hindu BJP said it would end Kashmir's special constitutional status, and remains committed to this dubious goal.

This violent, clumsy response from Delhi to what is a political issue has increased the sense of alienation among Kashmiris, with many young and educated citizens of the region taking up arms to resist the Indian military machine on the battlefield and the erosion of Kashmiri autonomy.

The killing by Indian forces of young Kashmiri freedom fighter Burhan Wani in 2016 sparked protests in the held region, and also highlighted the trend that young educated Kashmiris were willing to opt for armed struggle against India after being disillusioned with the political process.

Indian forces recently gunned down Zakir Musa, said to be India's 'most wanted' militant, who was among Wani's comrades. Following the killing of Musa, thousands turned up for his funeral.

Unfortunately, ugly cycles of violence in occupied Kashmir have become the norm, and unless the establishment in Delhi comes up with a fresh approach, they will show no signs of abating.

Along with the concerns many in the region have regarding Mr Modi's approach to regional politics and his government's treatment of minorities within India, the issue of Kashmir will remain prominent.

Will the Indian prime minister continue with his hard-line approach, pushing Kashmiri youth to the wall and forcing them to fight the Indian state? Or will he display statesmanship and adopt a fresh approach to the troubled region?

While those wishing to see peace prevail in South Asia will be hoping that Mr Modi picks the latter option, the reality may be more of the same.

However, while the BJP's suppression of the Kashmiri freedom struggle has resulted in the disillusionment of practically all Kashmiris with India, even some of Delhi's most loyal supporters in the held region — the Abdullah clan, Mehbooba Mufti etc — appear dismayed at the way the Hindu nationalists have treated Kashmir.

A different approach to the occupied territory by Delhi can help break the deadlock in South Asia, but only if Mr Modi and his acolytes have the courage to opt for it.

No smoking

YESTERDAY marked the World Health Organisation's No Tobacco Day, with this year's theme being 'tobacco and lung health'. The latter highlights the damage caused to the lungs "from cancer to chronic respiratory disease" as a result of tobacco use. It is an opportunity for Pakistanis to ask themselves if they are doing enough to deter the smoking habit, which is still prevalent across all socioeconomic lines. Despite the known link between cigarette smoking and a whole range of diseases and health-related complications, and even with growing awareness of the harmful effects of smoking and second-hand smoke, it seems as if the number of tobacco and nicotine users is only increasing in the country at a time it has drastically reduced in large parts of the developed world. Most worryingly, tobacco users are getting younger and younger. According to figures released by the Pakistan Paediatrics Association last month, around 1,000 to 1,200 children between the ages of six and 16 years take up smoking every day. Cigarettes are highly addictive, and difficult to give up once a person takes up smoking.

It is extremely important to introduce legislation that bans the selling of cigarettes to minors. The price of cigarettes is also relatively cheap in the country, unlike other parts of the world, but the cost to national health is staggering. Loose cigarettes are easily available in the market. Some estimates link the use of tobacco to 160,000 deaths each year in Pakistan. All this can be avoided, but it requires intelligent policymaking and the will to change.

Towards the end of last year, the government had proposed imposing the sin tax on tobacco and sweetened beverages, which is the right way to go. But much more needs to be done. Other countries that have heavily taxed cigarettes have seen success with the number of users gradually dropping, following years and years of activism by concerned individuals and groups. Pakistan should look up to these nations when formulating its own anti-tobacco policies.

Increase in fuel prices

IT has become a ritual of sorts in our political circus: successive governments are forced to raise the price of fuel — petrol, diesel, kerosene etc — for reasons to do with revenue or the scaling back of subsidy expenses, only to be met with howls of protest from the opposition.

The PPP government was forced to see through a massive fuel price hike in 2008 when, as part of an urgently needed IMF programme, it had to eliminate fuel subsidies in one go. The ex-depot sale prices of petrol and diesel, for instance, were Rs53 and Rs32 respectively when the elections of February 2008 took place; they shot up to Rs86 and Rs56 by July because the newly elected government had no choice but to pass through the full impact of the global price to consumers at the pump. It was the PML-N that raised a storm at the time, only to be confronted with a similar challenge when it was elected to rule.

The PML-N reaped a bonanza when the record-high oil prices finally crashed while the party was in office. But there was a flip side to this rapid fall. Since a large part of the state's revenue comes from taxes on fuels, the government's revenue collection was set to drop just as rapidly. So it resorted to raising taxes on fuel as the price declines accelerated, passing

on only half the benefit to the consumer and keeping the other half to maintain the fiscal balance. The PTI protested through those years, arguing that fuel price increases burden the common man with inflation and should not be used for revenue generation.

Now that it is in power it is the PTI's turn to discover that facts are indeed facts.

Yes, the devaluation of the exchange rate had made a fuel price adjustment inevitable, but those who came before also had their compulsions. Even the claim of the ruling party that it is keeping a lid on using fuels for revenue generation purposes holds little water. The sales tax on petrol, to take one example, was being charged at 8pc in the prices notified on Aug 1, 2018, which then rose to 17pc by Jan 1, fell to 12pc by May 5 and has again risen to 13pc in the latest notification on June 1. Of the Rs4.26 increase in the price of petrol, a full Rs1.34 is accounted for by the increase in sales tax alone. The PDL has also risen from less than Rs10 before the government's arrival, to Rs 14 per litre today.

It is now the ruling PTI's turn to face the same type of opposition that it had displayed to governments in the years gone by; today, it finds itself with no choice but to bow before the facts while taking the taunts of "economic terrorism" and "petrol bomb" in its stride.

Polio crisis

IT'S been an abysmal couple of weeks for polio eradication in Pakistan. While Nigeria — one of the three countries where polio has not been eradicated — seems to be on its way to being declared free from the 'wild' strain of the virus, Pakistan has been seeing a worrying increase in the number of cases at home. Large-scale disinformation campaigns and the misuse of modern-day technology to perpetuate myths have caused immeasurable damage to years of efforts put into eradicating the virus, which has resulted in many front-line workers and security officials losing their lives. The optimism that could be seen not too long ago, when it truly seemed that the country was inching closer to complete eradication of polio, seems to be disappearing, as officials now look for ways to tackle these unexpected new challenges they are faced with. So far, only six months into

2019, the total number of cases stands at 21, which is higher than the figure from the previous two years combined. Nine of the cases are from KP, while there are another three each from Sindh and Punjab. In Karachi, the latest environmental survey conducted by the Emergency Operation Cell found 11 sites that were vulnerable to the spread of the virus. And Lahore had its first polio case in two years, followed by another one in May. Referring to the cases in Lahore that came as a shock to many, the World Health Organisation's International Health Regulations Emergency Committee recently expressed deep concern regarding the prevalence of the virus "outside the high-risk corridors". Looking at the data emerging from various countries that are at risk, the committee found recent events and the rising number of polio cases in Pakistan most worrying, concluding that the country's polio efforts were no longer 'on track'.

The committee also recommended that all affected countries guarantee that their residents receive the vaccine and have an international certificate of vaccination in hand before any international travel. To these concerns, the prime minister's focal person for polio eradication responded that the efforts were, in fact, 'back on track' through new innovations being introduced in the operations. However, he added that the number of polio cases by the end of the year will have risen to 50, before beginning to decline again. If these words were meant to be reassuring, they certainly are not.

Many mouths to feed

THE PTI is readying itself for a media coup in Lahore, in the bargain reminding everyone around that democracy is not about one man speaking for the government all the time as might have been the case in the past; it is about giving a voice to the masses. The party's new Punjab wizard, provincial Information Minister Samsam Bukhari, was blamed for going slow, especially when he had illustrious and loud predecessors to compete with. But lo and behold, he mumbled the magic mantra and found at his command 40 committed souls — spokespersons — with a licence to grill. Only one assignment fits their size: drowning out all other voices with their chorus. But the party is by no means the inventor here. Others before the PTI had taken it upon themselves to make public lists of experts they were comfortable being represented by. Knowing that it is a quick learner, the PTI must have

been previously caught up with other important things to have not come up with a publicised panel of its own people speaking out with the requisite conviction whenever and wherever necessary.

Journalists — of whom incidentally we always have too many — are too old-fashioned to come out of their mindset. They may quickly and obediently agree with the PML-N's Rana Sanaullah that these spokespersons are here to counter the Maryam Nawaz 'threat'. However, one should not forget who was originally responsible for this trend where parties are required to have legions of spokespersons ready to respond to an issue at a ticker's notice. Over and above the habit of newspapers telling their readers how the relevant spokespersons were unavailable to speak, there are now channels and tickers and talk shows that cannot be missed. These mushrooming channels need to be fed the required info round the clock. This may just be the beginning. All things considered, we may soon have lists showing us which spokesperson currently speaking for which party was working which shift on a particular day.

OIC politicking

UNITY in the Muslim world has been a distant dream, with sectarian, nationalist and other factors often cropping up to fuel division. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has, in particular, been ineffectual in promoting unity and the common interests of over a billion Muslims across the globe. What is worse, the organisation is often used by some Muslim states as a political vehicle to denounce and demonise their geopolitical rivals within the OIC. This was sadly the message that emanated from a series of meetings held in Makkah over the past few days. Early on Saturday morning, the Saudi monarch used the OIC summit held in Islam's holiest city to denounce Iran's "sabotage", referring to recent Houthi strikes on Saudi oil pipelines, as well as attacks by as yet unidentified assailants on oil tankers in the Gulf. The Saudis' tone towards Iran at the summits of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League preceding the OIC conclave was even harsher. Riyadh accused Tehran of indulging in "criminal acts" while the Arabs — with the exception of Iraq — rallied around the Saudis in denouncing Iran and called upon "the international community to take a firm stand to confront Iran". Tehran has reacted to the statements in kind,

accusing Riyadh of “sowing division” and towing the “American and Zionist” line.

Ideally, if any OIC member has issues with another, instead of indulging in mudslinging publicly, the good offices of a third country should be used to resolve the issues. However, the reality is that the OIC and other multilateral Arab and Islamic forums are often seen as being used by Saudi Arabia to forward its geopolitical aims. Moreover, the ongoing Saudi-Iranian spat has an unseemly sectarian flavour to it, reflected in the fact that Iraq — an Arab country — refused to denounce Iran, considering its own Shia population.

In the shadow of such internal bickering, other issues — some would say the ‘real’ issues plaguing the Muslim world — were also raised, including by this country’s prime minister during the OIC summit. The proverbial burning issues of Palestine, Kashmir, the shocking plight of the Rohingya as well as the hateful march of Islamophobia all were highlighted. But how can the Muslim world, and others, take such pronouncements seriously when there is a profound lack of unity and clear divisions within the OIC? The issues are indeed grave; the Palestinian dream of a state risks being shattered by US President Donald Trump’s ‘deal of the century’. In Kashmir, India continues to use brutal tactics against the held region’s people while the misery of the Rohingya shows no sign of abating. The OIC — with the combined petrochemical wealth and manpower of its members — has huge potential to address the ills of the Muslim world and the global community in general. But how can these energies be harnessed when the forum is used to forward petty agendas and promote division?

Sales tax bonds

At long last, the government has managed to deliver on its promise made in January to exporters that the sales tax refunds they are owed will be paid in the form of bonds that carry a return, are encashable, transferable and can be collateralised. The promise was made in the days when the finance bill amendment was introduced — but it has taken several months for the government to actually deliver on it. The first refunds of about Rs7bn have finally been paid through these bonds, while hundreds of other applicants are in the queue and an additional amount of Rs45bn is in the pipeline awaiting disbursement. In time, this figure is clearly set to rise, and given the

looming withdrawal of exemption from sales tax for the export-oriented sectors, it seems that the government's recourse to these bonds will increase massively. If the figures put out by the exporter community are anything to go by, hundreds of billions of rupees in outstanding refund claims might end up being settled through these bonds, while hundreds of billions more will accumulate annually if the zero-rating regime is withdrawn as is being reported.

What exactly will these bonds be worth in the market? At present, they carry a negative real return of 10pc per annum paid out on maturity after three years, so the returns cannot possibly be the purpose for holding on to them. The only other thing giving any value to these bonds is that banks can use them to meet their Statutory Liquidity Reserves ratios, though how keen the banks are for this remains to be seen. They will likely sell at a steep discount in the market, and as more and more of them are issued, the discounts are likely to get steeper and steeper, because it is doubtful if the banks would have an unlimited appetite for them. Having started this scheme, it would be key to know when to end it. It will be tempting for the government to keep on using these bonds to settle refund claims, but at some point in time, the issuance of these bonds will start having a monetary impact, as well as consequences for debt management and disclosure. Recourse to such midway measures that appear fiscally neutral in the beginning should be limited, and discipline will be required to resist temptation and to end the scheme quickly.

HIV and healthcare

THE outbreak of HIV/AIDS cases in Ratodero — around 730 thus far, including nearly 600 children — must focus the authorities' attention on the appalling gaps in healthcare in Sindh that have created the conditions for such a distressing situation. Given the incident has occurred in Larkana, the home district of the PPP government's top leadership, makes it all the more indicative of the wider malaise in the province. The team of international health experts that arrived on Tuesday to investigate the reasons for the spread of the disease has also handed over an emergency supply of HIV/AIDS medication to the provincial health authorities. Undoubtedly, an outbreak of HIV/AIDS creates heightened alarm in the general public

perhaps because it is incurable and the stigma around it has grave social consequences. However, ensuring that such a tragic situation does not arise again necessitates not ad hoc but overall long-term changes in healthcare. This would also curb the spread of other diseases needlessly caused by criminal negligence on the part of the authorities as well as a lack of adherence to basic principles of healthcare by medical professionals, let alone those masquerading as doctors.

Healthcare facilities in interior Sindh are grossly inadequate and understaffed. Significant shortages of medical supplies, aside from a deliberate disregard for patients' health, also contribute to the illegal practice of reusing syringes. The dearth of government facilities has led to a mushroom growth of private clinics, often run by quacks out to make a quick buck from an unsuspecting public — Sindh's Anti-Quackery Directorate has sealed over 300 clinics since the HIV outbreak came to light,. Notwithstanding legislation about the screening of blood, a shockingly lax regulatory regime allows infected blood to enter the system. That Pakistan has one of the highest rates of injection use in the world compounds the problem further. A public awareness campaign discouraging injections/drips, tightening regulatory protocols and ensuring adequately stocked and sufficiently staffed healthcare centres is the only way to learn from this calamity.

World Environment Day

FORTY-FIVE years ago on this day, the United Nations' World Environment Day was first celebrated. Throughout the world, on June 5, efforts are made at creating greater awareness of environmental issues and finding solutions to the world's most pressing climate-related problems. Since 1974, the day has increasingly assumed global significance, with country after country realising the import of a joint natural heritage that transcends borders. Glass ceilings have been shattered and information is easily accessible to everyone. And yet, despite all their technological advancements and research, societies and governments have moved away from a basic truth about the crucial link between human existence and nature. In all these years, we have only seen climate patterns change at an accelerating speed,

with commerce and convenience trumping environmental concerns in a world where so-called 'free-market' greed and desire reign supreme — with no realistic alternatives in sight to replace that system.

In the past few years alone, we have witnessed our mighty rivers and oceans clogged with toxic waste and plastic; the death of coral reefs that maintain the ecosystem for diverse marine life; ferocious wildfires swallowing everything in their path; glaciers melting at terrifying speed; rising water levels, heavy rainfall and flooding that destroy and displace in equal measure; droughts and heatwaves that scorch the earth and kill vegetation, animal and human life; rising food shortage; and large-scale climate-caused migration. And it is only expected to get worse. Despite growing evidence of the catastrophes posed by climate change, there are still some among those occupying the most powerful positions in the world who deny the reality of global warming. In 2015, the Paris Agreement stated that the responsibility for halting climate change rests with each nation. Its aim was to reduce global warming to below 2°C — unfortunately, we are not even close to achieving that goal, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase.

As many parts of Pakistan are currently gripped by a suffocating heat wave, policymakers must reflect on whether they are keeping their promise. That Pakistan is the world's seventh most vulnerable country to the risks of climate change is an oft-repeated statistic. This year's theme in particular — 'air pollution' — is something the country is no stranger to. For the past few years, several parts of the country have been enveloped in thick smog at certain times of the year, presenting a health emergency. According to a Washington-based report, Pakistan is second only to India and China when it comes to mortality rates connected to poor air quality. Pakistan may be fortunate to have a prime minister who refers to himself as an environmentalist and clings to an idealism that is refreshing. But until the idealism translates into long-lasting change that can be seen (and breathed), it will remain a hollow and futile sentiment.

PTI restructuring

TO have a worker-based political organisation may be a romantic notion in Pakistan but it does make a lot of practical sense for Prime Minister Imran Khan and his associates to want to create a party worth the name. The

recent decision to attempt a restructuring drive within the PTI, bar a few offices at the top, is a part of fulfilling that desire. There have been signs about the level of importance Mr Khan attaches to organisation at the local level. After his camp lost a couple of crucial by-elections in Punjab a few months ago, Mr Khan was faced with a difficult question: was the PTI's loss due to the inability of the party cadres to effectively communicate his message? The PTI, which claims to be anti-dynasty, has drawn considerable flak for its failure to work towards an activist-based system to sustain the kind of political culture it advocates. The dissolution of the structure is proof that the PTI's own ranks feel they lack the organisational capacity or efficiency of, say, the Jamaat-i-Islami, which had otherwise apparently inspired the PTI founder on some counts. In fact, the model the ruling party has adopted is the same as pursued, generally, by the others — which may not be the result of any democratic exercise.

The idea is to have a stronger PTI by 2021, especially with the next general election scheduled for 2023. The party has a new constitution, a gift to mark its 23 years — and its first birthday at the helm. It is natural for all parties and leaders in power to try and consolidate themselves in a way that guarantees a firmer, longer grip on power. Thus, as news about the PTI's desire to turn itself into a formidable organisation with deep roots among the people does the rounds, it is not impossible to notice a parallel effort to reinforce the image of Mr Khan as a true leader of the people. This is not for the first time that such a dual task has been undertaken. All rulers, both politicians and military men, and all parties and ruling factions, have gone through similar exercises in their time. It is unfortunate for the anti-dynasty and anti-dictatorial elements though that quite often personalities have beaten their own parties in the race. Given these trends, Mr Khan's party will have to do something exceptional to come out of his spell and act as a modern and efficient machine.

Brilliant win

PAKISTAN'S stunning victory over favourites England in the crucial World Cup match at Nottingham on Monday has turned the tournament on its head. The 14-run win that broke a dismal 11-match losing streak for Sarfraz Ahmed and his men has reaffirmed their status as the most predictably

unpredictable team in world cricket, whose exploits have often left analysts and critics completely flabbergasted. The win has prompted diehard Pakistan supporters to find similarities between this World Cup and the one in 1992 where an initial losing streak was overturned handsomely as the team went on to win the contest. Nevertheless, the question being asked is, how will Pakistan perform in the next game against Sri Lanka, or against arch rivals India on the 16th? Surely, it is a team that transcends analysis. To predict a Pakistan win at this stage against the formidable England, that had given the team a 4-0 drubbing just two weeks earlier, would have been to mock both cricket logic and common sense. It is true that upsets and turnarounds add to the charm and glory of the sport, but even by that yardstick the odds had been too heavily stacked against a Pakistani win.

Pakistan's World Cup campaign was marred by a spate of injuries, hasty changes in the squad, an unimaginative captaincy and shoddy bowling and fielding. The defeat against the West Indies on Friday did not help. Players on the field were subjected to disparaging remarks. All that has changed. The outcome of the match, where the favourites have been humbled with such flair, shows Pakistan's resilience and confidence. There is a definite sense of hope. Still, much ground has to be covered, and the team is aware of it. There is a mountain to climb in the India game, as indeed in the tough contests against Australia and New Zealand. How far Pakistan will go in this tournament is a moot point. But after a disastrous start, they now appear a cohesive, determined unit. Winning the title seems a distant dream, but this had also been the case in 1992. The best way forward is to remain focused and take one match at a time.

Data protection

AN alarming yet little discussed practice has become routine in the lives of mobile users across the country; citizens find themselves being subjected to a flurry of unsolicited mass messages which can be categorised as spam, the objective being to sell a product or service. From home tutors and visa services to restaurants, refrigeration products and even matrimonial companies, a large range of brands and sellers target citizens through these SMS adverts with the hope of luring them into buying a product or service. Most citizens haven't a clue about how these companies obtained their

personal information, such as their mobile phone number or email — a fact that has been underscored in a detailed investigation published in this newspaper recently. The report lays bare how people are selling subscriber details of numbers from various mobile networks in Pakistan, as well as their call history and location. Data being sold in Pakistan has to do with Nadra number details, CNIC pictures, call detail record (CDR), IMEI scanning, bank account details and secure active Sims. Shockingly, when one such seller was asked if a family tree of an individual could be provided if CNIC details were given, the reply was in the affirmative and the price tags for family trees, with and without photos, were quoted.

The phrase ‘data has become the new oil’ prompts the reckoning that it is data that oils the engines of modern e-commerce. Companies both big and small are after the personal data of consumers in order to target their marketing campaigns to attract prospective customers. It is no secret that the personal information of citizens has been compromised. As rightly highlighted in this report, threats to Pakistanis’ personal information are growing as the country’s digital footprint expands, allowing businesses — and even criminals — to misuse private data they should not have access to. Other than instances where this data is obtained directly and with consent, it is largely disseminated after being leaked from databases which should be secure. In the report, the general secretary of the Pakistan Software Houses Association has argued that many leaks of mobile numbers from telecom companies are reported to have been carried out by individuals who either worked for these companies or had worked for them in the past. Nadra employees have faced the same allegations — but law-enforcement agencies did not act against the individuals due to the absence of complaints.

The government must immediately turn its attention to data-protection laws. It is clear that there is a systemic issue of leaks within institutions that have databases like telcos or Nadra which have private information. The breach appears to be more of a human problem than a technical one, and laws must be formulated so that action can be taken against individuals who leak data to various entities and make citizens vulnerable to exploitation.

A toothless law

HAVING a law on the statute books is an important first step towards curbing social evils. It is evidence of the government throwing its weight behind the prevention of such acts, redressal for the victims and sanctions against the perpetrators. However, when the state drags its feet in putting in place mechanisms for implementation that are part of the law itself, it can justifiably be accused of paying lip service to the issue. The Sindh High Court has been hearing petitions by women seeking protection against violence and harassment at the hands of spouses, in-laws and other relatives. Earlier in the week, Justice Salahuddin Panhwar castigated the Sindh chief secretary for not complying with his earlier directives pertaining to the enforcement of the domestic violence act. Stating that “the responsibility of the government never comes to an end by making an enactment but continues till the objective thereof is achieved within spirit of the enactment”, he ordered the provincial government to ensure compliance with his injunctions within three months.

The Sindh Assembly passed the domestic violence act in 2013, making Sindh the first province to have such a law. Given that six years have elapsed and the government is nowhere near “institutionalis[ing] measures which prevent and protect women, children and any other vulnerable person from domestic violence” — the stated objective of the legislation — this is an appalling dereliction of duty. It took the government three years to frame the rules for implementing the act. Even now, of the mandated 29 protection officers, only four have been appointed. Protection committees to ensure that the victim is provided medical treatment for injuries inflicted by the aggressor and relocated to a safe place — in effect, acting as a rescue mechanism in a potentially life-threatening situation — are not yet functional. So negligent has the approach been that sections of the police and lower judiciary are unaware of the existence of the law. Accounts of violence wreaked by men on their wives, daughters and sisters are tragically commonplace, and often only emerge after the woman has been murdered. That makes it all the more important for vulnerable individuals, including children in violent domestic relationships, to receive emergency assistance and legal aid. Instead, unsympathetic officials and cumbersome legal procedures discourage victims from coming forward, and exacerbate the

trauma of those who do. Only one case has so far been successfully prosecuted under the law. It is not difficult to see why.

World Oceans Day

TODAY marks the UN's World Oceans Day 2019. The five great oceans that cover over 70pc of the earth's surface are faced with unprecedented threats in the 21st century. With a rising human population and increasing consumerist demand, these water bodies that are host to the vast majority of the planet's life forms have seen more disturbances in the past few decades than in the centuries before. With climate change and water temperatures rising, entire ecosystems have become imbalanced: coral bleaching and the change in migratory and hatching patterns of fish are just a few of the effects of global warming. Then there is the massive problem created by humankind's addiction to plastic, which causes suffering to other forms of life that are not responsible for this state of affairs. The worldwide production of plastic has increased to nearly 300m tonnes a year. Over 8m of that ends up in the oceans, where it can take anywhere from 100 to 1,000 years to disintegrate. Plastic has been found in marine life in the Mariana Trench — the deepest part of the ocean known to us.

Other forms of pollution include discarded deep-sea fishing nets and hooks that marine life gets entangled or ensnared in. There is also large-scale industrial pollution, while growing tourism industries by the coast and commercial shipping activity leave behind their share of pollution, disturbing the natural habitat of animals and plant life. Oil and gas companies also continue to engage in drilling operations and deep-sea mining under the seabed. Then there is the glaring problem of overfishing, illegal fishing and unethical fishing practices such as the use of dynamite to catch fish, which results in large-scale losses and damage to the environment, with some species of fish nearing extinction just to feed humanity's expanding appetite. The citizens of the world must elect leaders that pledge to make the environment a top priority, and we must hold one another accountable in the safekeeping of our shared planet before it's too late.

Renewed talks offer

AS Narendra Modi kicks off his second term in office as India's prime minister, it is unclear what approach he intends to adopt towards Pakistan.

Will Mr Modi continue with the bellicose anti-Pakistan rhetoric that was witnessed for most of his first term to please his hard-line Hindu support base? Or will he turn the page and attempt to pursue dialogue with this country to break the ice in South Asia?

While the messages coming from New Delhi are mixed, Islamabad is clear in its vision: let both nations come to the negotiating table and find a way forward to shed the animosity of the past seven decades — and counting — and attempt a new start in South Asia. This was the gist of the letter Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote recently to his Indian counterpart to congratulate him on his election victory. In the letter, the prime minister reiterated this country's resolve to discuss all outstanding issues, including militancy and the long-festering Kashmir dispute. Mr Khan added that both countries needed to join forces against poverty and underdevelopment.

Considering that the two countries were at the brink of war only a few months ago, the need for dialogue cannot be understated. Especially now that Prime Minister Modi is done electioneering, perhaps he can seize the opportunity and take bold steps where the bilateral relationship with Pakistan is concerned. There are indeed powerful lobbies on both sides that will not want a normalisation of ties.

But both leaderships must look at the bigger picture — the future of over a billion people in South Asia — and work towards achieving a permanent peace for the development and progress of the region.

In this regard, while Pakistan has been gracious and showed forbearance, many in India have exhibited belligerent, warlike behaviour and arrogance when addressing Pakistan. The government showed grace by returning Indian pilot Abhinandan Varthaman during the height of the stand-off in February, while senior functionaries in Pakistan — from the prime minister down — have said they are ready for dialogue. Yet it needs to be seen if India is ready to reciprocate.

There seemed to be a brief thaw as the foreign ministers exchanged pleasantries in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek last month. However, nothing substantive came out of that chance encounter.

Both premiers will be attending a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting (also to be held in Kyrgyzstan) next week. While the Indian side has said no bilateral meetings are planned at the event, it would be wise for both leaderships to seek out this — or any other mutually convenient opportunity — and attempt to normalise relations.

Let both start with the ‘soft’ issues (CBMs, people-to-people contact) and work their way up to the major issues (Kashmir, violence). It is clear that if these opportunities are lost, then only further turbulence is likely in one of the most tortured geopolitical relationships in the world.

Uptick in violence

THERE is a point after which seemingly random events become indicative of a pattern; and it is now apparent there has been a marked escalation in terrorist violence in the country. The latest incident took place on Friday when three army officers and a soldier were martyred in an IED blast that struck their vehicle in Datta Khel tehsil, North Waziristan. Four others were injured. Including these casualties, 10 security personnel have died and 35 have sustained injuries during the last few weeks in the same area. A day earlier, two Frontier Corps personnel lost their lives when they were attacked while on Eid patrol duty in Harnai, Balochistan. Civilians too are falling prey to the uptick in violence. Five people were killed and 13 wounded on Friday in two bomb explosions in Ziarat, also in Balochistan; the victims belonged to the Bohri and Hazara Shia communities. Recently, there were two large-scale, brazen attacks by separatists in the same province. The first, on April 18, was a massacre near Ormara targeting mainly security personnel travelling on a bus; the second, an attack by armed assailants on PC hotel in Gwadar, took place on May 12.

These are worrying indicators for the security situation, particularly given the other challenges facing the Pakistan government. Datta Khel was one of the most volatile tribal areas when extremist violence perpetrated by the Fata-based TTP was at its height in the country. Widely believed to be a

command-and-control centre for Al Qaeda and a hub of terrorist activity, it was a frequent target of US drones; in fact, the first drone strike after the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 was in Datta Khel. The area's complex history of militancy means the comparative peace forged in North Waziristan and the rest of erstwhile Fata is perforce a tenuous one. It is worth asking whether enough is being done to strengthen it. Surely no one would want conditions to be created in which violence can once again find a foothold and create havoc for military personnel and civilians alike. Meanwhile, Balochistan remains a cauldron for multifaceted threats to security. Aside from insurgents determined to sustain their campaign whatever the cost, murderous extremist groups based in the province have for years targeted minority communities across the country. Urgent assessment of the situation is needed. Perhaps the state should try another approach for a durable peace.

Tax-filing extension

ANOTHER month, another extension. That has become the story of the tax filing deadline this fiscal year. Now in a recent announcement, the government has extended the deadline to the end of the fiscal year, meaning those who have not filed their returns all year have yet another chance to do so. The argument is that the government intends to bring the filing deadline in sync with the cut-off date for the amnesty scheme it has announced. For a government whose finance team is building its revenue plan on aggressive documentation and a base-broadening drive, this seems to be an almost alarming level of flexibility for those who refuse to declare their assets and incomes or even to file their tax returns.

Once the budget is announced and the pursuit of its ambitious revenue target gets going, there will be little room for flexibility. A point is approaching where the government will have no choice but to take on powerful vested interests in the economy and engage in long drawn-out battles in the courts and tribunals and, depending on how far it is willing to establish its writ, perhaps even in the marketplaces, to get recalcitrant non-filers into the tax net. If it shies away from the gritty nature of this battle, the government will be left with no choice but to meet its revenue obligations through taxing those who are already compliant, or by resorting to further hikes in taxes and

surcharges on fuels and power. Unfortunately, the record built up thus far does not inspire much confidence. The government has rolled back restrictions on non-filers, accommodated special interests of the business community and even bowed before speculative trades like property and stock markets. The repeated extensions in the filing deadline appears to be the most innocuous manifestation of this meekness. It is fine for now to show this flexibility, but soon the state of play will have to change, and muddling through will no longer be an option.

Internet monitoring

AMONG the most alarming aspects of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority's recent moves to implement a Web Monitoring System is the haste in which the latter was conceived and the PTA's directions to the telecom industry to implement it. In effect, telcos are expected to pay exorbitant costs in order to — and “for the purposes of national security” — monitor, measure, record and filter internet traffic on a massive scale in Pakistan. Given the enormous, long-term potential ramifications of WMS, it is deeply troubling that the process behind it is one shrouded in lack of transparency, with no input from stakeholders such as the telecom industry itself, IT experts, digital rights advocates, or the public. No tender notice was advertised prior to its introduction, nor is it apparent whether there is a process to audit its funds. Moreover, the Senate Standing Committee on Cabinet Secretariat has expressed concerns over the PTA's agreement with a US-based firm allowing it to monitor web traffic in Pakistan — which in itself indicates an absence of prior parliamentary oversight.

Besides the lack of consultative or fiscal transparency, there are likely to be other financial and social consequences. The cost of blocking more and more websites in Pakistan will have to be borne by the telcos and in turn passed on to consumers — making fixed broadband and cellular data more expensive and thus increasingly inaccessible to many citizens. The onerous process of restricting content — particularly given the opacity regarding these decisions or how to redress them — will also affect quality of service. There will be a cascading effect of economic losses for commercial and individual consumers as a result of slower internet speeds. Another potential consequence of WMS is that services that offer internet voice

communications, such as WhatsApp, Messenger and FaceTime, may be blocked in the country, since the encryption they offer would interfere with the ability to surveil communications.

Then there are questions related to the effect WMS will have on civil liberties, particularly in the absence of personal data protection laws and underdeveloped jurisprudence on privacy issues in Pakistan. With the increasing use of digital footprints for intelligence gathering and criminal forensics, can the right to due process remain intact if evidence of an alleged crime is gathered in the absence of a court-ordered warrant specifying the scope of surveillance? Practical and capacity issues notwithstanding, on paper, there is little to prevent ordinary citizens being subjected to the same level of scrutiny as criminals. Moreover, necessary (or simply desired) privacy may become impossible under the WMS regime, endangering, for example, practices such as independent journalism and whistle-blowing. Should citizens be comfortable with this hyper-normalisation of surveillance — incurring all the socioeconomic costs and threats to constitutional rights, without debate or consent — for the sake of ‘security’?

Defence budget

THE announcement that the military will be “foregoing routine increase in annual defence budget” has justifiably triggered a discussion around this crucial allocation. For many years, perhaps decades, an argument has been made that Pakistan spends too much on defence, and that its developmental and social service delivery priorities have suffered as result. In response, the argument has been advanced that Pakistan faces a far larger adversary that spends much more on enhancing its military capabilities, and even though our allocations seem large when viewed as a proportion of GDP, they are small by comparison to the scale of the threat the country faces. The old ‘guns vs butter’ dilemma is possibly the only real economic conversation that the country has had since at least the 1980s. What complicates the picture are those parts of the budget that are spent by the defence establishment but are declared under civilian heads, such as through the Public Sector Development Programme, or the separate allocation for military pensions that is declared in budget documents but is outside the routine defence budget. On top of this, allocations for military

procurement and expenditures for the war against terrorism remain opaque. So large amounts of defence allocations are not captured in the figure for the defence budget, where nearly half of the figure is meant for salaries.

Now, and in the past as well, when the country has gone through its cycles of austerity, with sharp reductions in expenditures, the defence establishment has shared in the burden. In the years 2009 till 2013 for example, when the country was still recovering from the impact of the great crash of 2008 and going through a period of intense austerity, increases in defence allocations dropped to between 2pc to 3pc per annum. Beyond the actual numbers, the conversation around this allocation now needs to move towards the broader theme of reform. To begin with, our understanding of defence allocations can benefit from greater transparency and disclosure. It was a hard-won reform when the government persuaded the military establishment to share more than a single line in the defence budget, but there is still plenty of room for improvement in the disclosure regime of defence spending. After that, the next step would be oversight to see how the money is being spent. That is when genuine reform can be said to have begun.

Environmental concerns

IT was only last year that the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency had revived its water-testing laboratory and air quality-monitoring systems, after receiving instructions to do so by the Supreme Court's water commission in 2017. According to a report published in this paper on Saturday, however, it has now come to light that Sepa's air quality-monitoring stations and water-testing laboratory have been out of service for the past several months. The reason? It is the same issue that was pointed out after the 18th Amendment was passed and the agency came under the provincial government, and it remains a challenge that seems to plague many government departments in Sindh — the lack of finances. Three environmental monitoring systems were provided by the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency and the Japan International Cooperation Agency in 2007. The functioning of these operations is vital to the health of Sindh's population, where public health services are few and of poor quality. Sindh has also been hit by a series of health scares in recent years, along with severe water shortages. In fact, the

water commission had pointed out that the quality of drinking water in Sindh had deteriorated, with 78.1pc of the water samples collected found not suitable for drinking purposes, largely due to untreated sewage water mixing with freshwater bodies.

It is widely acknowledged that the bad quality of water along with the lack of awareness of basic hygiene and sanitation practices leads to serious illness. In fact, many illnesses in the country are directly connected to the poor quality of water and air, which has led to a high percentage of entirely preventable illnesses in the population. The suspension of vital services cannot simply be an issue of lack of funds. That there is wide-scale lethargy, incompetence, mismanagement and misuse of funds in the government sector is common knowledge. Whatever the real reason may be, the provincial government must urgently look into the matter and not seek excuses.

Politics of austerity

AT the start of a heady series of confrontations, and with the unveiling of a dismal economic picture, Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for austerity.

He also appealed to the public in a televised address yesterday to avail the option provided by the amnesty scheme.

The two appeals are linked, of course, since the amnesty scheme is in large measure also a revenue-generating exercise designed to help the government meet its hefty revenue target of Rs5.5tr — around 35pc higher than the current year's collection.

The Economic Survey, meanwhile, has painted a dismal picture of the economy, with large sectors posting negative growth and next year's target for total GDP growth being a mere 4pc.

Of course, most projections and expectations are that even this modest target will prove challenging for the government to achieve.

There is now little doubt that the government must brace itself for an extremely difficult year ahead.

The public and the business community will be called upon to make large sacrifices as they contend with higher inflation and unemployment, coupled with a rain of taxes and an aggressive drive to net more taxpayers, especially from the country's largely undocumented small- and medium-enterprise sector and services.

All governments that have embarked upon this course in the past have found their reservoir of goodwill evaporate quickly once the full brunt of the adjustment begins to bite.

To top it off, the government is aiming to accede to an IMF programme soon, which means there will have to be strong oversight. Missing targets or even seeking their relaxation midcourse will hardly be acceptable.

Given the extremely challenging task opening up before the government, it is surprising to see a series of political confrontations also starting at precisely the same time.

Just when the government is about to undertake one of the most intense economic adjustments in our history, it finds itself embroiled in a clash of wills with the political opposition, the lawyer fraternity, and the business community of the country.

Going forward, traders are also likely to express their anger if the government gets too aggressive in its attempts to get them to register themselves with the tax authorities (similar exercises in the past have always failed).

We can debate the merits of the arguments that are made to explain why these confrontations are necessary.

We can also debate the manner in which austerity should be pursued — whether frontloaded to attain stabilisation quickly, or dragged out over a number of years to dilute its adverse impact on the people.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that enforcing austerity measures will test the limits of the government's ability to manage divergent political priorities.

This is a bad time for it to be on a war footing with so many power centres around the country. Caution is advised.

PBC's reaction

DAYS before the Supreme Judicial Council is due to take up references filed by the government against Justice Qazi Faez Isa of the Supreme Court and Justice Karim Khan Agha of the Sindh High Court, the Pakistan Bar Council has announced the formation of committees which its vice chairman, Amjad Shah, says will identify “inefficient and corrupt judges”. The special committees will purportedly collect evidence to form the basis of references against them and committee members will even review judgements. Mr Shah has declared that the council will prepare and submit references against judges to the president and the SJC for further action. He also said the names of the judges in question would not be disclosed till the filing of the references against them and that “no one would be allowed to engage in their character assassination”.

Although the PBC may be justified in questioning the lack of transparency in the references against Justices Isa and Agha, its latest salvo is reactionary — and dangerous. The decision to form committees to investigate senior judges and their judgements stands in contradiction to its pledge to shield the judiciary from controversy. Not only is it illogical to target judges en masse as a response to the targeting of two judges, it also runs the risk of causing an institutional clash such as the one that triggered the lawyers movement in 2007 — a situation which may drive a wedge between the people and the state. Former chief justice Saqib Nisar’s recent judicial activism and his interference in matters of governance had yet again made the judiciary vulnerable to criticism, despite years of restraint after chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry retired. The lack of clarity behind the recent references against two senior judges, too, has cast a shadow over the reputation of honourable judges. The PBC has every right to protest and debate the filing of the references and their timing, but it must be aware that there is already a system in place which examines allegations of misconduct against sitting judges. Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa, too, has inspired confidence through his statement that people should trust the judges, and that the judiciary will provide justice when hearing the matter against justices Isa and Agha. Instead of moving against other judges in

what appears to be a reactive campaign, it would be prudent for the legal fraternity to confine its protest to the issue of the present references.

KCR evictions

WHERE encroachments are concerned, the usual pattern followed in Pakistan is that the illegal occupation of land is allowed by the state — in fact, often facilitated by those in power — until some state institution — usually the court — orders that the racket be halted. This is pretty much the case with the occupation of the tracks and land of the Karachi Circular Railway. It was only after stern orders from the Supreme Court last month that the administration swung into action and started clearing the tracks for this vital public transport project, after decades of inaction and after much of the area had been encroached upon. However, while the court order must be respected and the tracks cleared so that the KCR can be revived, the anti-encroachment operation has taken a human toll, as many people have been left homeless because of it. A large number of affected persons took out a rally in Karachi on Sunday demanding that the drive be suspended until they were provided with alternative shelter. In fact, the apex court had also ordered that alternative arrangements be made for those affected by the anti-encroachment drive. The Sindh government has promised the evicted persons land for housing. Therefore, arrangements should be made to give them shelter forthwith.

Looking at the big picture, it must be asked where the authorities — the Railways ministry, the Sindh and Karachi administrations, the police etc — were when houses and shops were being built on or near the tracks of the KCR. It goes without saying that encroachments can only spring up under the patronage of the state, and through the machinations of the land mafia. However, when the order comes to remove encroachments, the state abandons those who paid hard-earned money to build a roof over their heads. While encroachments cannot be condoned, the involvement of criminal elements in running this racket and the connivance of the state should not be overlooked as they facilitate the illegal occupation of land.

Faltering economy

MUCH of it was already known, but it bears repeating from an official platform like the latest Economic Survey of Pakistan that the country's economy is now in the throes of a sharp slowdown which is expected to persist all through the next year as well. The growth target set at the start of the fiscal year was 6.2pc, but the out-turn today is 3.3pc, just past the halfway mark. This is far below the level that the growth rate needs to be at to even absorb the additional requirements in the labour force on an annual basis. To top it off, the Survey, as well as the prime minister's finance adviser Hafeez Shaikh, highlighted that inflation will be "considerably higher" all through next year after seeing steep increases in the closing months of the current fiscal year. There was no indication of how much higher, but perhaps a clue will be provided if and when the government announces its inflation target for the next year. Suffice it to say that one of the main drivers of inflation next year will be higher utility and fuel prices, as per Mr Shaikh's remarks and the Economic Survey.

What this means is that we should brace ourselves for a full year of rising unemployment coupled with high inflation. This is an incendiary combination that is rarely seen. The last time we saw collapsing growth amid rising inflation was when the country made the transition from military rule to civilian democracy about a decade ago. It was the legacy left behind by Gen Pervez Musharraf and it took many years — till 2013 — before growth returned and inflation was finally tamed. But even in those years, as the finance adviser himself pointed out, the adverse impact on employment was mitigated by the government's policy of shifting the base of its spending, and the motor force of the economy, from the urban to the rural economy. As a result, as Mr Shaikh said, the economy was able to still generate more jobs despite growth having fallen to around 2pc, compared to the fastest-growing years of the PML-N government that followed.

The Survey makes it abundantly clear that a large economic adjustment has to be undertaken. Revenues have posted zero growth while expenditures have grown by almost 8pc. Even the shrinking of the current account deficit by 27pc from last year is not as encouraging a story when one sees that much of it owes to the shrinking furnace oil imports, along with a handful of other items. Exports have posted zero growth as well, while foreign

investment has fallen by almost 50pc. It now remains to be seen what strategy the government intends to follow to help mitigate the impact of this awful situation on the poor. We can only hope that something more than cosmetic measures will be undertaken for that crucial objective.

Politicians' arrest

THE prediction that Eid would be followed by eventful days has shown early promise of being accurate. PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari was picked up on Monday in a fake bank accounts case.

And one day later, the authorities provided proof of how they deal with opposition politicians with an equal hand when the National Accountability Bureau arrested the PML-N's Hamza Shahbaz.

The build-up to the arrests had been apparent for some time.

The big catch was thought to be only days away when, recently, a perceptible acceleration in the pace at which the accountability body was working became evident.

Though the government has denied any role in the latest events, there was increasing mention in the media about Prime Minister Imran Khan getting impatient and wanting some of these high-profile cases to be expedited.

It was pointed out that the government needed to show the public that things were proceeding apace during its reign.

And what better way of achieving the most visible manifestation of this than detaining the government's strongest rivals as the ruling party itself went about the task of announcing a challenging annual budget?

This is a very critical phase of the confrontation between the PTI government and the opposition parties that now have all the more reason to be united against a drive to crush them.

There remains the crucial question of whether the environment is conducive to protest and agitation by the PPP and PML-N. But nothing can be ruled out.

At a time of sharp media focus, the PTI would be committing a grave mistake if it were to quickly and thoughtlessly dismiss the initially slow pick-up of the opposition's protest engine as an unfixable problem in their strategy.

These two opposition parties have many reasons to be angry and animated. They have created chaos in the past and are connected to other opposition groups with their own axe to grind against those in power.

In previous years, complacent governments, even those banking on their most powerful backers, have found themselves overtaken by unexpected events when the opposition's campaign is set in motion.

There is little doubt that the fight is going to gradually get messier and uglier.

It won't be easy for a PTI that has sustained itself by accessing the same pool of human resource which was available to other ruling parties in the past, to say that its actions do not constitute a witch-hunt.

Last of the Kalash?

A PHOTOGRAPH of Kalash women captured in their distinct, traditional attire was printed in yesterday's newspaper — smiling as they took a selfie. Naturally, the colourful image stood out. In the 21st century, however, it seems as if the camera has both immortalised the Kalash and presented the latter with their greatest survival challenge. There are only 3,500 to 4,000 members of the tribe remaining in the northern parts of the country. And yet, in nearly every travel book on Pakistan, in the various music videos and advertisements flashing on television screens, images of the Kalash are used disproportionately to highlight the country's cultural beauty and diversity. While the intention may be well meaning, these images have frozen the Kalash in time, as they are reduced to two-dimensional, inanimate objects, untarnished by modernity, and viewed as an aesthetic, to be seen and rarely heard; in fact, an ancient, indigenous people perceived as foreigners in their own land. There have been several reports of intimidation and threats to the tribe by religiously motivated militants in recent years. But less reported is how local tourists have harmed the Kalash way of life and threatened the tribe's basic human need for privacy.

Stirred by the images they see in popular culture, full of curiosity and wonder — and lust, in many instances — local tourists make their way to these remote parts of the country, in the hope of capturing the few remaining Kalash on their cameras and film. Intentionally or not, however, many end up behaving in ways that are deemed intrusive and disrespectful by the local population, since they are not sensitised to their customs, or are misinformed due to harmful rumours. Some Kalash women have taken to wearing veils to protect themselves from the prying eyes of male tourists, while others have mentioned not wanting to celebrate their festivals any more. It would be a great tragedy of our generation if we lose this unique tribe due to the ignorance of some.

Budgeting on hope

THE government has presented a harsh budget and must now perform the high-wire act of keeping its balance while adhering to its targets.

The revenue target is a significant challenge; there is minimal room for slipping up, in view of the expenditure cuts already undertaken and the IMF programme.

If the aggressive tax plan that the budget is built around does not yield the revenue increases they are counting on, the rulers will have no option but to raise taxes on fuels and power, or other quick-yielding heads, since they have already given a commitment to not rely on printing currency via State Bank borrowing.

This would have been the only other avenue to plug potential shortfalls in collection.

With inflation already projected to be in the range of 11pc and 13pc on average all next year according to the budget documents, this could further aggravate matters for the citizenry.

In other words, the budget is ambitious and risky, and with the real GDP growth rate projected to fall further to 2.4pc by next year, things could turn even more dismal as the fiscal year unfolds.

At a time of rising prices and falling job opportunities, the government has made a decision to rely extensively on income tax increases in order to meet its ambitious target of Rs568bn in fresh revenues (aside from the nearly Rs1tr it will be raising from existing measures).

The withdrawal of sales tax exemptions enjoyed by industry for many years is likely to generate more noise in the days to come, but what the government will actually have to answer for is the increased burden of income taxes in every household where incomes are declared and within the tax net.

The budget may help reduce the imbalances in the economy in a way to put a smile on the face of the IMF, but the people of Pakistan have very little to cheer about.

Even the schemes touted in the budget speech of the youthful junior minister for revenue, Hammad Azhar, pale into insignificance next to the gruelling taxation measures and the crushing burden of inflation and unemployment.

The government made a conscious choice to front-load its adjustment, in the parlance of the IMF, and undertake the bulk of its revenue increases and expenditure cuts in the first year.

This is contrary to the direction in which former finance minister Asad Umar seemed to be moving.

His preference was to stretch the adjustment out over a longer period of time in order to mitigate its adverse impact on the people.

Having made the choice to let Pakistanis feel the pain first, the government has asked they make a large sacrifice for the sake of the macroeconomic health of the state.

Now it must wait for their answer as the budget measures are implemented.

Altaf Hussain out?

ON Tuesday, MQM founder Altaf Hussain was taken into custody by police authorities in London over an anti-Pakistan speech he made to party

workers in Karachi in 2016. As per reports, he has now been released on bail.

This would appear to be something of an anti-climax for those who have followed his journey in Pakistani politics as the leader of an ethnically motivated party known for striking fear into the hearts of ordinary citizens in urban Sindh. It is something of an irony that Mr Hussain, thousands of miles away, may yet find an escape route, even as the Sharifs and the ever-resourceful Asif Ali Zardari are held accountable for their deeds in Pakistan.

It is clear that Mr Hussain's role has weakened considerably, especially as the MQM has split into factions — not least because of a conscious effort by the establishment and certain political forces to divide the party. In fact, it has been evident for quite some time that the once revered and deeply feared 'Bhai' has practically ceased to exist in spirit. He may retain his silent admirers, and those who would still heed his call to not vote in a general election, but at 66, and after having served as the lynchpin of many a project, besides being in a state of extended self-exile, it can be safely assumed that, politically, Mr Hussain is well past his prime.

He is but a pale shadow of the kingmaker who once ruled over vast areas of Karachi and Hyderabad.

In the past, whenever the law initiated an investigation into the conduct of Mr Hussain, who besides his routine incendiary tirades has also been in the public eye for alleged money laundering and a suspected role in the murder of a senior MQM leader in London, warnings were sent out. Monitors were asked to keep a close watch on the areas that constituted the party's stronghold.

Many of the old watchers have since done away with the warning ritual, and only the curious try and gauge the feelings of those who once overwhelmingly stood behind Mr Hussain. Perhaps, a deeper analysis is still needed to go beyond the persona and politics of the man. Various accounts suggest that many issues stand unresolved. Mr Hussain may be down, perhaps permanently, but the feeling that his influence and actions have given birth to a very divisive brand of politics is very much alive.

Repugnant remarks

EVEN by the standards of Faisal Vawda, his latest brush with controversy is beyond the pale. On Tuesday evening, while appearing as a guest on a couple of TV talk shows, the federal minister for water resources blithely declared, not once but twice, that, “If we had it in our power to hang 5,000 people, the future of 220m people would be transformed”.

Not content with this vile remark, he went on to disparage the Constitution, saying that if one waited to do so within its ambit, such a purge would take 20 years. The obvious implication is that in Mr Vawda’s eyes, the Constitution — which enshrines fundamental rights, including the right to security of person and due process — is a hindrance to ‘real’ progress.

When a legislator who has taken an oath to “preserve, protect and defend” the Constitution displays naked contempt for the basic law of the country, it is abhorrent in the extreme. By his words, Mr Vawda has undermined the very basis on which a democracy functions. Clearly, the minister has little appreciation of the enormous responsibility — not to mention honour — that being a member of the house of representatives entails.

As to his repugnant prescription of mass murder, one should draw his attention — and that of others perhaps yearning for such unbridled exercise of power — to past episodes of savage state-sponsored violence on the global stage that have rightly been consigned by posterity to history’s hall of shame. This is not to say that Mr Vawda is suggesting a cull on the scale of the Great Purge in Stalin’s Russia or the Cultural Revolution in China.

However, his remarks are indicative of a fascist mindset willing to go to any length to achieve its objectives, and one hopes it is limited to this one individual. The government must immediately censure its MNA for his appalling remarks, and disabuse him of the notion that the Constitution is a piece of paper to be trampled upon at will.

Debt inquiry

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has said he will set up an inquiry commission to look into the reasons why Pakistan’s total debt climbed from Rs6tr in 2008 to Rs30tr by 2019. He wants to know “where all this money went”.

Read: PM Imran vows to go after 'the thieves who put country badly in debt'

Retrospective analyses of economic management and where things have gone wrong are a good idea, and perhaps national-level reflection on how things have been run thus far is necessary to prevent a repeat of previous mistakes. But what is of concern is that it looks like the prime minister has made up his mind at the outset, rather than seeking to arrive at the results at the end of the search.

In fact, far from being a search for the deeper dysfunctions that afflict our economy it seems that what Mr Khan has in mind is some sort of law-enforcement probe to see if somebody may have made off with the money.

Given the amounts involved — a Rs 24,000bn rise in total debt over a decade — it is hard to imagine that individual malfeasance alone can be the explanation.

This was an era of sharply rising government indebtedness across the world as countries struggled to emerge from the ravages of the 2008 financial crisis.

Second, when looked at in absolute terms, the amount seems alarming, but if we take it as a percentage of GDP, which is the proper proportion to maintain here, the alarm bells lose much of their sound. Gross public debt, which measures only the government's borrowing and excludes the private sector, rose from 58.6pc of GDP in June 2009 to 74.4pc by March 2019. This is a large rise undoubtedly, though probably not the largest in the country's history, and does not seem quite as alarmist as when stated as an absolute quantity.

Mr Khan has shown a lack of understanding of the play of larger macroeconomic forces.

Debts of this magnitude do not accrue because somebody, or even a lot of individuals, are putting the money somewhere. They accrue because the economy is suffering from large debilitating deficits that require urgent attention.

He would have an idea of how this works, because in a period of 10 months alone, since he came to power, the government has had to borrow almost 2pc worth of GDP just to deal with these deficit itself.

Both his current financial adviser and previous finance minister explain the massive jump in the country's debt profile by saying their hand was forced by necessity.

If the commission ever comes around to seeking answers for the rise of the country's debt in the last decade, chances are high they will arrive at the same conclusion. Perhaps the commission should be converted into a group led by economists, that is tasked to search for answers instead of hunting for scapegoats.

HIV in Punjab

FOLLOWING the outbreak of the HIV infection in Sindh — which has grabbed national headlines in recent months — it seems that Punjab too has to contend with a new spate of HIV/AIDS cases in five of its districts. According to a recent report, there are over 2,800 patients registered with the Punjab AIDS Control Programme for free medicine; they hail from Faisalabad, Chiniot, Sahiwal, Jhang and Nankana districts. Reportedly, most of them only came to know of their illness through screenings during blood donations, foreign travel or while undergoing surgery. Not surprisingly, the recent rise of the deadly disease is thought to be caused largely by medical malpractice at hospitals, the rampant use of unsterilised equipment by doctors and dentists, the reuse of syringes, which is exacerbated by a thriving quackery racket in the absence of satisfactory government healthcare. Law enforcement has not been able or willing to put an end to the presence of unlicensed 'medical' practitioners in private clinics across the province. In 2018, a village in Sargodha came under the spotlight — briefly, before the news moved on to other topics — for a sudden HIV/AIDS outbreak. Even this was blamed on a quack reusing syringes on the unsuspecting population. Between 2008 and 2018, approximately 869 people were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in four districts of Sargodha. More recently, blood screenings of prison inmates in Faisalabad and Sargodha found 50 prisoners infected with HIV/AIDS, along with a host of other blood-borne illnesses. Other reasons for its spread include unsafe blood transfusions, the use of contaminated razor blades and a lack of public awareness of safe sexual practices. Additionally, stigma surrounding the

disease makes it extremely difficult for HIV/AIDS patients to receive the medical care and compassion they deserve.

According to the National Health Services in its report to the Supreme Court last year, there are approximately 150,000 people suffering from HIV/AIDS in the country: 75,000 people in Punjab; 60,000 in Sindh; and 15,000 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Despite the sudden high rise in figures in recent months, the issue has not received the attention it deserves in the national discourse and policymaking. Unfortunately, tragedies only seem to create outrage when they present opportunities for political gain. It is time for the government to declare a national emergency, and not allow the problem to fester any longer. Deep-rooted challenges will not simply disappear if we pretend they do not exist.

A curious apathy

THE FIA, which has of late displayed much alacrity in unearthing evidence against allegedly corrupt politicians, is curiously apathetic where it comes to doing the same in the decades-long Air Marshal Asghar Khan case. In 2012, the Supreme Court handed down a landmark verdict ordering the government to proceed against military personnel accused of having doled out Rs140m among various favoured politicians in order to ensure the PPP's defeat in the 1990 elections. Since then, the only action of note by the law-enforcement agency has been to repeatedly request the Supreme Court to close the case pertaining to the verdict's implementation. It did so once again on Wednesday in a report submitted to a three-judge apex court bench, maintaining its inability to substantiate the allegations given that the principal accused, Younis Habib, the petitioner retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan, and nine of the supposed recipients, are no longer alive. At a hearing in January, the family of the late air marshal opposed the FIA's attempt to consign the scandal to the dustbin of history, pleading that the outcome of the probe the army claimed it was conducting against the personnel allegedly involved be made public.

The 2012 judgement has a profound bearing on one of the main principles of a democratic system — the sanctity of the vote. Manipulated elections —

an unfortunately common feature in this country — interrupt the evolution of civil institutions, leaving them over time incapable of protecting people's fundamental rights. Indeed, we are witnessing the deleterious fallout of precisely such a corrosive process. However, the FIA appears least inclined to exert itself in the matter, instead offering flimsy excuses every time it has been called to task by the apex court. On the face of it, there appears no reason for this lack of enthusiasm. After all, there is an on-the-record confession by one of the principal parties to the crime and several other actors in the shameful episode are still around, and can easily be summoned for questioning.

Tax rates

ONE of the most important features of the new budget is the sharp increase in income taxes, particularly for individuals and associations of persons. Salaried people will be in for a bit of a shock in August when they receive their first paycheck of the new fiscal year. Eleven new slabs have been created for income tax payers and the lowest earners seem to be bearing the brunt of the increase. It is easy to understand that the steep cuts in income tax that last year's budget brought had to be reversed. They were issued by a government that was in its last days, and most people agreed that the incoming administration would reverse them.

But more fundamental than adjustment in the tax rate is the change in the underlying philosophy of the documentation of incomes. The previous government brought into the tax system a distinction between filers and non-filers of tax returns through the introduction of the Active Taxpayers List. Those whose names were not on the ATL became liable for penalties each time they utilised the services of the formal economy, particularly banking transactions, where withholding taxes were applied. In time, the penalties were increased to include the purchase of cars and property as well, with the intention that down the road, the purchase of airline tickets and the renewal of ID cards and passports could be made conditional on the ATL as well. The hope was that this would encourage compliance and lead to an increase in the number of filers, thereby bringing in more revenue. But the non-filers proved to be a stubborn lot and did not show up at the tax authorities' doorstep in droves as they should have.

The current government has done away with this direction altogether, and in the latest finance bill, it has opted for a coercive approach. In his budget speech, the state minister for revenue threatened non-filers with prosecution, and the FBR is known to be demanding that police stations collect data on rental incomes in their localities. Traders will be asked to get themselves registered for a token fee, and income tax payers will be scrutinised using artificial intelligence to discern their consumption patterns and locate high-net worth individuals. Where the previous philosophy was cerebral and subtle and sought to tilt the schedule of incentives for non-filers in a direction that would nudge them towards the tax net, the current approach is robust, direct and seeks to summon non-filers into the net and pursue those who are non-compliant. The first strategy did not work as well as its architects thought. We will see how well the get-tough approach of the present government works. What is different this time is that the government is counting in very significant measure on the success of its new approach to meet its target for incremental revenue this fiscal year. Failure this time carries a far higher cost.

Amnesty IHK report

AS much as New Delhi may wish to keep the lid on its abuses in India-held Kashmir, the work of neutral observers — as well as the part played by activists on social media— means that it is very difficult to hide from the world the violence perpetrated by India’s armed forces in the troubled region. However, this does not stop the Indian state from clamping down on efforts by activists to raise a voice against atrocities in the occupied territory; earlier this week, the Indian authorities prevented Amnesty International from releasing a report in Srinagar on a controversial law, using the fig leaf of the “prevailing law and order situation” to block the event. Yet the report, which details abuses under the Public Safety Act, was released online, pointing to the fact that in today’s world, tired old methods to prop up censorship and the obfuscation of facts just don’t work. As for the report itself, it is quite a damning indictment of India’s behaviour in IHK; Amnesty terms the law “draconian” while the report says a “pattern of abuses” by Indian authorities has been uncovered, including the detention and torture of teenagers. Over 1,000 Kashmiris have been reportedly detained under this black law between March 2016 and August 2017. This is, of course, not the first time

abuses have been highlighted in IHK; the UN has aired similar concerns regarding rights abuses in the region.

While information may be hard to obtain and verify from the held region, the efforts of activists and social media users to raise a voice for the oppressed Kashmiri people must be appreciated. However, with India claiming to be a democracy, its high-handed efforts in the region — particularly to block information critical of its security forces under the vague excuse of ‘law and order’ — are patently undemocratic. By violently crushing the Kashmiri political struggle and aiming to do away with the region’s special status, India is fuelling animosity against Delhi amongst Kashmir’s people. But despite decades of such oppressive tactics, the Kashmiri desire for freedom and dignity remains unchanged; in fact, India’s brutality has actually succeeded in making a new generation of educated Kashmiri youths take up the gun and shun the political struggle. Reports such as Amnesty’s should serve as a wake-up call; instead of blocking such documents, India should pay greater heed to them and change its failed policy in occupied Kashmir.

Gag on satire?

YET again, Pemra has waded into the territory of attempting to sanitise our screens of not just particular content, but of concepts themselves. This is not the first time that the authority has issued ‘advice’ regarding the broadcasting of satire. And, indeed, its repeated calls for TV channels to develop more robust in-house editorial oversight mechanisms is warranted, given a general absence of self-regulation among media houses when it comes to enforcing codes of conduct — which often result in the broadcast of all manner of unethical content, from the invasion of privacy to defamation to hate speech. However, by attempting to cast itself as an arbiter of acceptable forms of humour, Pemra not only exposes itself to mockery but also reveals the antipathy of public figures and institutions towards criticism.

Tolerance of satire (or lack thereof) is a good indicator of the health of a functional democracy. It is no coincidence that, throughout history, authoritarian figures have sought to censor and suppress satire, considering the genre’s unique ability to make people laugh at — and even question — the sophistry, ulterior motives and imperiousness of those in power. The world over, including in Pakistan, lampooning public figures is a time-

honoured tradition for precisely this purpose: to pull the flimsy scaffolding from under received wisdoms, to throw up impediments in the path of cults of personality, to act as a countervailing force against abuses of power. At its best and most sharply honed, satire expresses the fundamental optimism of dissenters and their desire for change. In issuing such overbearing notifications, Pemra is sending a message that conflates respect for authority with the fear of it. But seeking to preserve either through suppression or intimidation is bound to fail. Comics will continue to find ways to challenge and subvert such repressive policies, even if it comes down to offering “praise undeserved as “satire in disguise”. The medium is designed to make the powerful uncomfortable. It wouldn’t be funny — or true — if it didn’t.

Missed opportunity

THE high-powered 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which brought together key world leaders in Bishkek, ended on Friday with a reiterated pledge to collaborate on security and development — but ironically became yet another missed opportunity for Pakistan and India to move the needle on bilateral talks.

After the SCO summit, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi confirmed that while Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi shook hands and exchanged pleasantries during their interaction on the sidelines of the event, these were a “courtesy” and not a structured meeting.

Mr Qureshi asserted that India has “not come out of its election mindset”, saying it was still confined to the “extreme position” it had taken to keep the BJP vote bank intact. He also added: “India has to make this decision, we are neither in haste, nor troubled. When India prepares itself, it would find us prepared, but we will hold talks on the basis of equality, in a dignified manner.”

There is no doubt that Pakistan has taken a principled and diplomatic position on talks with India.

From the time that Mr Khan took office, Islamabad has been consistent and open in its stance with New Delhi regarding constructive bilateral dialogue

through his words and actions — gestures that have repeatedly been rebuffed or ignored by India. In fact, even the prime minister's vow, "if India takes one step, Pakistan will take two", his Kartarpur gesture and offer of talks on issues including terrorism were met with a similarly dismissive response.

More recently, Mr Modi literally went out of his way to avoid Pakistani airspace, when his plane took a circuitous route to the SCO in Kyrgyzstan even though he had permission to fly over Pakistan.

Despite the government's utmost efforts and mature outlook on the relationship, India has maintained its cold attitude towards talks — a sign that Mr Modi's anti-Pakistan vitriol was not just election rhetoric to secure a BJP victory. Just as troubling is that India this week deprived Sikh pilgrims from Pakistan of the Jorr Mela yatra when it disallowed a train from Pakistan to pick them up at the Attari railway station.

The Modi government's stiff attitude towards Pakistan is unreasonable and risks embroiling the region in further tensions. An obstructionist and stubborn position on Kashmir and the human rights abuse against protesters is only compounding the problem, which has long-lasting regional implications. India's policy of avoiding engagement, ignoring the Kashmir issue and hurting people-to-people contact is being witnessed internationally and further inaction will hardly benefit it. As Mr Qureshi has also noted, "India has to make a decision on whether or not to hold bilateral talks with Pakistan to resolve all outstanding issues" and "Pakistan sought the dialogue to be based on equality". The onus to take a step forward now lies on India.

Punjab budget

PUNJAB'S decision to propose an 'austerity budget' for the next financial year, which holds down both its current and development spending despite an estimated growth of over 25pc in its share from the federal tax pool, is understandable. The PTI government in Islamabad has through its own first full-year budget undertaken an economic stabilisation effort aimed at contracting the economy under the IMF's watch and the party cannot afford to let its administration in the province upset the federal applecart. But it isn't

the only reason for the government to keep a tight rein on its expenditure; provincial finance managers, like many others, doubt the FBR's ability to collect the targeted tax of Rs5.5tr. Therefore, despite a large hike, allocations for development expenditure are lower than planned; Punjab has reduced its non-salary current expenditure and pledged to run a cash surplus equal to 5.2pc of GDP to meet a federal requirement. The conservative allocations will allow it to attain its budgetary targets in spite of reduced transfers from the divisible pool during the year. At the same time, however, the Punjab government plans to attract private capital to build economic infrastructure by leveraging its major asset — land — available abundantly everywhere to make up for its lower allocations for the annual development programme. Besides, the budget has enunciated some measures to expand the provincial tax base and revenues by increasing tax rates on income from agriculture, changing the description of provincial sales tax on various services and strengthening the penal provisions, as well as extending the scope of the devolved urban immovable property tax it collects for redistribution among the districts. But the measures announced for this remain inadequate given how important it is for Punjab to quickly raise its own tax revenues to reduce its dependence on federal tax transfers from the divisible pool, create space for development and improve the quality of public service delivery.

The budget shows the policy direction in which the government is headed. Instead of pursuing large infrastructure projects like their predecessor, the incumbents have elected to focus on human resource development through significant public investments in the social sector to improve and expand the geographical scope of healthcare, education and other services. The decision to ring-fence the uplift expenditure for south Punjab must help bridge the massive opportunity gaps between the poorer and wealthier districts. But does the government have what it takes to execute its budget plans? That is the question.

Sindh's priorities

THE budget announced by the Sindh government may be unique in the sense that it is swimming against the tide of what the ruling party wants the

provinces to do. The budget has announced a salary increase of 15pc for government employees, larger than what its counterpart Punjab has granted. The thrust of the Sindh budget also seems to be on current expenditures going by a comparison of budgeted development spending from last year to this year, again in contrast to Punjab that has kept current expenditures restrained and invested its resources in an expansion of development spending. The finance minister, Murad Ali Shah, attributes this to lower transfers from the centre under the NFC award, but there are grounds to be sceptical of this claim. The provincial government has different priorities that are better served through current spending instead.

On the development side, there is a continued focus on building and construction for the new resources that are going into the education sector, and very little on pedagogy, teacher-training and the software of public education. A brick-and-mortar approach to building state capacity is still the main thrust of the budget. Continued allocations for public transport in Karachi show that the government is serious about the bus lines they are intending to build. But no major shift in strategy or spending or revenue priorities is in evidence. To top it all, the province has not restrained its expectation of transfers from the centre for the next fiscal year, despite strong demands from the federal government to run large surpluses this year to help it with its deficit-containment strategy. Punjab has obliged but Sindh appears indifferent. In the year ahead, this is likely to emerge as a bone of contention, because given the shape of things, transfers to the provinces will probably come under greater strain. The budget shows it will be business as usual next year.

Dam fund returns

DROP by drop, some semblance of sense is beginning to find its way to the whole 'dam fund' conversation. When the Supreme Court looked at the Rs10.6bn that have been deposited in the fund thus far and learned that the entire amount seems to be sitting in current accounts that yield no return, and that, with the rise of inflation, are losing close to Rs10m per day, it was right to be alarmed. Fact is, this is one of those things that is always taken into account whenever large quantities of money are being handled by any

institution or entity. In most cases, however, where even a bit of competence is available, such things are thought of and sorted out before, not after, the large quantity of money materialises. Idle money evaporates. This is common knowledge, and the fact that these donations were allowed to sit in unproductive accounts for such a long period of time means that the trust of the donors that their money would be properly utilised had been dealt a blow at the very outset of the whole affair.

Now that the court has decided to place the funds in 10-year paper — from the sounds of it since the National Bank of Pakistan is offering a return of 12.6pc on them — further questions of an equally critical nature arise. What tenor is the return for? Meaning, for what time period will the funds be put away to ensure this annual rate of return? Second, what happens to the interest earned, considering the amount could be larger than Rs1bn a year? Does it get compounded or will it be drawn and used elsewhere? If it is compounded, that means the funds are locked away for an extended period of time, and somebody might want to inform Wapda of this because some of its people have come on the airwaves announcing that they have plans for utilising these funds. If the interest is to be withdrawn, where will it be used?

Instead of venturing further down this road, and taking on the task of fund managers, the Supreme Court would be well advised to find an alternate use for the money — one that adheres to the spirit in which it has been donated. When the former chief justice launched the whole enterprise, he clearly did not know what he was doing. Everything about the fund was made up along the way, with no foresight about how the money would be placed, how the amount would be utilised — or whether or not it is the job of the court to be running such an effort in the first place. Now that this unfinished business has been left for posterity to tackle, the best thing would be to use the funds to finance small dam construction in Balochistan and call it a day.

Oil tanker attacks

AFTER two similar attacks last month in the vicinity, the world is once more on edge as two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman earlier this week. Both vessels survived the attack while there were no casualties. However, the war drums are once more being beaten since US President

Donald Trump has said the attacks have Iran “written all over” them. The Islamic Republic has denied the accusations, with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeting that the events were “suspicious”, questioning the timing of the attacks; one of the targeted vessels was Japanese and the attack occurred when the Japanese prime minister was in Tehran for bilateral talks. While most US allies have followed Washington’s lead in blaming Iran — the Americans have offered grainy video as ‘evidence’ of Iranian involvement — others have exercised caution. Russia has said there should be no rush to judgement while British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn has also questioned the US claim. Moreover, a Japanese firm owning one of the ships has also disputed the American narrative. As the UN secretary general has said, only a “truly independent” initiative can uncover the facts, and it would be unwise for states to use the incident to raise the temperature in an already volatile region and build a wobbly case for war.

Indeed the Gulf region — particularly the Strait of Hormuz — is a strategically key area, especially for the global petrochemical trade. Any closure of this passage or disturbance in the littoral states is likely to throw the global economy into a tailspin. Following the attacks, the price of oil jumped due to heightened fears. The way to proceed is to give the UN the mandate to investigate the attacks — both the ones that occurred this week as well as the ones that happened off the UAE coast last month. The matter is simply too sensitive to let individual states play judge, jury and executioner. Extra caution is especially needed as there is an active anti-Iran war lobby in the US, backed by supporters in the Gulf and Israel, who would like to see Washington and Tehran engage in conflict. Better sense should prevail instead of bellicose rhetoric, and the attacks should not be used as an excuse for a new war in the Middle East. As the invasion of Iraq has shown, wars launched on the back of dodgy intelligence spell nothing but disaster.

A baby in the house

WHEN MPA Mahjabeen Sheran found herself with no other choice but to bring her eight-month-old baby to a Balochistan Assembly session last month — indeed many working mothers find it difficult to leave their child at home — she never expected to hear taunts from her fellow parliamentarians.

On that day, her son was feeling unwell and there was no one to look after him at home. She decided to leave him at the ‘lady’s chamber’ of the provincial house, but the child continued to show signs of distress. Having seen images of international women politicians bringing their children to their workplace — including New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, lauded in Pakistan for her ‘feminine’ style of politics — Ms Sheran thought there would be no issue in her doing the same. On the contrary, she was asked to leave by her colleagues. Video clips of the incident started doing the rounds on mainstream and social media. For a society that ostensibly places so much value on motherhood, it was baffling to witness adult MPs create such a hue and cry over the issue. Fortunately for other women parliamentarians, Ms Sheran did not allow the event to dishearten her. Instead, she galvanised support for a campaign to set up day-care centres in all provincial assemblies and government departments. Thanks to her efforts, the Balochistan Assembly now has its first day-care centre, as Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan Alyani decided to establish one last week on the premises of the parliamentary house. The move is laudable, and will hopefully be replicated by others in both the public and private sectors.

As Pakistani society is changing with more and more women entering the workforce, there should be greater understanding of the dilemmas faced by working mothers, and steps should be taken to accommodate rather than discourage them. As tweeted by Ms Sheran herself: “Women restricted to ‘chardeewari’ is [a] thing of the past... Day-care centres aren’t a luxury, they are a necessity!”

Politics of invective

THE quality of rhetoric in the country’s political arena has been questionable for some time, but in the absence of any ‘self-regulation’ by the politicians themselves, it has become steadily more problematic. Most recently, the PML-N has resorted to the easiest trick in the playbook on how to malign political opponents. Last week, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi in a press conference accused Prime Minister Imran Khan of having committed an offence against religion. Allegations to the effect had been circulating on social media in the wake of certain remarks made by Mr Khan

in a speech last week. Sections of the opposition have now pounced on them as a stick to beat him with. It is a short-sighted ploy that inevitably boomerangs on those dishing it out; the PML-N itself has been its target when a minister in its government was forced to resign, and another was shot and wounded on religious grounds last year. That makes the party's latest salvo against the prime minister all the more reprehensible.

The value of politicians weighing their words before articulating them applies to other kinds of rhetoric too. Gendered insults, derogatory epithets and scandalmongering have vitiated the political atmosphere. Most parties to some extent are guilty of this at some point or another, especially in the run-up to elections. In a country like Pakistan, with its stunted democratic institutions, personal attacks and character assassination tend to take precedence over substantive, issue-based discourse. However, the PTI has been loath to give up its combative approach even after coming to power. Without detracting from the foolhardiness of the opposition's latest attempt at vilifying the prime minister, one could even argue they have been goaded into taking this path by the relentless invective spewed by Mr Khan himself against the leaders of the main opposition parties. In fact, his often less-than-restrained fulminations on the container during the PTI's four-month dharna in 2014 mark the point at which the quality of political discourse in the country took a decidedly downward turn.

Using civilised speech, even while criticising the other side, is not only possible but also pragmatic. Power is ephemeral; today's incumbents could be in the opposition tomorrow and vice versa. New circumstances may demand across-the-aisle compromises which previously uttered uncouth words and allegations of criminal wrongdoing can make that much more difficult. Also, in the absence of a decisive majority in parliament, the treasury benches often require cooperation from the opposition to enact legislation; the PTI government, which is looking to urgently pass the budget, has a razor-thin majority in the National Assembly. Moreover, politicians should consider how their mudslinging plays out in the court of public opinion. It makes them an object of ridicule, undermines their authority, and ends up discrediting democracy itself. Only anti-democratic forces benefit from this unseemly spectacle.

The new leadership

THE meeting between Maryam Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari in Jati Umra on Sunday is important in the context of long-term Pakistani politics, especially as the opposition parties try and build up momentum for a drive against the government. There was no press conference at the end of the luncheon meeting, which would suggest that the heirs of the two major political parties-cum-dynasties in the country initially want to pave the way for a meaningful partnership. It would make sense for both to sit together before the media soon to discuss joint strategies and aims once they have come up with them. It is not going to be a light challenge for the government. It was because of the latter's refusal to play ball with the older established leadership of the two parties that Mr Bhutto-Zardari and Ms Nawaz now have the leading role. Many who desired a resurrection of the PPP had been hoping that Benazir Bhutto's son would be allowed to try and breathe new life into the PPP. He has got a chance to prove his mettle as the head of a party that thrives on protest — and at a time when the PPP is in turmoil. For her part, Ms Nawaz has the opportunity to speak with the frequency she wanted to before she was silenced by the dictates of pragmatism for many months, which is a long period in politics.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari and Ms Nawaz are no Ms Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif who came together to sign the document they called the Charter of Democracy. Even if we disregard the official taunts that the endeavours of the two next-generation politicians result in, it is obvious that at one level theirs is indeed a campaign to rescue their respective fathers. They have talked quite loftily of the need to develop further the famous Charter of Democracy, but that agreement belonged to a different era altogether. It was relevant to a period in which the PPP and the PML-N took turns to govern and play the role of opposition. It was believed that this arrangement would continue forever. But that pattern has since been disrupted. There is another party in power, and it is determined to perform the old job of annihilating all the bad politicians — ie everyone except those in power. The period of agitation that the new leaders of the PPP and PML-N are entering is not aimed at securing power. It marks a battle for survival.

‘Trump Heights’

ON Sunday, an absurd performance seemingly out of the twilight zone was witnessed in the occupied Golan Heights.

Here, Israel’s power elite — led by Benjamin Netanyahu — gathered to name an illegal settlement in occupied Syrian territory after the US president, to thank the incumbent of the White House for his many favours to Israel.

These include, of course, recognising the illegal occupation of Jerusalem and the Golan, approving unlawful settlements on Palestinian land, and giving the Zionist state a free hand to crush the Palestinians.

Behold Trump Heights — the latest real estate development on occupied Arab land.

The hamlet currently has a population of less than a dozen, but perhaps the Israeli government believes the new branding may result in a rush of investors to snap up the prized real estate, ignoring the inconvenient truth that Tel Aviv is giving away land that does not belong to it. But such prickly details have never bothered Israel, as its rapacious assault on Palestinian land since 1948 has shown. And though Donald Trump may have been a New York real estate mogul before entering the Oval Office, even he will have a difficult time justifying this shameless land grab in front of the international community.

Though ‘Trump Heights’ may be the butt of political jokes, it masks a much darker reality: that the Arabs — particularly the Palestinians — are powerless when it comes to defending their land from occupiers and encroachers. The UN recognises the Golan as Syrian territory, yet the US and Israel have shown utter contempt for international law by ‘normalising’ the illegal occupation of the region. The same is the case for the many Israeli settlements on Palestinian land; Tel Aviv has been emboldened by its American patrons to grab Palestinian land without a second thought, and there seems to be no one — in the international community, including the Arab and Muslim worlds — to stop this criminal land grabbing and raise a voice for the dispossessed Palestinians.

State Bank governor's remarks

IN his first public remarks since assuming office, the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, Reza Baqir, sought to reassure markets about the direction of the economy. He confirmed that the exchange rate would remain 'market-determined' and that the IMF programme was on track to being approved by the board on July 3. Interestingly, he made a distinction between 'market-determined' and 'free float', thereby retaining some space for himself to intervene in case volatility in the forex markets grew beyond a certain level. What those levels might be is not known, nor can he make it clear. But in asserting that the bank had met all the preconditions for the IMF programme, he indirectly confirmed that the recent interest rate hikes and exchange rate depreciations had indeed been undertaken at the behest of the Fund.

As an introductory meeting, the affair seems to have gone off well. It is important that Mr Baqir, a former IMF staffer who was recently brought in as State Bank governor, should not remain a mystery for the markets. It is a delicate balancing act for him, since anything he says can have implications for the markets, while prolonged silence and carrying on business from behind a curtain can fuel speculation. He must do more to communicate with the public, and make greater efforts to understand the lay of the land since the debt and foreign exchange markets in Pakistan are driven in significant measure by individuals and entities, not just the play of market forces. The textbook provides him only a limited understanding of his job.

The State Bank governor must now explain what the drivers of inflation are in Pakistan and how monetary policy can be an effective tool in fighting it. He must also explain why the debt markets remain inactive for tenors beyond three months despite the large hike in the discount rate, going by the auction of Treasury Bills held on June 10. It seems the markets are holding out for further rate hikes, and in doing so, perhaps could be forcing his hand. By some estimates, each percentage point hike in the discount rate can raise the cost of domestic debt servicing by Rs200bn. It is money that the banks will eye with great interest. Similarly with the exchange rate, where market expectations seem to be of continuing depreciation that importers and exporters are trying to price into their behaviour. Now that he has placed the State Bank's core functions largely at the mercy of market

forces, Mr Baqir will need to show his mettle by demonstrating that he is on top of his game. He cannot allow the State Bank to be buffeted by the markets. An effective communication strategy will play an important role in this, and he should continue down the road he began on Monday.

Morsi's death

THE death of Mohamed Morsi — Egypt's first democratically elected president — while ignominiously shackled inside a courtroom on Monday comes as a shock. It shows that the hopes and aspirations inspired by the Arab Spring have been dashed, and that the old, repressive order very much dominates in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world. Morsi reportedly collapsed while addressing the judge; activists said he had not been receiving adequate medical care during the six years he was in prison. The former president faced questionable charges of espionage, and during his long incarceration, he was allowed to meet his family only a few times. Even his burial was a tightly controlled affair, with only a handful of family members permitted to attend his last rites; his widow was reportedly barred from participating.

Mohamed Morsi's nearly year-long rule over Egypt was far from perfect; there was criticism he was going too fast where the implementation of his Islamist-rooted agenda was concerned, and there was genuine public discontent. However, remnants of Egypt's ancien regime took advantage of the public protests, and soon enough, the generals moved in to send Morsi's elected government packing. Yet, it is perhaps unfair to pass judgement on Morsi's performance after only a year in power, especially considering the fact that his strongman predecessor Hosni Mubarak held on to the reins for three decades. Had the late president been allowed to complete his term, the democratic process might have continued, and Egypt would have been a different, more stable place today. Unfortunately, the gains made during the Arab Spring have nearly all been reversed, and today, under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's watch, it appears as if the Mubarak regime never went away. There are reports that around 60,000 political prisoners are locked up in Egypt's jails, though it is a number that is difficult to verify. Journalists have been arrested in the country while democratic activity has been severely stifled under the Sisi regime. In short, the bad old security state of Hosni

Mubarak is alive and well in today's Egypt, as the country's economy tanks and hopes for representative rule fade. Morsi's rise was unexpected, as the academic worked his way up the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood to become his country's first elected leader. His fall was tragic, with his untimely end arguably hastened by the ignominies heaped upon him by the Egyptian establishment.

Mentally ill convicts

NEWS of the stay order on the execution of 36-year-old convict Ghulam Abbas by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa comes as a relief to many, particularly all those who have been campaigning for his right to life following reports that a Rawalpindi court had issued his death warrant. The question of why lower courts continue to do so in such cases without coordination with the superior courts remains unanswered. Ghulam Abbas has been suffering in jail for 13 long years, and has shown clear signs of having mental health issues. His condition is said to have worsened in recent months. That our jails are overflowing with mentally ill prisoners is an open secret. While the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights outlaws the execution of prisoners declared 'insane', there continues to be a lack of understanding of mental health issues in Pakistan, even amongst the most reasonable members of society. It was only three years ago that the Supreme Court stated that schizophrenia did not count as a legally defined mental disorder, when hearing the case of death-row prisoner Imdad Ali, before the assertion was challenged by the then Punjab government. According to experts, out of the 4,688 prisoners currently on death row, 188 are mentally ill patients in Punjab alone. Instead of getting the treatment they deserve at an appropriate facility, prisoners suffering from mental disorders are punished for what they cannot control or comprehend.

At the beginning of this year, the then chief justice Saqib Nisar had stayed the execution order for another mentally ill death-row convict and former policeman, Khizar Hayat, who was suffering from schizophrenia and psychosis. After spending 16 years of his tragic life in prison, Khizar Hayat passed away a few months later in a hospital — emaciated, a shadow of his former self. One can only hope Ghulam Abbas does not meet the same end, and is given the medical treatment and compassion he requires.

Tax collection drive

FROM the looks of it, a very vigorous tax recovery drive is being prepared and aggressive powers to search, seize and scrutinise assets and all places where they may be hidden are in the process of being given to the Federal Board of Revenue. Banks have been asked for details of all accounts that have more than Rs5m, data which will now be cross-checked with the FBR database, wealth declarations as well as travel history and utility bill payments made by the people in question. Separately, the trader community has been told to come and get themselves registered by paying a fixed amount in tax depending on the size of their premises, and to collect a token which is to be displayed on their premises to avoid visits from the tax authorities. Meanwhile, high-net-worth individuals have been warned that the deadline for the tax amnesty scheme will not be extended, and that those who are found in possession of undeclared assets afterwards can face confiscation and imprisonment. The minister of state for revenue said during his budget speech that failure to file tax returns is now going to be a prosecutable offence, again with a possible prison term. Utility bill connections are being scrutinised, data gathered, laws to move money out of the country are being tightened, and come July 1, we could see the launch of a very vigorous tax collection drive.

It would be good to see a parallel move to broaden the tax base as well. This is not the first time we have seen such muscular efforts to bring in revenue and net more taxpayers; past experience teaches us that such drives usually run aground in less than one year. The first year of the Musharraf regime, from 2000 till 2001, is a case in point. Back then, of course, there was also a parallel loan recovery drive under way since most banks were public-sector entities and weighed down by non-performing loans. That drive ended fairly quickly since it damaged business confidence and unleashed an uncouth and untrained tax bureaucracy, with virtually unlimited powers, upon the taxpaying population. We can only hope that what is about to happen from July 1 onwards will not be a repeat of history.

The broadening of the tax base is serious business in this country, but it will clearly take more than raw muscle power to make it happen. Thus far the government's amnesty scheme has drawn a poor response, ie people with large undeclared wealth seem to be calling the government's bluff. Unless

there is a veritable flood of declarants in the seven working days left till the deadline, a flaccid amnesty scheme will mean the whole effort is off to a bad start. Drawing lines in the sand is rarely effective in public policy.

Afghan refugees

TODAY marks World Refugee Day. According to the United Nations, there are 71m people around the world with refugee status — the highest ever recorded. From Syria to South Sudan, men, women and children are forced to flee their homes and seek shelter in other nations due to conditions out of their control: war, genocide, discrimination, and large-scale economic and environmental catastrophes. Pakistan hosts one of the world's largest refugee populations, as Afghans escaping war and tyranny have been entering the country for the past 40 years. Many have made Pakistan their home, and their children and grandchildren born here know of no other. Recently, the Tripartite Commission comprising Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reinforced its commitment to upholding the principle of voluntary repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity. Unfortunately, the reality of how repatriation works on the ground is often the opposite and does not run on principles. There have been reports of harassment, coercion and raids on Afghans when these announcements are made. Once welcomed into the country in large numbers in the name of Muslim brotherhood, Afghans have increasingly found themselves being seen as visitors who have overstayed their welcome. They are the target of suspicion and resentment, and viewed as a burden on the resources of a struggling nation and economy. Moreover, and more worryingly, they are seen as a security threat and treated as such. Like many refugees around the world, they are often made scapegoats for the nation's problems and are unable to shake off their 'alien' status in the eyes of both state and society. While it is important for Afghan refugees to return to their homeland, it is even more crucial that their repatriation is on a voluntary basis and the process supported and accommodated every step of the way by the Afghan government.

The international community and world powers must also pitch in to offer assistance, as many of the problems faced by Afghanistan are a direct result of continuous interference by other nations. To its credit, the PTI government

has always displayed a sympathetic approach and a commendable degree of humanitarianism when it comes to the plight of Afghan refugees. In February, for instance, Afghan refugees were allowed to open bank accounts and participate in the formal economy for the first time — at least in theory. More steps are needed to ensure their inclusion.

KP budget

THE Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's budget for the next year promises to restrain current expenditure and implement a large development programme to create thousands of jobs, reduce the throw-forward of incomplete schemes and extend public service delivery to residents of former Fata (now tribal districts) that has been scarred by conflict. The province has set aside a sum of Rs319bn for development across KP, including Rs83bn for the merged tribal districts. The development outlay is 35pc of the total expected provincial income of Rs900bn, and almost 12pc bigger than the planned development spending of Sindh and just 8pc smaller than that of Punjab. Indeed, the KP government should be commended for restricting its non-development spending to create room for a substantial increase in the allocations for building infrastructure and extending public services to the backward tribal region that had been the hub of the war against terrorism for many years, and where a new ethnic rights movement has attracted a popular following. But does the provincial bureaucracy have what it takes to conceive, plan and execute viable development schemes?

The mess made of the multibillion-rupee Peshawar metro bus project and the throw-forward of schemes that need consistent investments over the next three and a half years to complete is enough to create doubts about the provincial bureaucracy's capacity to handle development projects. There remains a wide gap between the claims made by the PTI government about development in the province in the last six years of its rule and the ground reality. It desperately needs to focus on building the capacity of its departments to execute projects to prevent the waste of public money because of delays and cost overruns. Apart from that, the province should also prod its tax-collection agencies to raise provincial revenues. Unless the government has the money and capacity to implement its plans, it will not

be able to close the development gaps, boost economic growth and improve the quality and reach of public services in the province.

Yet another council

THE formation of another council for high-level decision-making raises some important questions. First among these is, why is there a need for such a council? The notification creating the National Development Council gives four functions to be focused on, while adding the caveat that others can be included later on. These functions are to “set policies and strategies for development” as well as “accelerated economic growth”, and “approve long-term planning for national and regional connectivity and provide guidelines for regional cooperation”.

There are two things worth noting about these terms of reference. First is their overlap with the functions of other existing councils. The National Economic Council, for example, pulls together senior leadership from around the government under the chairmanship of the prime minister precisely for matters such as these. Next is the Economic Advisory Council, which consists of specialised expertise drawn from academia and the private sector. And then, back in late December, we had an Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs with a very similar brief. Between these three, points one to four of the new development council’s functions are amply covered. It is worth wondering what is so different about this council that it is more likely to succeed — in the eyes of the rulers — where the others seem to have been found wanting. Perhaps it is in the composition.

The second thing to note is the open-ended description of the functions of the council. What exactly does “accelerated economic growth” mean here, especially in the context of the macroeconomic stabilisation process that the country is about to embark upon? And what sort of “planning” will be required for “national and regional connectivity”? The terms seem to point towards some kind of a hybrid task, including economic management and foreign relations, that the council is being prepared to discharge. And the language leaves the door open to further dilation of the functions, as well as the composition, of the council. It is difficult to escape the impression that the council is being brought in as some sort of national decision-making body to preside over all aspects of the government’s operations — from CPEC to

taxation matters, trade and diplomacy. It is difficult to see why the need to notify such a council arose in the first place. The fact that the army chief will be part of it, and perhaps more uniformed individuals in the days to come, shows that the decisions to be taken there will require broad, horizontal input. The presence of the military on the council has elevated its importance, and thereby given rise to speculation as to its purpose. It will now be interesting to see how often the council meets, whether its agenda and decisions are shared with the public, and how it coordinates with other decision-making bodies of the federal government, especially the cabinet.

217m and counting

TO put it bluntly, there are too many of us. Decades of failed or virtually non-existent family planning policies have put Pakistan on an alarming trajectory. According to a new UN report, *World's Population Prospects 2019*, the global population is set to increase from 7.7bn today to 9.7bn by 2050, with over half the increase concentrated in only nine countries. Among them is Pakistan. A few more findings in the document should suffice to illustrate the disaster we are courting by our head-in-the-sand attitude to family planning. Taking latest census figures into account, this country of 217m people is now the fifth most populous in the world, up three notches since 1990. The nation's demographic profile, specifically the number of people of reproductive age, means it will retain that ranking through to the end of the century by which time it will have an estimated population of 403m. In fact, the report notes that even if drastic family planning measures were instituted to immediately bring down global fertility rates to two births per woman, the number of deaths would still lag behind, and the world's population would continue to trend upward.

Pakistan's runaway population growth sabotages gains in almost all sectors of development and exacerbates existing challenges — economic, environment, health, education, etc. Tackling any of them without simultaneously addressing the unsustainable birth rate is a self-defeating, Sisyphean endeavour. The time for squeamishness and faux outrage in the matter is long gone. Countries with similar sensibilities, such as Iran and Bangladesh, have been single-minded in their efforts to bring down their birth rates; the results have been stupendous, offering a 'demographic

dividend' of potentially accelerated economic growth. Even resource-rich Saudi Arabia has been more proactive and has a fertility rate of one child less than does Pakistan. Soon after coming to power, Prime Minister Imran Khan described population control as one of his government's priorities, recalling the effectiveness of family planning TV campaigns in the 1960s in keeping the numbers down. Successive governments have often cited right-wing propaganda as being a hurdle to reducing the birthrate — a view contested by many experts in the field. The main problem is a lack of political will to implement a sustained campaign in which public messaging is clear and the availability of contraceptives is assured. Its absence thus far has gravely compromised Pakistan's future. Family planning must be undertaken on a war footing.

Balochistan budget

BALOCHISTAN isn't known for budgeting or investing its financial resources responsibly. However, its budget of Rs419.9bn for the next fiscal year reflects a desire to move things in the direction of better management. But will the government succeed in putting its house in order, and quickly? Not many are convinced. The inflated development spending target of Rs108bn (net of provincial share from the federal uplift budget) despite a gap of Rs47.7bn between total income and expenditure means many schemes will not see the light of day. Others will find their allocations slashed significantly to balance the budget, increasing the massive development throw-forward of Rs288.9bn. A large number of schemes may not be completed. This year, the government had to cut the original development estimates from Rs88.2bn to Rs42bn to cover the Rs62bn deficit. The bloated allocations for development are reflective of the peculiar political environment of the province where successive governments sacrificed fiscal discipline to keep their coalition partners happy.

Still, the government has somehow diverted a small chunk of money for initiatives to help the poor. For example, it has proposed an endowment fund for the destitute, made allocations for providing relief to survivors of natural disasters, and financially helping victims of terrorism. It also plans to build highway trauma and emergency centres, initiate an Apna Ghar housing scheme, launch a green tractor programme for farmers, invest in solar power

for areas where people still live without electricity, give scholarships to thousands of students, and encourage girls' education. Additionally, it promises to spend a significant amount on the social sector including education, health and clean water — basic public services that many of those living in the sparsely populated province have never had access to. These steps need to be appreciated. But unless the ruling coalition takes a firm decision to enforce fiscal discipline, it will not succeed in plugging the leakages or putting an end to the waste of financial resources.

The sugar dilemma

FOR a brief moment, it looked like former finance minister Asad Umar had carved for himself an important new role in the ruling party. In his speech in parliament, he surprised many by taking a contrary line to the one presented by the government in its budget. And then, in a few remarks, he spoke of the sugar industry and how the beneficiaries of its rising prices needed to be investigated. The context was the tax on sugar that the budget has brought in, and how it would fuel further price increases.

Each time the sugar industry is mentioned in such a context, it is time to pause. The sugar industry is to Pakistan what Wall Street is to American capitalism. That might not come across as an appropriate comparison, but it becomes clearer when one considers the clout that Wall Street wields in American politics, and the number of people who have served in high positions in Washington D.C., particularly in the Treasury department, and its influence on Capitol Hill. In Pakistan, it is worth bearing in mind that the leadership of the three large political parties — the PML-N, PPP and PTI — have all heavily invested in sugar mills. From Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif to Jehangir Khan Tareen, to name only a few, there are many who derive their strength and clout from sugar. This is the one sector that no government can reform, to the point where in some places its interests can lead to a ban on the use of unrefined sugar, or gur. Mr Umar is right when he says the sugar sector needs to be investigated. But who will carry out the investigation? Its interests know no party, and have a special place in the power politics of Pakistan. Sugar is where state and capital are fused so tightly that no investigation by any arm of the state is likely to be able to advance.

Mr Asad also spoke on some of the conditions the IMF had originally asked for when he was leader of the negotiating team. According to him, the IMF had conditions that were far harsher than what we see in the budget, such as a near-doubling of gas prices and a sharper increase in taxes than what the present budget brings. All this may be true, but the required adjustment cannot be postponed indefinitely. Beyond firefighting, which is what is being planned at the moment, the government will have to make progress on badly needed and long-delayed structural reforms. If that does not happen, the same harsh conditions will return without the option of postponement.

Abusing the team

THE scathing criticism of the Pakistan cricket team's dismal World Cup performance is at an all-time high, especially after the team collapsed against India in a match in which the captain and most players appeared to have done everything wrong. In fact — other than a thrilling victory against England whom we narrowly beat by 14 runs — our team has lost three matches, against the West Indies, Australia and India, while the game against Sri Lanka was abandoned because of rain. In a nutshell, the team's World Cup 2019 stint has been utterly disappointing, leaving it last but one in the rankings, only slightly ahead of Afghanistan. Naturally, the disappointment from the losses — particularly the thrashing from India — has opened the floodgates of criticism and allowed the dams of anger to burst. From diehard cricket fans to former cricketers and analysts, scores of individuals are commenting on the poor show put up by Pakistan. While the players' performance is indeed cause for concern for the Pakistan Cricket Board and the team's management, it appears as if some elements have crossed the line and gone well beyond constructive criticism. Among them is former cricketer Shoaib Akhtar who has publicly called Captain Sarfraz Ahmed and the team management "brainless". Separately on social and mainstream media, a video is being circulated of the players at a night out with their families; the latter have also become the target of critics. This was evidenced by the response of Sania Mirza, wife of Shoaib Malik, who lashed out on Twitter at those "disrespecting her privacy" and bullying her online for the team's losses.

Although disappointment is a justifiable emotion in this case, the personal attacks and harsh words used against the players who are still very much in the World Cup are unfair. With four matches remaining — and victories needed in all to qualify for the semi-finals — unnecessarily vicious comments are taking away from constructive feedback and putting further pressure on a team that has been unable to handle the strain. There is no doubt that the team has made bad decisions; from choosing to bat second to playing consistently non-performing players and dropping catches — the list of careless mistakes is endless. In this situation, the focus of criticism should be on bad choices and poor strategy — and not on name-calling. Ridiculing the team will hardly produce positive results; commentators should know better and use a less belligerent tone to convey their concern.

Killing of policemen

IN a pattern reminiscent of a few years ago, law-enforcement personnel in Karachi are once again falling prey to criminal elements. Two policemen in plain clothes were gunned down in Orangi last Monday, bringing the number of law enforcers killed in targeted attacks in the city this year to 10. Police claim that the empties found on the scene matched those collected elsewhere in the same locality at the site of two earlier attacks on cops. In fact, at least half the policemen murdered in targeted killings since January were slain in Orangi. That may indicate the involvement of a local group familiar with the identity and routine of cops living in the neighbourhood. Similar attacks, however, have taken place in various other localities, including Hijrat Colony, Defence Society, etc.

Karachi, with its history of warring gangs, violent extremist groups, militant wings of political parties, etc, has not been easy to police, even though the force itself is riddled with corruption and known to partake in the proceeds of crime. The years leading up to the Karachi Operation in late 2013 were particularly perilous; in 2014 and 2015 too, with law enforcement taking on a slew of criminal elements, being a cop in the sprawling metropolis meant gambling with one's life. Police were ordered to patrol in groups, and many avoided wearing their uniform in public lest they be targeted. Even traffic police were not spared, prompting bulletproof vests to be issued to them. According to official figures, 165 police fell in the line of duty in 2013; the

next year, the number was 136. By 2016, it had fallen to 29. However, the number of police fatalities so far this year may point towards a resurgence in criminal elements that had been lying low or were driven out of the city by the Rangers-led crackdown. Targeting law enforcement adds to outlaws' sense of invincibility and demoralises the police. The attacks must be investigated thoroughly. Complacency is not an option.

Political turncoats

DURING the budget debate in the National Assembly on Friday, MNA Khawaja Asif urged all political parties not to allow “people to sneak into them from the back door”. A PML-N stalwart himself, Mr Asif remarked that political “turncoats” had created discord in parliament through hateful speeches which, he said, were “aimed at pleasing rulers”. “If you want to include them [outsiders] in your parties, do not give them front seats, as sitting in the front row is the right of diehard genuine leaders of the parties,” he said, in reference to those who shift political loyalties from one party to another whenever the opportunity arises.

Mr Asif's impassioned plea to his fellow MNAs is heartening at one level — yet also deeply ironic, as there is hardly any political outfit in Pakistan that has refrained from accepting party shifters into its ranks. After all, the term ‘lota’ — a colloquialism for those who hop from one party to another — was coined in the 1990s at a time when the bulk of the PML left Nawaz Sharif in the aftermath of his sacking. Surprisingly, when Mr Sharif was restored to office by the courts, the same people returned to the party and were accepted — an exercise that laid the foundations of the lota culture that prevails today. No doubt it is the democratic right of politicians to choose a party of their liking. However, their blatant lack of consistency as far as political ideology goes is questionable — especially since they are vying to represent millions of citizens, with many of them also seeking public office. There are far too many examples of such individuals in our political culture — whether it is Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who went from the PML-N to the PPP when they governed, and who is now in the PTI, or the likes of Fawad Chaudhry, who was once Gen Musharraf's media man, then a PPP and now a vocal PTI representative. Even a stalwart like Javed Hashmi, after years of lending dedicated support to Nawaz Sharif, ditched the PML-N for the PTI

as the grass appeared greener under Imran Khan's banner. Similarly, the PML-Q, once a part of the Sharifs, broke away to become part of the pro-military Musharraf family and a major detractor of the Sharifs. The PTI today, including much of the federal cabinet, is full of floor-crossers — a far cry from the promised naya Pakistan that Mr Khan is so fond of talking about.

The practice of switching parties is often made fun of, but, on a more serious note, it hurts democracy and weakens political parties. Khawaja Asif's remarks should prompt self-reflection within all parties — including his own — about their tendency to encourage this culture of opportunistic shifts in loyalty. Politicians who are driven by self-interest only contribute to the perversion of the political system as their motives are aligned with convenience instead of reform.

Crisis in the Gulf

OVER the past few days, the US and Iran have come perilously close to conflict, and if various accounts doing the rounds are to be believed, Washington was on the verge of ordering strikes against the Islamic Republic. Though the crisis has been brewing for several weeks, things came to a head on Thursday when the Iranians shot down an American drone they said was intruding into their airspace. The US, meanwhile, claims the craft was operating in international territory. Following this episode, there have been revelations that the US was about to launch retaliatory strikes against Iran, but pulled back at the last minute on the orders of President Donald Trump. This series of events illustrates just how combustible the situation in the Gulf is, and that amidst the posturing and psychological warfare, the threat of an actual conflict may be closer than many imagine. It appears that there is a fair bit of indecision within the White House; war hawks in Mr Trump's inner circle have long been pushing for conflict with Iran, but more pragmatic elements within the establishment — as well as Mr Trump's own disinclination towards a new war at this time — seem to be keeping their provocations in check. Yet the US president himself is sending mixed messages; on Friday, he said he was still willing to talk to Iran, but in the same breath threatened the country with "obliteration". In response, a senior Iranian general has said that in case of an attack, US interests in the region would be "set on fire".

Clearly, in this game of brinksmanship — with the US primarily responsible — a conflict in the Gulf would unleash a catastrophe. Though America is the superior military power, Iran's asymmetrical capabilities should not be underestimated; any conflagration is unlikely to remain localised and may stretch from the Gulf to the Levant, while also sparking sectarian tensions in Muslim states where the conflict will be given a communal colour because of the involvement of America's Arab allies. There is still time to step back, and the ball is primarily in America's court. If Mr Trump wants to avoid war, he must rein in his virulently anti-Iran deputies, stop threatening to destroy the Islamic Republic, and end the economic strangulation of Tehran through sanctions. These moves may rebuild Iranian trust. Moreover, regional states such as Pakistan can also play a conciliatory role, given the threat a war would pose to their own security.

Security in KP polls

MUCH like justice that must be seen to be done, an election must be seen as being free, fair and transparent for an electorate to believe that their will has been correctly expressed. The ECP is mandated to ensure that elections in the country meet those requirements. The upcoming elections on July 20 to the KP Assembly in the newly merged tribal districts are its next major task, not an easy one considering the area's turbulent history. Security is of course a major concern but the ECP's approach to it may have an adverse effect on the quality of the exercise. According to a notification by the election regulator, security personnel drawn from the military and civil armed forces are to be deployed inside and outside each polling station. Several political parties have objected to the prospect of forces' personnel being inside the polling stations, voicing misgivings about the effect of such a huge security presence on the voters.

This election will be an important milestone in erstwhile Fata's entry into the democratic fold. Any impression of voter intimidation in an area whose inhabitants have suffered much and whose expectations have been raised by the state's promises of development, will only add to the feelings of discontent. Security concerns are valid but they must be balanced against the equally important requirement that voters be able to cast their ballot in a space free of any semblance of the state's coercive power. The ECP should

repose trust in the polling agents that they are capable of following their code of conduct and maintaining discipline inside the stations. The Election Act 2017 empowers the ECP to take “appropriate” security measures to ensure the smooth conduct of the polls; at the same time, elections are the linchpin of a democracy and the ECP must guarantee civilian ownership of the exercise. Proper security arrangements outside and in the vicinity of polling stations should suffice to allay fears of the process being disrupted for any reason.

Near miss at FATF

It appears that Pakistan had another narrow escape at the meeting of the Financial Action Task Force held in Orlando, Florida, a few days ago. Despite strong pressure to move towards blacklisting Pakistan’s financial system through a resolution moved by India, the final vote averted that outcome. It is encouraging to note, according to reports trickling out from the secretive deliberations, that Pakistan seems to have found support from countries beyond the traditional three — China, Turkey and the GCC delegation that includes Saudi Arabia. According to these reports, some European countries that have in the past supported the resolutions traditionally tabled by India voted against it this time round. As a result, Pakistan averted being blacklisted despite immense pressure. Credit for this must be given to the delegation that represented the country in Orlando as well as the Foreign Office that organised a strong outreach effort in the run-up to the meeting.

But there is no time to celebrate. All that has really been won at the table is a little more time — a few months. The statement released by FATF after the meetings lists 10 areas in which the government needs to show strong progress, and each of these areas is focused entirely on actual, material outcomes on the ground. The days of simply passing laws and putting in place regulations to make a case for compliance with the global body’s demands that Pakistan shield its financial system from entities and groups designated by the UN as terrorist entities are clearly over. The list of areas in which concrete progress now needs to be witnessed ranges from action against cross-border cash couriers to ensuring that law-enforcement agencies “target designated persons and entities, and persons and entities

acting on behalf or at the direction of the designated persons or entities”. Another item in which compliance is being sought is “demonstrating that facilities and services owned or controlled by designated person are deprived of their resources and the usage of the resources”.

FATF has also signalled that it is running out of patience with Pakistan when it pointedly says that the country has “failed to complete its action plan items” with a January deadline as well as those due in May 2019. The statement ends with a veiled threat, saying that FATF “strongly urges Pakistan” to ensure full compliance by the October meetings, “[o]therwise, the FATF will decide the next step at that time for insufficient progress”. Pakistan committed to an action plan last year which is set to expire by October, so if any residual compliance shortfalls remain by that time, there is now a strong likelihood of full blacklisting. It is important to do everything possible to avert this outcome in the narrow window of opportunity that deft diplomacy has granted.

Railways derailed

IT seems as if there is no end to the tragedy of many years that has befallen Pakistan Railways. Most recently, a passenger train crashed into a stationary goods train near Hyderabad, killing three people — the driver and two assistant drivers — and injuring several others. Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad sought forgiveness from the nation as he accepted responsibility for the crash. Since he was given the ministry in August last year, a portfolio he has held once before under Gen Pervez Musharraf, there have been several accidents and mishaps that are difficult to ignore, despite grandiose promises of better times. Soon after occupying his current position, the minister claimed he would revamp the railways in 120 days, launching new freight train services and ending the deficit by the end of the year. He would achieve all this by working 18 hours a day and eliminating corruption, he said. But when it came to filling thousands of vacancies in the department recently, Sheikh Rashid bizarrely announced that candidates would be hired through a ballot system — essentially, a lottery. The incident showcased a non-serious attitude that is simply incomprehensible given the massive structural problems facing state-run institutions, issues that can

only be resolved through competence, dedication and fresh thinking. But the plight of Pakistan Railways goes further back. During the previous government's tenure, some 20 people were killed and 65 others injured when a passenger train crashed into a stationary train in Karachi in November 2016. Two months before that, six people were killed and over 150 injured when another passenger train crashed into a stationary train near Multan. And a year before that, 18 were killed when a train fell into a canal near Gujranwala. When such tragedies occur so frequently, they cannot be considered 'accidents' anymore; they are the result of criminal neglect and indifference towards the poor who largely make up the bulk of passengers.

How can successive governments speak of bullet trains in some imaginary future when they cannot even repair the outdated infrastructure and equipment they inherited from the former colonial powers generations ago? Pakistan Railways is part of the fabric of the entire nation; it is supposed to facilitate economic activity and provide affordable and comfortable travel to millions. Surely, the railways ministry is far too important a portfolio to go to anyone who does not appear to comprehend the seriousness of the mission.

Sudan crisis

AMONGST the revolutionary slogans and placards raised by protesters in Sudan, there were three words that stood out as a forewarning if the country continued on the blood-spattered path it is on — "Victory or Egypt".

Indeed, recent events in the northeast African nation have unfolded in a manner that brings back memories of the Arab Spring that swept through the Middle East and north Africa nine years ago.

Nationwide uprisings led by a largely youthful population braved militias, tear gas, live ammunition and arrests in order to overthrow the three-decade-long old order of former president Omar al-Bashir.

The military dictator is accused of overseeing genocide; he is wanted by the ICC on several counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

But it was rising inflation, particularly the high price of bread and fuel, which sparked his eventual downfall.

Since his removal through a military coup, the Transitional Military Council has taken over for a two-year period, before civilian rule can be implemented, it said.

Barely two months later, however, the TMC grew restless.

It withdrew from a power-transfer deal with the protesters and called for early elections.

On June 3, around 128 peaceful protesters were brutally murdered by a militia supported by some within the country's divided military.

At least 40 bodies were retrieved from the Nile, and there are claims of rape being committed as a tactic to silence dissent.

Incidentally, rape was also one of the crimes against humanity carried out by Omar al-Bashir in the Darfur massacre.

When power vacuums are created after long periods of repression, they are often filled by other forms of dictatorship that are sometimes more oppressive than what came before.

But if power does not change hands through the will of the people, the latter find no way of getting rid of an entrenched status quo other than mass agitation — and often assassination.

While some fear another Egypt — or worse, Syria — we can only pray the Sudanese protesters are able to successfully carve their own path in the history books.

Charter of economy

IT might sound incongruous in these times of polarisation, but there is a growing need for the political parties to agree on a 'charter of economy' if Pakistan is to have any hope of breaking its cycle of eternal return to the IMF.

The issue has come back to the surface of late, especially since Maryam Nawaz obliquely announced her opposition to making any 'deal' with the government, while Shahbaz Sharif and Asif Zardari have both supported the idea.

The logic of refusing to deal with one's opponents because they have come to power 'through the back door' is fine for political purposes, but the need and demand for a charter of economy is different, and predates the present.

It is worth remembering that the idea had been floated in the past by the PML-N itself.

A charter of economy need not represent a 'deal' or a 'bargain' of any sort.

It doesn't have to be a negotiation process where one side gives and the other takes.

It is, in fact, a roundtable discussion for all parties to concur on a minimum economic agenda they think is desirable.

There are some common things that all parties have done when in power.

For example, they have all floated bonds in international markets and taken loans from the IMF and the World Bank.

Then there are some things they have all struggled with when in power — for example, broadening the tax base and documenting the economy.

There are some areas where they do not agree with each other — for example, what to do with state-owned enterprises.

On each of these agenda items, there is a need for the parties to sit down together to discuss with each other what their position is, what actions they are willing to support, and where they draw the line.

The PPP has opposed outright privatisation, for example, preferring a divestment of stakes instead, whereas the PML-N and the PTI both now seem in favour of privatisation (even though the latter party's manifesto does not propose privatisation as the solution to the growing burden of SOEs).

The parties need to have this dialogue with each other behind closed doors, and with the din of politics locked out.

Those members of their parties who support such a path should discuss it with those among their colleagues who oppose it and persuade them to change their minds.

Moreover, the process needs to be led by Prime Minister Imran Khan himself, otherwise it will lack the kind of credibility it needs.

This is the time for Mr Khan to show that he is capable of providing the kind of leadership the country needs.

The economic conversation has suffered as it was held hostage to political tides over the years.

It is now time to sit together and agree on at least a minimum common agenda for the economy.

FBR-Nadra portal

HISTORICALLY, tax amnesty schemes haven't had significant success, with those who choose not to document their assets often not taking the bait. Clearly, the government is intent on making its scheme work where others have failed — by swapping the fishing line for a trawler net. In announcing the launch of an online tax-profiling portal with data collated by the FBR and Nadra only days before the June 30 assets declaration deadline, the government's message is clear: they have a detailed picture of citizens' assets, income, expenditures and lifestyles, ie information that can be used in the future to prosecute individuals who have so far evaded the law. However, and perhaps in large part because it took the public by surprise, many have expressed discomfort and anxiety with this rather drastic signalling. And not without reason.

The fact that the decision to upload the personal data of around 53m citizens online was taken without following a stakeholder process and parliamentary debate is quite concerning. The Constitution guarantees citizens' right to privacy, and though the data collected by Nadra, for example, was willingly submitted, it was without the understanding that this information would be put on an online portal at some future date. The fact that travel history is also included in this profile has been particularly jarring for many. In an age when even using a relatively benign app requires consenting to an exhaustive terms-and-conditions agreement, this betrays a lackadaisical attitude towards how Pakistanis' personal data is gathered, stored and used. And though FBR chairman Shabbar Zaidi has given assurances that the database is secure, the general lack of transparency prior to the portal's

launch still raises serious questions about what precautions have been taken — or what recourse citizens have in the (however unlikely) event of a security breach. Pakistan still lacks a personal data protection law. A draft bill introduced by the IT ministry last year has several major shortcomings — the most pertinent in this case being that it does not extend to public bodies and government-held personal data, which includes biometric details. Following the June 30 deadline (after which the portal would have effectively served its purpose) it ought to be taken offline. However well-intentioned this initiative may be — and it is hoped that it is successful — security and privacy questions need to be answered before any similar actions are undertaken again

Comeback win

PAKISTAN'S convincing 49-run win over South Africa on Sunday has once again rekindled hopes of them making it to the World Cup semi-finals, though realistically, it is a difficult target to achieve.

It was a commendable performance, indeed, from a team that had appeared down and out after being defeated by India last Sunday, and that has been at the receiving end of scathing criticism from dejected fans. The South Africans, who have certainly not been at their best in this tournament, were determined to go out on a winning note, and wanted to take advantage of a demoralised Pakistani team. Instead, they encountered a buoyant outfit that had picked up the pieces. The openers provided a solid start, and the prolific Babar Azam was again among the runs.

Thankfully, Shadab Khan and Wahab Riaz, who had so far appeared off colour, performed well in the crucial contest, while Mohammad Amir continued with his lethal form. However, it was Man of the Match Haris Sohail who stole the show with his breathtaking, match-winning knock of 89. The affable left-hander, who had sulked in the dugout for the last three games as his senior Shoaib Malik made a mess of things in the middle, grabbed the opportunity to hit out at the Proteas attack.

More importantly, Sarfraz Ahmed's captaincy was aggressive and imaginative, which choked any sort of fight-back by the other side in the run chase. In the two matches against Australia and India, Sarfraz had been

criticised for not being fully engaged and for being short on ideas. But on Sunday, under him, his charges executed the game plan to the letter.

Having said that, there is no margin for error; Pakistan has to win all their three matches to make any sort of case for playing the semi-finals. Despite the win against South Africa, they languish at a lowly seventh spot with an unimpressive scoring rate. The fielding, too, remains a major worry and may well be the deciding factor against a fiercely competitive rival like New Zealand that they face next. How far Pakistan can go in this tournament also depends on how teams like England, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka fare in their remaining games. But luck favours the brave, and if Pakistan maintain their renewed impetus, they can still pull off the unthinkable.

Model civil courts

RATHER than dispense justice, Pakistan's leaden-footed judicial system tends to prolong the agony of litigants and accused alike. Legal safeguards to ensure the rights of both parties, taken for granted in more developed countries, are virtually absent. There are around 2m cases pending before various courts in the country. Model criminal trial courts recently set up on the directions of the National Judicial Policy Making Committee have been an effort to jump-start the process. According to a report released a few days ago, the 110 model courts across the country have in two and a half months decided 5,647 long-pending murder and narcotics cases. The outcome has encouraged the NJPMC in a meeting on Monday to propose the establishment of model trial magistrate courts and model civil appellate courts in all the districts. No adjournments will be permitted in the MCACs, and verdicts are to be announced within three days after conclusion of the proceedings.

Given it takes between four to five years for criminal cases to be decided while the model courts complete the process in three months, the initiative has the potential to overhaul the legal system. It is wholly appropriate that pending civil cases too are to be brought gradually under the purview of the model courts. According to a study of lower courts in Punjab, civil cases on average require 58 hearings over a period of about 37 months from the time of filing until the verdict is given. For most people therefore, litigation is prohibitively expensive, and expedited hearings are the obvious solution. It

seems incomprehensible that there has been considerable resistance to the model courts among sections of the legal community; one would imagine that some judges also have reservations. But perhaps this is not surprising: the workings of the model courts threaten to upend the culture of endless adjournments that is a feature of the legal system which compounds the backlog. Only by breaking this vicious cycle can the apex court effect a change in the modus operandi.

According to a study conducted by the Supreme Court a couple of years ago, it can take 25 years for a case to wind its way through the courts before it is finally disposed of. Even then, procedural and evidential problems result in many unsafe convictions. Between 2010 and 2018, the Supreme Court overturned death sentences in no less than 78pc of the 310 appeal cases that came before it during this period. Ironically, it is the very lack of a viable justice system that has made the concept of 'speedy justice' so seductive that far too often the state — and the public — has glossed over an individual's right to fair trial. One hopes the model courts do not lose sight of this historical context. Justice, and not swift disposal of a case, is the objective.

No more torture

THE use of torture by law enforcement and security officials in Pakistan has often been described, and quite rightly so, as endemic. In fact, as a cruel joke goes, the police here use the 'third degree' with such reckless abandon that a suspect will 'confess' to anything just to make it stop. The news pages and TV screens regularly feature accounts of those in custody relating nightmarish run-ins with the law, where police officers have tortured them psychologically or physically. In many instances, death in custody is the result, as in the case of an undertrial prisoner in Karachi a few days ago. The family of Sagheer Tanoli say he was tortured by police and later on died, though prison officials assert that he was brought to jail in an 'injured' condition. Such accounts are far too frequent, pointing to the fact that the 'thana culture' in Pakistan is a euphemism for torture and violence. Today, as the world observes the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, state and society in this country need to reaffirm their intention to stamp out torture, especially torture carried out by those in uniform.

As experts have pointed out, while Pakistan has ratified the Convention against Torture, the country lacks a specific law criminalising this odious practice. Lawmakers have come up with draft bills, but none of these have been passed. While it is true that there are good laws aplenty in Pakistan — though scant enforcement — a law against torture would be a significant step towards eliminating violence within jail cells, in homes and elsewhere. Moreover, police and security forces have to be sensitised to the fact that violence against those in custody cannot be justified under any circumstances, and that scientific methods need to be applied to solve cases. Torture in custody at the hands of officials of the state is partially responsible for the brutalisation of society. Indeed, torture breeds more violence and lawlessness in society, which is why this vicious cycle needs to end. Efforts to pass legislation that criminalises torture must be speeded up, while at the same time police and paramilitary forces must undergo training which reinforces humane treatment of persons in custody. Moreover, any official found condoning or encouraging the use of violence must face the law. Unless condemnation of torture comes from the very top of the power structure, such brutality is unlikely to go away.

MNAs' production orders

NATIONAL Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser has yet to provide a satisfactory explanation of why he has chosen not to exercise the powers vested in his office to issue production orders for the elected representatives of North and South Waziristan to participate in the current session of parliament.

The Assembly's procedural rules clearly state that the speaker or any chairman of a committee can summon an MNA who is in custody to attend parliamentary proceedings. Yet, despite the repeated protests of members of the opposition, including BNP-M president Akhtar Mengal and PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the speaker has prevaricated.

Earlier, he had suggested that he required a written request to consider issuing the orders, which is not accurate, though even this self-imposed criterion had already been fulfilled in a letter sent to him late last month by Mr Bhutto-Zardari. On Monday, the speaker said that he was consulting the law ministry on the matter, which is also unnecessary. While the merits of continuing to deny MNAs Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir their right to attend

house sittings and represent their constituencies in the ongoing budget debate are difficult to comprehend, the drawbacks are all too obvious.

The people living in the tribal districts of KP have for too long endured disenfranchisement and upheaval. Waziristan's fragile stability in particular — a hard-won gain after decades of unrest and conflict — has been seriously tested in recent weeks. Failure to summon their MNAs to parliament sends a clear signal to the people of Waziristan that many down country remain stubbornly careless and negligent in their attitude towards them, and perhaps even consider their elected representation as unimportant.

It is now more vital than ever to be sensitive to the need to not further alienate the people of Waziristan. They must be shown that their rights and that of their MNAs are considered as sacrosanct as any other citizen's. Speaker Qaiser should immediately issue production orders for Mr Dawar and Mr Wazir to appear in parliament.

Devolution's critics

THE din surrounding devolution is once again growing louder, with federal minister Dr Fehmida Mirza being the latest to draw attention to the landmark 18th Constitutional Amendment which transformed centre-province relations in 2010. Dr Mirza on Tuesday lashed out at the PPP for its alleged failure to implement the amendment in Sindh where it has ruled for years. She said that, although its purpose was to end the sense of deprivation among the smaller provinces, it had regrettably failed to achieve the objective. Dr Mirza also hit out at the PPP for criticising efforts to roll back the amendment when the party is allegedly not working towards its implementation in Sindh.

There are several truths to consider when it comes to the 18th Amendment. First, it was a colossal step in Pakistan's history in that it boldly overhauled the 1973 Constitution to truly turn the country into a federation. In doing so, as Dr Mirza pointed it, it also decentralised power to transfer autonomy — hence, funds — to the provinces in order to make the provision of services such as health, education, sanitation, social welfare etc more effective (this aspect, in fact, has formed the basis for heated debates today). Second, the effort in favour of its reversal basically hinges on the argument that the

amendment diverts too much money to the provinces and leaves very little for the federal government, a view that makes little sense considering how impractical it is for the centre to be involved in delivering local social services. The logic behind the rollback debate is also weak on the premise that giving powers back to the federal government will not automatically translate into more funds for the centre. So if the finances remain the same — as would expenditure — why is there a considerable push by certain quarters to take powers away from the provinces?

The answer is that, ultimately, the issue is one of lack of trust between the centre and the provinces. The cash-strapped incumbent government, whose coffers are practically empty after mass spending on debt servicing and defence, is desperate for greater control of finances and is, therefore, building a case to undo the amendment despite its democratic framework. To address this trust deficit and discourage naysayers, it is the responsibility of all provincial governments to make good on their duty to deliver services to citizens — a responsibility which the PPP has been accused of abandoning in the last decade despite being granted autonomy. The state of basics such as transport, education, health and sanitation paints a sorry picture across Sindh, a reality which allows public support for a case against the 18th Amendment, thus giving credence to the detractors' views. To reinforce the importance of devolved power, the provinces must show results, or risk facing a campaign that undermines a historic achievement.

A fair deal?

A STRANGE series of events has been unfolding over the past few days in the Gulf state of Bahrain. Gathered here — under the watchful eye of President Donald Trump's son-in-law and Middle East point man Jared Kushner — an assortment of American and Arab officials have presented grandiloquent visions of a golden future for the Palestinian people. Dubbed the 'Peace to Prosperity' workshop, the participants envision investing billions of dollars in Gaza and the West Bank, turning Gaza into an Arab version of Singapore, and granting the occupied territories lollipops like 5G internet coverage. However, the irony that the Palestinians themselves remained absent from the event has been lost on no one. The Palestinian side boycotted the Manama workshop as both Hamas and Fatah have been

united in their criticism that this talk of economic prosperity is but a smokescreen, designed to obfuscate the core issue: a just political settlement that seeks to establish a viable Palestinian state. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has said a political solution to the Palestine question must precede all other matters, while the PLO has observed that Trump & Co want to sell the “mirage of economic prosperity”.

Some defenders of the Manama event have said, rather naively, that there is no harm in discussing an economic revitalisation plan for Palestine. Yet even Mr Kushner has said that a “fair political solution” is required to the Arab-Israeli question, though adding that that such a solution would come later. The problem is that these promises of an economic bonanza sound hollow because they fail to address the central issue: the brutal Israeli occupation. The fact is the Palestinians are suffering from financial problems because of Israel’s strangulation of their society and economy. From the looks of it, the ‘deal of the century’, now rechristened the ‘opportunity of the century’, appears to be a multibillion-dollar bribe to the Palestinians to forget Jerusalem, forget the right of return, and forget the dismantling of illegal Israeli settlements. The road to dialogue should always be kept open, yet this dialogue must promise to secure the human and political rights of the Palestinians, and end the demeaning treatment being meted out to the latter by Tel Aviv. The Palestinians should be saluted for resisting the immense pressure being exerted by the US, and their well-heeled Arab ‘brothers’, to participate in such a dubious venture. Clearly, the Palestinian side has emphasised that their land — and dignity — is nosalet for .

Women want progress

IN this year’s Progress of the World’s Women report, UN Women has highlighted how placing women’s rights and family-friendly policies at the heart of public planning and budgeting can have immense knock-on effects for the socioeconomic development of the country. Pakistan has a long way to go before it can realise the goal of ensuring the health, happiness and safety of all its citizens. Much of this has to do with the fact that political and policy considerations have always been skewed towards a male-centric model of development. But it is women who, as social and biological caregivers, have the most to offer to address the many crises afflicting our

nation. Yet, with over 101m women in Pakistan according to the last census, the status of women across all classes is abysm

ally worse than that of men. Pakistani women are overwhelmingly undernourished; undereducated; underp

aid, unacknowledged and undocumented for their labour; they lack access to social and financial services; and are

Pakistan cannot advance unless it ensures a more equitable arrangement for women to advocate for their families' well-being. Two key areas require urgent attention. One is the persistently high levels of violence against women in the public and domestic spheres, and the other is their lack of financial inclusion. Women's access to microfinance options has consistently shown that they tend to invest with altruism and foresight, spend and save prudently, and stimulate economic and entrepreneurial activity — significantly improving the socioeconomic indicators of their families and communities. But the threat of coercion and abuse will forever thwart this progress without robust legal and social protections. It is hoped that in the coming years more legislation, policies and programmes are guided by gender-equality principles, and reflect women's priorities — health, education, economic opportunity and the guarantee of individual safety and autonomy to pursue these goals. It's time to put our house in order.

Unimpressive MPC

THE opposition's multiparty conference in the capital on Wednesday proved nothing more than yet another exercise in rhetoric, with politicians once more announcing a rallying point in the future.

This time they resolved to observe a 'black day' on July 25 — the first anniversary of the 2018 general elections — to protest against the alleged rigging during the polls.

At a press briefing after the conference, political leaders from the country's main opposition parties sat together to reveal the opposition's 'strategy'.

Stalwarts Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Shahbaz Sharif, Mahmood Khan Achakzai and Yousuf Raza Gilani shared the stage with scions Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

Together, they presented a smorgasbord of ideas ranging from the removal of Sadiq Sanjrani as Senate chairman, to the formation of a committee to implement the MPC's decisions.

The parties also reiterated their rejection of the 2019-2020 federal budget and the government's proposed National Economic Council and debt inquiry commission.

This week's meeting marked the third time the opposition parties sat together to discuss politics and a joint course of action — a strategy that is yet to materialise despite efforts to build momentum.

Their very first congregation held during Ramazan, at the invitation of Mr Bhutto-Zardari, saw them discuss the political situation and contemplate a future mode of protest.

A follow-up invitation from Ms Nawaz to Raiwind, too, saw the leaders discussing everything from the judges' references to the government's economic policies; the meeting ended with a pledge to agree on a joint course of action.

The latest gathering has resulted in a similar announcement of a 'mass contact campaign' to mobilise the people against government policies — a sign that these meetings are actually quite hollow when it comes to substance. Evidently, the opposition's get-togethers have failed to yield concrete plans or create a sense of hope among the people suffering the consequences of a spiralling economy.

With no clear strategy in view, it seems that the opposition is sitting together simply because political parties have common reservations about the ongoing accountability process.

With Nawaz Sharif in jail and Asif Zardari in NAB custody, the PML-N and PPP appear to be actually avoiding a tangible plan — perhaps there is also concern that they may not be able to draw the crowds.

Be that as it may, it is telling that these political figures do not seem to be able offer a coherent plan even after numerous meet-ups.

Undoubtedly, the main role of opposition parties is to question the government of the day and challenge its policies in the interest of the public.

In this spirit, the unity of the opposition and its meetings are intrinsic to forming a strategy.

But alas for our opposition parties, despite the assembly of heavyweights under one roof, the outcomes of iftar-dinner meetings and hotel huddles have been rather anti-climatic.

Rupee slides

AS the slides in the rupee continue unabated, some important questions are now coming to the fore. It is true that artificially holding the exchange rate at a level dictated by the political bosses makes for bad economic policy. But now that we are supposedly moving away from that regime towards what the State Bank calls a 'market-determined' rate, it is important to keep an eye on the volatility and ask whether the recent moves are indeed being determined by the market. Why is it that the exchange rate starts to see sharp slides just as an important IMF-related decision point approaches? The last slides happened when the staff-level agreement was coming up, and now that the board approval is due on July 3, we are again seeing sharp downward movements. There may not be anything to this, but it is worth bearing in mind that not so long ago the State Bank itself was telling us that the new level of the exchange rate is more in line with economic fundamentals. What fundamentals have changed since then to merit the more recent depreciations of the last few days?

There will no doubt be a public clamour for more stability in the exchange rate because it is central to the business operations of a large part of the country's services economy as well as manufacturing. Planning for the future is difficult in the face of sharp exchange rate swings that come like bolts of lightning from time to time. Now that the regime is moving towards greater flexibility and the new State Bank governor has retained some space for himself to intervene in the exchange rate markets, a great deal of concern is revolving around how and when that intervention might be triggered. It

might not be possible to say what level the rupee is headed for in the months to come given the prevailing market-related uncertainties. But there is still a clear need for more communication on the direction of the exchange rate, or else the uncertainty may lead the wheels of the economy to grind to a halt. If there has been no commitment with the IMF on the value of the exchange rate, then more needs to be made clear, particularly what 'market determined' actually means. But if, contrary to official assertions, a value has indeed been agreed upon, the authorities should note that this fact will soon become impossible to conceal.

Time up for 'shoppers'?

SOMETIMES old ways of doing things were better for the collective good. Using cloth bags instead of plastic ones is among those; the ubiquitous 'shopper' blights the country's landscape — snagged on branches, littering the ground and choking drains. In late April, the local administration banned the export, import, purchase and use of plastic bags in Hunza, reportedly the first district in South Asia to put the environmentally friendly measure into effect. The administration distributed 1,000 such bags among the residents of the scenic valley to encourage them to switch to cloth bags, and carried out awareness-raising activities about plastic waste pollution. These efforts demonstrated commitment; without taking the public on board, the ban would have been difficult to enforce or sustain.

Hunza attracts huge numbers of domestic tourists every year, and is touted among the top destinations for wooing international travellers to Pakistan. That is another reason why the ban in this area is so important: nothing defiles a stunning landscape as do 'shoppers' scattered about. Encouragingly, however, similar bans have recently been announced by the provincial governments as well in order to curb plastic waste pollution. Local administrations must ensure the restriction on non-biodegradable shopping bags is strictly observed — the country produces some 30m tonnes of solid waste annually, of which an estimated 9pc are plastics, including polythene bags. There will be some murmurs of discontent of course — from consumers because 'shoppers' have been a staple for so long, and from producers who will lose a steady stream of revenue. The country's largest city, Karachi, generates around 20,000 tonnes of solid waste daily but,

shamefully enough, the authorities make no effort at waste collection. Nevertheless, this has not stopped the provincial government from repeatedly announcing a ban on polythene bags — empty words in the absence of follow-up action. Aside from clogging waterways that are the principal cause of urban flooding, the plastic waste that goes into the sea also endangers marine life. We must demonstrate far better civic sense.

Ghani's visit

WHILE the history of the Pak-Afghan relationship can at best be described as chequered, there is little point in dwelling on bitter experiences. In fact, it would be more helpful if both states worked on achieving a productive bilateral relationship and a peaceful future for the region, especially Afghanistan. In this context, the two-day visit of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to Pakistan was a welcome step in repairing and cementing the bilateral relationship. Prime Minister Imran Khan called for a “qualitative transformation” in relations while Mr Ghani reaffirmed the need for “political alignment” between the two states. The Afghan leader — apart from his engagements with government officials and think tanks — also met the heads of Pakistan's leading political parties during his visit.

Indeed, geopolitics has resulted in frayed relations between Islamabad and Kabul, particularly in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and thereafter. However, as Ashraf Ghani's visit and the current warming of ties illustrate, Pakistan has a central role to play in facilitating and supporting a peaceful, functional Afghanistan. Whatever the constraints of geopolitics may be, geography as well as common cultural ties that go back centuries dictate that both states coexist peacefully. Instability in Afghanistan will make the whole region, particularly Pakistan, unstable, one of the main reasons why a negotiated end to the long-drawn war in Afghanistan must remain on top of the bilateral agenda. Pakistan has played and ought to continue to play a role urging all Afghan factions, including the Taliban, to make extra efforts to bring the conflict to a close. However, while other states can help facilitate a negotiated peace, it is the Afghans themselves that need to hammer out the finer details of a final settlement acceptable to all stakeholders in their country.

In order to move the peace process forward, the Afghan Taliban must shed their rigidity, particularly when it comes to recognising the Ghani-led dispensation in Kabul. Moreover, guarantees from all sides — particularly the Taliban — are needed that violence will stop. If a ceasefire is adhered to, the goal of a negotiated settlement may be within reach. Talks between the Taliban and the US are due to resume in Doha; the armed group cannot afford to let this opportunity go to waste and apart from talking to the Americans, should open direct channels with the government in Kabul. Pakistan should continue its efforts to facilitate peace, while working towards developing good relations with Kabul. There may be spoilers, as factions within Afghanistan as well as states in the region would not like to see a fruitful Pak-Afghan relationship. But these irritants cannot be allowed to get in the way of full normalisation of ties between Islamabad and Kabul; there is much benefit in both sides realising the immense potential of the relationship where trade, commerce and cultural ties are concerned.

A polio emergency

REPORTS this week of multiple polio cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have dealt a blow to the polio eradication campaign in the country, sounding the alarm for a polio emergency. Five new cases in KP have taken the tally of reported cases in the first six months of 2019 to an astounding 32 — a major setback from 2018 and 2017 which saw annual totals of 12 and eight cases respectively. Of the cases this year, KP has reported the highest at 18, signalling challenges in the polio vaccination drive across the province. Officials said the crisis is a result of refusals and hesitation on the basis of misconceptions about vaccination — notions due to which a large number of children stay exposed to the crippling poliovirus and are in danger of suffering from lifelong disabilities.

The rise in reported polio cases this year is devastating, for the simple reason that polio is a vaccine-preventable disease which has largely been eliminated everywhere in the world — with the exception of Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even a single child infected with the poliovirus can lead to other children contracting the disease, especially in areas of poor sanitation. In fact, the poliovirus can easily be imported into a polio-free country and can spread rapidly amongst unimmunised populations. After our

government renewed efforts to eradicate the virus in 2015, a sharp decline was witnessed in reported cases in the following years — with only eight in 2017. But statistics from the past two years and the recent cases show that the virus continues to exist in Pakistan and that it is a matter which requires dramatic action from the government. The responsibility should be assumed by Prime Minister Imran Khan, who ought to declare a polio emergency and take charge of the campaign. Mr Khan must send a clear message about the urgency to eliminate the virus. He should be seen by citizens across all provinces as the driving force behind the eradication campaign. The subject of health is one that is close to the prime minister's heart, as he has campaigned passionately for the cause. From building a cancer hospital to highlighting the issue of malnutrition in his inaugural address as prime minister, Mr Khan has shown a commitment to the physical well-being of Pakistanis. He must assume the mantle of spearheading the polio campaign to give our future generations a fighting chance and free them from the burden of an incurable, lifelong disability.

Selective brouhaha

IT seems that members of the treasury benches have a strong, rather opposition-like affinity for raising a ruckus at the slightest provocation, little realising either their power as incumbents or how this prickliness plays into their opponents' hands. At no time was this more obvious than during Thursday's cut-motion proceedings in the National Assembly. Successful as they might have been in having the speaker expunge the offending term 'selected' from opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif's remarks, it opened the floodgates for far more impish techniques of inserting the word into the public record. Moving cut motion after cut motion, opposition MNAs delivered their subtle ripostes with a straight face to an easy audience. Indeed, for days, the attempt to censor the use of this word has dominated public conversation and made for many a tittering headline both at home and abroad. This is hardly a unique phenomenon, and social scientists might find ample material in Pakistani politics these days to examine the phenomenon of how attempting to suppress something is akin to giving it free publicity. The PTI's proclivity for reacting hotly to having its democratic bona fides called into question has only served to reinforce perceptions of the circumstances under which the party was elected.

But while the opposition wears a self-satisfied smirk for proving to be a pesky thorn in the government's side through its comedic stylings, perhaps a gentle reminder would not be out of place. It may have succeeded in getting under the government's skin, but not one cut motion managed to pass through parliament. Despite having the numbers, the opposition parties' many announcements of igniting a powerful resistance campaign against the government's moves have thus far proved little more than damp squibs. To a public anxious about the state of the economy and the impending austerity measures, the fact that their representatives seem to take more pride in delivering pot shots across either side of the aisle than reflecting their concerns is a classic case of 'first as tragedy, then as farce'.

Army chief's remarks

THERE is a rough road ahead for Pakistan, and national institutions must play their role in reviving the economy. On that score, at least, everyone is on the same page. There is, however, a difference of opinion about how we have arrived at this juncture.

On Friday, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa, speaking at a seminar on the economy at the National Defence University, contended that "fiscal mismanagement" and timid decision-making in the past are responsible for the dire straits the country finds itself in.

Read: COAS Gen Bajwa points to 'fiscal mismanagement' as reason behind Pakistan's economic woes

Further, he endorsed the PTI government for the "difficult decisions" it has taken to resuscitate the economy, citing examples of other countries having overcome similar challenges with the same approach. It is indeed imperative that Pakistan get its house in order, for as the army chief rightly stated, "there can be no sovereignty without economic stability". The military has demonstrated its own commitment to what is likely to be a long and arduous exercise by foregoing the annual defence budget increment.

It has not been long since Pakistan emerged from years of extremist violence. The relative peace that has been secured is a credit to the armed forces ably performing their constitutional duty to protect the country.

Nevertheless, recent terrorist incidents point to the tenuous nature of those gains.

The military leadership should not allow itself to be sidetracked from its core responsibilities — which include keeping the eastern and western borders secure — and instead apply its energies to its area of expertise.

Maintaining the separation of powers as defined in the Constitution strengthens institutions and, in turn, the overarching governance framework. However, by endorsing the PTI government's actions, the army chief is expressing an overt political opinion. That is undesirable for more than one reason.

Politics is seen as the art of the possible, which means it can — even in the most evolved democracies — require some bending of principles and the forging of improbable alliances. That is why it is best left to the politicians while other institutions remain above the fray.

Moreover, the armed forces play an important role in the conduct of elections; the appearance of impartiality on their part thus has a critical bearing on the credibility of the polls.

The PTI government has thrown itself with gusto into the task of attacking the PPP and PML-N for alleged mismanagement of the economy when they were in power; the opposition has responded fiercely to its accusations. This is the nature of the political back and forth in a parliamentary democracy, even a dysfunctional one as ours.

Gen Bajwa's remarks unnecessarily expose the military to accusations of encroaching on the political realm.

The PTI, by including the army chief in a top economic consultative body — the first time this has happened in a civilian government — will be much to blame if there are negative repercussions for the military's public standing, and Gen Bajwa's legacy.

Anti-press tactics

IN a sign of increasing pressure on the media, the Narendra Modi-led government, apparently retaliating to unfavourable reporting, has stopped giving advertisements to at least three Indian newspapers.

Officials from the Times and ABP groups say their publications have been deliberately starved of government ads worth millions of rupees in a move which began even before Mr Modi was re-elected with a landslide mandate.

Although there has been no official comment on the ban from Delhi, the message is clear.

In the words of one media group's representative: "Once you don't toe the government line in your editorial coverage and you write anything against the government, then obviously the only way they can penalise you (is) to choke your advertising supply."

Even the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha has called attention to the government's tactics to quash criticism, dubbing it "undemocratic". Ironically, a BJP spokesperson insists that the press in India is free.

The issue of government-sponsored advertisements in the media is a complex one; the ads are usually tenders for government contracts or publicity for government schemes. Their issuance translates to considerable revenue for publications. Much like the situation in Pakistan, in India, too, these advertisements are usually given out on the basis of target audiences and readership.

But in a world where heads of state are increasingly becoming intolerant, authoritarian figures, such as the Indian prime minister, indirect and uncharted means are used to stifle the voices of those whose duty it is to hold leaders accountable.

Instead of respecting press freedom, such personalities undercut the media by halting ads and creating a financial crisis as a way of punishment for critical coverage. And because there are no specific rules that regulate the giving (or holding back) of government ads to media outfits, a legitimised loophole makes room for vindictive behaviour, or blackmail, in the garb of 'prerogative'.

Such anti-press tactics ought to be condemned. Not only do they exert a financial strain on newspapers and journalists, they also intimidate media personnel and prevent them from holding elected officials accountable — a function which lies at the heart of a healthy democracy.

Mr Modi, whose pre-election advertising blitz showed him plastered on the front pages of scores of newspapers, should tolerate criticism instead of employing crafty ways to suppress journalism.

Ethnic profiling?

THE Rawalpindi administration's recent move to surveil small hotels and cafes owned by Quetta natives settled in the capital has all the trappings of ethnic profiling. After the regional police officer issued orders to 'obtain details' about the employees and owners of these ventures, the small business owners say they are feeling harassed by the frequent visits of officials in plain clothes who claim to be from different departments. Despite being provided identification and registration documents, police and intelligence officials continue to frequent the hotels to ask various questions while being plied with tea. The 'visits' started after a meeting took place between police and intelligence officials in which they decided to keep an eye on two dozen hotels and cafes as they feared these premises could be used by 'miscreants for unlawful activities'.

While there indeed exists a justified fear of security threats in a country like Pakistan, selecting enterprises owned by citizens hailing from a specific area reeks of prejudice. The targeting of hotel owners from Balochistan on the basis of their ethnicity is open discrimination — a tool often employed by law-enforcement agencies during surveillance. Due to a lack of employment opportunities in their native towns, these men move to bustling cities in search of a livelihood and offer good services and quality food for low prices. Marking them out as targets for investigation simply based on their ethnicity results in humiliating and often traumatising exchanges. It gives rise to a lack of trust in security forces on the part of not only the victims of this harassment but also their families and friends. Moreover, it negatively impacts police-community relations. So far, no evidence has surfaced of the

hotel owners having links to banned or militant groups. Without credible intelligence, which appears to be lacking in these cases, intimidating these men will ultimately lead to decreased cooperation between law enforcement and ordinary people — a net loss for both the state and the citizens it vows to protect.

The world's largest democracy will present a sorry picture if it curtails press freedom at home.

