



DAWN

EDITORIALS

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Compiled By
Shahbaz Shakeel
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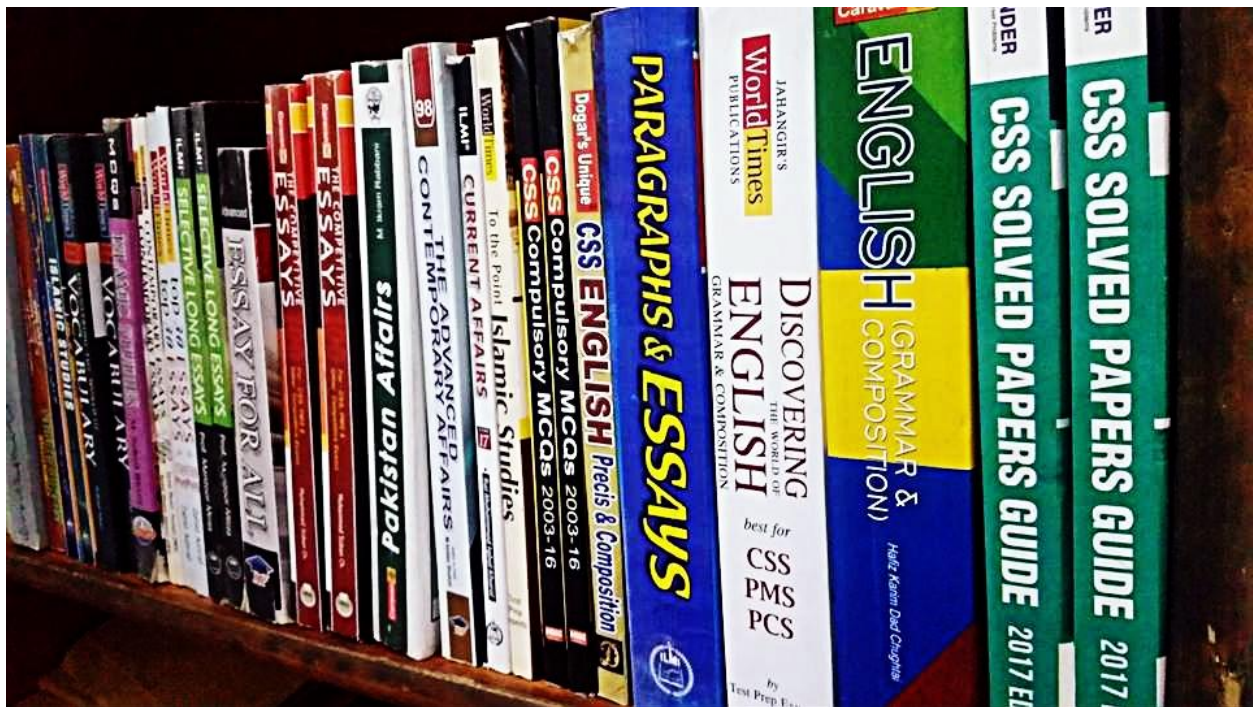
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Ruling Punjab

AFTER a month of intense political drama, court battles and violent moments in the provincial assembly, Punjab finally got its new chief minister on Saturday. That the National Assembly Speaker had to fly into the provincial capital on the orders of the Lahore High Court to administer the oath to PML-N's Hamza Shehbaz, because the governor had spurned previous court rulings to do so and the president was unwilling to nominate a representative in his place, shows the political minefield that lies ahead.

Given the determination of the opposition PTI and PML-Q to snatch back power from the PML-N-led government, new twists and turns in provincial politics are likely to keep the chief executive very busy in the weeks ahead. But it will be more challenging to deliver on his party's promises to the people, give a budget that promises significant relief to inflation-stricken citizens, and improve service delivery, at a time when the government faces tough economic conditions.

Immediate and visible improvements in governance in Punjab are not only important for Hamza Shehbaz to establish himself as a worthy administrator in his own right — and not simply as his father's 'political heir' — they will also be needed for his party to win the province next year in the general elections.

In the past, the formula where the elder brother ruled Islamabad and the younger managed Punjab worked well for the PML-N. Will it be smooth sailing this time as well, with his father ruling Islamabad? So far the PML-N leadership has tried to tread very cautiously at the federal level, taking their allies along almost every step of the way, in view of the enormous economic and political challenges facing it. But Punjab is also where the party will find it much more difficult to accommodate its allies, who may be contesting against it in the next elections.

As chief minister, Shehbaz Sharif was not known for sharing powers even with his cabinet ministers and used to micromanage everything through his favourite bureaucrats. But those were different times and he was not encumbered by any obligations to allies. His son is confronted with quite a different situation. He may have to go the extra mile to accommodate the other parties, especially PTI dissidents who have risked their political careers to support him.

Moreover, even though Hamza Shehbaz is not new to Punjabi officialdom as he frequently interacted with bureaucrats during the PML-N's last two terms when his father was chief minister, he is still an unknown commodity to them in terms of being their boss.

Despite his family's strong political hold on the province and its bureaucracy, Hamza Shehbaz, who is justifiably dogged by allegations of nepotism, must create a place of his own if he plans to stay in politics for a longer innings, like his uncle and father.

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KP Police's challenge

POLICE in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have always been at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, and as a result, have borne the brunt of militant acts, often paying with their lives. They have shown remarkable courage and resilience against a faceless, shadowy enemy that has been operating with impunity from neighbouring Afghanistan. Thirteen policemen have fallen in the line of duty and 19 others have been wounded since the outlawed TTP's launch of its so-called Al Badr spring offensive on April 2, taking the overall figure of policemen killed this year to 31. This is not a small number for a police force which has lost nearly 2,000 men since the 'war on terror' began. In remarks to the Wall Street Journal, the TTP head honcho, Noor Wali Mehsud, acknowledged that his militant network faced "no resistance or opposition from the Afghan Taliban". The KP Police has been doing what it can, capturing and killing many terrorists in kinetic and search-and-strike operations and foiling many terrorist incidents. Credit must be given to the police and intelligence agencies for busting the IS-K cell that was responsible for the deadly suicide bombing at the Koocha Risaldar mosque in Peshawar city, and killing a key suspect. But as the IG KP Moazzam Jah Ansari said at an iftar with the near and dear ones of martyred policemen, this was the best the police could do: lay down their lives to protect the lives of citizens.

More than 100,000 policemen are on duty 24/7 across KP, including in the merged tribal districts. Being a civilian law-enforcement force, the police, and this includes traffic police, are mostly deployed on static duty, making them vulnerable to hit-and-run attacks. Many policemen have been killed in targeted attacks while commuting between home and office. Their visibility makes them

an easy prey. Unlike the armed forces, it is hard to enforce strict SOPs for a force that has to operate openly, but certain ground rules will have to be laid down to at least minimise the losses. The morale of the police has a direct bearing on the public morale. As the IG rightly pointed out, the success of the police can only be gauged from how safe the public is and not from the number of casualties inflicted on the terrorists — and that Pakistan would have to speak to the Afghan Taliban to rein in their ‘guests’ who are launching attacks on this country.

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Cholera outbreak

AFTER first denying media reports warning of a cholera outbreak in the city, the Sindh government has suddenly — and thankfully — come to its senses and instructed major hospitals in Karachi to set up special wards for patients suspected of having cholera or diagnosed with it. While about 150 cases had been reported from three districts of Karachi until a day ago, it is believed that the actual number is much higher. Last week, health experts had warned that the city was about to face one of “the worst outbreaks” of cholera in recent years. According to them, hundreds of patients — adults and children — were reporting cholera symptoms and approaching healthcare facilities. The director of the largest children’s hospital in Sindh, the National Institute of Child Health, stated that the health facility was receiving at least 10 to 15 cases of cholera every day, besides a large number of cases of acute watery diarrhoea. Though diarrhoea remains endemic in the country, killing some 53,300 children under the age of five years ever year, the sudden surge in cholera cases is being reported for a couple of months now.

The ongoing heatwave, poor sanitation, environmental pollution and the non-availability of clean drinking water are major factors contributing to the spread of cholera in the city. Immediate awareness campaigns are required to educate the public about food safety and how to cope with the first signs of the illness, while strengthening disease surveillance and carrying out extensive testing of patients with symptoms to gauge the extent of the outbreak. The outbreak must be contained quickly, because it will be harder to stop if it spreads to the rural areas. The Ogawa strain is apparently dominating the cases emerging in Karachi. It is known to spread in populations very quickly. Though cholera and diarrhoea have

similar symptoms, the former can kill within hours if left untreated. The health authorities must alert the public about its dangers and act quickly to ensure that rapid rehydration treatment is easily available.

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Doping scandal

IT'S the third case in just over three years of widespread doping in a single sporting discipline in Pakistan. If this one doesn't spark an investigation into why doping positives have started springing up so frequently in the country, or doesn't bring some clarity to the role that sports institutions must play to end this menace, such incidents will keep tarnishing Pakistan's image on international sporting platforms. After all, the doping case that emerged last week is one which potentially brings to an end the career of Talha Talib, one of Pakistan's brightest hopes for ending the country's long Olympic medal drought. Nine months ago at the Tokyo Olympics, Talha finished fifth in the 67 kg class, narrowly missing out on ending Pakistan's quest for a medal at the Games since 1992, but raising expectations of a better performance at the 2024 Olympics in Paris. There seemed to be genuine hope, which has now been dashed. Talha is one of six weightlifters who have been caught either using banned substances or evading dope tests by the International Testing Agency. It has left the Pakistan Weightlifting Federation facing a four-year ban from the International Weightlifting Federation.

Earlier this month, it emerged that seven kabaddi players had used performance-enhancing drugs after dope tests were conducted during the National Championships at the start of the year. The Pakistan Olympic Association then formed a committee to probe the matter. Last year, the POA returned two gold and nine bronze medals won by Pakistani sprinters at the 2019 South Asian Games after three of them returned positive dope tests for anabolic steroids. It saw the POA suspend the Athletics Federation of Pakistan. It remains to be seen what action is taken against the PWF, whose chief is a close ally of the POA president. More importantly, it calls for action to streamline the roles of the POA, Pakistan Sports Board and Anti-Doping Pakistan, down to the national federations in order to ensure that doping doesn't rear its ugly head again.

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Census and polls

It is critically important that the next general elections are held in a manner that certifies that they are free, fair, transparent, and credible. They should also fulfil all constitutional requirements. It is in this respect that the Election Commission of Pakistan has written letters to the relevant stakeholders demanding that the results of the seventh population and housing census should be published by year end. As reported in this newspaper, the ECP has dispatched formal correspondence to the parliamentary affairs and planning ministries and well as the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics to remind them of the need for completing these constitutional requirements within the given time frame. According to the schedule, the census exercise has to start by Aug 1 and the results should be handed over to the ECP by Dec 31. The ECP is bound to start the delimitation of constituencies after the census result is officially published.

If the elections are held at the stipulated time late next year, then the ECP has plenty of time to get the delimitation of constituencies done according to the latest census. It would also have sufficient time for the revision of electoral rolls and other formalities that need to be completed before the elections. The government too will need to legislate electoral laws well in time so that the ECP can incorporate them into its plan for holding the elections. In this respect, it is important that the fresh census is completed on time and that it addresses all the problems and complaints that made the previous exercise controversial for parties like the MQM. The coming elections will be held in a very polarised environment, and this makes it even more important that the ECP take all steps necessary to avoid any fresh controversy. Such steps should also include ensuring that foreign observers are invited well in advance so they can all complete their formalities on time. However, it must also be said that the ECP should keep itself prepared for early elections. If need be, and if time does not permit, then the ECP should be open to using data from the previous census to get the delimitations done if elections are to be held on short notice. It is the ECP's responsibility to be ready at all times and not link this readiness to any particular event or issue that can cause delay.

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Rights record

HOW long must we, the Pakistani people, continue to suffer as our individual freedoms are suffocated and the constant threat of violence hangs over our heads? With the 75th Independence Day celebrations in a few months, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's annual report on the state of our civil liberties and rights paints a sorry picture of where our nation stands.

The report, which examines the state of human rights in the country in the year 2021, is a reminder of the state's continuing failure to protect individuals from going 'missing'; of powerful quarters' growing intolerance towards criticism and free speech; of our failure as a society to respect and protect religious minorities, and of the harrowing violence the women of this country continue to be subjected to each day.

Editorial: State of human rights

It is unfortunate that ringing alarm bells on the dismal state of human rights is often viewed with suspicion in our country. It is necessary, however, for all citizens to ask questions that can help unveil how powerful quarters often abuse their position to deny the public its rights and privileges. For example, one should ask what is defamatory about demanding that citizens not be kidnapped and forcefully disappeared, and, instead, be prosecuted transparently under the law for any crimes they may have committed? Is our security apparatus incompetent or just plain lazy that it has to resort to brutish methods to enforce its writ? Likewise, why must the powerful throttle critical voices and the media with force and intimidation when they ought to be able to counter with reasoned facts and arguments?

It is necessary also to see the state of affairs when it comes to women, children, transgender persons and minorities' rights as our collective failure as a society.

The Noor Mukaddam murder, which features in the HRCP's report, was emblematic of inhuman violence and brutalities women are often subjected to by people they know, yet legislation against domestic violence was scuttled by the Council of Islamic Ideology based on its narrow interpretation of the law. The CII also opposed a bill on forced conversion, despite the abduction and conversion of young, non-Muslim women, often minors, remaining a major rights issue.

Likewise, a recent spate of killings of transgender persons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa highlights that much remains to be done till transpersons are to be considered equal humans by society, let alone equal citizens of the state.

It is unfortunate that discourse on national development often becomes too narrowly focused on achieving economic improvement rather than on how political leadership can help transform the lives of the citizenry more holistically. This allows the people in authority to avoid taking difficult decisions through which most of Pakistan's rights problems can be resolved.

It is up to the people to push their representatives to ensure there are major improvements in Pakistan's rights report card.

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Men on the moon

CONTROVERSY surrounding the sighting of the Eid crescent has become an annual spectacle in Pakistan, in contrast to the rest of the Muslim world where the exercise of verifying the moon's presence is more straightforward. Practically every year, there is disagreement between the official Ruet-i-Hilal Committee, and the unofficial body headquartered in Peshawar's Qasim Ali Khan Mosque.

This year has been no different. While the official committee decided on Sunday that the nation would celebrate Eidul Fitr on Tuesday, Mufti Shahabuddin Popalzai of Peshawar said the festival would be observed on Monday. The fact is that the Peshawar cleric's pronouncement ran counter to prevailing scientific opinion as well as the official consensus that the Shawwal crescent in Pakistan was not in view on Sunday evening.

Even more disturbing is that the PTI-led KP government decided to disregard the announcement of the consensus opinion of the central Ruet committee that is formed on the basis of consultation with the zonal committees, and to celebrate Eid on Monday, thus renewing the annual crisis that surrounds the religious occasion in the country.

The Ruet's decision reflected the Met department's calculations that the moon would not be in view on Sunday. The PTI itself, when in power at the centre, had championed such scientific evidence, and former science and technology

minister Fawad Chaudhry had earned the ire of the clerical establishment for his promotion of moon-sighting efforts rooted in science.

Now the PTI administration in KP has itself rejected scientific evidence, as well as jettisoned the consensus exercise. It is unfortunate that in Pakistani politics, disregard for consensus and science, together with clerical intransigence, has turned the moon-spotting exercise into a farce, with Eid being celebrated in the country on different days.

Rational scholars as well as the state must encourage the use of scientific evidence to support the religious duty of moon-sighting, while political forces must not exploit the exercise to settle scores with their opponents. Instead, they should accept the official majority opinion.

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Upping the ante

IT is a familiar but deadly script that seems to play on an endless loop in this country — levelling accusations of blasphemy to target adversaries.

The incoming government led by the PML-N, with its first-hand experience of being at the receiving end of such tactics that culminated in the Faizabad dharna of 2017 and claimed the scalp of its then law minister, should have been doubly wary of playing the religion card.

Even otherwise, the profound harm that religious extremism has done to the body politic and the rivers of blood that have flowed in consequence is reason enough to steer clear of this low-hanging fruit. That has not happened: on the contrary, the government has upped the ante.

On Sunday, news emerged that a case under the blasphemy laws was registered in Faisalabad against former prime minister Imran Khan and other senior figures in the ousted government as a response to the incident in Masjid-i-Nabawi a few days ago. The sections of the PPC under which the case has been filed are: 295 (harming or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult a religion; 295-A (deliberate or malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs; 296 (disturbing religious assembly); and 109 (abetment).

Without taking away from the gravity of the ugly incident at the holy site which brought shame to the country, the government's reaction is wholly unacceptable.

Firstly, the crime such as it is was not committed in Pakistan, and to suggest that local laws can be applicable in such circumstances is stretching credibility. Secondly, using blasphemy laws to settle political scores — for that is exactly what this is — is condemnable. And it has rightly been met with shock and dismay across the board, including by lawyers, civil society activists, etc. The HRCP demanded via social media that the cases must be withdrawn immediately, adding: “No government or political party can afford to allow allegations of blasphemy to be weaponised against its rivals.”

Indeed, as former information minister Fawad Chaudhry pointed out on Twitter, this is likely the first time that a sitting government has used the blasphemy laws to target its opponents.

Are the seasoned politicians with their hand on the wheel even considering the long-term consequences of this abhorrent turn of events? Do any of our leaders, in government and otherwise, have the moral courage to halt this march to destruction?

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Press Freedom Day

DEMAGOGUERY cloaked in the guise of populism is sweeping many parts of the globe, including our region. The media's critical role in holding the powerful to account is being put to the test. On World Press Freedom Day today, it is thus all the more important to recognise the many ways, both old and new, in which journalists' voices are being stifled and to remind governments of their duty to safeguard the universal right to impart and access information.

The Pakistani state has long had a fraught relationship with the media, paying lip service to the notion of press freedom even while doing all it can to bend its practitioners to its will. Decades of overt and covert military interventions and frequently unstable civilian governments have created a landscape where the media, instead of being a watchdog for the public interest, is expected to serve as a conduit for a heavily securitised approach to domestic and regional developments. Reportage or opinions on 'sensitive' issues invites scrutiny by

powerful quarters and entails risks to journalists that have varied in intensity and scope at different points in time.

The last few years have been particularly challenging. Employing its social media outreach to devastating effect, the recently ousted PTI government did more to throttle mainstream media than perhaps any civilian government in the country's history. Even well-regarded senior journalists critical of its performance would find themselves at the receiving end of an online mob lynching by troll armies using the canard of 'fake news' to malign and discredit them.

The barrage of online abuse targeting women journalists was particularly disturbing, aiming as it did to shame them into silence through sexualised tropes and character assassination. Meanwhile, on the granular level of the newsroom, the government's backers in the establishment micromanaged news coverage through coercive tactics not seen since Gen Ziaul Haq's military regime.

The findings in the Freedom Network's latest annual report echo this pattern, with the state and its functionaries ranking as the "biggest threat actor" targeting media in Pakistan. It was the suspected perpetrator in a whopping 41pc of at least 86 attacks against the media and its practitioners that the organisation recorded between May 2021 and April 2022.

Another significant finding was that the nation's capital, home to some of the most secure locations in Pakistan, proved to be "the riskiest and most dangerous place to practise journalism". Sindh was the second worst. Digital media journalists paid the highest price for their work, with two of them among four media persons that were killed in the period under review.

The PML-N, which has a major role to play in the ruling coalition, must now demonstrate that it will turn the page not only on the marked truncation in media freedom under the PTI government, but also on its own efforts to control the press through controversial legislation.

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Iran deal in peril

EFFORTS to revive the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 have seen many ups and downs, but recent indications indicate that the deal may be 'near

death'. It is unfortunate that the meticulously reached agreement was torpedoed unilaterally by the Trump administration in 2018. This move only widened the trust deficit between the parties. The Ukraine war has further complicated matters, exposing clear divisions between the P5+1, specifically Russia and the US and its European allies. Moreover, the removal of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard from America's list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations is another major sticking point. Western diplomats quoted in the media have therefore quietly expressed apprehensions that the deal may be close to its demise.

If the Western parties to the deal are serious about salvaging the agreement, they would have to assure Iran of two things. Firstly, Tehran would want a promise that all economic sanctions would be lifted in exchange for compliance with the deal, and that the Islamic Republic would be free to sell its oil and gas in the world market. Secondly, the US should consider removing the Revolutionary Guard from its terrorism list. Whatever Washington's claims, the fact remains that the Guard is an essential part of Iran's defensive structure, and chances of the deal succeeding without the removal of the Pasdaran from the terrorism list are slim. As one Iranian official has told the media, the Pasdaran issue "is our red line". The ball, therefore, is in the West's court. All parties need to take bold steps to revive the deal, which has the potential to help normalise relations between Iran and the West. However, the opposite is also true. Should the deal collapse, the level of confrontation between Iran and its allies and the pro-American camp in the Middle East will rise to far more dangerous levels. Israel has already made a number of irresponsible statements in this regard, and any brinkmanship on its part can spark a fresh regional conflagration.

Interference invited

THE political farce playing out over the control of Punjab is threatening to turn into a disaster.

The besieged Punjab governor, with just a few days left in office, has written to the military for 'assistance' in what is essentially an unrelenting tussle between the PML-N and the PTI-PML-Q alliance over who will keep control of the prosperous province. The army chief has been sent a 'reminder' that he has "a role to play in the implementation of the constitutional framework in the province".

This unabashed invitation for military interference in the province's affairs is unconstitutional and utterly condemnable. It is unfortunate that the PTI, with its very recent experiences of how undemocratic partnerships ultimately pan out, seems to have learnt nothing from the process.

The governor, Omar Sarfraz Cheema, has since doubled down on his stance, saying that he can arrest newly sworn-in Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz if he is granted the assistance of one subedar and four jawans from the army.

It is unfortunate that things are turning so ugly. The two sides do have bitter differences and it is quite possible that the new Punjab chief minister is transgressing his bounds by taking actions that are legally unjustifiable. Still, their fight, like all political fights, can and should be resolved within the strict bounds of the Constitution and the rules and laws regulating the democratic order.

It is unfortunate in this context that, far from seeking the judiciary's guidance in the matter, the Punjab governor, who had earlier not complied with the court's instructions regarding the constitutional crisis, is now approaching the army to make it clear that he has no faith that the judges will act as neutral arbiters.

needless overt and covert appeals for military interference in what are essentially political and constitutional disputes have become an unfortunate feature of Pakistani politics. Meddling in political affairs has earned our security establishment unneeded epithets like 'umpire', 'third force' and 'khalai makhlooq'. Ambition and a certain over-regard of their managerial capabilities have led many a general to play the game of thrones, with the result being the steady corruption and disembowelment of our entire governance system.

We now seem to be at a point where every major political party has tasted from the chalice of fauji 'benevolence' and found it bitter. All efforts should now be directed at blocking such interference, not inviting it, to allow the democratic project to stabilise.

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SBP's challenge

IN normal circumstances, the government's decision to not give Dr Reza Baqir another term as central bank governor would not have provoked much debate.

But the present political and economic situation in Pakistan is hardly normal. The change at the top comes at a time when the country is grappling with a terrible economic crisis amid an uncertain political situation and is trying for the restoration of IMF funding to reduce pressure on the deteriorating balance of payments position. On top of that, the elevation of deputy governor Murtaza Syed as acting governor, instead of the announcement of Dr Baqir's permanent successor, is also raising questions about the political authorities' intentions to 'control' the State Bank from Q Block, undermining its recently granted independence. It is also unclear as to how long the government plans to carry on with this 'interim' arrangement. There are legitimate concerns that the PML-N wants this opportunity to informally clip the bank's powers. Senior PML-N leader and former finance minister Ishaq Dar's recent criticism of the fall of the rupee and increased yields on government debt are strengthening this impression, even if the government has no intentions of influencing the bank. The political optics can be unsettling for the ruling coalition, which is already facing pressure from the PTI for early elections. Besides, it will create confusion at the central bank and affect its decision-making at a time when foreign exchange reserves are depleting on the back of a growing trade deficit that has expanded to over \$30bn in the nine-month period from July to March on rising global energy, food and other commodity prices.

With inflation spiking, foreign exchange reserves depleting, the currency falling and the current account deficit widening, the bank is facing the formidable challenge of stabilising prices and the external sector. Can it overcome these hurdles when the fiscal authorities do not support it by tweaking their policies? For how long can the bank increase the interest rate and let the home currency fall to avert doomsday? At the end of the day, it is primarily the responsibility of the political and fiscal authorities to curtail the runaway fiscal deficit, restrict imports through increased taxes and arrange foreign financing to shore up the reserves.

So far the government does not appear to be in a mood to pursue prudent policies to curtail the fiscal deficit, which, according to Finance Minister Miftah Ismail, could go up to 9pc to 10pc of GDP, unless expensive energy subsidies are revoked and other government expenditure reduced. Indeed, the finance ministry and central bank should collaborate for price and external sector stability. But excessive political intervention in the central bank's functions of

monetary and exchange rate policy determination can be detrimental for the economy. The economy today is too weak to afford such policies again.

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In a bind

THE new government's bumbling efforts to articulate a strong counter-narrative to Imran Khan's blistering multimedia offensive are taking a turn for the quixotic. Despite it now becoming clear that facts alone will do little to puncture the post-truth bubble the PTI thrives in, the government does not seem to be done beating the 'Cablegate' horse. The recent announcement of an inquiry commission to probe the matter is an exercise in futility, especially after two separate National Security Committee pronouncements have failed to dent the crafty narrative spun by the PTI.

It is all the more exasperating that the information minister also seems to have undermined the very purpose of the independent commission she has promised by pre-empting what its 'findings' will be. The inquiry commission will, "fairly decide that the narrative of foreign conspiracy was all drama and the real character behind it was Imran Khan", Marriyum Aurangzeb has said, leaving one to wonder what the point of it is if there is no other conclusion it may reach. As expected, the PTI has rejected the inquiry commission and called it an attempt to "conceal the truth". It has demanded a judicial commission instead, which must conduct an open hearing of the case if it is to be accepted by the ousted party. This in itself is unlikely to happen, given the sensitivity and classified nature of the diplomatic cable at the centre of the drama. Even if such an inquiry were to take place, its outcome would be secondary for the PTI compared to the political opportunity to stoke nationalist sentiment and create a furore over the decidedly undiplomatic language used by the US representative, as reported in the Washington cable. Amidst all this, it is clear that Imran Khan has been a few steps ahead of the incumbent government, especially when it comes to controlling the public narrative. It will take a lot more than inquiry commissions to counter the sheer force with which he has struck back.

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IHK constituencies

THE Indian government's moves to change the demographic profile of held Kashmir are continuing, with New Delhi giving more seats to the disputed region's Hindu areas in the latest redrawing of constituencies. But as critics of the move have pointed out, such action constitutes gerrymandering, which will help the ruling BJP in India create new 'facts on the ground' in the occupied region.

Specifically, the delimitation gives nearly the same number of seats to the Hindu-majority Jammu area (43) as those carved out for Muslim-dominated Kashmir (47).

Indian officials say elections in the held region will soon follow, but any electoral exercise based on such flawed constituencies, and likely to be boycotted by many Kashmiris, will seriously lack legitimacy. Even some of India's staunch loyalists in the region, such as the PDP and the National Conference, have criticised the move.

Pakistan's Foreign Office, meanwhile, has said the new delimitation is "aimed at disenfranchising and disempowering the Muslim-majority population" in India-held Kashmir.

It is clear that the government in New Delhi is trying its utmost to dilute Kashmir's Muslim majority. For example, the redrawing of constituencies will allow India to further stage-manage local elections, reducing the Muslim majority in IHK's legislature. Having a legislature of its choice will allow India to cement its iron grip on IHK.

This seems to be a natural corollary of India's revocation of occupied Kashmir's autonomous status in 2019. In the aftermath of that disastrous move, India has attempted to erase Kashmir's unique culture and identity step by step. The more egregious moves allow people from outside the disputed region to be granted domiciles, paving the way for them to buy property and secure government jobs in IHK. Thousands snapped up the domiciles, much to the consternation of Kashmiris.

The gerrymandering of constituencies, therefore, is just another condemnable step aimed at engineering demographic change in IHK.

Of course, the clampdown imposed by India on IJK after the events of August 2019 cannot be forgotten, in which the rights of the Kashmiri people were severely curtailed, while the authorities rounded up and imprisoned even those amongst the Kashmiri political class who tended to toe New Delhi's line. Amongst others, international human rights groups have also raised concerns about India's ongoing abuse of fundamental rights in the occupied region.

Sham elections and engineered legislatures will not change the fact that Kashmiris are not happy with New Delhi's brutal rule and desire to carve out their own destiny through democratic means. India's use of state violence to suppress the Kashmiri desire for freedom, as well as its deployment of legislative and administrative tricks to change Kashmir's demography have both failed.

Instead of engineering dubious change, India must work with the Kashmiris and Pakistan to help find a long-lasting solution that can bring peace and stability to the troubled valley.

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Growing hunger

FOOD insecurity is a significant and persistent problem in Pakistan, with millions of poor to low- and middle-income households across the country experiencing some level of hunger or undernourishment. It may well be the biggest challenge facing Pakistan amid a growing population and increasing poverty. A new report published by the Global Network Against Food Crises says multiple shocks like high food and fuel prices, droughts, livestock diseases and widespread loss of income-generating opportunities due to the impact of Covid-19, as well as conflict, have driven high levels of food insecurity in Balochistan, KP and Sindh. This is worrisome given that Pakistan is ranked by the Global Hunger Index at 92nd position out of 116 countries and placed alongside nations with a "level of hunger that is serious". Almost 13pc of the country's population is reported by the index to be undernourished. At least 7pc of children under five years are described as wasted and 37.6pc as stunted, with 6.7pc dying before reaching their fifth birthday. The World Food Programme estimates that around 43pc Pakistanis are food-insecure, and 18pc of those face acute food insecurity. Although the statistics don't really capture the situation on the ground, these numbers are staggering enough to merit action.

Food insecurity isn't just about food scarcity. Unaffordability because of rampant poverty and access to food due to conflicts in various parts of the country are the biggest barriers to food security in Pakistan. Double-digit food inflation amid dwindling incomes and job losses has left more households food-insecure in the last three years. Also, food insecurity doesn't affect all members of a family equally. Women and children are always more at risk of suffering hunger than the adult male family members. Additionally, the residents of poorer districts and backward regions face a far greater risk of food insecurity for longer periods. For a country like ours, the war against hunger will not be easy to win. It involves a vigorous effort against growing multidimensional poverty, regional inequality, the rural-urban divide and gender disparity, as well as wholesale changes in the government's policies that directly and indirectly impact the ability of the average Pakistani to access and afford healthy food. No one expects the situation to change overnight. But we need to take the first step now. The upcoming budget can be an excellent opportunity for our rulers to start tweaking policies for a more pro-poor, inclusive growth.

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Apolitical or not?

FURTIVE whispers about who was really behind the political engineering of these past few years have just been confirmed. One of the reasons given by former prime minister Imran Khan for why he wanted to retain Lt Gen Faiz Hameed as DG ISI has inadvertently brought to light one of the traditional roles played by the security establishment in the 'management' of domestic politics.

During a recent podcast, the ousted prime minister stated that he had wanted Gen Faiz to continue as spy chief because he was aware that his political rivals were planning to topple his government, and he wanted the former spymaster to act as the government's "eyes and ears" as their plot played out.

The candid admission exposed Mr Khan's inability to navigate the complexities of national politics independently, while also shedding light on the mechanics of the 'partnership' under which the last administration — often derisively described as a 'hybrid regime' — had been functioning. To be fair to Mr Khan, he is not the first or the last prime minister to have hoped to use the intelligence apparatus against his political rivals. However, with his remarks, the former prime minister

has now himself suggested that his government survived as long as it did thanks to the support of powerful, non-political forces.

This was not the only own goal by Mr Khan during the podcast: his acknowledgement that he had been aware of the then opposition's plans to overthrow him since July of last year and subsequent plan to use the ISI chief to counter the move give the lie to his more recent claims about the circumstances of his ouster.

Rationalists should ask why he insists he was ousted through an 'international conspiracy' — which he first spoke of only in March 2022, when his departure seemed inevitable — when apparently he had been aware for months of the opposition's plans and had been hoping to tackle them with the help of his old spy chief.

The logic of the 'conspiracy theory' gets fuzzier the more Mr Khan speaks on the topic. Is he suggesting that he was denied the support of the country's spy chief in the midst of a foreign conspiracy? Is it not more reasonable to understand from his remarks that Mr Khan failed to keep his government despite having months of notice, likely because he failed to counter the opposition in the absence of support from powerful quarters?

Meanwhile, the former prime minister's admissions would have left the establishment red-faced. After many solemn press conferences in which it was insisted that the military had no interest in interfering in the political domain, a former prime minister has just confirmed that it was not so. How are we to know just how 'apolitical' they have really been in the events that have transpired of late then?

Published in Dawn, May 8th, 2022

Curbs on Afghan women

ANYONE who thought that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan would tread with caution after being accused of human rights violations, must disabuse themselves of the ridiculous notion. Their latest move to make the burqa mandatory for Afghan women is yet another step backwards in their treatment of the country's most vulnerable segment. While there can be little appreciation for America's invasion of Afghanistan, and the years of violence and regional

instability it spawned, it is only fair to say that, during the occupation, Afghan women experienced a vast improvement in their lives. Without discarding all cultural norms, many, especially those residing in urban areas, found themselves free to work, to learn, to play a sport, to participate in politics, to articulate their views. In short, they had opportunities and choices before them that the Taliban's first stint did not allow. The previous Taliban regime had forced the burqa on them, denied them an education and banned them from working and even availing healthcare provided by males. Unfortunately, the past is never far away, and for Afghan women, it has returned with a vengeance.

From the very beginning of the Taliban's return to power in Kabul last August, there had been doubts about whether the new rulers would allow Afghan women to retain their freedom, even though international aid to the country was linked to human rights delivery. Some like members of the women's football team and the famed all-female orchestra managed to escape. But millions of women remain in the country, a number of them facing security threats as the Taliban clamp down, restrict their schooling and discourage them from stepping out of their homes. Bit by bit, they are losing their liberty, and with it their future. Vast swathes of the population are desperately poor and, as always, the women are the hardest hit. The Taliban could have allowed women to retain their rights — which, in turn, would have attracted international goodwill and aid. But their flawed approach makes them oblivious to reason and compassion.

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Wheat crisis

THE looming wheat supply gap in the country now appears all set to morph into a full-blown crisis over the coming months. The reasons include significant domestic output shortfall and surging international prices in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing supply concerns. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has been informed that the current wheat harvest is likely to hover around 26.2m tonnes against the target of 28.9m tonnes. Given this situation, the government will need to import at least 3m tonnes of grain to stabilise the market and meet the demand of 30.8m tonnes, despite the carryover stock of 1m tonne. With reports of wheat being smuggled into Afghanistan because of the large price difference between the local and international markets, imports may

surpass the estimates. However, market players are insisting that wheat imports in such large quantities may not materialise owing to two reasons. One, the cereal is in short supply globally, because of a poor harvest. Two, Islamabad does not have enough dollars to purchase expensive imports, with the nation's foreign currency reserves plunging to \$10.5bn on the widening trade and current account deficits.

What will wheat shortages and expensive imports mean for the consumers here? The flour millers have already raised their prices in Punjab by Rs11 per kilo based on the open market wheat price of Rs2,200 per 40kg after the termination of official releases. The Punjab government had until now been providing wheat to the millers at the subsidised price of Rs1,950 per 40kg, which was further slashed to Rs1,600 for the first 20 days of Ramazan. The flour prices are likely to rise further if the government is unable to control smuggling and take action against hoarders, who would want to take advantage of the projected shortages and difficulties in imports. The flour scarcity in the market and the high price of the commodity will increase food insecurity in the country, especially in the more backward and poorer districts of the country, unless the government proactively ensures its availability at subsidised rates. It is unfortunate that Pakistan, which was self-sufficient in wheat production until a few years ago, is now persistently facing shortages and is forced to import large quantities to meet its requirements every year. The situation calls for urgent action to tackle the issues of water shortages, urea unavailability, poor farm management practices, climate change, etc that are bogging down our agriculture sector.

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Sharp escalation

THE danger is clear and present: militancy is on the upswing and matters could get worse before they get better.

As per statistics released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, April saw a 24pc increase in militant attacks as compared to the month before. There were 34 such attacks in April with a death toll of 55. At least 25 people were injured. In March, the attacks numbered 26, but the casualty figures were much higher — 77 dead and 288 injured — largely on account of the

devastating suicide blast at a Shia mosque in Peshawar on the fourth day of the month which was claimed by the Islamic State group's Khorasan chapter.

The frequency of attacks in March was twice that in February, indicating a rapidly worsening security scenario. Most of the violence took place in the tribal districts, parts of which have become hotbeds of militancy once again, followed by the rest of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and then Balochistan.

Editorial: Showing firmness

The second coming of the Afghan Taliban last year has had a negative fallout on Pakistan's security landscape. In fact, militants of all stripe seem to have been emboldened by the success of the insurgent force in driving out the world's sole superpower.

There is an eerily symbiotic connection between the new regime's takeover of Kabul and the rise in militancy in this country. The year 2021 saw the highest number of militant attacks in Pakistan after a consistent decline of six years — with the maximum occurring in August, the very month the Afghan Taliban seized power next door.

It soon became clear that, contrary to their pledges to the international community, Kabul's new rulers were not going to take any action against the banned TTP, or any other violent extremist outfit for that matter, that are taking refuge on their soil. This was partly because they feared that such action could drive some from its own ranks towards other militant groups. But the situation also presented the Afghan Taliban with the opportunity to repay the TTP for giving them safe harbour in erstwhile Fata when they were fleeing the US forces invading Afghanistan. At most, they were willing to facilitate talks between their ideological brothers-in-arms and the Pakistani state.

After the failure of the short-lived truce that came about as a result, the TTP has not looked back. Pakistan needs to neutralise the threats emerging on its western flank without delay.

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Lanka emergency

NEARLY two months since demonstrators took to the streets of Sri Lanka to protest their government's handling of the economic and political crises, there are no signs of the island nation emerging from its troubles. In fact, the country's beleaguered president has declared a state of emergency for the second time in the country since the protests began, giving security forces sweeping powers against demonstrators. The prognosis is indeed grim, with foreign exchange reserves dwindling to dangerously low levels, while the country's finance minister says economic instability is likely to last two more years. All of this, of course, will do little to soothe the anger of the Sri Lankan people, who have been putting up with painful food, fuel and medicine shortages, as well as lengthy power cuts. The crisis has been exacerbated by Covid-19, which battered the tourism-dependent Lankan economy, while protesters say the concentration of power within the Rajapaksa family has only made a bad situation worse. That is why the protesters, coming from various walks of Sri Lankan life, are united in their call for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to leave office.

While maintaining order is imperative for the government, the demonstrators have an equal right to peaceful protest, especially in such trying circumstances. Instead of clamping down on protests, the Sri Lankan state must keep the channels of dialogue with the citizenry open and assure the public that everything possible is being done to help them weather the storm. While the world is going through a period of great uncertainty, principally due to the Ukraine war, the international community must help Sri Lanka keep its economy solvent so that the state does not collapse. Emergency funding needs to be arranged so that there is no stoppage in the supply of essentials such as food and fuel. The path to economic recovery will be a long and hard one, but political stability and transparency on the part of the state are required to help pull the island out of the morass.

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Covid-19 report

A WORLD Health Organisation report has estimated that the actual number of deaths from Covid-19 across the world may be at least three times higher than

what has officially been reported. The report has identified India as one country where the death toll may be as high as 5m instead of the half a million acknowledged by New Delhi. For Pakistan too, the WHO report says the actual number of deaths may be eight times higher than what the official data suggests. Both India and Pakistan have disputed the figures presented in the report, and for now, it is hard to say whether the report is closer to reality or the governments' version. However, Pakistan's former health adviser Dr Faisal Sultan has made it clear through an official statement that while there could be some marginal discrepancy in the country's death toll estimate, it cannot be as high as what the WHO report is suggesting.

This makes sense. Dr Faisal Sultan has argued that the data from hospitals and graveyards does not show that the official figures can be so inaccurate. There is no denying that the response of the government of Pakistan to the Covid-19 challenge was effective. The formation of the NCOC as the hub for coordinating all Covid-19 responses was an excellent initiative and it paid dividends both in terms of efficiency and outcomes. The success of the NCOC was acknowledged by the international community and it would not be wrong to say that it played a central role in ensuring that Pakistan was saved from the ravages of the pandemic that countries like India endured. That said, it may be opportune to take stock of the weaknesses in our health system, and in the overall response to the pandemic, that have been identified in the last two years. This would enable us to take corrective measures and be better prepared for such an eventuality in the future.

One aspect that needs greater examination is the authenticity of the data and the difficulties in collecting it. The WHO report may not reflect the reality, but it does remind us that we need to invest greater efforts in institutionalising the response mechanism that the NCOC was able to cobble together in an emergency situation. The health ministry, therefore, needs to undertake a comprehensive exercise to identify all the weak points and draw up plans to fix them. The NCOC blueprint already provides a starting point for such an initiative. It needs to be expanded upon and the government should prioritise it before we are once again caught unawares. The country's health sector benefited from various upgrades during the Covid-19 response but those upgrades now need to be formalised through the injection of resources and system improvements. The good work of the NCOC must not be allowed to go to waste.

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Lost at sea

IT is unfortunate that despite a policy reset promised once the PTI-led alliance was shown the door, we have heard little of consequence from the new government regarding what plans it has for actually governing the country.

Two ministries, in particular, stand out as examples of the new government's wayward priorities. Despite a recent surge in high-profile terrorism incidents, the Ministry of Interior under Rana Sanaullah seems to be growing too fixated on which Pakistani citizens are to be thrown in prison, who are to be prosecuted for criticising state institutions, who should be tried under blasphemy laws, and whose entry into and exit from the country should be blocked.

On the other hand, Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb seems unable to get over which gifts or cars the former prime minister allegedly retained, non-starter inquiries on 'Cablegate' and providing running commentary disparaging the PTI and its activities.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif himself seems to be spending too much time worrying about Imran Khan and his speeches and issuing statements that he will prosecute the former PM for criticising institutions of the state.

In all this, the new rulers too seem to be resorting to the PTI's oft-criticised strategy of attacking and berating political opponents to hide a dearth of ideas to tackle major governance challenges.

Key to understanding why this seems to be happening is Mr Sharif's recent communication to journalists that there has been no decision yet on whether the government will complete its term till August 2023 or go for early elections. This logically entails that the political leadership is unsure of how much political capital it is willing to risk on course correction, especially for the economy. This is evident in the government's continued flip-flopping on fuel and electricity subsidies — which would have been withdrawn by now if the new finance minister was being taken seriously by his own government.

Meanwhile, a host of other economic challenges also triggered by the Ukraine crisis gathers on the horizon, threatening to rain down more blows on our already vulnerable economy if immediate preparatory measures are not taken.

With things balanced so precariously, nerves are starting to fray.

The military has recently issued a stern warning to political leaders, journalists and commentators about not wanting to be 'dragged into' political matters. Respect for state institutions is indeed enshrined in the law, but the military leadership must allow some time for the citizenry to familiarise itself with the new 'apolitical' direction the establishment has taken. Taking or encouraging any harsh measures in haste may add fuel to the resentment smouldering in many of its most ardent erstwhile supporters.

For now, the FIA's efforts to have draconian aspects of Peca reinstated in order to punish those transgressing the red lines have thankfully been checked just in time by the government. Let's hope sense continues to prevail.

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Another heatwave

THE long hot summer is about to get even hotter, and future summers even worse. Just after a scorching March and April in many parts of the country, the Met office last week again forecast "severe heatwave conditions" across Pakistan. Some areas are expected to remain between 7°C to 9°C above normal while others between 6°C to 8°C. Among possible impacts of the very dry and hot weather, according to the Met office press release, is water stress on reservoirs, orchards, vegetable farms, etc and "farmers are advised to manage crop water accordingly". Grim tidings have also emerged from just published research in which top climate scientists say that South Asia is yet to experience the hottest part of the year. That would be a catastrophic event "likely to kill thousands" in India and Pakistan, according to the lead scientist at a climate science research non-profit. And these extreme events will not be outliers. A landmark report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has predicted "intensity and frequency of hot extremes, such as warm days, warm nights, and heatwaves; and decreases in the intensity and frequency of cold extremes, such as cold days and cold nights" across Asia. However, things will be worse in South Asia where "more intense heatwaves of longer durations and occurring at a higher frequency are projected".

In short, we have crossed the Rubicon. But while we must brace for the impact of decades of self-indulgent, short-sighted policies — particularly by the developed nations — despite scientists' increasingly urgent warnings about greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, we may be able to mitigate the fallout to some extent. The government must place climate change at the centre of its political, development and governance agenda because the phenomenon will impact every aspect of our lives. For example, the switch to renewable energy sources must happen sooner rather than later and policies must be formulated to facilitate this change. With Pakistan slated as being among the countries worst affected by climate change, our youth is among the primary stakeholders. They must be taught in schools and institutes of higher education the gravity of what they face so that they may perhaps make wiser decisions than their older generations did. The government cannot afford to disregard the perils of climate change.

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Azan controversy

IN today's India, the majoritarian assault on Muslim cultural and religious symbols continues, with the latest controversy surrounding the azan. Mosques in India's commercial capital Mumbai have been turning down the volume when it comes to calling the faithful to prayer over the microphone after Raj Thackeray, leader of a local Hindu party and a nephew of the late radical politician Bal Thackeray, threatened to chant Hindu prayers outside mosques if they refused to lower the volume. Again under the fig leaf of enforcing civic regulations, moves are being made to erase or at least severely curtail expressions of Muslim public life. Last year, the government in the state of Haryana issued orders restricting namaz in public places, apparently acting after pressure was applied by extremist Hindu groups. While the law of the land needs to be respected, something sinister is afoot in India: Indian Muslims are being marginalised and excluded from the public sphere through state-sanctioned discrimination. Meanwhile, the administration looks the other way when Hindu zealots enforce their own anti-Muslim codes and practices.

On one end of the spectrum, there have been numerous calls for the economic boycott of Muslims by extremist Hindu outfits. On the other end, state functionaries themselves have been involved in spewing anti-Muslim venom, or

doing little to punish the perpetrators of anti-Muslim violence. Suffice it to say, the developments of the past few years — particularly under Narendra Modi's watch — have made a mockery of Indian secularism, with the shock troops of the Sangh Parivar remaking India in their own saffron image. Those political forces within India that still believe in a multicultural, multifaith polity, as well as civil society, will need to raise a voice against these prejudiced moves. It is very easy to use religious and ethnic rhetoric and the 'othering' of minorities to capture a few votes. But the long-term effects of these misguided policies will be disastrous for communal harmony. Indian Muslims should not be made to continuously prove their patriotism and forcibly choose between their religion and their country, while moves to restrict Islamic cultural practices need to be resisted.

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Worrisome outlook

THE PSX meltdown on Monday signalled the market's growing concerns over worsening economic fundamentals and a disturbing near-term outlook due to the government's indecision on economic challenges.

The one-day drop of 2.23pc in the benchmark KSE-100 Index wasn't huge. Investors have seen worse days. But the fact that the market is hovering around the current levels, rising a bit on isolated good news only to fall again, for many months now, exposes the underlying economic vulnerabilities and investors' waning confidence.

The latest fall was driven by a combination of factors ranging from deteriorating fiscal conditions, increasing external-sector difficulties, political uncertainty ahead of the next budget and bearish trends overtaking global stock markets on rising US interest rates.

But the most important factor has been the failure of the new coalition government to come up with a credible plan to take politically tough decisions to fix the economy. For example, it remains undecided about the reversal of the fiscally unsustainable energy subsidies, which is the 'prior action' that IMF wants it to take before it agrees to restart funding.

That's not all. There are differences within the PML-N on how to deal with the Fund, with former finance minister Ishaq Dar, who is opposed to IMF 'dictation',

wanting a new loan with 'softer' conditions. If the strings of the finance ministry are being pulled from London, then Finance Minister Miftah Ismail has his hands tied.

However, this isn't the only factor keeping the PML-N from removing the cap on energy prices. The fear of a political backlash at a time when Imran Khan is working hard to bring large crowds to Islamabad this month is also keeping the government from taking tough decisions. The problem with the energy subsidies is that the government may decide not to reverse them in the hope of avoiding greater inflation. But the trade-off would mean significantly boosting the fiscal deficit, forcing more bank borrowing since foreign flows have dried up. That, in turn, means pushing interest rates and will delay the revival of the IMF programme, constraining options to secure dollars from both multilateral and bilateral lenders, as well as raise commercial loans.

With State Bank foreign exchange reserves down to around \$10bn, the nine-month current account gap at over \$13bn and no hope of additional financing coming from friendly countries without an IMF deal, the rupee remains under pressure, fuelling inflation and driving up interest rates, something the new set-up wants to avoid. No matter what, energy prices will have to be increased if we want the much-needed IMF programme to avoid default on our external payments over the next several months. Indeed, the government will have to pay the political cost. But can it avoid the inevitable by refusing to take crucial decisions? Stock market meltdowns should be the least of our worries for now.

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Lanka violence

THE situation in Sri Lanka is deteriorating fast and unless the political class and the pillars of the state show visionary leadership, more violence and instability can be expected. While demonstrators had been protesting peacefully for weeks against the government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, specifically against his handling of the debilitating financial crisis that has brought the Sri Lankan economy to its knees, violence broke out in the country on Monday when government supporters and demonstrators clashed at various locations. A number of fatalities have been reported, including a lawmaker who reportedly shot two people before turning the gun on himself. Protesters have also set fire to

officials' homes, as well as a museum dedicated to the Rajapaksa family. Food, fuel and medicine shortages on the island have been widespread, while the state coffers are nearly empty; in fact, tens of billions of dollars of foreign debt await payment. In such a combustible situation, the president does not seem to have a game plan to extricate the nation from the crisis, other than reshuffling his cabinet. Protesters are also livid at the Rajapaksa family's political dominance, with members of the clan occupying key government posts. Bowing to popular demand, the president's brother and prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa — who had himself served as president earlier — resigned on Monday, but this may be too little too late as demonstrators want the entire system changed.

There are lessons in the Lankan crisis for other states going through similar troubles. For one, if the economy starts to tank and no steps are taken against fiscal mismanagement, political and social instability will be the natural outcome, putting the survival of the state at stake. Moreover, one-family rule, especially in developing democracies, can lead to mass disaffection with the state if there is widespread economic mismanagement and corruption. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa clan has dominated governance, while there have also been accusations of corruption and self-enrichment against the family. When people cannot afford food and fuel, they will rightly ask tough questions and demand accountability of the ruling elite. To stave off further disaster, international financial institutions should provide lifeline funding to Sri Lanka so that the state does not collapse, and people have access to the necessities of life. Moreover, the state needs to handle the situation delicately and assure citizens it is working overtime to address the crisis, and bring back a semblance of normality to the country.

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Sirbaz's feat

TEN peaks conquered, four more to go. Sirbaz Khan continues to scale new heights in his attempt to become the first mountaineer from Pakistan to summit all 14 peaks in the world above 8,000m. Last week, the 32-year-old raised Pakistan's flag atop the Kanchenjunga in Nepal, considered the toughest of the 14 due to its deep gorges and bitterly cold weather. The feat moved him two summits clear of his mentor, the legendary Mohammad Ali Sadpara who died

during a winter expedition of K2 in early 2021. The achievement came just a month after another famous Pakistani climber Abdul Karim, known as Little Karim, passed away. Hailing from Ali Abad in Hunza, it has been quite a journey for Sirbaz who worked for 11 years in a kitchen before becoming a professional climber. That says a lot about his determination and relentless pursuit of the heights he has conquered as well as the hurdles he has had to overcome. Saad Munawar, Sirbaz's expedition manager, noted after Sirbaz reached the top of Kanchenjunga that there was a time when local climbers were not allowed to summit the peaks in Pakistan and now mountaineers from the country were conquering peaks in foreign lands.

Sirbaz's predecessors weren't even classified as mountaineers for a long time. They were termed 'high-altitude porters'; the peaks they conquered as travelling parties for more renowned climbers never came on record. They climbed mountains in flip-flops and cast-off gear. Just to climb mountains in the regions they were born in, they had to rely on being part of expeditions. Things are changing though. Sponsors are now supporting local climbers, which has also helped Sirbaz, who wants to raise his tally of 8,000m conquests to 12 by scaling Makalu in Nepal and Gasherbrum-I in Pakistan by the end of summer. However, more investment, from both the government and private companies, is needed to nurture local talent. As the focus shifts to local mountaineers and after Sirbaz hopefully completes his 'Mission 14', the desired change should come.

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Punjab in limbo

THE needlessly drawn-out tussle over the control of Punjab is starting to resemble the unending finale of a sour absurdist comedy.

Governance in the country's most populous province has been turned into a farce thanks to the PML-N and the PTI-PML-Q combine. Both rivals are laying claim to the offices of the governor and chief executive. The fight has created multiple constitutional crises, with no legal clarity anymore on who is supposed to be reporting to whom, and who has the legal authority to call the shots in which matters.

With the announcement of a new provincial cabinet delayed until a governor sympathetic to the PML-N takes charge, the entire province remains in limbo.

Meanwhile, the prime minister and his son — the newly minted Punjab Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz — may have erred out of frustration when the president and the recently ousted Punjab governor refused to accept the new incumbents. In forcing Omar Sarfraz Cheema out of office, they have resorted to measures that some believe overstep the law and that could trigger a fresh challenge.

On the other hand, the PTI-PML-Q alliance seems to be deliberately nurturing the crisis for its own political ends, all the while calling on the judiciary and the military to intervene in matters that should have been democratically resolved.

As this sordid drama plays out, both parties seem to have little care for the actual needs of the people. Just as Nero famously fiddled while Rome burned, our political leaders seem oblivious to the fact that severe water shortages are wreaking untold misery on the people of south Punjab and threatening an agricultural crisis that is likely to pile on even more economic pain than what is already expected in the months ahead.

The immensity of the challenges facing the people of Pakistan at the moment ought to have had a sobering effect on any party hoping to take responsibility for them. One would have expected that the importance of loyalty to kin and country being preached from the pulpit every day would by now have translated to tangible measures to serve the people, even if at the expense of political capital here and there.

Sadly, our parties' obsession with seizing or keeping their political offices betrays a lack of ability to lead during a crisis. Commonality of purpose may now be too much to hope for in a nation that has become so bitterly polarised by political affiliations that it would rather watch itself burn than make any attempt to unify for the common good.

One hopes that a time may not be visited on this country when the political leadership belatedly realises that its failure to build bridges cost the people of Pakistan dearly. For now, it is a pity that this is the leadership we have to settle for in these tumultuous times.

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Voice of reason

SANER heads may yet prevail where the fallout in Pakistan from the Masjid-i-Nabwi incident some weeks ago is concerned. On Monday, participants at a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights slammed what they termed as the weaponisation of religion for political ends. Further, they counselled utmost care in handling blasphemy cases filed in the country against members of the PTI and its chairman, ousted premier Imran Khan, after some party supporters accosted government ministers at the holy site in Saudi Arabia and raised slogans against them. Senator Walid Iqbal, who chaired the meeting, pointed out the anomaly of filing charges in Pakistan for actions that had taken place in another country. A council member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan also condemned the blasphemy accusation and described it as among the first few instances of the law being used for political point-scoring.

It is reassuring that the top leadership of the two largest parties in the coalition government — the PML-N and the PPP — have unequivocally voiced their reservations over the manner in which the incident has been dealt with. The PPP's Farhatullah Babar and Khursheed Shah as well as the PML-N's Khawaja Asif and Javed Latif have all gone on record to oppose the filing of FIRs against the PTI leaders. Aside from the obviously problematic aspect of using religion for political vendetta in a country that needs to dial down such rhetoric rather than give it further oxygen, it also makes for poor strategy. As pointed out by several politicians, the move actually proved counterproductive for the government — that too, one trying not to lose public approval in challenging circumstances — by enabling the PTI to cast itself as a victim and blunt the widespread condemnation of its supporters' behaviour at the holy site last month. At issue is something far bigger than political rivalry; it is about the very future of Pakistan. The political leadership on both sides of the aisle must chart a course away from the stormy seas of religious extremism that continues to threaten social cohesion. At the aforementioned Senate Standing Committee meeting, discussion also centred on how to prevent the misuse of the blasphemy law by making amendments to it. This is an important conversation that needs to be carried forward. Allegations of blasphemy must not be lightly made, given the terrible price they have exacted time and again.

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Enhanced vigilance

WITH the confirmation of the first case of the Omicron subvariant BA.2.12.1 in Pakistan and the government's advice to take precautionary measures, the health authorities should immediately launch another nationwide vaccination campaign and revive the recently abolished airport Covid-19 protocols. The National Institute of Health, which, after the NCOC was wound up, is heading national anti-Covid efforts, first announced the detection of the BA2 variant on May 8 in a passenger who had flown in from abroad last month and, three days later, was tested for Covid-19. Subsequently, it was confirmed that he was infected with the new variant of the infection. Few details were given about the vaccination status of the infected traveller, but the circumstances clearly point to some glaring gaps in the monitoring of incoming passengers at our airports. Even at the height of the pandemic, it was observed that not all arriving passengers would be administered rapid antigen tests at the airport. Given the global situation, plus the near normalisation of travel and everyday activities in this country, one would expect airport authorities to ensure rapid antigen testing for thousands of incoming travellers.

Apart from tightening airport protocols, the government should also launch another campaign for initial vaccinations and a second round of booster doses. For its part, the WHO has advised against a strategy of relying on repeated booster doses, stating it to be "not viable" and calling for the development of newer vaccines that promise better protection against the newer strains of the virus. But experts in many countries, including the US, are encouraging the public to receive a second or third booster dose, till such time a new alternative is available for enhanced protection against the sneaky and increasingly transmissible variants of the coronavirus. Pakistan too can rely on vaccines and booster shots to expand vaccination coverage. Even if they offer limited protection, it is better than having no immunity at all against the virus. Meanwhile, the authorities should be prepared to call for masking and social distancing if matters worsen.

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Cold feet

IT was never expected that the old hands brought in to steady the ship would take so long to find their feet. Despite wave after wave tossing domestic capital markets as panic grows over the new government's inability to start with fixing the economy, the PML-N seems caught up in 'private' consultations.

The sudden announcement of PML-N ministers' being summoned to London — with the 10-member delegation led by the prime minister comprising the ministers of defence, information, planning, power, finance, railways and others — has not been well received by those still awaiting important policy decisions that can prevent markets from sinking further.

the absence from office of key members of the cabinet despite the alarms blaring at full volume back home has left many concerned at just how paralysed the PML-N seems to be. It is quite clear that important individuals in the PML-N are aware that they do not have much time on their side. Key among these are Ishaq Dar, Maryam Nawaz and Khawaja Asif, who have made public statements in recent days that seem to place them in the PML-N's 'cut losses and run' camp.

Mr Dar seems quite opposed to the sensible approaches proposed by Finance Minister Miftah Ismail with respect to tackling the economy. Ms Nawaz feels that it will take years to fix "Imran Khan's mess", and that a few months will not be enough — which has widely been interpreted as her suggesting that the PML-N needs a longer mandate than the year or so left in this Assembly's tenure.

Then there is Mr Asif, who suggested that we may be heading for elections as early as October this year; however, he had to walk back his remarks after PPP co-chair and coalition partner Asif Ali Zardari called a hurried press conference to publicly contradict that position and assert that there could be no elections before electoral and NAB law reforms were carried out.

The PML-N talk with the media in London did not throw much light on whether the party would be making the tough but necessary decisions to protect the economy or taking a more populist route. The former is the responsible way to lead with an economic crisis so dangerously close; the latter a self-serving strategy that may succeed in preserving political capital for the party, but at severe cost to the economy.

Whatever the case, electoral and accountability reforms alone cannot be the crutch on which this government hobbles to the next election. Tough decisions need to be taken as early as possible to protect the economic interests of millions of Pakistanis, who will ultimately foot the bill for further indecision. While the PPP may have its own priorities, the PML-N needs to decide firmly what its course of action will be. It's time to lead or get out of the way.

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India trade ties

THE appointment of a trade officer in Pakistan's high commission in New Delhi has sparked discussions about a possible resumption of trade across the Wagah border. Trade ties between Pakistan and India have largely been frozen since the latter revoked held Kashmir's special constitutional status in August 2019. However, the Ministry of Commerce says there is "no change in Pakistan's policy on trade with India" — meaning that commercial links will continue to remain frozen — while adding that the posting is a routine affair and not a prelude to normalisation of trade ties. As has been well-documented, South Asia remains one of the world's least economically integrated regions, with the fraught Pakistan-India relationship limiting commercial activities. Perhaps the new government is testing the waters by appointing a trade officer to gauge domestic response. Yet, many in government as well as the private sector have pointed out, the resumption of trade can be a possible pathway to better bilateral relations, and if done right, can contribute to mutual economic progress. In fact, the former PTI-led government had toyed with the idea of allowing limited imports from India last year (before rowing back) though former prime minister Imran Khan had also engaged in mixed messaging by saying that there would be no trade until the changes to India-held Kashmir's autonomous status were reversed. Many of the previous administration's senior officials had also discussed the benefits of bilateral trade. Moreover, the army chief has also spoken positively about the need for trade with India, as have some of the country's top business persons.

Of course, some elements in the country will decry the idea of maintaining commercial ties with India and accuse the government of 'selling out' the Kashmir cause; in fact, it should be mentioned that the parties currently in power

themselves opposed trade with India when in opposition. Support for Kashmir is based on principles and should continue. If ties improve with India through trade, it may create more conducive conditions to resume bilateral dialogue, as well as negotiations, to peacefully and judiciously resolve the decades-old Kashmir dispute. Therefore, bold and innovative thinking is required of the government. Let it explore the prospects of resuming trade, especially if it works in favour of reviving the local economy. This can create the dual benefits of economic revitalisation and normalisation of ties with India — surely a better option than the distrust that dominates South Asia today.

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Death of a journalist

RAMALLAH: Palestinian honour guards carry the coffin of veteran Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh following her state funeral in the West Bank on Thursday. Abu Akleh, who was killed while covering an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank, was among the Arab media's most prominent figures and widely hailed for her bravery and professionalism.—AFP

SHIREEN ABU AKLEH became a journalist for the very reason that a free media is so important: to be a voice for the people. In her case, as an Al Jazeera field reporter covering the Arab-Israeli conflict for decades, she held up a mirror to the suffering of the Palestinians, telling the stories of their everyday struggles against the depredations of a racist regime. On Wednesday, her voice was silenced — with brutal precision. Ms Akleh, one of the Arab world's most prominent journalists known for her fearless reportage, was killed by a single bullet to the head while covering Israeli army raids on a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. She was wearing a press vest and a helmet when shot in broad daylight. Eyewitnesses and other journalists who were with her, including another reporter wounded by a bullet in his back in the same attack, have unwaveringly pointed the finger at Israeli troops, saying that no Palestinian gunmen were in the vicinity at the time. Al Jazeera has described the killing as deliberate murder and asked the international community to hold Israel accountable.

However, as in most issues involving this unequal conflict, realpolitik may trump the facts. The US government has expressed confidence that Israel — responsible for decades of disproportionate violence and brazen injustice against

the Palestinians, not to mention air strikes in Gaza a year ago that destroyed the offices of AP and Al Jazeera — is capable of conducting a thorough investigation into Ms Akleh's murder. But the killing was so outrageous, the video footage of its immediate aftermath so harrowing, that facile statements such as these are now being drowned out by calls, including from the UN, for an impartial inquiry. International journalist bodies should ensure that those responsible are identified and brought to book. Otherwise Ms Akleh's death, testament to the risks many mediapersons take in the pursuit of truth, will be yet another in the long list of journalists' murders that have gone unpunished.

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Fake markers

RECENT reports reveal that the two children in KP who had contracted polio this year, had fake marks on their hands. Indelible blue ink is generally applied to a child's finger after he or she has been vaccinated. But, it seems, the ways to avoid vaccinations are endless and continue to challenge all efforts to eradicate polio in the country. In April, after a gap of 15 months, two polio cases emerged in the country — both in Mir Ali council of North Waziristan. They surfaced at a time when our polio authorities thought they were nearing the end of the decades-long war against the crippling illness. Neither child had been administered the polio vaccine; the cases had been detected 10 days apart and in the same area. It may well be that such attempts to mislead vaccinators are prevalent in other parts of the country too. In fact, last June, the Unicef chief had warned Pakistan's polio managers to pay special attention to the “hundreds of thousands” of “missing” and “invisible” children — those whose parents continued to refuse the vaccine for their offspring and those who remained undocumented and outside the school network. He advised the government to try and understand why such parents were against the vaccine.

However, it is noteworthy that concerns about discrepancies in the official data had surfaced as far back as late 2018 when a third-party audit had revealed that the number of children who had received the polio vaccine was marked up by as much as 10pc in official reports in many areas. Subsequently, in July 2019, the then PM's focal person on polio had admitted that the phenomenon of silent refusals was widespread in KP. Meanwhile, a report in this newspaper in

September 2019 cited the Kabalgram union council medical officer in Shangla district as saying that as many as 60pc of parents refused to have their child vaccinated against polio. Clearly, the authorities should revise their strategy and plug the structural gaps so that their efforts do not go to waste.

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Severe water crisis

FOR almost two months, warnings were being sounded by experts about the impending water shortages in the country. The prognosis was expected after the country received 26pc less snowfall last winter compared to previous years, followed by a completely dry spell in March and April. That the slower melting of glaciers would intensify the shortages had not been taken into account.

Together, these factors meant that Pakistan's rivers would run dry. In fact, the two largest reservoirs, Tarbela and Mangla, hit dead level much earlier than expected. Thus, it is not surprising that the lower riparians in southern Punjab and Sindh are facing their worst shortages in decades, with water from the mighty Indus reduced to 40pc of its normal flow.

Pictures of swathes of parched agricultural land and livestock carcasses dotting the bone-dry bed of the Indus in parts of Sindh and south Punjab underscore the severity of the crisis that farmers are struggling to handle. The situation is precarious as a very large number of people in the affected districts are on the verge of losing their crops and animals.

Worried about their crops, livestock and looming hunger, smallholders are staging protests in Sindh. There have also been isolated reports of attacks on Sindh irrigation staffers by angry farmers. The worst part of the story is that even when the glaciers start melting in the next few days, filling rivers and dams, and the monsoon season sets in, most affected farmers will not be able to recover their livelihood losses.

It is almost certain that the current water shortages will persist beyond summer into winter and we may not have enough water for the Rabi crops, especially wheat, in the reservoirs, putting food security at risk.

The current situation is just another reminder that Pakistan may become the most water-stressed nation in the region by 2040 because of multiple factors, including climate change, population explosion, mismanagement of the water economy, primitive irrigation practices, an obsolete water transmission infrastructure, lack of reservoirs, etc. The country already ranks 14th among the 17 'extremely high water-risk' regions in the world, a list that includes hot and dry countries like Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan's water troubles are not confined to surface water. Groundwater resources are also severely overdrawn for irrigation. Yet no government has shown any urgency to deal with the formidable challenge to food and the long-term economic security of the country's 220m residents.

The present crisis should be a wake-up call for federal and provincial authorities. It is time they took stock of Pakistan's biggest existential challenge and crafted holistic policies to improve governance in the water sector, built reservoirs for times of shortages, and improved the water transmission infrastructure.

The authorities must realise that we are running short of time and options, just like we are running out of water.

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Yasin Malik's trial

CONCERNS have been raised about the questionable trial of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front chairman Yasin Malik by an Indian court, with the AJK prime minister as well as Mr Malik's party convinced that he would not get a fair hearing.

Mr Malik has been in detention since February 2019; he himself withdrew his defence lawyer after anticipating that he would not get an impartial trial.

AJK PM Sardar Tanveer Ilyas added that Yasin Malik had been "coerced" by a "kangaroo court" into pleading guilty in a dubious case of terrorism dating back to 2017. Moreover, the JKLF has said the trial is part of a "political vendetta" against the veteran Kashmiri leader being carried out "at the behest of the Narendra Modi-led Hindutva regime".

There can be little doubt that Mr Malik is being punished by New Delhi for refusing to toe its line on India-held Kashmir. Similar tactics have been used by India to target Kashmiri leaders who favour freedom, while even some of New Delhi's loyalists have been meted out despicable treatment by the Indian state, particularly after the revocation of IHK's special status in August 2019.

In this context, the National Assembly's resolution, passed unanimously on Thursday, carries weight, as it calls upon the international community to ensure "accountability of India's grave and persistent violations of human rights and war crimes" in occupied Kashmir. Mr Malik is not the only one facing New Delhi's wrath; hundreds of other Kashmiri citizens have faced similarly deplorable treatment for demanding freedom.

It is not just Pakistan that is calling out India for its abhorrent tactics in IHK.

In a statement released on Friday, the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission of the OIC, in strong language, condemned the recent delimitation in the disputed region, through which the Hindu-majority areas of IHK were given more seats in the territory's legislature.

The OIC body termed it a "nefarious attempt" and a "wicked" measure to change Kashmir's demography. This is in stark contrast to the OIC's earlier muted references to Kashmir.

With regard to Yasin Malik's trial, India needs to quash such dubious references against all pro-freedom leaders. Meanwhile, where the Muslim world's response to the Kashmir question is concerned, though the statement from the OIC body is welcome, the Muslim bloc — especially its more influential members — needs to do more to press home the point to India that its brutal policies in the occupied region are unacceptable.

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Imran's lesson

THIS is for the second time in five years that a former prime minister has been in direct confrontation with the military over the latter's political machinations. First, it was Nawaz Sharif: after his unceremonious ouster from power in 2017, he had been outspoken and named specific individuals he held directly responsible for

his dismissal. Now, Imran Khan seems to be taking the same route, making no secret of the fact that he blames the military for his government's failure to complete a five-year term.

Both Mr Sharif and Mr Khan had a falling-out with their army chiefs, following which they found their respective governments on slippery ground. Both refused to bend to the military leadership's wishes, for separate reasons, and both believe they were made to pay the price for asserting their authority.

The two politicians may be poles apart in terms of ideology and approach to governance, and the manner of their respective departures was very different; yet, they share common ground, too, in that they believe external pressures never gave them the room they needed to implement their vision for the country.

Between them, the leaders of Pakistan's two largest political parties have managed to do what years of an independent media, that cried itself hoarse over the issue, could not. They seem to have finally convinced the vast majority of the populace that our democracy is weak and susceptible to pressures and coercion from undemocratic forces.

Mr Sharif seemed to have understood and internalised this when he introduced his 'vote ko izzat do' slogan, even if his party is struggling to stay true to that belief. It is unclear whether Mr Khan's romance with his uniformed 'saviours' has come to an end, but his call for 'haqeeqi azadi', or 'true freedom', echoes Mr Sharif's call for 'respecting the vote' in that it demands the will of the people reign supreme.

But Mr Khan is simultaneously demanding intervention to ensure early elections, which puts pressure on the military's new resolve to remain 'apolitical' and let civilian leaders sort out their differences themselves. That Mr Khan refuses to engage at all with his political rivals on any matter of reform, governance or legislation is a shame, because it is the civilian leadership which will have to set the red lines collectively if it wishes to stop being at the mercy of non-democratic powers.

It is understandably tempting for any party to seek the backing and patronage of the security and intelligence apparatus, but when will it become clear that such patronage exacts a heavy price and almost never delivers any long-term dividends? It would be much wiser for all parties to formally note the army's desire to be 'neutral' or 'apolitical' in matters of governance and democracy, and

to collectively hold the establishment accountable for any deviation from that policy.

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Child sexual abuse

IT is interesting that despite the strictures of society and political leaders on community evils, there is little attempt to look deeper into the issue of child sexual abuse in the country. It is a question worth exploring why, despite the existence of several laws made to protect children against abuse and newer initiatives such as the Zainab Alert app, this scourge is not only rampant but endemic in many parts of Pakistan. A list recently shared by Sahil, a leading NGO that focuses on child protection, names the 10 districts where this abhorrent practice is most common.

According to data shared by the organisation, the most number of cases continue to surface in Kasur district that reported 298 cases in 2021. Kasur, where a huge child pornography ring was exposed some years ago, was also the home of little Zainab, whose rape and murder, had led to violent protests. Kasur is followed by the capital twin districts of the country — Rawalpindi and Islamabad — with 292 and 247 cases respectively. The abnormal increase in cases from Rawalpindi and Islamabad indicate the possible presence of a trafficking ring. Other districts include Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Lahore, Okara, and Muzaffargarh in Punjab, and Khairpur in Sindh. According to the NGO, more than half the total number of reported cases (3,852) have emerged in these districts. Sahil officials say these figures have been gathered from a thorough analysis of news reports from 85 newspapers. The officials also revealed that sexual abuse of boys from six to 10 years was on the rise. These figures are probably just the tip of the iceberg. Abusers are often known to the victims, and in many cases the matter is never reported to the police for reasons of shame, ostracisation and fear of revenge. The absence of a sensitised police force has also prevented victims and their families from coming forward. No law is going to do much good until the authorities stop tiptoeing around the matter and abusers are tracked down and punished.

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Small mercies

AT a time when Pakistan is getting closer to the brink with its foreign currency reserves dropping to just around \$10bn on a soaring trade deficit, even a hint from the ADB of additional funding of \$2.5bn during the next financial year is a relief. The funding is to be made under ADB's programme loans and its Countercyclical Support Facility, a relatively new facility to help countries to finance their oil imports amid an unprecedented hike in global commodity prices. The Manila-based bank has also indicated that up to 60pc to 80pc of these funds would be disbursed before December to mitigate the adverse impact of the higher international commodity prices caused by Covid-related supply disruptions and the Russia-Ukraine war on Pakistan's balance-of-payments position. Meanwhile, the State Bank has reported that the April remittances sent by Pakistanis living abroad to their families have shot up to \$3.1bn — the highest in any given month. It gives hope that the current fiscal year's target of \$30bn remittances will be achieved, somewhat slowing down the haemorrhaging of forex reserves, which have already dropped by over \$6bn since February because of the soaring trade and current account deficits.

We should be grateful for small mercies. But our balance-of-payments trouble is too deep-rooted to go away with small cash injections. We must put our house in order if we wish to end our periodic 'boom-and-bust' cycles. With the cost of energy subsidies — announced by the previous government and continued by the present set-up — for the next fortnight estimated to spike to Rs75bn, it is time the authorities decided to remove the price cap on fuel and electricity prices as a first step to show that they intend to pursue sound economic policies. Unless the government takes this unpopular decision, there is little hope of a deal with the IMF, the talks for which are set to begin in Doha next week. Getting dollars from lenders, 'friendly' countries and international markets without coming under IMF discipline will be next to impossible. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are already said to have told the prime minister to seek the Fund's blessings before expecting fresh funds from them. Returning to the global bond market will be difficult and expensive with yields on Eurobonds floated earlier already spiking to 16pc. If the PML-N led coalition plans to rule for the remaining tenure of the assemblies, it should start taking decisions now.

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Iran deal revival

WHERE the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 is concerned, a great deal of fluidity exists regarding its fate. One day, the world is told that it is 'near death'. Yet soon after, we learn that negotiations would resume and a new deal could be in sight. This reflects the high level of uncertainty amongst the stakeholders, as well as the desire to revive the deal and prevent further confrontation between Iran and the West. In the latest developments, the EU's foreign policy chief has reignited hope that the deal may be salvageable. Josep Borrell, who was speaking after his emissary returned from Iran, said that nuclear talks had "reopened" and that a "final agreement" could possibly be reached. The Qatari emir was also recently in Tehran and met the top Iranian leadership, apparently to convince the Islamic Republic to resume the nuclear talks, which have stalled since March. These developments are quite positive considering that only a few days ago, serious doubts had been raised about the revival of the deal, which had been scuttled by US president Donald Trump's administration in 2018.

At this point in time, it is difficult to predict the fate of the negotiations the EU official has alluded to. Engagement between the stakeholders is, of course, welcome; yet, one major sticking point remains: the American designation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a 'foreign terrorist organisation'. The Iranians are adamant that the elite military grouping be removed from the US terrorism list, though American officials, both on and off the record, remain non-committal. Indeed, the success or otherwise of the nuclear negotiations may come down to this single point. The Pasdaran were placed on the terrorism list by the Trump administration, and Joe Biden and his team should consider removing them from there as a confidence-building measure. No doubt, the American president will face tremendous domestic pressure from a huge section of the political class — including from lawmakers within his own party — that is wary of upsetting Israel. Yet if the nuclear talks are to succeed, all sides will have to take bold decisions. Placing the Pasdaran on the list was a questionable move, and has not stopped Iran from pursuing its regional aims. If the US and its European allies are serious about the JCPOA's revival, they need to consider Iranian demands, or else risk sinking the deal for the foreseeable future.

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Deprived of funds

THIS May, Pakistan's former Fata region will complete its fourth year of merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The merger, brought about through a constitutional amendment, was a watershed moment for the people of the tribal region who had seen nothing but deprivation. Sadly, however, nothing much has been done to bring this poorly governed region on a par with the rest of the country. It has now emerged that the federal government has delayed the release of Rs17.1bn out of a pledged amount of Rs54bn meant for the merged tribal districts. No excuse can be accepted for this delay, knowing that this is the last quarter of the financial year. Funding for the merged districts needs to be prioritised, owing to the region's recent transition, socioeconomic complexities and security challenges. Unfortunately, neither the federal government nor the provinces, which had promised to shoulder the responsibility, have taken much interest in this regard.

The previous government had made substantial increases in the budgetary allocation for the merged districts, but in the absence of an institutional framework under the National Finance Commission, the promise of a 3pc share in resources made to the people of the tribal region — one that could have introduced a qualitative change in their lives — remains unfulfilled. KP has largely been left to fund infrastructure development in former Fata from its own meagre resources. It is an irony that while the NFC clearly lays down the formula for distribution of resources on the basis of population, area and poverty, among other things, the province, despite having seen its population, area and poverty figures go up post-merger, has not been compensated. The federal government needs to find an institutional mechanism to transfer additional funds to the merged districts but it must also make it part of the NFC. Mainstreaming Fata is a commitment of the federation and any negligence will have huge costs. It is high time the federal government worked with the provinces to resolve this issue.

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Electoral reforms

EARLY elections or not? That is the question. And it seems to be weighing heavy on the mind of everyone in the coalition government, although its stated position

thus far is firmly on the side of completing the term and going in for polls sometime next year.

On Wednesday, at a hurriedly called press conference, PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari said unequivocally that elections would be held only after electoral reforms and amendments to the NAB law, a process which could take “three or four months”.

The remark served to ‘correct’ the impression created by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif of a change in stance when he asserted in a BBC Urdu interview earlier that day that the possibility of elections being held even before November could not be ruled out. JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman on Thursday echoed Mr Zardari in saying that the legislative changes had to precede the next polls.

There appears no convincing reason for electoral reforms, and the changes to the NAB law even less so, to be a deciding factor where the timing of the polls is concerned. The parties leading the coalition are primarily concerned with rolling back the Elections (Second Amendment) Act, 2021, which provides for electronic voting machines and e-voting for overseas Pakistanis. But this is a task easily achieved in a situation where the government collectively enjoys a majority in both houses of parliament, so what is it waiting for? Critics may argue that rolling back the amendments with only a rump opposition in the Lower House after the mass resignations of 123 PTI MNAs would detract from the legitimacy of the exercise.

However, the passage of the legislation was in itself controversial, being among the 33 bills that the PTI government bulldozed through in a joint sitting on Nov 17 last year. As to amendments to the NAB law, having nothing to do with the electoral exercise, they can be undertaken by those who form the next elected government. All in all, Mr Zardari — who has made no secret of his preference for elections in 2023 — and Maulana Fazlur Rehman seem to be playing for time in order to avoid early polls.

Nevertheless, a sharp divergence of views on the issue has come to the fore in recent days, with Maryam Nawaz, Ahsan Iqbal and Ishaq Dar among core PML-N leaders speaking in favour of seeking the people’s mandate sooner rather than later. That the difficult decisions needed immediately to stabilise the dire economic situation may exact a significant political cost from those in the coalition who have the most to lose, is a very real concern.

Rather than flounder in indecision, calling early elections could be a less risky strategy. That way a caretaker government, which by definition has least skin in the game, in its 90-day tenure could take the unpopular decisions the moment calls for.

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Buyer's remorse

THE process of consultation with allies is underway. Yesterday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met the MQM-P convenor and the JUI-F and PPP leadership. It remains to be seen how quickly decisions are taken.

Since becoming the face of the unity government, the PML-N has rapidly lost the goodwill it spent years building up while in opposition.

After Finance Minister Miftah Ismail's press conference on Sunday, it is clear that while the PM and his kitchen cabinet are aware of the economic crisis, they look to their party's leadership in London for 'guidance' on policy matters. Nawaz Sharif et al, meanwhile, seem to be making decisions that are more in the interest of the PML-N than the people.

Internal differences are causing serious delays in economic governance, as well as creating uncertainty in the capital markets. The reaction on Monday to Mr Ismail's press conference came in the form of another sell-off in the stock market and the continued weakening of the rupee-dollar exchange rate.

It is difficult to sympathise with the PML-N, even though the party keeps reminding us that the economy is in the shape it is because of the decisions the PTI made in its last days in power. Yes, the unsustainable fuel and electricity subsidies draining Pakistan's treasury were indeed introduced by the PTI, but what has this new government done about them?

It is strange to hear senior PML-N leaders lamenting the subsidies, yet not even coming up with a subsidy rationalisation plan though it is in their power to do so. The truth is that while they can blame Mr Khan all they want, each day of their own indecision is costing the treasury billions of rupees and wreaking further destruction on the capital markets.

The PML-N contends that any difficult decision it has to take must first be endorsed by the other parties in its government. This not only betrays the PML-N's lack of trust in the parties it chose to ally itself with in order to remove the PTI from power, it also exposes its lack of foresight when forming the government.

If the PML-N so desperately wanted the other parties to share the burden of economic decision-making, why did it not demand that the finance ministry be headed by a coalition partner?

It is evident that the PML-N is only suffering from buyer's remorse, and it is only the commitments it made to secure the vote of no-confidence that are holding it back from abdicating its responsibilities altogether. If there is no decision in the next few days, the PML-N should step down and let a caretaker set-up take over.

Even that decision will likely come with political costs — people will ask what the vote of no-confidence really achieved. However, the way the transition of power has been bungled, there is hardly any other option.

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Sikh traders' killing

THE brutal murder of two Sikh traders in the outskirts of Peshawar on Sunday illustrates the vulnerability of minority communities in KP, as well as the threat militant groups continue to pose to the country's security. Ranjeet and Guljeet Singh were murdered by unidentified gunmen at their shops and while no group has claimed responsibility for the atrocity, the Peshawar police chief has termed it "an act of terrorism". There have also been other incidents in which members of the Sikh community were targeted in KP in the recent past. A Sikh hakim was murdered in October last year, with IS-Khorasan claiming responsibility for the crime, while another Sikh trader was shot in February but fortunately survived in what was termed a 'robbery bid'. Meanwhile a Christian clergyman was killed on his way back from church in the KP capital in January. Considering these incidents, as well as March's Koocha Risaldar mosque bombing, which was also the handiwork of IS-K, the threat the terrorist group poses to peace becomes clear. Moreover, elements linked to the banned TTP have also become quite active in KP and the former tribal belt, with attacks on security forces as well as civilians continuing. The latest incident — not claimed by any group as yet —

came on Saturday when three soldiers and as many children were martyred in a suicide attack in North Waziristan.

Where the protection of minorities is concerned, security needs to be stepped up in the areas where non-Muslim citizens live, work and worship, while those involved in the murders need to be brought to justice. Overall, the state, particularly the security apparatus, needs to proactively neutralise the emerging threat, before militancy becomes an uncontrollable beast that can only be countered by large-scale military operations. Far too many soldiers and civilians have laid down their lives to quell the militant threat and their sacrifices should not be in vain. The authorities are taking action; for example an IS-K operative — said to be one of the planners of the Koocha Risaldar atrocity — as well as a would-be suicide bomber were reportedly killed by security forces on Saturday. More such intelligence-based operations need to be carried out to uproot the militant infrastructure that terrorists are trying to re-establish. Moreover, the Taliban regime must clearly be communicated the fact that Afghan soil cannot be used to host anti-Pakistan terrorists, and that action must be taken against these malign actors.

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Cholera outbreak

REPORTS of rising cases of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea in several areas are raising the spectre of a public health disaster in a country where waterborne diseases are the main cause of death in young children. The worst-hit appears to be Pir Koh tehsil in Dera Bugti district of Balochistan where, according to government figures, at least six people have died while nearly 40 are infected with cholera. Independent reports claim that there have been no less than two dozen fatalities. Cases first began surfacing in Karachi in April as doctors reported receiving scores of patients — both adults and children — with cholera symptoms. Over 180 cases have so far been confirmed by the Sindh health department. A case has also been reported from Lahore, though the actual number is believed to be higher — something that the Punjab health authorities have yet to acknowledge.

Though both cholera and diarrhoea cause dehydration, the former disease is more severe. The rapid discharge of fluids from the body can cause a cholera

patient to die within hours, if not treated. Unfortunately, the authorities have ignored this worrisome fact. Initially, officials in Sindh denied media reports about a cholera outbreak, but then, thankfully, instructed all major hospitals in Karachi to set up special wards for cholera patients. Doctors are apparently still treating many patients who have cholera symptoms, but without laboratory tests there is no way of knowing the extent of the outbreak. Cholera is a dangerous illness, and cannot be ignored. It is imperative that provincial governments instruct the relevant departments to investigate and confirm the nature of the pathogen infecting an unusually large number of people in the country, and then develop an effective strategy to check its spread. The country's healthcare system is overstretched and has barely survived a pandemic. It may not be able to deal with a cholera outbreak that could spiral out of control unless safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities are ensured.

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SC on defections

THE judgement is monumental and will significantly influence Pakistani politics for years to come. After a nearly two-month wait, the Supreme Court has dilated on Article 63A of the Constitution to provide its opinion on how the votes of legislators who are deemed to have acted against their party's directives should be treated. Through a 3-2 decision, the court has held that any legislator who defies their party's voting instructions on the four instances highlighted in Article 63A ought not to have their vote counted at all.

This is a significant departure from a widely held view that Article 63A was quite comprehensive in detailing what qualifies as defection and how defectors should be dealt with procedurally. The dissenting judges took the same view, saying they felt any additional reading into Article 63A would be akin to rewriting the Constitution. The majority, on the other hand, held that Article 63A cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the Constitution, especially not without considering the rights of political parties under Article 17.

The court, therefore, issued this order to act as a bulwark against "unconstitutional and unlawful assaults, encroachments and erosions" on the rights of political parties. The court has reasoned that since defection undermines the rights of political parties, any dissenting vote in the four instances detailed in

63A should not be allowed as the rights of an individual cannot be allowed to prevail over the rights of the party. On the matter of whether a defection may earn lifetime disqualification, the court has left it to parliament with a recommendation that it legislates a punishment that is sufficiently strong.

The court's opinion has significant repercussions for the future as well as the present. In any future voting on the four specific instances highlighted in Article 63A, the order hopes to take away any temptation to indulge in the sale and purchase of votes. It also hopes to give political parties a greater sense of security. However, the same ruling will also prevent legislators from casting their votes according to their conscience, and it is not clear whether the court has taken this factor into account. All over the world, legislators vote against their own parties without hesitation if this is what their principles demand. Pakistan should be no different.

More immediately, however, the ruling turns attention to the role PTI defectors have played in recent assembly elections. The ruling has no immediate bearing on the federal government as dissenting PTI MNAs never actually voted against their party in the vote of no-confidence against Imran Khan. However, Punjab Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz only secured victory in the province thanks to the support of the Jehangir Tareen and Aleem Khan groups in the PTI, and this order opens the door for legal challenges to be launched against the legitimacy of that victory.

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Karachi blast

THE frequency of urban terrorism incidents over the past few weeks in Karachi should send alarm bells ringing within the state apparatus and result in an effective strategy to counter such destabilising activities. Monday night's blast in the city's Kharadar area — a congested commercial zone — is the third incident of terrorism in three weeks. At least one person has been killed in the tragedy. Last week, a similar blast took place in Saddar in which one person was killed, while on April 26 a suicide bomber struck a van at Karachi University's Confucius Institute resulting in the deaths of three Chinese individuals and a local driver. The KU attack was claimed by Baloch separatists while the banned Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army took responsibility for the Saddar blast. Law enforcers say

there are similarities in the Saddar and Kharadar blasts, as IEDs were used in both incidents. It appears that a police mobile was the primary target of Monday's incident, while a vehicle of the Pakistan Coast Guard was thought to be the main target in the Saddar attack. Though death and injuries did occur in the Kharadar incident, the toll could have been much higher as the area is packed with traders and pedestrians during business hours in the day.

Clearly, inimical actors are trying to stir up chaos in Karachi through such acts. Whether it is ethnonationalist separatists or religiously inspired militants, the authorities must improve vigilance to prevent further acts of violence targeting the public or law-enforcement personnel. Karachi specifically has been rocked by major bouts of violence of various types over the past few decades and the authorities will need to work extra hard to prevent a resurgence of urban terrorism. Each time such an incident occurs, the administration promises to track down the culprits and bring them to justice. It's about time they put into action an effective counterterrorism strategy focusing on intelligence-based operations and other pre-emptive steps to prevent incidents of terrorism. Admittedly, policing and securing a city as large and unwieldy as Karachi is difficult, yet to secure the lives and property of the public, urgent action must be taken. The federal and Sindh governments, using the intelligence agencies and police force, are required to stop this new wave of urban violence before it spirals out of control. While the new rulers may be distracted by political turmoil, they cannot afford to be lax when it comes to maintaining law and order.

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Threats to Imran Khan

IT seems there is never a dull moment in Imran Khan's life. First, it was a cabal of local and international players conspiring to have him thrown out of power; now, the former prime minister says he is in imminent danger of being assassinated. Tempting as it may seem to write off the latter as another political stunt, assassination threats must not be taken lightly. Mr Khan's fears for his life have recently been reasserted publicly and have therefore caused a considerable stir among his well-wishers. Mr Khan has told supporters that he has even recorded a video naming those who should be held responsible if any misfortune befalls him. This video is reportedly in the custody of unidentified

individuals and is to be released in the event of Mr Khan's untimely demise. The former prime minister continues to be admired by many, and all this talk of mystery poisons, secret videos and foreign conspirators has prompted an outpouring of concern for his well-being.

It would appear that Mr Khan and company seem reasonably convinced that the threats to his life are credible. Rather than worry about them in jalsas, however, it would be more helpful if Mr Khan could formally communicate the exact nature of these threats and any supporting information in writing to security and intelligence agencies as well as the government. It is commendable that both the prime minister and interior minister have acted responsibly and proactively by offering the government's support for a probe into the reported threats received by Mr Khan, as well as providing additional personnel and vehicles to secure his residence and movements. The government has made it clear that it will not object to a judicial commission to review the threats to the former chief executive's life, and the PTI should take it up on the offer. These threats need to be immediately assessed and the findings reported to both Mr Khan and his supporters so that their concerns can be removed.

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To be or not to be

WITH coalition parties affirming their support for the PML-N on any tough measures needed to right the listing economy, it is once again up to the prime minister and his cabinet to decide what course they want to set for the government.

The allies have formally communicated that they expect to see the unity government remain in power and complete legal, electoral and accountability reforms before the next general elections are announced. However, though their commitment to providing support throughout should give the PML-N some confidence, that is unlikely to make things any easier for it. This is perhaps the reason why the government reportedly also wants the military establishment involved.

According to reports, it plans to communicate the strategy agreed upon by the ruling coalition to Rawalpindi, and the military's 'receptiveness' to the actual intent of this outreach effort is likely to decide the matter.

Despite all this, however, many observers feel the PML-N may already have taken too long. Fearing public backlash, the party squandered the opportunity to make corrections to the economy immediately after taking over, even though the markets had been expecting it to. The party's unanticipated internal differences subsequently degraded its goodwill to a significant extent as they caused considerable damage in capital markets.

Five weeks later, the PML-N is back at the starting line. Its failure to take timely decisions is evident in the fact that negotiators are currently in Qatar for parleys with the IMF for desperately needed funds without anything to offer in return.

Fuel and electricity subsidies, which the IMF had demanded be withdrawn as a precondition to any future disbursements, had not even been touched when the scheduled talks began.

Withdrawal of subsidies is also not the end of the challenge facing the government. A sharp increase in fuel and electricity prices will spill over in the form of rising prices of nearly every commodity due to higher transportation and production costs. Inflation may be further compounded by higher prices of food staples due to shortages caused by global supply chain disruptions and climate change.

Any attempt at economic course correction in such a scenario will bring with it months of intense criticism from the public before it even starts to bear fruit. Anyone leading the reforms can expect to be criticised severely and lose public support.

The PML-N, as the face of the unity government, should therefore ask itself: does it have the patience and fortitude to implement reforms just for the sake of the national good, especially if they will cost it dearly even if polls are held next year?

If there is any hesitation in the minds of the party's bigwigs regarding this, it is far better for them to bow out and call elections immediately. The same decision taken weeks or months from now will have far more devastating consequences.

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Impact on Punjab

THE Supreme Court judgement interpreting the issue of disqualification of parliamentarians under Article 63A of the Constitution has raised more questions around the 'legitimacy' of Hamza Shehbaz's election as the chief minister of Punjab. The court's declaration that votes cast by lawmakers in defiance of directions given by their parliamentary party (in the election of the prime minister and the chief minister or in a vote of no-confidence or vote of confidence) 'cannot be counted and must (therefore) be disregarded' has pushed the country's most populous province into a deeper crisis. Most constitutional lawyers say Hamza has ceased to be the province's chief executive because the votes of 26 dissident PTI lawmakers who had voted for him on April 16 stand uncounted after the court's judgement. That means he has lost the simple majority in the House and a new election ought to be held to elect a new chief minister. Nonetheless, some are of the view that the decision would have a 'prospective' and not a 'retrospective' effect; hence, he is 'safe' unless the court says otherwise. Still, the future of Hamza's almost three-week old administration in effect hangs in the balance for now, with the PTI planning to file a petition with the top court to seek its removal. The incumbent's entire case hangs on establishing before the court that the defecting PTI MPAs hadn't received directions from their party to vote for his rival, a question on which the ECP was expected to give its decision yesterday, but postponed the announcement.

Punjab is in the midst of a profound crisis of governance for almost seven weeks now. The incumbent chief minister is waiting — rather struggling — to put together his cabinet; the president has refused to accept the dismissal of the PTI governor by the federal government and appoint his successor. Separately, two no-confidence motions are pending against the Punjab Assembly speaker and deputy speaker. Both PML-N and PTI are awaiting the ECP's decision on the PTI defectors' fate, insisting on their own interpretation of the law and lobbying legal challenges at each other. Little wonder the province's administrative machinery is virtually paralysed because of lack of decision-making by the political authority. The apex court's interpretation of Article 63A and the ECP decision to withhold announcement of its verdict on defections will likely make matters worse rather than bring stability and clarity to the chaotic political and administrative situation.

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Forest fires

THOUGH spot and forest fires have become a perennial phenomenon especially in peak summer, the recent blazes — which include some due to alleged acts of arson — are symptomatic of the devil-may-care attitude of officials and the public towards protecting nature. Fires were seen on Sunday and Monday in the Saidpur and Chinari areas of the Margalla Hills; large fires were also reported over the weekend from forests in Kahuta, Kallar Syedan and Kotli Sattian areas. News of the Margalla forest fires broke a couple of days ago when they were featured in two TikTok videos on social media. Most striking was the nonchalance of the Islamabad officials who remained oblivious to the blaze in the capital's own backyard — although it originated in KP — until they came in for harsh criticism on social media. Earlier this month, a similar fire had erupted on one of the picturesque Murree hills; evidently spreading over several acres, it could be seen from miles away.

That the authorities were caught woefully ill-prepared and mostly relied on the local communities' conventional ways of beating the fire out, is cause for immense alarm. The country is gripped by a severe heatwave, and the fires — one of which reportedly blazed for days — could have easily spread out of control and caused damage to life and property, besides posing a serious environmental hazard. Moreover, the authorities' claims that fires are mostly caused by mischief-makers, tourists, or the timber mafia (to hide evidence of their activities), is a flimsy excuse for their inaction. Given this, the announcement by Minister for Climate Change Sherry Rehman that fire vigilance in the affected areas would be beefed up is a long-awaited step in the right direction. While the arsonists must of course be punished, such vandalism can be easily prevented by a permanent fire vigilance force, even a small one, with requisite professional training. Nature reserves should be protected at all costs if we are to have a fighting chance of surviving the impact of climate change.

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TTP peace talks

ANOTHER attempt to sue for peace with the outlawed TTP is being made, again facilitated by the Afghan Taliban that rule Kabul. According to a spokesman of the Afghan Taliban, there has been “significant progress” in talks between the government and the TTP that took place in Kabul, with the result that the latter has extended a ceasefire till the end of this month.

Moreover, in an apparent goodwill gesture, the state has freed and reportedly pardoned some convicted high-profile militants, including Muslim Khan, once considered the face of the TTP Swat.

However, both the civilian and military authorities in Pakistan remain tight-lipped about these developments. But before the success or otherwise of this nascent peace process is considered, some tough questions need to be answered by the state.

Primarily, the people of Pakistan need to know what the finer points of any agreement with the TTP are. After all, this is a group that has waged war on Pakistan and has been responsible for some of the most atrocious acts of terrorism the country has witnessed, so there is natural concern whether the TTP’s leadership and cadres will be willing to give up the way of the gun. Moreover, is the state willing to simply forgive those whose hands are stained with the blood of our soldiers and civilians — including the children of APS Peshawar — and who remain unrepentant? Also, in order to make peace, how much is the state willing to concede to the militants? Will they swear to respect the law of the land and democratic governance, and renounce violence? The state, therefore, needs to tell the people — preferably through parliament — what exactly the details of the peace process are.

Peace is required, especially in the war-ravaged erstwhile tribal belt, but there must be a difference between peace and capitulation to the demands of the militants. Moreover, it should be remembered that a similar exercise to make peace with the TTP was launched by the previous government last year, which collapsed soon after it began.

While it may bring short-term peace, any agreement that legitimises the TTP without the group surrendering its weapons and promising to respect the

Constitution will sow the seeds for major trouble in the future. Also, the state must be clear about how far an amnesty should go.

For example, will those responsible for the deaths of thousands of Pakistanis be 'forgiven' with the stroke of a pen? This will surely send the wrong message. The fact is, it will be very difficult to mainstream the TTP considering the nature of the group, and if they are allowed a foothold, the militants will effectively wipe out all other groups that disagree with their ideology. Therefore, more transparency, and plenty of caution, is needed on part of the state regarding peace talks with the TTP.

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Beyond the law

THE senior judiciary should take care not to overreach in its zeal to 'fix' issues it ideally need not worry about. On the advice of a fellow judge, the chief justice has taken suo motu notice of alleged interference by powerful individuals in several ongoing criminal cases, as well as media reports of changes being made to accountability laws. The court fears that such interference in the legal system can affect the constitutional requirements of fair trial and due process, apart from "eroding the confidence of the people in the rule of law and constitutionalism in the country". The suo motu seems to have been prompted by the Federal Investigation Agency's continued failure to indict Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Punjab Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz in a multibillion-rupee corruption case. Initial proceedings on the suo motu on Thursday saw a bar placed on any transfer and posting of officials involved in "high-profile" NAB and FIA cases, as well as notices being sent to federal and provincial authorities to report on the cases they are prosecuting. The court also expressed concerns about the names of "thousands" of individuals being taken off no-fly lists. While conducting the hearing, Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial justified the suo motu as a measure to "protect the criminal justice system and the rule of law".

The court's concerns indicate that it has been feeling at least some pressure from the series of relentless attacks on its credibility by former prime minister Imran Khan. The chief justice's reasoning for the suo motu, in this context, seems to reflect a desire in the senior judiciary to reassert its non-partisanship in matters of public interest. As far as the court wants to protect the legal system

from unconstitutional interference or influence, it seems within its rights to do so. However, the court need not concern itself with defending NAB or the existing accountability laws. In the 2020 judgement in the Paragon City case, the Supreme Court itself had excoriated NAB for its patently unlawful, unjust and politically-driven agenda. The legislature should be allowed to fix those deficiencies if it is doing so fairly. There has already been much criticism of the apex court's recent short order in the Article 63A case, which is being viewed as the judiciary unilaterally 'rewriting' the Constitution. The court should avoid another controversy arising from any further transgression in the legislature's domain.

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Political musical chairs

YET another political crisis is brewing in Balochistan, where old rivals Jam Kamal Khan Alyani and Sardar Yar Mohammad Rind have joined hands to topple Chief Minister Mir Abdul Quddus Bizenjo from power through a no-confidence motion. Siding with them are some disgruntled provincial cabinet members. They have already been sacked by Mr Bizenjo, who himself had ascended to power seven months back when Mr Alyani was forced to quit the office to avoid the embarrassment of being overthrown through a similar no-trust resolution submitted by his current ally and PTI leader, Mr Rind, and his successor. Prima facie, those leading the effort to oust the incumbent or supporting the resolution have a personal axe to grind with Mr Bizenjo. It is too early to say if they will succeed in mustering the support of the required number of 33 lawmakers in the 65-member House as many must be waiting for an opportune moment before taking their leap of faith. But the move is going to intensify the political mess in the province.

Political instability in Balochistan isn't new; it is a norm in the province that has been wrecked by years of Baloch insurgency, militant violence and underinvestment. The perpetual uncertainty has adversely affected development and increased public anguish and despair as a large majority of its people are forced to live in appalling conditions, enduring poverty, hunger and disease. Matters are made worse by the establishment's increasing and blatant interference in the province's politics, and their role in making and breaking

governments and political parties in recent decades. The political turmoil developing currently is just another manifestation of the past and present shenanigans of the powers that be in the province. Even though the latest move against the Bizenjo government appears motivated by personal grudges and interests, the irony is that the outcome of the no-confidence vote will most likely be determined by the direction in which non-political forces controlling the province want the winds to blow in the country's existing political settings.

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Yasin Malik's conviction

THE conviction of veteran Kashmiri freedom fighter and head of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front Yasin Malik by an Indian court on terror funding charges on Thursday reflects the panic within the Indian establishment where the Kashmiri freedom struggle is concerned. While at one time Mr Malik was amongst the leading lights of the armed struggle against Indian occupation, since the mid-'90s he has advocated a democratic, non-violent movement for Kashmiri rights. According to the JKLF, Mr Malik termed the charges framed against him as "fabricated and politically motivated" while adding that he was willing to pay the price for "seeking azadi". Pakistan has also condemned the "sham trial" while earlier the Foreign Office had issued a demarche to the Indian charge d'affaires over Mr Malik's questionable case. Though he has been convicted, Yasin Malik's sentence will be announced next week.

The fact is that such methods are unlikely to extinguish the Kashmiri desire for freedom. Mr Malik is a respected figure in the Kashmiri freedom struggle and advocates independence for the disputed region, something that is not favoured by this country's establishment. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, another major Kashmiri leader, has also been in arbitrary detention for nearly three years. Instead of detaining and punishing the genuine Kashmiri leadership through dubious cases, India needs to open up channels with these leaders to help resolve the decades-old dispute. Of course this will mean the hard-line BJP government that rules Delhi will have to admit that its actions of August 2019, in which the autonomous status of held Kashmir was done away with, were ill-advised. Peace in Kashmir can only be achieved by involving the genuine Kashmiri leadership, with both Pakistan and India as stakeholders. Ham-fisted methods will only increase the

desire for azadi. In Mr Malik's case, the Indian government needs to revisit the doubtful charges against him while also considering his ill health, and release him so that he can return to his family.

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Band-aid measure

THE foreign exchange savings that the Shehbaz Sharif government is targeting to achieve by banning the import of 38 'non-essential, luxury goods' will have negligible impact on Pakistan's growing balance of payment constraints.

Touted as the first major policy decision by the PML-N-led coalition to boost the flagging economy, the import ban is not likely to yield more than \$100m a month or close to 1.6pc of the country's average monthly import bill of over \$6.5bn in foreign exchange savings, contrary to the differing official claims of between \$300m and \$500m.

A more pronounced impact would have been possible had the cap on energy prices been removed and measures like early closure of markets and reduction in the number of working days enforced to curtail domestic energy consumption.

Oil and gas imports for power generation have almost doubled to more than \$17bn between July 2021 and April 2022 from \$8.7bn during the previous corresponding period due to a record surge in their global prices. Moreover, not all goods banned under the order can be classified as non-essential or luxury items. The measure, dubbed by many as indirect protection to local producers of the banned imports, is also expected to result in an increase in the prices of their local substitutes, fuelling inflation. Needless to say, it might also encourage smuggling of these items into the country.

Editorial: To be or not to be

The decision has come when the nation's liquid foreign currency reserves have slid to just above \$10bn and the rupee has weakened to over 200 a dollar, with imports jumping by 46.5pc to \$65.5bn in the first 10 months of the present financial year and projected to peak at \$77bn by the close of the fiscal.

Given the magnitude of the economic meltdown and deteriorating external sector position, most experts are calling upon the government to take unpopular decisions and reverse unfunded energy subsidies that have intensified the crisis. Even though the coalition partners now appear to be in agreement on what needs to be done to save the economy and get the IMF funding, they are reluctant to make tough decisions without the buy-in of the powers that be and assurances that their government will be allowed to complete the term.

With the country in the grip of speculation that the establishment wants the coalition to announce early elections and is working on putting together an interim set-up, none of the ruling coalition partners would want to lose whatever political capital they have by taking unpopular decisions.

PML-N leader Shahid Khaqan Abbasi told a TV show host the other day that if the other stakeholders (including the military) were not prepared to own the difficult measures that need to be taken to save the economy, his party should quit the government. It is difficult to not agree with him given the enormity of the economic challenge facing the country.

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Bilawal's defence

BILAWAL Bhutto-Zardari's robust defence at the UN headquarters of former prime minister Imran Khan's Feb 24 trip to Russia came as a pleasant surprise to those more accustomed to the unrelenting toxicity of Pakistani politics. The young foreign minister — the youngest in Pakistan's history, in fact — displayed remarkable maturity by refusing to fall for a baited question that he could easily have used to discredit and disown the PTI government's foreign policy decisions. Instead, Mr Bhutto-Zardari stood by the decision taken by Mr Khan and presented a united front despite knowing that there is immense pressure from the US and the international community to condemn the invasion of Ukraine.

During a news briefing at the UN headquarters in New York, Mr Bhutto-Zardari was asked by a journalist what he would say about Mr Khan's trip to Moscow on the same day the Russia-Ukraine conflict flared up, and how the new government would 'rectify the mistakes' of its predecessors. Mr Bhutto-Zardari, without missing a beat, stated in response that he would, "absolutely defend the

former prime minister of Pakistan”, and that Pakistan should not be punished for what he described as “an innocent mistake”. In fact, he reiterated many of the same things Mr Khan himself has said regarding the circumstances of that visit: ie, that the trip was made as part of Pakistan’s foreign policy, and that its planners had no prior indication that Russia would be launching an invasion that same day. Not only that, Mr Bhutto-Zardari appeared to echo the former regime’s policy when he stressed that Pakistan was not part of any conflict, did not wish to be a part of any conflict, and wanted to emphasise the importance of dialogue and diplomacy as a resolution to the conflict without taking any side. When he flew to the US at the invitation of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Mr Bhutto-Zardari was subjected to jeering criticism by supporters of the same prime minister he so stoutly defended on Thursday. It remains to be seen whether Mr Bhutto-Zardari’s decision not to air Pakistan’s dirty laundry in public and to instead show solidarity with a bitter rival will change any opinions about him at home. Be that as it may, Mr Bhutto-Zardari has demonstrated his potential to grow into a national leader simply by showing that he can act with greater maturity than many of his much older peers.

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Back in the game?

WITH the new government struggling to make crucial decisions independently, Pakistan’s ‘parallel governance system’ seems to have been reactivated in a bid to restore order. The capital has recently been abuzz with speculation over an interim set-up being ushered in ahead of an early election.

The rumour mill started churning after former finance ministers Dr Hafeez Shaikh and Shaukat Tarin, as well as former State Bank governor Reza Baqir — all of whom served during the PTI government — and selected diplomats reportedly met a senior security official for discussions on the resumption of the IMF programme. Given the urgency with which the country needs budgetary support, one could safely assume by looking at the guest list that the purpose of getting all of these technocrats together was to secure a commitment to implement whatever terms are reached with the IMF in the ongoing negotiations, regardless of which party is in power over the next few months.

The PML-N's infighting and continuing indecision on the tough measures needed for economic course correction are likely what activated the state's fail-safe protocols.

From the very beginning, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his cabinet seem to have been consistently undermined and prevented from taking important decisions by Nawaz Sharif and his coterie of loyalists. While the prime minister had seemed prepared to take his inherited challenges head-on and to immediately get started on securing the economy, the elder Sharif still remains unwilling to risk his party's electoral prospects on measures that are going to prove unpopular with the masses.

Likewise, Finance Minister Miftah Ismail, who was ready to hit the ground running with plans to immediately roll back unsustainable fuel and electricity subsidies in order to secure an IMF loan, was severely undercut by Ishaq Dar, the 'senior' former finance minister in the PML-N. The latter recently went so far as to tweet an article that was highly dismissive of Mr Ismail's ability to navigate the economic crisis.

Throughout this stand-off between Islamabad and London, Maryam Nawaz has made it impossible for the prime minister to offer his coalition partners any assurance of the stability or continuity they have repeatedly demanded. In jalsa after jalsa, Ms Maryam Nawaz has repeatedly called on the prime minister to pack up his government and go for elections, stressing that the government should not take responsibility for the economic mess created by its predecessor.

The chaos within the PML-N has created ample room for its rivals. Former prime minister Imran Khan — who has kept his guns trained on the new government and the entire state, firing salvo after salvo to restore status quo ante — now senses that his desired early election may suddenly be within reach. He has delayed the announcement of his long march on the capital, likely to see how recent developments in Islamabad pan out.

Is another game afoot?

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Shireen Mazari's arrest

AS if the political climate was not toxic enough, Punjab's anti-corruption department took former human rights minister Shireen Mazari into custody in Islamabad yesterday. The incident ignited a firestorm of denunciation across the board.

Soon after her arrest, her daughter Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir alleged that she had been "beaten and taken away by male police officers". While admittedly the entire episode was not captured on camera, a video clip that emerged later showed female police officers pulling Ms Mazari by the arm out of her car after she refused to step out. That said, the timing makes it seem like a clear case of political victimisation.

The former minister has ostensibly been arrested on the basis of an FIR in which she has been accused of encroaching on a piece of land in Rajanpur district, but the timing of the arrest is suspect. Ms Mazari has of late been harshly critical of the ruling coalition as well as the senior military leadership for its declared 'neutrality' in the events of the last few months that led to the ouster of the PTI government.

Given that Punjab Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz ordered her immediate release, at the time of writing it seemed highly likely she would be set free within a few hours. Nevertheless, there must be an investigation as to why Ms Mazari was taken into custody in the first place.

What happened yesterday came across as a regrettable attempt to intimidate a prominent opposition leader into silence. The PML-N-led coalition should not be using the same tactics against the PTI that the latter had employed while in government, and for which it was justifiably criticised.

And if there are other reasons behind Ms Mazari's arrest rather than the somewhat prosaic contents of the aforementioned FIR, then she should be formally informed of what law she has violated, if any, and given full opportunity to defend herself. Abuse of power can never be condoned, regardless of who it targets or from where it emanates.

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Currency concerns

IN the midst of the power struggle in the country, the rupee slid past 200 to a dollar in the interbank market last Friday. The persistent decline in the value of the home currency, which has dropped by about 32pc against the dollar in the last one year from a low of 152, has been caused by balance-of-payment constraints on the back of a surging import bill, a soaring current account deficit and depleting foreign exchange reserves. Increased political uncertainty, decision paralysis, unsustainable energy subsidies and suspension of the IMF programme have quickened the rupee's downward journey in recent weeks. That multiple curbs placed on dollar purchases from the open market by the central bank to arrest the decline in value in winter failed to fend off speculative raids on the currency shows that the exchange rate is almost impossible to manage without improvements in economic fundamentals through tough decisions. Instead, the restrictions have led to dollar hoarding, created a huge black market and exponentially raised the premium charged by currency dealers on under-the-counter transactions.

How the exchange rate market behaves in the coming days largely depends on the outcome of Pakistan's ongoing talks with the IMF in Doha for the restoration of the Fund's programme, which will pave the way for funding from other multilateral and bilateral lenders. Needless to say, the outcome of ongoing negotiations with the IMF hinges on the government's decision to reverse the energy subsidies and prepare an austere budget for the next financial year. Although the government says it is ready to take politically unpopular measures, it is delaying crucial decisions because of pressure over the timing of the next elections. If they cannot complete the remaining tenure of the assemblies, the coalition partners would not want to make decisions that can erode their political capital ahead of the polls. With the final round of negotiations expected to take place on May 24 and May 25 as stated by the prime minister, Pakistan is fast running out of time to meet the Fund's conditions for the revival of its programme. The currency market has responded positively to what many describe as inconsequential import curbs placed by the government to stop the depletion of foreign currency reserves. But that will do only so much. It's time all players understood the grim economic reality, and helped reduce political uncertainty over the tenure of the coalition rather than adding to it.

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Defection rulings

TWO judgements this past week have rewritten the rules of Pakistan's parliamentary democracy. First, the Supreme Court ruled that voting by lawmakers against party directions in the four scenarios laid out in Article 63A automatically nullifies their vote. Then, the Election Commission of Pakistan ruled that the 25 PTI lawmakers who voted in favour of PML-N's Hamza Shehbaz as Punjab chief minister would be de-seated for defying their party — even if the technical prerequisites for their dismissal had not been met.

A dissenting vote, therefore, did not only become worthless, it also became a sure-fire way of losing one's seat in the legislature.

According to observers, the two rulings taken together seem to have effectively rendered Article 63A ineffective. The article in question had been inserted in the Constitution to identify the circumstances in which lawmakers would be deemed to have formally defected from their party and to lay out the procedure for having them ejected from their seat.

Before the Supreme Court applied its own reading of Article 17 to identify the 'spirit' of Article 63A, the law did not indicate that a defector's vote would not be counted, thus allowing individuals whose principles discouraged them from following the party line to exercise their right to participate in matters of national import.

Secondly, Article 63A had also laid out certain procedural rules to determine if defectors had indeed acted in bad faith. These included a notification of the party's directions to its lawmakers as well as a provision asking party heads to formally seek an explanation from the defectors as to the cause of their violation of party directions. However, the ECP's decision seems to have deemed these measures inconsequential, thus denying defectors any protection from unfair disqualification.

To have to enforce loyalty to the party, even if in just four scenarios, is a sign of structural weaknesses in the democratic system, which are not for the Supreme Court or the ECP to rectify. By setting aside the existing law to prescribe their

own 'solutions' to a political problem, the two institutions have not really solved the crisis at hand.

Instead, the Punjab government has been thrown into further chaos, which is only bound to invite further litigation in the days to come. If the political leadership's past legislative attempts to address defections were considered insufficient, the matter should have been remitted to parliament.

The beauty of Pakistan's legislative system is that it requires wide consensus when legislating on constitutional matters. Revisiting the defection laws with the collective wisdom of at least two-thirds of parliament would have yielded a more nuanced updating of Article 63A. Political parties understand the subtleties of domestic politics better than any court does. It should have been left to their judgement to negotiate a way out of this mess.

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Blaming others

BLAMING the nebulous 'foreign hand' for creating trouble within our borders is an age-old method used by the security agencies to shift the responsibility, often for their own lapses, elsewhere. While there may indeed be some truth to these claims, questions arise about what the proper method of addressing them should be, especially if a friendly country is supposedly involved, while we also need to ask ourselves what is fuelling such external hostility towards Pakistan. In the case of the May 12 Saddar blast, officials of Sindh's Counter Terrorism Department told the media that the suspected terrorist responsible for the blast — who was recently killed in an 'encounter' — was trained in Iran. Belonging to the banned Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army, the officials said the militant was financed and trained by Indian intelligence, and that the Iranian authorities were not involved in the anti-Pakistan activities. The claims have been rejected by the Iranian embassy in Pakistan, which said the allegations were made without providing evidence. In the past, other acts of violence within Pakistan have also been linked to India — the Kulbushan Jadhav affair being the most high-profile — as well as to Afghan intelligence before the Taliban took Kabul last year.

If law enforcers have solid evidence linking acts of violence and terrorism to foreign states, this needs to be shared with the capitals concerned through

diplomatic channels instead of being aired publicly, especially when it involves friendly countries. If such sensitive claims are aired in the media, much damage can be done to bilateral ties. The authorities also need to consider why an atmosphere of suspicion should envelop our ties with three neighbours. In the case of India, the mutual antagonism can be traced back decades, while the regime that ran Kabul before the Taliban takeover was also believed to be pro-India. But Pakistan-Iran ties are reasonably cordial. Ideally, along with increasing security internally, Pakistan needs to work on improving ties with its neighbours to help address the root causes of hostility that fuel destabilising activities.

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Spirit of the law

WOMEN'S right to inheritance is often galling for their male relatives in our patriarchal society. However, with cultural practices favouring them in every sphere, men can and do find a way around this 'hurdle' without much difficulty. One tactic is to take advantage of many women's lack of exposure to the world of business and their dependence on male relatives to interpret its fine print for them. Many a woman has thus been duped into signing away her property, only to realise too late that her trust has been betrayed. The Supreme Court has in a recent verdict addressed this loophole by ruling that to deprive an illiterate, purdah-observing woman of her property without professional or independent advice provided to her, or without making her understand the consequences of her action, was not sustainable in law. Consent, therefore, is not worth the paper it is written on until it is given freely with full awareness of its implications, which is how it should be. The case in question involved a gift deed of properties inherited by two sisters, both illiterate and purdah-observing, prepared fraudulently on blank paper through misrepresentation by their brother.

Legal protections do not amount to much without the will to apply them in the true spirit. The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Act, 2011 added Section 498A to the Penal Code to criminalise the act of depriving women of their right to inheritance. Anyone found guilty of this crime is liable to imprisonment of between five to 10 years and/ or a Rs1m fine. The apex court's recent verdict takes into account the lived reality of many women who sign contracts involving their property. Further, it puts the onus of proof where it

belongs — on the individual who enters into a transaction with the purdah-observing or illiterate woman; it is for him “to establish that the said document was executed by her after mindfulness of the transaction”. However, there are other ways that women are deprived of their property. These involve the full spectrum of family and communal pressures, underpinned by archaic notions of honour, to surrender what is theirs, or should rightfully be theirs, in favour of male relatives. Resistance can invite physical violence, even a risk to life. For this to change, society needs to undergo a change in mindset whereby women are not mere appendages to the men in their family, but complete individuals in their own right.

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Marching in May

MORE unrest. That is the forecast for the weeks ahead as the PTI formally proceeds with its planned march on Islamabad.

Just what it ends up accomplishing is anybody’s guess. Simply laying siege to the capital till the government folds up is unlikely to force the desired results — especially not anytime soon. The government will have time on its side, while the PTI will need to find a way to endure days — potentially weeks — of a sweltering early summer without the support of its old financiers or behind-the-scenes benefactors, the latter of whom have been told to ‘stay neutral’ by Imran Khan himself.

The party and its supporters should expect a rigorous test of their endurance as well as their commitment to their leader’s narrative of ‘true independence’.

Some of the government’s allies, like the JUI-F’s Maulana Fazlur Rehman and PPP secretary general Nayer Bokhari, do not feel that there is anything to worry about. They believe the long march is bound to fail because Mr Khan cannot muster the required public support, thanks to his economic policies and governance failures over the past three-odd years.

However, the PML-N senior command does not share that view. Its leaders’ strong reaction to the announcement of PTI’s long march indicates that they are in no mood to let any provocation go unchallenged.

The minister of interior, for one, has made it clear he is more than willing to use force.

He recently stated that he wishes to throw Mr Khan in jail, “to wipe the politics out of him”. He has also threatened to not let protesters leave their homes, much less march on Islamabad, if that is what his government decides.

Such responses, however, will only hurt the PML-N’s democratic credentials.

The PTI is well within its rights to call for a long march and to demonstrate peacefully for however long it wishes to once it reaches Islamabad. The government would be wise to avoid needless confrontation with the PTI and its supporters wherever possible.

At the same time, Mr Khan should take responsibility for ensuring that his party’s activities do not devolve into rioting or the destruction of public property. No measure of discontent with the status quo gives his party or supporters licence to step outside the lines drawn by the laws of this country.

The last time he laid siege to D-Chowk, protesters from his camp had attacked the PTV headquarters and attempted to storm parliament, inviting a violent showdown with police.

The atmosphere this time, too, is quite charged, thanks to the combative rhetoric adopted by Mr Khan in recent jalsas.

As a responsible politician, he will be expected to maintain control of the crowd, ensure that life in the capital is not disturbed, and that no citizen, including his own supporters, is put in harm’s way.

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Policy rate hike

THE State Bank has raised its policy rate by 150bps to 13.75pc, hoping that its latest monetary-tightening action will help moderate demand, improve inflation expectations and contain risks to external stability. The success of the latest decision, however, hinges largely on the government’s willingness to clean up the fiscal mess created by its predecessor and exacerbated by the incumbent’s decision paralysis on the question of reversal of huge price discounts on

transport fuel and electricity bills. The SBP also expects the government to slash non-interest expenditure led by higher subsidies, grants and provincial development spending, as well as revive normal petroleum levy and GST on fuel next year to achieve fiscal consolidation. This should alleviate pressure on inflation, market rates and the external account. That the bank also ditched its 'forward guidance' on interest rates in view of the current uncertainty shows it is now willing to hike the rates in case the government doesn't put its fiscal house in order. Even though the SBP had boosted the rate by 250bps last month, this step failed to curb inflation or to stabilise the external sector due to lax fiscal policies and continuing energy subsidies.

Besides raising the policy rate, the bank has increased the rates for concessionary working capital for exporters and on loans for purchasing machinery to 7pc and 7.5pc to lessen distortions. In future, these rates will be automatically adjusted in line with the policy rate. The warning that the bank will take action against commercial banks charging excessive premium over and above the policy rate on sovereign debt must help rid the government of their leverage over it. The rise in rates, along with the expected fiscal consolidation — including the reversal of energy subsidies — is projected to increase inflation, which has already touched a two-year high of 13.4pc, and slow down growth to 3.5-4.5pc in the next financial year from the 5.9pc estimated for the current fiscal. Nonetheless, deteriorating external stability that has stoked inflation and led to pressure on foreign exchange reserves and the rupee has left the country with no choice but to swallow the bitter pill. These actions are crucial to meeting IMF conditions for the revival of its funding programme, which will pave the way for additional dollar flows from other multilateral and bilateral lenders. It is time the coalition government took its cue from the bank, cast away its decision paralysis and acted to stabilise the economy.

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Questionable campaign

OVER the past couple of days, a number of cases have been registered in different parts of the country against various journalists and anchorpersons. The modus operandi and the contents of the FIRs all point to the fact that the source behind this apparently coordinated campaign is the same. Amongst the

mediapersons who are facing cases is Imran Riaz Khan of Express News; a case has been filed by an individual against the anchor in Thatta on charges of incitement to mutiny, provocation with the aim of causing a riot, etc. The complainant says he had filed the case against Mr Khan after he came across an audio clip on social media in which the mediaperson had allegedly used “hateful and inciting remarks” against state institutions. Multiple cases, mostly in Sindh, have also been filed against ARY’s Arshad Sharif and Sabir Shakir, as well as Bol’s Sami Ibrahim. The contents of the FIRs against Mr Sharif largely match those filed against Mr Khan, while the complainants have accused Mr Sharif of “spreading hate” amongst institutions, particularly the military.

The charges against the mediapersons are very serious and should not be thrown around so frivolously. There are legal procedures in place that can be activated if an organisation or a mediaperson is believed to have breached the law. Campaigns such as these targeting journalists for expressing a certain point of view cannot be condoned and should be abandoned by the powers that be. In fact, the methods employed — using dubious characters in far-flung cities to register cases featuring identical charges — border on the ridiculous. While we may often not agree with the views expressed by the mediapersons in question, this paper defends their right to freedom of speech. In order to promote a genuinely democratic culture in Pakistan, a free media is essential to encouraging rational debate. And in case there are genuine issues of libel, defamation, etc., legal safeguards are in place which can be employed instead of resorting to such orchestrated campaigns.

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Back to bedlam

PTI chairman Imran Khan (L) and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. — DawnNewsTV

FEAR tactics have never worked in the past, and most likely will not this time either. The government’s ill-advised decision to use the state apparatus to intimidate PTI leaders and their supporters on the eve of their march to Islamabad has only worsened political tensions at a time of severely heightened volatility. It is unclear why the PML-N feels unleashing violence will help it regain ground over the resurgent PTI.

After initially signalling it would allow the march to proceed, its policy significantly hardened after a Monday meeting attended by the prime minister and his elder brother from London. The PML-N reportedly decided that an early election would not be 'dictated' by Imran Khan and gave Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah carte blanche to 'deal' with the PTI marchers.

The minister promptly ordered police parties to 'raid' key PTI leaders' homes in the late hours of Monday and make arrests. Videos and pictures of the police action were uploaded to social media, inviting widespread anger and condemnation.

As Tuesday wore on, both the government and the PTI appeared unwilling to take a step back and re-evaluate their stance. Mr Sanaullah, flanked by the government's allies in a press conference, issued a terse defence of the government's heavy-handed actions, stressing that the PTI no longer has permission to march to Islamabad. The denial of PTI's right to protest was premised by the interior minister on clashes that took place between protesters and the police during the 2014 dharna, as well as some PTI leaders' boisterous 'warnings' that there would be a 'bloody' march this time around.

Simultaneously, while addressing his own press conference, Mr Khan was inviting the judiciary and establishment to step in and ensure an early election before the situation worsened any further. He also remained adamant about heading to Islamabad today. He urged his supporters to not be intimidated by the government's tactics, asking how many people the police could realistically arrest.

This is exactly the situation observers feared the country was headed towards as the tussle for power between the government and the PTI grew increasingly bitter. Both sides are equally to blame for this intractable mess.

This government has lost its legitimacy due to its inability to deal with major challenges, inviting public criticism and giving more impetus to the PTI. It now looks desperate to reassert itself as it resorts to using force. Meanwhile, the PTI chief's relentless attack on both state and government has introduced considerable disorder into the system. He is not willing to give an inch, regardless of the cost the country may end up incurring.

With the country's political leadership entangled with each other, the situation does not bode well for the future. Space is rapidly opening for non-democratic forces to intervene. Any such development will be a great loss for us all.

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Balochistan blaze

THE forest fire on the Koh-i-Sulaiman range in Balochistan's Shirani area is among a series of blazes to have erupted in the country in the past few weeks. Though the eruption of such spontaneous fires has become more frequent in recent years, the phenomenon has been especially fierce this season owing to the ongoing record-breaking heatwave. During this month alone, the extremely hot and dry weather has caused fires to erupt in forests in the Musari and Phapreer areas in Murree, Kamalia near Toba Tek Singh and Kahuta. Meanwhile, the Shirani inferno has reportedly consumed around 30pc of the pine nut forest, although with the help of Iran's aerial firefighting efforts, the authorities claim that the blaze has nearly been put out.

Undoubtedly, these fires are a by-product of the larger phenomenon of climate change, that is also responsible for the soaring temperatures being experienced across the country. However, the authorities' tackling of these fires exposes the government's forest management and disaster response systems as underprepared to handle freak climatic events. Balochistan government officials admitted as much when they stated they were caught 'off guard' and 'unprepared' by the 'extremely dangerous' crown fire, which is a blaze that spreads from treetop to treetop. Moreover, the high altitude of the affected forest — between 1,200m and 3,300m — also made it difficult to douse the flames for a number of reasons. A similarly delayed response was witnessed in the case of the recent fires that started on the KP side of the Margalla forest near Abbottabad. This is extremely worrisome, especially since research indicates that such heatwaves will only become more frequent and more intense with time. According to the Global Food Policy Report 2022, heatwaves such as the ongoing one in the country will increase at the shocking rate of 0.71 days per decade in Pakistan. Though Balochistan officials have vowed increased vigilance of forests, that in itself is not enough unless the forest department staff is trained to prevent such incidents and equipped with the requisite gear. Perhaps the

government why 30,000 jobs set aside for non-Muslims were still vacant. And yet, this institutionalised discrimination persists in our society, furthering a majoritarian mindset that then becomes a breeding ground for other problems.

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Dark days

PTI Yasmin Rashid smiles as she drives a car after Punjab police officers break the vehicle's windshield. —PTI official/Twitter

THE chaotic scenes witnessed in major cities yesterday are yet another reminder that political fights should be left to the ballot, not the streets. The PML-N-led government's violent attempts at thwarting the PTI's march on the capital accomplished little more than to add more acridity to the political climate. It had no grounds to forcibly deprive PTI supporters of their right to protest as long as they were being peaceful. Simply repeating that the party was involved in violent incidents in the past was no justification for deploying thousands of security personnel and expending state resources on such a massive scale. Rather, it showed that the government had completely panicked when confronted by the political challenge the march had initially represented.

The PML-N should have perhaps listened to stalwarts from its allied parties when they said there was little threat posed by the long march. It would have allowed it to focus its energies on preventing transgressions of the law if and when they happened.

Instead, the government severely disrupted life in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Faisalabad, Sialkot and parts of Karachi with unnecessary roadblocks and forced suspension of routine activities. Visuals broadcast by news channels early in the afternoon of civilians being beaten up and cars being wrecked by men in plain clothes accompanied by some overzealous policemen in Lahore's Bati Chowk area set the tone for the day. Later, protesters clashed violently with police, resulting in the destruction of private and public property. All this was promptly turned into visual fodder for social media, where it will fuel more resentment against the state.

The PTI, on its part, does not seem to have been prepared to face such a large deployment of state machinery. This shows that it still has much to learn when it

comes to street mobilisation. While its small turnout in Punjab may be explained by the intimidation tactics used by the state, the turnout in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the party faced no challenges, was similarly disappointing.

Mr Khan's claim that he would march with 2m to 3m people ended up falling quite flat, considering that the crowd accompanying him seemed smaller than even some of those seen in his recent jalsas. Perhaps PTI leaders did not realise that a few-hours-long public meeting is one thing and to expect supporters to give up entire days of comfort while risking violence and arrest quite another.

The seeming collapse by Wednesday evening of a Supreme Court-brokered compromise on relocating the site of PTI's sit-in from D-Chowk to another venue was a troubling sign. In defiance of an agreement to move to a park near H-9, angry demonstrators proceeded to D-Chowk anyway. Were they instructed to do so, or are they no longer listening to their leaders? With the system wracked by chaos, there is no knowing what tomorrow will bring.

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No room for dissent

WHILE political turmoil roils the land, a number of incidents over the past few days have demonstrated that though governments may come and go, the state's lack of tolerance for divergent and critical voices remains the same. On Tuesday, a small group of civil society activists in Karachi calling for the recovery of Baloch missing persons was briefly hauled away and detained before being released by the police. The law enforcers apparently moved in after the Sindh government banned rallies and political gatherings in the province under Section 144 to thwart the PTI's Azadi march. While the administration may well have been jittery about the PTI's plans, there was no need to sabotage a small peaceful protest. Similar demonstrations were also held in Balochistan last week. Moreover, PTM MNA Ali Wazir — a lawmaker who is not in the good books of the establishment — remains incarcerated despite having secured bail from the Sindh High Court and the Supreme Court. Mr Wazir has been in detention since December 2020 for allegedly making remarks against state institutions at a rally in Karachi's Sohrab Goth area. As he faces a number of cases, despite the bail orders from the highest court in the land, he has not been released in another case pending bail. Interestingly, production orders were issued for the lawmaker when the no-

confidence motion had been moved against Imran Khan in the National Assembly last month.

The common thread tying the aforementioned incidents is the establishment's unwillingness to tolerate dissent, though it should be mentioned that civilian administrations past and present have been just as intolerant of opposing views. Peaceful protest, as well as lawful criticism of the state, are rights protected by the Constitution and cannot be taken away from citizens. In addition, the administration, particularly the establishment, needs to contemplate the reasons why people have taken to the streets to highlight these issues. Whether it is the case of Baloch missing persons or the PTM's concerns, the state has been dismissive of these grievances, often linking them to an invisible 'foreign hand', instead of constructively engaging with the protesters. Demonstrators must be free to raise a voice for the return of missing persons, while there should be no reason to keep Ali Wazir and other political prisoners behind bars when the Supreme Court has ordered their release. In the longer term, the state needs to address the underlying factors fuelling discontent.

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Harassing passengers

REPORTS of the confiscation of personal items from passengers' private luggage by customs officials at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport defy comprehension. That the officials would not know the difference between commercial imports and private luggage, and, in fact, resort to bragging about the quantity of personal items — such as chocolates and cellphones — confiscated by them is absurd. According to news reports, scores of branded pairs of shoes, over 200 cellphones and more than 100kg of fruit, amongst other items, were seized from the unsuspecting passengers since an order was issued last week to ban the import of 38 luxury and non-essential goods in a bid to stabilise foreign reserves. In some cases, the officials even took away items already in use. One woman, for example, reported that not even a cellphone that she had used for over two years was spared.

Even though Finance Minister Miftah Ismail later clarified via Twitter that the action taken by the customs officials was to check the activities of smugglers who pose as private citizens, it is unlikely that they would not know the difference

between those bringing in banned goods and overseas Pakistanis visiting family or citizens returning after a vacation or business trip. It is also worth asking on what grounds were such measures authorised — measures which amount to harassment of citizens and the violation of their basic rights. The ban on the import of luxury and non-essential items had been imposed by the state to arrest the flight of capital. It makes no sense to seize items brought by citizens who were already outside the country. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm to police the private lives of citizens is part of a time-honoured tradition of our law-enforcement agencies. There are multiple examples where the rights of citizens have been trampled upon on the pretext of national interest or a simplistic understanding of short-term bans. The authorities need to put a stop to this violation of rights at the earliest, while also working on effective ways to nab the real smugglers.

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After the march

FORMER prime minister Imran Khan either ‘ran away’ from Islamabad or made a temporary, strategic retreat. It depends on the political lens one wears when viewing the events of yesterday. Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that there is little that was natural about the sudden and quite belated realisation that struck Mr Khan on Thursday morning. Given the thrust of his recent speeches, full of sound and fury as they were, it was strange to hear him concede that going ahead with the sit-in may “take the nation towards anarchy”. After all, his caravan had proceeded from Swabi to Islamabad, with little regard for the many hurdles erected by the government to stop it along the way. His diehard supporters had braved roadblocks as well as the Islamabad and Punjab police’s liberal use of force that included tear gassing to make the ‘Azadi march’ a reality. Why did the kaptan suddenly feel compelled to declare early? Was it the realisation that the crowd he had expected never really showed up? Or was it something else? A missive, perhaps, from brokers he has been keen to hear from? It is difficult to say.

There were a couple of interesting developments immediately after Mr Khan abruptly departed from Islamabad. The Supreme Court, asked to hold Mr Khan in contempt, instead took quite a magnanimous view of his failure to stick to the

terms of an agreement the august court itself had brokered a day earlier. The government, which had complained sharply of being 'tied up' after the court had first intervened in the matter a day earlier, was understandably miffed. Many have complained in the past that Mr Khan has been shown too much favour by state institutions. That same complaint predictably followed the court's decision yesterday.

Later, the government pushed through important amendments to election and NAB laws through the Lower House. The PPP and JUI-F had previously suggested that an election could be held once these laws were passed. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif subsequently referred to the possibility of an election, inviting Mr Khan to engage in talks but also making it clear that only parliament would decide when the election would be held. This seems like a chance for all to save face. If Mr Khan takes up the offer, both the PTI and the government may just be able to get what they want. It will, however, be up to Mr Khan to take the more difficult step. He has persistently displayed a stubborn unwillingness to resolve any dispute through dialogue and diplomacy. He must realise that this is not how politics works, and certainly not the way to succeed in a modern democracy. He cannot continue to desire the privileges of power but decline their attendant responsibilities. This crisis needs to be resolved soon.

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A tough decision

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif speaks to reporters. —File photo

THE government's decision to raise fuel prices from Thursday night to partially pass on the impact of rising global oil prices to consumers will remove a major hitch in the way of concluding a staff-level agreement with the IMF.

The Fund had on Wednesday refused to revive the \$6bn programme without the removal of the fiscally unsustainable fuel and electricity subsidies and had given Islamabad two days to lift the cap for the continuation of talks.

The government's announcement should now bring Pakistan closer to the revival of the IMF package, which was suspended after the previous PTI government froze energy prices for four months through June to provide relief to the public as

then prime minister Imran Khan attempted to fight off the pressure of the no-confidence threat posed by the opposition.

The hike in fuel prices will significantly increase inflation but will pave the way for the early release of an IMF loan tranche of almost \$1bn, unblock financial assistance from other multilateral and bilateral lenders, shore up foreign exchange reserves, improve the exchange rate and energise the stock market.

In its brief statement at the conclusion of the weeklong negotiations in Doha, which focused on fiscal consolidation including the reversal of fuel and power subsidies and the formation of next year's budget, the IMF had emphasised the "urgency of concrete policy actions ... to achieve programme objectives" and expressed its willingness to continue "its dialogue and close engagement with Pakistan's government on policies to ensure macroeconomic stability".

That the Shehbaz Sharif government, which had been reluctant to enhance fuel prices despite the consistent rise in global oil markets out of fear of a political backlash, has finally decided to lift the price cap shows that it feels politically more confident to take tough and unpopular decisions to tackle the economic crisis.

The decision came on the eve of a six-day ultimatum given by Mr Khan to announce early elections. The increase in fuel prices, however, is only the first step towards saving the economy as both the IMF and State Bank want the government to not only transfer the entire burden of global energy prices to the consumers but also recover the full amount of GST and petroleum levy in the next fiscal year. Once that condition is fully met, chances are that the IMF will enhance funding under the programme and extend the arrangement through June 2023 for fiscal consolidation in the country.

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Xinjiang files

QUESTIONS about the status of the Muslim Uighur people in China's Xinjiang autonomous region often arise, with Beijing usually dismissing such claims of abuse as 'Western propaganda'. However, as a recently leaked trove of documents has highlighted, these allegations cannot be simply brushed under the carpet, and more clarity is needed from China about the Uighurs' welfare.

The documents, dubbed the Xinjiang Police Files, date back to 2017-18 and were reportedly hacked from police servers and delivered to various media outlets, including the BBC. What they detail is simply chilling. For example, as per the documents, police guards were ordered to shoot any 'students' trying to flee internment centres to death if they failed to heed warning shots. Moreover, even sick inmates were reportedly kept in handcuffs and shackles while being administered treatment. The photographs of inmates — ranging from teenagers to senior citizens — that are part of the leak are simply harrowing, showing haunting images, with some inmates in tears.

Similar reports of abuse of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang's internment camps have emerged in the past. While China insists these are 'schools' for combating extremism where 'students' sign up voluntarily, the evidence suggests otherwise. Though it is true that China a few years ago did face a wave of violence in which Uighur separatists indulged in deadly mass knife attacks, Beijing's reaction has been wholly disproportionate. Critics argue that the Chinese state has attempted to wipe out Uighur religious and cultural practices. While the West may indeed have a bone to pick with China in exposing such reported abuses, Beijing needs to look inward and realise that such harsh practices will not inculcate loyalty to the state, and may instead fuel separatist sentiment. In particular, Muslim states, which have largely remained silent on the issue, should use diplomatic channels to communicate their concerns about the Uighurs to China, and ensure that the community's fundamental rights are protected and that they are free to practise their faith and cultural traditions.

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Causing damage

FORMER prime minister Imran Khan's remarks that he called off his protest, not because he had reached a deal but because he feared there would be bloodshed can only be swallowed with a heavy pinch of salt. Speaking at a press conference in Peshawar yesterday, he said he became aware of the "extent of the situation" when he reached Islamabad. "I knew that day there would be violence," he said, claiming that his supporters were "ready" after seeing the "terrorism" of the police. "Everyone was ready to fight," he added. It is true that the police used unnecessary force against PTI activists who were exercising their

right to protest. Such harsh tactics are condemnable. However, political temperatures were already running high when Mr Khan announced his march, and the clashes in Lahore were an indication that things could spiral out of control. Why then did the PTI leader decide to continue to Islamabad?

Indeed, with PTI supporters pouring fuel over trees and setting them ablaze near D-Chowk, the original destination, one can conclude that the possibility of bloodshed was not a last-minute concern. Marchers who set off from Swabi destroyed the green belt on the Islamabad-Peshawar Motorway near the Swabi-Jehangira Road. Many activists had no qualms about cutting off branches to hoist the flags they were carrying. Local authorities say it would take around three months to restore the damage to the green belt. The party leadership should be ready to take action against the miscreants who resorted to violence, arson and the destruction of public property, instead of justifying their actions. For instance, last week, former minister Asad Umar had warned that if an attempt was made to arrest the former prime minister, even he would not be able to control the supporters' reaction. Moreover, Mr Khan in yesterday's press conference once again equated his protest with jihad and said all those who participated were heroes. This indicates that the leadership knew that violence could erupt and that it was possibly some other reason that stopped the march.

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POL price shock

THE petrol price hike announced on Thursday night was inevitable.

Considering the fast-depleting government coffers and the high price of crude globally, the heavy subsidy on petroleum products was unsustainable, haemorrhaging funds as it was from the national treasury. Moreover, removal of the petroleum and electricity subsidies was a key demand of the IMF, without which the multilateral lender would not authorise the release of bailout funds.

However, POL prices, as well as electricity rates, will rise further in the near future, as the subsidy has only been partially reduced, while petroleum levy and GST still need to be applied. Therefore, the shockwaves of these increases will be felt at the fuel pump, and in every sector of the economy. Though the markets

have responded positively to the hike, and the rupee also gained slightly against the dollar, consumers had already begun to feel the pain on Friday.

The POL prices were frozen by the former PTI government as a parting shot and the present administration had little choice but to raise them, though this could have been done incrementally.

Editorial: Buyer's remorse

However, the economic planners of the country must put their heads together and come up with methods to dampen the impact, particularly on the working and middle classes. People are already on tight budgets, and higher fuel prices can well trigger an inflationary storm.

There were reports of some relief measures to soften the impact on the poor, but progressive economic thinking is still needed to tackle the monster of inflation, as hardly any sector of the economy will be shielded from price hikes. Transport, grocery bills, utilities will all rise, while some vendors have already jacked up prices.

The state must look into exactly how much of an impact POL hikes have had on the prices of everyday items, to ensure vendors are not fleecing the public. Price-checking mechanisms — rarely enforced by the state — can be of use in this scenario.

In the longer term, increasing wages and economic and industrial growth are likely solutions to our financial stagnation, as is increasing taxes on the rich and closing legal loopholes for the elite that give them tax breaks. Those who live luxurious lives should pay their fair share, instead of the overtaxed being further taxed, to improve the nation's financial health.

Investing in renewable energy can also help shield the public from the volatility of global oil prices, while creating better public transport facilities can reduce the number of vehicles hitting the country's roads, and consuming more fuel.

While the state bears major responsibility to soften the blow of fuel price hikes, communities must also look at collective solutions to help weather the economic storm. For example, carpooling to work and school can help bring down costs, while working from home is also an option in many cases to keep transport budgets in check.

Changed laws

THERE will be much noise made over bills passed in the last two days by parliament to amend election and National Accountability Bureau laws. Some of the criticism may indeed be legitimate, but the changes that have been made were expected, even inevitable. Consider, for example, the amendments made to the National Accountability Ordinance of 1999. NAB is arguably the most hated federal institution for its long history of unlawful and unjust victimisation of politicians, sometimes even journalists. It has been roundly criticised in the past by the highest court of the land for demonstrating a complete lack of respect for due process and for acting with prejudice. Its failure to properly investigate and prosecute even those cases where evidence might have been plentiful have invited frustration — sometimes from those who support it. The leaders currently in government suffered the worst of NAB's excesses, and it is understandable why they wanted to cut it down to size. However, it would have been much better if this had been done in a more democratic way — with debate, consultation and consensus — rather than through the use of an amendment bill which essentially rewrote the original law. It was the responsibility of the PTI, which had been one of the loudest champions of NAB in recent years, to have made itself part of that process. However, after resigning from the assemblies, its lawmakers left the field empty for the government to do as it may. They are responsible for that.

Likewise, the government's decision to make changes to the election laws (which had been bulldozed by the PTI government last year despite strong protests) must be viewed pragmatically. There were significant challenges in the implementation of overseas voting and the introduction of electronic voting machines which the Election Commission had detailed earlier, but the PTI had ignored. The changes now made to those laws give the ECP room to first trial pilot projects and then use those findings to see how both things can be implemented in the future. It should be noted that without the changes that have just been made, there could be no early elections as the ECP simply did not have enough time to implement the election law amendments legislated by the PTI. Will the PTI challenge them in court, especially if it means foreclosing the possibility of an early election? It will be interesting to see.

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fairly the businesses and industries that have done well over the past few years have contributed to the national kitty.

Over the past year alone, trends in the real estate market and data on sales of automobiles have suggested that a considerable amount of money is circulating in the local economy. Wealth cannot be allowed to continue to pass between the hands of a few as the vast majority of the populace suffers the impact of decisions taken for the former's benefit. It is the surest way to foment even more social and political unrest, which Pakistan cannot afford in times like these. Economic justice has to be done.

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Hockey disappointment

IN the space of about two hours, the disappointment of a narrow 3-2 loss to Japan turned into sheer anguish for the Pakistan hockey team. Umar Bhutta's men had two goals disallowed in Jakarta; had even one of them been counted, the outlook would have been very different. A draw would have secured Pakistan a place in the Super 4s stage of the Asia Cup. Instead, the defeat handed defending champions India the opportunity to decide their arch-rivals' fate. The equation was still favourable for Pakistan. India needed to beat hosts Indonesia by 15 goals to pip Pakistan to runners-up spot in Pool 'A'. As it transpired, India won 16-0 and with a spot at next year's World Cup on offer for the top three finishers at the Asia Cup, Pakistan were out of that race too. It will be the second time in three editions that Pakistan will not feature on the sport's biggest stage. Once the most dominant force in world hockey, Pakistan have also missed the last two editions of the Olympics.

Retired Brig Khalid Sajjad Khokhar has become the first Pakistan Hockey Federation president to have overseen failures to qualify for the World Cup and the Olympics during his six-year tenure. In the aftermath of the Asia Cup, there have been calls for a change at the PHF helm. But any change at the top should not have a trickle-down effect. The national team has shown improvement since Dutchman Siegfried Aikman took over as head coach. Trying to implement modern methods, Mr Aikman, who's been handed an unprecedented five-year contract, has had his run-ins with the country's former Olympians, who he says are obsessed with hockey of a bygone era. It's that obsession which has seen

Pakistan fall behind the world's elite teams, including those in Asia. Mr Aikman is keen on raising a strong national team by improving their fitness levels to compete with the Europeans. It's a rebuilding process that won't happen overnight. For now, he needs to be given time.

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Twisted notions

THERE is a sickening sense of déjà vu about the crime and, even worse, the certainty that this will not be the last time such a heinous act is committed. In fact, this time around there were two women — Pakistani-origin Spanish sisters duped into coming back to their native village in Punjab on the pretext of their mother's ill health. Just a day after they arrived, they were murdered for refusing to go through with an arranged marriage to their cousins, both of whom reportedly have no formal education or jobs. The sisters had been forced to enter into nikah with their cousins a year ago but were adamant they would not process the visas that would enable their husbands to join them in Spain. That act of defiance, the refusal to be treated as chattel to facilitate the ambitions of their extended family, cost the young women their lives — becoming yet another statistic in the shameful chronology of 'honour killings' in the country. The police have arrested six people for the murder, including two of the sisters' own brothers.

The case is reminiscent of the killing of an Italian national, 28-year-old Sana Cheema in 2018, who, it is believed, was also murdered upon her refusal to agree to an arranged marriage and for wanting to, instead, marry her Pakistani-Italian boyfriend in her adopted country. Her father and brother were among three men arrested for the murder, but all were acquitted after a year for 'lack of evidence'. In 2016, British national Samia Shahid was killed when she was tricked into coming to Pakistan to see her critically ill father. Her family was angry with her for having divorced her husband, also her first cousin. At the root of all these murders is of course the very twisted idea that women are the repositories of family honour, without the autonomy and agency to make important decisions about their lives, such as choosing their life partner. That thinking is so ingrained that it refuses to evolve even when their sisters/daughters have been brought up in the West. The law on honour killing was amended in 2016 to ensure that perpetrators cannot evade punishment even if they are 'forgiven' by the victim's

family — which, in a grotesque travesty of justice, is often also their own family. As can be seen in the acquittal of Qandeel Baloch's killer, much more remains to be done.

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Ayodhya's ghosts

The Babri Masjid in India's Ayodhya being demolished by Hindutva supporters in 1992. — AFP/File

THE demolition of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid in 1992 was an epochal moment in the post-independence history of India. As the frenzied mobs of Hindu hard-liners reduced the mediaeval mosque to rubble, based on the belief that it had been built atop the birthplace of Hindu deity Ram, their actions also dealt a severe blow to Indian claims of secularism.

In fact, the Babri incident announced the raucous arrival of the Sangh Parivar onto India's national stage, perhaps the beginning of a journey that would one day culminate with an adherent of Hindutva in India's driving seat.

Examine: What the Supreme Court's Ayodhya judgment means for the future of the Republic of India

However, what is troubling is that the ghosts of Ayodhya seem to have been revived, as a renewed movement against several historical mosques and Muslim monuments has begun to gain momentum in India.

In the Hindu holy city of Varanasi, formerly Banaras, tension surrounds the Gyanvapi mosque, as a group of women have claimed the image of a deity can be seen on one of the masjid's walls. Moreover, a shivling has reportedly been discovered in the ablution pond, leading to a court order calling for the sealing of the ablution area.

In Mathura, a court application has been filed calling for a ban on azan at the Shahi Idgah as, according to some Hindu groups, the sanctum sanctorum of a temple dedicated to Krishna is located inside the mosque. One of the suits has been filed on behalf of Shri Krishna.

Meanwhile in Delhi, Hindu extremists are targeting the historical Qutub Complex containing the Qutub Minar, calling for temples demolished by Qutbuddin Aibak in the 12th century to be rebuilt.

The atmosphere in India regarding these historical disputes can be gauged by the fact that a non-Muslim Delhi University history professor was arrested after he questioned the authenticity of the Gyanvapi mosque shivling claims online.

Unfortunately, in their quest to rewrite history, Hindu fundamentalists in India are stoking the fires of communal enmity. Their attempt to mix history, religion and politics creates an incendiary situation that can have far-reaching consequences for communal peace.

While indeed Muslim kings and sultans did demolish temples, should the Muslim citizens of modern India be made to pay for their actions? Moreover, there is a sufficient body of evidence that suggests that Hindu rajas also targeted temples patronised by rivals, while also attacking Buddhist and Jain places of worship.

Clearly, the Sangh Parivar's moves are not about religious freedom or access to places of worship. Rather, they are part of a systematic attempt to erase India's Islamic history, and permanently marginalise its Muslim population. Instead of learning from history and creating a society in which different races and religions can coexist, India's extremists are trying to gain political capital from stirring up religious hatreds of the past.

While India's current rulers are very much wedded to Hindutva, civil society needs to speak up before this madness spreads.

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Wheat imports

THAT the lowest price the Trading Corporation of Pakistan, which is out to purchase half a million tonnes of wheat from the international market to partially plug the supply-demand gap, has been quoted at \$515.49 a tonne (including cost and freight) confirms fears that wheat imports will burn a large hole in our widening trade deficit. Already, during the first 10 months of the current fiscal, the deficit has jumped by 65pc to \$39.3bn, on the back of a 46.5pc increase in imports to \$65.5bn from a year ago. The price offered to TCP is almost 45pc

higher than the October 2021 rates. It is billed to spike further due to lower output in most wheat-growing regions, supply chain disruptions on account of the Russia-Ukraine war, and export restrictions imposed by major exporters like India. Even at current prices, Pakistan requires over \$1.5bn to cover its supply shortfall. The TCP is reported to still not have made purchases. But how long can Pakistan delay imports? Even though the authorities have decided to buy 2m tonnes from Russia on a government-to-government basis, the plan faces many hitches due to the Western sanctions against Moscow, with the exclusion of that country from the global payment system being the biggest issue. So much for that plan for now.

The estimated supply gap for the current marketing year is 3m tonnes, owing to a lower targeted wheat harvest of 26.9m tonnes this season as against the annual demand of 30.8m tonnes. The shortfall is due to warmer than usual weather, water scarcity, and the high price of fertiliser that is in short supply. The situation is said to have been complicated by speculators who are likely to hoard their wheat stocks to rig profits when and if domestic shortages become pronounced. The unchecked flour smuggling into Afghanistan, because of the massive gap between local and international prices, means that imports may surpass earlier estimates, exacerbating the problems of a dollar-starved government. The looming wheat shortages had become visible as early as February, when the government confirmed that the area under wheat cultivation had dropped by 2.2pc from the previous year and existing stocks had declined. The government announced at that time that it would import 2m tonnes of grain from Russia to shore up strategic stocks in anticipation of a lower output. However, no time frame was defined and the country will have to pay a higher price for that.

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A moment of joy

IN the midst of a torrid summer, with the political temperature spiking and dark clouds gathering on the economic horizon, comes news to send one's spirits soaring — the phenomenal success of Joyland at the Cannes Film Festival. Pakistan's first ever entry to the prestigious event and director Saim Sadiq's debut film, Joyland has won the jury prize in the Un Certain Regard category, in which are nominated movies with unusual styles or 'non-traditional' content. It also bagged the Queer Palm, an independently sponsored prize for best LGBT,

queer or feminist-themed film at Cannes. The global recognition is a moment of pride for all Pakistanis, especially for filmmakers who have to contend with formidable hurdles to bring their endeavours to fruition, even more so if they tackle social taboos. And the story of Joyland, about a married man in love with a transgender dancer, is nothing if not subversive. Though one suspects such encounters are far from uncommon, in today's Pakistan where moral policing appears to be a national pastime and censoriousness a virtue, bringing such stories to life requires grit and determination. The Joyland team clearly has that, and judging by the awards, oodles of talent as well.

It is not inconceivable that despite this triumph on the global stage, the movie may not get a public viewing at home. One hopes, nevertheless, that the many international accolades that Joyland is garnering will encourage the authorities to screen the film locally. For the ultra-right, that tasted 'victory' in the case of Sarmad Khoosat's Zindagi Tamasha by threatening public protests if the film was released, this may once again be a chance to prove its credentials as a pressure group. That movie, which challenges stereotypes particularly dear to the religious lobby, has been subjected to entirely unjustified bans and delays — including a request by the authorities to the Council of Islamic Ideology to review it. The film has yet to premiere in local cinemas. It is high time the authorities showed some spine instead of caving in to regressive elements.

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Talking to TTP

AN indefinite extension of the ceasefire between the government and the banned TTP has once again refocused attention on the status of negotiations between the state and the terrorists.

After years of battling the banned TTP, the state had reopened channels of communication with the TTP, facilitated by the Afghan Taliban. However, if we review the reported demands of the militants, it is easy to understand why a UNSC report has termed prospects of peace between the TTP and the state of Pakistan "bleak".

Simply put, if the demands were to be met, it would amount to a surrender of the state's authority over parts of the erstwhile tribal belt where the militants are active.

Among the TTP's demands are withdrawal of troops from the former Fata area, reversal of the merger of the tribal areas with KP as well as the enforcement of their version of Sharia through the Nizam-i-Adl regulation in Malakand. In fact, some high-ranking militants have reportedly already been released as a gesture of peace.

However, militant groups should not be allowed to dictate to the state where security forces can and cannot go. Moreover, the merger of Fata and KP in 2018 came about as part of a constitutional process, and cannot be undone to accommodate the TTP's whims. As for the enforcement of Sharia in the region, a similar experiment was tried in 2009, and fell through very soon, with the military having to move in to quell a rebellion instigated by the terrorists.

Considering this chequered history, prospects of a durable peace with the militants are bleak, unless the TTP promises to renounce violence and join the mainstream and respect constitutional norms.

The state is confronted with a dilemma as with the fall of the US-backed regime in Afghanistan last year, the TTP now has friends and protectors in the shape of the Taliban rulers of Kabul. As the UN report points out, there are up to 4,000 TTP fighters holed up in provinces bordering Pakistan, while another estimate states that this year alone, the TTP has carried out over 40 attacks in the country, resulting in nearly 80 deaths.

The problem with negotiating with extremist groups is that they will seldom stick to their word, as history shows, and will return to violence on the slightest pretext. Moreover, even if the militant leadership commits to peace, there is no guarantee that others within the organisation will also honour their pledges. Again, we have seen this happen in the past as splinter groups have branched out to continue to fight.

We must also ask if the state is willing to forgive a group that has the blood of thousands of citizens on its hands. Confronted with these inconvenient realities, the state needs to handle the negotiations with care, and ensure that any peace deal respects the Constitution and the democratic process.

Abducted citizens

IT is a bold step; one that seems intended to force a much-needed breakthrough on an issue that has remained a persistent blot on Pakistan's civil rights record. The Islamabad High Court has ordered the issuance of notices to every chief executive to have presided over government — from the era of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf to the incumbent, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. They have been asked to either satisfactorily explain their “tacit approval” of the state's “undeclared policy” of disappearing citizens, or face the charge of high treason for knowingly allowing the subversion of civil rights laid out in the Constitution. IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah has also castigated the National Assembly for not doing enough to fulfil their constitutional obligations, as well as the media for not being persistent in highlighting the issue proactively.

The IHC chief justice is no doubt well aware which organ of the state is actually responsible for the policy in question. His decision to also hold the country's rulers directly responsible seems to be a considered move to apply pressure on them to refuse in the future any support, tacit or otherwise, to powerful factions who operate from the shadows. It is necessary for the leadership to take a firm stance. A report submitted to the IHC on the performance of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances earlier this year had made clear that efforts to recover missing persons had yielded only modest results, with the commission sometimes unable to recover even those missing persons whose production orders had been issued by the courts. There can be no justification for disappearing any citizen by force, no matter how severe their crime. Those who favour and justify this policy claim it is sometimes the only way to check militancy and terrorism, when, in fact, it represents major failures on their part in preempting, investigating and prosecuting these crimes through the existing legal system. These failures only help sustain a vicious cycle of distrust: enforced disappearances cause more pain, more frustration and deeper feelings of alienation in marginalised communities, which in turn gives them greater cause to support activities antagonistic to the state. Balochistan, whose people face the highest incidence of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, remains difficult to govern as the state has failed to win the hearts and minds of its citizens due to its flawed policies. It is time to reset the strategy.

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Tackling polio resurgence

The emergence of as many as six polio cases since April in North Waziristan district, after a hiatus of 15 months, has poured cold water over hopes of Pakistan being, in the words of Unicef officials, “closest to the finish line”. While the cases in themselves are cause for alarm, they also reflect the damaging impact Covid-19 has had on routine and targeted vaccination campaigns against a number of infectious diseases, including polio. Moreover, the strong resurgence of the virus in a high-risk area also indicates that several systemic issues have persisted, despite efforts to correct them. It appears that Pakistan’s robust handling of the pandemic came at a high cost to anti-polio efforts. Some experts say that significantly fewer vaccination campaigns, and the use of the polio infrastructure for Covid-19 reporting, led to reduced vigilance in high-risk polio areas, including North Waziristan.

The gaps in vigilance are evident in the fact that all six children who have contracted polio in North Waziristan were unvaccinated, despite official efforts to improve immunisation coverage. Then there are also reports that the polio workers were deceived by the ink markings applied on the children’s fingers, presumably by their parents who were pretending the vaccine had already been administered to their offspring. This should give sleepless nights to the national polio managers for two reasons. Resistance to anti-polio efforts in the form of refusals or violence is already a long-standing issue, even in pockets of large cities such as Rawalpindi and Karachi. And efforts to mislead vaccinators could also be prevalent in other parts of the country. It is in this context that Pakistan’s polio managers were, earlier in the year, warned by the WHO to not become complacent in immunisation efforts since the absence of active cases could not be read as eradication of the polio virus from the country. Hence, the resurgence in cases should be viewed with a true understanding of the realities and tackled firmly, in accordance with the advice of international health bodies.

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