

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of October 2020*

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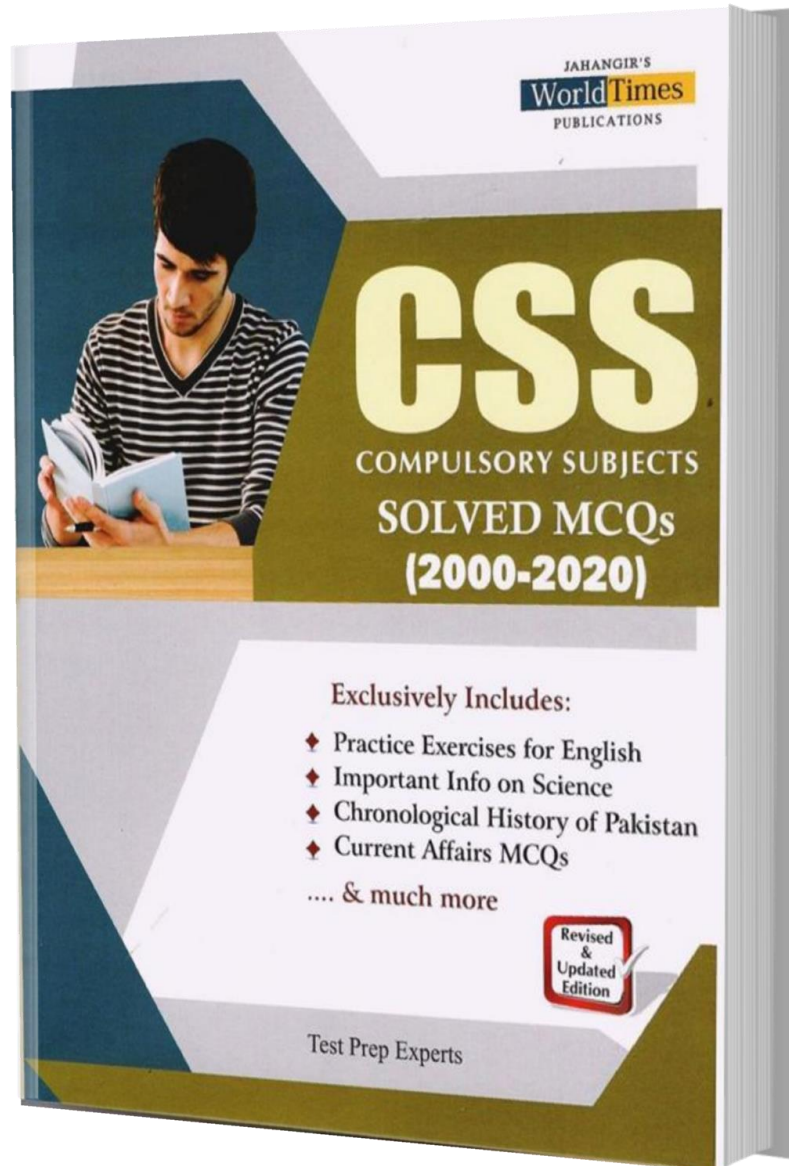
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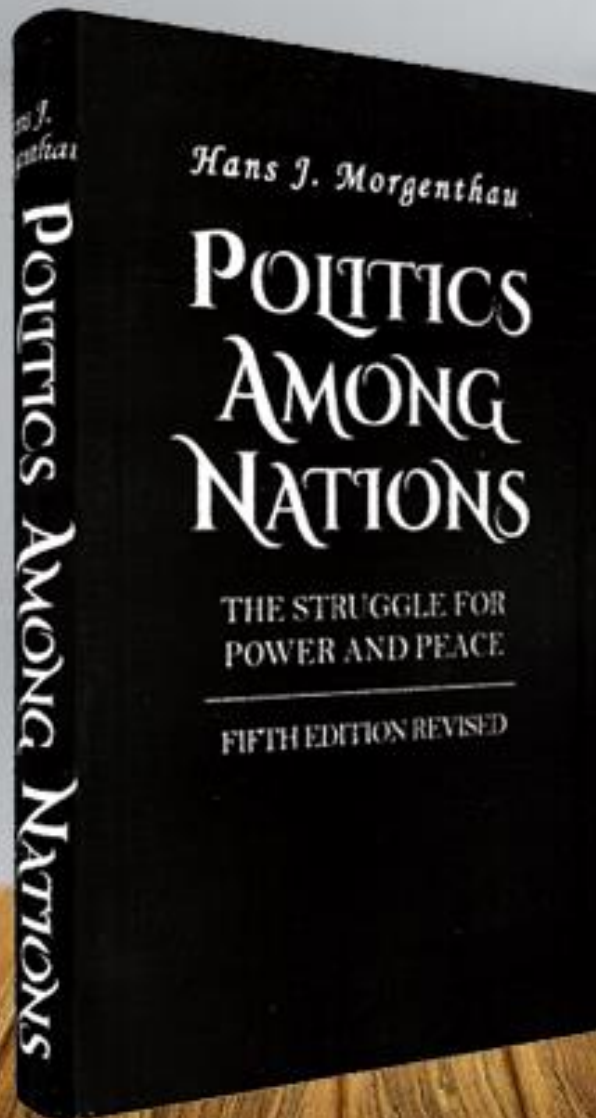
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# The Afghan promise

A GENTLEMAN by the name of Abdullah Abdullah arriving at the head of a delegation to Pakistan raised a promise whose fulfillment appears a little more realistic now. The chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation is not exactly known for having a soft corner for Pakistan. The third day into meetings between the team from Kabul and officials in Islamabad and the two countries are now looking to change the way they have been dealing with each other. What we are talking about here is transformation in how interests are viewed and in perceptions deliberately nursed over time, until they not only enslaved official policymakers but also impeded exchanges at the people's level. Mr Abdullah, a long-time vocal critic of Pakistan's alleged help for Taliban militants, cut through the suspicion and doubts that have piled up over the past. "After many troubling years, we now need to go beyond the usual stale rhetoric and shadowy conspiracy theories that have held us back." Finally, the Afghan emissary for peace says he can hear the people demand a fresh approach.

As Mr Abdullah came up with these encouraging words at an event in Islamabad on Tuesday, his sentiment was reciprocated by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and later by Prime Minister Imran Khan — adding to expectations at a crucial moment of the Afghan peace process. The increase in militant activity in Afghanistan has been a source of serious concern when meetings have been going on in Qatar to find a lasting solution to the woes of a land that has unfortunately been the subject of all kind of power intrigues and bloody schemes, often involving international players. Pakistan has been quite central to the effort for restoration of peace, which will ultimately free the US of its long foreign military involvement. With history on its side, Islamabad warns against haste and calls for gradual withdrawal, just as it has repeatedly brought up the issue of cross-border attacks on its security posts.

These allegations could at last be a thing of the past if the two sides are able to live up to Mr Qureshi's vow of building a "common future". Pakistan's foreign minister sees new realities and it may be presumed that this recently acquired awareness will free both countries from the old formula where one of them had to play the master to the other. Mr Abdullah wants no terror footprint in his country and Mr Qureshi declares Pakistan has no favourites in Afghanistan. All we need

now is for these lines to be backed by action of a kind that will play a most significant part in the success of the US-sponsored peace talks currently on in Doha. Not least importantly, they will define the relationship between two countries that could actually do with a new, peaceful chapter in coexistence.

## Amnesty India

THE forces of darkness in India grow more menacing by the day as all remaining checks on their depredations are methodically dismantled by the state. Amnesty International has announced it is suspending its operations in that country after its bank accounts were frozen last month by the Indian government as part of what the organisation described as an “incessant witch-hunt” against rights groups.

For its part, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government accuses the organisation of being involved in the illegal transfer of large amounts of money from its UK operation to India. Amnesty India has denied the claims of financial misconduct and vowed to challenge the freezing of its accounts through the courts. In a blunt statement, Amnesty India’s executive director said that “Treating human rights groups like criminal enterprises and dissenting individuals as criminals without any credible evidence is a deliberate attempt... to stoke a climate of fear”.

Judging by the increasingly fascist trends in India, it is certainly not coincidental that the last roadblock created in the way of Amnesty’s work follows on the heels of two reports by the organisation that were highly critical of the government’s human rights record. One pertained to violations by security forces in India-held Kashmir and the other to police conduct during recent sectarian rioting in New Delhi.

Our neighbour to the right has always exhibited a certain disdain for international human rights organisations. That disdain has grown into paranoia and outright hostility as the Modi government has sought to strip the country of its pluralistic character and give it an undeniably saffron stamp. Even egregious crimes such as the gang rape of a Muslim shepherd girl by Hindu men in Jharkhand a couple of years ago acquired a communal colour rather than evoking across-the-board revulsion. Shrill right-wing jingoism is now part of the dominant discourse in India and dissent is increasingly fraught with peril.

Critics of the government, including journalists, activists, lawyers, etc, are subjected to investigation and detention, often under harsh anti-terrorism laws. Modi's illegal annexation of Kashmir and the miseries heaped on its beleaguered populace have gone hand in hand with the state's efforts to bring down a veil of secrecy over its excesses. Foreign diplomats have faced extraordinary resistance to travelling freely in IJK to gauge the situation for themselves. Day by day, India's claim of being a democracy, let alone the world's largest, is becoming fatally compromised.

## **Film museums**

THE KP government's decision to acquire the ancestral homes of Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor and turn them into museums is welcome news indeed. Both personalities are unequivocally two of Bollywood's greatest legends, and people on either side of the Indo-Pak border take pride in their cultural association with these names. Incidentally, Bollywood stars Madhubala, Prithvi Raj Kapoor and Vinod Khanna were also born in Peshawar. Though the provincial government's decision is stated to be part of its larger Peshawar Revival Plan, attempts have also been made by previous governments to acquire these sites.

Both buildings, situated near the famous Qissa Khwani Bazaar, are in a dilapidated state and faced with an imminent threat of demolition. In fact, the Kapoor Haveli suffered considerable damage in 2016 during a demolition attempt by its current owner. Thankfully, the provincial archaeology directorate had intervened and pulled the plug on the operation. On the other hand, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif had declared the Kumar home a national heritage site in 2014. A dispute over the price had prevented the then KP government from acquiring the property, but it did succeed in declaring the house a protected antiquity to stop the owner from making any structural changes to it. This time, however, the provincial government intends to bypass the owners and use in its favour the Land Acquisition Act, 1894, which allows the state to take over private land for public use. One hopes this decision will help restore Peshawar's cultural hustle and bustle that faded in the years following 9/11. News reports indicate the KP government also plans to acquire the birth home of current Bollywood giant Shahrukh Khan, also in the same Qissa Khwani neighbourhood, and turn the area of these three ancestral houses into a large museum space dedicated to the subcontinent's rich film industry. If the KP government succeeds in executing this

commendable plan, it will provide a golden opportunity to boost tourism and, by association, the country's film industry.

## **Foreign funding saga**

THE Election Commission of Pakistan held another hearing on the political parties' foreign funding case on Thursday, and gave yet another date for yet another hearing. This time the hearing pertained to the PML-N and PPP, but the longest running case is that of the ruling PTI that has continued for nearly six years without any conclusion in sight. The scrutiny committee appointed by the ECP to probe allegations of undisclosed foreign funding of the PTI has also been dragging its feet. It had submitted a report to the ECP which was found unsatisfactory. The committee was given six weeks to submit a more solid report. This time frame expires in another two weeks.

The laws about foreign funding for parties are fairly clear. All funding must be transparent, above board and accounted for. All parties, not just the bigger ones, must provide complete documentation of their funding to ensure that dubious and illegal money is not being invested into these parties, thereby injecting corruption into an already weak democratic edifice. In this respect, the PTI as the ruling party has a major responsibility to set an example by providing all details required by the ECP and answer all allegations made against it. The case against the PML-N and PPP also merits equal attention though the timing does raise eyebrows when it coincides conveniently with NAB's flawed accountability process that focuses overwhelmingly on the opposition. These parties have much to answer for given the heavy amounts of money they spend on electoral activities. Mature democracies have stringent campaign funding laws aimed at ensuring that all funds spent by political parties are legal and within a limit that cannot be construed as buying overwhelming influence over the party.

It is in this context that the ECP should use its powers to make political parties accountable for all sources of funding, with special focus on money coming from foreign sources. However, the ECP's track record so far leaves much to be desired. These important cases have been allowed to drag on endlessly giving rise to a perception that the ECP is taking a lenient view towards the issue. This must change. Six years is more than enough for the PTI case to reach a final conclusion. The last chief election commissioner had ordered daily hearings of



this case; it began facing habitual delays once he left office. The ECP must now move swiftly to conclude all these cases and make decisions that force these and other political parties to open up their ledger books and account for every rupee received. If we want to strengthen democracy and reform the structure of our political parties, this is a key step in that direction. The ECP must do its job without delay.

## **Emergency helpline**

THE gang rape of a woman on the Lahore motorway has exposed many a weakness in administration and policing. What is most unfortunate is that, after her car broke down, the victim rang several helplines to get assistance for her vehicle, but because of a lack of coordination and a lethargic response, help came too late. The episode begs the following question: what is a citizen to do in an emergency situation, such as during a robbery or a medical crisis at home? That the episode has compelled the government to formulate a national emergency helpline is welcome news — and a step that requires careful thought and spadework. It is a shame that citizens do not have an easy way of reaching emergency services in moments of crisis, and that they need to know the ins and outs of a labyrinthine system of public services with different jurisdictions and mandates to navigate an already fraught situation.

There are several successful models around the world that can be studied and adapted to create a singular national helpline in Pakistan. Several aspects must be considered and different requirements identified; a coherent plan would need to be drawn up for each of those requirements to be met; cost, expenditure and income streams must be considered, as well as staffing, technical resources and contingency plans. One example of a successful coordination effort is the National Command and Operation Centre that is dealing with the coronavirus pandemic in the country. However, given the perennially difficult relationship between the provincial and federal governments, will this project become a reality? The success of such an endeavour is contingent upon the cooperation of different entities and public bodies. With services unevenly distributed across the country, the challenges are indeed daunting. Sindh still does not have a Rescue 1122 service, and service distribution between urban-rural areas is also patchy. An effort of this magnitude must first begin with provinces consolidating their resources internally. The ultimate goal should be to provide citizens with the best

and fastest support available in their area, and doing so in a coordinated way can also help identify which areas need further development. The provincial and federal authorities should rise to the challenge and approach this by putting aside their differences. This is a serious national priority. Citizens in distress should not be forced to run from pillar to post to request help.

## **Space for student politics**

ONCE again, this time in a meeting of the subcommittee of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Federal Education held on Wednesday, the question of restoring student unions has been raised. Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood reiterated the stance expressed by Prime Minister Imran Khan last December in support of reviving these representative bodies, following student solidarity marches organised in cities across the country, with the caveat that care must be taken to draft a "comprehensive and enforceable code of conduct" under which they should operate. The pace at which the issue has so far been deliberated on, however, has not indicated much enthusiasm judging by the mixed responses of the MNAs as well as earlier statements by other policymakers — such as the HEC, which in January expressed its opposition to such a move. Nonetheless, it appears that a consensus may finally be forming.

Now, the subcommittee members have decided to hold meetings with university vice chancellors to glean their input. This indeed appears to be the next logical step if one is to get a clearer picture of the need for and expedience of campus politics. No less valuable, however, is the insight of those student organisers who have been advocating on lifting the ban on student unions. The reality is that practically every political party has a student or youth wing active on campus. But a common misconception is to equate these with genuine elected representative bodies — which can help the youth channel their civic and political impulses responsibly and productively — the absence of which has created a vacuum that has given rise to illegitimate activities, including violence. Given how the pandemic has upended so much of the education sector, it is even more urgent that students are able to effectively raise their voices and express demands through democratic forums. An inclusive framework for student unions, based on meaningful consultations with all stakeholders (including students), must be devised soon to allow room for healthy debate on issues important to our youth.

# **Babri acquittals**

THE recent verdict in which a federal Indian court has absolved some of the top guns of the ruling BJP of any involvement in the 1992 destruction of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid is extremely disturbing, though not unexpected.

Much before the Mughal-era mosque was brought down by a Hindu mob in a violent, vulgar display of majoritarian power, the BJP had been calling for the mosque to be replaced by a Ram mandir. In 1992, the Hindu far right got its wish as the mosque was soon turned to rubble as zealots razed it, while earlier this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundations for the mandir as all legal hurdles standing in its way were cleared.

The latest court decision only strengthens perceptions that under the BJP's watch even the judiciary does not have the resolve to call out the forces of Hindutva.

Clichéd as it may sound, the Babri Masjid demolition was actually the beginning of the end of Indian secularism, with the Nehruvian dream replaced by the nightmarish vision of the Sangh Parivar where all those falling outside the ideological fold — particularly Muslims — were relegated to the margins of national life. Going back to the latest verdict, the acquittal of L.K. Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi and other leading lights of the Sangh Parivar flies in the face of justice.

The Lucknow court said there was no conspiracy to demolish the mosque. However, in 1990, Mr Advani had launched an infamous 'yatra' "to seek legitimacy for the Mandir movement," indicating that destruction of the masjid was very much on the Hindutva agenda. Moreover, a former judge who had headed a commission that investigated the Ayodhya debacle for 17 years said that there was "ample evidence" linking the aforementioned leaders to the crime.

However, facts matter little in the Sangh Parivar's scheme of things; brute force, distorted history and violence are the tools the shock troops of Hindutva use to silence all opposition. Even state institutions seem to be afraid of speaking the truth. Last year, the Indian supreme court had paved the way for a Hindutva victory while allowing a temple to be built at the Babri site, and calling for an "alternative site" to be given to Muslims for a mosque.

The Babri destruction was a harbinger of much darker things to come. Today's India, where Muslims are lynched on suspicions of consuming beef, where the community is asked to prove its citizenship or be prepared to be disenfranchised, and where the Indian military machine punishes the people of held Kashmir with great barbarity, is in fact a country fashioned by those who were instrumental in bringing down the mosque. If the country continues on this grim trajectory, very soon Muslims and other minorities may be transformed into a permanent underclass and denied all fundamental rights.

## Pressure on judges

DISPENSING justice in this country can be a hazardous job. The challenge assumes greater importance at a time when a large number of high-profile cases are pending in the courts and the opposition leaders are prone to issuing frequent reminders of the merits of having a free judiciary. Indeed, this is a matter that needs to be highlighted and it is a positive sign that some members of the superior judiciary are willing to talk candidly about the pressure they have had to face while hearing significant cases. The other day, the top judge of the Islamabad High Court, Justice Athar Minallah, spoke at a webinar about the pressures a judge is exposed to while hearing cases. In connection with a specific case regarding a political personality, Justice Minallah described how a man used social media to allege wrongdoing on part of the judge. It was such a comprehensive story that "those who did not know me would have been justified in believing" it, he asserted. In another instance, he narrated how his own wife, on account of some unscrupulous social media operators, felt compelled to call and confirm that the honourable judge was indeed in Cape Town where he had gone to attend a meeting.

It is an open secret that at the lower level, the pressure on judges exists in an even cruder form on a daily basis. Threats are routinely hurled by those who believe they have been given the short end of the stick by the courts — in addition to the real danger that is ever-present. Of late, the alarming trend of educated lawyers attempting to put 'non-cooperative' judicial officers 'on trial', with the scenes captured on mobile phones, has painted today's judges as mere shadows of the past commanding figures. Justice Minallah's formula is straightforward. For judges to be independent, they must be able to decide "on the basis of facts and in accordance with the law, without any restrictions,

improper influences, inducements, pressures, threats or interference, direct or indirect from any quarter or for any reason". At this crucial moment in history, when sensitive questions are being asked about institutions that are central to building the foundations of a fair and durable system for the people of Pakistan, freeing the judiciary from threats and inducements is an essential topic of debate. Others must join those who want to take this discussion to its logical conclusion.

## **Increased medicine prices**

THE government has been widely censured for allowing pharmaceutical companies to increase prices of 94 life-saving drugs by up to 260pc a few days ago. The criticism isn't without justification. A report in this newspaper has quoted some patients as saying that they've either reduced their daily dose of medicines prescribed by their physicians or have been forced to discontinue the treatment altogether as prices shoot up, even though the government has yet to notify the new rates. Could anything be more disturbing than to see people stop treatment of serious ailments, even if it means serious health complications for them and difficulties for their families? Some medical practitioners have gone so far as to accuse the government of giving in to the blackmailing tactics of the pharmaceutical industry. Others have questioned the wisdom of allowing such a hefty increase, claiming that the price of raw material has come down substantially. Still others want the government to look into allegations of transfer pricing by the industry, which lets it move significant parts of its earnings to principals as cost of raw material.

The government's claim that it has allowed the price increase under the 'hardship category' as per the Drugs Pricing Policy of 2018 to end the shortages of several medicines in the market (which forces patients to buy expensive imported alternatives) cannot be disputed. It is also a fact that drug manufacturing is a business for investors; if they don't earn good returns on their investment they will pull their money out and invest in some other business. However, it is the job of the policymakers to find a way to strike a balance between the interests of the pharmaceutical industry and those in need of medication. One solution could be to help the industry bring down its cost of doing business to hold down drug prices. The other could be opening up the market for generic drugs in order to provide cheaper but good-quality medicines to those from the low- and middle-income segments.



## **Feuding politicians**

WITH political temperatures soaring and opposition parties all set to kick off their public engagement campaign in a few days, Pakistan's political landscape appears to be sliding back towards confrontation and conflict. PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif has upped the ante by delivering three back-to-back speeches criticising the security establishment for its involvement in politics. Prime Minister Imran Khan has retaliated by accusing Mr Sharif of serving Indian interests by critiquing the military. Members of the government and opposition have intensified mutual accusations and the streets may soon be witnessing heated political activity in what is threatening to be a zero-sum game.

Nawaz Sharif has raised some important points. His reference to the establishment's direct and indirect involvement in politics for decades is nothing new. This is common knowledge and well-documented. What is new is a major political leader saying so publicly and emphatically. Mr Sharif may have his own reasons for raising this matter at this stage, but the fact is that the establishment's role in politics has weakened Pakistan's democratic structures and made it harder for political parties to grow and mature. It was hoped that with time Pakistan's weak democratic institutions would grow in strength and confidence. However, the dilution of political power gained from the electorate has made these parties even more dependent on the establishment. Mr Sharif may have a personal angle in his anti-establishment positioning, but what he says must be given the weightage it deserves. The government is doing no service to democracy by responding to Mr Sharif's critique with slander. By now, our politicians should have learnt from their mistakes and realised that calling each other 'traitor' and 'Indian agent' damages the system's credibility, undercuts the effectiveness of political dialogue and shrinks the space for a viable working relationship inside and outside parliament. The PML-N and PPP had resorted to such mudslinging in the 1990s and had learnt the hard way; in the end they were net losers. The PTI has to climb a steep learning curve if it wants to traverse this distance.

The opposition parties have a right to protest on the streets as long as these rallies do not disturb law and order. However, if Mr Sharif really wants to show that he believes in the supremacy of the law, he must return to Pakistan and face the requirements of the law. He may have all the right things to say while sitting

in London, but his words lose efficacy if he remains a fugitive. In the same vein, Prime Minister Imran Khan should ensure that his government does not resort to high-handed tactics against the protesting opposition. Saner minds must prevail. All concerned need to think beyond their personal and political interests and make sure the system is not put at stake. The establishment too should step back and maintain a distance from politics.

## **Macron's views**

OVER the past two decades, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 episode, there has been a flurry of political, intellectual and academic activity to try and make sense of the relationship between Islam and the West. Though this is not a monolithic, monochrome relationship and has a variety of shades, the actions of individuals acting in the name of Islam and perpetrating acts of terror in the West have fuelled the debate. French President Emmanuel Macron weighed in with his two cents on this sensitive issue while speaking in a town outside Paris on Friday. He was of the opinion that Islam is a “religion in crisis” across the world, while bemoaning French Muslims’ apparent lack of assimilation in the host country’s society. He talked of “Islamic separatism” and alleged that plans were afoot to create a “counter-society”. Interestingly, Mr Macron also pointed out that the problem of radicalisation was partly due to “ghettoisation”, in a reference to Muslim populations concentrated in French banlieues.

There is indeed a problem with radicalised Muslims who — swayed by atavistic ideologies — have perpetrated acts of violence in the Muslim world and beyond. However, the French president’s tone seemed to be heavily weighed down by the white man’s burden and the need to ‘fix’ Muslims and their faith. Radicalisation is a fairly modern phenomenon and has largely been fuelled by political and socioeconomic factors. While there can be no justification for violence, Western leaders often smugly lecture the Islamic world while ignoring their own role in creating and supporting the jihadi infrastructure, whether in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, or more recently in Syria in an effort to dislodge Bashar al-Assad. In fact, France itself has been responsible for horrific crimes during its colonial occupation of Algeria; Paris has yet to apologise for these grim deeds despite an Algerian demand to do so. Indeed, the descendants of formerly colonised peoples often face difficulty integrating into Western societies due to the latent racism that lies not too far from the surface. And while local laws must

be respected, preventing Muslims from expressing their religion, by banning the hijab, or fanning efforts in Europe to outlaw halal meat, sends the message that Muslims will only be accepted if they abandon their spiritual practices. Instead of lecturing Muslims, Western leaders need to show empathy, create opportunities and open avenues of dialogue with their Muslim populations to create national harmony.

## **Strange ‘solidarity’**

THE PPP’s decision to hold a ‘Karachi Solidarity Rally’, even as its administration implements mini smart lockdowns in various parts of the city to curb the spread of Covid-19, is strange to say the least. This tit-for-tat rally, to be held today, is in response to an MQM-P demonstration held on Sept 25 that called for a ‘South Sindh province’ comprising Sindh’s urban areas. Meanwhile, in a separate rally held on Sept 27, the Jamaat-i-Islami too had jumped onto the bandwagon by announcing a countrywide solidarity day for Karachi on Oct 14. The JI also announced a three-day ‘referendum’ to highlight Karachi’s rights.

As the governing party, one would have expected better sense from the PPP. However, when the provincial education minister was asked if it was wise to hold a rally during the pandemic, he replied that hate was more dangerous than any virus. This statement by a politician who has been a strong advocate of protective measures and critical of several pandemic-related decisions of the federal government is no less than irresponsible. Not only does it play down the threat that rising Covid-19 cases pose to the public, it also undermines the provincial government’s own attempts at implementing mini lockdowns in virus hotspots in the city. Members of the PPP-led Sindh government have on several occasions criticised the federal government for its initial complacency and not taking sufficient protective measures. But if the party that had appeared firm in its resolve to curb the virus is now willing to dispense with caution by encouraging a large gathering in one of Karachi’s most populated areas for political reasons, then it makes a mockery of its position on lockdowns and protective measures. Though the minister stated that SOPs will be followed in the rally, he must be aware that such gatherings can easily turn into superspreaders. With the daily Covid-19 tally again going up, this is a risk that the PPP could have easily avoided.

# More censorship

EACH day it seems there is a fresh assault on the fundamental right to freedom of speech. The arguments about ‘upholding the rule of law’ that are used to bolster such restrictions are specious and misleading. They cannot disguise the actual objective behind this campaign, and it is no less than a sustained campaign, which is to erase every vestige of dissent and discomfiting opinion from the public domain.

On Thursday, Pemra issued an order in response, so it claimed, to a complaint that some TV channels had aired the speeches of a proclaimed offender — clearly meaning Nawaz Sharif — and banned satellite news channels from airing any speeches, interviews and public addresses by proclaimed offenders or absconders. In its statement, Pemra repeatedly referred to its code of conduct, and to the Supreme Court’s emphasis on broadcast media’s compliance with it.

The aforesaid code of conduct often mentions the need for the electronic media to observe fairness and impartiality. But is Pemra itself practising what it preaches? How can it explain that in March 2019 it explicitly cited the right to freedom of speech when it dismissed a complaint against the speeches of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf and Allama Tahirul Qadri being broadcast, despite both individuals also being proclaimed offenders?

Or consider the fact that in March 2015, Saulat Mirza, a death-row prisoner was able to make a lengthy ‘confessional statement’ on camera from his cell without Pemra taking any action against the TV channels that aired it. The application of the law must be consistent in order to be credible. Given what has gone before, Pemra’s directive is clearly geared towards preventing Mr Sharif’s words from reaching the wider public.

In fact, censorship by the authorities is becoming a troubling pattern. On Friday came yet another prohibition order, in which Pemra directed TV channels to stop broadcasting news about the motorway gang rape, although this time it was on orders of the ATC in which the crime is being tried.

Giving credence to the police’s argument that media reporting was hindering the arrest of the prime accused, the judge in question said such coverage would

“[diminish] the evidentiary worth of the material collected by the prosecution” and also “disgrace” the victim.

The media in this matter has largely conducted itself responsibly and protected the victim’s identity, despite the huge publicity the horrific case has garnered. If the court has any reservations, it can order the media to refrain from showing pictures of the accused so as not to compromise the identification parade. A blanket order such as this one serves no purpose.

Indeed, continuing coverage will keep up the pressure on law enforcement to do its job and ensure that both perpetrators are prosecuted. In the process, the “disgrace” will hopefully be placed where it should be — at the door of the rapists, not the victim.

## **Difficult to survive**

INFLATION is again in the news. It jumped to 9pc year-on-year in September. Month-on-month headline inflation rose 1.5pc compared to 0.6pc in August when it climbed to 8.21pc, according to new Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data. Average inflation edged up 8.85pc during the first quarter of the fiscal, but remained within the 7pc to 9pc band forecast for the entire year and was lower than last year’s figure of over 10pc. The increase in the price of vegetables, chicken, fresh milk, pulses, wheat flour, sugar, eggs and other food items has contributed majorly to the rise. Non-food items contributing to the spike included construction inputs, transport and health services. Food prices increased 14.7pc as the rural population experienced higher hikes than urban dwellers. Prices are predicted to increase further this month if electricity and gas prices go up as the government moves to revive the \$6bn IMF deal. The State Bank has already indicated the end of further monetary easing, which started in March to fight the economic impact of Covid-19.

A look at PBS data shows that prices have been rising in the country for over a year largely because of disruptions in food supply chains and periodic hikes in the administered prices of electricity and gas rather than a surge in demand for goods and services. Little wonder then that the State Bank has failed to curb inflation despite pursuing a tight monetary policy until the coronavirus forced the economy to shut down. High inflation comes with a heavy economic cost that low- and middle-income groups know only too well. Even a small shock in prices



causes the poor to cut essential expenditure to survive. Indeed, many families have no option but to send their young children to work. High inflation is also considered a tax that erodes international business competitiveness and discourages investment as interest rates go up. Controlling inflation, especially consistent hikes in prices of food, education and healthcare, has always been a major challenge for the PTI administration which has failed to shield the economy and the poor from this scourge. Surprisingly, the action against what the government dubs as the sugar and wheat mafias has pushed up the prices of these commodities instead of bringing them down. With opposition parties likely to highlight the rising cost of living in their planned protests, the government is fast running out of time to provide relief to those at the bottom of the population pyramid.

## **Cancer on the rise**

THE findings of a recent study conducted by the Dow University of Health Sciences have revealed that cancer of the gastrointestinal tract is on the rise in Karachi. This might not just be a coincidence, as the study indicates — Karachi is also the city with the highest prevalence of oral cancer in the country. According to researchers, this rise can be attributed to the growing use of tobacco products (one of the main causes of oral cancer) and the consumption of unhealthy foods. The study was based on data collected over several years from 2010 to 2019. The survey revealed that most of the cancer cases (around 60pc) were diagnosed in women as compared to men. The most common cancer among women is breast cancer, followed by oral and then oesophageal cancer, while in men it is oral cancer. The findings of the DUHS survey are not surprising. Research indicates that cancer, often a hereditary malady, is also linked to environmental factors and poor dietary habits, as in the case of oral cancer that affects those who regularly consume tobacco products, paan and betel nut. The increasing incidence of cancer in Pakistan has also been noted by other independent studies carried out in the country. A separate survey by the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences lists cancer as the second leading cause of death — the first being heart disease — in the country. The survey indicates that every year, around 148,000 new cancer cases are reported in Pakistan.

Poor environmental conditions combined with a dilapidated healthcare system and the recent hike in drug prices paint a worrisome picture for the hundreds of

thousands of cancer patients in the country. Lack of screening facilities, and difficulty in accessing health services, also hinder treatment. The authorities need to invest in satellite centres of tertiary hospitals to enable screening tests while also ensuring that patients receive the required treatment. It is equally essential to educate the public on the importance of early diagnoses and treatment.

## **Pointlessly strident**

PAKISTAN'S political discourse is suffering from a crisis of civility — one which does little to bring relief to citizens who face numerous challenges. Day after day, politicians and leaders use language for each other that is excessively strident and overly personal.

While politics and politicking are intrinsic to a democracy, the present trend of hounding, name-calling and labelling of opponents as traitors are a far cry from the issue-based debates which are essential to a parliamentary system. For instance, in recent days several government spokespersons have generously used the word 'traitor' to describe Nawaz Sharif and other members of the PML-N after he and the party launched a verbal onslaught against the government and military establishment.

Similarly, Mr Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz too have hit below the belt and referred to the prime minister in unsavoury terms. None of this is helpful. In the cacophony of deafening attacks, politicians from both the ruling party and opposition have lost sight of the bigger picture.

When there is nothing but an open-ended blame game, many issues of immediate and long-term importance are sidelined and politics serves not the people but self-interest. Such inflammatory rhetoric gives rise to dangerous polarisation, which weakens the foundations of democracy. It also makes conversations among members of the public tense and further deepens divides.

Both the government and opposition must remind themselves that they are here to serve the people and protect their interests. The entire aim of public debates between members of the government and opposition is to find solutions to our most pressing challenges. Therefore, the mutual civility which is so obviously lacking in our national conversation is critical for productive national dialogue and constructive solutions. At present, our country's challenges are exacerbated by

the inability of our politicians to engage in civil discourse as they are too busy firing salvos at each other to score political points.

This cycle of attacks and counter attacks must wind down for the greater good of the public. Political parties must reflect on how they can play a role in constructive engagement, as this noise and viciousness hurts the political process and strengthens undemocratic forces. No doubt, each party has its own set of rabble-rousers but they also have saner voices. Perhaps it is time for these voices to prevail upon others within their own ranks.

The ruling party has a responsibility to take the lead and is very much a part of the problem. The opposition, too, can tone down its rhetoric so a halfway meeting point can mark a new beginning. Indeed, its main role is to question the government of the day and hold them accountable, but it should be able to do that in a more meaningful manner. Both owe it to their electorate to restore civility and engage better, as dysfunctional politics will hardly solve the myriad problems faced by the public.

## **Second wave**

CONSIDERING that the second wave of Covid-19 has already started confronting shaken health systems across the world, Pakistan must remain on guard. While this country has mercifully dodged the devastation some of the world's Covid hotspots have endured, there is no reason to be complacent. This was the thrust of the prime minister's tweet on Sunday, in which Imran Khan urged people to wear masks in order to "avoid a spike". Indeed, winter is approaching and viruses find a more favourable atmosphere to spread during colder weather. According to figures released by the National Command and Operation Centre, the number of active Covid-19 cases is nearing 9,500, whereas there were just over 6,000 cases last month. The Pakistan Medical Association has also sounded the alarm, saying that people's relaxed attitudes may cause an increase in infections.

Soon after the threat Covid-19 posed to the national health system became clear earlier this year, different pillars of the state responded in different fashion. For example, the federal government was seen to be reacting slowly, whereas the Sindh administration was quick to announce lockdown measures. Though these measures severely affected daily life — with economic and educational routines

paralysed — the pain was necessary and manageable, compared to what the situation may have looked like had Covid-19 spread rapidly in the country. With the right preventive measures and perhaps some luck, Pakistan escaped a catastrophic situation that many in our region — such as India and Iran — as well as those farther afield — the US and European states — had to face. However, the challenge the coronavirus poses has not gone. Wearing masks and following other SOPs, such as regular handwashing and social distancing, are indeed simple steps that can go a long way in keeping a second wave at bay. Moreover, with much of the public abandoning SOPs, there is a need to step up awareness campaigns and prevent crowding at workplaces, markets and educational institutions. And while larger lockdowns may be an option considering the severity of the situation, perhaps mini lockdowns can quickly be put in place in areas where a high number of infections are being reported. As the PMA has said, the fight against Covid-19 can only be won if people act responsibly and follow SOPs, and the state implements rules strictly. Pakistan must be ready to face the second wave and defeat it through preventive steps.

## **Funding for tribal districts**

THAT the much-touted 10-year development plan for the seven merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has failed to take off in its very first year doesn't show the PTI government in a good light. A report in this newspaper says the federal government had released only Rs37bn in the last fiscal out of the Rs72bn it had pledged under the Tribal Decade Strategy 2030 to fast-track development in the underdeveloped areas. The performance of the provincial government is even worse as it released just Rs1bn out of the Rs11bn it had promised for the uplift of the ex-Fata districts. The actual utilisation of the funds on the ground is believed to be very little compared to the amount released to the departments. Other factors may also have contributed to the extremely slow start of the 10-year development strategy, but non-availability of funds is the major reason for the project's failure to take off.

In the last two decades or more, the economy of the former Fata districts has taken a serious hit because of the long years of the war against militancy in the region. Vast numbers of residents were left without home and livelihood. The slow start of uplift schemes in these districts means that the people of one of the country's poorest regions will not have access to schools, hospitals, roads, clean

drinking water, and other public services for a longer period than they may have anticipated. More important, many may lose confidence in the government for failing to make good on its commitments. Indeed, Prime Minister Imran Khan is deeply interested in implementing development works in the merged tribal areas. It is, therefore, quite surprising to see the bureaucracy creating hurdles in his plans. The merger of the tribal districts with the settled areas of the province had brought a ray of hope for the people. It is the responsibility of the government to keep their hopes alive by according top priority to the development of this region by removing financial and administrative snags in the way.

## **The ‘sedition’ label**

THE colonial curse of the sedition law hangs over us like the sword of Damocles, with dozens of political leaders and lawmakers being booked overnight in a case of alleged rebellion against the state. It emerged that a private citizen’s complaint to the Lahore police resulted in an FIR that named 41 people from the PML-N for a range of offences, including sedition.

The list includes two former prime ministers, three former generals and a string of former ministers — it even includes the sitting prime minister of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Surprisingly, late on Monday night, when news of the sedition case did the rounds, two government officials publicly distanced themselves from the move.

Minister Fawad Chaudhry even said that the prime minister was not aware of this case and that when he learned of it, he condemned it. Section 124-A of the Pakistan Penal Code specifically states that the act of rebellion which is criminalised must be committed against the government; but with the government denying it is behind the case, the mystery as to who encouraged it to be filed can be left to the imagination.

In the past, such cases initiated by private citizens have been filed at the behest of elements that have generously handed out certificates of ‘traitorhood’ to activists and politicians. The entire episode reeks of panic, paranoia and poor thinking. That the prime minister of AJK was booked under this controversial law is preposterous and makes a mockery of Pakistan’s principled stand on Kashmir.

Those who relish in branding opponents as ‘India-sponsored traitors’ have foolishly booked Raja Farooq Haider, unwittingly conferring legitimacy, in the eyes of others, on Narendra Modi’s high-handed and despicable approach to Kashmir.

The draconian sedition law was a tool for the British to suppress the freedom struggle in the subcontinent against imperialism. Yet, this British Raj relic still haunts us today. The trend of labelling political opponents and critics as traitors, and accusing them of sedition, must end, and the government must investigate what happened in this case and revisit this repressive law.

For too long, journalists, politicians, academics and activists critical of the state have been hounded for their views and booked in such cases so that their words are stifled. Such tactics are menacing and vindictive, and have no place in a democracy.

They must be condemned by political parties across the board. It is not enough that a handful of ministers are condemning this case. The case must be withdrawn and the government must engage with opposition parties to review the anachronistic sedition law.

Furthermore, it must also actively discourage the labelling of political opponents as traitors. Those raising legitimate questions about governance, democracy and the separation of powers should not be punished, and should not have their patriotism questioned. Such actions have not worked in the past and are sure to backfire again.

## **Tackling stunting**

AT least four out of 10 children in Pakistan are unlikely to ever meet their cognitive and developmental potential. That is a shocking prospect. And yet, it is borne out by the statistics for childhood stunting — 44pc nationally, third highest in the world — a condition that results in this dire outcome. Prime Minister Imran Khan at the outset of his tenure had laid emphasis on the importance of tackling this issue. In his inaugural speech, he had held up an X-ray scan of a stunted child’s brain alongside that of a normal one. The brain of the affected child was clearly smaller, a black-and-white projection of the enormous cost of this pernicious condition. Stunting results from chronic malnutrition in the first two



years of life; when mothers are malnourished during and post pregnancy; where unsanitary practices prevail; and because of inadequate psychosocial stimulation. Hearteningly, it appears the PTI government has started work on tackling the problem of childhood stunting in a substantive way.

On Monday, the prime minister chaired the first meeting of the Pakistan National Nutrition Coordination Council and asked his special assistants on health and social protection to devise, in consultation with the provinces, a comprehensive road map to prevent stunting. The prevalence of this condition varies from province to province but nowhere is it any less than alarming. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2018, in KP (including tribal districts) 48.3pc of children are stunted; in Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan 46.6pc each; in Sindh 45.5pc; in Punjab 36.4pc; in Azad Kashmir 39.3pc; and in Islamabad 32.6pc. In the first phase of the government's plan, 36 Ehsaas Development Centres have already been set up in nine districts to provide food to meet the nutritional requirements of mothers and newborns. It is instructive, and poignant, how so many consequences flow from the second-class status accorded to women in this society. A significant percentage of stunting occurs in utero, because of maternal malnutrition and the lack of importance generally accorded to the health of women. Millions of girls grow up watching their brothers being given the choicest morsels at mealtimes while they eat the leftovers later. Unsurprisingly, more than 50pc of adolescent girls in South Asia are anaemic or underweight. One hopes a more holistic approach, which not only takes all the provinces along but also addresses gender-based social prejudices, is put in place to bring down stunting rates. The country's future depends on it.

## **Professor's murder**

ALL too often Pakistan receives a violent shock, reminding society of the perils of letting hate and intolerance grow without check. On Monday, Dr Naeemuddin Khattak, an Ahmadi professor, was gunned down in Peshawar after an altercation with a colleague over religious issues. This is the latest in a growing series of troubling incidents in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa capital in which members of the Ahmadi community have been targeted. In July, an American of Pakistani origin reportedly belonging to the religious group was shockingly murdered in court by a teenager, while last month a mob laid siege to an Ahmadi family's residence.

This is, of course, not the first incident of its kind. Ahmadis in this country have faced persecution for decades, while the state has done little to bring those responsible for crimes against the community to justice. Unfortunately, the anti-Ahmadi violence ties up with the overall growing extremist tendencies in society — nurtured since the 1980s — that are now manifesting themselves in hideous ways. Whether it is the targeting of Ahmadis, or any other individual/group that is seen to be ‘deviant’ by the self-professed guardians of religious mores in Pakistan, this pattern of violence must be confronted by the state before it leads to the mainstreaming of vigilantism. Over the past few weeks, avowed sectarian groups with a history of violence have staged massive marches across major cities of Pakistan. This shows that while they may have been lying low for the past few years, they can mobilise at very short notice should the need arise. The KP government needs to do more to protect the lives and properties of Ahmadis living in the province. Additionally, the state must send a very clear message that there is zero tolerance for vigilantism and cold-blooded murder. If this toxic trend is not forcefully checked, we may soon return to the old days when targeted killings and attacks on places of worship were occurring with alarming frequency across the country.

## **Island controversy**

BUDDOO and Bundal, two islands lying off the Karachi coastline are the subject of a heated back-and-forth between the federal and Sindh governments. The controversy is a telling example of the leadership’s misplaced priorities, lack of transparency and callous indifference towards ‘ordinary’ citizens.

A few days ago it came to light that on Aug 31 President Alvi, keeping parliament out of the loop, had promulgated the Pakistan Islands Development Authority Ordinance whose first schedule specifically mentions Buddoo and Bundal. The Sindh government reacted fiercely, asserting its ownership over the islands and describing any attempt to develop them without the provincial cabinet’s approval as unconstitutional. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari likened the move to India’s illegal annexation of Kashmir.

On Tuesday, there was another twist to the tale when Maritime Affairs Minister Ali Zaidi posted on social media a letter from the Sindh government dated July 6, making Bundal island “available” to the federal government.

Real estate developers and their cronies among the ruling elite have long had an eye on the two islands in question. The area is an ecologically important site: it is part of the Indus delta where the mangrove forest cover is a breeding ground for shrimp and other shellfish. Thousands of fisherfolk depend on these islands for various fishing-related activities that make up their livelihood. However, for those holding the reins of power, the prospect of multibillion-rupee fortunes clearly trumps these 'trivial' human and ecological concerns.

In 2006, during Gen Musharraf's government, a deal was struck between Port Qasim Authority and a Dubai-based construction company to build a model city over 12,000 acres, complete with a 1.5km long bridge — costing \$50m — to connect it with DHA phase 8. The project never materialised. Then in 2013, talk of an 'Island City' to be developed by Bahria Town Ltd on the same site began doing the rounds, which also did not see the light of day.

Given the ecological and human cost involved, the matter is one of considerable public interest, and calls for far more transparency than thus far on display. The centre has conducted itself in an unseemly and opaque manner by bypassing parliament over an issue that was bound to invite allegations that it is usurping provincial rights. Sindh already nurses historical grievances on that score, and these events have not helped the situation — although the PPP chairman's analogy with India-held Kashmir was uncalled for.

However, in light of Mr Zaidi's revelation, one must ask whether the Sindh government has colluded with the centre; after all, elements within it have facilitated land grabbing of state land in a particularly ruthless manner. If so, it is a shameless surrender. The caveat that development on the islands would take place while protecting the interests of the local fishermen is an old chestnut that no one is likely to believe.

## **GB politics**

WITH elections due in Gilgit-Baltistan next month, this would be an opportune time for those who make decisions in Pakistan to study the northern region's political situation, particularly the legitimate demands of its people. While the region opted for Pakistan soon after the partition of the subcontinent, successive governments in Islamabad have been very slow to grant full political rights to GB. Even today, while progress has been made, GB remains outside the political

mainstream, with a hybrid system in place where the area's elected representatives compete with powerful, unelected bureaucrats sitting in the federal capital to decide its fate. Moreover, when movements for rights gather steam, these are quickly subdued with often harsh penalties imposed on political leaders. Take the case of Baba Jan. The Hunza-based activist was handed down a 71-year sentence by an antiterrorism court for raising a voice for victims of the Attabad Lake incident. Hundreds of people held a protest in Aliabad, Hunza, on Monday demanding justice for Baba Jan and 13 others who have been in jail since 2011. The protesters slammed the application of terrorism charges against the activists, and called for the release of all political prisoners.

Instead of clamping down on all those who demand their rights and terming them 'anti-state', the rulers need to deal with the issues that confront GB in a democratic manner. Using heavy-handed tactics will only add to the discontent that is bubbling in the region. For example, when Baba Jan contested local elections while imprisoned, he managed to bag the second-highest number of votes. Before the situation in the region deteriorates, the state must address the people's genuine concerns with empathy and in a manner that gives them ownership of the political process. For instance, the elected Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly must have more powers. Moreover, the centre must give serious thought, though keeping possible drawbacks in mind, to the plan to give the region provisional provincial status, and thus representation in the National Assembly and Senate; waiting endlessly for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute — to which GB is historically linked — is unfair in the eyes of GB residents. GB has a young, educated population aware of its rights. Denying them the space to express their rights, and using failed methods to suppress opinions diverging from the official line should be shunned. Instead, an attitude of accommodation and dialogue must be adopted by the state in GB.

## **Decriminalise defamation**

THE state is responsible for protecting and promoting citizens' right to free speech. We, however, are witnessing a worrying trend towards the opposite — a chilling effect on open discussion and debate, fuelled by the use (and abuse) of outmoded and draconian legal provisions incompatible with democracy. One aspect of this phenomenon is the escalating rash of criminal defamation proceedings against individuals speaking out on matters of public interest —

journalists, political activists and women breaking the silence on endemic abuse and harassment. Defamation is a criminal offence under Sections 499 and 500 of the Pakistan Penal Code, and Section 20 of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. It should be noted that there is still recourse against libel under civil law. But criminal libel laws are by design unreasonably punitive to individuals and harmful to society; in execution, law-enforcement agencies are often found to be capricious and coercive. Despite the fact that such laws make exceptions for true statements in the public interest, the mere initiation of criminal proceedings against those doing so is enough to stifle free speech. The potential for abuse is even graver.

None of this is surprising; it is a reflection of similar experiences in other countries where defamation remains a criminal offence. So much so that many international bodies, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Free Speech, have long been calling for criminal libel laws to be abolished. So have local rights groups in Pakistan. In recent years, many countries, recognising their detrimental effect, have repealed criminal libel laws. Criminal defamation is a tool that favours the might of the powerful over the voices of those who are less so. Pakistan must go the way of other rights-affirming states and move to abolish it. Time and again, we have seen how the system lets down, and in some cases contributes towards even more harm, victims who seek recourse from it.

## **World Bank forecast**

IN a new report, the World Bank has painted a very dismal picture of Pakistan's economic outlook for the next two financial years, saying the nation's growth prospects will remain significantly subdued.

The report projects the economy will recover by 0.5pc during this fiscal after it shrank by 0.4pc last year — the first contraction since 1952 — owing to the pandemic. This depressing forecast may face further risk in the case of infections going up again and given the impact of resumption of economic stabilisation policies under the IMF deal.

In fact, the release of the report South Asia Economic Focus coincides with worrisome news of a surge, albeit slight, in Covid-19 cases as business picks up

in the wake of a government decision to reopen the economy after virus infections peaked in June.

Read: Marriage halls, restaurants becoming Covid hubs, says Asad Umar

The report also warns that poverty is likely to rise with Covid-19 lockdowns, which have chiefly affected informal services and small industrial businesses, the two sectors in which the majority of non-farm labour is employed.

Though the bank has not given any numbers related to the increase in poverty, experts estimate the economic crisis induced by the pandemic could have pushed millions more into poverty, especially in the cities.

It is hard to dispute the projection. Yet it is also difficult to agree completely with the gloomy post-lockdown picture. The report has apparently drawn heavily on old data to make its projections, and short-term trends depicted by new economic data for the first quarter of the present financial year to September tell a more encouraging story.

The economy and businesses that were badly hit during the lockdowns have shown resilience and performed better during the last three months. GDP is now projected to expand by 2pc this year compared to the bank's projection of 0.5pc. Many of those who lost their jobs during the pandemic are back at work, even if in certain cases they have been forced to accept pay cuts. The cash handouts given by the government under the Ehsaas programme prevented hunger in several households. The rural population was also largely spared the crop losses in spite of the desert locust attack.

There is no denying that a possible resurgence of infection still poses a major risk to the economy, and the resumption of demand-compression measures under the IMF programme is likely to keep growth muted for some time. Yet the outlook is neither too desperate nor too encouraging. There is still uncertainty hanging over the future but there are also signs of recovery.

The situation demands that the government implement the required reforms to assist struggling businesses quickly get back on their feet, and address, in the words of a senior World Bank official, the weaknesses of the "informal sectors through smart policies" and by ensuring wise allocation of meagre public resources to help the poor.



# **One-sided accountability**

FOR the last few years, opposition parties in the country have been crying themselves hoarse over a blatantly one-sided, politically motivated witch-hunt at the hands of the anti-graft authorities. Dubbed an ‘accountability drive’, the pattern followed in hounding opponents has become increasingly predictable. Politicians critical of the government are investigated by the FIA and NAB, booked in cases —the key charges being the misuse of authority or having assets beyond known sources of income — and promptly arrested. They then languish in custody as the authorities conduct their investigations, for months on end, before there is a formal indictment and the case begins. The current drive follows Imran Khan’s campaign pledges in the 2018 election, when he vowed to jail ‘corrupt people’ who had ‘amassed billions overseas’. But two years later, and especially after this week’s on-record revelation by recently retired FIA director general Bashir Memon, this accountability drive is looking more and more like a vendetta. Mr Memon in a video interview accused Prime Minister Imran Khan of pressuring him to prosecute opposition leaders on serious charges “though there was no evidence to do so”. He also said that Mr Khan wanted senior opposition leader Khawaja Asif to be tried for treason under Article 6 of the Constitution, and several members of the Sharif family to be booked in corruption cases. Shockingly, he gave the impression that the NAB chairman was accommodating similar requests by the government, and had pursued cases that Mr Memon had protested against. Despite the passage of a few days since his claims, no official clarification has been issued by the government.

His statement lends credence to something the opposition parties have been saying for months: that the ongoing accountability drive is a venomous campaign masquerading as a quest for justice. Though Mr Memon’s allegations have come a little late in the day, the courts handling many of these FIA and NAB cases ought to take into account that there may be something more to them — not just in the case of the Sharif family but all individuals targeted in this drive. Not only must the government issue an immediate response to his statements to explain what happened, it must also reflect on the serious and long-lasting damage such a calculated campaign can have on the public’s trust in the system as well as the injustice towards those caught in the accountability net on trumped-up allegations.

## **Hina Jilani honoured**

HINA Jilani has been chosen for many awards in her life, but the Stockholm Human Rights Award must rank as something special. It is an honour conferred annually by the Swedish Bar Association, the International Bar Association and the International Legal Assistance Consortium. It is this recognition by one's peers that makes it an extraordinary honour. Ms Jilani has been hailed as someone who has "dedicated her life to the protection of the vulnerable through her commitment to human rights and the rule of law. She has worked tirelessly and in situations of great adversity" and has shown the "resilience and courage" to divert "from the beaten paths" and speak "truth to power". For those in Pakistan and abroad who have followed her journey closely these remarks would conjure up images in which the lawyer and rights activist is taking on an impossible task in the face of great adversity and at huge personal risk. Their concerns would be justified.

The reference here to peers, or one's own people, also brings to the fore all those thoughts about how this country hasn't quite been able to benefit from the exceptional talent in its midst. There are many Pakistanis of international repute whose expertise has not been utilised; not only this, but in some cases, they are also treated as a threat to the old order or seen as rebels promoting 'dangerous', progressive values. Ultimately, changing values do force their way into the mainstream as their protagonists wait for bolder, more proactive rulers for a movement towards the promised change in a truly just system. A government that claims to believe in genuine tabdeeli or transformation could learn a few things from the experience of someone like Ms Jilani in the areas of rule of law, women rights, civil rights, etc. Into its third year in power, it must realise that the delivery phase has arrived, and make good on all its promises to improve lives and ensure people's due rights.

## **Christmas deadline**

WITH an eye on the Nov 3 US presidential election, Donald Trump has announced that the remainder of American troops in Afghanistan should be "home by Christmas". With approval ratings sagging compared to his Democratic challenger Joe Biden, the US president has in all likelihood made this

announcement to rally his support base, and assure them he will deliver on his campaign promise made before he won the White House race in the last election.

Read: Trump unchained? Afghan troop surprise shows pre-election impulse to upend policy

However, while the exit of foreign troops from Afghanistan is a desirable aim, the process must be orderly and not leave the country in further chaos. If foreign soldiers cut and run without a proper Afghan peace pact in place, the government in Kabul will be vulnerable to attacks and the country may once more plunge into an anarchic state.

The Afghan Taliban reaction to Mr Trump's announcement has been positive, with a spokesman for the armed group tweeting that the 'Islamic Emirate' welcomes the move.

The fact is that the Afghan peace process is too sensitive an issue to be used as a tool to boost approval ratings for US presidential candidates. The Afghan government and the Taliban are currently trying to hammer out a peace deal, while senior American officials are making frequent trips to this region to ensure a workable agreement emerges that would allow an orderly exit of foreign troops. Zalmay Khalilzad, America's point man for Afghanistan, was in Pakistan on Thursday to meet the army chief and discuss the Afghan peace process.

This is the second time the American envoy has visited this country in less than a month. These negotiations and shuttle diplomacy show that the Americans want to get out of Afghanistan soon, which is understandable. Over 2,400 American troops have been killed since the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, while more than 20,000 have been injured. Washington has pumped \$975bn into the war effort, with little to show by way of success.

In fact, the signing of the peace agreement with the Afghan Taliban by the US earlier this year is proof that the war is unwinnable. Considering these points, the Afghan war, even if it is a hot-button issue in American politics, should not be used to burnish struggling electoral campaigns.

Instead of giving unrealistic deadlines, the US administration must work with the Kabul government and regional stakeholders to ensure that the final withdrawal

of foreign troops from Afghanistan is an orderly affair. In fact, the Ashraf Ghani-led administration must take the lead in mapping out the peace process.

Ultimately, foreign forces must leave Afghanistan; but this should ideally only happen when a peace agreement involving the Kabul government, Afghan Taliban and all other stakeholders in that country is a done deal. History tells us that leaving Afghanistan in a state of chaos — as the Soviets did — will only add to internal and regional instability.

## **Resignation talk**

KHAWAJA Asif's disclosure that the PML-N will resign from the 84 seats it has in the National Assembly has set off a flurry of speculation. While it echoes what Nawaz Sharif proposed at the multiparty conference last month, a lot must be unpacked and decided before this step is taken. No doubt in the past, the mass resignation option has been used by Benazir Bhutto in 1993 and more recently by Imran Khan in 2014. While this political tool has seen varying degrees of success by opposition parties who want to up the ante against an incumbent government, at this moment such a move might be called premature, even senseless.

The PDM is barely a month old. It is also the product of a marriage between various stakeholders whose agendas vary. Even though the platform is united in calling out the alleged interference of the military establishment in politics, since the alliance's inception it has been apparent that each political party has individual grievances and proposals — some of which have been publicly aired. The PML-N has the largest share of opposition seats in the Assembly; yet to maintain the tone of resistance and defiance set by Mr Sharif, it has continued to talk of resignation. Then comes the JUI-F, with some 15 seats, but none for its leader and PDM chief who is also amenable to the idea of resignation. The PPP, however, appears unsure about the resignation of its 55 legislators in the Assembly at this stage, with Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari communicating the same to Mr Sharif at the MPC. With such lack of consensus, if just one major opposition party takes this extreme step, it will expose cracks in the movement. In fact, by being the only one to resign, the PML-N would hurt itself by forgoing the power of quorum to requisition a session, something no other opposition party has. While the PDM sorts out its differences, there is an opportunity for the government to

reach out and engage opposition parties — something it has hardly attempted so far. One of the biggest setbacks is the unhealthy relationship between the opposition and government in parliament, which has resulted in the passing of ordinances and much wheeling and dealing for even key legislation. This stubbornness cannot continue as a political storm gathers before our eyes, ready to push the country into further turmoil.

## **Against capital punishment**

ON the World Day against the Death Penalty (Oct 10), Pakistan presents a chilling picture. It is a land where the chorus for sending individuals to the gallows, which is the most favoured deterrent against crime, is on the increase. There is no question of analysing the facts; anger simply spills over and is channelled in never-ending demands for exemplary retributive justice. There are several examples of how this anger builds up. The voices demanding the public hanging of little Zainab's rapist-murderer in Kasur a couple of years ago rose to a crescendo as investigators, the epitome of incompetence, irresponsibility and insensitivity, fumbled like lost souls in search for clues. More recently, when the motorway gang rape case was reported, it was their utter mistrust in the criminal justice system that compelled people to call for capital punishment — a penalty this paper firmly stands against — as well as a summary trial and public execution. The most worrying part was the government's approval of such sentiments. Indeed, it appeared to be trying to gain political capital out of it all by claiming that it was in favour of not just capital punishment but also carrying out the sentence in public.

This country is no stranger to botched trials extinguishing innocent lives. We are all aware of the number of instances where those declared killers turned out to be innocent when their case was appealed in the higher courts. Only yesterday, an article on these pages informed us that 80 times out of 100, a prisoner on death row is acquitted by the Supreme Court during the appeals process. This number itself should settle the issue about death penalty in a country which is reported to have some 4,000 condemned prisoners. There is no justification for taking a fellow human's life. To facilitate a process that takes the accused to the gallows is even more difficult to justify when the criminal justice system is flawed at so many levels. A single wrong conviction is one too many.

## **Bewildering words**

A FAMOUS king once said, “after me, the deluge”, while another emperor claimed, “I am the revolution”. Therefore Prime Minister Imran Khan was in good company when he proclaimed on Friday, “I am democracy”. Certainly, the prime minister’s chutzpah may compensate for what is missing among his numerous virtues. In the present context however, he may have done himself no favours by choosing his words without care. The hubris of power ill suits any leader struggling to govern through a weak government. Mr Khan’s speech at a lawyers’ forum may have been sarcastic by choice, but the arguments he put forward will raise more questions about the way the government is run than about the shenanigans of the opposition. For instance, when he referred to former DG ISI Lt Gen Zaheerul Islam demanding the resignation of the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, it came across as an endorsement of the retired spymaster’s tactics. He also said that he had nothing to worry about the intelligence agency finding out anything about him because he had nothing to hide. Again, this sounded like a validation of the security apparatus’s penchant for probing into the lives of elected leaders.

Such statements invariably create an impression that the top political leadership sees nothing wrong with the military holding politicians to account for their acts of omission and commission. It is peculiar that someone who claims “I am democracy” seems to have no objection to an intelligence agency playing the role of arbiter in the country’s political affairs. This is not for the first time that the prime minister has traversed this path, which suggests that these remarks are not a slip of the tongue but a reflection of his thoughts. Such beliefs require a rethink. The military has a role to play in advising the government on matters of national security, but it should not be needlessly involved in issues that an elected leadership has to deal with. By politicians repeatedly invoking the military as the ‘umpire’, the national institution is dragged into needless controversy. The prime minister is fond of saying that his government and the military are on the same page, but he needs to differentiate this from accepting the military’s role as a supra-political player.

Friday’s speech has also reinforced the image of a government that is refusing to look beyond the opposition. Almost the whole of Mr Khan’s speech mocked his political opponents and there was very little by way of the government’s plans to



control runaway inflation and unemployment. More than halfway through its term, the government should really be getting over its obsession with political opponents and speaking more about policies. However, increasingly, it appears that the PTI government is unable to grow out of this long-running phase. This is hardly the way to run a democracy.

## **TikTok ban**

THE government's ban on TikTok has come as a devastating blow to the video-sharing platform's devoted community in Pakistan. Dubbed the "people's platform", the app, used and loved by citizens from all walks of life, was blocked overnight after an initial warning in July.

According to reports, Pakistan is the company's 12th largest market, with 43m downloads — a testament to how accessible the app has been for people regardless of whether they live in a bustling city or a village. Millions of users are angry and dejected. For them, TikTok was an avenue for creative expression, commentary, comic relief and bizarre musings.

The app created 'TikTok stars' out of ordinary citizens who are otherwise shut out from traditional paths to celebrity; it gave so many a stage to showcase their talents. In many ways, the popularity of the app here was a celebration of how internet and mobile phone penetration can democratise a society. But unfortunately, the PTA put an end to that when it banned the app for "immoral and indecent" content. The dramatic decision came after a similarly worded statement was issued by the regulator some months ago; yet the statements offer no clarity on what the questionable content is and how it is harming the public.

It is disappointing that an app that provided hours of enjoyment has been denied to a young population living through a pandemic and devoid of entertainment. With every passing day, the state is growing bolder in its attempts to police morality. Whether it is the ban on a biscuit advertisement or apps such as Tinder or TikTok, the justification that something is 'obscene' is often invoked to roll out restrictions. What is more dangerous is that this outlook is endorsed by the prime minister who has been quoted as saying that TikTok is "vulgar" and "hurting societal values".

With so many political and economic challenges, why is moral policing a top priority? The move to ban such platforms betrays paranoia and ignorance. Not only does it fly in the face of the promise of a 'digital Pakistan', it undermines the government's pledges about giving opportunities to young people. This ban will hurt scores of users who leverage their social media following to generate revenue through ads. It also bodes badly for the future and will encourage more government bans and restrictions.

## **Busy cricket season**

AFTER having seen little to no international cricket at home for nearly a decade, Pakistan finally has much to look forward to. A busy home season is lined up that will see Pakistan host Zimbabwe for an ODI and T20 series beginning Oct 30. The next year should hopefully see the arrival of leading teams like South Africa and New Zealand, followed by England and Australia in 2022, besides some 'A' team tours. This is a significant development that is primarily the outcome of a dramatically improved security situation at home and the efforts of the PCB. Besides presenting a softer image of the country, these tours will lift the morale of this cricket-crazy nation that has seen little sporting excitement in the decade gone by. Up until early last year, the return of full-fledged international cricket to Pakistan had appeared a remote possibility. Despite visits by a World XI and a few other under-strength teams, there was not much to dispel the gloom. The major teams continued to stay away in the aftermath of that 2009 firing incident on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore. The long period of isolation for Pakistan seemed like an eternity.

But a high-profile, incident-free tour by the MCC in November last year convinced the ICC and others that Pakistan was ready to host foreign teams again. The two-Test tour by Sri Lanka last December saw international cricket restart in the country. That was followed by a Test and T20 tour by Bangladesh and a month of contests by the PSL which was entirely relocated on home turf for the first time since its inception in 2016. A key catalyst in this turnaround for Pakistan cricket has been the positive feedback of the 40-odd foreign players who participated in the PSL V matches in Karachi, Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi early this year. It is imperative that the government and PCB play the part of perfect hosts to foreign teams to keep up the momentum.

# Another Zainab

ANOTHER year, another Zainab — two little girls who shared a name and met the same terrible fate. In 2018, it was an eight-year-old who was abducted, raped and murdered in Kasur. This time, it is a two-and-a-half-year-old violated and slain in Charsadda. She had gone out to play with other children when she was kidnapped; her body was found in a field the next day. Of course, there have been many more such victims. To list but some from the last few weeks alone: five-year-old Mawrah, raped and killed in Karachi, her body torched and discarded on a garbage heap; an eight-year-old boy sodomised and murdered, also in Karachi; and a 12-year-old boy gang raped by five men in Jhang who was rescued by his father.

Looking further back, who can forget the Kasur child porn scandal in 2015, which has been followed by more incidents of child rape in the district, making it almost a byword for this heinous crime? That episode laid to rest the fanciful notion that depravity in this society could not plumb such depths as to profit off the bodies of innocent children, let alone snuff out their lives. However, it was in January 2018, when the story of the horrors visited upon Zainab in Kasur sparked national outrage — particularly when it was learnt that 12 girls before her had also been raped and killed in the area — that it seemed a corner had been turned. The public had had enough of the impunity with which child rapists acted and of the police's lackadaisical, often callous, approach towards bringing perpetrators to book. Nevertheless, it took over two years before the Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Act was passed. The purpose of the much-needed legislation is to expedite procedures and synchronise the workings of various bodies responsible for recovering missing and abducted children. It also mandates the setting up of a helpline and the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Agency to send out alerts upon receiving information that a child has gone missing. According to research in the US, in 76pc of the child homicides studied, the minor was dead within three hours of abduction, and in 88.5pc of the cases, the child was dead within 24 hours. There is thus in most cases a very small window of opportunity to save a child's life. An alert effectively used can be a critical tool.

A good piece of legislation, ZARRA must be implemented without any delay. Otherwise it will be no better than the existing child protection laws in the country that have no practical footprint. Also, given that abusers are often people known

to the victims, there must be more open conversations in schools with students about sexual violence. Prudishness will only leave our young ones vulnerable to the monsters amongst us.

## **Cotton output**

PAKISTAN is set — yet again — to miss this year's official cotton production target of over 10m bales by a wide margin if the crop arrivals at the ginning factories are anything to go by. The Pakistan Cotton Ginners Association reported a 35pc decline in cotton arrivals by Oct 3. If the trend persists, it will mean that the crop output this year will be half its peak of some 14m bales achieved about a decade ago. Many factors are to blame for the consistently dismal performance of the cotton crop, which supplies raw material to the country's \$13bn export-oriented textile industry. However, government policies allowing establishment of sugar mills in the cotton belt, lack of research in the development of new seed varieties, growers' increasing expenditure on fertilisers and insecticides, and climate change are among the major reasons behind the dwindling crop output in recent years. The situation has forced the Senate chairman to take notice of the plight of cotton growers and ginners and ask the upper house panel on commerce to prepare a comprehensive report. What that means for the future of the crop, which helps the country fetch about 60pc of its export revenues annually, is not clear yet.

The government is aware of the situation but hasn't implemented any effective measures to reverse the trend of falling production and deteriorating product quality, meaning that the country's economy will continue to pay a heavy price for this official neglect. It also means that textile exporters will become more reliant on imported cotton in the coming years to meet their requirements at the expense of their international competitiveness and foreign exchange, which is already in short supply. It is unfortunate that the country is watching the destruction of one of its major crops at a time when other cotton-producing nations have dramatically increased their productivity and improved the quality of their crop by investing in the latest seed technology over the last two decades. Although the majority of Pakistani farmers also switched to Bt cotton many years back, the adoption of poor-quality, uncertified genetically modified varieties in an unregulated market has done great harm to the cotton economy instead of helping it. If the government wants to protect the country's textile exports, it will

have to invest substantially in seed research to develop disease-resistant and high-yield varieties to once again make cotton an attractive, profitable crop for farmers.

## **Nobel for WFP**

THE Nobel Peace Prize often goes to statesmen and activists who have done great service to the cause of peace in the world. However, this year the Norwegian committee that decides the prize went for an unusual winner: the UN's World Food Programme. The choice of winner indicates the seriousness hunger poses to world peace; in the words of the committee chair, "the link between hunger and armed conflict is a vicious circle", adding that while conflict leads to food insecurity, lack of access or availability of food can also stir up conflict. The WFP helped feed 97m people last year, particularly in Yemen, as well as other troubled regions such as South Sudan and Congo. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic and the global recession it has engendered risks pushing between 83m and 132m people into hunger. As the WFP's head warned earlier this year, the world is facing "multiple famines of biblical proportions". While poorer states and conflict zones have been hit hard by hunger due to the pandemic, even richer nations are not immune. For example, shocking images of serpentine breadlines in the US — the world's number one economy — over the last few months illustrate the depth of the problem.

As for how to address this key issue, there are no easy answers. While the WFP must be commended for stepping in to feed millions of vulnerable people, the root causes — conflict, inequality, poverty — that fuel global hunger must be addressed. Ideally, the destructive cycle of conflict and hunger must be broken. In places like Yemen this is possible if the powerful actors involved in this brutal war show the resolve to cease hostilities. Tackling food waste can be another solution, as over a billion tonnes of food are wasted every year. And considering that the global economy will be in frail health for the foreseeable future, social safety nets must be put in place to ensure that the poorest and the weakest in the world don't go to sleep hungry.

## **More progress needed**

IT has been over two years since Pakistan was placed on the FATF grey list. During this period, Islamabad has amended numerous laws and taken several actions to remove the weaknesses in its AML/CFT regime to address FATF concerns over money laundering and terror financing. But these measures have not impressed the global body.

Since the exact details of the FATF's demands remain shrouded in unnecessary secrecy, it is hard to weigh what the government chooses to tell the people against what the FATF has divulged so far. Hence, it's difficult to evaluate the decision of the Asia Pacific Group, the FATF's regional affiliate, to retain Pakistan in the 'enhanced follow-up' list.

The APG has acknowledged that the country has made "some progress" in addressing the deficiencies in its framework to fight money laundering and terror financing. Its latest report, for example, concedes that Islamabad has made robust progress on 27 action points, including legislation in 15 areas, recommended by the FATF, and that measures had been taken to reduce vulnerability of national savings, Pakistan Post and real estate dealers to money laundering and terror financing. Yet it doesn't find major changes in technical compliance, noting that the improvement is not "sufficient". Thus, the progress on FATF recommendations in large part remains unchanged from a year ago.

It is unclear whether the report will have any impact on the FATF's decision to remove from or retain Pakistan on the grey list in its meeting starting Oct 21. Many are hopeful that Pakistan will be moved out of the list as the latest review is based on the country's performance until February this year. Islamabad has since made substantial progress on the recommendations, even though issues related to enforcement remain.

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi expects the country to be taken out of the grey list "soon". How soon? He didn't specify. He himself appears unaware of the outcome of the plenary. Pakistan needs the support of a minimum of 12 member countries of the 39-member FATF to exit the grey list. Chances are we may not be able to secure the required support in the forthcoming FATF meeting but will get more time to work on our AML/CFT regime.



Nevertheless, it is time for the world to appreciate Pakistan's efforts and the willingness of the country's leadership to do more to comply with the FATF's mandate so that Pakistan can be removed from the grey list.

At the same time, Islamabad must be more transparent and step up its efforts to create a stronger legal framework, which is at par with global AML/CFT standards and FATF requirements. By ensuring transparency, it will be able to effectively quash concerns that some of the recent changes in the laws are meant more to hunt the opposition leadership rather than meet the FATF's demands.

## Second wave?

COVID-19 cases are rising steadily in the country, with the positivity ratio crossing 2pc and daily deaths once again in double digits. Planning Minister and head of the NCOC Asad Umar has said that the rate of those testing positive for the coronavirus has increased after being less than 2pc for six weeks.

As a result, the government is rolling out smart lockdowns in areas where transmission rates are high. In Punjab, the authorities fear a second wave is imminent as daily cases surged to a 30-day high and five critical patients succumbed to the virus overnight. In Sindh, too, daily cases are climbing, with some days seeing more than 400 confirmed cases in the province.

While the government statistics suggest two out of every 100 patients tested are positive, testing is still abysmally low. In the past week, daily tests have been under 30,000 — a sorry figure considering the sheer size of our population. According to numbers compiled by some international Covid-19 trackers, Pakistan's daily testing at 0.14 per thousand is among the lowest in the world. This means that the confirmed cases being recorded by labs and collated by the government are just a fraction of the true number. Given the high transmission rate of the virus, if the spread is not controlled now, hospitalisations and deaths can once again jump and overwhelm the healthcare system.

While these grim figures are very much a reality, if one were to go into commercial or public spaces in the country, it would appear as if Covid-19 has been defeated. SOPs are being openly flouted, and distancing and face

coverings are a rarity — a casual attitude which is sadly seen in members of the government as well as opposition politicians.

The prime minister recently spoke at an event where scores of attendees sat in a packed auditorium, many without masks. The opposition parties, too, are going ahead with their protest under the PDM banner, for which they are urging thousands of political workers to gather. These public figures and political leaders should be more responsible, and use their respective platforms to caution people about the dangers of contracting the virus.

The government must take the lead, and refocus its energy on Covid-19 prevention as it did during the peak — a genuine need for vigilance is why the government should dissuade the opposition from protesting, which is a democratic right. Failure to act by both sides will be a catastrophic mistake.

## **Preserving wildlife**

IN an effort to redress biodiversity loss, the climate change ministry recently announced that it would create Pakistan's first 'National Red Data Book on Mammals'. Based on field surveys that will be led by a team of experts, the book aims to be a rich source of information for policymakers and researchers, identifying the multilayered threats to wildlife species and documenting the population of mammals in the country. From intrusions into their natural habitats, to the destruction of their food supplies, the rapid urbanisation, industrialisation and deforestation of the past few decades have resulted in major disturbances in the country's diverse ecosystems. Pakistan is believed to have the second highest rate of deforestation in Asia. And with an annual fertility rate of 3.6 children per couple, the country's growing population leads to an unprecedented strain for space and resources. For instance, the increase in domestic livestock alone is responsible for large acres of land being lost to grazing. Then there is the other human-made problem of pollution, and particularly plastic pollution that clogs landfills and water bodies, posing an existential threat to various land, marine and bird species.

The present century's rapidly changing weather patterns only add to the threat to native wildlife species, which is especially worrying given that Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. (However, in some instances, extreme weather has proven to be a blessing for certain wildlife

species, and there was a noted increase in the Indus dolphin's population after the disastrous floods of 2010-11.) Last year, the International Union for Conservation of Nature warned that thousands of species were at risk of 'vanishing' due to climate change, as it updated its Red List of Threatened Species to include 1,840 new animal and plant life. As we try to find 'lessons' amidst the tragedy of the novel coronavirus pandemic, our extractive relationship with nature and other forms of life should not be overlooked.

## **Tigers unleashed**

THE Corona Relief Tiger Force has steadily had the scope of its 'responsibilities' widened to well beyond what its name suggests it was set up for, which was in itself a controversial move. On Sunday, Prime Minister Imran Khan tasked the million-member force of volunteers with checking the prices of food items and posting them on its portal, adding that he would discuss the matter further in a forthcoming meeting.

The CRTF was established by Mr Khan in late March, a month after the first coronavirus case was reported in Pakistan, to help the government in providing relief to the people in the midst of the pandemic lockdowns and ensure that the public was adhering to SOPs to prevent the contagion from spreading. A large number of doctors, engineers, lawyers and retired army personnel registered themselves as CRTF volunteers.

According to the government, the force also includes over 300,000 students, 133,000 social workers, 40,000 teachers and 17,000 health workers. With Sindh refusing to allow it to work in the province, the force eventually became operational only in the provinces ruled by PTI and its allies. Soon enough, however, the premier declared he wanted the volunteers to also supervise the workings of the utility stores during the economic hardship brought on by the pandemic, check hoarding, involve themselves in the PTI's tree plantation drive, and assist in the government's efforts to combat climate change and locusts.

Escalating food prices is an extremely serious issue and must be tackled in a responsible and credible manner. As the government itself apprehends, the opposition is likely to exploit it for political gain during its campaign to dislodge the current dispensation. To employ the services of a volunteer force operating without any legal cover is an oddly casual and inappropriate approach by the

prime minister. Even in the provinces where CRTF is operating, there are district administrations, which include price control magistrates, mandated to carry out the latest task assigned to the volunteer force.

Certainly, there may be officers who are incompetent: the DC Lahore removed 17 price control magistrates in January for not doing their job properly. But having volunteers prowling around haranguing shopkeepers — or, in worse case scenarios, using their ‘Tiger certification’ for illegal financial gains — is surely not the answer.

Opposition politicians from the outset have criticised the CRTF as a political gimmick; increasingly it is being seen as a private political force that answers to the prime minister. It does appear to be an idea rolled out without much spadework, which is why the volunteers are being entrusted with a variety of tasks that have nothing to do with the pandemic, so that they do not appear completely redundant. However, while these paper tigers do not have the legal authority to enforce government directives, one wonders how far this experiment will go.

## **GB protests**

PROTESTERS in Gilgit-Baltistan, demanding the release of political prisoners imprisoned since 2011, called off their agitation on Saturday after the region’s caretaker government assured them that the held individuals would be released. The protest, in Hunza’s Aliabad area, lasted for six days and most of the region’s political and religious parties, along with families of the incarcerated individuals, participated in large numbers. At the heart of the matter is a protest held in 2011, in the aftermath of the Attabad Lake incident, when locals started demonstrating against the administration for what they said were insufficient relief efforts. As a scuffle broke out between protesters and police in Aliabad, hundreds of activists, including Baba Jan, were rounded up by the authorities for ‘rioting’ and later given lengthy prison terms under the antiterrorism law. It is for the release of these men that the large, peaceful protests have been held in the northern region over the past few days. Along with Aliabad, activists held protests in other GB cities and towns in solidarity.

With an election in the region due next month, the authorities need to handle the situation with care. Demonstrations have up till now been peaceful, but

discontent is brewing, mainly due to the harsh penalties imposed on people exercising their democratic right to organise. The GB administration has said it will release the 14 political prisoners in a month and a half; this process needs to be expedited and those incarcerated simply for expressing their opinions must be given maximum relief under the law. But beyond the Aliabad incident, the leaders in Islamabad must ensure that an atmosphere of political freedom and a democratic culture are allowed to flourish in GB. Muzzling the people's opinions simply because they differ from the official line will have counterproductive results, and will add to discontent in a geopolitically sensitive region. We have seen the failure of this approach before — particularly in Balochistan. In that province, due to the mistakes of the establishment, alienation from the national mainstream grew; this was exploited by forces internal and external. The same mistake must not be made in GB. The educated, politically aware populace must be allowed to make informed decisions at the ballot box, while more needs to be done to give the region the same rights the rest of Pakistan enjoys. Heavy-handed tactics must be abandoned in favour of a democratic, inclusive approach.

## **Cleric's assassination**

IN the present politically charged atmosphere, the assassination of a prominent Deobandi scholar threatens to exacerbate communal tensions. Saturday's attack on Maulana Adil Khan, chief of Jamia Farooqi, and his driver, in Karachi has elicited strong condemnation from several quarters including Prime Minister Imran Khan and COAS Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa; they have held "Pakistan's enemies" responsible for trying to foment sectarian violence here. Messages from other religious leaders and bodies, including Mufti Taqi Usmani who narrowly escaped an assassination attempt last year, also termed the incident an attack on national security. In the light of recent events in the country, such statements are warnings of the grimmer tragedy that lies ahead if sectarian sentiment is allowed to gain ground. There are several reasons — but primarily stemming from within our borders — behind this deepening sectarian divide. For instance, in Muharram, on account of debatable remarks made from the pulpit, blasphemy cases were registered against some 40 members of the Shia community. A few weeks later, three back-to-back Azmat-i-Sahaba rallies were held in Karachi by Deobandi, Bareilvi and Ahle Hadith groups, in which members of banned sectarian groups also participated. Another rally was held in

Islamabad after which a leader of the banned ASWJ was booked by the police for hate speech.

Meanwhile, Sindh Education Minister Saeed Ghani asserted that an old Supreme Court order of former chief justice Saqib Nisar had prevented the provincial government from providing security to the slain cleric. Such a lame excuse cannot be accepted; it is the province's responsibility to ensure security for its inhabitants, including those in high-profile positions that can leave them vulnerable to attack. However, the challenge extends far beyond the provision of guards and bulletproof vehicles. For years, extremist groups have been used by the state as 'strategic assets'. These 'assets' have turned into liabilities for the country. Unless the government takes bold and decisive action against all militant groups, intolerance and tit-for-tat killings will continue to take innocent lives.

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Opposition politicians from the outset have criticised the CRTF as a political gimmick; increasingly it is being seen as a private political force that answers to the prime minister. It does appear to be an idea rolled out without much spadework, which is why the volunteers are being entrusted with a variety of tasks that have nothing to do with the pandemic, so that they do not appear completely redundant. However, while these paper tigers do not have the legal authority to enforce government directives, one wonders how far this experiment will go.

## **GB protests**

PROTESTERS in Gilgit-Baltistan, demanding the release of political prisoners imprisoned since 2011, called off their agitation on Saturday after the region’s caretaker government assured them that the held individuals would be released. The protest, in Hunza’s Aliabad area, lasted for six days and most of the region’s political and religious parties, along with families of the incarcerated individuals, participated in large numbers. At the heart of the matter is a protest held in 2011, in the aftermath of the Attabad Lake incident, when locals started demonstrating against the administration for what they said were insufficient relief efforts. As a scuffle broke out between protesters and police in Aliabad, hundreds of activists, including Baba Jan, were rounded up by the authorities for ‘rioting’ and later given lengthy prison terms under the antiterrorism law. It is for the release of

these men that the large, peaceful protests have been held in the northern region over the past few days. Along with Aliabad, activists held protests in other GB cities and towns in solidarity.

With an election in the region due next month, the authorities need to handle the situation with care. Demonstrations have up till now been peaceful, but discontent is brewing, mainly due to the harsh penalties imposed on people exercising their democratic right to organise. The GB administration has said it will release the 14 political prisoners in a month and a half; this process needs to be expedited and those incarcerated simply for expressing their opinions must be given maximum relief under the law. But beyond the Aliabad incident, the leaders in Islamabad must ensure that an atmosphere of political freedom and a democratic culture are allowed to flourish in GB. Muzzling the people's opinions simply because they differ from the official line will have counterproductive results, and will add to discontent in a geopolitically sensitive region. We have seen the failure of this approach before — particularly in Balochistan. In that province, due to the mistakes of the establishment, alienation from the national mainstream grew; this was exploited by forces internal and external. The same mistake must not be made in GB. The educated, politically aware populace must be allowed to make informed decisions at the ballot box, while more needs to be done to give the region the same rights the rest of Pakistan enjoys. Heavy-handed tactics must be abandoned in favour of a democratic, inclusive approach.

## **Cleric's assassination**

IN the present politically charged atmosphere, the assassination of a prominent Deobandi scholar threatens to exacerbate communal tensions. Saturday's attack on Maulana Adil Khan, chief of Jamia Farooqi, and his driver, in Karachi has elicited strong condemnation from several quarters including Prime Minister Imran Khan and COAS Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa; they have held "Pakistan's enemies" responsible for trying to foment sectarian violence here. Messages from other religious leaders and bodies, including Mufti Taqi Usmani who narrowly escaped an assassination attempt last year, also termed the incident an attack on national security. In the light of recent events in the country, such statements are warnings of the grimmer tragedy that lies ahead if sectarian sentiment is allowed to gain ground. There are several reasons — but primarily stemming from within our borders — behind this deepening sectarian divide. For

instance, in Muharram, on account of debatable remarks made from the pulpit, blasphemy cases were registered against some 40 members of the Shia community. A few weeks later, three back-to-back Azmat-i-Sahaba rallies were held in Karachi by Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahle Hadith groups, in which members of banned sectarian groups also participated. Another rally was held in Islamabad after which a leader of the banned ASWJ was booked by the police for hate speech.

Meanwhile, Sindh Education Minister Saeed Ghani asserted that an old Supreme Court order of former chief justice Saqib Nisar had prevented the provincial government from providing security to the slain cleric. Such a lame excuse cannot be accepted; it is the province's responsibility to ensure security for its inhabitants, including those in high-profile positions that can leave them vulnerable to attack. However, the challenge extends far beyond the provision of guards and bulletproof vehicles. For years, extremist groups have been used by the state as 'strategic assets'. These 'assets' have turned into liabilities for the country. Unless the government takes bold and decisive action against all militant groups, intolerance and tit-for-tat killings will continue to take innocent lives.

## **A matter of intent**

THOUGH not exactly an icebreaker, the first major interview given by a senior Pakistani official to a major Indian news outlet since New Delhi revoked held Kashmir's autonomous status last year signals that even in such gloomy circumstances, if the intent is there on both sides the peace process can be revived.

The interview featuring the Prime Minister's Special Assistant on National Security Division and Strategic Policy Planning Moeed Yusuf, conducted by veteran Indian newsman Karan Thapar for The Wire, was indeed bumpy at times. However, Dr Yusuf's revelation that India had sent feelers for talks with Pakistan indicates that behind the constant nationalistic bombast emanating from New Delhi, there may be a desire to reopen the channels for dialogue.

As Dr Yusuf pointed out, the core issues affecting bilateral ties remain Kashmir and terrorism. While many in India like to repeat the mantra of Pakistan sponsoring cross-border terrorism, the SAPM revealed that this country had evidence that India was involved in the 2014 APS tragedy. Moreover, with a

right-wing Hindu nationalist set-up controlling the levers of power in New Delhi, the anti-Pakistan rhetoric has reached a fever pitch.

But, it is never too late to climb down, for South Asia can ill afford a perennial state of conflict the Pakistan-India dispute engenders. He added that Pakistan stands for peace and regional growth, and that this country wants to open the trade corridor on its eastern border.

Talks must be meaningful and issue-based. They should not be used as a cover by India to distract the world, particularly from the grim situation in held Kashmir, simply to show the global community that New Delhi is doing all it can to bring peace to South Asia. As the Pakistani official mentioned, there has to be solid intent on the Indian side. Dialogue in itself is not a sign of normalisation; this region has witnessed many episodes where peace was in sight, only for the dream to be dashed before the goal was achieved.

Having said that, and without prejudice to Pakistan's principled stand on the Kashmir question, talks should not be preconditioned. Let the process begin and see where it goes. If both sides list lengthy preconditions before the talks commence, there will be little chance of success. In such circumstances, especially when trust levels are low, backchannel diplomacy may be an option. The SAPM had a point when he said that should Pakistan and India fail to sort out their issues, this region will be left behind.

Indeed the demand for "real dialogue" is a genuine one. Perhaps if the 'soft' issues are addressed first — Sir Creek, people-to-people contacts — progress can be made on the core problems. However, if the stalemate is left as it is, the small window for peace in South Asia may close soon, and it is anybody's guess when it will open again.

## **ADB report**

TO a considerable extent, Pakistan's economy has escaped the compounding impact of the coronavirus outbreak and the locust invasion. The worst may be behind us, at least for now, although the twin plagues have hurt millions of Pakistanis and disrupted the economy. A new ADB report about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the locust swarms on farm households in Sindh shows that livelihoods and food security were significantly affected by the virus outbreak

and the hoppers. Half of over 400 farmers interviewed for the survey reported lower food consumption and a third complained of reductions in their earnings because of the nationwide lockdown enforced to curb the spread of infection. Similarly, the swarms have affected almost all respondents from upper Sindh and over a third from lower Sindh. The farmers also reported an almost universal lack of response from the government as a “source of information about the locust swarms or relief in the form of surveys and spraying”.

The bank had conducted the survey back in June when infections were peaking, and developing locust invasions were threatening to devastate the crops and orchards in most parts of the country. Three months later, the situation does not seem as dire as at the time of the survey. Although the two scourges have left deep scars on the economy and the people, a substantial number of households in the urban and rural areas appear to be on the road to recovery. Overall, the economy is on the mend as reflected in the published data for the first quarter of the ongoing fiscal year. But is there any room for complacency? The answer to the question is in the negative. The virus outbreak and the locust attack have clearly shown us that we are not ready to combat such emergencies. Indeed, the government took some timely policy and other measures to mitigate the effects of Covid-19 and the locusts; but these actions were temporary and, in some cases, may have only delayed the inevitable. We still don't have the required infrastructure to handle any recurrence. For example, we do not have a single functional crop duster to protect our farmers from another locust invasion. Nor do we have facilities to treat Covid-19 infections outside a few major cities. Thus, as the ADB report points out, the government needs to take action to both mitigate the damage already caused and to invest in long-term means to confront such emergencies.

## **Transport for women**

FOR most Pakistani women, negotiating societal, physical and moral restrictions is a way of life. Be it the workplace, an educational institution or their home, the challenges they face are far too many. Daily transport is no different: fear of sexual harassment, the stigma attached to coming into contact with unrelated men and a plethora of logistical problems while commuting, place countless barriers in their pursuit of education and work, and even in their attempts to complete everyday chores. The problems begin even before women reach the

bus stop. A pilot survey of 1,000 households in Lahore carried out by the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan showed that at least 300 — 30pc — of the respondents felt it was “unsafe” for women to walk in the neighbourhood. This issue was also raised at a seminar in Karachi. Urban planners at the event stated that the logistics of the existing transportation system were geared towards men and that women faced difficulties in gaining access to various modes of transport.

Secondly, the experts said, the present transportation system did not meet the requirements of women, who had different commuting patterns from men. There were a number of issues, for example, lack of adequate seating for women in public buses. Experts suggested the plying of exclusive public transport for women. The idea is a sensible one. Women would feel safer in larger groups and with a considerable number commuting for work and education it might also prove to be economically viable. In 2014, a women-only bus service was launched in Islamabad and Rawalpindi but the service was closed after a few months. Perhaps transport authorities in Pakistan can revisit this initiative and give incentives to transporters for operating buses exclusively for women. The authorities should also deploy law-enforcement officers at bus stops and improve street lighting near bus routes. Small steps will go a long way in making women feel safe on the streets and allow them to increase their productivity at work.

## **Digital surveillance**

THE stage is steadily being set for increased internet surveillance in the country. The government has a clear target for which it is silently laying the groundwork, but the preparations are all taking place without the input of key stakeholders from the tech industry.

A report published in this paper yesterday revealed that this lack of transparency has set off alarm bells for the big technology companies who will be the direct targets of this regulation and surveillance. Represented by the Asia Internet Coalition, major social media platforms including Google, Facebook, Twitter and Apple have published a letter written to Prime Minister Imran Khan expressing deep concern about the lack of consultation in drafting the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2020 — a key legal framework that will give the government the power to monitor and



restrict digital content as well as punish social media companies that don't comply with government requests.

The letter goes so far as to say that the companies have lost trust in the “non-transparent and abbreviated” consultation process. While this has been said publicly, in private and on condition of anonymity, top executives at these tech companies are said to have revealed even more startling developments which indicate that there is far more at stake than is made public. One executive said the government wants these companies to shift their user data servers into Pakistani territory, with on-demand access to any and all data.

It was also revealed that the government wants to further restrict and control what is published on social media, with a demand to block and regulate content. The rules, under which these sweeping powers would be legalised, have so far been kept secret, with the coalition even stating that, despite multiple requests, no draft of the revised rules has been shared with industry stakeholders for input or feedback.

That the government is diligently laying the foundation for the large-scale digital surveillance of citizens is deeply unsettling. What is more disturbing is the secrecy with which all of this is being done, with even the tech companies complaining that they have been left in the dark. The clandestine nature of these rules and the key demands of the government to these tech companies suggest that something sinister is at play. That the authorities want citizen data to be stored in Pakistan so that they can access it without going through a legal process speaks volumes for the state's desperation to monitor citizens' movements online.

Such a hawkish approach to digital companies makes a mockery of both the prime minister's dream of a 'digital Pakistan' and his claim of “I am democracy”. The dogged tracking of citizens, the eagerness to access their data and the desire to proactively block certain kinds of content reeks of paranoia and is shameful behaviour in a democracy.

## **Extending G20 relief**

THE decision of G20, a group of the world's 19 richest nations and the European Union, to extend its debt relief initiative for heavily indebted countries for another

six months to end-June next year is a good move. It will support the depressed economies to fight off the adverse impact of Covid-19 on their people, finances and healthcare systems. The relief has helped countries like Pakistan divert savings from the initiative for social protection and to take measures to tackle the fallout of the global illness on small businesses and livelihoods as their economy contracts. Additionally, the initiative has somewhat lifted pressure on the external sector of the economies by strengthening their meagre foreign currency reserves and reducing their servicing requirements amid shrinking trade and investment inflows. Announced in May this year, the Debt Service Suspension Initiative was to originally last till December 2020. According to the World Bank, Pakistan is estimated to have saved \$2.7bn owing to the suspension of its debt-servicing payments. The estimates of the size of the potential savings that Islamabad will accrue because of the rescheduling of its bilateral loans following the extension in the initiative are not immediately available. But the relief is expected to be significant. There is a good chance that G20 may further extend the initiative for another six months should the group feel the need for it.

There is no doubt that the G20 action is assisting many struggling economies not only in their fight against the pandemic but also in their recovery from the latter's harmful effects on the poorer segments of their populations and small businesses. Yet the relief amounts to a short-term postponement of the bilateral debt of the participating nations at the end of the day. Most of the economies considered eligible for relief, especially ones like Pakistan requiring more bilateral and multilateral loans for paying off their old, outstanding debt, are unlikely to recover fast enough to be able to start servicing their foreign liabilities without burdening their people and businesses. It is time that G20 and multilateral lenders like the World Bank and IMF started working on ways to help these countries through cancellation of their existing debt to create space for a quicker economic turnaround. It may not be possible for bilateral and multilateral lenders to write off the entire debt. Even a partial cancellation will help. Alternatively, the debt payments of vulnerable economies may be suspended for a longer period of, say, 10 years.

## **Misbah's dilemma**

HE came, he saw, he relinquished. That is the sum total of former cricket skipper Misbah-ul-Haq's 13-month stint as head coach-chief selector-batting coach. Now

he is only head coach. On Wednesday, Misbah announced he was quitting his job as chief selector because he couldn't give ample time to his other duties assigned by the PCB. It was in September last year that the PCB, in an unprecedented move, decided to appoint Misbah as the national team's head coach and chief selector, a decision that was destined to backfire. The critics were up in arms on two counts. Firstly, they correctly pointed out that Misbah, despite being a fine cricketer and the most successful captain in the country's cricketing history, had no experience whatsoever of coaching or selecting a team. Secondly, they insisted, it would not be physically possible for Misbah to discharge his two duties with diligence and that he would not have the time or focus to do justice to both. But rather than heeding these observations from experts including former players, the PCB went on to announce that Misbah would also handle the role of batting coach.

Predictably enough, it has been a downhill road for the ex-skipper. Pakistan lost major series against Australia and England. In all three formats — Tests, ODIs and T20s — its rankings have taken a beating, which has justifiably earned the ire of fans. The appointment of ex-batsman Younis Khan as batting coach on the last England tour in July-August was a sign that the pressure of wearing three hats at once had started to tell on Misbah. Now he has excused himself from the chief selector's role as well. The new dispensation in the PCB wants to show it means business. But all it has done so far is to take hasty decisions, only to reverse them or see them backfire. The PCB must learn from the failed Misbah experiment and appoint a seasoned person as chief selector to ensure Pakistan is represented by the very best.

## **Multiple attacks**

IN recent weeks, back-to-back terror attacks in the country have marked a clear rise in militancy levels. This week's security incidents in Waziristan and Gwadar have underscored just how grim the situation is. Six security personnel were martyred in Razmak and 14 in Ormara; both were high-casualty incidents, yet the latter attack was particularly brazen. In the tribal district, the use of IEDs by the outlawed TTP follows a common strategy of militants in the region, but the Ormara ambush gave an entirely new dimension to militancy.

It is also evident from the large number of casualties that a number of militants must have been involved in the attack on the convoy of FC troops and private OGDCL guards.

That these security personnel were brutally attacked by a militant group raises concerns about vigilance in the insurgency-hit area as well as the need for appropriate counterterrorism training for these personnel. Recently in Bahawalpur, the army chief too stressed the importance of training, saying that it is a vital part of a soldier's professional development and is key to tackling future security challenges.

The Ormara attacks should reinforce the army chief's message, as it underscores the need to give proper training to those assigned on security duties in an area where an insurgency has persisted for many years. Those deployed for the security of a convoy in these sensitive areas must be given adequate training to fend off such nefarious plans. Unless the state is able to provide proper security cover, most people and companies will be reluctant to work in those areas. Incidents like this in Gwadar, which is being developed and marketed by the government as a hub of international investment, will discourage investors and create a tense environment.

Another major factor here is the involvement of the Baloch Raaji Ajoji Sangar — an alliance of insurgent groups BLA, BLF and BRG who have claimed responsibility for the attack. The group was banned and put under surveillance by the government under Section 11-B of the ATA in 2019, yet the recent attacks show intelligence failure. Whether these groups are backed by foreign agencies or a product of local insurgency, the government's top counterterrorism agency must provide answers on what happened in Gwadar.

What is unfortunate is that the agency formed as a key player for counterterrorism under NAP is often said to have no vision or capacity. What is even more troubling is that a committee has been formed to consider a proposal to cut Nacta's strength by over 50pc — a move that contradicts the interior minister's call to "strengthen" the agency. Not only must the government account for Nacta's abysmal performance, it must also reflect on its counterterrorism strategy after these attacks and know that training and intelligence gathering are essential. Neither can be done without resources.

# **Islamabad protest**

IT is difficult to recall the last time Islamabad drew this kind of crowd. Thousands of discontented individuals, working for various departments of the Pakistan government, and hailing from trade unions and other groups, assembled on Wednesday to protest the scourge of inflation. They planned to march on parliament but their way was blocked at the point where rulers and their spokespersons felt that they were getting too close for comfort. Quite often, these government employees are overshadowed by big files flashed on media, although they have been pressing for reasonable compensation in these times of soaring expenses across the country. Wednesday's protest, which carried the message right to the heart of power, was a sit-in organised by the All Pakistan Clerks Association which has demanded a well-structured basic pay scale and an end to downsizing besides the redressal of other complaints. Most of the participants withdrew after this latest, very large and restive protest demonstration, without getting reassurances that they could bank on. However, the Lady Health Workers stayed on and continued with their push under the most adverse conditions, even when the street lights were switched off, with reports that the nearby petrol pumps were forbidden from extending any facilities to these stubborn protesters to freshen up. These women have earned quite a reputation for themselves as tough street fighters against the raw deals they are subjected to by their employers. Time and again, they have proved their mettle.

The cause is there and the protesters who left could return. But there is nothing in sight which could qualify as a sign of the government's desire to tackle the issues which are reflected in the demands of these government employees, and that are being faced without discrimination by all Pakistanis bar a privileged few. It has become impossible to live within one's means after the increase in the price of essentials in recent times. Perhaps the situation could be termed unavoidable given the unfortunate equation of local conditions and foreign diktats that we have to deal with. But how has the PTI government responded to this? By trying to check the prices at retail shops? Is this where the problem lies? This gimmickry is surely not the answer to the woes of government workers and other Pakistanis caught up in straitened circumstances. They could all join hands to make it impossible for the government to stop them outside Islamabad's red zone the next time.

## **Picture of poverty**

TODAY the world is observing the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty at a time when the global economy is struggling to recover from the devastating Covid-19 impact, which has pushed millions of people into poverty. A UNDP study of 70 countries, including Pakistan, says the coronavirus outbreak may set global poverty levels back by nine years with an additional 490m people falling into multidimensional poverty. With the health crisis having derailed economies across the world, people living below the poverty line, women, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other marginalised groups are facing a greater risk of reduced food consumption and earnings. That is as true for Pakistan as it is for any other nation. The IMF has projected a sharp increase in poverty in the country with up to 40pc Pakistanis living below the poverty line after the pandemic struck. This compares with an ADB assessment of 24.3pc of the country's population living under the poverty line in 2015. The poverty incidence was reported to be about 31pc in June 2018, a couple of months before Prime Minister Imran Khan's ascension to power.

Though the government under the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is committed to cut poverty by 6pc to 19pc by 2023, an anaemic economic growth, locust attack, entrenched high food inflation, and lack of implementation of pro-poor policies may already have pushed millions into poverty even before the virus reached Pakistan. According to independent assessments, the number of poor may have increased by 8m in the first year of the present government, and was projected to rise by another 10m even if the health crisis hadn't disrupted the economy. There's no doubt that the government's decision to ramp up cash handouts to the poor to mitigate the impact of the pandemic did help them survive hard times. But that isn't enough. If the poverty eradication target is to be met, the government must grow the economy at a faster pace, control inflation and significantly increase pro-poor expenditure.

## **After the rally**

THE Pakistan Democratic Movement jalsa in Gujranwala on Friday has set the stage for a charged few weeks ahead. The inaugural event of a lengthy anti-



government campaign promised by the opposition alliance saw a galaxy of leaders addressing a large crowd that had, by most accounts, filled up the venue by late evening.

The leaders of the PML-N, PPP and JUI-F among others took their time in reaching the city which led to a delayed start of the event. The presence of sizeable crowds inside and outside the stadium and the tone and tenor of the speeches suggest that political temperatures will continue to rise as opposition parties keep upping the ante against the PTI government.

However, it is the speech by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif that has set the national discourse ablaze. In directly blaming the army chief and the head of the ISI for the removal of his government, and saying they will have to answer for all they have done, Mr Sharif has brought Pakistani politics into uncharted territory. By doing so, he has amplified in the public domain what was hitherto fodder for whispers and innuendos. While the other speakers at the jalsa did not go as far as Mr Sharif did in his accusations, they did refer repeatedly to the role of the establishment in bringing Imran Khan and his PTI to power.

The government spokesmen reacted predictably by ridiculing the opposition for a 'flop show' but the fact is that with the Gujranwala event the opposition and its red-hot narrative have taken centre stage. But the big question remains: what now?

The PDM is all set for its Karachi jalsa which would essentially be a PPP show. Therefore, it will not face the administrative hurdles that the Gujranwala event did. What will matter more than the size of the crowd will be the content of the speeches. With PPP playing host, it may not be surprising if the criticism is directed more at the PTI government than the establishment. It is yet to be determined if Mr Sharif's line of attack remains his alone or whether it will determine PDM policy.

The government for its part is not brimming with options. It can unleash a wave of arrests and other obstacles to undermine the jalsas scheduled for the coming weeks in Peshawar, Multan and Lahore, but administrative solutions to political problems are usually not very effective. The government will somehow need to address the inflationary pressures bearing down on the citizens. One can expect a barrage of press conferences and statements combined with a degree of administrative repression from the government, but the real issue is how the

establishment will react to the PDM campaign after the latest salvo by Mr Sharif. Action will speak louder than words, but lack of action may speak even louder.

## **More Iran sanctions**

AS election day in the US draws closer, the Trump administration is tightening the screws on arch-nemesis Iran through more sanctions, apparently to please the American president's right-wing voter base, and his allies in the Middle East. Some days ago, Washington sanctioned 18 Iranian banks, while any foreign parties dealing with these entities will also invite American wrath. This, in effect, is a recipe to completely strangle the Iranian economy that is already reeling from international isolation due to American pressure, as well as the effects of the Covid-19 crisis. While the US treasury secretary has said "humanitarian transactions" with Iran would be exempt, the international financial community will likely not be willing to process these, fearful of earning Washington's ire despite the reassurance. The justification for the latest sanctions? Iran's "support of terrorist activities and ... its nuclear activities". This, quite frankly, is a flimsy excuse, for while Iran may be playing an expansionist game in its own backyard, the American rhetoric is unconvincing, especially when it has no problems with allies that have abysmal human rights records. Tehran has reacted by terming the American move "economic and medical terrorism". Indeed, independent observers have said US sanctions have badly affected Iran's efforts to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, especially considering that the Islamic Republic has one of the highest caseloads in the region.

While Donald Trump is trying to please his domestic constituency and Middle Eastern friends by pushing Iran to the wall, it is not wise policy to further increase the temperature in a volatile region. Presidential elections in Iran are due next year, and constant American pressure may propel an ideological hardliner towards the Iranian presidency, one who might have little interest in talking to Washington and prefer fighting the US and its allies in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere. Moreover, if a new Iranian administration decides to jettison the nuclear deal — which America unilaterally left in 2018 — the US will be principally to blame. To avoid these worst-case scenarios, saner elements within the American establishment need to prevent the rhetoric from escalating. While Mr Trump makes attempts to win re-election, this cannot be at the cost of vitiating the situation further in the Middle East. A Biden administration may or may not

seek to repair ties with Iran after Nov 3. Therefore, Mr Trump must hold off on his confrontational actions vis-à-vis Iran and give diplomacy a chance.

## **Breast cancer awareness**

ACROSS the world, the month of October is marked as 'PINKtober', a campaign to raise awareness about breast cancer. The most common form of cancer globally, it claims around 458,000 lives every year. However, according to WHO, the number of deaths is higher in developing countries, including Pakistan where, while several factors have led to an increased incidence of breast cancer, there are myriad problems in accessing health services which prevents early detection. With about one in nine women in Pakistan suffering from the disease, a conservative estimate holds that around 40,000 of them die of it every year — the highest mortality rate in Asia. Of late, the government has taken a few initiatives to increase awareness about breast cancer. President Arif Alvi has called on all elected members of parliament to work towards raising awareness of this health issue in their areas in collaboration with mediapersons and health bodies. The government has also initiated an awareness campaign in partnership with private cellular networks. However, a consistent and holistic effort is required to curb the incidence of the disease in the country. For women, knowledge of early symptoms is essential for timely treatment but awareness campaigns can only be effective if adequate investment is also made in basic healthcare infrastructure and breast cancer screening facilities. Mammography procedures are often costly and, given the poor service delivery in public-sector hospitals, constitute an unthinkable out-of-pocket expense for millions of households in the country.

Also, since the disease mostly occurs in females, their societal roles and the attitudes of men in their own family play a significant part in their being able to seek help and receive treatment. Moreover, taboos associated with regular screening and breast examination also lead to delayed diagnosis which contributes to the high death toll. The government must invest in strengthening the primary healthcare system while keeping up a consistent awareness campaign to be able to effect change in the prevalence and morbidity of breast cancer.

# Superspreader protests

IT is the season of protests in Pakistan, but these public gatherings couldn't have come at a more problematic time. Citizens crushed by food inflation, gas and power crises and the general sluggishness of an economic slowdown are seething with anger — so much so that they are prepared to flout prevention protocols and take to the streets even as Covid-19 cases climb.

Yesterday, the PPP hosted the second rally under the PDM banner in Karachi where crowds congregated to protest and also to pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the Oct 18, 2007, attack in the city. Prior to that, the PDM power show in Gujranwala saw thousands packed at a stadium for long hours. Even earlier, the Karachi Ulema Committee protested in the city against the killing of Maulana Adil. In Islamabad, thousands of government employees from various departments all over the country staged a sit-in last week to protest against the price hike and 'anti-employee policies' of the government. Along with the public, the political parties, too, are under pressure as they view the pre-Senate election period before March as their 'do or die' moment.

While there is no doubt that these citizens and political parties are coming out due to genuine concerns and that they are exercising their democratic right to protest, the pandemic and its devastating consequences cannot be ignored. Here, both opposition party leaders and the government have to show responsibility.

At the opposition rallies, most leaders themselves are not wearing masks, nor asking their workers to wear them. With such blatant disregard for Covid-19 SOPs, it is only inevitable that these occasions will be superspreader events and put thousands of people at risk.

The government through its policies and demeanour has alienated both its political opponents and ordinary people, both of whom seem to have decided that the ongoing economic and political crisis is a bigger threat than the coronavirus that has wreaked havoc in many countries.

It is a difficult time but it will become more dangerous if the government and political leaders continue to ignore the threat posed by the virus. The positivity rate is the highest since August; health workers and hospital staff are once again

beginning to feel the pressure of increased hospitalisations. The public's grievances, anger and frustration notwithstanding, these mammoth gatherings of people standing next to each other, and not wearing masks cannot continue.

The government must provide relief to the people and engage with the opposition for the greater public good. Being tone deaf and combative will only make things worse: the winter months are approaching and could spell disaster, especially for those with respiratory illnesses, given the increasing Covid-19 cases. Better sense must prevail among the political leaders in this country across party lines.

## **Agriculture woes**

PAKISTAN'S agriculture sector has been in distress for a very long time owing to poor policies and official neglect. This is reflected in dwindling crop yields, decreasing farm incomes and increasing rural poverty and food prices. Consequently, the share of agriculture in the national GDP has diminished to 19pc from 27pc in the last two decades. Hence, when Minister for National Food Security and Research Syed Fakhr Imam blames past governments for having neglected this important sector it is difficult to disagree with him. But the question is: what has stopped the present administration from revamping the sector and reforming official agriculture policies to tackle the issues it has been facing? The sad fact is that the government has shown little interest thus far in working out a long-term solution to factors impeding the growth of agriculture supply chains. It has preferred the usual short-term approach of handing out untargeted subsidies that seldom reach the smallholders who work almost 90pc of the arable land, and pursuing crop procurement policies that have thrown the private sector out of competition and discouraged farmers from shifting to value-added crops. Mr Imam's claim that the government is working on policies for the development of agriculture in order to create an environment in which farmers get a fair return on their produce remains to be tested.

Multiple factors are to blame for diminishing agricultural productivity. These include uncertain irrigation water availability, unpredictable weather patterns, underdeveloped cold storage facilities, low investments in extension services and research, rising input costs, and lack of fiscal and policy incentives for farmers to adapt to new technology-based farm practices. Surprisingly, unlike other crops, rice yields have more than trebled in the last few years because of investments

by the private sector in hybrid rice technology, resulting in additional income for rice farmers in Sindh and Punjab and an increase of more than \$1bn in export revenues. This indicates that the government could revive the agriculture sector by investing in research, involving the private sector in supply chains, promoting use of modern technology and helping farmers adapt to international farm practices. Agriculture is still the mainstay of Pakistan's economy as it employs over 40pc of the workforce, provides raw materials for more than two-thirds of merchandise exports, and can help eradicate poverty and end hunger besides ensuring food security. Further neglect of the sector will have huge consequences for both farmers and the economy.

## **Accessible Pakistan**

PAKISTAN'S first smart road for visually impaired people was inaugurated in Attock on Thursday. The 500-metre-long road will start from Main Road and lead up to the Blind School, which will undoubtedly make the journey of many students easier. The recently launched Peshawar BRT, too, includes separate tracks and ramps for people with disabilities. Both these examples highlight an effort to create more inclusive and accessible spaces for differently abled citizens, and must be replicated in other government and privately owned establishments, given that a large number of Pakistanis live with some form of disability, though the exact figure is contested.

Earlier in August, the Supreme Court ordered government officials to refrain from using words which could appear offensive to people living with disabilities, including 'disabled', 'physically handicapped' and 'mentally retarded', since such language perpetuates stigma. And in July, in an 11-page report, the apex court ordered the federal and provincial governments to ensure that people living with disabilities receive their due rights in employment, and are provided special facilities in public spaces and transport. The present PTI government, in particular, has announced a number of benefits for people living with disabilities, including free medical treatment at hospitals registered under the Sehat Insaf card scheme, along with the provision of free wheelchairs and white canes. Despite some gains made in recent years, however, there is a long road ahead in ensuring people living with disabilities lead lives of dignity, free from infrastructural and societal barriers, including prejudices about their competence. Unfortunately, the differently abled are far too often overlooked and do not



receive due representation in public life. During the elections of 2018, for instance, people with disabilities reported difficulties in getting to the polling stations and casting their votes due to the lack of arrangements. Better legislation is needed; a step in that direction was taken with the passage of the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Bill, 2020, last month.

Correction: The original version of this editorial mentioned that the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Bill, 2020, had lapsed in May. However, the bill was passed in a joint session of parliament last month. The oversight is regretted.

## **No right to censor**

IN an age that requires transparency and leveraging the rapid flow of information, Pakistan appears to be swimming against the tide. Protestations against rising media censorship and growing curbs on the constitutionally mandated freedom of expression have been rising since the PTI government took power more than two years ago.

Today, it is no secret that the media is under constant pressure to desist from saying, writing and showing anything that does not gel with the official version of events. Speaking truth to power, apparently, is considered quaint and unfashionable. The fact is, nothing could be further from the truth. This unfortunate reality was visible in vivid colours during the PDM rally in Karachi on Sunday.

TV channels would dip into speeches by various leaders and then cut back to studios on apparent whim. However, there was clearly more than what met the eye. It was not long before it became obvious that speakers who are known critics of the establishment's political role got little or no time on air.

Leaders like Mahmood Achakzai, Mohsin Dawar and Akhtar Mengal — who have been consistent in demanding greater rights for their provinces and communities — were either not shown while speaking to the large audience, or parts of their speech were muted. It was clear that news channels were being instructed from somewhere whom to show and whom to black out. This made a mockery of the concept of editorial freedom and reduced the coverage of private news channels to the level of a state broadcaster.

Organisers of the Gujranwala and Karachi jalsas have done well to ensure leaders from all parties get to speak to audiences. This represents a mature and progressive approach to national integration and is the right way to bring more people into our political mainstream. However, by censoring the speeches of its critics, the official machinery is nullifying the inclusive progress towards greater integration.

This is a short-sighted and self-defeating approach that does more harm than good. We should have learnt this by now, having repeated the same mistakes over and over again. Somehow the state finds it hard to reconcile with democratic notions of tolerance and respect for differing points of view within society. Censorship of the kind we are witnessing today reflects the fear and insecurities embedded within the state structure. Such insecurities have fuelled alienation among those who need to be enveloped in a national embrace. We continue to endure the adverse consequences of pursuing such myopic policies.

Censorship has no place in a modern society. If Pakistan has to live up to its Constitution and the values of its founder Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the state must step back from its coercive approach towards freedom of expression and let people speak their mind. Contrary to official beliefs, this will strengthen, not weaken, the federation.

## **Exit denied**

BLACKLIST? It is more like a black hole that has devoured thousands of Pakistani passport holders wanting to travel. Interior Minister Ijaz Shah learnt that a large number of Pakistanis were prevented from going abroad because their names were on a travel blacklist. He asked the DG Immigration & Passports to hold an 'immediate' meeting of the review committee "to consider cases on merit and remove names after due process". The results were eye-opening. No less than 5,807 citizens of this modern state were freed from the ban that had led to an automatic seizure of their passports. The committee apparently has the mandate to periodically review such cases. This time it was meeting after nearly four years — yes, four years of categorising people as unfit to go abroad. The lucky ones who managed to escape the ignominy belonged to the 'B' category of the travel blacklist, which is mostly comprised of names of Pakistanis deported for one reason or another. Those under Category 'A' are said to have been

involved in more serious crimes such as terrorism, money laundering and anti-state activities. The committee is set to consider more cases in its “forthcoming periodic review as per recommendations of the agencies and departments concerned”. Not just that, the interior minister directed the committee to meet biannually so that it can review the cases of blacklisted individuals.

Bravo! A generous gesture, indeed, towards Pakistanis stuck on the list for years. But before rushing off to celebrate this victory of good sense, let’s ask the interior ministry a question that has often been asked before: under what legal authority is this list created and maintained? There is a four-decades-old Exit Control List that can take care of anyone not in the good books of the government. With the ECL there, any travel blacklist would appear to be surplus to the requirement of our gatekeepers, however eager they may be to block exits. Unfortunately, this black hole of a list still has some 36,617 individuals marked as not good for travel abroad. The suspicion is that the blacklist was created for the fast disposal of cases as opposed to going through the legal formalities that officials always find so cumbersome. If so, it’s just another sad manifestation of the same trait that encourages those in authority to break the law in the name of a speedy remedy, an example of which can be found in policemen staging hasty encounters.

## **Worsening gas shortage**

THE proposal to stop connecting domestic gas consumers to the extensive pipeline network of SSGC and SNGPL in future as part of the broader national energy-sector reform plan has been on the table for some years now. The suggestion was put forward to bridge the growing supply gap during winter on account of fast-depleting indigenous resources and the increasing demand of fuel but was never implemented for fear of a backlash. With worsening winter gas shortages a permanent part of our energy crisis for over a decade and a half, the previous government had tried to fill the gap by incentivising the establishment of two RLNG terminals to import liquid natural gas. But the imports have never matched the demand, which continues to rise.

Gas accounts for more than half of Pakistan’s total energy consumption and is used for a variety of purposes ranging from cooking to manufacturing fertilisers to fuelling cars to producing electricity. Nevertheless, domestic consumers, who get the heavily subsidised fuel through one of the world’s largest pipeline gas supply

networks, have always led the other sectors in generating new demand. With almost a quarter of its population connected to the gas supply network, around 3m more people are waiting for new connections while gas companies have the capacity and resources to provide up to 400,000 connections annually. Pakistan needs more gas. What should we do? The ban on domestic gas connections may slow down the pace of increase in the winter supply gap and cut imports, but it will not help cover the worsening gas deficit. Nor are LNG imports a sustainable solution given the nation's weak external sector situation. The long-term solution lies in adding to domestic gas reserves by exploring indigenous resources. But the government will have to make new gas exploration attractive for firms by offering them competitive prices. For that, it needs to remove pricing distortions and subsidies to bring domestic prices at par with international rates. That again will be a politically tough decision to make.

## **Capt Safdar's arrest**

THE circumstances surrounding retired Capt Mohammed Safdar's arrest must be thoroughly investigated and the findings made known. For if there is any truth to the version increasingly gaining credence, it indicates that the rule of law in this country is in absolute peril.

The drama unfolded early Monday, just hours after the PDM's successful rally in Karachi, when the police took Capt Safdar into custody from the hotel where he and PML-N vice president Maryam Nawaz were staying, after allegedly breaking open the door to the couple's room. The arrest came after an FIR was filed against him, Ms Nawaz and 200 of their supporters for violating the sanctity of the Quaid-i-Azam's mausoleum, damaging government property, etc.

According to the complaint, during their visit to the site, Capt Safdar trespassed into the restricted area surrounding the grave and started raising slogans, thereby violating the law prohibiting political activities at the mausoleum. However, what appears to have transpired behind the scenes is no less than jaw-dropping, notwithstanding Pakistan's increasingly tenuous link with the norms of democracy.

On Monday, Ms Nawaz's spokesman and PML-N leader Mohammed Zubair said he was told by the Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah that the Rangers had abducted the Sindh IG and taken him to a sector commander's office where he was forced

to issue arrest orders; the additional AIG was also brought there. Some PDM leaders at a later press conference seconded this account, accusing certain state elements of trying to create rifts within the opposition alliance.

The episode has certainly been a huge embarrassment to the Sindh government. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari denounced the arrest as a “sad and shameful act” and some PPP leaders such as Saeed Ghani tweeted that the provincial government had nothing to do with it. The Sindh chief minister in a press conference yesterday attempted to shed some light on the episode, but only succeeded in muddying the picture even further. While correctly describing Capt Safdar’s actions at the Quaid’s mausoleum as “inappropriate”, Mr Shah said the police acted “in accordance with the law”, but he neither refuted Mr Zubair’s version nor alluded to it.

What followed immediately after, however, leaves little doubt as to what took place on Monday morning and the ripple effects it has had. Mr Bhutto-Zardari’s press conference appeared to confirm that thuggish tactics that are the hallmark of despotic regimes were indeed resorted to. How else can one interpret the fact that the house of the province’s top cop was laid siege to at 2am, a few hours before Capt Safdar’s arrest?

Several senior policemen in Sindh applied for leave on the grounds that their high command had been “ridiculed” in the matter and the entire force left “demoralised and shocked”. Although the officers later sought a deferment of their leave, Sindh’s main law-enforcement agencies are in an ugly face-off, with things moving in an alarming direction.

## **More infections**

FEARS regarding a spike in Covid-19 cases across the country are escalating, with senior government officials and the prime minister himself warning of a crippling second wave if precautions are not taken. Federal minister and chair of the NCOC Asad Umar said the daily Covid-19 mortality rate last week climbed to 12 — a 140pc increase as compared to earlier. In a stark warning, he said that if people continued to violate SOPs “we will lose both lives and livelihoods”. Furthermore, a press release issued by the NCOC said two days in the last week have seen daily deaths at 16 and 14 — grim figures which suggest that the virus is spreading. The prime minister, too, expressed fears that Covid-19 infections

can climb in the winter months as smog levels increase and respiratory illnesses are triggered.

The situation is indeed worrying, yet if one were to venture outdoors to any public space, the lax attitude of the public as well as politicians and some members of government would appear shocking to say the least. Not only are the basic protocols of mask-wearing, distancing and sanitising being ignored, public gatherings are in full swing. Wedding functions, political rallies, conferences and government-held events are taking place as if the coronavirus pandemic is a thing of the past. This behaviour is appalling, especially given how serious the authorities were earlier and how successfully they prevented an all-out disaster in the summer months. This casual approach to Covid-19 simply cannot continue. Neither is it enough that the government is issuing warnings, and pleading with people to adhere to the SOPs. The human rights minister observed that people have stopped wearing masks in all public places and correctly framed this attitude as “an act of extreme selfishness” as it endangers others as well as the careless individual. However, going by the rising infections, such condemnations and Twitter reprimands are not having the desired effect. Daily testing at a maximum of about 30,000 is not enough for a population of 200m. Testing must be increased and made accessible. The messaging from the government, too, must be re-energised, for it appears that the risk of contracting Covid-19 is largely absent from the public imagination. The government should focus on Covid-19 prevention as a priority, and build on the strengths which helped lower infections in the first round, lest it sleepwalk into a disaster which will have a disastrous impact on the health of citizens, the healthcare sector and the economy.

## **Forced conversions**

THE findings of a parliamentary committee on forced religious conversions adds an interesting aspect to the discourse around the controversial issue. The committee appears to have done a relatively thorough job of unfolding the layers of how and why forced conversions take place, but some findings tend to oversimplify the social, economic and religious persecution faced by minority communities in the country. To investigate the matter, the committee members travelled to Sukkur and Mirpur Mathelo where they held public meetings with around 1,000 families, and also met stakeholders in Karachi. The committee



members, who include an MNA and an activist from the Hindu community, categorically said that the government had failed in its responsibility to shield minority communities from forced conversion. Though they denounced all manner of religious conversion under social or economic duress, they stopped short of calling these conversions forced. Instead, they described it as exploitation, calling them “procedural forced conversions” — conversion as an effect of the social, administrative and economic marginalisation of the Hindu community in Sindh. Citing the reason for not calling these conversions forced, Senator Anwarul Haq Kakar, who heads the committee, said the review of cases did not reveal any incident of illegal confinement of Hindu girls who testified in court.

Though the committee rightly identified social and economic marginalisation as the reason why some girls willingly convert, to put all incidents of forced conversions under this category is unfair and insensitive. Considering that a large number of girls involved are under the legal age of marriage, their ‘willingness’ — coerced or otherwise — should not be the determining factor where conversions are concerned. Meanwhile, there should be shelters for young women from minority communities who have reached the legal age of marriage and who want to tie the knot outside their faith. The findings should be considered a rough draft for further investigation into a sensitive matter that has the potential to split communities and make girls vulnerable to pressures.

## **A police force undermined**

A SNOWBALLING crisis, with dozens of Sindh police personnel applying en masse for leave on account of the humiliation they alleged was meted out to their IG early Tuesday morning, has been averted. But make no mistake; this is a temporary reprieve.

IG Sindh Mushtaq Mahar has deferred his leave and ordered his officers to do the same for 10 days. That the deferment is not open-ended is indicative of the police leadership’s expectation that the inquiry into the incident ordered by army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, which they have welcomed wholeheartedly, will be completed within such time.

The Sindh police is angry, and understandably so. Earlier, perhaps given the ‘sensitivities’ involved, there was not much clarity from official quarters as to what

had actually transpired in the hours before retired Capt Mohammed Safdar's arrest in Karachi.

However, PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's press conference later in the day made it fairly apparent that Sindh's top cop had at 2am found his house laid siege to by the Rangers, after which he was brought to a sector commander's office and made to sign orders authorising the PML-N leader's arrest. The intention was obviously to engineer a schism within the PDM opposition alliance. In other words, a federal paramilitary force was used illegally, for political ends, to abduct the head of the province's principal law-enforcement agency.

The action reinforces the growing crescendo of voices echoing the claim, most recently made by Nawaz Sharif, that there is 'a state within the state' of Pakistan. Indeed, the Sindh Rangers, which technically report to the interior ministry, often operate as though the laws of the land do not apply to them. They have in many instances violated the right to due process by disappearing people, several of whom have endured torture in custody. It is that sense of impunity — both on the part of those giving the order to compel the IG's compliance, and those who carried it out — which created a situation precipitating an imminent institutional clash. Hubris can often lead to unintended consequences.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah did well to show their support for the Sindh police by visiting the IG at his residence. For a major civil law-enforcement agency to be undermined, that too in such a brazen manner, is entirely unacceptable and deserves to be roundly condemned. The inquiry promised by Gen Bajwa must be thorough, transparent, and lead to those responsible for the fiasco being shown the door. This is too serious a matter to be brushed under the carpet. Finally, it is worth considering that political interference in the workings of the police is also a sign of disrespect towards these law-enforcement personnel. Unfortunately such meddling is on the rise across the country, and it must end.

## **Mountain of debt**

THE power sector's outstanding debt, known as 'circular debt' in common parlance, is reaching new heights as the government gropes in the dark to find a solution to a problem that is becoming untenable. A new Nepra report estimates the debt to have increased by more than a third to Rs2,150bn in the last fiscal

from Rs1,600bn a year ago. Although the power-sector regulator recognises in its State of the Industry 2020 report the “contribution” of the economic impact of the Covid-19 health crisis on consumers to the increase in debt last year, it does not mince words in highlighting the real issues of poor governance and mismanagement plaguing this sector and causing the accumulation of debt over the last one decade and a half. The Nepra report acknowledges that electricity theft had increased and more people had delayed or defaulted on payment of their bills owing to financial stress during the pandemic. But at the same time, it says that the government’s policies of raising tariffs and resorting to revenue-based blackouts (on high-loss feeders) are to blame for the increased power theft and defaults, which, in turn, are adding to circular debt liabilities. Instead, it advises power-sector policymakers to improve governance of distribution companies to check theft and recover bills to reduce the losses that are feeding into the debt.

It is sad to note that political expediency has kept successive governments from fixing the long-term problems of governance and inefficient management of state-owned distribution companies to stop further accumulation of circular debt. The circular debt challenge will continue to threaten the sustainability of the power sector as well as the fiscal stability of the country unless reforms are implemented immediately. Little progress has been made so far on power-sector reforms since 1990, when the government first adopted a road map to privatise public-sector power generation, transmission and distribution firms in order to create a competitive electricity market in the country. The process could not move ahead after the formation of Nepra to regulate the sector in the late 1990s and the sale of KESC in the mid-2000s. Several attempts have been made to develop an effective competitive electricity market in the country and numerous deadlines have been breached. Turkey had started working on its power-sector reforms at almost the same time. Thirty years later, it has developed a functional competitive market while we have yet to take off.

## **TikTok restored**

PAKISTAN’S 20 million-strong TikTok community must be rejoicing over the government’s recent decision to lift the ban on the video-sharing app. The Chinese government too welcomed the move, stating that companies operating from the country must abide by the laws, customs and religious values of host

nations. But although the ban has been revoked, Pakistan's image may have suffered a blow. The arbitrary decision taken by the PTA to ban the app for having "immoral" and "obscene" content exposed the authorities' lack of understanding of the digital economy and the virtual world. This is ironic considering that the tech-savvy PTI governing team attaches high priority to the goal of a Digital Pakistan. Such bans will make it difficult to convince competent professionals to come to Pakistan and work on the Digital Pakistan project. It might have also scared away potential investors who were interested in Pakistan's relatively untapped internet market.

There have also been some reports in the international media that suggest the ban might have been an attempt at muzzling criticism of government policies by TikTokers. The PTA chairman while briefing a Senate committee last week revealed that TikTok blocked about 4m videos and 25,000 Pakistan-based accounts over the past three months. One wonders, however, under what criteria these accounts were shut down, especially since TikTok is a way of expressing creative musings. Though the PTA has now restored Pakistan's third most popular app — after Facebook and Twitter — it has done so on the condition that the platform will not allow "vulgar" or "indecent content" to be shared. Instead of adopting the isolationist approach of banning information and differing points of view, perhaps the PTA can work with content creators to disseminate awareness messages about the second wave of Covid-19 and to debunk conspiracy theories about the polio vaccine. TikTok has proven to be an equaliser for Pakistanis in the virtual world, and it can be utilised in a positive way, instead of being subjected to obsessive screening for supposed vulgarity.

## Hekmatyar's visit

OVER the last few weeks, there have been several high-profile exchanges between Pakistani and Afghan officials. These visits have been viewed as positive both for the improvement of bilateral ties between Islamabad and Kabul, as well as to ensure that a long-term Afghan peace settlement materialises soon.

However, the visit of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to this country was particularly interesting, especially to those who have been following the tricky path of Afghan politics over the past several decades, particularly the Pak-Afghan relationship. Mr Hekmatyar has worn many hats: Mujahideen warlord, former prime minister of

his country and in his latest avatar, an elder statesman. While speaking at an Islamabad think tank on Wednesday, the Afghan veteran said peace in his country could be won if the Americans pulled out, and if there was a “non-aligned” government in Kabul, free from outside interference.

Mr Hekmatyar is a wily survivor of several Afghan conflicts, starting from just before the Soviet invasion, throughout the USSR’s occupation of Afghanistan, and well after the American invasion of his country. As leader of the Hezb-i-Islami faction, he hobnobbed with world powers eager to use Afghanistan’s holy warriors to bring down the USSR’s ‘evil empire’.

Read: Pakistan stands by Afghan brethren in hard times, says Alvi

However, as the world witnessed, following the exit of the Soviets, Afghanistan saw anything but stability, as the Mujahideen factions started a brutal struggle for power amongst themselves. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was a key player in this power game, and was seen as close to this country’s establishment. He twice held the premiership of his country; it was during his second stint as prime minister in 1996 that Kabul fell to the Afghan Taliban, ushering in a new phase of the Afghan conflict. In the post-9/11 era, Mr Hekmatyar spent many years in the wilderness, living in exile and planning his next move on the battlefield, till Ashraf Ghani ushered him back into the mainstream through a peace deal.

Considering his proposals for peace in Afghanistan, by all means foreign forces must leave the country. However, as this paper has argued, this must be an orderly process. A sudden flight will leave the government in Kabul vulnerable to collapse, leading to another prolonged period of instability in Afghanistan. Mr Hekmatyar speaks from experience, considering the fact that he himself has participated in numerous violent attempts to capture Kabul from the government of the day. As for his advice about foreign non-interference in Afghan politics, it is difficult to argue with this.

While much of Afghanistan’s destruction can be credited to brutal power plays between local factions, global powers have been using the country as a chessboard for years. If a genuine peace agreement is to work, all of Afghanistan’s neighbours, regional powers as well as global actors must pledge not to interfere in the country’s internal matters, and leave the Afghans to chart out a peaceful future for their battle-scarred motherland.

## **Stunting challenge**

IT is tragic that some of our biggest challenges remain unaddressed, caught in the maelstrom of power politics from which there is no escape. Hunger and food security are two such issues. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2018, 40pc children under the age of five years are stunted in the country. These children are not likely to reach their full cognitive and developmental potential due to inadequate and deficient nutrition. What is also tragic is that for most of these children, stunting begins even before they are born. Around 14pc of women of reproductive age are undernourished while half the population of adolescent girls in the country is anaemic. Given the number of early marriages in the country and a raft of social mores that disallow women from taking independent decisions concerning their own sexual and physical health, it is no surprise that these undernourished girls and women go on to bear children whose physical, biological and mental development is lagging from the moment they are conceived. This is not all; nearly 13pc of our children have some form of functional disability, and two out of every 10 children under five years also suffer from wasting — a condition in which part of the body is emaciated due to lack of nourishment.

Our future appears to be in double jeopardy — at one end, high politics seems to have overshadowed all aspects of public welfare, while at the other, hunger is damaging our children's bodies. The cost of malnutrition is high and varies across the country — 48pc of children are stunted in KP, 45pc in Sindh, 46pc each in GB and Balochistan, 36pc in Punjab, 39pc in Azad Kashmir and 32pc in Islamabad — but no action is taken and children continue to suffer for no fault of their own. Prime Minister Imran Khan talked about the issue in his maiden speech after coming to office in August 2018. It took two years, however, for the government to launch the Ehsaas Nashonuma Programme in nine districts in August this year, while the first meeting of the Pakistan National Nutrition Coordination Council was held earlier in the month. Though these steps should be commended, a broad-based and holistic strategy with targeted execution is required to tackle this mammoth problem. All the officials have to do is take care of the people of the country. High politics will take care of itself.



## **Lahore smog**

BREATHING the Lahore air is not without its risks. At a time when people are already grappling with the coronavirus that has continued into the flu season, the mist that is settling in has added to respiratory hazards. The air quality index in the city rose to 214 on Wednesday, indicating that the annual smog is on its way back to debilitate and disrupt. October marks the start of the period when the fall in temperature makes this 'dusty' sheet visible in the Punjab capital and some other parts of the adjoining plains up to Delhi. Otherwise, the air quality is bad the entire year and the presence of a relatively thinner smog layer this time, probably because of less activity in the preceding months on account of pandemic-related shutdowns, doesn't ease apprehensions. Fears are that as the mercury goes down, the dirty blanket could get thicker. There has been plenty of nervous activity on display and an attempt is being made to take preventive measures. This won't lead to a remedy since the cause of the smog is still by and large unrecognised.

The blame has been put on the poor and vulnerable country cousins who have been accused of releasing plumes of pollution into the atmosphere during stubble burning while preparing the fields for the next crop. Their contribution to the pollution ranks much lower than that of their urban counterparts who are forever in a hurry to go somewhere. The main contributors include industry, our power-making units and worst of them all, the transport sector. These have been listed in smog studies carried out or aided by groups such as the FAO and World Bank. This is exactly why any talk about controlling the traffic on Lahore roads, about finally switching over to petrol and substituting furnace oil with natural gas wherever possible generates so much interest among those who know and care. The change will hopefully come, but first, there has to be a better, long-term plan in place.

## **NAB on the rampage**

IT is hardly a coincidence that the National Accountability Bureau has ramped up its efforts against members of the opposition parties in recent days as they go full throttle in their criticism of the PTI government.

Just days after Prime Minister Imran Khan in a fiery speech expressed his frustration with the accountability process and demanded the speedy conclusion of cases, NAB approved a spate of references against PML-N leaders, including Nawaz Sharif, his ex-secretary Fawad Hasan Fawad, former minister Ahsan Iqbal, former foreign secretary Aizaz Chaudhry and former IB chief Aftab Sultan. Not only did this string of references come hot on the heels of the prime minister's demand, his impassioned public plea to the chief justice of Pakistan that 'for God's sake, decide corruption cases early', too, saw the Supreme Court order all 24 accountability courts to expedite proceedings in corruption references without granting any adjournments to parties.

The prime minister's directives to accountability bodies reflect a flawed and deeply troubling approach to justice. No doubt, Mr Khan is feeling the heat of the united opposition's unreserved criticism against him at the back-to-back rallies of the Pakistan Democratic Movement. However, hurling threats at political leaders, vowing to put more pressure on them through fresh cases and cancelling production orders all reek of personal vendetta — a charge made by opposition parties for the last two years against the prime minister.

Since the PTI came to power in 2018, opposition party members have time and again accused the government and its corruption watchdogs of a biased, one-sided and politically motivated witch-hunt. By lashing out at his opponents and threatening stricter and speedier action against them at a public forum, the prime minister is diluting his own claims that these institutions are independent and is strengthening the opposition's allegations of a targeted campaign.

Moreover, against the backdrop of the accusations made by ex-DG FIA Bashir Memon some weeks earlier, in which he claimed that the prime minister ordered him to prosecute opposition party members without evidence, the entire accountability drive looks deeply personal and reactive. This is a dangerous trend that is sure to backfire, as it negates the very principles of independent, impartial accountability that form the basis of any equitable justice system.

If this targeted approach continues to be the modus operandi of the government and accountability bodies, it will have far-reaching implications for the people's trust in the justice system. Across the country, there is already a robust public debate taking place about the separation of powers, the independence of institutions and the alleged interference of some entities in processes that are not within their purview. Mr Khan would be well-advised to rethink this policy of an

overzealous, compliant accountability body, as it makes a mockery of his claim that NAB and other watchdog bodies are independent institutions functioning without any external influence.

## **Withholding tax**

PAKISTAN has one of the most inefficient, cumbersome and unfair tax systems in the world. The emphasis of tax policy has mostly been on revenue collection through indirect taxes, which stunts economic growth, burdens businesses by adding to their operational costs, discourages compliance, encourages evasion, etc. The obsession of the authorities with indirect taxation has grown to the point where more than two-thirds of income tax is harvested through the withholding regime owing to the ease in collection and without officials having to leave their offices. Sadly, many withholding taxes are imposed on consumption and unjustly burden honest taxpayers or those who are not required to pay tax on their incomes at all. For example, approximately 100m Pakistanis are forced to pay a hefty 12.5pc adjustable advance income tax as mobile phone users although a large majority earn far less than the income threshold that attracts (direct) tax. Such distortions in the system impede efforts to broaden the net. Apart from ease in collection, the lack of capacity of the officials of the Federal Board of Revenue to correctly assess the taxable income of a person has also increased their reliance on the regressive withholding regime. This can be gauged from the fact that the efforts of FBR staffers yield less than 5pc of the total income tax gathered in any given year.

Realising the gravity of the situation and the negative impact of withholding taxes on economic growth, businesses and individuals, Prime Minister Imran Khan has directed the FBR to scrap all “unnecessary withholding taxes” as part of its reorganisation for broadening the net for sustainable fiscal stability. With the future of the country’s economy tightly tied with the performance of the FBR, the elimination of regressive withholding levies is crucial to restoring public trust in the system and encouraging tax compliance. Rather than creating hardships for pensioners, widows, labour and others who don’t have taxable incomes, the FBR must focus on broadening the tax net. In this age of technology and abundance of data on the financial history of individuals, it should not be difficult for the tax authorities to assess incomes to ensure compliance and widen the net. The FBR claims to have a list of more than 3m wealthy people who live a luxurious life but

who do not pay tax or file returns. It is high time the authority moved beyond sending such individuals notices and took punitive action against them.

## **World Polio Day**

WHILE Pakistan has been relatively luckier than most countries in preventing a high Covid-19 infection rate and death toll, the polio monster — which has been vanquished everywhere except in Pakistan and Afghanistan — has continued to cripple youngsters. As warnings are issued about a second wave of coronavirus infections, the fact that some 80 polio cases have been reported this year alone has slipped through the cracks. Today, as World Polio Day is observed by an international community that, for the most part, has rid itself of the disease, considerable introspection is required at our end. It is clear that the incidence of polio is not only rising, but that it is doing so with a vengeance.

The alarm was also raised by the global polio watchdog in its last assessment in August, when it warned that cases of both wild and vaccine-derived poliovirus were going to rise steeply in the country. Though the authorities might blame this on the ongoing pandemic, the Independent Monitoring Board report and other evidence indicate that problems began way before the pandemic struck, though the more recent emergency did exacerbate matters and put every other health issue on the back-burner. The IMB report has questioned the structural and technical capabilities of the country's polio programme, and identified negligence in key areas, for instance, failing to appoint doctors to spearhead the polio response in eight super-high risk union councils of Karachi. However, despite all its problems, the polio programme proved to be useful in controlling the spread of Covid-19 as the vast network of community health workers was utilised for contact tracing. Vaccination campaigns resumed in July after a hiatus of four months, but full resumption of anti-polio efforts will take time and some rethinking on the part of the authorities. A workable solution is required to synergise and expand the existing community health network to include local doctors to combat Covid-19 and polio — both highly communicable illnesses — at the same time and not at the cost of the other.

## **Remaining FATF items**

THE FATF verdict is out. And there are no surprises. After its three-day plenary, the Paris-based global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog announced on Friday that Pakistan would be retained on its list of jurisdictions under increased monitoring, ie the grey list.

This was, of course, a disappointment to some who desperately wanted to see the FATF blacklist the country for not completing in time the 27 actions recommended for strengthening and removing the deficiencies in the AML/ATF regime. At the other end, those who thought the FATF would show more leniency and acknowledge the progress made in the last several months were too optimistic.

Although the FATF conceded that Pakistan has made significant progress and addressed 21 of the 27 items while partially addressing the remaining six, it decided to not change the country's status. Instead, it gave Islamabad another four months to complete work on the remaining items, while strongly urging Pakistan to "swiftly complete its full action plan by February 2021 as all action plan deadlines have expired". This is fair enough.

Ever since Pakistan was put on the so-called grey list in June 2018 for the second time in six years, few had imagined it would have been able to make so much progress. But the fact that the country has shown its political commitment and is able to satisfy the global watchdog in 21 areas in such a short time is no mean achievement. Rather, it should be celebrated as a victory. Yet, the real test starts now.

We have been given a very narrow window of time to achieve the rest of the targets — tougher ones pertaining to law enforcement's capacity to identify and investigate the "widest range of terrorist-financing activity". It wants "the investigation and prosecution [to] target designated persons and entities, and those acting on behalf or at the direction of the designated persons or entities". Further, Pakistan has to demonstrate that terrorist-financing prosecutions result in effective and dissuasive sanctions. We also need to show the world that the provincial and federal authorities are on the same page on enforcing measures.

Indeed, this is a big ask from a country like Pakistan where large parts of the economy operate in the shadows and where law enforcers have little or no training in identifying, investigating and prosecuting financial crimes. But do we have a choice? It is, after all, in our own interest to remove weaknesses in our AML/ATF regime and strengthen our investigators and prosecutors not just because the FATF requires us to do so.

The fact that the government chose not to avail the option given by the FATF to not report at its meeting owing to the pandemic shows that we are confident that we can meet the next deadline with a bit of effort and political will. And we should — for our own sake.

## **Accountability fixation**

IN a string of recent public addresses and interviews, Prime Minister Imran Khan has devoted much of his time to lambasting the opposition parties and vowing to accelerate the accountability process. During a conversation with ARY journalists on Friday, Mr Khan in a similar fashion during the near two-hour interview launched a blistering attack on his political opponents and pledged ‘not to forgive their loot till his last day’. That Mr Khan has taken the accountability drive so personally is unsettling; it not just challenges the principle of judicial neutrality but also indicates that his focus is largely on opponents instead of matters of governance. What is more troubling is that Mr Khan has already decided that if the people ever vote his political opponents into power, he will take to the streets in protest. He knows that the prime minister’s seat is not a birthright. With just two more years left till election season, he would do well to focus his energy on actually giving relief to the people and go beyond his vows of bringing back looted wealth. At present, the public is facing multiple crises due to food inflation, a shortage of gas and power, and mass unemployment. Simultaneously, a political crisis is unfolding which has seen the undermining of the Sindh police force — an episode Mr Khan surprisingly brushed off as a “non-issue” and went so far as dubbing a “comedy”.

While there is no doubt that allegations of financial mismanagement at the hands of public officer holders must be investigated according to the tenets of the law, Mr Khan’s relentless and dogged obsession with the opposition’s alleged theft is perhaps distracting him from the greater task at hand, which is to serve the



people of this country and uphold their constitutional rights. By fixating on the accountability drive and constantly threatening to jail his political opponents, it appears Mr Khan is missing the forest for the trees; accountability, after all, is just one crucial aspect of governance. The prime minister would be well-advised to focus on the larger issues of bringing relief to citizens crushed by economic hardship. Raging against his rivals' alleged theft was a good campaign slogan when he was in opposition, but it may not be enough for the public to vote for him in the next election if his policies fail to bring them relief after five years of government.

## **IBA cancellation**

IT seems that Karachi's prestigious Institute of Business Administration has been forced to cancel an online seminar scheduled for early November. It would have featured world-renowned economist of Pakistani origin Atif Mian talking about why the economy is slowing down in the country — something we should all be very concerned about. We are open to being instructed on money matters by experts who are not necessarily our co-religionists. However, there is one exception, and so impassioned has been the campaign against this particular community declared non-Muslim by an amendment to the Constitution that it is surprising that someone would still risk inviting a member of the community to an event — any event, even one that is purely academic. Was it the scenes of a group of young Pakistani students at a college in Punjab defacing a poster of the country's first Nobel laureate that jolted the dreamers who had planned the seminar out of their reverie? The bets had been on for a while about the fate of the event. For some people, it was a lecture unlikely to be held in an atmosphere that encouraged faith-based bans on all kinds of pursuits.

The hosts have not been too forthcoming about the reasons for the cancellation. Some commentators on television channels, and more of them on social media, have been wondering whether it was outside pressure or overpowering voices from within that thwarted this 'bold' attempt to fight the taboo in our midst. All that would be of pure academic interest. Inside and outside, and all around, it is the same attitudes that dictate. The spell can only be broken by those in a commanding role — by a government that not only nominates Dr Mian as an economic adviser but one which can also stand by its choice even in the face of

threats. This requires a leadership that can separate religion from other affairs of the state. How long will it take for the rulers to realise this?

## **Justice Isa case**

THE 174-page detailed judgement of the 10-member Supreme Court bench on the reference filed against Justice Qazi Faez Isa lays bare some severe deficiencies in the government process. The court held that President Arif Alvi did not form a considered opinion under Article 209(5) of the Constitution, hence the reference against Justice Isa “suffered with multiple defects”. It also said that since there was no valid authorisation for the investigation, the tax records of Justice Isa were illegally accessed.

In clear terms, the judgement said that although the preparation and framing of the reference were not patently motivated by malice, the scale and degree of the illegalities were such that the reference was deemed to be tainted with mala fide in law and therefore quashed.

This is serious critique from the highest court in the land and it requires a thorough probe into how these “multiple defects” happened and who is responsible. It is a travesty that an investigation was ordered against a judge of the Supreme Court — who will serve as the chief justice of Pakistan in the near future — without due authorisation from the president or the prime minister and instead such authorisation was obtained from the law minister. This aspect requires being investigated so that the people responsible for this grave irregularity are identified and taken to task.

Randomly authorised investigations against judges by the executive must not be allowed, and a clear message must be sent to all concerned that such abuse of power has consequences for those who indulge in it. This also applies to the illegal accessing of Justice Isa’s tax records. The government has crossed many lines that are not meant to be crossed.

Delving into the tax records of a serving judge of the Supreme Court illustrates the weakness of our system and of those who manage it in government offices. How is it possible that no one in a long line of people who were involved in authorising access to Justice Isa’s tax records, and then providing the access via the department that holds this data, could muster the courage to call out the

orders as illegal? This matter must not be brushed under the carpet as is the norm.

At the same time, discomfort persists around the Supreme Court order for the FBR to further probe the sources of funds for properties owned by Justice Isa's family. Every care must be taken that this does not turn into a witch-hunt. The entire issue has reeked of intentions that may not be entirely honourable and this has created an unnecessary controversy around the person of a respected judge. Now that the Supreme Court judgement has identified the illegalities in the process initiated and followed through by the government, those involved must be held accountable for these misdeeds.

## Women's vote

THE participation of women in the electoral exercise still lags behind that of the men. But the gap is shrinking, and that is a welcome development. As recently as July, the discrepancy in the enrolment of men and women had reached 12.72m in a total of 112.39m voters. The Election Commission of Pakistan had made it clear it intended to focus actively on narrowing this difference. Clearly, its efforts have borne fruit. Earlier this month, the data showed the gender gap has narrowed for the first time to 12.41m — in fact, of the 3.28m voters added to the electoral rolls between July and October, a majority were women. With the release of district-wise data by the ECP, a more complete picture has emerged. Only nine districts in the country account for a gap of over 3m between male and female voters — that is, around 25pc of the total difference. There are 16 districts where the gap between the two sets of voters is over 200,000. Of these, 14 are in Punjab, and one each is in Sindh and KP. In Lahore and Faisalabad districts, the gender gap is a whopping 1m.

Despite many elections having come and gone, the patriarchal mindset that persists in much of Pakistani society finds it difficult to come to terms with women having a voice in decision-making processes. Local chapters of political parties have often struck deals to keep female voters away from the hustings. When rights activists began to create a ruckus over this and the ECP took notice, the agreements became more tacit and employed social pressure to discourage women voters. Fortunately, the Election Act 2017 has given some teeth to legal provisions against female disenfranchisement, for instance making it mandatory

to have at least 10pc of total votes in each constituency cast by women. The ECP cancelled a 2018 by-election in Lower Dir on account of zero women's votes. When the election was held again, over 1,000 women exercised their right to vote — a small beginning, but a significant one. The political parties must also nominate more women candidates. In the 2018 elections, more women than ever before contested on general seats, but only because the law now requires that parties allocate at least 5pc tickets to women on general seats. No party did more than meet this minimum requirement. Higher visibility for women in the political arena is necessary to effect change.

## **Mehbooba's statement**

THAT Kashmiris across the political spectrum have rejected India's unilateral steps to strip the occupied region of its special status last year is quite clear. However, the criticism particularly stings when even those Kashmiri politicians once considered staunch loyalists of New Delhi slam the Indian state for its ham-fisted policies in the disputed area. Former chief minister of India-held Kashmir Mehbooba Mufti recently unleashed a devastating critique of the right-wing BJP clique in New Delhi after being released from 14 months in detention. Ms Mufti said she would only raise the Indian flag once the banner, constitution and special status of the held region were restored. Moreover, in a direct hit, she compared the rulers in New Delhi to "robbers". This is not the first loyalist Kashmiri leader to break ranks with India and criticise it for its ill-advised policies in the held region. Farooq Abdullah, another former chief minister of occupied Kashmir and a veteran pro-Delhi politician, has also lambasted the Indian government, saying the abrogation of IHK's special status sparked the confrontation with China along the Line of Actual Control. Mr Abdullah had also been incarcerated after the disturbances in IHK last year, despite decades of service to New Delhi.

If this is the level of anger India's 'friends' in Kashmir are feeling, one can only imagine the alienation of the average Kashmiri. However, the BJP mandarins remain unmoved, and seem convinced that their colonial onslaught will succeed. This delusional approach must end. The people of Kashmir want nothing to do with the Indian occupation and want a constitutional, democratic solution to their seven-decade nightmare. Instead of pursuing a stubborn course, the Indian state should approach the Kashmiris with respect and listen to their concerns. But the

BJP government isn't exactly known for its compassionate, humane approach to politics, and is more at home with brutish tactics. Perhaps IHK will have to wait for a more sensible government to take power in New Delhi in order to resolve the impasse.

## **Growing acrimony**

THE rally by the opposition alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement in Quetta on Sunday confirmed fears that the political situation is escalating dangerously in the country. The government and opposition are now locked in a treacherous spiral with each day sending political temperatures soaring. At the Quetta rally, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif once again criticised the political role of the establishment by directly addressing the army chief and DG ISI. Maryam Nawaz also delivered a scathing speech and passionately argued for the recovery of the missing persons, an issue that resonates across Balochistan. In retaliation, the federal information minister said that the PDM had become part of an "axis of evil" which included Israel and India. These incendiary accusations by government spokespersons — often bordering on the infantile — are fuelling an already combustible situation. This cannot bode well.

The opposition alliance has a long list of grievances that converge on one major theme — that the 2018 elections were manipulated by the security establishment to bring the PTI to power. It now blames the government for persecuting its members through politically motivated cases and incarcerations. The government refuses to engage with the opposition saying the latter is only interested in relief for itself. There is no overlap between these extreme positions and the PDM is building up momentum for a long march to Islamabad in a few months. On display is the worst that our system has to offer — bad governance, flawed accountability, weak institutions and constant, unending turbulence. The reason why all this sounds so familiar is because we have seen this cycle of instability repeatedly over the decades. In the absence of any institutional mechanism to resolve seemingly intractable political disputes, politicians have resorted to upping the ante till one party blinks. The problem with this mode of conflict resolution has been that often no one ends up being the victor. The establishment has time and again walked in to break up warring sides and take centre stage itself. This has ensured that the Pakistani democratic project remains weak.

We are again in almost the same situation. Prime Minister Imran Khan has done himself, and his government, no favours by refusing to engage with the opposition. His attitude remains rigid and uncompromising. His spokespersons reflect this intransigence by pouring scorn on their opponents and using insults and crude language to demean them. The establishment too is in a tight spot because it has now been made to participate in the fracas instead of refereeing it. The unfortunate incidents in Karachi have shown the state crossing many red lines. The opposition too is being irresponsible with some statements targeting individuals within the establishment. The only way to defuse this dangerous situation is for all concerned to step back and break the spiral of events before it is too late and space for compromise disappears.

## **Inflammatory words**

FRENCH President Emmanuel Macron believes that “Islamists want our future”. He had no qualms about saying this in public as he vowed not to “give up cartoons” though he knew full well how incendiary his remarks could prove to be. Such loud sentiments are appalling. They follow the killing of a teacher who is reported to have shown his students controversial depictions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

There can be no justification for murder but neither can the extremist actions of a few be made the basis of tarring an entire community — by a national leader no less. Where is the healing touch that is so sorely needed to curb the “tyranny and fanaticism” that Mr Macron spoke of? Surely, the idea is to overcome divisions and to lay the ground for a peaceful coexistence that is so necessary in a multicultural milieu. The law should always follow its course, but communities must not be pitted against one another.

Read: Imran accuses Macron of maligning Islam

The best course for the French government would be to defuse tensions between religious groups. The provocative remarks are exactly the tonic that extremists need to propel their ideological war. And this is precisely what the Pakistani leadership has been trying to convey across the din of protest that Mr Macron’s words have created.



For centuries, France has led nations across the world in their quest for a better world, for liberty, equality and brotherhood. From the intricacies of art to the pursuit of revolution and politics, Mr Macron is the custodian of one of the world's richest historical legacies. It is the betrayal of this heritage that Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Foreign office are talking about when they question the French president's remarks, and call his words an "encouragement to Islamophobia". Mr Khan said this was the time the French leader could have provided a "healing touch and denied space to extremists".

Mr Khan and other Muslim leaders would do well to launch a drive to find allies who can help build up a strong defence against forces of extremism, going beyond the exercise of force. With the passage of time, a growing number of politicians all over the world have been swayed by the power of faith-based sentiment. This has increasingly threatened those who want to keep religion out of politics. A holistic campaign to fight extremist thought and action could well be worth the effort, both abroad and at home.

## **Tyranny in IHK**

THE Black Day being observed by Pakistan today should serve to remind the world of India's invasion of Kashmir this day 73 years ago and the merciless continuation of its brutal occupation of the territory. A question often asked concerns Pakistan's locus standi in the Kashmir dispute. Even a cursory look at the history of the Kashmir dispute will show that Pakistan is one of the two original parties to the dispute and that India is the last party which crashed into it without an internationally recognised and valid diplomatic and military initiative. Pakistan's position is above board. On Aug 15, 1947, the Maharaja of Kashmir signed a standstill agreement with Pakistan, giving it the control of railways and post. Simultaneously, the Pakistani flag went up in Srinagar. Then, following the massacre of the Muslims of Poonch by the maharaja's state machinery, Pakistani tribesmen intervened; the maharaja fled Kashmir's capital and signed an instrument of accession with India. It is on the basis of this fraudulent instrument of accession signed by a fugitive ruler that India sent its army into Kashmir. India is thus the last party to the issue and has based its claim to Kashmir on a sheet of paper having no validity in law.

Strangely, it is India which went to the UN as an aggrieved party, and, ironically, it is India which has consistently acted in violation of the world body's resolutions calling for a plebiscite in Kashmir. Last year, it heaped contempt on the UN by abolishing Kashmir's special status and changed the law to pave the way for Indian nationals to settle in Kashmir with a view to altering the territory's demography. India's bigoted Hindutva leadership should know that Israel, far more prosperous and resourceful than the poverty-stricken country that is India, has failed to create a Jewish majority in the occupied territories. The fascist Hindutva leadership should give up its bunker mentality and flee India-held Kashmir.

## **Crossing red lines in Quetta**

IN Quetta, the Pakistan Democratic Movement ventured into forbidden territory. At its Gujranwala and Karachi rallies, the PDM leaders highlighted the people's economic hardships and the misery caused by skyrocketing prices of essential food items and medicines, and rightly so. But it was at the mammoth gathering in Balochistan's capital last Sunday that the speakers also addressed the issue of enforced disappearances, and gave voice to the grief of the families of the missing.

By calling Adeeba Qambrani — a young Baloch woman whose three brothers have been disappeared — to the stage, Maryam Nawaz put a face to that grief. "No longer will husbands and brothers go missing, people of Balochistan," she vowed. PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif said: "I am aware of the Baloch people's problems, Nawaz Sharif knows [...] the missing persons issue is still there. I feel pain when I see the victims."

In political terms, bringing up the issue of enforced disappearances in such a no-holds-barred way is a gesture of defiance to the powers that be, indicating the opposition alliance's willingness to cross what were hitherto considered 'red lines'. There is also no shortage of cynics who decried the PDM's move as insincere and opportunistic. They point out that people went missing in Balochistan during the PPP and PML-N governments too; mass graves had also been discovered in the province. Both points of view have merit.

It is nevertheless significant that the problem of enforced disappearances is being raised from the national stage by a section of the top political leadership.

The anguish that the families of the missing endure every day, not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead, was there for the entire country to see. Had MNA Mohsin Dawar been able to participate, it would have further underscored the extent of the problem, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa believed to be the staging ground for the highest number of enforced disappearances.

Any country where individuals can be spirited away in brazen violation of their fundamental right to due process and security of person is a democracy in name alone. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has only succeeded to some extent in tracing the whereabouts of the cases that have come before it. It has failed spectacularly in the other, equally important, aspect of its mandate; that is, “to fix responsibility on individuals or organisations responsible”.

While no part of the country is now immune to this despicable practice, highlighting the issue in Balochistan is particularly fitting because enforced disappearances have further deepened the sense of alienation among its people. Despite the vast resources that lie underneath its soil, the majority of Baloch live in poverty, the many promises made to them of a better future still unfulfilled. BNP-M’s Akhtar Mengal asked at the Quetta rally whether the Baloch consider themselves equal citizens of Pakistan. Sadly, there can be only one answer.

## **PMC’s costly steps**

NO stranger to controversy ever since it replaced the erstwhile Pakistan Medical and Dental Council, the Pakistan Medical Commission continues to court contentious issues. A month before some 150,000 aspiring medical students from across the country were to sit for their MDCAT, the PMC came up with its latest innovation: expanding their syllabus. Ever since the new syllabus was uploaded on the PMC website on Oct 19 with some surprise ie ‘out of course’ additional subjects and topics, several hundred protesting students have taken to the streets. They argue, with plenty of logic, that it would jeopardise the future of many who wouldn’t be able to compete. And that is not the only unnecessary controversy the PMC has kicked off. Earlier, it decided that MDCAT would be ‘centralised’ at the national level but allowed the National University of Medical Sciences and Aga Khan University to conduct their own independent entry tests to the surprise of everyone. This step has already led other private college

owners to demand the same exemption for their institutions. This is not all. The PMC's decision to abolish the quota for foreign students and make it mandatory for both foreign passport holders and non-resident Pakistanis to clear MDCAT in order to get admission in Pakistan is also controversial. Similarly, the permission given to private colleges to have their separate fee structures for foreigners, different from the one for Pakistani students, may encourage college owners to accommodate more foreigners in order to increase their earnings. The Pakistan Medical Association is concerned over the decision as it fears that it would potentially close the doors of medical education on many deserving local students.

More information is required to discuss the pros and cons of the PMC decisions in detail. One thing, however, is clear. The PMC has failed to explain the rationale behind these actions to stakeholders, and should have taken more time to deliberate before announcing such crucial decisions. Some of the steps appear to be aimed at serving the interests of private college owners at the cost of deserving students and medical education. It is advisable for the PMC to take all the stakeholders into confidence rather than imposing its decisions on them. At the same time, it must try and act as a regulator of medical education in the country rather than take measures that only expose it to accusations of bias.

## **Learning poverty**

A RECENT report by the World Bank has revealed that Pakistan's economy could incur considerable losses in the next couple of decades because of Covid-19's impact on the education system. The report Learning Losses in Pakistan due to Covid-19 School Closures has predicted that learning poverty in the country might rise to 79pc from the present 75pc, owing to the closure of schools. It states that around 930,000 children — an increase of around 4.2pc on the existing figure of 22m — are expected to drop out from primary and secondary schools as a result of closures and other logistical problems caused by the pandemic. Considering that around 44pc of our children are already out of school, these fresh pandemic-related dropouts could well mean that half of our child population will have no opportunity to learn, grow and eventually become productive members of the workforce. If this damage is not remedied, says the report, the country could in the next 20 years incur a loss of between \$67bn and \$155bn in GDP at its current value. Keeping in mind the shambolic state of the

country's public education system, these predictions hardly come as a surprise. Logistical issues including the absence and poor qualifications of teachers, rundown school buildings and lack of drinking water and bathrooms are no less than a curse that no government has managed to break.

Though the government has, since the start of the pandemic, attempted to put in place a remote learning infrastructure, it has largely been ineffective due to lack of digital access and societal factors. To prevent new dropouts, the World Bank report suggests conducting mass enrolment drives with cash incentives for families to encourage them to send their children to school. The fresh crisis notwithstanding, the government can also use these strategies to boost overall school enrolment and improve the graph of learning poverty. A little investment in education would go a long way in ensuring an economically stable future for Pakistan.

## **High food costs**

THE food prices in the country have soared dramatically during the last one year, fuelling concerns over the rapidly rising cost of living. Pakistanis have been confronting the sticky, double-digit food inflation every day since August last year. Although the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data shows that the pace of increase of food inflation had slowed down to 12.4pc and 15.8pc for urban and rural consumers last month after peaking at 19.5pc and nearly 24pc in January, it doesn't quite alleviate the economic sufferings of millions of people, especially in the midst of the pandemic. No data can measure the impact of the massive spike in the price of wheat flour or sugar or vegetables or pulses on the daily calorie intake or monthly budget of low- to middle-income families. In fact, many think that the PBS, which tracks the prices of a basket of essential goods and services consumed by the majority, cannot even record the actual price inflation because it does not have the capacity to do so. Thus, its price data usually understates the actual situation.

There are multiple factors behind the surging food inflation, which was more or less under control before the PTI came to power in 2018. One, the economy had been experiencing broad-based inflationary pressures for a couple of years owing to the implementation of stabilisation policies aimed at reining in the fiscal and current account deficits. It is naive to expect food prices to remain stable

when everything else is becoming more expensive because of government policies or market dynamics. Two, disruptions in the food supply chain from the pandemic also raised input and transportation costs for farmers who had no way of recovering it except by jacking up selling rates. Three, the reduction in the output of minor and major food crops, particularly wheat, and an increase in demand since the virus outbreak also created a major supply gap in the country. The failure of the government to predict the market, especially in the case of wheat and sugar shortages, and make timely arrangements to fill the gap through early imports have led prices to increase further. Instead, the government responded to the food inflation crisis with occasional administrative actions against 'profiteers and hoarders'. This compounded the shortages.

The short- to medium-term solution lies in developing the capacity to predict food commodity markets, both domestic and global. It lies in quickly addressing supply chain disruptions and covering shortages through early imports. Long-term food price stability depends on the government's willingness to revamp its agricultural policies, liberalise the trade regime allowing market forces to freely play their role, reduce the cost of farm inputs, invest in high-yield and drought-resistant seed technologies, and give growers incentives to adopt modern farm practices to increase yields. Without increasing crop output, food prices won't stabilise.

## **Peshawar blast**

THE IED blast in Peshawar on Tuesday morning brings to an end a relatively long period without high casualty terrorist attacks in the country. And Pakistanis have once again been reminded that their children are not safe in their places of learning.

At least eight young people died and more than 110 were injured when the device exploded at the Spin Jamaat or White Mosque while students from the nearby Zubbairyah madressah were attending a class there. The instructor was senior cleric Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, an Afghan national from Jalalabad whose lecture was being live-streamed when the blast occurred.

A news report in this paper quoted security sources saying it was caused by a sophisticated time bomb that "does not bear the signature of usual suspects like the TTP" and that it could be the work of a new and well-trained group. They



further said the large crater left behind in the marble floor indicates the use of a military grade explosive or TNT.

The sheer inhumanity of the attack — targeting a venue full of students with an IED packed with pellets to increase its power to maim and kill — takes one back to Dec 16, 2014, when 143 people, mostly students, were slaughtered by militants at the Army Public School, Peshawar. This time around though, there is some speculation that Sheikh Haqqani may have been the actual target.

The theory is bolstered by the fact that the cleric survived a previous attempt to assassinate him in August 2016, when he was injured in a gun attack suspected to have been carried out by elements of the militant Islamic State group. In a video message he posted after the recent blast, Sheikh Haqqani has indicated that he believes this was yet another attempt on his life by the IS.

While this is a matter for conjecture at least until a claim of responsibility emerges or evidence to support it is found, what is clear is that militants are regrouping and perhaps evolving further into better-trained outfits. The signs have been there for the past several months, with deadly terrorist attacks as well as intelligence-based operations regularly taking place in the tribal districts. The innocent blood spilt in Peshawar on Tuesday illustrates how tenuous is the peace secured after so many years of bloodshed. We cannot afford to take our eye off what is a clear and present danger.

## **Growing virus concerns**

THE feared second wave of Covid-19 cases in Pakistan has arrived, with daily confirmed cases and hospitalisations increasing at an alarming rate. At the time of writing, 14 people in the previous 24 hours had succumbed to the virus and 825 had tested positive, marking a rise in both mortality and positivity rates. On Wednesday, after repeated warnings of rising Covid-19 cases across the country, the National Command and Operation Centre made it compulsory for all citizens to wear a face mask when leaving their homes — a directive that came as the positivity rate approached 3pc and the total reported number of active cases in the country crossed 11,000. All provinces have been asked to ensure that people wear face masks and adhere to the SOPs, particularly in bazaars, shopping malls, restaurants and on public transport.

The decision to enforce mask-wearing is indeed welcome and necessary, but it is a step that should have been taken much earlier. Many countries that emerged from the first wave of infections made mask-wearing mandatory even during the months when cases were fewer — a guideline authorities in Pakistan did not declare mandatory till this week. A few months after the pandemic began, international health authorities started to stress on the importance of mask-wearing as there is clear evidence that face coverings significantly lower transmission. In the post-July euphoria period in Pakistan, however, when Covid-19 cases were successfully lowered after restrictions and SOPs were enforced, mask-wearing sadly remained voluntary. Still, it is not too late to enforce the SOPs and stem the rising Covid-19 tide to prevent an all-out disaster. Authorities must build on the knowledge and strengths that helped them lower the curve previously and use the data available to take decisive action. They must also improve their messaging to the public and convey how serious the threat has become. Without strict adherence to the SOPs, the closure of schools and businesses will become inevitable — something that will deeply impact the education sector and economy which are already reeling from the restrictions of the first wave.

## **US-India agreement**

THE United States and India have signed a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement which is expected to boost their bilateral defence and military ties at a time when India is facing a tense stand-off with China in Ladakh.

American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper flew into New Delhi to sign the pact with their Indian counterparts. BECA has finalised the completion of four pacts of a strategic nature between the two countries. BECA will give India access to classified geospatial data as well as critical information that has military application. The regional tour by these senior US officials, which has included visits to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, is aimed at countering growing Chinese influence.

In this respect, the US secretary of state raised the issue of India's border tensions with China and expressed solidarity with New Delhi. In Sri Lanka, the US official called China a "predator". The Chinese foreign ministry responded by saying Mr Pompeo's accusations reflected his "Cold War mentality" and urged

him to “stop sowing discord between China and regional countries as well as undermining the regional peace and stability”.

The US may have its strategic reasons to block Chinese influence in the region, but it should be well aware of the complexities that are weaved into interstate regional dynamics here. Cosying up to India is one way in which Washington wants to resist the domination of China but this has a direct impact on its relations with Islamabad.

Within the larger domain of superpower rivalry, Pakistan has followed a well-calibrated policy to maintain constructive relations with both China and the US. This suits us and there is no reason why we would want to weaken our ties with one power in favour of the other. With China, we have maintained a strategically close and well-aligned relationship since the 1970s, and both states have come even closer with the rolling out of CPEC. With the US, we continue to have a strong relationship which is currently paying dividends in many areas including Afghanistan.

It is a delicate balance that we have maintained but it can be adversely impacted if the US starts to enhance India’s military capabilities that can constitute a clear and present danger to Pakistan. Washington knows well how India attempted a failed bombing inside Pakistan in early 2019 and nearly brought the two countries to war. It was Pakistan’s strategic restraint, despite thwarting Indian aggression, which avoided an armed conflict.

However, the Narendra Modi government’s threatening statements against Pakistan continue to keep the region under the threat of violence. The US should weigh these factors well and ensure its actions contribute to promoting peace instead of feeding into India’s belligerence. This is a complex region and Washington should deal with it as such.

## **CII decision**

OVER the years, the Council of Islamic Ideology has generated its fair share of criticism for coming up with controversial observations. However, this time in a welcome break from the past, it has ruled, in the matter of the construction of a Hindu temple in Islamabad, that there was nothing in the Constitution or Sharia to bar the provision of a place of worship for a minority group in the country. The

dispute had been referred to it by the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. CII chairman Qibla Ayaz also took into account the concerns of those who had opposed the building of the temple complex in the capital at state expense. Hence, the government cannot spend directly on creating this temple and the community centre meant for weddings and other ceremonies. For such funds, a new head would have to be created exclusively for the community of which 3,000 members hope to use the promised facility as well as the nearby old temple in Saidpur village. The decision also allows Saidpur temple and an adjoining dharmshala to be handed over for use by the Hindu community. Hindu leaders are hoping that the project can be executed without further hiccups. In agreement are others who believe in a dignified coexistence based on the principles of tolerance and mutual respect — values that many in this country will reflect on, especially today on the birthday of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

In these highly volatile times there is a need for countries, leaders and the public in general to shun all forms of discrimination — social, economic or legal — in national life. All too often, communal feelings have run high, compromising the safety of minority groups. Patient deliberation and course correction are needed to resolve issues such as forced conversions. This government has taken some positive steps towards recognising religious freedoms — such as inaugurating the Kartarpur Corridor. However, a greater effort is needed at all levels to ensure that minorities don't remain on the fringes of society.

## **A raucous house**

IN a democracy, parliament is responsible for the key functions of scrutiny, legislation and debate. Yet, in the current environment, our National Assembly sessions have been dominated by name-calling, unsavoury speeches and obnoxious behaviour.

In this week's episode of what can be dubbed 'the chronicles of chaos', the chair of the lower house surprised everyone by ordering the ejection of a protesting MNA. In a dramatic scene, the speaker instructed the sergeant-at-arms to escort a PPP lawmaker out of the house, after he loudly protested that his question regarding the tax returns of the prime minister's advisers had been ignored.

Although a senior PPP MNA tried to pacify the deputy speaker by tendering an apology and asked the chair to withdraw his ruling, Mr Qasim Khan Suri insisted

he would allow the lawmaker to sit in the house only if he exited the premises first and returned with his permission.

Similar scenes of utter pandemonium have sadly become a defining feature of the proceedings of the National Assembly. Instead of performing their functions of scrutiny, legislative business and debate for the public good, sessions have been reduced to shouting matches with no regard for the sanctity of the house.

If one were to examine the rules governing parliamentary procedure, it would be amply clear that MNAs belonging to both the treasury and opposition benches violate nearly every point relating to decorum. But though the blame must be apportioned to both, the responsibility of bringing effective legislation lies primarily with the government — and on this count, it has failed miserably.

Its relationship with the opposition members is so toxic that it is near impossible to engage in any constructive debate both inside and outside the Assembly. While both sides should exhibit higher levels of courtesy and fight the tendency to shout each other down, it is the government that must provide an environment conducive to vigorous, healthy debate to enable sound legislation. Instead, all too often unhealthy politics has seen the government bypass parliament in legislative matters through ordinances — a dangerous trend that undermines democratic values as the arbitrary decrees seek to circumvent parliamentary opposition to government policy.

The government should show maturity and rethink its approach on engagement, or it will continue to rely on questionable means of lawmaking. This will dilute the democratic character of the Constitution by taking the power of legislation away from the people.