

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of September 2018

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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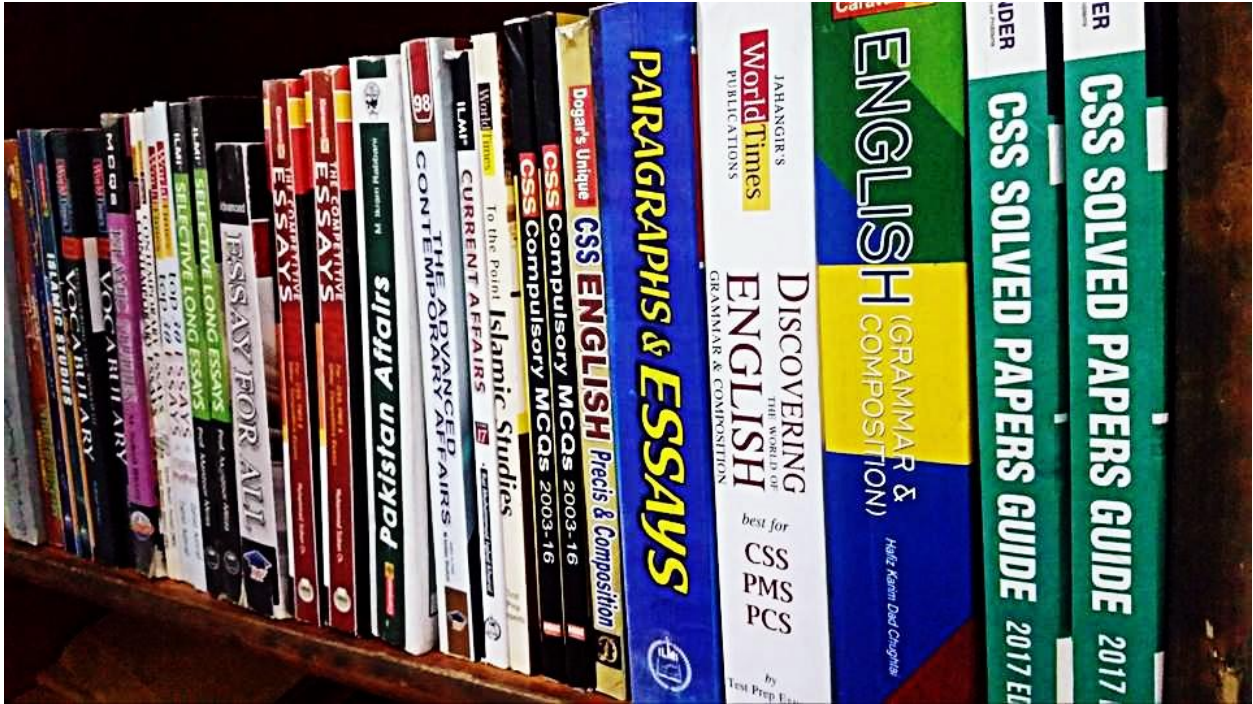
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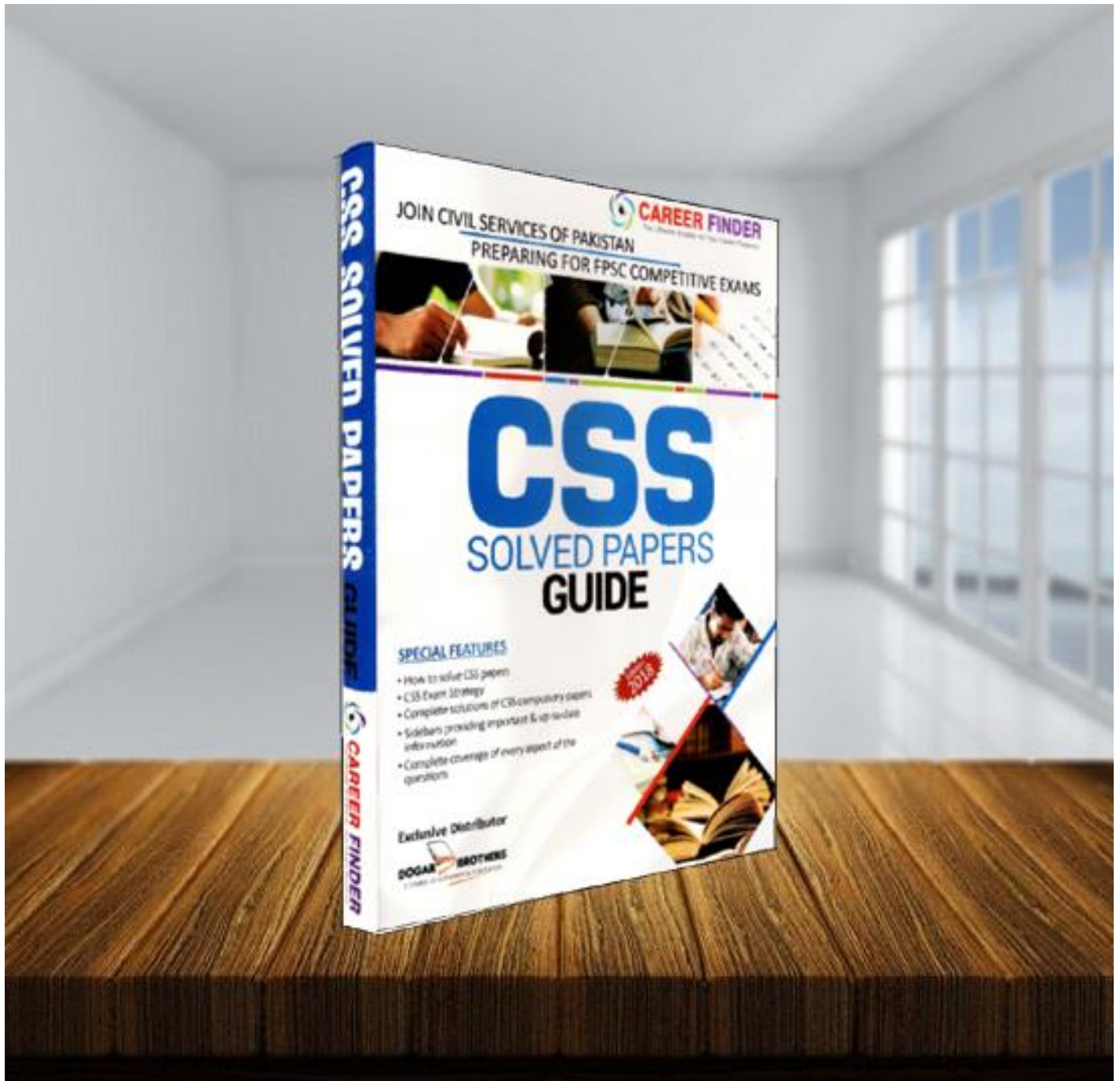
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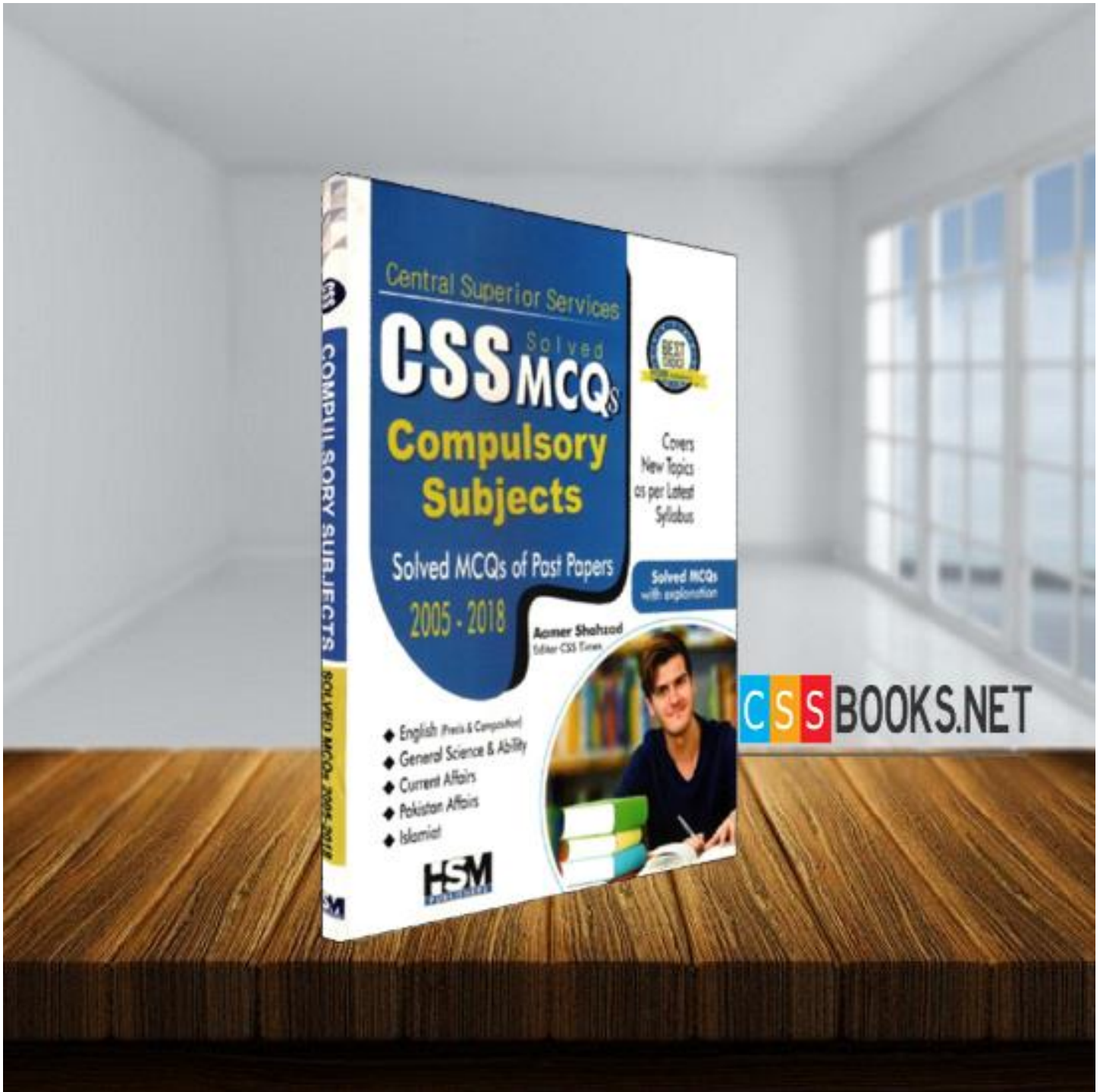
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Indus water breakthrough

After many years, a small but significant breakthrough seems to have been made in the talks between the Pakistani and Indian water commissioners.

The talks had been largely stalled since 2014 so the latest agreement by the Indian side to permit an inspection of two of the facilities being built on the Chenab river is a step forward. Even in the latest round of the Permanent Indus Commission talks, the first day seemed to lead to a cul-de-sac. It was only at the end of the second day that news of the breakthrough emerged.

It would have been better for both sides had they jointly briefed the media, or if that were not possible, issued a joint press release. Ending the talks without any public word is counterproductive as it creates an impression that runs contrary to the positive news emerging of an agreement for inspections. Now that it seems a deal has been struck for inspection, the next step is for Pakistan to make the most of the opportunity.

At issue are two hydropower projects that India is building on its side of the Chenab river whose waters belong to Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty. The same treaty, however, gives India the right to build hydroelectric projects on the river provided that it does not divert water for agricultural purposes. One other project on the same river, the so-called Baglihar dam, had already been the subject of a bitter feud between the two countries around a decade ago when the matter was sent to a neutral expert for settlement. The results of that exercise were mixed, with both sides claiming victory once the neutral expert's verdict came in.

The two projects this time round are the Pakal Dul dam and the Lower Kalnai hydroelectric project. The former is a large project totalling some 1,000MW, while the latter is smaller at about 48MW. But both of them involve the diversion of waters from tributaries that feed the Chenab, much like their cousin built on the Neelum river, the Kishenganga Dam.

This is a different design configuration that involves the diversion of water from one tributary to another to take advantage of the water head, but the same water is returned to the river at a different spot further downstream. As such, its technical evaluation becomes more difficult, and the Indian side should honour its

agreement in full by allowing the Pakistani delegation to visit the entire area where the project is spread out.

Both sides should make an effort to ensure that resorting to arbitration is avoided. Almost every Indian project on the Chenab and Neelum is landing up at the altar of the World Bank, portending an unhealthy trend with regard to both countries that appear unable to resolve their mutual differences.

Child sexual abuse

It is time the government adopted tough legal measures to prosecute child sexual abuse cases so that we are able to protect our future generations. Calling out the cruel indifference of the state towards child rights, a recent report on child sexual abuse revealed 2,322 cases countrywide between January and June this year, compared to the same period in 2017 when 1,764 incidents were recorded. This indicates a 32pc increase. Collating media reports, Sahil, a child rights organisation, noted that more than 12 children were abused every day. These statistics not only underline the deep-seated complexity of the problem but remind us of the perils of not taking action against abusers. When the rule of law is inadequate, perpetrators remain unaffected, especially when the police respond in a way that does not protect underprivileged victims. Children between the ages of six and 15 years are the most vulnerable, while there is an alarming increase in under-five rape cases. This uptick in numbers, however, could be attributed to the increase in complaints filed as some victims and their families have begun to courageously speak out after the public outrage spurred by the Kasur child sexual scandal in 2015. Yet, breaking the silence can prove perilous; survivors are often disbelieved, even ostracised. According to the report, 48pc of abusers were acquainted with their victims. When abusers belong to the same community or family, it is easier for them to lure their victims and threaten them into silence.

Although the rape and murder of six-year-old Zainab in Kasur elicited national anger not too long ago, much remains to be done to tackle the underlying causes of such crimes, as well as to adopt measures to prosecute sexual violence. To this end, not only is Pakistan a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the state has legislated to criminalise child sexual assault, child pornography and trafficking. The problem, however, lies in inadequate

implementation. As a first step, the government must constitute a national commission to protect child rights. Secondly, streamlining better processes to facilitate complaints and providing counselling and medical help are imperative. Raising public awareness in schools and in the media on recognising and preventing all forms of abuse should be mandatory. For too long, the epidemic of violence against children has been sidelined. This must change to protect their future.

Anti-culture minister

A TYPICALLY fired-up Fayyaz Chohan, Punjab minister for culture and information, is hardly the kind of auspicious note that PTI well-wishers would have wanted the new government to strike at the very beginning of its term. Mr Chohan has offered some sort of an apology for his recent insulting remarks about stage and film actors in the face of a string of protests from showbiz personalities. Even so, the storm is refusing to die down; more and more 'proof' is being plucked from internet footage to show just how anti-culture the new minister can be. The PTI's predecessor in Punjab, the PML-N, was widely criticised for not promoting an environment that was conducive to cultural expression in the province. Those who believe that the state through various governments still has a huge role to play in helping create an atmosphere where culture can flourish, instead, find themselves facing a troubling scenario and fear overreach. Their concerns are bound to persist unless the statement of regret that the minister has extended over his remarks about professional performers of long standing is followed by certain practical steps where he moves in a direction opposite to the one he appeared to be headed in.

Culture is a sensitive subject and must be handled with care; at the same time, it offers tremendous possibilities for anyone wanting to make a quick impact. A minister belonging to a party that many say represents the long-suppressed sentiment of the mainstream should really relish the opportunity of being in a position to undertake corrective work in the area. It does not quite fit into the scheme of things when the first impression created by the man in charge of culture in this culturally diverse province indicates a desire for narrow control and suppression; instead, he should be promising to work towards greater freedom after a prolonged dry spell. Punjab needs a minister who inspires ideas and movement in society, and not someone who promotes taboos.

Better ties with Iran

AFTER Prime Minister Imran Khan declined to travel abroad immediately in order to focus on a domestic governance agenda, there had been an added emphasis on which foreign leader would travel to Pakistan first. That Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is the first foreign leader to meet the new prime minister is of some significance then. To begin with, it demonstrates that Mr Khan's pledge in his victory speech on July 26 to stabilise and improve relations with Pakistan's neighbours is a serious goal of his government. Mr Khan's meeting with the Iranian foreign minister ahead of a visit to Pakistan by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also sends a signal that the PTI government will attempt to chart an independent course. Furthermore, Mr Zarif's meeting will not have gone unnoticed in Saudi Arabia. So if Mr Khan has struck the right and courageous note in foreign policy, the PTI government will almost certainly need to navigate past serious external challenges to an independent-minded foreign policy.

To be clear, it is in Pakistan's essential national interest to maintain good ties with Iran and, indeed, all its neighbours. But the leadership in Saudi Arabia has virtually declared Iran a mortal enemy, and US President Donald Trump is determined to bring the Iranian economy to its knees with severe unilateral sanctions. Pakistan needs equally stable relations with all three countries, and, therefore, must tread a difficult path. Emphasising border security cooperation with Iran and supporting it in its tussle with the US over the nuclear deal that the latter country has unilaterally pulled out of are sensible options to pursue at the moment. The nuclear deal, formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was painstakingly negotiated not just between Iran and the US but the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany and the rest of the EU too. All signatories other than the US remain committed to the agreement and most are willing to consider improvements to the deal to address the Trump administration's hostility to it.

While it is unlikely that the US will reverse course quickly or that Saudi Arabia's hostility towards Iran will ebb anytime soon, Pakistan and those countries still committed to the JCPOA are taking a principled stance in support of dialogue and international agreements. At some point, better sense must prevail, and Pakistan and Iran stand to make significant gains from ramping up bilateral trade and other economic activities. Nearly a decade ago, there was, briefly, hope that

Pakistan would find a way to build and activate the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, but fierce US opposition prevented Pakistan from getting Iranian gas at a time of great shortages in the country. Today, Pakistan ought to be able to explain to the US and Saudi Arabia — in fact, both should realise themselves — that its legitimate economic and security needs require stable ties with Iran and other regional countries.

FATF challenge

FINANCE MINISTER Asad Umar did the right thing by highlighting in the Senate the challenge that the country faces in the form of implementation of the action plan submitted to the Financial Action Task Force. He also did well to assure everyone that Pakistan would not be blacklisted and that the action plan as submitted would be implemented fully. The words inspired some confidence that a pragmatic approach was being adopted. This government will be tested to the hilt in all its contacts with global bodies and the international community, and in meeting the many demands and expectations that are placed upon it. At the moment, FATF is at the forefront of the challenge. The forthcoming review will evaluate the progress made in implementing the action plan agreed to during the caretaker regime, and that was drawn up by the previous government. Here, there will be no room to say ‘we would like to revisit this action plan’, or to ask for time to find one’s feet.

Some of the elements of the plan — in light of the observations of those who have seen it — are fairly straightforward. For example, controlling currency smuggling at the borders and bringing illegal currency exchange under control should be relatively easy compared to the larger and more important task of curbing the activities of groups and people proscribed by the UN in Resolution 1267. At that point, the government will have a choice to make: stand by the action plan and confront those groups and people at home, or support the proscribed entities and confront FATF. The stakes are high on both sides. The other low-hanging fruit in the plan can be worked on more easily, such as ramping up action under the Anti Money Laundering Act and ensuring more prosecutions and convictions. Revamping the legislative and regulatory framework to choke off avenues for benami transactions and businesses is also

relatively simple, though actually stamping out these practices is a bigger and far more arduous job given the size of the informal sector in Pakistan. Mr Umar's speech inspires hope that the government will take its international pledges seriously. But the real test of his intentions comes when the implementation of the action plan begins in earnest. One can only hope that the government delivers on its commitment.

Quetta's water crisis

Balochistan's government has declared a state of 'water emergency' in Quetta. This announcement should not surprise anyone keeping an eye on recent developments in the province. Many parts of the capital have been without water for months. Households have to rely on costly private tankers, which are known to exploit the water scarcity situation. This Eid, for instance, tanker companies were reportedly charging up to Rs5,000 for a single tank of water. Unfortunately, with drought-like conditions, rising temperatures and power shortages, residents have little option but to pay up. A few kilometres away from the city, Hanna Lake — its turquoise waters once hydrating the cantonment area and preventing the flow of rain and floodwater from the mountains to the city — is now a dry stretch of land. Trees that lined the valley are barren. In other regions, almond trees had to be cut down due to the amount of water they required.

How did we get here? The crisis can be attributed to natural factors (cyclical droughts), but also manmade conditions: poor water management, deforestation and population growth. Groundwater, the main water source for domestic and agricultural use, is said to be depleting at 0.884 metres annually. And despite a ban on the unauthorised installation of tube wells, their rampant (and illegal) use continues. Environmentalists warn that if concrete steps are not taken, Quetta will witness large parts of its population displaced in the near future. Climate-based migration has already been identified in GB and Sindh. The previous government proposed a Rs40bn project for allocating water from the Pat Feeder canal, but nothing came of it. Given that people cast their votes on the promise of water ('paani do, vote lo'), the new government must work closely with Wasa and the Public Health and Engineering Department to come up with a water management plan and ensure its implementation.

US aid cut

The US has delivered an object lesson in how not to conduct diplomacy.

Mere days ahead of a short visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Pakistan, the US Department of Defence has announced a permanent aid cut to Pakistan of \$300m. The move has surely been coordinated across the Trump administration and now what remains to be seen is if Secretary Pompeo will try and bully the Pakistani leadership during his visit or if he will be deployed in a more traditional good-cop diplomatic role.

The aid cut-off is not new and has already been factored into budgetary estimates, so perhaps the measure is designed to placate hawks inside the Trump administration. But it will surely rankle in Pakistan and rightly so: more than the aid, it is the hectoring and aggressive tone of the Trump administration towards Pakistan combined with an apparent disregard for a peace process in Afghanistan that is a problem.

Yet, Pakistan ought to react cautiously and avoid unnecessary public wrangling. The US aid cut-off has come on the heels of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's warm visit to Pakistan in which the latter emphasised its support for Iran and the nuclear deal that the US unilaterally pulled out of. That could be a factor in the Trump administration's apparent pique at Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan is almost sure to shortly turn to international creditors and the US has already indicated a willingness to overtly bring geopolitics into the workings of the IFIs.

But a cautious public reaction can be accompanied by a robust defence in private. The focus in Afghanistan should be a peace process with the Afghan Taliban, and while Pakistan has consistently expressed an interest in supporting a peace process, it can only do so much in the face of political disarray in Afghanistan and reluctance in the US to engage the Taliban in dialogue.

The US and Taliban may be locked in a different kind of race now: both are trying to maximise their advantage on the battlefield to win greater concessions from the other side at the dialogue table. If that is in fact what the US is aiming for, Pakistan can emphasise the role it can play to facilitate a dialogue among the Taliban, the Afghan government and the US.

The longest war in US history will not change dramatically in military terms, but political support for the war in the US can only further deteriorate. President Donald Trump clearly only reluctantly agreed to extend the war in Afghanistan and is reported to be frustrated with the lack of progress that he was promised by his generals.

Secretary Pompeo and US national security and military officials ought to stop pursuing counterproductive strategies and work towards the common international goal of ending the war in Afghanistan and blunting the IS threat.

PM's request

To be fair, no government can be expected to work miracles within weeks of coming to power. That is why Imran Khan's request at a meeting with a number of anchorpersons at Prime Minister House in Islamabad — that his government be given three months before its performance is criticised — is not unreasonable.

Among the issues discussed were: the accountability of PTI leaders; the use of official helicopters by the Punjab chief minister's family; the altercation between the First Lady's former husband and DPO Pakpattan that resulted in the latter's transfer; and unseemly remarks by the Punjab information minister against a theatre star. The prime minister assured the media persons that there would be a perceptible difference in how the country was run in three months' time.

The prime minister has a point, to some extent. There are many areas of governance in Pakistan that require major systemic reform. Sound policies are needed, and these will only show incremental results over time. For example, Finance Minister Asad Umar has said it may take up to three years to stabilise Pakistan's deteriorating financial situation.

Shrill denunciations are not going to hasten the process. Thus it is only fitting that the new administration, barely two weeks into its term, be cut some slack over policy matters in the initial few months. However, that does not mean the media should turn a blind eye to the missteps and avoidable mistakes made by the government in the meantime. After all, while PTI has come into power at the centre for the first time, it has led the KP government for the last five years and should have a grip on what is required to avoid kerfuffles that only provide fodder for naysayers and distract from the larger picture.

The actions and utterances of those occupying some of the top government posts have come in for valid criticism. So has PTI's stated intention to overhaul media regulation — the federal information minister used that loaded word, 'censorship' — a move denounced by various journalist bodies.

Such missteps have taken away from some of the positives: for example, the government has lifted political censorship from all state-run media outlets, and some of its appointees to important posts are competent individuals. The media must be a watchdog for public interest, but a balanced one, at the same time.

Palestine aid cut

GEOPOLITICS can be a cruel and heartless domain. However, even in the realm of international relations, there are some basic moral standards all parties are expected to respect. Included in these is the protection that should be provided to refugees fleeing war and persecution. In this respect, the Palestinian refugee population has been suffering for decades: first after the creation of Israel, and then after Arab lands were occupied by the Zionist state in 1967. However, in a recent move, the Trump-led US administration has decided to cut all funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency. The US is the largest donor to the agency, which provides critical help to Palestinian refugees in areas such as education and food aid. The Americans have said the UNRWA is "irredeemably flawed" while Israel has expectedly welcomed the move. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has termed the funding cut a "flagrant assault against the Palestinian people", while an agency spokesperson has said the move will affect "some of the most marginalised ... and fragile communities in the Middle East", including the disabled, women and children.

The Trump administration has long been considered hostile to the Palestinian people. Just last week, the American ambassador to the UN said "Palestinians continue to bash America". She should know that when the US sides with Israel each time the latter unleashes death and destruction upon the Arabs, the Palestinians cannot be expected to declare their love for America. The fact is that the US has abandoned all pretence of being neutral in the Arab-Israeli dispute. In fact, it has become a staunch defender of Israeli brutality. The cutting of aid to some of the Middle East's most vulnerable people — uprooted from their homeland as a result of colonial machinations — and the politicisation of

refugees is just the latest in a long list of anti-Palestine moves emerging from Washington. Instead of trying to address Arab grievances and win 'hearts and minds', the ruling clique in Washington seems content to permanently alienate them.

Neptra report

THE latest report by the power sector regulator, Neptra, has highlighted two crucial issues that continue to bedevil the sector despite all the work that the previous PML-N government claimed to have carried out in this area. The first challenge is one that has been known for a long time: the sector suffers from a chronic inability to meet its own costs despite healthy tariffs having been granted. This is because the billing and recovery machinery remains weak and is beset by corruption and incompetence. The second challenge highlighted is one that has not received adequate attention. The integrity of the numbers churned out by the power bureaucracy is dubious at best. The two challenges are interlinked. With dubious numbers come dubious policy directions and advice, and even more dubious implementation.

The report is based on data from the year 2016-2017. Nevertheless the underlying problems it points to are more enduring. It says, for example, that, between them, K-Electric and the other distribution companies lost around Rs111bn in that year due to recovery problems and higher-than-allowed technical losses. Bringing this amount down will not be easy, but the process certainly begins by rectifying the data being released by the power bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the Economic Coordination Committee decided to conduct an audit of the power sector to determine the source of the losses, though not enough is known about the terms of this exercise. In order to be successful, the audit will require access to reliable data, and if the auditors are to generate it themselves then we will be waiting a lifetime for the result.

Rectifying the data on the basis of which the power bureaucracy functions is important before any other corrective step is undertaken. Towards this end, the government should mandate a more regular and rigorous data release template. This should include operational as well as financial data. Release cycles can stretch from daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly to annual periods. However, the power bureaucracy should be made to issue data that gives us a snapshot of the

functional health of the system at designated points in time. Once such a data stream has been activated, it will become trickier to fudge the numbers because any unnatural intervention in the data stream will create an anomaly that will be contradicted by information elsewhere. Getting the numbers right is necessary because the power bureaucracy is too accustomed to operating in the dark where it can present to those charged with overseeing the sector whatever picture it desires. Corrective steps in the power bureaucracy's functioning will always be limited by the sheer scope of discretionary decision-making within the bureaucracy, and constraining this should be the top priority.

Living standards data

HOUSEHOLD surveys are an important source of socioeconomic data because they focus on significant indicators and the information derived is used to institute development policies. This week, it was learnt that the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) is undertaking its first-ever social, living standards and household integrated economic survey in KP's seven tribal districts, most of which have felt the impact of years of conflict, military operations and displacement. Also responsible for the 2017 housing and population census, the PBS is constitutionally mandated to conduct this multi-topic survey and will report results in June 2019. It must not only ensure that the data collated is representative of the population — tribal women included — but that it is useful and accurate. Only then can this treasure trove of information be used to devise sustainable policies for which allocations should be earmarked in the province's future annual development plans. Following the Fata-KP merger, this exercise is a significant step towards mainstreaming a less developed region where basic rights, such as education and healthcare, are overlooked. For too long, the tribal belt has remained an inaccessible black hole, its people suffering the wrath of all warring sides. Periodically, handpicked donor agency projects facilitated through the Fata Secretariat only brought temporary relief. Therefore, much rests on the outcome of this extensive survey which will assist in identifying myriad challenges, including gaps in education and healthcare, unemployment, lack of access to nutrition and the status of women. Undoubtedly, the PBS will be faced with the challenge of reaching volatile areas as was apparent during the 2017 national census. However, mustering local support and security assistance is one solution.

If this region is to experience progress, the abysmal lack of agency accorded to tribal women must be reversed. For this to happen, women's voices must be heard with their livelihood, health, education and other requirements documented. The oft-used argument of lack of access to tribal women owing to an orthodox patriarchy is no justification for them to remain voiceless. That said, stakeholder inclusivity, including the youth, is imperative as the knowledge collected will go on to form the bedrock of socioeconomic intervention. Take, as an example, education and employment data: both are necessary for targeted intervention on the ground. In equal measure, key state ministries must regard the knowledge gauged through this exercise as helpful in helping to understand Fata's policy issues and developing strategies in response.

Asiad debacle

PAKISTAN'S performance at the recently concluded Asian Games in Jakarta was nothing short of a national disaster. The fact that the country's 358-member contingent returned with just four bronze medals in hand lays bare the plummeting standard of sports in the country. It is not as if sports administrators here suddenly woke up to the Asiad challenge. Neither were the players left with very few months to prepare for the contest. They all had four years to train for the Games. And yet, they made a mockery of the whole show. Regretfully, instead of putting together the best possible combinations, working out strategies and ironing out player deficiencies over the years, sports administrators have been found focusing on extending their terms in office while successive governments have simply turned a blind eye. The bitter truth is that the power struggle within and outside the sporting corridors of Pakistan is accompanied by bureaucratic red tape, political interference, conflicts of interest, and corruption. This has resulted in a substandard infrastructure, doping problems, incompetent coaches, an illogical domestic calendar, dwindling sponsorship money and an ever-shrinking national circuit.

The only highlight of the games was the bronze medal brought home by young karateka Nargis. Hailing from the Hazara community in Quetta, the talented 19-year-old did the nation proud by beating her Nepali opponent. The other three bronze medals for Pakistan were won in kabbadi, squash and javelin throw competitions. Not too surprisingly, the hockey team returned empty-handed yet again and now must face a long and arduous qualification process for the Tokyo

2020 Olympics. For long, Pakistan hockey has been a game of musical chairs, and prolific Olympians from yesteryear have allegedly taken turns to deprive the game of its glory and funds. That, of course, needs to be remedied urgently. Among the many challenges facing the new government is the particularly stiff one of inspiring confidence among sportspersons and adopting revolutionary measures to resurrect sports in the country.

Above politics?

A third consecutive parliament and provincial assemblies have elected a third president in little over a decade since a return to civilian government in Pakistan.

To the extent that the election is a democratic milestone and has not been marred by allegations of misconduct or rigging, the new president, Arif Alvi, and the presidential electoral college ought to be congratulated.

In a post-18th Amendment landscape, the presidency is a wholly ceremonial office, but Mr Alvi has pledged to be a more visible president for the full federation. After the underwhelming term of the outgoing president, Mamnoon Hussain, and the intense politicisation of the presidency during Asif Zardari's term, perhaps Mr Alvi will be able to strike a better balance.

As a symbol of the federation, the presidency can draw attention to areas of the country that are either less prominent in the national discourse or ignored by the political class. At all times, the president must remain above the political fray, but a judicious use of the presidential platform can help highlight causes that truly bind the nation.

The poll also completes a full round of elections to the provincial assemblies, the National Assembly, the Senate and the presidency this year. The PTI is now firmly installed in three provinces and at the centre and will need to quickly pivot from campaign mode to governing. Prime Minister Imran Khan has sketched an ambitious domestic reforms agenda, but thus far few strategies and road maps have been revealed.

Certainly, much will depend on the path that Finance Minister Asad Umar chooses: austerity mandated by the IMF could dash many of the government's plans on the expenditure side. But if reforms are to be enacted, the beginning of a government's term is when there is significant political capital to spend.

A quick, though not hasty, rollout of a reforms agenda will also give the PTI governments at the centre and in the provinces enough time to assess whether the results are satisfactory and make changes before electoral considerations once again come into play a few years down the road. After a controversial election year, much will depend on whether or not the PTI governs in a forward-thinking manner.

For the combined opposition, the presidential election is yet another indication of confusion and uncertainty in its ranks. The PPP and the PML-N will need to decide relatively soon if they can work together in opposition or if separate paths are preferable.

The opposition has an important parliamentary role, but for the opposition to help strengthen democratic institutions, there needs to be consensus and coordination. The PML-N and PPP are entitled to choose their own paths; for the sake of the democratic project, they should make their choice clear now.

Myanmar journalists

ALLEGATIONS of treachery are a useful tool to silence journalists. So it was proved again on Monday with the conviction of two Myanmar journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, under their country's Official Secrets Act. Both were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. Working for Reuters, the two were arrested last December under the draconian British colonial-era law on vague allegations of "possessing important and secret government documents related to Rakhine State and military security". More to the point, they had incurred the authorities' ire because they were among the rare local journalists who dared report on the massacre of the Rohingya by the Myanmar military. The conviction follows on the heels of a UN panel's harsh indictment of the Myanmar regime and a damning report by a fact-finding mission of the global body which recommends the country's top military officials be investigated and prosecuted for the violence against the Rohingya. The horrific campaign of gang rape and murder — which the report describes as having been carried out with "genocidal intent" — drove 700,000 Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh.

Myanmar's military regime has on several occasions used the archaic Official Secrets Act to stifle dissent and prevent the exposure of its human rights violations. But it is not alone in those objectives. As governments around the

world exhibit an increasing tendency towards authoritarianism, the climate for journalists is growing ever more hostile. Turkey, Egypt, India and Pakistan are among the recent examples where media repression has been particularly troubling, even though it may vary in form from one country to another — at least for now. In countries where the state has much to hide — a situation that goes hand in hand with scant respect for human rights — journalists are maligned as traitors and troublemakers, making them vulnerable to vigilante violence, online abuse and harassment. They have been arrested and convicted on trumped-up charges of terrorism, and subjected to enforced disappearance. Many have lost their lives — 39 so far in 2018 — either targeted or killed in the line of duty while covering conflict situations. A number of media outlets too have been placed under tremendous financial pressure through various tactics by the state. Local and international journalist bodies must continue to demand that governments respect the right of the media to do its duty by the people. Journalists themselves, whatever their differences, must unite over this cause.

Seeds of change?

THE government has set an ambitious target of planting ‘10bn trees’ in the next five years; that’s roughly 5.4m trees a day! Few can deny the cause is noble — but is it achievable? Or sustainable? Are these figures even realistic? While the public is enthralled by the idea, environmentalists are more cautious. Large-scale plantations have been carried out by nearly all previous governments though the size, scale and catchy PR of the latest operation seem unprecedented. Unfortunately, these ambitious projects proved to be ill-conceived. Firstly, invasive and damaging non-native species such as the ‘water-guzzling’ eucalyptus and conocarpus were introduced to local terrains in the ‘60s and ‘70s. These species only thrive in water-logged areas, and Pakistan’s diverse topography and unique biodiversity were not factored in. In urban settings, the conocarpus’ invasive roots damaged drains and pipelines. In some cases, these trees had to be cut down, less than a decade after being planted, as they were lowering the water table. Secondly, in attempting to plant the highest number of trees in the shortest amount of time, they were not set in place properly. In some instances, ‘seed bombs’ were scattered carelessly. Or the trees were not watered adequately. There has been a very low survival rate of such trees. Additionally, while efforts were diverted to planting new trees, little attention was paid to existing trees and forests that continued to be cut down for timber and

land. Lastly, corruption in government departments, including forestry, has remained a menace. Even the PTI's 'billion-tree tsunami' in KP — praised by independent audit groups — is currently under investigation by NAB for alleged embezzlement of funds.

Pakistan is the seventh most vulnerable country to the risks of climate change. That Prime Minister Imran Khan included 'environment' in his 11-point agenda shows sincerity. Time will tell if that sincerity translates into sustainable change, and whether this government can learn from mistakes of the past.

Political interference

The PTI's battle to depoliticise the bureaucracy and make it more efficient will run into problems that are both expected and unexpected.

Already, from Chakwal to Dera Ghazi Khan, senior bureaucrats have alleged that the PTI's elected representatives have sought to influence the transfer and postings of local bureaucrats. There also remains a controversial matter before the Supreme Court regarding alleged political interference in the transfer of a senior policeman.

The instances of alleged political interference in the functioning of the police and local bureaucracies could be interpreted as teething problems for the PTI governments at the centre and in the provinces that are relatively inexperienced — or perhaps they are early signs that the PTI's rhetoric of change is quickly coming undone. At this early point, the PTI governments have a great deal of control over whether or not bureaucratic reforms are implemented. A historic opportunity surely awaits.

What is clear is that a balance will have to be struck between rightful and necessary legal protections for bureaucrats and productivity demands. Prime Minister Imran Khan and senior PTI leaders have fiercely attacked the bureaucracy and police for well-known politicisation and poor performance.

But as early incidents suggest, the bureaucracy and police also need adequate protection from unjust and illegal demands made by the elected representatives and allies of the governing party. Previously in KP, the preferred means of depoliticisation of at least the police force was for Mr Khan to himself select the police chiefs and then back them to do their jobs. But at the national level and

with three provincial governments to manage, such personalised control is neither possible nor desirable. What is required is for the institutions of the bureaucracy and the police to be strengthened — to have internal checks and balances and systems of promotion that favour the competent and the professional.

Moreover, professional reforms in the bureaucracy and police must be accompanied by awareness programmes for the public and elected representatives too. One of the reasons why the general public is often easily exploited by local bureaucrats and the police is a lack of awareness of the rules and the law.

As for elected representatives, especially the so-called electables, whose very attraction to the voter is premised on access to the police and local bureaucracy, there is a need for sustained awareness campaigns to be conducted.

Too often, an incoming government promises great positive change, but that commitment is easily outlasted by status quo elements within the government itself. Prime Minister Khan has both promised sweeping reforms and asked for some time for positive change to become apparent. That is a reasonable request. The bureaucracy and the police forces should also look to the PTI's promise as an opportunity instead of a threat. The country needs and deserves a better police and bureaucracy.

High school fees

WITH public education in the doldrums, private schooling in Pakistan is often the first choice for many parents despite the steep increase in tuition fee every year. It was the skyrocketing school fees that prompted concerned parents in Sindh to petition the high court earlier this year. This week, they emerged victorious when the court ruled in their favour, noting that a spike in fees beyond the annual 5pc is in violation of the Sindh Private Educational Institutions (Regulation and Control) Ordinance, 2001. The ruling stated, among other things, that private schools violating the law must either refund the extra amount charged or adjust it in future bills within three months. Parents alleged that increases were between 12pc and 60pc. Meanwhile, schools justify the stiffer fees saying that the hikes reflect inflation in the form of increased prices of basic amenities and services, including water and electricity, mandatory security measures, teachers' salaries,

etc. Although private education is a profit-making venture that offers better quality for premium prices, and not a charitable enterprise, most schools are becoming too expensive for even middle-class working families to send their children to. The solution lies in maintaining standards while ensuring affordability, but the reality is that there is little competition from public schools that are unequipped to offer the same learning experience. The fee challenge is evident in the other provinces as well. For example, while many families will pay for private schooling no matter what the cost, parents have protested in KP and Punjab. Often the dispute turns into a prolonged stand-off. To avoid such a situation, there is a need to form arbitration bodies — whether headed by provincial governments with private-sector education partners or a mix of school and parent representatives — to settle the matter.

While monitoring education services, the government should institute a uniform regulatory system overseeing private schooling expenses and profits as a way of adjusting fees accordingly. At the end of the day, the rising demand for private schools can be attributed to the abysmal quality of education in government schools. If Prime Minister Imran Khan spoke of education as a pressing issue, surely it must feature on top of his government's 100-day to-do list. The state must start working towards bridging the expanding education gap between the rich and poor and ensure that all school-going children have access to free, quality learning.

Needless controversy

WHAT ought to have been an uncontroversial appointment has turned into an acrimonious issue at the heart of which is a divisive disease that, if left uncured, can rend the very fabric of society.

The government's decision to include Dr Atif Mian — an economist of international renown — in its new Economic Advisory Council has generated much controversy as the Princeton professor is a member of the stigmatised Ahmedi community.

Defending his appointment, however, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry rejected the criticism on Tuesday, saying that Pakistan belonged to minority communities just as much as it did to the larger majority. Stressing Dr Mian's academic credentials, Mr Chaudhry rhetorically asked whether minority

communities should be thrown out of the country. On Wednesday, Mr Chaudhry reiterated the government's position.

Unfortunately, there are many sections of society that are hostile towards those who hold religious beliefs outside the majority faith.

Over the decades, the country has morphed from one where the contribution of minority communities to state and society were celebrated, to one where individuals are targeted on the basis of their belief and often subjected to the most condemnable forms of vigilantism.

The malaise has gone far beyond the religious right — and has now also taken a hold of those representing the political mainstream. Consider the calling attention notice objecting to Dr Mian's appointment that was submitted to the Senate. Most of the 16 senators who signed it do not belong to the religious parties.

At best, this can be interpreted as a populist move. At worst, it shows that there is increasing prejudice against minorities even at the top political levels. The government's approach is then commendable as it has attempted to send a message that personal beliefs should not come in the way of matters of governance and administration.

Indeed, there should be no room for discrimination against minority communities, especially in a country where the right to religious freedom is enshrined in the Constitution.

Pompeo's visit

A second US secretary of state has visited Pakistan in less than a year, but Mike Pompeo's visit has not yielded any immediate and outward sign of an improvement in ties.

After a dramatic aid cancellation to Pakistan by the US defence department just days ahead of Mr Pompeo's visit, perhaps the best that could have been hoped for is a set of meetings devoid of public acrimony and rancour.

With Mr Pompeo scheduled to travel to India immediately after a short, hours-long stay in Islamabad, the possibility of the inaugural 2+2 ministerial meeting taking aim at Pakistan was also high. The joint statement following the meeting in

New Delhi yesterday between the Indian foreign and defence ministers and their US counterparts delivers an explicit and harsh rebuke meant for Pakistan, likely delighting hawks in Delhi and Washington and further complicating Pakistan's ties with the latter.

As ever, it remains unknown how a significant divergence in interests defined by the US and the Pakistani state can be reconciled.

Presumably, the strong US rhetoric against Pakistan in public is backed by specific demands behind closed doors. But it remains an odd approach for several reasons.

First, the US persistence in seeing Pakistan through a security lens and primarily in terms of the war in Afghanistan has prevented a rational discourse between the two countries. While the state here has historically erred in its approach to Afghanistan, there is a fundamental divergence between the interests of Pakistan and the US in Afghanistan.

Second, for many years it has been apparent that the war in Afghanistan will not be won militarily and can only be ended by a political settlement at the negotiating table. The US pressure on Pakistan to curb alleged Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries on its soil does little to help the ultimate goal of bringing the warring Afghan parties to the negotiating table. Indeed, Pakistan has often suggested that undue pressure on the Taliban could reduce the influence that it has over the network when it comes to nudging them towards talks.

Yet, where the US is wrongheaded in its approach, Pakistan would be mistaken to remain in denial about elements of its counter-militancy, counterterrorism and counter-extremism strategies. While significant gains are evident and anti-Pakistan networks have been vastly degraded, there is a militant and extremist infrastructure in the country that has remained largely untouched. The externally oriented networks ought to be dismantled for Pakistan's own sake, there being no rational policy or security reasons for the continued existence of such groups.

The Pakistani state has suggested in recent years that it would like to gradually move against such groups, but whether through political mainstreaming or dismantlement, no coherent or reasonable policy has been put forward yet. Pakistan should be completely terror-free for its own sake.

Gas price jolt

THE news that Prime Minister Imran Khan may have given his assent, in principle, to a sharp upward revision in the price of gas across the board has sent shockwaves through industry circles. Domestic consumers are first in the line of fire, since the determination by Ogra upon which the decision was based singles them out as particularly costly in terms of the subsidy being provided. Most specifically, the determination points to those in the first two slabs, the poorest of the poor, to say that the rates they pay must be tripled. It may appear to be a particularly bold move by Mr Khan to approve, even in principle, this determination, which was resisted by the previous government for five years, but a closer look reveals that the decision may have been made without considering all the options first.

There is no doubt that gas prices need to be revised. This is true given dwindling supplies and the growing reliance on imported LNG, with wide pricing gaps between the two. But it is also true at a deeper, more philosophical level. For decades now, we have been telling ourselves a very damaging lie — that gas is cheap and abundant. In reality, it is precious and scarce. The lie is propagated chiefly through the subsidised price which in turn promotes waste and discourages conservation. The reality ought to have been obvious a decade ago, but successive governments have found it hard to take the necessary steps. Their reluctance has brought us to a point where drastic actions are required — the unfortunate duty of the present government. Simple upward revisions as suggested by the gas bureaucracy and regulator will not get the job done. Given such revisions today to meet growing revenue requirements will only postpone by a few years the day of actual reckoning. What is essential is reform in the price of gas, as well as the mechanism through which the gas price is determined. This means allowing market forces to play a larger role in pricing, and allowing the latter to have a bigger part in allocations between sectors. This is the issue that lies at the heart of the matter. Given that the PTI has campaigned on advancing meaningful change in the country, this is the direction the new government should take, instead of rubber-stamping the determination sent by the regulator.

See no ‘evil’?

RESTRICTIONS on the media are often justified on the pretext of preserving tradition and cultural values, language that has an emotive appeal for a generally conservative society. Prime Minister Imran Khan’s use of these loaded terms at a briefing on Wednesday about state-run media may have been innocuous enough, reiterating a generic, timeworn script, or it could indicate the government’s intention to nudge state-run media towards more conventional programming. Certainly, some of the government’s decisions pertaining to PTV and the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation that were reiterated by the prime minister at the briefing are laudable. Lifting censorship from state-run media outlets and promotion of impartiality in their content is a logical measure. In the presence of more robust private television channels, such restrictions had only resulted in a loss of credibility for PTV and PBC.

However, the prime minister’s words are cause for concern in the light of Pemra’s instructions to satellite TV channels, also on Wednesday, to review their news and entertainment content. Where news is concerned, there is undoubtedly a need for channels to inform viewers in a less sensationalist and voyeuristic manner, particularly where crime and accidents are concerned. It is Pemra’s directions about entertainment programming that are troubling. Reality does not always conform to social and cultural values; physical and sexual violence against girls and women, religious prejudice, etc abound in our society. Broadcast media is a valuable tool to create awareness among the people, and its message is even more effectively conveyed within the entertainment format. Pakistani dramas have, largely speaking, acquired a social consciousness and a willingness to examine ‘difficult’ topics that are a welcome departure from some of the stereotypical fare churned out earlier. Udaari, a TV serial dealing with the subject of child sexual abuse, is one of the foremost examples of the new approach. There will always be a place for pure ‘family-friendly’ drama, but a head-in-the-sand attitude is unwise. The media has a responsibility to address burning social issues.

Rearranging CPEC

THE news from Southeast Asia has made some headlines domestically too, as a newly elected leader in Malaysia decided to revisit all Chinese projects launched by his predecessor.

The outlines of the news resonate closely here in Pakistan, where a new leader promising a new beginning has just begun his career, and has promised a closer look at all CPEC projects to determine whether or not any wrongdoing may have been committed when they were being negotiated.

As in the case of Malaysia, the former leader is now in jail, facing corruption charges, which adds fuel to the notion in the public's mind that all deals negotiated under him should be re-examined.

Take a look: CPEC repayment plan under preparation

One key difference, perhaps, is that in the case of Pakistan, the new leadership has promised greater transparency and continuity in CPEC projects, provided no real evidence of wrongdoing emerges.

Perhaps this resonance between the news from Malaysia and developments here lies behind the three-day visit that the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has just begun. He is the third foreign minister to visit Pakistan since the new government took over, and his is the longest visit of all.

His plate is heavy given the massive stakes China has in this country, but in contrast to the US secretary of state who was here recently, his baggage is light. This gives him the space, not only to spend time in the country, but also indulge in activities like meeting students who are about to begin their studies in China.

Also read: How Gwadar's CPEC development might leave its people behind

But at some point, the pleasantries will subside and the conversation will turn to more substantive matters, like the fate of the large investments China has made here, and the future of the plans drawn up under the CPEC framework. Those plans include almost Rs1tr worth of the Pakistan government's commitments to projects under CPEC, to be paid from its own resources.

On top of that, plenty of work needs to be done on the special economic zones which require extensive coordination with provincial authorities.

Apart from the air of 'change' sweeping the country, the stars light behind the venture. The ruling party controls two provinces as well as the centre, and is in a unique position to advance the project given the virtual absence of an organised opposition.

This is a good opportunity for the government to clarify all issues with the Chinese authorities regarding CPEC, and its own thinking on the project's future.

Chief among these clarifications must be the question of transparency. In Pakistan, public policy requires far greater transparency and disclosure. That is just how our laws and public traditions are.

Once the importance of this priority has been impressed upon our Chinese guest, the rest of the path forward becomes a lot clearer automatically.

Jinnah's Pakistan?

A meritorious appointment has been undone for reasons that have nothing to do with professional competence or qualification.

Princeton's Prof Atif Mian has stepped down from the Economic Advisory Council after a campaign by far-right religious elements threatened to engulf the PTI government in a crisis that, sadly, could have quickly spiralled out of control.

On Aug 11, 1947, Mohammad Ali Jinnah famously declared: "You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the state." In 71 years, Pakistan has slipped far from Jinnah's beautiful dream and it is not clear how and when the country can be returned to the inclusive and progressive path that the founding father envisaged.

The PTI has clearly erred in both strategy and political will, but none of the mainstream political parties in the country have emerged from the episode with any credit. The PPP did not join a Senate resolution calling for Prof Mian's removal, but neither did the party publicly endorse his appointment. The political class will try and put the latest capitulation behind it quickly, but the effects will surely linger.

The historical record incontrovertibly demonstrates that concessions to religious zealots further erode the space for rational discourse and decision-making. With profound governance challenges, a divided polity and a political landscape that is plagued by anti-democratic interference and other problems, no one party can take up the challenge of confronting religious extremism. But as security policymakers debate the political mainstreaming of some extant militant networks, there has been a question whether it is, in fact, extremism that is being mainstreamed in Pakistan.

The religious far right in the country has been mobilised in a manner that ought to worry all right-thinking citizens: short-sighted concessions and manipulations by the state will have far-reaching consequences for society.

Pakistan was, is and will remain a diverse society. Efforts to erase cultural, social and religious differences will not succeed because the population is vast and the country large. But beginning at the margins, it is possible to make life intolerable for a growing number of people — if hate is not purposefully and determinedly countered.

A brilliant mind has been prevented from serving his country; what hope is there for the average citizen in the face of intolerance and organised hostility? Jinnah's Pakistan is tolerant, progressive, inclusive and democratic. Will Pakistan's leadership return to the vision of the founding father?

International Literacy Day

AN abundance of research has documented beyond argument that higher rates of education in any given country or region are directly related to increased prosperity, human achievement and fulfilment. Today, as the world marks International Literacy Day, designated as such by Unesco in 1966, it is worth pondering how, let alone achieving education for all, mankind is not even near the underpinning requirement of universal literacy. As such, literacy is a key component of the UN's SDGs and its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, SDG 4 specifically includes amongst its targets the access of young people to literacy and numeracy, and focuses on related opportunities being made available to adults who lack these vital skills. This year's theme is 'literacy and skills development' for, as the UN notes, challenges in this regard persist

across the world in an environment when work-required skills are also evolving rapidly.

Against this backdrop, it is disheartening to note that Pakistan, despite its commitments to the SDGs, remains sadly lacking on this front. Under Article 25-A of the Constitution, the state is committed to providing “free and compulsory education to all children of five to 16 years”. But education is a distant dream when even literacy levels remain stubbornly low — and show, in fact, signs of decline. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey, 2017-2018, the country’s literacy rate (counting individuals of age 10 and above) stands at 58pc, down from 60pc two years earlier. This is despite the improvements the former PML-N government made to the education budget. The reasons range from the lack of state capacity and opportunity (schools, teachers, infrastructure, etc) to a spiral of poverty that pulls children out of school and into employment, to a lack of nuance in the distinction between literacy and education. We have in place now a new government that has specifically pledged to address these challenges; it remains to be seen how far ‘naya’ Pakistan can progress beyond lofty promises and rhetoric.

Donating to the economy

THE timing could not have been worse. Just when the news of the travails of the crisis-hit Economic Advisory Council was in the headlines, Prime Minister Imran Khan appeared in a televised broadcast making an appeal to overseas Pakistanis to donate to the dam fund.

These circumstances only underscored a prime ministerial disconnect with reality — especially given the EAC resignations and the questions being asked of the government at this time.

The biggest question pertains to the policy direction that the new government intends to take. The EAC is one forum where that policy direction will be formulated and its first meeting has been overshadowed by controversy and resignations followed by the appeal for donations to the dam fund.

At a time when the twin deficits — fiscal and external — are increasing to worrisome levels, the focus of the government should be on the macroeconomic fundamentals more than anything else.

Foreign investors and creditors are also keeping a watchful eye on the prime minister in order to determine how strong a grip he has on the realities of the Pakistani economy.

In the midst of all this, the signals that need to be emerging from the Prime Minister House should be about economic policy more than emotional appeals for donations.

Now that the appeal has been launched, it is crucial to keep a few matters in mind. It would help if there were measurable targets against which to evaluate progress.

Second, it is becoming important that the rules of business be formed and disclosed about the account into which all the funds are going. Who has the authority to withdraw these funds? Against what authority?

Third, the government must provide clarity about where the money will go once it leaves the fund. Will it be handed over to Wapda? Or will there be an alternate mechanism to determine how the money is spent?

It is also important to bear in mind that such donation drives require constant pushing to be successful. Will Mr Khan now devote more time and energy to drumming up support for the donations?

And most importantly, will these donations remain voluntary throughout, or will they take a turn towards involuntary extractions like they have in the case of the other dam fund in operation?

All these questions, and many more, weigh upon the new direction launched by Mr Khan through his announcement.

The responsibilities of the members of the EAC, and the finance minister in particular, have assumed an added urgency. They need to quickly put out a plan for stabilising the country's economy, as well as manage expectations that somehow emotional appeals can get the job done.

The country is waiting for their output.

Idlib offensive

WHILE the guns may have largely remained silent in the Syrian theatre over the past few months, a new offensive in the country's Idlib governorate looms, as Bashar al-Assad's forces plan to retake the region from rebel groups. A summit in Tehran involving Turkey, Iran and Russia on Friday failed to reach a breakthrough that could have put off hostilities, and there are reports that Russian jets have already started bombing targets in Idlib. As observers have noted this could be the last major battle of the Syrian civil war, as Idlib remains the final stronghold of rebel factions, including jihadists affiliated with IS and Al Qaeda. Considering the coming offensive, legitimate questions have been raised about the fate of civilians. Indeed, in this brutal war, all sides are guilty of not doing enough to protect non-combatants, as around half a million people are believed to have perished since the war began. While leaders at the Tehran summit reiterated the need to protect civilians, it is hoped Mr Assad and his forces heed these calls to ensure that there is minimal 'collateral damage' and that no indiscriminate killing of civilians is carried out in the battle to retake Idlib.

There has also been talk in recent weeks of a possible chemical attack in Syria, with the US State Department saying that Washington "would respond" to any such attacks carried out by Damascus or its backers. However, speaking on the record, Russian President Putin has said he has "conclusive evidence that militants are preparing such operations and provocations", pointing to a possible false-flag chemical attack by the jihadists to draw in external powers. While the violence in Syria overall is appalling, the use of chemical weapons would be particularly reprehensible. There are several external players working in Syria at cross purposes. What is needed is for all outsiders to stop using the country as a proxy battleground and create a conducive atmosphere for a negotiated solution to the war. The militants in Idlib and elsewhere must be flushed out, but this must be done in such a fashion that innocent lives are not lost. The Idlib operation must be handled with care; unless this is done and external involvement is kept at bay, the Syrian people's long nightmare will not end anytime soon.

Harassment on campus

UNIVERSITIES in Pakistan have a real fight on their hands when it comes to tackling pervasive sexism, misconduct and sexual harassment. The evidence in certain cases that professors and staff continue to blatantly abuse their position implies that legal procedures to tackle harassment are ineffectively implemented on campuses. In one case recently, a young student enrolled at the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University in Nawabshah alleged she had been subjected to months of harassment by a lecturer — and that she was not the only victim. The student alleged that the university's vice chancellor not only refused to pay heed to her complaint, but that he had falsely implicated her father in a case involving a car accident to pressure her to withdraw the charge. While the student's plea for justice has been taken up by the Sindh High Court, a separate four-member inquiry committee will also investigate her complaint and report its findings to the province's chief minister. Dissatisfied with the investigation of an internal three-member university inquiry committee (mandatory under the province's anti-harassment law) she went public with her case.

Such cases demonstrate that many educational institutions, instead of addressing the complaints of their students fairly, are too concerned about protecting their own reputation and that of their academic staff. Though it is impossible to estimate the extent of the problem — public records are few and victims show reluctance to register complaints because it risks their academic career — sexism is rife in male-led institutions. Often perpetrators leave an institution to get a job with another while the victim is left unsupported and damaged. Breaking the silence on harassment will only happen when universities follow legal policy by registering and investigating complaints and ensuring there is zero tolerance for this type of behaviour. Stamping out harassment is about changing culture at institutional levels so that women have an equal right to education in an academically conducive setting without having to endure verbal and physical misconduct.

Afghan refugee crisis

IT is a protracted refugee crisis and all facets of the challenge surrounding the Afghan refugees in Pakistan deserve greater attention, internationally and inside this country too. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi has on a trip to Pakistan rightly emphasised two aspects of the long-running Afghan refugee crisis: Pakistan has been a generous host for nearly four decades to Afghan refugees and, as security conditions in Afghanistan remain precarious, the continuing rights of the refugees must be respected, ie only their voluntary return should be facilitated. Unhappily, to the extent that there is a national debate on Afghan refugees and occasionally when it comes to the Pakistani state seeking leverage in its relationship with Afghanistan, the refugees are cast either as pawns or guests who have overstayed their welcome. But the reality is that the refugees are a long-suffering population; they should be treated with respect and in line with Pakistan's international commitments and moral responsibilities.

Certainly, Mr Grandi's visit has also highlighted another important aspect of the refugee problem in Pakistan: the outside world has not always done enough to help this country manage the crisis and help the refugees. The 1.4m Afghan refugees who are registered are less than half of their total estimated population of 3m in Pakistan. Protracted refugees crises tend not to attract the resources necessary to keep the refugee population safe and reasonably well taken care of. With security conditions in Afghanistan deteriorating and political uncertainty continuing, voluntary repatriations have virtually ended — meaning that Pakistan will have to manage a steady, and perhaps even an increasing, number of refugees in the immediate future. Visits by Mr Grandi and other efforts can help raise awareness of the protracted crisis, but a great deal more can and should be done. The outside world is rightly focused on the conflict inside Afghanistan, but the Afghans living as refugees outside the borders of their country should not be forgotten.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains to turn around a national debate that is suspicious of or outright hostile to Afghan refugees. It is nearly 40 years since the start of the refugee crisis and two generations of Afghans in Pakistan have known only this country as their home. The lives of unregistered refugees can be significantly worse than their registered counterparts. Forty years of service to refugees should continue with dignity and respect for all.

Suicide prevention

TODAY marks World Suicide Prevention Day — a day that demands sombre reflection in Pakistan, followed by decisive action, for the struggle ahead is enormous. Festering under the weight of stigma, triggered and exacerbated by widespread socioeconomic stressors, mental illness potentially affects up to one-third of our population, with marginalised groups being most vulnerable. Recent reports have highlighted alarming suicide rates in Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly among students and married women. While some cases might be misreported, in these areas and across Pakistan, it is clear that injustice, poverty, inequality, violence and intolerance are driving many to despair. Forcing individuals to endure psychological pain in silence absolves society of the burden to reform. This must change.

Despite the Senate's decision earlier this year to repeal the colonial statute criminalising attempted suicide, Section 325 of the Pakistan Penal Code remains. This presents a significant challenge, as any kind of meaningful intervention requires, as a precursor, that suicidal ideation be treated as a symptom of disease, not as a crime. Decriminalising suicide could be the most consequential action the government could take to address this public health crisis, but it must dovetail into a broader policy of promoting mental well-being. Most sufferers have no recourse to any form of treatment; the very fact that mental illness is stigmatised (and in its worst manifestation criminalised) has hampered much-needed quantitative and qualitative research, resource allocation and capacity building in this field. Only a small minority can access what limited psychiatric services are available, let alone find a compassionate support structure in their families and communities. Political and community leaders must be at the vanguard of reaching out to the vulnerable with understanding instead of opprobrium. Of note is the manner in which President Arif Alvi recently addressed a high-profile alleged suicide by calling for increased psychiatric services and a suicide prevention helpline. This is urgently needed; while local NGOs have attempted similar initiatives, a national, 24/7 helpline, staffed with trained operators, can help in emergency situations and serve as a network, connecting at-risk individuals with public and private health services, rehabilitation facilities, crisis centres, etc. The media, too, has a vital role to play, not just to create attitudinal change but also to develop guidelines for reporting on suicide and mental health in consultation with professionals, to avoid

sensationalising and stigmatising such issues, and to avoid a possible contagion effect.

Neglecting healthcare

A SURPRISE visit by the Sindh health minister to Jacobabad Civil Hospital left not only the facility's medical staff but the minister herself in shock. The minister expressed dismay at the absence of staff members and the subpar hygiene conditions she witnessed. These revelations would not, however, come as a shock for Pakistan's poor and sick, who are dependent on government-run hospitals to provide them with quality healthcare. That same day, in Thar, an outbreak of viral infections, water-borne diseases and malnutrition claimed the lives of at least four more children in Civil Hospital, Mithi. Parents bemoaned the shortage of medicines and other facilities in the hospitals they went to. They said the civil hospitals had stopped providing free ambulance service to and from their villages.

But it's not just Sindh. Healthcare seems to be a national afterthought. Pakistan ranks 154 among 195 countries in both quality and accessibility of healthcare, lagging behind Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. While the previous government claimed to introduce large-scale reforms and 'mega-schemes' in the health sector, and the current government has also listed healthcare as one of its top priorities, the ground realities often speak otherwise. Recently, in Lahore's Jinnah Hospital, costly medical equipment was seen stored outside, while its cardiac surgery unit failed to meet its second deadline of completion. In Peshawar, which has recently witnessed a measles outbreak, doctors complain of the shortage of medical facilities, staff and beds at Lady Reading Hospital. Health and education are two of the main indicators against which human capital is measured. Although resources often go to tertiary healthcare facilities, more emphasis should be paid to primary healthcare, preventable diseases and maternal and infant mortality. These provide the foundation of any country's healthcare system. Change takes times. After years of neglect, it would not be realistic to expect miracles overnight. But the longer we take to implement reform, the more lives will be lost to neglect

Trans rights

A TRANS woman suffering severe burns on 80pc of her body was found outside a taxi stand in Sahiwal last week, when a passerby alerted Rescue 1122. Since no hospital in the district had a burn unit, she was to be shifted to Lahore's Jinnah Hospital. She died on her way there, and was buried by the local municipal corporation. No loved one came searching for her. An FIR was not registered. Her identity remains unknown till this day. Two horrific videos surfaced on social media. In the first, the victim sobs in pain as the rescue team lifts her ash-covered body onto a stretcher. In the second, she is inside an ambulance; her eyes are shut, the severity of her burns and the bloodied gash across her neck visible. We do not know if she is dead or alive. Who inflicted such hateful violence upon her body and spirit? What horrors was she made to suffer? What was her life like before this calamity struck? What was her name? Perhaps we will never have answers to these questions, but we should ask ourselves this: what will it take for us to treat those who embody a non-normative gender identity with respect and dignity? And when will the trans community finally feel safe and accepted in their country of birth?

On the one hand, Pakistan has made several gains. Earlier this year, Marvia Malik made her appearance on TV, becoming the country's first trans newsreader. Parliament passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in May, which guarantees the right to self-identify, and to have that identity registered on all government-issued documents. Thirteen people identifying themselves as trans participated in the general elections. On the other hand, trans people continue to be the object of ridicule, discrimination, harassment — and ultimately violence. In KP alone, around 62 members of the trans community have been murdered this year. Implementing the Transgender and Intersex Community Election Manifesto's 33 demands will be a step in the right direction.

CPEC confusion

When the new government sat down with the Chinese to 'renew' cooperation under the CPEC project, the day was marked more by confusion than fanfare.

It all began with the report in the Financial Times which quoted the prime minister's commerce adviser Abdul Razak Dawood as saying that CPEC "unfairly benefits Chinese companies" through tax breaks and many other incentives that are unavailable to local counterparts. Not only that, he went on to say that the deals under CPEC would be reviewed, adding that "we should put everything on hold for a year so we can get our act together".

These words were published on the same day as the country heard that Chinese and Pakistani delegates sat down together, and after a long meeting, agreed to broaden the base of the CPEC arrangement as well as open it up to involvement by 'third countries' that might be friendly to both China and Pakistan.

Unfortunately, the two messages did not mix well. Soon a 'clarification' arrived from the commerce adviser, asserting that he was "quoted out of context". This, of course, begs the question what the original context was since the words uttered by him are quite clear.

While both governments spoke of renewing ties, broadening the base of their cooperation and inviting others to participate in their bonhomie, at least one of the ministers let it slip that there are powerful apprehensions about the entire deal within Pakistan. Long before we heard the words of the commerce adviser, who hails from the business community, we have heard various trade and business bodies articulate the very same concerns in very similar language.

Going forward, it is necessary to heed the substance of both voices that spoke on Monday. There is no doubt that CPEC should continue, and certainly grow with time. China is arguably Pakistan's most important neighbour and has been a consistent friend through the decades. But as we move forward, it is important that Pakistan's own interests, and political traditions, be kept front and centre.

To what extent does the new government wish to heed the voice of the business community when formulating its approach to CPEC? How far is the new government willing to go to honour its commitment to the electorate to conduct an audit of some CPEC projects like the Orange Line train, or to bring greater

transparency to future CPEC negotiations such as those around the ML 1 project, or to place details of past agreements before parliament?

All of these are commitments made by the PTI before and after the election and we need to know where they stand today. Following Mr Dawood's remarks, the Chinese embassy in Pakistan also issued a strongly worded reaction denying the interview altogether. It is clear that the time to choose the future course of CPEC has arrived.

Cabinet expansion

THE federal cabinet is set for expansion with four new members scheduled to be sworn in today. With the PTI-led federal government's agenda for its first phase in office taking shape, the federal cabinet will be key to implementing Prime Minister Imran Khan's vision and ideas. The first challenge for Mr Khan will be to maintain a streamlined cabinet in line with his campaign promises. The demands of coalition allies and party members who need to be politically accommodated tend to grow in office, and without a clear sense of direction and purpose, the federal cabinet can quickly become bloated. The practice of adding ministers but deciding their portfolios later is a slippery slope towards a needlessly large cabinet and old-fashioned patronage politics. The prime minister does have the political authority to insist on a relatively small team, but the Constitution permits a federal cabinet that is 11pc of the total membership of the National Assembly and the Senate. If the maximum cabinet size of nearly 50 ministers and advisers is to be avoided, now is the time for Mr Khan to assess which ministries, divisions and departments can be clubbed together and managed by a smaller setup.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect from a governance and reforms perspective of the prime minister's cabinet so far is his decision to keep the interior ministry portfolio for himself. The appointment of a minister of state for interior, Shehryar Afridi, has eased some of the burden on the Prime Minister's Office, but a full-time junior minister in one of the most important ministries in the cabinet is still an unsatisfactory state of affairs. Mr Khan has suggested that the reforms he wants to introduce in law enforcement across the country require the strongest of political backing and only his office can provide that. But the implementation of reforms, once finalised and unveiled, is as much about management as political will. The interior ministry is a vast bureaucracy that requires close supervision by

a fully empowered minister. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif also erred in not appointing a full-time foreign minister for much of his last term because infighting and lack of direction quickly became a dominant feature in the Foreign Office. Good governance and sustainable reforms come from strengthening democratic institutions. The federal cabinet is the lynchpin of effective governance; Mr Khan should empower his cabinet to the full extent possible.

Gas price reform

THE Economic Coordination Committee has taken the right decision in turning down the gas price increase proposed by Ogra, the gas sector regulator. The determination drawn up by the regulator sought a near tripling of the price of gas across all consumer categories, with the brunt of the impact borne by the poorest domestic consumers. Interestingly, the fertiliser sector saw the smallest increases in the determination. The regulator seemed to be looking out for the commercial interests of publicly owned gas distribution companies in drawing up the determination, rather than taking the consumer and the public interest into account like it is supposed to as a neutral body. The ECC turned down the price increases determined by the regulator, but now must go further to reform gas pricing as a whole if it is to free the sector from the clutches of the vested interests of bureaucracy and industry. The recorded message released by the government after the meeting said only that the decision to increase the price had been postponed till the subsidy could be rearranged and approval of the prime minister obtained.

This does not go far enough. A real party of change would seek to reform the gas pricing mechanism altogether rather than just tinker with the price and call it a day. The government's role in setting the price of gas needs to give way to market forces. As in the case of petroleum products, gas price reforms need to link the cost of the vital fuel to international markets, and let the end user price fluctuate accordingly. The price of petrol and diesel at the pump is set by Ogra at regular intervals using a formula that takes the international market price as a benchmark while ensuring uniform prices across the country. There is no reason why the same cannot be done for natural gas as well, while keeping it affordable for the poor.

Until such deeper price reform is initiated, the government will find itself wrangling with the same issues and fending off the same political challenges to its decisions as previous dispensations had to do. And its decisions will end up looking the same as well, which will be a challenge to the ruling PTI's self-image as a party of change. The pricing methodology being used by the regulator is woefully outdated and not revising it is not the path to the future. Instead of debating whether the decision ought to be referred to the Council of Common Interests, or where the burden of the increase should fall, one would expect a finance minister with a corporate background to ask why it is necessary for public-sector gas companies to be getting 17pc return on assets in the first place, a central feature of the gas price methodology. From there, the reform conversation opens up by itself.

Five million house

SUCCESSIVE governments have been unforgivably negligent about housing needs in the country despite the fact that the issue impacts the majority of our population. It is therefore commendable that Prime Minister Imran Khan, following through on one of his main election promises, has taken the initiative so early in his government's tenure to construct 5m housing units across the country. Judging by his directions to relevant officials in a meeting on Monday that recommendations for an action plan complete with timelines should be finalised in two weeks, he is a man in a hurry. To underscore the importance he accords to the mammoth project, the prime minister himself, it is said, will oversee its monitoring and implementation.

The yawning gap between the need for housing and its availability is increasing by the hour. Conservative estimates place the backlog at 9m units; unmet demand pushes up the figure by 200,000 units every year. Shelter is an essential human need; and the state has increasingly abdicated its duty to its citizens in this regard — the middle-income strata to some extent, but mainly to the huge low-income segment that does not have the resources to access housing options. Earlier, the government was directly involved in housing development. As the ingress of the private sector — encouraged and facilitated by the state — increased, the government slowly began to cede control of this essential function, and its place was taken by informal suppliers of land, a process that has spawned an entire culture of urban violence. Matters have come to such a pass

that during the last two decades, not a single major government housing scheme has been launched in any of the larger cities. Instead, corrupt bureaucracies have joined hands with real estate developers, invariably backed by powerful lobbies, to commodify land for sale to the highest bidder — sometimes even land earmarked for low-cost housing. Nevertheless, well-intentioned as Mr Khan's initiative is, housing development is a complex undertaking that requires a well-thought-out, holistic strategy. It is also a provincial subject, and while three of the provinces are either directly or indirectly ruled by the PTI, the centre must also engage the Sindh government in order to address the wretched shortage of urban housing in that province. For sustainable results, Mr Khan should take stock of previous governments' successes and failures in this sector and urge provincial dispensations to strengthen the housing development authorities that exist in urban centres.

Women's vote

ONCE again, PTI's Shaukat Ali Yousafzai defeated PML-N's Rashad Khan in the Shangla-I by-election that took place on Sept 10. This time, however, Mr Yousafzai secured 41,960 votes against Mr Khan's 22,113 votes — a large margin compared to his narrow win in the general elections on July 25, when the former obtained just 17,300 votes against the latter's 15,600 votes. So what made the difference? The increased participation of women — primarily. For the first time, the ECP had declared results from the general election null and void due to the low turnout of female voters. To encourage women to take part in the democratic process, the Election Act makes it mandatory to have at least 10pc of total votes in each constituency cast by women. This new provision was introduced thanks to the efforts of women lawmakers. Encouragingly, only three constituencies had a female voter turnout of less than 10pc, compared to 17 constituencies in 2013. Twenty-two constituencies had a higher turnout of women than men. And in the tribal regions, there was a 36pc increase in women voters — the highest in the country.

In Shangla, only 5.9pc women showed up to cast their votes on July 25. In the repolling, that figure increased to 13.7pc. Patriarchal traditions limit women's mobility and bar their political participation. Keeping in mind the traditions and realities of the land, tents were provided for purdah-observing women, transport was provided by political parties to and from the polling stations, and female staff

and police were deployed inside polling booths, this time around. While much remains to be done by the political parties to adhere to election rules and nominate at least 5pc women candidates to the general seats, the ECP must be lauded for its efforts to bring ordinary women into the political fold. But it should also be noted that these numbers are still relatively low. Women are 'half the sky' — not 10pc. The state must take the first steps. Society will follow.

Sustainable LG goals

IMPROVEMENTS to local government systems in the provinces are essential to their future success, but reforms that are rushed through can often have unpredictable or negative consequences. Prime Minister Imran Khan's interest in reforming the LG system in Punjab can ultimately be beneficial: while LGs are constitutionally a provincial subject, the PTI has experience of introducing a widely praised LG system in KP, is governing Punjab today and is part of the ruling coalition in Balochistan. As the current LG systems in Punjab and Sindh have demonstrated, vested political interests at the provincial tier can thwart the very purpose — ie a decentralisation of power to the tier where public services can best be delivered — of introducing LGs. Therefore, if the PTI national leadership plays a coordinating role between its governments in the provinces and engages the PPP setup in Sindh in good faith, there is a possibility that the public across the country could have access to effective LGs going forward.

Yet, if positive change is to be effected, the prime minister may need to demonstrate more patience and purposefulness. Demanding that the committee on local government deliver its proposals within 48 hours, as Mr Khan did in a meeting with the committee in Islamabad on Tuesday, is unlikely to lead to comprehensive solutions. Earlier, when the committee was formed at the start of September, it had been given one week to present its proposals. While the KP template for local government exists, Mr Khan has expressed a preference for even greater change. Proposals under consideration, according to media reports, include scrapping union councils in favour of village-level councils and holding direct elections at the tehsil and city government tiers. The prime minister's democratising approach in the case of LGs may be right, but radical change needs to be carefully considered and implemented in a way that ensures longevity.

For example, just as Mr Khan today seeks to sweep away the evidently flawed LG system in Punjab, a future non-PTI government in Punjab may seek to undo the changes to be introduced by today's rulers. If LG reforms are to be durable, the constitutional scheme ought to be respected and the provincial leaderships, both in government and opposition, given the space and time to present their ideas. The ruling PPP in Sindh, the opposition PML-N in Punjab and mainstream political parties in Balochistan should be approached for their input and proposals. While it was the Supreme Court that expedited the creation of LGs in the provinces, it was the national political leadership that mandated their creation in the first place in the 18th Amendment. Working with the provinces and the opposition may be slower than ruling by fiat, but the prime minister should not allow haste to come in the way of durable LG reforms.

A quiet dignity

There was an air of dignified nonchalance about the way Kulsoom Nawaz performed the task assigned to her by circumstances.

She arrived on the scene after the men of her family blundered. Calmly, she went about performing the task of getting her husband and some of her in-laws out of jail. Mission accomplished, she departed quietly — appearing to have more important things to attend to rather than indulge in a fight for power.

Read: Kulsoom Nawaz — A woman of substance

She left in style with the freed Sharif family members in tow and an agreement about their passage for exile in Saudi Arabia in hand. There is one view which says that Ms Nawaz's role in the release of Mian Nawaz Sharif and others following the 1999 coup is routinely overstated. According to a valid objection, she is unfairly compared with the likes of Nusrat Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto.

But, in the context of how Pakistani prime ministers have been brutally toppled and how one of them was executed in the face of impassioned appeals by influential international players who were regarded as 'friends' of this country, Ms Nawaz's feat was by no means insignificant. It was a coup of sorts, aided perhaps by the fact that she had only a Gen Pervez Musharraf and not a Gen Ziaul Haq and his times to contend with.

Hers was an example of how one must stand by one's comrades in moments of crisis. It was also an unfortunate confirmation that when it came to fighting a battle for survival, it wasn't the party but the close relatives of the disgraced political leaders who offered any hope of escape. In any case, Kulsoom Nawaz did manage to pull it off and left an indelible mark on politics, though without making too much noise or causing inconvenience to anyone.

The thought must have crossed many a mind that she could have been given a role to play as her husband tried to fight off another challenge to his rule in the 2013-2018 period. But even if there was a will to do so, her illness proved debilitating.

Her stay at a London hospital brought out the worst in some of her compatriots. Now, previous doubts about her illness appear to have been overtaken by the heartfelt homage she is receiving from people across the board after her death. There is a lesson here for those who care to learn.

Rise in 'honour' crimes

THE number of women — and men — being killed in the name of 'honour' keeps rising at a disturbing rate in this country. Only last week, three brutal cases of 'honour' crime were reported. A father confessed to killing his daughter, her children and husband in Hafizabad in Punjab because she had married a man of her own choice four years ago. A woman and her teenage neighbour were strangled by the woman's husband and father in Karachi on the suspicion of an extra-marital affair. In another account, the KP police in Mansehra and Battagram districts have yet to investigate the murder of a married woman and a man — the alleged perpetrators identified by a witness as the woman's father and grandfather. And these are not isolated incidents. While HRCP documented 737 'honour' crimes between June 2017 and August 2018, the figures do not reflect the full picture. This is because most cases go unreported as families — and even survivors — fear they will never get justice. Even after arrests, convictions rates remain abysmally low because the real challenge is the legal loophole allowing perpetrators — often fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and uncles — to go free as victims' families can pardon them. For women oppressed by patriarchal dictates, the law does not prevent killers from roaming free while society sanctions this behaviour by first policing women, then blaming them and

silently accepting their cold-blooded murder. It is condemnable, then, that the state has yet to remove the 'forgiveness' loophole from the anti-honour killing law.

Regressive traditions supporting murder in the name of honour are reason enough for removing punishment waivers and compoundability provisions from the law. In cases where the state becomes the prosecutor in crimes against women, perpetrators have been penalised. Instead of presenting misogyny as tradition, the government is duty-bound to strengthen police investigations and court procedures so that justice is served and the killers of women jailed.

Debate on dams

THE warning signs are present and all sides, including the protagonists, ought to pay heed and help reduce tensions. Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has said that critics of the Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand dams fundraising initiative will be taken to task and that no opposition would be allowed to stand in the way of the construction of the dams. The chief justice's comments appear to be in response to senior PPP leader Khursheed Shah's veiled criticism of the court and the national drive to build major dams that has gained political and media momentum in recent months and weeks. It is unfortunate that the national discourse has taken this unwelcome turn. In recent days, the chief justice has inaugurated the judicial year by demanding that the judiciary improve its performance, and has separately also spoken of the need to regulate the superior court's suo motu powers. It is arguably there that the superior judiciary's attention should lie and not in the policy domain of the executive.

Certainly, there is a vital national debate on water to be had. By all independent and objective measures, Pakistan's growing population is either already in the grip or on the verge of an acute water crisis. But the reasons for the shortage are many, as are the potential responses. While dams may — and this remains to be determined by expert consensus — have a role in addressing Pakistan's water woes, it is already apparent that they cannot be the only solution. What is needed is a democratic national debate that is anchored in science and informed by water policy experts. Unhappily, well intentioned as the current push for building specific dams may be, there appears to be a growing element of pressure involved in the debate. Indeed, it is not apparent where the science, technical

input and expert opinion in support of the current dam-building drive has come from. The necessary scientific research and professional endorsements may well exist, but they have still to be made public.

Yet, political opposition to the building of dams also needs to be rooted in science and sound policy. Chief Minister of Sindh Murad Ali Shah has made a better effort than Khursheed Shah in highlighting issues of inadequate water flow to support big dams and the effects on coastal Sindh of diverting water away from the Arabian Sea. With the nation's attention on dam-building at the moment, the political leadership ought to take the opportunity to inform and educate the public instead of reflexively and glibly opposing measures proposed by others. From a democratic perspective, it is undesirable that the superior court and elected representatives engage in public sparring. All sides agree that there is an existing or imminent water crisis in the county. Surely, a national solution to a national problem can be found.

Media under siege

PRESS freedom cannot be gauged by body bags alone. If it was, Pakistan would rank among the comparatively safer countries in the world for journalists today. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a total of 15 media workers were killed in this country during 2010 and 2011 for reasons confirmed as being related to their work; more recently, from 2015 onwards, 'only' four have lost their lives on account of their profession. But as most journalists in Pakistan will vouch, a reduction in deadly violence of the kind that has killed at least 57 media persons in this country since 2000, does not mean an absence of violence. The CPJ's latest report explores the evolving media landscape in Pakistan where practitioners of this essential pillar of democracy are being silenced through more insidious ways as well as through direct acts of intimidation. Indeed, it can be argued that the number of fatalities has dropped in part because these tactics are working.

To put it another way, self-censorship has become the means to self-preservation. The report cites several examples to illustrate the oppressive environment in which journalists are working, and the impunity enjoyed by those determined to crush dissent and impose a one-dimensional narrative in the public domain. Recalcitrant journalists are picked up, beaten, abducted, arrested on

flimsy pretexts, charged with terrorism, etc. Some are maligned as anti-state, an allegation calculated to provoke violence against them, or at the very least destroy their credibility. Editors are 'advised' to refrain from covering certain issues, or to do so with a particular slant. Resistance is met with strong-arm measures to disrupt circulation and limit viewership. No one, at least in public, dares name the perpetrators; and no one is held accountable. It does not help that the red lines are growing increasingly blurred as 'national interest' becomes ever more loosely defined, subject to the needs of the moment. The PTI, now that it is in government, must honour its pre-election pledge to uphold constitutional rights, including the right to freedom of the press. Lifting censorship from state-run media was commendable, but it should also address the censorship that is throttling private media. As suggested in the CPJ report, journalist safety legislation must be urgently enacted and the perpetrators of violence brought to account. The new government can do much to assert its democratic credentials by ensuring that the open season on journalists comes to an end.

Surviving a silent killer

ACCORDING to a recent report by WHO, cancer is rapidly becoming the leading cause of death globally, with 10m deaths estimated in 2018, 70pc of which occur in low-and-middle-income countries. This year alone, Pakistan will have 174,000 new cancer cases and over 118,000 cancer-related deaths, with breast, oral and lung cancer accounting for over a third of these cases. For some time, the local medical community has expressed alarm over a rise in reported breast cancer cases. In the developed world, nine out of 10 women live beyond five years. Here, barely four survive as long. Each year, 90,000 Pakistani women are diagnosed — often too late — and 40,000 succumb to a disease that has a high cure rate if detected early. Other cancers' incidence rates can be reduced through preventative measures such as stricter controls on carcinogens, including tobacco and other substances known to cause lung and oral cancer (the leading cancer among Pakistan men) or by reducing the spread of cancer-causing infections, such as hepatitis and HPV.

Cancer is an issue that is close to everyone's heart — almost every family has known the grief of having loved ones wrenched from them by this ruthless killer. The name of Prime Minister Imran Khan's late mother, Shaukat Khanum, is

virtually synonymous with cancer treatment in Pakistan. Today, former First Lady Kulsoom Nawaz will be laid to rest, following a months-long battle with the disease. If ever there were a cause that could elicit broad-based support, it is the fight against cancer. The disease does not discriminate between the young or old, the rich or poor — but austerity measures, which often come at the expense of social security (including healthcare), must be countervailed with the political resolve to support those most in need. Rallying together as a nation to raise awareness, and increase and improve access to screening and treatment facilities, can heal not just ailing bodies but also, to some extent, the wounds of a fractured polity.

Merger challenges

THE merger of Fata and KP approved in the final days of the previous parliament was a historic milestone, but there remains a great deal of work to be done before the people of Fata can truly consider themselves to be equal to the citizens of the rest of the country. Prime Minister Imran Khan appears to be aware of the critical importance of the implementation phase of the reforms and has formed a high-powered task force to identify impediments in and to facilitate the merger of Fata with KP. The challenges remain formidable and local Fata leaders are drawing attention to problems in the transition phase, with the FCR still applicable to the region while the old people-to-state mechanisms for contact have been deactivated. The hodgepodge of archaic Fata rules existing alongside the formal laws applicable across the country will need to be addressed quickly lest disillusionment and resentment begin to spread among the people of Fata.

While the PTI has struggled to roll out a governance agenda nationally, in the case of the Fata and KP merger, the PTI arguably has a governance advantage. Having governed in KP for the past five years and won a second term in the province in the general election in July, the PTI leadership has both a familiarity with the provincial governance structures and continuity to ensure the extension of the administrative and judicial set-ups to Fata. Moreover, unlike the previous PML-N government at the centre, the PTI is not aligned with political forces that may want to slow down or disrupt the merger of Fata with KP. Indeed, Prime Minister Khan appears to be giving the merger the same level of importance as some of his most high-profile governance priorities. The merger task force that

was notified last week was done so at the same time as task forces on civil service reforms and austerity.

Yet, the enormity of the challenge ahead and the potential for administrative drift and political will dissipating should not underestimated. By virtually every socioeconomic and governance measure, the erstwhile region of Fata is one of the most backward in Pakistan. The region is also a recovering war zone, with a significant military presence and militant threat that cannot be regarded as fully eliminated. Lifting Fata to acceptable levels of development, prosperity and governance may well be a generational project. At the same time, the administrative and judicial setups in pre-Fata merger KP will also need to be shored up. In relative terms, the less well-off regions in KP may lag behind some of the prosperous regions of Fata. The former southern region of KP adjacent to Fata needs a great deal of social investment and administrative upgrades. The formal end of Fata should be followed by an end to its legacy of underdevelopment and neglect.

Austerity or folly?

Although Pakistan boasts grand colonial-era buildings, a rich Mughal heritage and ancient sites dating back thousands of years, decades of official disregard, bureaucratic red tape and a lack of resources have contributed to their neglect.

In effect, then, the government's proposal to convert Prime Minister House, the governor houses and heritage buildings into cultural and educational institutes and boutique hotels raises some serious concerns about the state's assessment of cultural preservation.

Tasked with revolutionising the management of heritage, Minister for Natural History and Literary Division Shafqat Mehmood, unfazed by the enormity of this project, has said the current annual bill of Rs1.15bn earmarked for government buildings would be better spent on building more museums, institutions and parks.

And we would not disagree with this initiative, if only the government were not in a tight financial spot and without adequate funds and expertise to match its plans. Will money for creating new museums and collections to fill spaces be readily available when our national galleries and historically significant

monuments survive in abject conditions? Also realistically shouldn't improving education and healthcare be an immediate funding priority for this government? One wonders if this is a populist measure showcasing a vision of austerity or simply an impractical scheme.

planning a cultural preservation project on such a grand scale requires ensuring sustainability either through a profit-making model (ticket sales, museums cafés, bookshops, etc) or through building a support system (donations, crowdfunding, private philanthropists, etc).

In recent years, our existing national museums have been so poorly funded that curators are unable to protect valuable collections. Many of our spaces remain derelict — unless funded through public-private partnerships as seen in the case of the Punjab government that, in lieu of state funds, used increasingly innovative ways to raise funds for preserving heritage sites. The conservation of the Mughal-period Shahi Hammam, a public bathhouse in Lahore, that benefited from a partnership between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the government and the World Bank is a case in point.

For now, our cash-strapped government must accept that radical revamps of historical government buildings and their gardens are at best a noble proposition — and if quickly and poorly executed, such plans are unwise, especially without an experienced staff and a generous budget that should come with this kind of a shake-up.

Fall from grace

ONCE upon a time, a fearless daughter stood up against a powerful military dictator. The year was 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi had just returned to Myanmar in the midst of yet another military crackdown. The army had responded to an uprising by brutally killing around 5,000 protesters. As general secretary of the National League for Democracy, Ms Suu Kyi championed human rights and democracy. A year later, she was put under house arrest. While she remained in captivity for nearly two decades, though released intermittently, the story of her struggle and her voice reverberated throughout the world. The woman with a slight built, with flowers in her hair, became a pop culture phenomenon, featuring in songs and music videos. She won awards and accolades, most notably, the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1991. The world cheered on when she was finally

released on November 2010; when her party dominated the parliamentary elections in 2015; and when she was declared head of state in 2016. Ms Suu Kyi had become a global icon, whose image would be adorned next to the likes of Nelson Mandela and other great advocates of peace.

That was until last year. The military launched another campaign — human rights groups termed it ‘genocide’ — against the country’s Rohingya Muslim population in August 2017. As news of mass migration, murder, rape and the burning down of entire villages came to light, Ms Suu Kyi remained tight-lipped, even defensive. Her brand of ‘peace’ increasingly began to look like passivity and criminal indifference. So her latest comments, defending the arrest of two Reuters journalists who exposed the military’s crime, should not come as a surprise. Her mistrust of the media is well known. And the treatment against journalists and activists under her government is also documented. It has become clear that Ms Suu Kyi is not the defender of human rights we once thought she was. In such a situation, the Nobel Prize for Peace, if it wishes to have any credibility left, should take back its distinction.

Bureaucratic reforms

IT was a necessary pep talk in the circumstances and has helped shed light on Prime Minister Imran Khan’s approach to reforms in the civil service. Addressing a gathering of bureaucrats in Islamabad, Mr Khan both asked for the bureaucracy’s professional support and pledged to protect bureaucrats from accountability witch hunts. The prime minister did not mention specific changes that his government intends to make, but did appear to suggest that the reforms process and its early results will take at least two years to become apparent. That is a fair demand and a sensible approach. Reforming the giant federal and provincial bureaucracies will require careful consideration that balances the need for greater efficiency with rightful legal protections of bureaucrats. The prime minister’s point man for civil service reforms, former governor of the State Bank of Pakistan Ishrat Husain, is an experienced leader, but as early incidents in the PTI government’s term have indicated, insulating the bureaucracy from political interference is a complex and long-term problem.

In his comments on Friday, the prime minister did express an admiration for the so-called Singapore model of governance. In Mr Khan’s understanding, the

Singapore model is effective because bureaucrats are highly paid and there is firm accountability. While there is merit in looking at global examples to effect change domestically, Mr Khan and his team should also take care to avoid simplistic prescriptions. Indeed, there are examples of relatively professional setups in public service in Pakistan. For example, the National Highways and Motorway Police along the Lahore to Peshawar motorway corridor is regarded as professional, courteous and effective. While higher wages are a factor, ensuring entry standards, on-the-job training, quality resources and human-rights awareness have also played a role. Similarly, citizens applying for or updating CNICs have a noticeably professional Nadra at their service. There, too, factors beyond simply pay have resulted in a public service that is reasonably efficient and can be lauded. While arguments for a pay increase for bureaucrats could have some merit, the bloated, overstaffed aspects of the bureaucracy will also need to be scrutinised. Otherwise, gigantic cost increases beyond the capacity of the state to absorb will become inevitable.

Certainly, Mr Khan is the only recent national leader who has made it a priority to advance civil service reforms. The previous PML-N- and PPP-led federal governments may have occasionally referred to the need for civil service reforms, but both parties were content to continue with business as usual in the bureaucracy. At a minimum, then, Mr Khan has infused the debate on bureaucratic reforms with a sense of urgency and political will. If Mr Khan and his advisers abide by a sense of fairness and the need for greater efficiency, positive change should be possible.

Monitoring clerics

EVERY year in Muharram, administrations in districts across Pakistan swing into action to keep an eye on potentially troublesome clerics whose rhetoric and fiery speeches may disturb the peace during this religiously sensitive time. As reported on Saturday, the entry of 23 clerics has been banned in Rawalpindi while the surveillance of 33 individuals on the Fourth Schedule has also been started. Similarly in Sindh, the administration has placed curbs on the movement of around 300 clerics for the next 60 days. Those under watch include ulema from all major sects. The reasons behind these precautions and restrictions are not difficult to fathom. As large crowds gather during the days of mourning, rabble-rousing clerics can easily work up congregations into a state of frenzy,

and if matters are not handled carefully, communal violence can break out, as it has on several occasions over the past few decades, especially since the unchecked rise of powerful sectarian hate groups in the 1980s. But while the administration's moves are welcome — indeed, necessary — to ensure the peaceful observance of Muharram, the question arises: if so many clerics and individuals are believed to pose a threat to public order and communal peace, why wait till Muharram to take action against them? The characters that spew sectarian hatred are well known, so why does the state not act against them if it has solid evidence of their involvement in spreading intolerance and promoting violence?

the fact is that the establishment has taken a lukewarm approach to dealing with sectarian figures. While some high-profile militants have been 'eliminated' by the state, other divisive figures are either keeping a low profile, or have been mainstreamed and have entered the legislatures. This has been the case even though the National Action Plan clearly states that "strict action" would be taken against those "promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance". However, it appears that 'strict action' is limited to asking sectarian clerics to keep quiet during Muharram and Safar, and not allowing them to leave their home districts. This approach is unlikely to reduce sectarian hatred and violence in society. If the state has a solid case against individuals involved in spreading hatred against different sects and religions, or declaring others non-Muslim, it should try these clerics under the relevant laws instead of taking cosmetic measures like restricting their movements during religiously sensitive periods or asking them to report to police before leaving their districts.

Rat infestation

PESHAWAR has a rat problem. There are almost daily reports of patients being brought to hospital to be treated for rat bites. Each day, there are seven to 10 such cases. It is mostly small children who are the victims. Fearing disease, they are given rabies shots, which are provided free by the government. Rat infestation is not new to urban centres. Where there are open sewers, inadequate drainage lines, and piles of garbage, filth and clutter, rats exist, and they breed rapidly. But the problem seems to have reached alarming levels in Peshawar. In 2016, an eight-month-old child bled to death after his face and nose were chewed on by a rat, while his parents were asleep. The incident made

headlines, but it seems the problem has only escalated since. It is not wealthy neighbourhoods that the pests pose a threat to, but the poorest localities, which are densely populated, where there is no adequate drainage system, where children sleep on the floor, as opposed to the comfort of a bed or charpoy, and where residents don't have water to clean themselves properly. It is, in fact, connected to larger issues of hygiene, urban planning and poverty.

It is vital that the KP government take action — and quickly. So far, KP's solution seems to be to turn to the services of one man, Naseer Khan, and his small team of committed 'rat killers'. But there's only so much one man can do. Khan has already expressed his reservations about using poison — his method of eradication — as livestock and other animals can also unwittingly consume the toxins. Perhaps some out-of-the-box thinking is required. For instance, in Chicago, disparaged as the 'rat capital of the US', feral cats have been unleashed to control the rat population. The initiative has met with some success. This much is certain: Peshawar doesn't need a Pied Piper or pipe dreams. It needs good governance.

Pak-Afghan cooperation

FOREIGN Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi rightly chose Afghanistan for his first official trip abroad.

In a visit to Kabul over the weekend, the foreign minister met the senior Afghan leadership and, according to media reports, discussed a range of subjects, from enhancing regional trade to a Pakistani offer to train Afghan police and other security personnel. Mr Qureshi and his Afghan counterparts also agreed to convene meetings of a number of bilateral and multilateral forums, especially the trilateral dialogue with China and the working groups of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity.

It is welcome that Afghanistan and Pakistan are engaging each other in a range of forums and in a numbers of areas of mutual interest. A broad-based engagement in dialogue can help lower tensions at the heart of the relationship.

Yet, if Afghanistan and Pakistan are to stabilise their relationship and bring peace to the region, it is in the security and peace arena that cooperation will be key. Afghanistan is looking towards Pakistan to help nudge the Afghan Taliban

towards dialogue, while Pakistan is looking towards Afghanistan to eliminate anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in that country. Thus far, neither country has been able to receive the level of cooperation that it has sought from the other, and a familiar blame game has been indulged in.

But events inside Afghanistan are gathering speed and between political disarray, a resurgent Taliban, the spectre of the militant Islamic State group and the impatience of President Donald Trump with the US-led war effort, there is a possibility of Afghanistan once again sliding into chaos. Now is the time for Pakistan to extend all the cooperation it can to the Afghan state to set up a framework for a peace settlement with the support of regional and international powers.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan should also focus on removing irritants in the bilateral relationship for Pakistan. The closure of the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad after interference and intimidation and disruption of trade across the border crossing are unwelcome distractions. While such unfortunate incidents can usually be contained, in a deteriorating security and political climate matters can quickly escalate. Moreover, Afghanistan should pay heed to Pakistan's legitimate security interests in fencing large parts of the border and seeking the dismantling of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

There is no easy road to regional peace; if there were, it would have been taken by now. But purposeful diplomacy and security cooperation can help achieve success.

Malnutrition reality

A NEW annual UN report, State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, warns that global hunger is rising to alarming levels last witnessed a decade ago. The report's authors state that, among other key drivers, climate extremes contributed to rising hunger afflicting 821m people last year — the third annual rise since 2015. Worse still, malnutrition has left over 151m children under the age of five stunted, with Asia accounting for 55pc of the total. That climate shocks harm agricultural production, leaving people without enough to eat, is an inescapable reality in Pakistan. With more than 60pc of the population food-insecure, we are not just faced with emergency levels of hunger but also chronic hunger. Nearly 80pc of babies are deprived of adequate nutrition because of

acute poverty. Resultantly, 44pc of all children are stunted. These figures tell a story of years of utter disregard for the less privileged. Moreover, it is of serious concern when a food-surplus country is a major producer of wheat and rice but its most vulnerable communities cannot afford to eat. Although Prime Minister Imran Khan's commitment to ending hunger demonstrates that his government has prioritised fighting malnutrition, one has reason to be sceptical when strategies to alleviate poverty and hunger have hardly ever made it off the table in the past. Combating malnutrition requires reassessing whether people's nutritional needs are being met. Policies must focus on those most vulnerable to the harmful consequences of poor food access — especially in Sindh where cyclical drought and floods cause death from severe hunger; and in districts of Balochistan and Fata where food insecurity is exacerbated by conflict and economic instability. Food fortification strategies and removing gender inequity are equally urgent measures.

While scaling up food interventions can break the cycle of malnourishment, strengthening the resilience of food systems in response to changing weather patterns is another challenge. Because undernourishment tends to be greater in regions highly exposed to climate extremes, a sustainable shift must be made towards agricultural methods that can provide safe and high-quality food. The government must realise that combating the many factors underlying acute malnutrition, including inadequate access to nutrient-rich foods, disease prevalence, poor healthcare, unsafe water and suboptimal breastfeeding practices, calls for political will, provincial resources and a dedicated task force committed to decreasing the number of children at risk of hunger-related death.

Bahria Town review

NO land grab takes place without the collusion of the bureaucracy and the backing of powerful lobbies. In the case of a land grab the size of Bahria Town Karachi — now sprawling over more than 30,000 acres in the city's Malir district — which has displaced or adversely affected scores of indigenous communities, there has been a particularly malign nexus at play. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court which has taken up a petition seeking review of its damning May 4 verdict in the Bahria Town Karachi case, asked some very relevant questions. These pertained mainly to the political connections of Bahria Town's top executives and the manner in which the Sindh government handed over prime state land along

the Superhighway to a private developer. The five-member bench also alluded to the possibility of referring the matter to NAB in order to determine who was responsible for the transfer. In June, the apex court had asked the accountability body to suspend all ongoing investigations against Bahria during the hearing of the review petition.

That said, it seems only prodding by the Supreme Court every now and then can get NAB to investigate what is corruption on a massive scale by public functionaries in Sindh. In a brazen abuse of power, provincial legislators amended the relevant law to circumvent the court's order of November 2012 banning the transfer or mutation of any state land in Sindh. Then, regulations directly contradicting the original legislation were framed to facilitate the land grab. The apex court has several times directed NAB to do the needful; indeed, on May 24, 2016, it listed 13 specific questions it wanted the accountability body's inquiry to answer. As a result, some incriminating evidence of malfeasance did come to light. In May, NAB said it had "irrefutable evidence" that the land has been illegally transferred. In fact, by now the various aspects that make up the entire sordid saga are there for all to see. The question is: will NAB go the entire distance?

Citizenship promise

It has come as a bolt from the blue, but if executed with care and by taking all communities along, it could alleviate the suffering and uncertainty of many.

In his maiden visit to Karachi on Sunday, Prime Minister Imran Khan unexpectedly unannounced that Afghans and Bengalis living in the country for many decades would be issued CNICs and passports, which would effectively make them formal citizens of Pakistan.

At this stage, it is unclear which categories of those residents will be considered for citizenship. Mr Khan mentioned both individuals who are living in Pakistan for more than four decades (presumably the first wave of Afghan refugees and Bengalis who remained in Pakistan after the separation of its eastern wing) and those who have been born and raised in Pakistan.

Much will depend on the details of the citizenship schemes, but it is clearly welcome that a prime minister has turned his attention to the plight of

marginalised and forgotten communities. As Mr Khan noted, the failure of Pakistan to provide effective rights to Afghan and Bengali communities with a long-term presence in the country often results in pushing individuals towards desperation and crime. All those who dwell in this country should have a life of respect and dignity.

Nevertheless, it is important that the PTI government not act unilaterally in the matter. Parliament should be consulted, as should the provinces and the communities in which the Afghans and Bengalis reside. While humanity and the state's moral responsibilities demand that the lives of non-citizens living in Pakistan for decades or born and raised here be improved, there are significant electoral and political dimensions to the issue that will also need to be considered.

For example, the granting of voting rights to large new groups in Karachi or Quetta could significantly alter the electoral dynamics of the provincial capitals and introduce shifts at the provincial level. Moreover, there could be concerns about ineligible individuals, such as those who have recently arrived in Pakistan, attempting to benefit from a citizenship drive.

None of these issues are insurmountable or should stand in the way of giving long-term residents of this country their due rights. But it is important at the outset to recognise potential challenges to the scheme lest the government's good intentions quickly be overwhelmed by both legitimate and cynical political opposition.

Mr Khan's idea to grant citizenship to long-term 'refugees' is significant and has the potential to positively transform the lives of many residents of this country. Yet, unilateralism at this stage by the federal government could sharpen political opposition to the PTI and mire a good idea in deep controversy.

Parliament, the provinces and local communities should all be consulted and their input taken seriously. All sides should remember that the current state of affairs is dismal and unacceptable.

Development decline

THE UNDP's latest annual human development report identifies wide inequalities between and within countries as the "defining issue of our times". The authors of Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update note that unequal opportunities are due to disparities in income, education, health and access to technology. Warning that this imbalance will impact less-developed countries, they note that past progress could become vulnerable to climate change, conflict and worsening living conditions. In South Asia, Pakistan is ranked 150th on the annual UN Human Development Index, which lists 189 countries in areas such as life expectancy, education and living standards. With the slowest growth in South Asia (other than Afghanistan), Pakistan lags behind India, Nepal and Bangladesh in most social indicators. The lack of access to quality education keeps children in school for an average of 8.6 years; for girls it is just 7.8 years. Resultantly, a mere 24.4pc of women participate in the labour force compared with 82.9pc of men. Furthermore, life expectancy is estimated at 66.6 years. When global development reports produce scathing indictments of this nature, there is the argument that unreliable or unrepresentative official statistics result in poor rankings. However, the reality is a rapid visible decline in overall development — despite minuscule improvements. And while these and other statistics present a stark picture in themselves, they also speak to the deprivation of many, in particular low-income population groups, women and minorities. The reminder is inequity can be dangerous when it fuels extremism among the youth and undermines support for social cohesion and sustained development.

Unrelenting gender inequality, nonetheless, remains one of the most significant barriers to human development. When women lack opportunities and empowerment, because of lower income and no education, there are limits to the country's advancement. With the gender inequality index measuring 0.541 (only ahead of Afghanistan), Pakistan must focus on the neglected status of half the country's population. Among many detrimental practices that deny women agency, the state must stop childhood marriage that undermines women's education and income. Women's voices should not be excluded from decision-making bodies — recently, a male-only team was constituted to fix our economic woes. For too long, women's rights have been neglected as seen in the gender inequalities present in health, education, employment and politics. Only when

gender inclusivity becomes an integral part of the national socioeconomic agenda will Pakistan register human development progress.

Muharram precautions

AS Ashura, which falls on Friday this year, draws close, religious activities related to Muharram are reaching their climax. Traditionally, the majalis and mourning processions on Muharram 8, 9 and 10 see the biggest turnout of people. Hence, the need for greater security precautions. Administrations in several parts of the country have already announced security measures: in Balochistan, 20,000 law enforcers will be placed on security duty; while nearly 70,000 police personnel will be deployed across Sindh. Indeed, with hundreds, if not thousands, of majalis and processions being organised across Pakistan, and sectarian hate groups bent upon disturbing communal harmony by targeting these religious events, it is a major challenge for the state to provide security cover. So far Muharram has been peaceful with effective security cover. However, the state must remain vigilant in the run-up to Ashura, particularly considering that new administrations are in place at the centre and in the provinces.

A few tested steps can help ensure that the mourning period passes by off smoothly. Firstly, any rabble-rousers stoking sectarian hatred must be dealt with firmly by the law, while intelligence agencies should be on their toes to thwart any attempt by militants to disturb the peace. And in case of any disturbance, the state, community leaders and ulema must do their utmost to calm matters and restore order. The media also has a responsibility to not publish or broadcast inflammatory material. 'Fake news' and rumours on social media must also be monitored. Multilayered security around mourning events has successfully been deployed for the past several years, with police and rangers on the outer cordon, and scouts and community volunteers manning the inner tier. This model needs to be replicated. And while the mourning period reaches its climax on Ashura, majalis will continue throughout Muharram and Safar, which is why the state must remain vigilant.

Gas price hike

IT is easy to oppose fuel price increases. At the same time, it is difficult to implement the latter. The previous government was unable to accept the reasoning proposed by the gas-sector bureaucracy for why a large increase in the price of gas was needed to ensure the liquidity requirements of the public-sector companies that dominate this area. It is, therefore, a little surprising to see the ease and speed with which the new PTI government took the step, even though it modified the proposal sent by the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority. The original determination that was drawn up by Ogra asked for a massive price increase to meet the revenue needs of the two gas distribution companies, and placed the largest burden of this increase on the poorest consumers. This was a bizarre choice, though undoubtedly the bureaucrats responsible for making this decision would have had some justification for it.

The federal cabinet did the right thing to modify the determination to ensure that the poorest consumers are protected from the burden of the price increase, and that the largest share of the burden falls on the biggest consumers in the household category. It was also wise to keep the export-oriented sectors away from the price increase, though for many of them in Punjab, this is of limited utility because the majority of their gas needs are met with imported LNG, the price of which has been left untouched.

And now comes the hard part. With the price increase to be notified within days, the government must now demonstrate that it has ideas beyond simply what the bureaucrats are proposing. In the matter of gas pricing, this clearly means a direction for reforms that allows a greater role to the market forces in setting the rates. If the government allows the bureaucrats to call the shots in the critical matter of policy direction, then this will be the first of many more price increases it will be asked to administer. Gas prices need to reflect all the right incentives: efficiency for the supplier and conservation for the consumer. This will only happen when the price is not set by the government, and the management of the companies has private-sector boards to report to. At the moment, the price mechanism being used by the regulator gives the distribution companies a 17pc return on assets, for which there is little to no justification. What is needed is a price that rewards recoveries and strengthened billing, as well as reduced system losses. Without creating such incentives, the companies will be back in a

few years asking for yet another price increase as the current one would have been properly digested by their balance sheets — this is almost certain if the government continues to look to the bureaucrats for policy direction.

Terror network

PUNJAB'S Counter Terrorism Department claims to have busted a network of militants affiliated with the banned TTP and Hizbul Ahrar which was poised to carry out attacks in the country. The CTD had been on the trail of the suspects for many months, and, according to one official, this was the longest intelligence-based operation "in the history of the CTD Punjab which culminated in success". Hizbul Ahrar is a relatively new name among militant outfits working in Pakistan, and an offshoot of the Jamaatul Ahrar. The group is said to be behind a fatal attack in Attock on personnel of the National Defence Complex last May. It then conducted a suicide strike in Nowshera a few days later. The CTD's Rawalpindi teams arrested five militants, including a young would-be suicide bomber, claiming that further violence by this network had been prevented. The attackers — the suicide bomber included — had been transported from Afghanistan. While Pakistan has consistently asked Kabul to take action against militants who take refuge on Afghan soil and carry out cross-border attacks, identifying and arresting local facilitators is also crucial to the fight against militancy here.

Indeed, there has been a constant problem when it comes to investigating terrorist outfits. The focus has remained on the foreign hand; this has led to slow progress on tackling the terror threat that is present inside Pakistan. Data clearly indicates that foreign territory and human resources outside this country have been used in the violent effort to destabilise Pakistan. These facts have been cited often enough, and Pakistan has good reason to be concerned about further attacks on its territory that are planned abroad. But in all this, the provincial CTDs must remember that their existence owes in large part to the need to deal with terror at the local level. We now hear that the outfit which has just been busted as a result of the Punjab CTD's prolonged and sustained pursuit will find it extremely difficult to regroup and recreate the network; the effort must be replicated in other parts of the country. Just as Pakistani security stands guard against any militants that are waiting to sneak in from the outside, equal vigilance is required to root out the local elements that aid terror outfits. They are as big a danger as anyone — and located much closer.

Afghanistan cricket

THE Afghanistan cricket team on Monday fired a warning to cricketing nations around the world by scoring a thumping 91-run win over Sri Lanka in the Asia Cup and indicating that they will not be easy prey in next year's World Cup to be played in England. The Afghans, now known for their fearless brand of cricket, outplayed the Lankans in all departments to register a handsome win at Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Stadium. Batting first, they piled up a decent 249 and then dismissed the more experienced Sri Lanka for a paltry 124. There was a clinical excellence about Afghanistan's win that underlined their rapid progress in international cricket; it was a continuation of their impressive run in 2018 which has seen them beating Zimbabwe and Ireland apart from winning the qualifiers to book a berth in the 2019 event. Cricket in this war-torn country has indeed emerged as a refreshing new dimension and a unifying force. Many of their cricketing stars — Mohammad Nabi, Asghar Stanikzai, Shahpoor Zadran — learned their cricket in Pakistan. Millions of Afghans fleeing war have sought refuge for nearly 40 years in camps outside Peshawar where they have been exposed to the cricketing fever that subsequently gripped their own land. And their talent and hard work has paid off. Afghanistan, that started playing the game as late as 1995, gained one-day international status in 2009 and has also been part of four Twenty20 World Cups.

The year 2017 was significant for Afghanistan cricket when full-member status of the ICC was achieved and the country became the 12th Test team, playing its debut Test against India in June this year. In recent months, the Afghans have beaten experienced cricket nations such as the West Indies and Sri Lanka, besides inflicting a T20 series sweep over Bangladesh, helped by teen sensation Rashid Khan. Both cricket giants, Pakistan and India, are also wary of the Afghans in the ongoing Asia Cup which is set for an exciting finish.

Mini-budget blues

THERE was never any doubt that the PTI government would have to announce a new set of painful fiscal measures soon after coming to power. Just like every other government before it for at least 30 years, this one has also begun its career by pointing to a broken economy, bankrupt treasury and stratospheric

levels of debt to argue that a painful adjustment is necessary to stabilise the economy. That moment inevitably arrived for the PTI government on Tuesday when it presented its 'mini-budget'. The presentation also ended weeks of a gruelling wait to discern the policy direction the new government intended to take.

It would have been better, though, given the amount of time that has gone into drawing up the supplementary budget, if a more coherent policy vision had emerged. On the one hand, the government is trying to raise revenues, while on the other, it has given sweeping benefits to non-filers of income tax returns by withdrawing the ban on their purchasing new cars and property. One of the better policy directions to come out in the last five years was the steady tightening of the noose around non-filers of tax returns. This began with imposing banking transaction taxes on non-filers. In due course, the process should have moved towards further penalties and restrictions for non-filers on the purchase of tickets for foreign travel, renewing of passports and much more. Instead, the government caved in to the special interests that had been actively campaigning against this ban since it went into effect in July. The property market has seen lacklustre activity since July, and automobile bookings were reduced from 20pc to 50pc depending on the model.

It was also interesting to see how the finance minister made it a point to emphasise that none of the cuts in development spending would touch the CPEC projects. The rapid climbdown that the government has demonstrated from the commerce adviser's words in a now infamous interview is striking, with the finance minister's budget speech being only the latest example. This comes when other projects are seeing cuts of up to Rs225bn from the core development budget of Rs800bn. Beyond the tax hikes and development cuts, the government now faces the prospect of implementing round two of the stabilisation agenda, which must include greater action on the exchange and interest rates, both of which will impact growth, investment and inflation. In short, the finance act is a small step towards a policy direction, with much more yet to come. Given the government's track record thus far of submitting to special interests and shying away from the real problems that the economy faces, confidence is dimming on its ability to keep a firm hand on the tiller through the choppy waters ahead.

Nawaz Sharif's release

THE remainder of the NAB trial will continue as will the appeal against the initial conviction by the NAB court, but for now former prime minister and PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif will not be held in prison. Mr Sharif's daughter Maryam Nawaz and his son-in-law have also been released.

The Islamabad High Court bench that ordered the prisoners' release has not issued a full judgement recording its reasons, so at this stage it is not possible to analyse why the high court has decided that they should not be held in prison.

Yet, the NAB court verdict that sent Mr Sharif to jail in the first place was a profoundly flawed judgement and it would appear to serve the cause of justice that the high court appeal against it will be decided before more jail time is served.

Since the NAB court convicted Mr Sharif on July 6, no independent jurist or legal analyst has stepped forward to credibly defend the judgement. Courts must treat all defendants equally and should accord no preferential treatment to VIPs or national political figures, and all defendants are entitled to due process and a fair application of the law.

Now it is time for the remainder of the NAB trial and the appeal against the initial conviction to be conducted according to the highest standards of justice. A fair application of the law is all that defendants can expect, and there is clearly much room for the NAB process against Mr Sharif and his family members to improve. Beyond that, there are issues of the judicialisation of politics and the politicisation of accountability.

When the Sharif family was ensnared in the Panama Papers in April 2016, as the serving prime minister at the time, it was right that Mr Sharif submit himself to accountability first. But in the two and half years since the Panama Papers rocked the political landscape in Pakistan,

NAB has failed to establish itself as an institution that is fair and has its practices firmly rooted in the law. Indeed, from Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar to Prime Minister Imran Khan, the exhortations to NAB to act in a more restrained and lawful manner have been numerous and clear.

For the Sharif family, the high court judgement has come at a time of mourning. On all sides, politics should be put on hold in the immediate days ahead.

TB challenge

ALTHOUGH over 1.5m people worldwide die of tuberculosis each year, the disease has not received the global attention it deserves. It remains the top infectious disease killer for the fourth year in a row. But a turning point may be near. Knowing that slow progress to fight TB would result in countries missing the 2030 SDG goal to eliminate the disease, UN member states have put the spotlight on a global eradication plan by rallying political support and investment. At least 42 world leaders will meet on Sept 26 to commit their nations to eradicating TB by 2030 at the first-ever tuberculosis summit on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting. Given that Pakistan ranks sixth among those countries that suffer from multidrug resistant TB (15,000 MDR cases are diagnosed each year), President Arif Alvi would do well to attend the summit. The move would demonstrate Pakistan's determination to eradicate TB, while the summit itself would serve as an opportunity for the country to seek assistance to curb and reverse TB's often fatal trajectory at a time when experts fear an even deadlier form of the disease. Pakistan should take full advantage of the opportunity to interact with the delegates at the summit where the disease will, for the first time, be receiving such high-level political attention, the aim being to ensure that poorer countries have access to effective and affordable medication to treat MDR TB. The outcome of this moot may be critical for the government.

While the international Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria provides free diagnosis and treatment, provinces in Pakistan have protested about poor resource allocation. For equitable distribution, transparency is essential. Meanwhile, the blunt truth is that too many poor people are infected with or dying of a curable and preventable disease. Providing health security as repeatedly pledged by this government calls for sustained investment and change in treatment approaches through greater efforts at universal health coverage.

Rigging inquiry

If democratic institutions are to be strengthened, failures, mistakes and poor decisions need to be identified.

The National Assembly's decision to form a committee to investigate allegations of poll rigging in the July 25 general election is a welcome move. As with previous such probes and similar parliamentary committees, much will depend on the scope of the inquiry and whether the government and the opposition can find a way to conduct a meaningful one.

After all, no government would like to see its mandate undermined by evidence of electoral rigging, and arguably all oppositions would like to magnify malfeasance that may have occurred. Nevertheless, it is fairly clear that there are credible allegations of rigging that need to be addressed.

At a minimum, the failure or otherwise of the Results Transmission System needs to be explained. While a reliance on technology is welcome, in the case of a general election, the technology used has to be virtually foolproof, and safeguards and back-up systems must be in place to ensure that there is no delay in the counting of votes and reporting of results. The events after polling closed on July 25 are unacceptable from a democratic standpoint and the country cannot afford a repeat of what at a minimum was gross mismanagement.

While a parliamentary inquiry can easily drift towards politicisation and showmanship, it is parliament that has the ultimate authority to amend the electoral framework — if it becomes clear that the system itself needs to be changed. Moreover, the 2018 poll was the first general election to be held after significant electoral reforms were approved by the previous parliament; a parliamentary audit of the electoral process was therefore already merited.

Thus far, the PTI has at least appeared willing to consider a serious inquiry into claims of electoral rigging, and if Prime Minister Imran Khan throws his weight behind the parliamentary inquiry, it ought to be possible for rapid progress to be made.

But much will depend on the conduct of the opposition. When the PTI was in opposition, it made very serious allegations of electoral fraud and manipulation having occurred in 2013, but failed to back up its claims with reasonable

evidence. Now it is the PML-N primarily that is alleging fraud, though virtually all opposition parties have levelled similar charges. It is therefore incumbent on the PML-N to assemble evidence that can be reasonably expected in the circumstances.

Perhaps the inquiry should consider approaching independent and international poll monitors for their input too. Independent experts may be able to provide solutions to chronic electoral problems that the political class may not be willing to consider if presented by a particular party.

The next scheduled general election is five years away, but the work for improving on the poor record of 2018 should begin now.

Pharma's tax dodge

BIG pharma often cites two factors to justify its high drug prices: large investments in research and development, and the high incidence of taxes. Neither of these is completely accurate. Analysing the available financial disclosures of just four multinational pharmaceutical companies, not only did Oxfam find that these firms spend far more on lobbying and marketing than R&D, it also claimed that they could be depriving seven developing countries, including Pakistan, of an estimated total of \$112m in tax underpayment. Based on its limited access to financial disclosures of the firms' operations in Pakistan, it alleged that one corporation alone may be underpaying the government to the tune of \$1.7m annually. The firms' representatives have been quick to state that they follow all procedures and laws of the countries they operate in (which may be technically true) but Oxfam points to a deeper issue in which both the industry and governments are complicit: the exploitation of a dysfunctional international tax system, riddled with loopholes, through practices of tax dodging, price gouging and influence peddling. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile a pattern in which these firms, with annual global 'superprofits' of up to 30pc, reported 5-7pc profits in countries with standard corporate tax rates, versus much higher profits in low-tax jurisdictions with smaller markets for their drugs.

The ultimate losers in this equation are those living in extreme poverty, without access to essential life-saving drugs and vaccinations ie public health provisions that this lost revenue could have accounted for. Such firms may find immunity in legal grey areas, but the ethical implication is stark for an industry that controls

the fate of millions of lives. With Pakistan's poor regulatory framework, there is a high probability of multinationals distorting taxable income declarations through under- and over-invoicing of transfer prices. What is certain is that more transparency is needed. Closer scrutiny of their financial declarations is essential to uncovering potentially dodgy practices, including the extent to which profits may be being shifted. But though multinationals constitute only a fraction of the local drug manufacturing industry, they wield considerable clout. Given the government's capitulation to special interest groups in its recently announced fiscal measures, can it withstand the pressure to enforce stricter financial monitoring of multinationals and ensure they are paying their fair share? A genuine commitment to accountability — the lynchpin of the PTI's electoral campaign — would demand as much.

passage to peace

IN the run-up to the 550th birth anniversary of Baba Guru Nanak next year, the historical Darbar Sahib shrine in Shakargarh, just 4km across the border from India, has been in the news. Many groups of Sikh are pressing for opening a passage from the Indian side to what is one of the most venerable sites of their faith. The debate was provided fresh impetus when army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa reportedly told a visiting Indian politician and former cricketer Navjot Singh Sidhu that Pakistan was working to open the Kartarpur corridor for the benefit of Sikh pilgrims. The remarks from someone so influential have led to many questions in Islamabad and New Delhi. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has confirmed that the initiative has been taken after gathering input from the national institutions concerned. He has said that work was under way on the passage, categorically promising that the Kartarpur border would be opened.

The Pakistani resolve on the subject will be welcomed by all those who favour encouraging people-to-people channels that can connect Pakistanis and Indians. These contacts are essential to building a relationship of peaceful coexistence between Pakistan and India. One hopes this 'proposal' is reciprocated by Delhi, which some months ago denied visas to Pakistani pilgrims wanting to visit the shrines of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti and Khawaja Nizamuddin Aulia. On its part, Pakistan must come up with the formal follow-up, such as officially communicating the idea to India. The Indian response to the opening of the Kartarpur passage in recent years has been negative. Only last year, a

parliamentary committee on that side of the border rejected the idea, saying that the time was not right for such a move, and accusing Pakistan of continued hostilities. It is still a tall order despite the goodwill represented by the many dreamers on either side of the border. Let us hope that it is not beyond the two neighbours to pleasantly surprise their people once in a while.

India's absurd move

EVEN by the often bewildering standards of Pakistan-India relations, the latest dust-up is confusing and disappointing.

A day after the spokesperson of the Indian Ministry for External Affairs confirmed a foreign-minister-level meeting between India and Pakistan in New York during the UNGA, India reversed itself in a spectacularly fiery and unfortunate statement by the MEA spokesperson.

The reasons stated by India for cancelling the meeting are self-contradictory and have been criticised inside that country itself by independent analysts and sections of the media. Extraordinary too is the intemperate and undiplomatic language used by India to attack Prime Minister Imran Khan personally.

Mr Khan has answered in a similar vein via his official Twitter account to India's jibe against him, and it is difficult to see how the two prime ministers will be able to move past the sudden personal animus that appears to have broken out. A moment of hope has been gratuitously extinguished by India.

The immediate challenge now will be to avoid a war of words between the two foreign ministers at the UNGA. While the bilateral meeting stands cancelled, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj will participate in multilateral forums where there will likely be intense media focus on them. Similarly, speeches at the UNGA have in recent years been taken as an opportunity by the two countries to verbally attack each other.

For Pakistan, the focus should be on drawing global attention to Indian human rights violations against and oppression of the people of India-held Kashmir, while simultaneously highlighting Indian intransigence in opening talks with Pakistan.

After all, Prime Minister Khan's recent letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi specifically mentioned that Pakistan remains willing to discuss terrorism-related matters. Foreign Minister Qureshi will need to draw on all his experience to keep the UNGA meetings on track rather than allow them to descend into a shouting match between India and Pakistan.

Beyond the UNGA, it is not clear when the next significant opportunity for resuming public dialogue will be available. Perhaps the approach in the near term should focus on back-channel contacts such as between the countries' national security advisers.

Prime Minister Khan should move quickly to complete his national security team by announcing his choice for NSA. Military-to-military contacts, particularly in matters pertaining to peace along the Line of Control, should also be maintained.

Unfortunate and bizarre as the eventual Indian response to Pakistan's offer for dialogue has been, it remains true that talks are the only rational path that the two South Asian rivals can take.

Prime Minister Modi's BJP is the front runner in next year's general election in India, so it would behove the party and its leadership to demonstrate sensible leadership instead of engulfing South Asia in deeper uncertainty and even fear.

Unnecessary pressure

PAKISTAN has made some headway against terror financing, but its progress remains uneven. That is the gist of a US State Department report released on Thursday in conjunction with its annual country reports on terrorism. Given that the Financial Action Task Force in June placed Pakistan on the grey list of countries that could have economic sanctions imposed on them if they fail to prevent terrorists from accessing funds, this assessment would be of deep concern to policymakers here. The document acknowledges that the security operations in Fata have significantly degraded the capabilities of terrorist outfits to wreak havoc in the country. However, it alleges that Pakistan has not fully implemented the UNSC sanctions regime against Al Qaeda and the militant Islamic State group. It also accuses the country of having "failed to significantly limit Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed from openly raising money,

recruiting, and training in Pakistan”. The implication is that Pakistan has been lethargic in acting against groups that are allegedly ‘externally focused’.

There is no doubt that despite the reduction in the frequency and magnitude of terrorist attacks, the threat of violence lingers. Intelligence-based operations continue to unearth militant splinter groups. Complacency is not an option, something that is as clear to Pakistan as it is to the world. The government periodically places notices in the newspapers listing banned or ‘under watch’ organisations, urging the public not to give them donations. The SECP earlier this year banned funding to entities and individuals included in the consolidated list issued by the UNSC sanctions regime; penalty for noncompliance was set at Rs10m. Following that, the Punjab government seized a large number of assets owned by the Jamaatud Dawa and its charity wing, the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation; it was unfortunate that the JuD successfully petitioned the Lahore High Court against that move. More recently, the ECP refused to allow an LeT affiliated group to register as a political party. The country made a high-level commitment at the FATF meeting in June that it would plug the loopholes in the financial system that terrorists use to their advantage, an assertion that Finance Minister Asad Umar reiterated barely two weeks after taking office. Quite correctly, Mr Umar described the undertaking as one that is in Pakistan’s own interest. Given that a new government is taking an unambiguous stance on the matter, it is only reasonable that it be given the space to fulfil its obligations.

Rohingya horrors

AFTER last year’s deadly crackdown on the Rohingya community in Myanmar, mass atrocities were committed, including sexual violence and murder, which led to the displacement of over 700,000 people who escaped to neighbouring Bangladesh. Now a 400-page scathing UN report, a year in the making, has condemned the leadership of the Myanmar army for “the gravest crimes under international law” against ethnic and religious minorities. The fact-finding mission boldly recommends that six top military officials — including the army’s commander-in-chief — be investigated and prosecuted for genocide. It clearly states rape and sexual violence were “a particularly egregious and recurrent feature” of the army’s conduct. Though denied access to Myanmar by the government, the report’s investigators interviewed 875 witnesses who had fled the country. Then, recently, the chief prosecutor of the ICCJ announced she

would hold a preliminary investigation examining evidence of killing, violence and rape suffered by the Rohingya people. The ICCJ needs to look no further than the UN report. Witnesses describe soldiers dragging people out of their home, shooting them at point-blank range or slitting their throats; women brutally raped; some of the victims were tied naked by their hands or hair to trees. In an ambush on a village in Rakhine state, security forces ripped infants away from their mothers and drowned them in the river. While about 10,000 Rohingya were killed in the first two months of the crackdown, satellite imagery showed nearly 400 villages wiped off the map.

Importantly, the UN report sharply critiques the world body's response to the Rohingya crisis noting agency staff failed to protect human rights in Myanmar. Agency officials loath to react during the violence focused, instead, on development goals — those who attempted to address human rights issues were blocked in their efforts. Nonetheless, there is damning evidence to ensure the guilty are held to account. Only then will persecuted civilian populations live with dignity and security.

India's tirade

The cancellation of a meeting at the UNGA in New York between the foreign ministers of Pakistan and India has been swiftly followed by escalating rhetoric.

Yet, amidst the flurry of unfortunate and undesirable statements, the comments by Indian army chief Gen Bipin Rawat stand out for their recklessness and menace. First, lashing out at Pakistan for violence in India-held Kashmir, the Indian army chief appears to have threatened what would amount to war crimes against Pakistan security personnel.

The growing belligerence of the Indian army in matters of national security and foreign policy has been noted with concern in recent years by independent regional analysts, and Gen Rawat's outrageous threats underline why India should carefully consider the long-term repercussions of injecting bellicose military rhetoric into the fraught Pakistan-India relationship.

Before the cross-border dust could settle following his first comments, Gen Rawat has suggested in fresh comments to the media yesterday that India may consider another so-called 'surgical strike' across the Line of Control in the

disputed Kashmir region. The army chief's comments have come in the run-up to the rather bizarre spectacle that India is planning this week: a so-called 'Surgical Strike Day' to commemorate the second anniversary of an 'attack' that Pakistan denies took place.

If the Indian military leadership's aggressive rhetoric is of concern, the BJP government's determination to turn the Indian public against Pakistan should worry all right-thinking and sensible citizens of the two countries. The celebrations planned this week by the Indian government appear to be part of an effort to weaponise the Indian public against Pakistan, which will almost certainly reduce the space for dialogue towards normalisation of ties and eventual peace. Until now, even in periods of intense tensions at the level of the state, the people of the two countries have had sizeable contingents of peace.

For its part, Pakistan has thus far rightly avoided being provoked by bellicose rhetoric from across the border. Military spokesperson, Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, while warning India against any misadventure, has underlined that war is not a solution. The information minister, Fawad Chaudhry, has suggested that Pakistan is still willing to consider opening the Kartarpur corridor to a revered Sikh holy site in Narowal district.

Prime Minister Khan should have chosen less intemperate words in his response on Twitter to India's cancelling the foreign minister-level meeting, but that can eventually be attributed to personal disappointment and inexperience in office. Pakistan must not follow India down the path of inflammatory rhetoric.

Prisoners' travails

OUR state might deny there is a prison crisis, but the absence of basic jail amenities, massive overcrowding and lack of rehabilitation facilities, all speak to the need for real reform. When the country's total prison capacity is estimated at 63,532, none of these challenges are surprising — 98 prisons currently accommodate 78,160 inmates including 48,780 undertrial prisoners and 1,225 juveniles. In effect, the federal ombudsman's recent recommendations to the Supreme Court suggesting it look to the Higher Education Commission, the Allama Iqbal Open University and other educational institutions to improve education facilities and skill training in prisons come as a welcome change and one that urgently needs implementation. Providing education to the jailed is part

of a wider prison reform initiative funded by Unicef in collaboration with the National Commission for Child Rights. Given that most prisons are unfit for human habitation, the Supreme Court has taken suo motu notice of worsening jail conditions to push provincial authorities towards instituting reforms. This makes prison renovation, capacity-building of staff and provision of basic hygiene facilities imperative for humane living conditions and lessening violence.

Jails should not be used merely as dumping grounds for those incarcerated. Given that two-thirds of the prison population comprises undertrial inmates, the state must also revamp its probation and parole system. Courts should have deadlines to clear case backlogs; and poor prisoners must be given legal aid. Besides, overcrowding, inadequate training of prison officers, violence and drugs, poor hygiene and lack of purpose all create hardened criminals rather than rehabilitated prisoners. Moreover, convicts in solitary confinement are prone to mental health issues; juveniles, women, and older prisoners are more vulnerable. In the case of KP's prisons, the National Commission for Human Rights found that 251 mentally ill prisoners incarcerated across 22 prisons were denied treatment in contravention of jail regulations. This NCHR report and others documenting the treatment of juveniles in jail and handicapped convicts (death-row inmates included) are a shameful blot on the state's human rights record. Reliance on lengthy sentences to tackle crime and terrorism-related offences is not the solution. Reforming the lives of convicts to prepare them for release has longer-term advantages for society. Also, if the government were to offer genuine incentives for released prisoners — such as the prospect of work or further study — it would give reason for people to lead a life without crime.

Thar drought

ON Aug 15, Tharparkar's deputy commissioner penned a letter to the Board of Revenue, requesting that the district be declared 'drought-hit'. The desert region had received insufficient and erratic rainfall, and hospitals were filling up with the dead, dying and diseased. Residents worried they would once again be witness to the all-too-familiar scenes of starvation experienced periodically. On Aug 20, the Sindh cabinet, in its first meeting after the general elections in July, declared the region to be drought-hit, and promised to send aid and relief packages. That was over a month ago. But then what? Wells have dried up. Groundwater (where available) is contaminated with fluoride and arsenic. Crops and livestock have

perished. Waterborne diseases, viral infections, and malnutrition have led to the death of nearly 450 infants this year alone. All this begs the question: where is the Sindh government? Where is the PPP that has always projected itself as ‘the party of the poor’, with its slogan of ‘roti, kapra aur makaan’?

The drought and water shortages are not ‘sudden’ or ‘unexpected’ events. PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari had requested his government to ‘stay alert’ in the likelihood of the natural disaster. The drought in Thar may be a natural occurrence, but it requires human intervention; ie long-term and short-term solutions. How the PPP responds to the crisis will determine its public perception in the coming years. However, its past record leaves much to be desired. The Rann Minor has not had water for many years: over 50,000 acres of fertile land lie barren, forcing inhabitants to migrate to other areas. Private firms responsible for setting up RO plants complain of lack of payment from the government. The Sindh government must act fast to save face and countless lives. ‘Corruption’ is a word (and accusation) thrown around sloppily, but often difficult to prove. Inefficiency and incompetence, on the other hand, can be observed by anyone.

Wrong signal on taxes

As the tax season draws to a close — barring an extension — it is imperative that the government send clear signals to taxpayers about the benefits of tax compliance.

A key part of any effort to broaden the tax base and promote documentation of the economy is to raise awareness about tax compliance, and to build a culture of filing returns. Far too many people are accustomed to not filing returns, and this habit that they have developed over several years needs to be broken if other documentation and revenue-broadening measures are to be effective.

One way of promoting this is to ensure a sharp demarcation between tax filers and non-filers, and start introducing obstacles in the execution of normal business transactions for the latter category. One of the better policy measures initiated by the previous PML-N government was the creation of the Active Taxpayer List; this should be built on to introduce new restrictions every year for those whose names are not on the list.

The latest of these restrictions was introduced in the budget passed in May. It forbade local government entities to register property and new vehicles purchased by non-filers of tax returns. The new PTI government reversed this ban in its latest mini-budget, arguing first that it made it impossible for overseas Pakistanis to invest or do business in the country, and then that the ban violated Article 23 of the Constitution, which guarantees all citizens the right to own and sell property across Pakistan.

When this reversal came under sustained criticism after it was introduced, Finance Minister Asad Umar started signalling that the government may well be ready to back away from it and search for other mechanisms whereby overseas Pakistanis and others not required by law to file returns in Pakistan can be kept out of the ambit of the ban.

So now an ambiguous situation has been created. It is not clear how difficult it will be to remain a non-filer. It is hoped that the government will continue with, and build upon, the reform that began with the compilation and publication of the ATL, extending the so-called ban on the activities of non-filers to foreign travel as well as maintaining bank accounts.

It is good and healthy in an economy like Pakistan's for people to frequently be confronted with the question 'are you a filer or non-filer?' — the way forward ought to be made a little more difficult, and a little more expensive, if their answer is 'non-filer'.

It is easy to work around the fact that there are many people who are not legally required to file tax returns with the FBR. That should not become a reason to roll back the reform altogether.

Missing women

THERE is often an unsettling aspect to meetings between bureaucrats and politicians on the country's financial crisis or talks on peace and trade with foreign leaders: too few women take part in the decision-making process. Sadly, even if highly qualified, women are outnumbered by men when it comes to senior jobs in the bureaucracy. Statistics from the Establishment Division note that only 31,281 women were employed, despite the availability of 649,176 government posts, during 2016-17. In the same year, only 16,133 government employees

from minority communities were employed in Punjab and Islamabad. With over 78,000 of these government posts unoccupied in this period, the question is, why were so few women and members from minority communities given jobs at the main secretariat and provinces? Despite a 10pc quota for women and a 5pc quota for minorities in public service, entrenched patriarchy and a mindset averse to inclusivity are depriving the bureaucracy of diverse talent — especially when these marginalised groups have so much to offer vis-à-vis leadership roles. For instance, even when exceptionally talented women ace the CSS exams (the three top scorers in 2016 were all women; in 2017 another 111 women were recommended for positions) only few make it to senior slots in the police, finance ministry and the foreign service. Chauvinism and hostile working conditions in the male-dominated ministries are the main reason why there are few women in senior management grades in government. Even if the bureaucracy is perceived as a gruelling choice because of its hours and postings, the careers of exceptional women must not be thwarted. Gender inclusivity must be addressed by the Public Commission.

When Prime Minister Imran Khan spoke to bureaucrats on serving Pakistan with commitment and adopting his government's policy reforms, he failed to mention that the bureaucracy is freezing out talented women candidates. Surely, the government has a duty to address the large gender gaps in public service, and to acknowledge that the abilities of both men and women are equal when it comes to the task at hand. Given the glacial pace of change, progress on closing the gender gap in politics and public service remains obstructed. The situation calls for immediate remedial action. The prime minister must be reminded that too few women at the top means that half the country's population is being kept out of the process of national decision-making.

Ahvaz attack

WHILE there are a number of ethnic rebel movements of varying intensity active inside Iran, large-scale violence and terrorist attacks within the Islamic Republic are rare. However, as chaos envelopes many of its neighbours and regional states, it seems militant groups are now training their guns on Iran. On Saturday, insurgents attacked a military parade in the city of Ahvaz, killing at least 25 people. While women and children were among the victims, the primary target appeared to be troops of the Pasdaran, the elite, ideological military unit

dedicated to protecting the Islamic system in the country. This is the second major attack in Iran where state symbols have been targeted; last year, in a deadly attack claimed by the militant Islamic State group, insurgents stormed the Iranian parliament, as well as the mausoleum of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran. IS has claimed the Ahvaz attack, while an ethnic Arab rebel movement has also made a claim of responsibility. The Iranian authorities, that have blamed the US, Israel and their Gulf allies for the atrocity, claimed to have arrested a “large network” involved in the attack on Monday, while the US and the Gulf states have denied involvement. However, in a tweet after the event an official believed to be close to a Gulf Arab government appeared to defend the militant strike. The Iranians have promised a “harsh” response to the atrocity; indeed, those involved must be brought to justice.

However, Iran, as well as its regional foes, must navigate carefully so that incidents such as these do not spark greater confrontation. President Rouhani is currently in the US to attend the UN General Assembly, while President Trump is also due to speak at the world body. Instead of crossing swords, perhaps both sides can use the opportunity to reopen dialogue channels, remote as it may appear at this point. As for Iran’s Arab foes, they must realise that terrorism is a common enemy and that gloating over a rival’s misery is highly insensitive.

Trading potential

It seems that while India and Pakistan exchanged hot words in the latest round of tensions between the two countries, the World Bank was putting the finishing touches to a study whose main conclusion is that both countries have a trade potential of some \$37bn if they can find a way to unlock it.

The region has clearly much to gain if, instead of barbs, the two countries traded goods and services. The figures produced by the World Bank is the highest such estimate that we have seen thus far; sadly, it is also apparent that the two neighbours are paying a heavy price for their continuing inability to engage in a productive manner.

For the moment, the high ground rests with Pakistan. It was the government of Pakistan that extended a hand for talks, and the government of India that invoked unreasonable grounds, as well as undiplomatic language, to reject the offer after having accepted it.

But the moral high ground is not enough: Pakistan must bring a solid negotiating position to the table. Given the disparity in size between the Pakistani and Indian economies, simple market access to Pakistan's domestic market will not be enough to attract sufficient interest from across the border.

The biggest plum in Pakistan's offering is transit trade rights to Afghanistan, which were signalled to Delhi as potentially being on the table, though rather late in the game. Beyond that, Pakistan has access to the energy resources of Central Asia and Iran that can be leveraged very effectively once the geopolitics at play to the west are sorted out.

Played smartly, Pakistan can build a far heavier negotiating position than it has currently managed to do, and thereby create an interest where there is little at the moment.

For its part, India needs to learn to live in its own neighbourhood. For decades, we have seen it forge ties of trade and investment with distant countries, while ignoring its own neighbours. As the largest economy in the region, it has to do far more to take up the responsibility for crafting greater regional flows, even if the value chains look more attractive in Southeast Asia.

Coupled with this lack of interest, India is also known for its reliance on non-tariff barriers as a tool to restrict trade. The weakest part of the World Bank's report is precisely when it comes to addressing this problem, where it refuses to see that the NTBs come and go with circumstances, ie their use as trade barriers appears to be centrally directed.

Instead, the report loses itself in the labyrinthine details of various trade bureaucracies. Nevertheless, the overall thrust of the report is a welcome breath of fresh air in a relationship that has so far been characterised by tense exchanges.

New lease of life

FOR years, a handful of dedicated group of doctors and social activists resisted all manner of threats and blackmail, even risked their lives, to spearhead a campaign that saw Pakistan at last shed its shameful global reputation as a thriving bazaar for vended organs. While constant vigilance is important to prevent the practice from once again taking root, there is a very real shortage of

organs for transplantation. More than 50,000 people die of organ failure every year in Pakistan, including approximately 15,000 as a result of renal failure; promotion of deceased organ donation is therefore of the utmost importance. On Saturday, the Supreme Court ordered the government to implement the recommendations made by a committee — comprising several of the original campaigners — set up to look into strengthening the legislation against the illegal sale and transplantation of organs and suggesting ways to promote deceased organ donation. In line with their suggestions, the judges asked that legislators enhance punishment for the crime to 14 years and Rs10m, from the present 10 years and Rs1m.

Other proposals say that the government must actively promote deceased organ donation, follow international protocols to determine brain death and to harvest organs, ethically and efficiently, for transplantation. Practical measures are key to success: more ventilators are needed in hospitals where brain-dead patients can be kept artificially alive until a decision about organ donation is made; a deceased donor database would facilitate matching with potential recipients; the subject of cadaveric donations should also be made an integral part of medical curricula, etc. For a country that consistently ranks among the highest in giving to charitable causes, it is deeply unfortunate that Pakistanis are so ungenerous where it comes to pledging their organs. A combination of superstition and ignorance continues to keep the number of such pledges very low. Proponents of commercial transplants often use the huge shortfall of viable organs to support their stance; but no argument can justify the wickedness inherent in such an unequal exchange, in which the haves can literally live off the flesh of the have-nots. It is heartening that some segments of civil society continue to persevere in changing mindsets through seminars, walks, public service advertisements, etc. Now that the apex court has spoken and spoken so emphatically, perhaps the government will throw its weight behind this noble cause and help it gain more traction.

Polio's last stand

THIS week, in an ongoing attempt to eradicate the deadly polio virus, a national polio immunisation campaign mobilising 260,000 personnel will attempt to

vaccinate 38.6m children under the age of five. One of the last three countries, including Afghanistan and Nigeria where polio is endemic, Pakistan might be close to stopping the transmission of the virus but will only get to zero cases when it tackles the challenges in the way of eradicating the disease. To have eliminated polio, it must report zero cases for three consecutive years, according to WHO guidelines. While sustained efforts to halt the virus's transmission have shown results since 2014 when 306 cases were registered compared to 54 in 2016, eight in 2017 and four cases this year, attempts have also been undermined by militant attacks on vaccinators and law-enforcement personnel. The Taliban had 'banned' vaccinations in the tribal areas, even certain settlements of Karachi, and militants still remain active. Only in January, a mother-and-daughter vaccination team was killed in Balochistan from where one of the three polio cases recorded this year has emerged. Yet another hurdle is the vaccine refusal rate. And, because the virus can be found circulating in sewage water, the government must improve living and housing conditions in low-income settlements.

Moreover, migrant populations travelling between the tribal region and Afghanistan's border towns export the virus even when anti-polio teams from both countries have coordinated to stop cross-border transmission. To ensure that every child entering Pakistan is immunised, it is imperative that well-stocked vaccination kiosks at border crossings, transit hubs, police check-posts and in localities where migrant families settle are made operational. Also injectable polio vaccines, experts say, should be used to enhance the immune system of children more likely to contract this virus. Stamping out this deadly virus would imply every child is vaccinated, especially those with families on the move and who have missed routine immunisations. The effort will require a cohesive public health infrastructure supported by our political leadership.

Strengthening Nacta

THE National Counter Terrorism Authority is a good idea that has been poorly developed and executed. Created in 2009, Nacta has been mired in bureaucratic infighting, lack of cooperation across security institutions, a dearth of resources and, for much of its short history, no clear direction or purpose. So it is welcome that Prime Minister Imran Khan convened a first board of governors meeting of Nacta on Tuesday and expressed a willingness to reinvigorate Nacta and provide

it with the necessary resources and policy direction. The prime minister's committee-forming spree has continued with a new team designated to overhaul the working of Nacta — a move that could either compound the confusion in Nacta or, because the committee has prime ministerial backing, act to infuse the organisation with fresh energy and vigour. A revived and effective Nacta would in turn boost the moribund National Action Plan and the country's overall fight against extremism and militancy.

Through three governments, the struggles at Nacta have proved to be myriad and some of the problems have been easier to resolve than others. But two issues in particular continue to create confusion and uncertainty. Since its inception, there has been a tussle between the Prime Minister's Office and the interior ministry over operational control of Nacta. Prime Minister Khan is reported to have decided on Tuesday to retain control of Nacta instead of allowing the interior ministry to supervise its operations. While it is critical that Nacta's permanent staff and secretariat be strengthened — which previous governments have only paid lip service to — a restructuring of Nacta should also definitively settle whether the organisation falls under the direct control of the prime minister or the interior minister. While prime ministerial control would likely increase Nacta's clout within the state apparatus, the trade-off is that Mr Khan is unlikely to set aside as much time for the organisation as the interior minister could. A sensible decision should be taken and then implemented for the long term.

A second area of concern has been the lack of cooperation extended to Nacta by various arms of the security and intelligence apparatus. As a coordinating body, Nacta can only be as efficient as the willingness of existing security and intelligence organisations to work with it. While Nacta officials have claimed that its coordination role has increased in recent years and that other organisations are more willing to work with the authority, there is still a discernible gap between the civil and military sides of the security and intelligence apparatus when it comes to a willingness to coordinate and work with each other. An empowered Nacta could go some way in helping reduce age-old tensions and suspicions and bring the various arms of the security and intelligence apparatus into closer cooperation with each other. Nothing less than the safety and security of Pakistan and its citizens depends on such cooperation.

Trump's UNGA speech

OVER the past seven decades, the hallowed halls of the UN have witnessed some fiery, marathon speeches by world leaders that have become classics in diplomatic lore. The oratory of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and Palestinian icon Yasser Arafat springs to mind. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's speech at the Security Council in 1971 also merits mention. However, Donald Trump's second speech as US president at the UN General Assembly on Tuesday will also be remembered — for all the wrong reasons. In effect, the US president attacked the concept of multilateral diplomacy in the very institution that has championed it since the Second World War, striking a confrontational, populist tone. “We reject the ideology of globalism and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism,” he observed. He urged all “responsible nations” to defend their sovereignty from “global governance”. Mr Trump's speech also contained plenty of invective against Iran, signalling that a thaw in relations between Washington and Tehran is highly unlikely.

Presently, in many parts of the world, the dangers of populism and hyper-patriotism are apparent. In Europe, many far-right groups have entered parliaments across the continent. The subcontinent is also not immune to the rise in right-wing zealotry; we in Pakistan have seen fanatics being mainstreamed while in India, the ruling BJP is increasingly showing its ‘true’ saffron colours and commitment to Hindutva, challenging the concept of secular democracy. And in the US itself, Mr Trump's very rise has challenged the system, as the American far right has been emboldened by the US president's capture of power. If anything, the world currently needs more globalism and cooperation, not less. Not too long ago, we witnessed the horrors of extreme populism as the far right in Europe unleashed a reign of terror during the Second World War. Worryingly, much of the language and symbolism being used by some leaders, including Mr Trump, can be interpreted as condoning extreme rightist tendencies. If diplomacy, multilateralism and dialogue are abandoned, what are the alternatives? Instead of rejecting globalism, it is isolationism and confrontation that should be shunned, and all states must work towards rebuilding an admittedly broken global system. Instead of more wars, more weapons and more deaths that will undoubtedly result if the path of confrontation is pursued by states, efforts must be made to create a more just global order governed by

human rights and international law, where states' sovereignty is respected and poverty, hunger and disease are addressed collectively.

Right to childhood

A RECENT policy brief by the Centre for Reproductive Rights and the National Commission for Human Rights highlighted inconsistencies in child marriage laws in Pakistan — a practice that is at odds with many aspects of the Constitution and international human rights. The problems associated with early marriages are well documented, but the topic is not given the priority it deserves in the country. Moreover, attempts at reform are met with hostility from conservative quarters. Last year, when the Senate Standing Committee tried to get approval for The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill, 2017 (thanks to the efforts of Senator Sehar Kamran), it faced months of opposition.

Marriage, along with divorce and inheritance, comes under the domain of personal religious laws. However, since the passing of the 18th Amendment (2010), the provinces can enact independent legislation. So far, only Sindh has increased the minimum age of marriage to 18 (from 16) for girls, while Punjab introduced amendments to the existing colonial-era law. In Sindh, offenders face three years of imprisonment and an unspecified fine. In Punjab, it is six months of imprisonment and a fine of Rs50,000. Despite progress (in these two provinces), loopholes continue to exist: the laws punish offenders, but do not make it mandatory for underage marriage to be declared null and void. As long as contradictory legislation exists, along with weak law and order, poverty and regressive cultural attitudes that view girls as a financial burden, property to settle debts and disputes, or exclusively as mothers, the practice will continue. An early marriage deprives girls of education; they are forced to take on adult responsibilities when they are mentally and physically not fully developed. They face health-related complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and are often victims of rape and domestic violence. The provinces — apart from Sindh, which has already taken the needed step — must ensure that the age of marriage is raised to at least 18 years. The future of many generations of girls depends on it.

Water priorities

THE attention that Prime Minister Imran Khan is giving to water issues in the country is a refreshing break from the more brick-and-mortar priorities of the previous government. However, securing the water future of the country will take a lot more than meetings and directives. It is unfortunate to note this — increasingly, there is an impression that while the government's priorities might appear sound, the new setup has little idea of what to do about pursuing them. The latest example of this was the meeting held by Mr Khan on Wednesday in which he directed key individuals on his leadership team along with senior members of the water bureaucracy to ensure better coordination with the provinces, apart from formulating a legislative framework to regulate surface water usage and groundwater extraction. These are all important issues and the prime minister's personal attention to them is welcome. But water is an intricate and sprawling issue, and it is absolutely necessary for Mr Khan to meet and solicit advice from people beyond the water bureaucracy.

Once he ventures outside the limited confines of the water bureaucrats, he will experience the difficulty of even trying to take a comprehensive view of the water predicament in the country. Urban and rural water issues, for example, are very different from each other, and involve very different tiers of government. Urban water distribution presents challenges that are part technical, part financial — they are also challenges that are deeply embedded in urban rackets and municipal dysfunctions. In some places, the dysfunctions are political, in others they are economic. Trying to take a single, comprehensive approach to problems in the water sector is clearly the wrong starting point.

Compounding the issue is the blinkered view that the water bureaucracy has traditionally taken of Pakistan's water sector. In their opinion, the problem is first and foremost one of quantity, and all other aspects of it, such as governance, reform of access regimes and pricing, are a distant second. The best illustration of this is the read-out that emerged from the meeting itself, in which water pricing was not even mentioned as a topic that was discussed. The scale of the water sector is so large, and the number of problems that need simultaneous attention so vast, that the prime minister would be well advised to adopt a more systematic approach to pursuing his priorities in this area. In doing this, it would be a sensible move to consult water sector experts outside the water bureaucracy,

and even beyond the donor agencies. It will take a monumental effort to build the coalitions he needs to generate a positive outcome in the water sector, and one can only wish him all the best in this endeavour.

Triple talaq' scourge

THE discriminatory practice of 'triple talaq' allowing men to instantly end a marriage by just uttering the word 'talaq' thrice not only violates the rights and responsibilities of marriage but also hands men the power to control women's lives. Often, no questions are asked, and no reasons given for a verbal divorce. So when the Council of Islamic Ideology announced on Wednesday that the practice of instant divorce should be discouraged and men who end marriages in this way be penalised, it was clear that the religious body's recommendation was overly lenient — especially as the emotional and economic impact of such a divorce ruins lives. In effect, parliament should have taken up the issue in the first place and framed legislation criminalising the practice which violates women's constitutional rights. A woman's contribution to a marriage is hardly recognised in conservative societies — and this custom further negates her right to a share in property, inheritance and child custody. Moreover, it is not for the CII to scrutinise marriage and divorce laws or even draw up new divorce deeds given that it is supposed to simply 'advise' parliament on whether laws are in accordance with Islamic injunctions. When the legislature is constitutionally bound to enact laws that are not contrary to religious belief, is there any justification for keeping on the CII, especially when its annual budget runs into millions at a time of austerity?

If anything, the National Commission on the Status of Women should work with the ministries of human rights and women development to prepare legislative mechanisms that stop men from arbitrarily dissolving marriages. Alternatively, the NCSW should suggest amendments to existing legislation such as the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961, or the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011 (which prohibits regressive acts that infringe on women's rights). Furthermore, since marriage is a legal contract under Islam, women must understand the terms and conditions in a marriage document before they sign it. To abolish the practice of 'triple talaq,' not only must parliament form a consensus on legal mechanisms, the government too should disseminate information through awareness campaigns on television, radio and social media platforms. Educating women about their delegated right of divorce when they

marry is critical to protecting them and their dignity. Only when women are aware of this will those who strike out sections in the marriage contract pertaining to divorce rights stop depriving them of their due.

Asia Cup fiasco

IF there is one trivia question tougher than what ailed Pakistan during their dismal Asia Cup campaign in the UAE, it is this: why was the winning combination of last year's Champions Trophy in England disturbed?

Sarfraz Ahmed's team, which crashed out of the six-nation contest after a shock defeat against Bangladesh on Wednesday night, clearly missed specialist batsmen like Mohammad Hafeez and Azhar Ali in the middle order, besides all-rounder Imad Wasim — all of whom were an integral part of Pakistan's fabulous title campaign in England last year.

Even with the existing set of players, Pakistan never really got their team combination right for the Asia Cup games. Their inexplicable preference for a wicketless Mohammad Amir over Junaid Khan who claimed four wickets against Bangladesh, the surprise omission of all-rounder Fahim Ashraf from a number of matches and the constant reshuffle in the batting order backfired.

Their only convincing win in the tournament came against minnows Hong Kong, and, though they won against Afghanistan in a last-over finish, the team appeared in disarray. India, even without Virat Kohli, proved a handful and outplayed the Pakistan team with comprehensive victories disappointing millions at home.

Apart from the players, the string of defeats also put under the spotlight the coaches accompanying the team led by Mickey Arthur and including Azhar Mahmood, Grant Flower and Grant Bradburn.

Having said that, a knee-jerk reaction at this stage or hasty measures would be ill advised on the part of the selectors or the Pakistan Cricket Board. The pool of players around whom Pakistan envisages building its campaign for next year's World Cup in England comprises a highly gifted, disciplined lot who have helped the team take impressive strides with scores of victories in the past year and a half.

Though the Asia Cup fiasco has come as a shock, it must not be made into an excuse to spoil the hard work of the team. Sarfraz and his men should be allowed a fair chance to regroup and bounce back.

Real estate scams

Far too often, those behind real estate scams in Pakistan manage to evade justice, with investigations — if they begin at all — petering out before they arrive at any conclusion.

The arrest in Dubai of Murtaza Amjad, one of the accused in the Eden Housing Society scam and a son-in-law of former chief justice of Pakistan Iftikhar Chaudhry, gives law-enforcement authorities in this country another opportunity to prove that they can and will prosecute such cases to the fullest extent of the law. Others accused in the Eden Housing Society case include Justice Chaudhry's son Arsalan Iftikhar, his daughter and her father-in-law.

While one cannot declare anyone guilty before due process takes its course, the government, given Prime Minister Imran Khan's emphasis on accountability, must ensure that NAB is able to investigate this, and other such scams transparently and without pressure from any quarter.

The culpability of sections of the ruling elite, including political bigwigs and members of the establishment, in many dubious real estate projects is well known. In cahoots with them are corrupt bureaucrats who manipulate land records and violate SOPs to enable illegal acquisition of government land, and local politicians and their thugs (often in police uniform) that provide the muscle.

However, despite the multiple moving parts in this racket, many of those involved have such clout that meaningful investigations are rare, and convictions virtually unheard of.

Bahria Town's activities were no secret, but it took years, and several orders by the Supreme Court, before NAB finally produced sufficient evidence for the apex court to deliver a damning verdict against the real estate behemoth in May this year. Then there is the DHA City Lahore case in which NAB named Kamran Kayani, the brother of former army chief retired Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, as one of the main accused. That investigation too, like so many others, has gone nowhere.

It is not as though land scams were unknown in this country earlier and that unscrupulous individuals did not dupe the public into investing in projects that did not materialise. But such fraudulent schemes were neither so common nor so massive in scale — involving multibillion rupee profits and affecting tens of thousands of people — as they are today.

In recent years, numerous such major projects have come up in various urban centres, often constructed on illegally acquired prime real estate or in violation of laws that govern the disposal of land. Violence is invariably part of the mix, used to evict indigenous communities and when rival groups of land grabbers settle scores amongst themselves.

Meanwhile, speculation has pushed property prices beyond the reach of the average citizen, let alone the lower-income segment of society that has no recourse but to look to informal suppliers of real estate. The land mafia should not be further emboldened by lack of action by the government.

Kashmir violence

VIOLENCE in India-held Kashmir has taken the shape of a recurring nightmare, with no sign of an early end to the repression. On Thursday, at least six people were killed in the held region, while yesterday a strike was observed to protest the killings. Most of those killed in the recent spate of violence were Kashmiris targeted by Indian security forces. Tensions are running high in the region due to the fact that the occupied territory's coalition government was replaced with governor rule — direct rule from New Delhi — in June while the BJP-led central government plans to hold local polls next month. However, it is clear that Delhi's heavy-handed tactics are not going down well with the Kashmiri people, and that democracy can hardly flourish in such suffocating circumstances. There have been widespread and frequent protests whenever India's armed enforcers have killed Kashmiri fighters; the fighters' funerals often become rallying points for the Kashmiri people fed up with Indian atrocities. Anti-India feelings in Kashmir have been particularly galvanised after troops killed Burhan Wani, a young Kashmiri fighter, in 2016. Inspired by Wani, many other young Kashmiris are opting for armed struggle to resist Indian rule. Also, in many instances protesters have raised the Pakistani flag as a sign of defiance before Delhi's security forces.

This mood of defiance in Kashmir has been defined well in a recent piece published in this paper by veteran Kashmiri leader and freedom fighter Yasin Malik. In it, Mr Malik points out why Kashmiris are disillusioned with India, and why many young, educated residents of the region are opting to pick up the gun to resist New Delhi. He has described the governor as a 'colonial sheriff' and highlighted the fact that the BJP is trying to change Kashmir's demography, as well as mulling a communal division of the region. Yasin Malik also mentions that there is an uncanny similarity in the reasons why his generation took up arms against India in 1988, and the factors pushing today's Kashmiri youth to fight India. It is also true that many parties in the occupied region, including Delhi's loyalists, oppose local elections in the current repressive atmosphere. Unfortunately, few within the Indian establishment are willing to listen to sane voices and would rather smother Kashmiri voices. This approach is bound to fail, as it has for the past three decades, with the level of anger continuing to rise in IHK.

CNG explosion

THE van cylinder explosion that led to the death of two students and injured 10 others in a small town near Muzaffargarh on Thursday is just one such incident in a long list of often fatal cylinder blasts. Allegedly, the driver of the school van had stepped outside for a smoke, unaware of the gas leakage. When the van caught fire, the children could not escape, since the doors were locked — not an unusual feature of school transport in Pakistan. The tragedy is not unprecedented. In May 2013, 17 children and a teacher in Gujrat were killed when a faulty gas cylinder burst into flames inside their school bus. Explosions of gas cylinders are frequent in Pakistan largely because of the lack of enforcement of safety standards and procedures. The previous government did not take action against illegal workshops that installed substandard cylinders, with insufficient gas-filling capacity in vehicles. Since December 2016, when the government formally deregulated CNG, there has been no system of checks and balances on the trade of cylinders and kits. Transporters use faulty or expired cylinders in their vehicles, which increases the risk of accidents.

CNG was introduced to Pakistan in the 1990s, at a time when the country's natural gas reserves were perceived as an unlimited source of fuel. Being locally produced and environmentally friendly, the government encouraged its use as an

alternative to diesel and petroleum. Seen as economically viable in comparison to the heavily taxed and constantly fluctuating prices of petroleum, CNG quickly gained popularity with owners of large public-sector vehicles as well as school vans and buses, which could easily accommodate the bulky equipment. According to the Economic Survey (2010-2011), Pakistan became the world's largest user of CNG, overtaking Iran, Argentina and Brazil. It is necessary to introduce a system of checks and balances. Social concerns cannot be allowed to take a back seat. We are playing with the lives of millions of Pakistanis.

Economic direction?

THE latest round of interest rate hikes administered by the State Bank speaks of ominous trends beneath the surface.

This is the second large hike since the latest round of monetary tightening began earlier this year, coming in at 1pc. In announcing it, the State Bank pointed to the growth of underlying inflationary pressures as well as the fiscal and current account deficits as key emerging challenges that have yet to be tackled in a convincing way.

Overall, economic activity is expected to decelerate this fiscal year, the monetary policy statement said, putting the growth forecast at 5pc.

Only a few days ago, the Asian Development Bank forecast 4.8pc growth, whereas the target was 6.2pc. Clearly, a rapid deceleration in growth is coming our way.

The State Bank's action shows that the underlying challenges that the economy faces are far from receding; in fact, they are growing.

Between July and September, this is the second downward revision of the State Bank's forecast for economic growth, and the second rise in the forecast for core inflation.

Not only that, the current account deficit continued to rise in the first two months of the fiscal year, despite the strong growth in workers' remittances and exports. In large measure, the difficulties on the external account front are the product of rising oil prices, but equally significantly, they are the result of pressing ahead with a type of growth that the economy was unable to afford.

The net result is a decline in foreign reserves by \$800m compared to the first two months of the last fiscal year.

These are worrying trends because they come after successive rounds of exchange rate depreciation as well as interest rate hikes.

The full scale of the adjustment that the economy needs to undertake, therefore, is far larger than anything imagined thus far.

Finance Minister Asad Umar has his job cut out for him, since such adjustments always exact a steep political cost, and it is not unusual for political governments to be reluctant to undertake them.

The imbalances that plague the economy may well be the handiwork of the previous government's economic management that gave us a short-lived, unsustainable spurt of growth that is now unravelling under the weight of its own imbalances.

But the job of stabilising the situation belongs squarely to this government, and more specifically to Mr Umar whose finance act is a small step in that direction — although given the scale of the imbalances, grossly inadequate.

Far more will be required in the days to come. The job includes not only charting a difficult course into the future, but persuading those around him, including his colleagues and stakeholders in the economy, that the bitter pill is the only one on the menu.

Online security

MORE than 50m users of Facebook have been affected by a security breach, according to the company, and many others have been logged out of their Facebook accounts — leaving them unsure whether their data has in fact been breached or if Facebook has simply taken precautionary measures, including turning off certain features for some accounts. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of users in Pakistan have been affected either by the security breach or the precautionary measures Facebook has taken after revealing it to the world. As data protection and online privacy become issues that users in Pakistan are increasingly aware of and must grapple with, it is not clear to what extent private corporations and the state itself are taking seriously the new threats to citizens.

Indeed, while security breaches at Careem, the ride-hailing service, and the Punjab Land Regulatory Authority have been publicly acknowledged, other alleged breaches, such as at Nadra, have been denied. The absence of a data protection legal framework in Pakistan has meant that individuals may not even be entitled to be informed if and when their data has been breached. That must surely change, and perhaps the PTI federal government, which has championed a young, dynamic and connected Pakistan in its politics, is better placed to address some of the challenges in the arena of data protection and online privacy.

From an individual-user perspective, what is required is relatively clear: a legal framework that prioritises the protection of the personal information of citizens. But private corporate interests and a security state's demands for greater information on the citizenry can run counter to the individual's right to privacy and expectation of data protection. Meanwhile, a growing number of first-time and frequent users of the internet in Pakistan can mean that awareness about data protection and online security may differ significantly — complicating the task of creating effective protections. At times, online privacy and security advocates here have highlighted the impact the absence of a legal framework has had on the fledging e-commerce and online commerce markets in Pakistan. But there is another positive effect that a public debate on online security and protection can have: at a time when civil liberties and fundamental rights of the citizenry are under attack from various quarters, a debate about the right to privacy online and security of data can help recast the broader rights debate in favour of individual citizens and their constitutional rights.

Child ‘abductions’

EARLIER this week, an enraged crowd gathered to protest against the abduction of six-year-old Huzaifa in Karachi. They blocked traffic, burnt tyres, and pelted police vehicles with stones. The next day, a CPLC-issued report confirmed that 151 cases of child abductions were reported in the city between January and August; out of these, 134 children were recovered. Most abductions took place in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods such as Landhi, Korangi, Gulshan, Nazimabad, Shah Faisal Town and Federal ‘B’ Area. Although Huzaifa was recovered shortly afterwards — he had been kidnapped by his ‘father’s friend’ — the protest by parents in the incident’s aftermath is indicative of the fear and

panic that exist. Incidentally, many of the protestors were mothers. Opposition members of the Sindh Assembly also staged a walkout to protest the perceived rise in the incidence of child abductions. There is a sense (exacerbated by WhatsApp groups and social media) that there has been a rash of child abductions in Karachi. This sets a dangerous precedent. In neighbouring India, with its 200m WhatsApp users, lynch mobs have attacked and killed innocents on the basis of rumours of child kidnappings by gangs. In Karachi, DIG South, Sindh Police voiced his concerns over the alarm created on social media after a woman was found to have fabricated a story about her eight-month-old daughter being abducted. In a similar situation in 2016, CPLC had to issue an official notice citing fears and rumours of child abductions, amplified on social media, as baseless.

Child kidnappings are a serious concern. Fake news, fabrications and panic create a dangerous situation for potential vigilantism. Organised or malicious campaigns to spread misinformation need to be reported: wrong information, in the wrong hands, can lead to disastrous consequences. One way to curb panic is for the law enforcers to have a centralised unit dealing with child abduction units, with proper investigations and mapping. This will not only help in investigating cases of missing, kidnapped and runaway children, but also control the spread of fake information.