



DAWN

EDITORIALS

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Compiled By
Shahbaz Shakeel
Abdullah Memon

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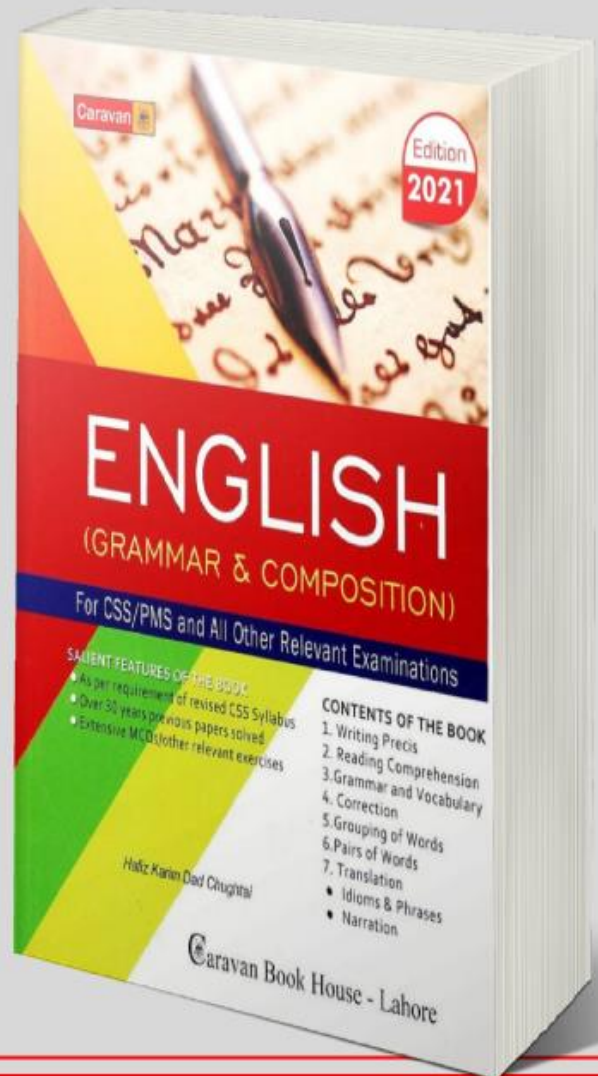
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New beginning

TWO stark images released in the wake of the US departure from Afghanistan tell two very different tales. In the first, the commander of the US 82nd Airborne Division — said to be the last American serviceman to depart from Afghan soil — can be seen hurrying towards a waiting aircraft late Monday night. In another picture, taken on Tuesday morning, a beaming set of Taliban clerics, surrounded by fighters of the movement at Kabul airport, seem to be announcing their victory.

In pictures: Triumphant Taliban march on Kabul airport after US troops leave Afghanistan

Indeed the hasty US-Nato withdrawal and the Taliban's lightning, and largely bloodless, takeover of Afghanistan serve as another cautionary tale to warn against the dangers of the Western penchant for nation-building and 'civilising' native populations. After two decades, thousands of lost lives and tens of billions of dollars, the Afghan Taliban are back in power, and their American opponents are on their way back home.

But beyond geopolitical lessons, there are very relevant questions about what lies ahead for Afghanistan. After all, during their last stint in power the Taliban enforced a brutal code influenced by their narrow interpretation of religion. This time around the armed movement says things will be different. Only time will tell. That many Afghans are fearful for their future is confirmed by the fact that in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul, there was a mad rush to leave Afghanistan. But unsavoury as the Taliban's precedents may be, it is also true that the Western-supported dispensation that has just been replaced was unable to run a clean administration, or provide security to Afghans. In fact, stories of corruption within Kabul's corridors of power were rife, and the erstwhile Afghan government's Western supporters were unable to plug the leaks. The Taliban, for their part, are not known to indulge in financial corruption, and have pledged to restore law and order.

The challenge for the Taliban and their Afghan political adversaries now is to form an inclusive set-up that represents all the country's ethnic groups, tribes and religious denominations. If the Taliban seek to create a state in their own image without bringing others to the table, Afghanistan may well slip back into civil war.

All groups — Pakhtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and others, Sunnis, Shias, religious minorities etc — must have a say in the new Afghanistan. While it would be naive to assume the Taliban will give the green light to a liberal parliamentary democracy, a representative system grounded in Afghanistan's religious and cultural realities — with safeguards for women's and fundamental rights — is what is needed. The challenge before the Taliban and their Panjshiri opponents, therefore, is to reach a power-sharing agreement that can pave the way for peace in Afghanistan. Should this endeavour fail, Afghanistan will again collapse into chaos, creating more misery for the Afghan people, and giving terrorist groups like IS a chance to exploit the situation.

Acts of impunity

YET another International Day of the Disappeared has come and gone, marked by protest rallies of people desperately seeking news about their missing loved ones — fathers, brothers, sons. Some disappearances go back to well over a decade, a form of cruel, ongoing collective punishment for their families. Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari said on the day that enforced disappearances have no place in a democracy. Indeed, this execrable practice is taken straight from the playbook of the most repressive regimes in history, and it only earns infamy for Pakistan in the global arena. According to the minister, the government is “moving forward” in its commitment to criminalise enforced disappearances and that the relevant draft legislation had last week been “approved unanimously” by the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Interior. The bill, introduced in the Lower House in June this year, distinguished an ‘ordinary’ abduction from an enforced disappearance and stipulated imprisonment of up to 10 years for the offence. Moreover, it described the crime as “particularly heinous ... not only because it removes human rights from the protection of the law” but also because of the mental torture it inflicts on the families of the missing.

This is the kind of unequivocal stance that is needed. Many voices, including within the legal community, have been raised over the years against the practice of enforced disappearances, which began taking place in KP and Balochistan and later spread to the rest of the country. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has succeeded, albeit only partially, in tracing the whereabouts of the missing people. But it has failed spectacularly in holding

anyone accountable, and thereby left the climate of impunity unchallenged. Speaking of impunity, in the KP Assembly on Monday the MPA from the North Waziristan tribal district brought up the issue of targeted killings in the area. According to him, 42 such incidents had taken place since January, and five people had been shot dead in the last 48 hours alone. No one, he said, had been arrested in connection with the murders and nor did the police investigate them. However, the government seemed curiously disinterested in the issue, neither responding nor rejecting his claims in the assembly. Do the MPA's words not spark any alarm? A breakdown in law and order is the last thing one needs in an area that has only recently emerged from the grip of militancy.

Illiteracy in tribal districts

A RECENT survey conducted by the KP government and UNDP paints a bleak picture of the state of education in the newly merged tribal districts. According to the survey, more than half the population of the seven tribal districts remains illiterate. Only 22pc of the population has studied up to the primary level, and 10 and 7pc of the people have studied up to the middle and Matric levels respectively. Given these figures, it is no surprise that only 3.5pc of the population has been able to attain an Intermediate degree. Though public education is in a shambolic state all over the country, with the national literacy rate hovering around 60pc and more than 25m children out of school, the tribal region was dealt a particularly severe blow due to the activities of militant organisations that operated from there. Memories of the destruction of girls' schools in the area are still fresh.

The sociopolitical dynamics are also reflected in the literacy figures for each district. At 61.2pc, South Waziristan has the highest percentage of illiterate people. This is not surprising given that this particular region was the bastion of the outlawed TTP as well as other militants after 9/11. Only 16pc of the population in this area has received a primary education. Meanwhile, in North Waziristan, where military operations displaced nearly 100,000 people in 2014, around 55.5pc of the people remain illiterate. Figures for the other tribal districts are: Orakzai 55.2 pc, Kurram 37.7pc, Mohmand 54.2pc, Bajaur 54pc and Khyber 50.8pc. Now that these areas have been merged with KP, the provincial government should make a concerted effort to build schools and colleges there and ensure proper teaching facilities. It is imperative that the people of the

merged districts do not feel that they are still marginalised and do not have the same opportunities as Pakistani citizens elsewhere in KP and the rest of the country. Not ensuring their rights can prove disastrous especially given the tenuous situation across the border with Afghanistan.

Conciliatory move

WITH no abatement in the furore sparked among the black coats by the seniority criteria in the appointment of Supreme Court judges being ignored, the country's top lawyer has made a conciliatory move. Attorney General Khalid Jawed Khan has written to the Pakistan Bar Council and the Supreme Court Bar Association seeking input from the legal fraternity on the selection process for the apex court. The AGP in his letter points out that the Constitution is silent on the issue and that the *SBCA vs Federation of Pakistan* (PLD 2002 SC 939) held that seniority is not a mandatory requirement for such appointments. However, he conceded that "...this judgement has not been universally accepted...". The aforementioned verdict allowed the controversial promotion to the Supreme Court of Justice Fakhir Mohammed Khokhar who was 13th in seniority at the Lahore High Court and also the sitting federal law secretary in Gen Pervez Musharraf's regime. It was a judgement that contradicted the seniority principle earlier laid down in the *Al Jihad Trust* case and the *Malik Asad* case judgements.

The recent discord between the Judicial Commission of Pakistan and the lawyers' bodies was prompted by the JCP's recommendation of Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, fifth in terms of seniority on the Sindh High Court bench, for elevation to the Supreme Court. Lawyers across the country went on a daylong strike to register their opposition. When the JCP a few weeks later nominated Justice Ayesha Malik of the Lahore High Court for appointment to the apex court, the PBC again opposed the move on the same grounds — that it would violate the criteria of seniority as the guiding principle in such appointments.

In his letter, the AGP has said he would place the legal fraternity's input before the JCP at its next meeting on Sept 9 — which coincides with the daylong protest strike called by the SCBA in connection with the issue. It is a welcome move to broaden the consultative process for determining the criteria and include

stakeholders beyond the JCP members. The latter should demonstrate good faith by deferring further appointments until the criteria have been settled. Meanwhile, a meeting on Tuesday of the Bipartisan Parliamentary Panel on Appointment of Superior Judiciary Judges held under the chairmanship of Senator Farooq Naek, approved the consideration of seniority as the guiding principle for promotion to the apex court. Some senior lawyers however, contend this was more for the sake of optics than anything else to make up for the PPP senator, also a JCP member, having voted in favour of Justice Mazhar Ali Khan's appointment to the apex court rather than the Sindhi-speaking Sindh High Court chief justice. It is difficult to deny that merit is the gold standard; however, in a country where nepotism has made cynics of the public, it is essential to devise objective criteria of merit for appointment to the highest court of justice.

Action on FATF plan

THE simplification of reporting requirements for stakeholders in the real estate sector under a FATF action plan should address concerns of realtors, developers and builders, as well as help remove deficiencies from Pakistan's AML/CFT regime that pertains to money laundering and terrorism financing. It will also tackle a key hurdle to full compliance with FATF's plan for Pakistan to bring its AML/CFT regulations up to date.

More importantly, compliance with the benchmarks for Designated Non-Financial Business and Professions will move the country a step closer to its eventual removal from the so-called grey list. The global watchdog had included Pakistan in the list of countries with poor AML/CFT frameworks in June 2018. The country remains on the list despite meeting 26 of the 27 conditions listed in the action plan for curbing money laundering and terror financing on its soil. In June this year, the group gave an additional six-point agenda to Islamabad for strengthening its money laundering regulations.

There is no doubt that FATF is often used by global powers as a political tool to put pressure on countries like Pakistan and there are examples where the global watchdog has delisted other jurisdictions on its grey list although they did far less than what Islamabad has done to tighten control over flows of illicit money. Hence, the concern that the platform is being used against Pakistan by India is not entirely misplaced. Yet, it is good to note that Pakistan is using this

opportunity to prove to the world that it is a responsible member of the global community in line with Islamabad's stated position on plugging loopholes available to the corrupt and terrorists for money laundering or terror financing anywhere in the world.

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan's economy and people will be the primary beneficiaries of a strong AML/CFT regime. The actions implemented have already resulted in a remittance bonanza for the economy. Meanwhile, compliance with the FBR's reporting requirements for over 50,000 registered and unregistered real estate players will go a long way in documenting one of the largest segments of the economy and mobilising massive tax revenues from sellers and purchasers of property. The quicker Pakistan updates its AML/CFT regime the better it will be since its removal from the grey list will address the concerns of foreign investors and open up new trade opportunities at a time when the economy desperately needs to boost exports and attract private foreign investment.

Overcrowded prisons

IT is no secret that the country's criminal justice system is overburdened, leading to a situation which can only be seen as flouting prisoners' rights. This long-standing issue was raised in the KP Assembly on Tuesday, when parliamentarians were informed that most of the jails in the province housed more than the sanctioned number of inmates. According to the details, the central jails of Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu and Mardan, and the district jails in Timergara, Lakki Marwat and Swat have far more prisoners than the authorised capacity. The largest prison in the province, Peshawar Jail, has 3,139 prisoners against a capacity of 2,820. Similar conditions exist in other places. The Dera Ismail Khan prison has 96 more inmates than it was meant to house; Bannu has 309 excess prisoners, Mardan 103, Kohat 495, Timergara 129, Lakki Marwat 187 and Swat 289.

These conditions are not unique to KP. Overcrowded jails are a sorry sight across the country. A report presented to the Supreme Court by the federal ombudsperson's office in November 2019 underscored the serious nature of the problem. The findings stated that 77,275 prisoners were held in about 114 jails across the country, against a collective capacity of 57,742. Consider what a

mockery this makes of the concept of jails being correctional centres when the fact is that prisoners are kept like animals. An alarmingly high number of people languishing in jails across the country are undertrials whose cases remain pending in court. In fact, such prisoners account for 71pc of the prison population in KP, followed by 70pc in Sindh, 59pc in Balochistan and 55pc in Punjab. In July 2018, the Supreme Court had asked the provincial governments to come up with solutions to the problem but nothing appears to have been done in this regard. The authorities should look into this matter and take concrete steps for the speedy disposal of cases, especially where inmates have been accused of petty crimes. This is a crucial first step towards prison reform.

New political party

A GROUP of nationalist leaders led by MNA Mohsin Dawar have formed a new political party called the National Democratic Movement to promote what they call a “secular federal democratic parliamentary system” in the country. The new party comprises well-known politicians and lawyers, some of whom were formerly associated with the ANP. At a press conference to announce the party, Mr Dawar denied the perception that this move would weaken the PTM from whose platform he had contested as an independent and won the election for the National Assembly. He also said that the new party would give representation to the youth and forge greater unity among the oppressed ethnic groups of society.

In a democratic society, the formation of a political party is a fundamental right of citizens and therefore the NDM deserves to be welcomed as the latest addition to a long list of parties in Pakistan. The leaders of this new party have felt that a vacuum exists among the electorate and they can fill it. The party should therefore find the space to pursue its agenda and provide an alternative platform for people to support. Many of the leaders in this new party have had extensive experience of the highs and lows of the country’s politics and espouse a clarity in their beliefs. However, an anti-establishment streak runs through their politics and often they have found themselves marginalised from the mainstream political discourse that defines Pakistan’s politics. It would be interesting to see whether they can utilise the platform of their new party to amplify their political ideology, or frame it in a manner that can widen their support base. The nature of the party will soon become apparent as it starts its membership drive and initiates formal engagements that include taking a position on issues that matter to the voters.

The timing of the party's formation is also significant, coming as it does in wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the imminent formation of the government in Kabul. KP will be impacted by events happening in Afghanistan, and the NDM will have to find its place within the wide spectrum of political thinking that dominates the province. The ANP and other parties in the province now have a new rival and they too will need to hone their political positioning for fear of being outflanked by the NDM. For the voters, having more choice is always better.

Nation-building ends?

AFTER a long, costly mission in Afghanistan and a largely chaotic withdrawal that seemed to revive the ghosts of Saigon, US President Joe Biden spoke to his nation earlier this week reflecting on the Afghan situation in particular, and America's role as global policeman in general. "It was time to end this war," said Mr Biden, while adding that the "era of major military operations to remake other countries" was over. Should the American leader stick to his words, this would mean a major, welcome shift in US foreign policy, ending an era of unilateralism which saw Washington's military machine break, remake and try to 'save' nations far from US shores. Rather than promoting democracy and human rights, America's foreign military forays had more in common with the predatory raids of the age of empire. Afghanistan, of course, was not Mr Biden's war, and it was his predecessor Donald Trump who paved the way for the American withdrawal from Afghanistan by signing a peace treaty with the Taliban in Doha last year.

America's record on the 'nation-building' front has been an appalling one. The Afghan mission which began two decades ago in the aftermath of the 9/11 events today has concluded with power being handed back to the Taliban. During his recent address, Mr Biden did not have kind words for the administration in Kabul that his country and other Western states had long supported, saying that the Afghan president had fled "amid ... corruption and malfeasance". After Afghanistan, the highly dubious decision by the Bush administration to topple Saddam Hussein in Iraq devastated the Arab country, unleashing sectarian and ethnic demons, and helping give birth to the monster known as IS. Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, but what followed after his removal by outsiders has been nothing to cheer about. Thereafter, Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama and his Nato allies were instrumental in mobilising an array of forces to get rid of Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad, as well as

removing Libya's Muammar Qadhafi. Today, Syria and Libya are still torn apart by ethnic, sectarian or tribal divisions, while Mr Assad remains in power.

The lesson to be learnt here is that nation-building and civilising missions are a bad idea. Democracy and the promotion and protection of fundamental rights are organic processes that cannot be 'imported' through external forces, or worse, delivered by F-16s and battle tanks. Instead of flexing its considerable military muscle to 'spread' democracy in imperial fashion, the US can give moral support to foreign movements working for representative rule, even if these movements are against authoritarian allies. This will prove Washington's commitment to the rule of law. If Mr Biden sticks to his decision, the US can play a more positive role in the comity of nations, instead of repeating the costly mistakes of the past several decades.

Geelani's death

SYED Ali Geelani's death removes from the scene one of Kashmir's most respected and tenacious freedom fighters, one who suffered decades of persecution but didn't compromise on his commitment to Kashmir's liberty. Controversial but universally respected for the refinement of his personality and dedication to his mission, Geelani was anathema to India because of the clarity of his views. He didn't equivocate nor did he temporise and made his views clear when he declared publicly on behalf of the people of Kashmir: "We are Pakistanis."

He was ill and wanted to go abroad for medical treatment, but at least once the Indian government denied him a passport because in the form he left the space for nationality blank since he didn't believe Kashmiris were Indian. The US, too, didn't give him a visa for medical treatment. His grit annoyed not only India, which accused him of sedition, confiscated his money and kept him incarcerated for the last several years; even some Kashmiri leaders opposed what they thought was Geelani's hard line.

However, the paladin that he was, Geelani wasn't ambiguous about his calling. The Kashmiris, he believed, should not only throw off the Indian yoke, their state must be part of Pakistan. He spurned every move by the occupying power for talks and insisted New Delhi must first admit Kashmir to be a disputed territory and agree to a plebiscite as laid down in various UN resolutions.

It would be self-delusionary for India to believe that Geelani's death will put an end to the struggle by the people of Kashmir for freedom. The criminal decision by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2019 to alter the status of occupied Jammu and Kashmir has boomeranged on the Hindutva government and served to steel the Kashmiri people. Geelani had repeatedly declared he was not India's enemy, that Pakistan and India should have friendly relations but that was not possible without solving the Kashmir issue — a cry in the wilderness given the BJP government's hubris.

Vaccine storage

AS the government prepares to administer Pfizer jabs to children under 18 years, parents have raised concerns about the vaccine's stringent storage requirements. Though it is natural for parents to be concerned about the Covid vaccine being administered to their children — which is happening for the first time in the country — it is critical for the authorities to address questions and clarify misconceptions.

When the Pfizer vaccine was first rolled out, the biggest challenge regarding its safe and effective administration in Pakistan was maintaining the cold chain. In its early days, the manufacturers of this particular vaccine had said that it had to be maintained at a temperature of -70°C . This is an ultra-cold commercial temperature requirement which led many to believe that storing and administering this vaccine in Pakistan, where power outages and faults are not unusual, would be near-impossible. Research and advice from the manufacturer have since evolved. According to current US guidelines about Pfizer, the vaccine has to be stored between -90°C and -60°C . This means that during shipment and transfer, these below-freezing temperatures have to be maintained. Before administration, the undiluted vaccine has to be thawed. According to the FDA, undiluted vaccine vials may be stored in the refrigerator at 2°C to 8°C for up to a month. Previously, the guidelines suggested that the thawed, undiluted vaccine vials could be stored in the refrigerator for up to five days. While this change is good news for Pakistan, health authorities here must communicate these guidelines to citizens in an accessible and transparent manner. The national manager of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation has claimed it can be refrigerated for up to 10 weeks, but it is not clear which body has approved this new limit. Not only must the EPI publish the literature that backs this claim at all

vaccination centres, it must also engage with concerned citizens to allay all fears about the vaccine. Vaccine scepticism must be addressed, and the only way to do it is with data backed by credible sources.

Opposing narratives

THE rift within the PML-N over what strategy and narrative its leadership should pursue to resurrect its fortunes is deepening by the day. Even though most PML-N leaders avoid labelling the struggle for dominance between the anti- and pro-establishment opinions of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif as divisive, they do admit to strong differences of opinion between the brothers over which narrative to follow in the run-up to the 2023 elections.

Shehbaz Sharif believes Nawaz Sharif's very vocal position on the establishment's direct and indirect interventions in politics is responsible for the PML-N's present plight. He wants both his brother and his brother's heir apparent Maryam Nawaz to let him deal with the establishment in order to improve the party's electoral chances.

Against this backdrop, the public snub the PML-N president received the other day from a party spokesperson dubbing his proposal for the formation of a consensus national government his personal opinion (and leading him to opt for a 'personal' spokesperson) was not unexpected. In fact, a few weeks ago, his statement in a TV interview, claiming that the PML-N could have won the 2018 polls and Nawaz Sharif could have become the prime minister had the party followed a different strategy, invited a strong reaction from many PML-N leaders. His assertion was immediately challenged by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who had been entrusted with holding the fort as prime minister by his party after Nawaz Sharif's disqualification. Similarly, Ms Nawaz has seldom hidden her contempt for her uncle's politics. At times, Nawaz Sharif himself has intervened to rebuff his younger brother.

The problem with the two opposing narratives is that the fissures on top are now making their way to the rank and file of the PML-N with increasingly public spats in its second-tier leadership. This is especially true after its defeat in the Azad Kashmir elections, in spite of the big crowds drawn by Ms Nawaz during the campaign, followed by the loss of a provincial seat in Sialkot. These

developments have strengthened the view held by the Shehbaz Sharif camp that the PML-N will have little chance of returning to power anytime soon unless its leadership ditches its anti-establishment stance. Yet a majority of PML-N leaders and voters are still inspired by the father-daughter duo's resistance to the establishment.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the PML-N president reportedly does not discuss his ideas at party forums before making public statements, reinforcing the impression of the growing divide. Or perhaps the PML-N leadership still doesn't know which road to take. Unless it's part of a political strategy, the party leadership needs to remove the confusion to play an effective role in national politics. Even though there's little chance of the party splintering over these differences, the possibility of electables leaving it close to the elections cannot be ruled out.

Growing trade deficit

LAST month's drastic increase in Pakistan's trade deficit, or the amount by which the cost of a country's imports exceed the value of its exports, has raised serious concerns. The 10pc depreciation in the value of the home currency in the last three and a half months, and a painfully slow turnaround in exports have forced many to suggest imposing an export emergency and curbs on luxury imports in addition to boosting interest rates, thus vindicating the stance of those who advised the government against spending its way to economic revival.

Meanwhile, the government has defended the 133pc growth in the trade deficit to just below \$4.1bn in August from a little over \$1.7bn a year ago and by 24pc from \$3.3bn in July. It contends the enhanced import of machinery and raw material reflect ongoing investments by businesses in capacity expansion and new projects in the textiles, leather, chemicals and other sectors. The prime minister's trade adviser claims that the government has a backup plan to sustain the pressure on the external sector. Does it? Indeed, the accumulation of the highest ever foreign exchange reserves in the last couple of years and remittances by Pakistanis abroad will keep pressure off the external sector in the near term in spite of the deteriorating trade balance. But for how long? With investors already flagging uncertainties like the potential spillover of the Afghan crisis after the Taliban's takeover, suspension of the IMF programme over differences regarding

Islamabad's growth strategy, exchange rate volatility, the drying up of FDI etc, external sector stability remains fragile. Growth in remittance flows also looks uncertain. A small shock may trip the nascent economic recovery and the frail balance-of-payments position unless the government starts pushing exports and discourages the consumption of non-essential import-based luxuries.

concerns over the stability of our balance-of-payments position as the current account deficit for August is now widely anticipated to be close to June's figure of \$1.6bn or twice the July number of \$773m. If the trade balance deteriorates further on the back of a stronger build-up in imports to support the ongoing consumption-based economic recovery going forward, CAD for the full fiscal year would likely breach the State Bank's estimate of 2pc-3pc of GDP during FY22 by a big margin. No wonder many economic experts who had supported the PTI government's growth strategy until now, are nervous and have started calling for 'urgent action'. T

Witness protection

MUCH ails our country's criminal justice system. A low conviction rate is why the guilty are not put behind bars, and this arises in large part because witnesses are afraid to testify in court. This is especially true for high-profile criminal cases involving arson, murder or terrorism. With the passage of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Witness Protection Bill, 2021, the provincial government has taken a step in the right direction. KP is the last province to legislate on the protection of witnesses, although the law appears to be quite comprehensive. It mandates the formation of a witness protection board comprising seven senior police officers, under the chairmanship of the home and tribal affairs secretary, as well as the establishment of two separate witness protection units, one each for terrorism and criminal cases. The law also allows, if the security situation warrants, for the deposition of a witness to take place outside court premises through a video link. Hopefully, the latter arrangement will lessen the fears that many witnesses have about their safety when testifying against influential criminals in court. The proof of the pudding is in its eating though, and it remains to be seen how the law will improve the conviction rate in KP. Witness protection laws exist in Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab as well but their application leaves a lot to be desired.

The reluctance to testify and the tendency to resile from statements are underscored by judges who themselves have stated that witnesses are too scared to help the courts punish violent criminals and terrorists. Take for example, the murder case of aspiring model Naqeebullah Mehsud, who was killed in a staged encounter in Karachi in 2018. Three witnesses retracted their statements because, according to the victim's family, they were afraid to testify against the influential policeman who was accused of overseeing this crime. Unfortunately in Pakistan, such examples are legion. According to a report in this paper, Sindh's inability to implement the witness protection law has hampered the progress of at least 1,700 cases at 33 anti-terrorism courts in the province. It is a shame that the conviction rate remains low because the state cannot ensure witnesses' safety. Hopefully the KP government will ensure strict implementation of the witness protection law. One also hopes that other provinces will take steps to remedy the situation in their own jurisdictions so that the guilty do not walk free.

Taliban recognition

OVER two weeks since they took Kabul, the question of international recognition still confronts the Afghan Taliban. Whether or not the international community recognises the hard-line movement as a legitimate government will make a huge difference where foreign investment, expertise and aid are concerned.

The last time the Taliban were in power only three states recognised their rule: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This time around, if they want to gain the recognition of the global community the Taliban will have to earn the world's trust, while foreign states must also act in accordance with ground realities and deal with the Taliban for the stability of Afghanistan. Currently, both the EU and the UK — major aid donors — are reluctant to deal with the Taliban, though in the same breath they also acknowledge that there are few alternatives to doing so.

While in Islamabad recently, the UK's foreign secretary said "we do not want to recognise the Taliban as a government, but we do see the importance of engaging ... with them". The EU has also said that "we will have to engage with the new government in Afghanistan" in order to support the Afghan people.

Basically, the Western bloc has two major concerns: they want guarantees from the Taliban that the movement will respect fundamental rights, including women's rights, and that the new rulers will not allow Afghanistan to become a hotbed for international terrorist movements. Considering the Taliban's last stint in power, these are valid concerns. However, building trust works both ways. The Taliban must prove through their actions that they will form an inclusive set-up that respects human rights, and religious and ethnic differences while ensuring that Afghan soil is not used for terrorism.

For their part, the Western states — that are particularly concerned about Afghan stability because they do not want a fresh wave of migrants headed to their shores — must engage with the Taliban to the extent possible, as isolating the group may drive them, once again, into the arms of even more hard-line actors. As Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told his British counterpart, the Taliban are the “new reality” in Kabul.

It is hoped that the international community reaches a consensus soon on recognising the Taliban. What is clear is that the welfare of the people of Afghanistan must top the agenda. They must not be left in the lurch at this difficult time simply because some states don't like the way the Taliban are running the show. Moreover, the world community has no qualms about dealing with Saudi Arabia — the bastion of religious conservatism — so if the Taliban truly commit themselves to inclusive rule, there should be no problem with recognising them. The Western bloc must not insist that Afghanistan be remade in their image, as the country has its own cultural and religious sensitivities.

De-seating lawmakers

THERE can be little argument that when lawmakers are elected, it is their duty to serve their electorate and if they fail to take oath of office, there are sufficient grounds for them to be de-seated. In this regard, state-run news agency reports said recently that a new ordinance (which has yet to be made public by the government) has been signed by the president. But, though the principle behind the new law seems fine, the government's intentions have been questioned. The law — Election Ordinance (Third Amendment) 2021 — calls for elected members of the “Senate, assembly and local government” to take oath within 60 days of the commencement of the first sitting of the maiden session of a legislature.

However, there is an impression that the PTI-led federal government would like to de-seat PML-N's Senator Ishaq Dar, who has not taken oath and is currently in the UK, and make way for Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin to secure a Senate seat. Mr Tarin became finance minister in April and must be elected to the legislature in order to continue in his post for longer than six months after his appointment. Government spokesmen have denied the ordinance is aimed at removing Mr Dar, who is facing NAB references. Estranged PML-N leader and former interior minister Chaudhry Nisar had recently taken oath as a member of the Punjab Assembly after having won the seat in 2018.

As mentioned above, lawmakers who fail to take oath are doing a disservice to their voters and should be penalised. However, if the government wanted to take corrective measures, it should have taken up the matter in parliament in line with democratic procedures. What was the rush? Couldn't the matter have been debated in the House? Resorting to ordinances, especially concerning such an important matter, should be avoided. It gives rise to the suspicion, even if misplaced, that such moves are meant to target the opposition. Lawmaking is serious business and should not be held hostage to petty political expediencies.

Unseemly campaign

THE PTI government's claims of respecting press freedom have long been exposed as patently insincere. Its proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority is no less than a declaration of war against journalists which, if passed, will prove to be the death knell for an independent media. Now Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has taken this campaign against the media up a notch. In television interviews over the past few days, he singled out particular news organisations, including this paper — in which the president of Pakistan himself had his article published recently — as having an 'agenda' to project Pakistan in a negative light.

According to him, the right to freedom of speech is being abused to peddle disinformation, and the government "only has a problem with fake news and not with genuine news". This is a disingenuous stance: while 'fake news' certainly exists, the PTI has also weaponised the term to try and discredit those sections of the media that believe in their duty to inform the public without fear or favour and hold the government and other institutions accountable. It is highly unseemly

for a federal minister — of information, no less — to lead a partisan attack on the integrity of certain news organisations.

Explainer: What is the govt's proposed media authority and why has it invited criticism?

The PTI government's secrecy about the proposed law to set up the PMDA is also in sync with its authoritarian mindset. On Thursday, Mr Chaudhry came under fire from members of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting who demanded to see the draft of the law under which the PMDA is proposed to be set up. Instead, the minister gave a verbal briefing on the subject in which he touched upon his usual talking points to justify the 'need' for such an authority. Journalists, who are among the principal stakeholders, have also been unable to obtain a copy.

However, if the two purported versions of the draft that have surfaced in the last few months are any indication, the government is determined to muzzle the media and grind it into an unquestioning uniformity through a draconian law. Curiously enough, this is the same government whose human rights ministry has drafted a media protection bill that even most journalists would consider a comprehensive effort to provide redressal for the threats, intimidation and violence many of them face in the course of their work. Are the information and human rights ministries working at odds with each other?

Combating anti-Pakistan 'conspiracies' should not mean stifling its media. Indeed, a vibrant press is the sign of a state confident in its ability to govern and stand up to attacks against it. Moreover, the government, if it bulldozes the PMDA legislation through despite the media's protests, may want to consider the reaction from those sections of the global community that take press freedom very seriously. Is stamping out all dissent worth inviting international censure?

Energy pricing

THE government seems to have finally recognised the importance of seasonal energy pricing for domestic and commercial consumers as it struggles to improve electricity sales and discourage consumption of gas for space heating. Well, better late than never. The energy ministry is pitching a proposal for implementing new seasonal energy pricing for both domestic and commercial

consumers to motivate people to consume more electricity by lowering power rates during off-peak months. The move highlights the twin problems of a substantial plunge in electricity demand and an unmanageable spike in gas consumption facing the authorities during off-peak months, chiefly in winters, leading to the creation of an additional large, unused generation capacity surplus and a massive gas shortage across the country. The energy ministry expects that electricity use during the off-peak months will be boosted by up to 300 MW while gas demand will drop by around 50mmcfcd once the new seasonal pricing becomes effective. That should somewhat help the government grapple with large gas subsidies and power-sector capacity payments. Increasing electricity consumption by the industry after tariffs were lowered on an incremental basis under an industrial energy package, demonstrates that such incentives can help absorb at least part of surplus generation. Industrial power consumption has gone up from 5pc to 18pc in 10 months and is expected to rise further by 25pc in Discos' network and about 40pc in K-Electric jurisdiction.

In an unrelated move, the government has raised the price of CNG, making it far dearer than petrol. Apparently, the decision was also prompted by surging LNG prices, which are projected to hold firm amid tight supply-demand fundamentals as global recovery from Covid-19 gathers momentum. The shift of transport to fuel oil from CNG will help reduce expensive LNG imports, saving the country precious foreign exchange at a time when the trade deficit has hit a high of over \$4bn. Although CNG owners resent the move, saying it would jeopardise their investments to the tune of billions of rupees, it is difficult to not agree with the decision when the local gas reserves are depleting fast and no significant discoveries have been made in a long time. While periodic changes in different energy prices are necessary to discourage or encourage the consumption of one fuel or the other for achieving economies of cost, long-term sustainability of the energy supply chain hinges on the early implementation of governance reforms in the power and gas sectors.

Doing Pakistan proud

HAIDER Ali is in the habit of making history. Already Pakistan's only medallist at the Paralympics, he won the country's first gold in Tokyo on Friday. Winning the discus throw event, and by some margin, speaks volumes about how 36-year-old Haider, who suffers from cerebral palsy, has kept himself in top form despite

limited resources. It's a story of grit and determination; of an unflinching quest for gold ultimately fulfilled. It was also remarkably the first time he was taking part in the discus event at the Paralympics, although he had won in the same event at the Asian Para-Athletics Championships in 2018. Haider had previously won the silver and bronze medals in the long jump events in the Paralympic Games of 2008 and 2016. Yet, this accomplished athlete who is a role model for his differently abled countrymen, would not have made it to Tokyo had it not been for the intervention of the Punjab sports minister, who arranged for flight tickets for Pakistan's Paralympic contingent. It was a move that not only made Haider a national hero but that also saw Pakistan's flag raised and the national anthem resonate around the Tokyo Olympic Stadium.

The last-minute flight tickets show where the country's sporting priorities lie. Sadly, Pakistan's para-athletes are way down the list. For all countries, the Olympics and Paralympic Games are a matter of great prestige. They use sports as a means to project soft power. These events run on a four-year cycle, which means achievements have immense magnitude. Haider's achievement should lead to a change in mindset. In a country where differently abled people are left to their fate, let alone encouraged to take part in sports, this should be a watershed moment. It should force the government to provide facilities for them and focus on their needs including giving them specialised coaches. Haider said he didn't want to remain the only Pakistani Paralympic gold medallist. His dream will only come true if those at the top understand what needs to be done.

ECP appointments rift

AS expected, the opposition has rejected the names given by the government for appointment of two members of the Election Commission of Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan had written a letter to Shehbaz Sharif, the opposition Leader in the National Assembly, proposing names for the posts that fell vacant after the retirement of two members of the ECP. The laid-down procedure for these appointments demands that the prime minister and the leader of the opposition hold consultations and agree on the names for the appointment. If they cannot agree, then the matter is sent to a parliamentary committee that takes the decision. The prime minister has refused to meet the leader of the opposition in person and the consultation is being done through correspondence. While rejecting the nominees of the government, Mr Sharif has constituted a committee

that will propose names after consultation with other opposition parties. The PML-N and PPP have already initiated this consultation process among themselves.

However, the deadline for the appointment of the two members of the ECP — that gives a specified time frame between retirement and appointment — is likely to be missed. This would mean the ECP will for now comprise of the chairman and two members only. While this strength will allow the ECP decision-making to continue unaffected, if one member is not available for any reason, the ECP could face problems in terms of quorum for decisions. It is unfortunate that the extreme polarisation between the government and opposition is now adversely affecting important constitutional obligations that are necessary for the smooth running of institutions. There was a spirit behind establishing such processes — a functional working relationship between the leader of the house and leader of the opposition — so that key appointments are made without the toxicity of partisanship. That spirit today has evaporated in the heat of polarisation and now the two sides are merely going through the motions to fulfil the laid-down procedure. This reflects poorly on the democratic framework for governance and depletes confidence in the political leadership's ability to navigate its way through rivalries while ensuring the running of the state is not affected.

This problem is beginning to cast a shadow on the conduct of the next general elections which are two years away at most. The issue of electoral reforms — so critical to inject confidence into the system — seems to be falling victim to this same polarisation. The opposition has categorically rejected the use of electronic voting machines while the government is insistent upon them and is threatening to bulldoze the legislation. Were this to happen, the elections would start to generate controversy at such an early stage and further weaken the already low level of trust in them. The government should take the initiative to lower this partisanship so that, if nothing else, the next elections are seen as fair and transparent.

Balochistan attack

WITH the regional security situation extremely fluid in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood, particularly next door in Afghanistan, the state must keep a keen eye on subversive elements that may try and take advantage of the situation and

destabilise the environment in the country. The martyrdom of at least four Frontier Corps men

Pakistan can do little to control security threats abroad, the security apparatus must do all possible to prevent militant cells from carrying out their activities here. As noted above, Afghanistan is an area of particular concern. Though this state does not have adverse relations with the Afghan Taliban — the de facto rulers of Kabul — Afghanistan lacks an internationally recognised government, while groups such as the self-styled Islamic State's Khorasan chapter, the TTP as well as Baloch insurgents may still be present on Afghan soil. Pakistan must therefore press the Afghan Taliban to take action against these security threats, while efforts must be stepped up to ensure there is no infiltration into Pakistan by hostile actors.

Intelligence-based operations also need to be revved up locally, especially in areas like Balochistan and erstwhile Fata, where the security situation has been particularly fragile in the past. Moreover, some regional states that do not want to see peace in Pakistan may also use the situation in Afghanistan to destabilise this country. These efforts must be countered. Lastly, the quicker an inclusive government is formed in Afghanistan, the better not only for that country, but the whole region. The Taliban as well as their Afghan adversaries need to work towards this goal, to ensure a new civil war is not used by militant groups to regroup and spread havoc across the region.

in a suicide attack on Sunday on the Quetta-Mastung Road on the outskirts of Quetta comes as a reminder that the country cannot afford to let down its guard even for a moment.

The banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the act of terrorism. Over the past few months, there has been an uptick in militant activity. Last month, at least two children were killed when militants struck a motorcade carrying Chinese nationals in Gwadar's East-Bay Expressway area while Chinese individuals have also been targeted in Karachi. These incidents are believed to have been carried out by outlawed Baloch separatists. Moreover July's Dasu incident, in which a number of Chinese nationals were killed, highlighted the need for stricter security measures to protect Beijing's nationals working in Pakistan.

Rupee depreciation

THE recent exchange rate volatility, which saw the rupee drop to a multi-month low of 167.23 to a dollar on Monday, is a natural response of the home currency to surging trade deficit, rising inflation and negative interest rates. That the Pakistani rupee has become the worst-performing currency in Asia from the best performer in March signifies a deteriorating market perception about the country's capacity to finance its foreign payment obligations going forward. The 144pc year-on-year surge in trade deficit in August to the highest-ever level of Rs4.23bn has put new pressure on the rupee. Hence, we see many calling for an early upward adjustment in interest rates, measures to restrict (luxury) imports, market interventions to arrest further devaluation and steps to prevent the build-up of imported inflation and negative business sentiment. Traders booking dollars for future import payments at a higher premium or spread indicates an expectation of further rupee depreciation as the current account imbalance is anticipated to breach the State Bank's projections of 2pc-3pc on account of stronger imports amid rebounding commodity and energy prices. The freeze on the IMF loan programme and the possible insecurity spillover from Afghanistan are also compounding economic uncertainties and keeping the rupee under pressure.

Pressure has been accumulating since May when it became clear that the government wanted to ditch the harsh IMF policies in favour of rapid growth before the next election. The 'revival' of growth has only put extra pressure on the external sector in the shape of drastic import growth without any significant improvement in exports. Sadly, the current growth spurt being touted is no different to the one under the previous PML-N set-up in that it is also being financed through expansive fiscal and monetary policies and short-term expensive borrowings without implementing productivity reforms. Thus, the sustainability of the present 'boom' remains uncertain amid fears of further deterioration in the fiscal and current account imbalances. Expecting the painfully slow uptick in exports and remittances to save the growth momentum would be folly.

Energy options

THE government expects the CCI-approved Indicative Generation Capacity Expansion Plan 2021-30 to tackle such vital issues as excess capacity and expensive, non-transparent power contracts. Indeed, the IGCEP provides for

new power-generation projects to be undertaken in accordance with demand-supply fundamentals through the open and competitive auction of contracts. But the decision to make hydropower projects the centrepiece of our future power-generation expansion plan at the expense of cheaper renewable alternatives — solar and wind — is problematic. The downward revision in targets to boost the share of non-hydro renewable energy in the country's overall generation mix as envisioned in the Alternative Renewable Energy Plan from 30pc by 2030 to 10pc defeats the very objective of moving towards cleaner affordable electricity and dealing with the power-sector debt. Hence we see Sindh opposing the plan. Shortly after the CCI decision, Sindh's energy minister took to Twitter to argue that the IGCEP bulldozes cost-effective efficient wind and solar power projects and violates the ARE Plan, the National Electricity Policy and Nepra guidelines. Insisting that the prime minister was being misled on the issue, he went on to state that Sindh would rest its case before a joint parliamentary session (to get the CCI decision overturned).

Sindh is not alone in rejecting the IGCEP, which seems to have been approved to procure the World Bank's \$400m Pakistan Programme for Affordable and Clean Energy loan at a time when the trade deficit is hitting the roof. Various civil society groups and academics had in July submitted before the power-sector regulator their objections to the NTDC's plan. To begin with, the IGCEP indicates an increase in planned hydropower share to more than half the country's total energy mix in the next 10 years. That sounds like a welcome development for the relevant government agencies since large-scale infrastructure schemes are good for politics and business. But does it augur as well for the people? The critics don't think so. It is believed that Pakistan's shift to hydropower will entail problems in terms of economic cost overruns, environmental damage and adverse socioeconomic consequences for lower riparian groups. If these hidden costs are also added to planning, most hydropower projects do not remain economically feasible.

That's not all. Contrary to NTDC claims that the majority of the projects would be run-of-the-river with minimal environmental and social costs, approximately 97pc of new hydropower will come from large dams, intensifying internal water conflicts. Therefore, this shift to hydropower is difficult to defend owing to economic, social and ecological costs. A recent World Bank study notes that the least-cost electricity mix in Pakistan requires a rapid expansion of variable renewable energy sources of solar and wind since they have become the

cheapest source for procuring power globally. What we need is the political will to support the shift to environment-friendly, affordable non-hydro renewable power.

New ‘cabinet’

WHILE the Afghan Taliban announced members of an interim ‘cabinet’ on Tuesday — the first step towards the formation of a new government — it is unclear if members of other political, tribal and ethnic groups will get a seat at Afghanistan’s governing table.

Nearly all of the key posts announced by the Taliban’s spokesman, from the prime minister, deputy prime minister, foreign minister etc, have been handed to senior Taliban clerics or leaders of the movement’s armed and political wings. “All groups have been represented,” claimed Taliban spokesman and new information minister Zabihullah Mujahid.

However, it was not immediately apparent whether members of the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek communities are also part of the new ruling structure.

Moreover, on Monday the Taliban had entered Panjshir, up till now a staunch bastion of anti-Taliban opposition, and raised their black and white standard in the valley, cementing their hold over practically the entire country. Leading Taliban opponent Ahmad Massoud has vowed to fight on, yet with his rivals now controlling his home base, it remains to be seen how he will organise his resistance.

The key question confronting the Taliban now is that of international recognition. Taliban officials have said they want “strong and healthy” relations with other states. However, this is contingent on a number of things. Firstly, the Taliban need to assure the world that things will be different this time around compared to their previous stint, where respect for fundamental rights, including women’s rights, is concerned. Secondly, they must pledge to take action against foreign terrorists based on Afghan soil. Moreover, when they talk of an inclusive government, they must deliver on these promises. This means all of Afghanistan’s major ethnic groups and religious minorities as well as the country’s women must have a say in matters of governance.

Also, while they may have taken Panjshir, instead of opening a new front, the Taliban should urge the resistance based in the valley to join them at the

negotiating table and reach a compromise. Afghanistan has witnessed decades of bloodshed and it is the duty of all groups, particularly the Taliban as they have now announced their cabinet, to prevent more conflict. The Taliban's actions over the next few days and weeks will decide whether the international community grants the new set-up recognition. Therefore, it is in the best interests of Afghanistan for the country's new rulers to create a truly inclusive administration.

Debatable selections

IT was a throwback to one of those days in Pakistan cricket when all sense seems to have vanished, when nothing follows the narrative so carefully nurtured by the Pakistan Cricket Board. On Monday, a logic-defying selection of the national team for the Twenty20 World Cup was followed by the resignations of head coach Misbah-ul-Haq and bowling coach Waqar Younis. And just 47 days before Pakistan begin their campaign in the UAE, where there is to be a high-voltage clash with India, chaos has erupted. Chief selector Mohammad Wasim called his 15-man squad a perfect balance of youth and experience, even appearing at a television show on Monday night to defend his selection which he said was made in consultation with captain Babar Azam and the team management. That team management though was out minutes after the announcement of the squad, which will also feature in the series against New Zealand and England before the Twenty20 World Cup.

Misbah and Waqar had two topsy-turvy years at the helm of a team that never produced consistently good results. Incoming PCB chairman Ramiz Raja had spoken about those inconsistencies in the lead-up to his nomination for the post and there was a feeling that the axe would fall on Misbah and Waqar — though surely not before the World Cup. Their resignations leave the interim coaching set-up of Saqlain Mushtaq and Abdul Razzaq with a squad of players regarding whom they probably never had a say. Asif Ali's return to the squad raised eyebrows, so did Khushdil Shah's. Azam Khan's selection as a reserve wicket-keeper borders on the senseless. Mr Wasim claims history has shown that throwing new players into tournaments has benefited Pakistan. Yet most of his selections are of those who have been tried and tested. In the past, the Pakistan team — mercurial as ever — has risen to the occasion despite troubled build-ups to major tournaments. The nation will pray that once again the team defies the odds and gives cricket fans something to cheer about.

Fort gate collapse

THE collapse last week of a good portion of the façade of the historical Pucca Qila in Hyderabad is highly unfortunate. Since the fort premises is also home to some 80,000 to 100,000 people, we can only be thankful that no casualties were reported. The structure had visibly been listing for some time, and the provincial culture department says that at the time of the incident labourers were making reinforcement efforts. The province's minister for culture immediately announced an inquiry. On Saturday, a case was registered against the contractor for 'destroying antiquity', while a culture department supervisor was suspended. Meanwhile, a video started circulating online that showed labourers apparently involved in demolition — using sledgehammers, no less — rather than undertaking proper restoration work. Soon thereafter came the inquiry team's report which, broadly, accused the district administration for not cooperating in the matter of conservation.

However, this deflection of blame appears somewhat glib — even defensive. We use the latter term because it is undeniable that across-the-board renovation and restoration work persistently faces the twin plagues of lack of funding and low quality of human resource. However, if, as per the culture department's claim, the district administration was slow in cooperating, why was work initiated in the first place? Then, where were the oversight mechanisms during the time it would have taken the workers to take heavy equipment up to the ramparts, while they should have been at work at the base? Why were the men not noticed and stopped? There are far too many unanswered questions here, and it behoves the culture department to make a more thorough inquiry into the matter, especially because the structural perils were no secret. Introspection may well be required, given that too often the temptation to demolish and rebuild takes precedence over restoration that is painstaking and slow work. However, there is little hope of this so long as the government remains unconcerned about heritage — as well as the danger unsteady structures pose to people.

More replacements

THE high turnover of bureaucrats holding important positions in Punjab is a manifestation of the PTI's uneasy relationship with the bureaucracy, which the

government appears to see as the main hurdle in the implementation of its vision for the country's most populous and politically important province. That the government has just brought in its seventh inspector general of police and fifth chief secretary in three years of its rule in the province, over and above countless administrative shake-ups at the district and departmental level, shows that it is still struggling to find a working arrangement it can be comfortable with. This is not an illegitimate desire. Yet the pace at which it has been shuffling civil servants is counterproductive and has widened the trust deficit between the ruling politicians and bureaucracy. This is affecting public service delivery, the very reason for making these wholesale changes. The chief minister and his government are not the only ones to blame for the insecurity of tenure of the bureaucrats and police officials. These changes are mostly ordered by Islamabad, reflecting the federal government's strong but impractical desire to remotely control the province. In recent months, scores of police officials and bureaucrats have been reassigned to please the PTI lawmakers.

The latest top-order police and administrative purge is believed to be a kind of compromise between the centre and province as pressures are building on the ruling party to deliver on its promises ahead of the 2023 elections. Nevertheless, few expect the new police boss and chief secretary to last very long in their jobs in the given circumstances. It therefore is hard to not feel empathy for the civil servants and police officials who have seen enormous political pressure from different sides in an environment of deep uncertainty surrounding their tenures under the present political dispensation. A couple of months ago, the Punjab Assembly approved a controversial bill that the provincial legislature could punish officers found guilty of breaching the privilege of assembly members. The state of constant friction between politicians facing public pressure to perform and civil servants with career concerns is not an unusual one. But blaming the police force and the bureaucracy for turning in less-than-optimal performances in Punjab as an excuse to reshuffle their ranks every few months will not help the ruling party. It is simple logic: no one is going to take their job seriously unless their tenures are secure.

EVM controversy

ELECTION reform has become yet another polarising issue between the government and the opposition. The PTI has been consistently pushing EVMs as

a modern, scientific way of ensuring free and fair polls while opposition parties are resisting the move claiming that the machines will, on the contrary, be conducive to rigging.

On Tuesday, the ECP, which had already expressed its reservations about the EVMs earlier, weighed in with specific objections — 37 of them, to be exact — contained in a document submitted to the Senate Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs. The ECP's objections include, among others, the concern that the machines are not tamper-proof and have software that can be easily altered; there is not enough time for such large-scale procurement and deployment of EVMs and training the massive number of operators required; there are security issues involving the chain of custody.

These points alone would be enough to throw the integrity of the polls into serious doubt. However, the government has rejected the ECP's arguments. Science and Technology Minister Shibli Faraz said yesterday that 27 of the objections were on account of the commission's own lack of capacity, while the indigenously developed EVM addressed the remaining 10. He also doubled down on the government's resolve to introduce EVMs for the next election, saying it was "fully determined" to pass the necessary legislation.

The government must reconsider its stance. Now that there is a renewed push for electoral reforms, it is critical to get them right — and for that, consensus between the government and opposition parties is key. At this point, they cannot even agree on prospective names for the appointment to the two ECP posts that fell vacant after the retirement of the members and it seems increasingly likely that the constitutionally mandated deadline for the appointments is likely to be missed.

The 2018 election, like many others before it, was marred by controversy and the allegations continue to vitiate the political atmosphere. The European Union election observers' report on it pointed out several major shortcomings in the essential ingredients that together are imperative for free and fair polls — transparency, a level playing field and a free media. In the document it submitted to the Senate committee, the commission also mentioned a number of election-related problems that EVMs will do nothing to address. They include low voter turnout, low women's turnout, misuse of state authority, election fraud, ballot stuffing, vote buying, dishonest polling staff, misuse of state resources, etc. Significantly, some of these problems fall in the category of pre-poll rigging,

which queers the pitch long before anyone casts a vote. While EVMs can certainly be introduced in future elections, it must be done not in haste but after sufficient parliamentary debate and adequate preparation for such a radical change in the method of voting. For 2023, the old-fashioned paper ballot is likely the safest route.

Land record online

THE prime minister is right in describing the initiative to digitise the country's land record system as "transformative", both for the economy and the people. Speaking at the launch of the digitised land record system and cadastral map of Islamabad showing the extent, value and ownership of land, particularly for taxation purposes, he reiterated the government plans to digitise the land revenue record in three major cities — Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad — by November this year and then in the rest of the country in six months for improved administration and governance of the real estate sector and construction industry.

If the government successfully meets the deadlines it has set for itself, it would bring a major shift in the economy and drastically reduce land conflicts that are responsible for almost half the litigation burden that our frail civil and criminal justice system must shoulder. As the prime minister pointed out, digitising land records will eradicate land grabbing, control illegal and haphazard construction activities and land development in both the urban and rural areas, guarantee transparency in land and property transactions, curb record tampering, and provide quick ownership information online. More importantly, the availability of verified records online should go a long way in increasing the access of people, particularly women, to land and property.

It is well recognised the world over that secure land and property rights are critical to increasing the access of people and businesses to land for effectively using this asset for quicker economic growth, poverty reduction and social inclusion. Doubtful and ambiguous land titles are a huge impediment in the evolution of the housing- and construction-financing industry in Pakistan since our risk-averse banks are reluctant to venture into this sector for fear of long litigation and losses. At the individual level, people are forced to pay a higher price for land or property with clean titles. Removing ambiguities overall would create more uniform levels of pricing. For the government, the accuracy of the

land record contributes to effective planning, better tax collection and resource allocations, and improved disaster management. Digitising land and property records is, therefore, the need of the hour for investment in housing, better environmental management and improved revenues.

It is, however, pertinent to note that the provinces have been extremely slow to implement the land administration reforms initiated more than one and a half decades ago with technical and financial assistance from different global institutions. Stiff resistance from the provincial revenue bureaucracy that is deeply invested in the legacy land administration system owing to factors ranging from financial corruption to fear of technology has kept successive governments from making meaningful progress in this area. With the prime minister himself pursuing the project, the renewed push for secure land and property rights in the country stands a much better chance of success this time around.

For a free media

IN the face of the inflexible attitude of the government on the proposed media regulatory body issue, journalists' associations have decided to hold protests outside parliament next week. Media organisations and journalists have been forced to take this step because Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has dug in his heels on the proposed body without realising — or perhaps despite realising — that he may be triggering a vociferous campaign by all stakeholders who cherish the constitutional right to freedom of expression, and who believe in the sanctity of an independent media. The government is adding insult to injury by not even sharing the draft of the bill even though media representatives have been demanding to at least see the details of the regulatory authority.

If the leaked first draft of the bill is to be believed, the Pakistan Media Development Authority combines all existing media regulatory bodies into one and will have sweeping powers to haul up journalists and media organisations in front of tribunals that can slap them with stiff penalties, fines and even imprisonment. The proposal has justifiably elicited protests from media organisations, civil society bodies as well as opposition parties. All are united in condemning this move by the government and labelling it a brazen attempt to throttle the media. While the information minister — who now says this proposed body is his initiative, and his alone — is arguing that he will not back down, there

have not even been discussions with the genuine representatives of media organisations and journalists' associations, and it is incorrect to claim that the relevant people in the media have been consulted. It is alarming that the government is adamant to bulldoze this body through parliament without paying heed to the genuine concerns of stakeholders. Is the government, and its information minister oblivious to the fact that since 2002 over 70 journalists have lost their lives in the line of duty? Are they unaware that the banned TTP has recently issued a stark warning to journalists regarding their coverage? It is such issues of safety and security of media workers that should be of the highest priority for the government which, instead, is obsessed with trying to gag the voice of independent journalists and media organisations. The proposed regulatory body must be resisted with full force by all those who cherish a free media and the crucial role it plays in strengthening democracy and holding to account those in power.

Not in school

A LOT has been said about the country's appallingly large out-of-school child population and how it adversely impacts chances of upward socioeconomic mobility. A new report titled *The Missing Third: An Out of School Study of Pakistani 5-16 Year Olds* by the Pak Alliance for Maths and Science contains several revelations about this phenomenon and clears a number of popular misconceptions. For example, Punjab, the province perceived to be the most developed, has the largest out-of-school population with 7.7m children aged from five to 16 years who are outside the education system. Sindh has the second highest out-of-school population with nearly 6.5m. It is followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 3.8m and Balochistan where more than 2m children do not attend school. The report also addresses the less-discussed subject of equity in access and the age group of school dropouts. There are more than 63m children in the country aged from five to 16 years. Among them, some 27m (42pc) go to public schools while more than 16m (26pc) are enrolled in private schools or seminaries or informal educational set-ups. The remaining 32pc — that amounts to an unacceptable 20 million-plus — do not go to school.

It is not that these children have never see the inside of a classroom. Enrolments occur much later than five years and peak at around nine years. The report says that the state does cater to 62pc of all school-going children, however, 90pc of

them drop out before completing 10 years of education, mostly at the age of 11 when primary schooling ends. It bears repeating that the authorities need to address the underlying issues plaguing the education infrastructure and the reasons that force students to stay out of classrooms. A concerted political and administrative effort is required to incentivise school attendance while ensuring equal access — that goes beyond income brackets to include girls as well as children with disabilities — so that these 20 million-plus children have a fair chance to make their place in the world.

Covid vaccination

THOUGH still far from the target of fully inoculating 70m people, the government's efforts to administer both doses of the vaccine to 20m and the first dose of the vaccine to 50m people should be commended. In the earlier stages of the vaccine roll-out, the government had set a target of fully vaccinating 70m people by the end of this year. So far, the government has administered 67,342,288 doses of the Covid-19 vaccine with the national positivity ratio hovering around 6pc. Though a large section of the public was initially hesitant to get themselves vaccinated, there has been a surge in the number of people lining up to avail the free inoculation facility. Only in the past week, the government administered more than 1m doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. At the current rate, it would take another 38 days to vaccinate another 10pc of the population. This is encouraging news. Moreover, government officials remain confident that they will not only achieve but surpass the target, as indicated by Planning Minister Asad Umar's tweet.

However, considering that the country is still several million doses short of achieving the target of 70m fully vaccinated people by the end of this year, the authorities have their work cut out for them. It is obvious that a large number of people have not returned for their second dose. Vaccine hesitancy, owing to widespread misinformation, still remains a big hurdle in the way of quicker and complete vaccination. There have been cases of infection and deaths in between doses, perhaps reducing some people's belief in the efficacy of the vaccine, without realising that both jabs are needed for stronger protection. Even with the Covid curve apparently reaching a plateau, the number of deaths still remains relatively high. So there is no room for complacency. More needs to be done to persuade people to get themselves inoculated and to ensure that SOPs continue

to be maintained at all times. The government must also ensure booster shots for those who had been vaccinated earlier.

20 years after 9/11

SOME events, due to their sheer magnitude, change the course of history. The terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001, targeting several sites in the US certainly fit this description, as the reverberations of that epochal event are still being felt across the globe, two decades since.

By all means it was an atrocity of immense proportions. Whatever grievances the Al Qaeda leadership may have had with the West, the targeting of innocent people can never be justified. Nearly 3,000 souls perished as the transnational terrorist group's operatives struck jets into New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon outside Washington, while a fourth aircraft fell in a field in Pennsylvania. Events thereafter would affect locales far from American shores, as it appeared that the so-called clash of civilisations was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Indeed, the US had every right to punish those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, as part of the doctrine of self-defence. However, the two-decade occupation of Afghanistan that has just ended in a Taliban victory and the never-ending 'war on terror' hardly did much to neutralise radical Islamist militancy. If anything, America's imperial overreach helped create even more bloodthirsty outfits, such as the self-styled Islamic State group, along with destabilising functioning Muslim states and increasing sectarian and ethnic fissures within these societies.

Al Qaeda could have been targeted through other, more intelligent and less intrusive methods. But the neocon clique that surrounded George W Bush at the time cynically sought to use the 9/11 tragedy to further its agenda of the 'new American century'. In the guise of fighting terrorism and spreading democracy, the American military machine embarked on imperial civilising missions across continents. Afghanistan was just the beginning; Iraq, Syria and Libya would also follow. The genuine pain and anguish of 9/11 gave way to the vulgar projection of American power across the globe.

Two decades since, the world is just as dangerous a place — if not more — than it was before the 9/11 events. The 'war on terror' gave us gulags and black sites

such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib run by self-professed democracies where fundamental rights were held in abeyance, while shadowy, well-connected contractors were hired to do the dirty work that Western capitals could easily deny. Recruiters for militant movements have used all these uncomfortable facts to influence young minds within the Muslim world, and strengthen their violent narratives.

In the aftermath of the recent fall of Kabul, President Joe Biden has pledged to reverse course on America's nation-building activities. This will go a long way in stabilising the Middle East, if he sticks to his promise. Moreover, many of the 'root causes' that fuel terrorism — authoritarianism within Muslim states; poverty; lack of opportunities; the targeting of Muslim states militarily by the West; Palestine, Kashmir etc — remain unaddressed even 20 years after 9/11.

Empathy, not prosecution

ON Sept 9, World Suicide Prevention Day, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah appealed for a more compassionate approach towards those who attempt to take their own lives. In a message to mark the occasion, he urged the federal government to revisit and repeal the law criminalising attempted suicide. Under Section 325 of the Pakistan Penal Code, the act is punishable with a one-year prison term or a fine, or both. Mr Shah correctly said that suicide is not a crime, but a "mental morbidity. Therefore, a victim should be dealt [with] as a patient, not a criminal". He also pointed out that the existing law was directly responsible for under-reporting of cases of attempted suicide and the reluctance of distressed individuals from seeking professional counselling.

The chief minister referenced three surveys conducted through the Sindh Mental Health Authority to collect data on suicide trends in the province, including a 'psychological autopsy' to understand the factors leading to suicide. Some startling patterns emerged from the studies. There were 767 reported cases of suicide between 2016 and 2020; of these, 79 occurred in Tharparkar district and included 48 females and 31 males. This flies in the face of the global trend that shows men are between three to four times more likely to commit suicide, although women are more likely to attempt it. Moreover, of the suicides committed in Tharparkar in 2020, no less than 60pc were committed by individuals between 10 and 20 years of age. This is but a snapshot of a much

wider problem. The incidence of suicide in Pakistan as a whole is estimated by WHO to have increased from 2.9 per 100,000 to 7.5 per 100,000 people. There are clearly many people who need access to mental health professionals before they take that final, irrevocable step. It is high time that a more modern attitude was cultivated towards mental health. What suicidal individuals need is empathy and resources for treatment, not censure and prosecution in a court of law.

Inexcusable remarks

EVEN judging by the uncivil levels to which political discourse has sunk in recent years, the ugly outburst by railways minister and PTI senior vice president Azam Swati on Friday has few precedents.

During a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs, called for discussion and voting on two key election-related bills, the senior PTI leader launched into a tirade accusing the ECP of taking bribes and “always” rigging polls. He also alleged that the ECP was poking fun at the government and attempting to harm democracy. Such institutions, he thundered, should be set on fire. The two ECP members present on the occasion walked out in protest. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry added more fuel to the fire later by echoing some of the aspersions.

Mr Swati has disgraced himself by his odious remarks against a constitutional body mandated to oversee elections in the country, and the PTI high command must take notice lest his claims and that of the information minister be construed as the party’s own stance. The ECP members are selected through a formal procedure aiming at a consensus between the government and the opposition; they are not imposed on either side.

Moreover, by trying to make the ECP controversial, that too when critical electoral reforms are under discussion, the minister himself could justifiably be accused of trying to harm democracy. Interestingly, it was just a few days ago the ECP listed 37 objections against using electronic voting machines in the next general election, objections that senior PTI leaders dismissed in no uncertain terms. Perhaps the minister’s animus springs from the ECP having taken an unequivocal position on a method of voting whose viability it does not have faith in, at least for the 2023 election, but which is heavily favoured by the PTI? Or does what happened in the Daska by-poll earlier this year still rankle certain

sections of the party? It may be recalled that the commission had declared the result — a victory for the PTI candidate — null and void after finding it had been falsely obtained, and ordered a re-election that the PML-N candidate won.

An independent and impartial ECP is in the interest of all parties desirous of at least a relatively controversy-free election in a landscape where various factors make that a monumentally difficult task. The commission should be lauded for having stood for the rule of law despite its decisions sometimes inviting the authorities' displeasure. For instance, in August 2019, the then chief election commissioner refused to administer the oath of office to two newly appointed ECP members on the grounds that their appointment was unconstitutional. A few months later, his stance was vindicated when the Islamabad High Court suspended the presidential order appointing them. The entire political class, whatever their differences, must refrain from unseemly diatribes against the ECP.

Banned groups

THE participation of individuals linked to the proscribed TLP in the cantonment board elections has again brought up questions about the fallacy of the government decision to ban the ultra-right party. Reports say that the TLP has fielded 84 men in KP, Punjab and Sindh. Although these men are in the run as independent candidates, they don't try to hide their affiliation with the TLP. Almost all of them are contesting on their party's election symbol to make it easier for TLP supporters to identify them on polling day, making a mockery of the decision outlawing the outfit under antiterrorism laws. This development brings to mind similar decisions made in the past to rein in certain out-of-control militant groups that had at first been cultivated by the state. There is hardly any instance where such administrative decisions were followed up to get the 'banned' outfits disqualified by the Supreme Court as required.

The TLP case is no different as admitted by the information minister when he said only the apex court can disqualify (and bar a registered) political party from contesting elections. That means the ECP cannot stop a party or people connected with it from participating in elections. That the government is unwilling to take the TLP case to court for an injunction against it indicates that it doesn't have evidence of its involvement in terrorism to get it disqualified. Or is it second-guessing its own decision, which many consider a knee-jerk response to its

inability to prevent TLP from wreaking havoc on people's life and property? Despite its tendencies to perpetrate violence, the TLP is a political party, registered with the ECP and with representation in the Sindh Assembly. Thus, it is important that the government explain the reasons for categorising the outfit as a terrorist entity. If the authorities have evidence to support their action, they should follow it up by filing a reference against the TLP and its leadership in the top court. If they don't, the 'administrative' ban on the party should be lifted. As far as acts of violence by party leaders and activists are concerned, and if they are receiving illegal funds, the authorities should pursue legal and administrative actions to punish those involved. Previous such experiences with organisations like the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan shows that 'administrative bans' are no more than an acknowledgment by the government of its lack of will to take tough decisions to tackle radical groups.

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Missing inclusivity

WHEN the Afghan Taliban swept into Kabul last month, there were fears within the country as well as abroad that the insurgents would return to the ways of old, imposing the brutal code that was in force during their first stint in power. However, Taliban spokesmen promised that this time around things would be different, and it appeared that the hard-line group was trying its best to show the world that it had become more 'moderate'. Yet the evidence up till now is not too convincing where the Taliban's 'inclusivity' is concerned. For example, Afghan journalists say they have been beaten and tortured by the Taliban for covering protests, while the new ruler have also fired shots in the air to disperse women demonstrators. Moreover, some former Afghan lawmakers who managed to escape the country say that the Taliban were hunting them down until they were able to flee clandestinely.

Along with the above-mentioned incidents, the make-up of the interim Taliban government — announced earlier this week — is anything but inclusive. The all-male line-up consists of the Taliban old guard, as well as members of the movement's inner circle. There appear to be no members of the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities in the interim set-up. Therefore, all things considered, the Taliban's promises of inclusivity appear to be ringing hollow. The hard-line group's honeymoon period in power is closing fast, and if a broad-based government is not formed soon, Afghanistan may well collapse into civil war.

Despite the Taliban's lack of progress in forging a more broad-based set-up, it is a fact that the international community cannot afford to isolate the group. The foreign minister stressed this point while meeting his Spanish counterpart in Islamabad on Friday. Isolating the Taliban would have "consequences" for Afghanistan and the wider region, warned Shah Mahmood Qureshi. Indeed,

isolating the Taliban may cause the group to harden its stance and cut itself off from the international community. This will lead to more problems for the people of Afghanistan, and may create more space for terrorist groups to operate within that country.

Therefore, the international community has to walk a tightrope; foreign states must stay engaged with the Taliban for the sake of the Afghan people, while the message from regional states as well as major foreign capitals should continue to be that the Taliban must treat all Afghan citizens with dignity and respect. Moreover, it should be made clear to the Taliban that use of Afghan soil by terrorist groups will not be tolerated. If the Taliban are sincere in their wish for inclusivity, let them bring on board other ethnic groups — including the Panjshiris — as well as women to ensure Afghanistan has a broad-based transitional set-up in place, that can help pave the way for a representative system in consonance with the country's cultural and religious realities.

Cricketing credentials

THE arrival of New Zealand's cricket team to play a series for the first time in the country since 2003 offers the much-criticised Pakistan selection for the upcoming Twenty20 World Cup a chance to prove the doubters wrong. Of course, it doesn't help boost the confidence of the players when the man who made the selections is having second thoughts himself. Under-fire chief selector Mohammad Wasim on Friday hinted that there could be changes in Pakistan's World Cup squad as the team searches for the right combination in the series against New Zealand and England preceding the mega tournament in the UAE. New Zealand arrived in Pakistan shorn of eight top players who are featuring in the rescheduled IPL. Yet, Pakistan don't have fond memories of when they last played against a second-string — rather third-string — side. They were whitewashed by an England side in a three-match ODI series in July. New Zealand will also play three ODIs before a five-match T20 series. It will be the T20s against New Zealand and the two T20s against England which will test Pakistan's World Cup credentials with the team having won just two of their last four completed T20s. The seven matches will show whether Mr Wasim's assertion that his selection was the best possible combination holds. While opening the door for potential changes, he has defended calling up Asif Ali, Khushdil Shah and Azam Khan saying those who

were given a chance in the middle order recently had failed to cement their places in the squad.

The chief selector also expressed his reservations regarding those players provided a chance by the team management that recently exited. Head coach Misbah-ul-Haq and bowling coach Waqar Younis resigned with the imminent arrival of Ramiz Raja as PCB chairman. Vice captain Shadab Khan said that the incoming boss wants the team to play aggressive cricket. This together with positive results against New Zealand will help instil confidence in the team and raise hopes of a solid performance at the World Cup.

Improving nutrition

GIVEN that Pakistan has the third largest population of stunted children in the world, the government's plan to expand the Ehsaas Nashonuma programme from 14 districts to the rest of the country is a step in the right direction. Food insecurity and stunting pose a grave challenge to social and economic progress. Stunting in Pakistan affects at least four out of 10 children under the age of five. The condition affects the mental, physical and cognitive development of the affected children who are not able to reach their full mental and physical potential. A further 29pc of children remain underweight while 18pc suffer from 'wasting' — low weight-for-height ratio indicative of weight loss owing to inadequate nutrition. Unicef has described this situation as a "rising emergency".

Can the situation be turned around for Pakistan's children? Certainly Prime Minister Imran Khan has given this problem due priority and raised it in his maiden speech as prime minister, showing on national television X-rays of the brains of two children, one normal and the other who had suffered the effects of stunting. The brain X-ray of the stunted child was clearly smaller than the normal one, depicting the damaging effect. It was against this background that the Ehsaas Nashonuma programme was initiated in August 2020 in nine districts of the country that had the highest stunting rates. The programme was later expanded to 14 districts, where 50 Nashonuma centres have so far registered more than 66,000 lactating women and children under two years of age to receive nutritional support in the form of cash. The authorities plan to set up mobile Nashonuma centres for the most hard-to-reach and backward areas. This is a smart decision, because in our society, women face a lot of difficulties in

being able to leave the premises of their home. Besides children, women too have a greater need for nutritional support. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2018, at least 14pc women of reproductive age are undernourished, naturally leading to the birth of underweight infants. Though the expansion of Eshaas Nashonuma is laudable, it is debatable whether the programme by itself addresses the root causes of stunting. The government needs to adopt a holistic strategy by simultaneously addressing the issues of maternal health, high birth rate and skyrocketing prices of food staples in the country. Unless the government addresses these issues, the success of Ehsaas Nashonuma programme will be limited.

Damning evidence

FOREIGN MINISTER Shah Mahmood Qureshi has unveiled a dossier that lists in detail how New Delhi has been committing gross violations of human rights in India-held Kashmir. It claims that India has also been facilitating and sponsoring the international militant Islamic State group. Flanked by National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf and Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, Mr Qureshi dilated upon the comprehensive findings contained in the dossier and demanded that the international community take notice of these abuses.

Of particular note is the evidence presented in the dossier along with the names of those Indian officials involved in perpetrating these crimes. These names include generals, brigadiers and colonels of the Indian army as well as other officials of various security agencies. The dossier also pinpoints the locations of camps that India has apparently established for the IS terror outfit. Pakistan had issued a similar evidence-based dossier last year which had spelt out the Indian state's involvement in acts of terror inside Pakistan.

It is obvious that India's ongoing brutal tactics to quell the freedom struggle in Kashmir are being documented in great detail. The evidence pointing to India's sponsorship of IS is extremely disturbing — and yet perhaps not altogether surprising given New Delhi's increasing reliance on violence in pursuit of its interests. Under the present BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, state-sponsored brutality against the Kashmiri people as well as minorities in India has increased sharply. However, it is unfortunate that the international community has not expressed the outrage that these acts of state violence

deserve. There is greater realisation among the community that Mr Modi's India has become intolerant, dictatorial and dangerously majoritarian, but the reaction these traits should elicit has yet to materialise.

With Pakistan now providing substantive evidence of Indian state-sponsored violence and terrorism, it is high time that international organisations and world leaders sat up and took note. As the largest country in the region, India is injecting instability that can lead to unpredictable consequences. In fact, it may perhaps not be inaccurate to say that India has become the most potent factor for instability in the region and if it is not stopped from exporting violence across its borders, and fuelling it in the territory that it illegally occupies, then all stakeholders in the region could become a victim of its belligerence.

Pakistan has done well to proactively expose India's actions. The foreign minister and the NSA should ensure that the dossier and its contents are not just shared with the international community, but also that policymakers in key capitals are convinced of the veracity of the evidence presented. This will require effective diplomacy and communication. Given the fragile regional situation, there is no time to waste. The press conference should be considered the start of a coordinated attempt in this direction. More evidence should continue to be shared.

Iran-IAEA deal

ONE of the major factors poisoning relations between Iran and the Western bloc is deep mistrust over Tehran's nuclear programme. This mistrust developed into a wide gulf after the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the meticulously crafted nuclear deal in 2018. Efforts had again picked up pace to revive the deal after new governments were formed in Washington and Tehran, yet as of now there appears to be a deadlock over the issue. However, one small step in moving negotiations forward was taken when the head of the IAEA visited Tehran on Sunday. The UN's atomic agency and Iran said they had agreed on a surveillance deal to monitor the Islamic Republic's nuclear activity, hailing in a joint statement the "spirit of cooperation and mutual trust". It is hoped that this cooperation is built on at the wider talks in Vienna and progress is made in reviving the JCPOA.

However, it must be said that for the nuclear deal to be revived and for it to succeed, Iran needs to see tangible economic benefits. After the JCPOA was signed in 2015, there were wide expectations in Tehran that foreign investment would flow in, helping lift Iran's sputtering economy. This did not materialise, as major foreign players were afraid of attracting America's ire by trading with Iran and violating other US sanctions. Moreover, after the US withdrew from the deal, America further tightened the financial noose around Iran, practically crippling its economy. These moves naturally undermined moderate voices in Iran, as the conservative establishment slammed the Rouhani government for being 'weak' and 'gullible' in trusting the Americans. With Joe Biden's arrival in the White House, hopes for a revival of the JCPOA were strengthened, though the US and the deal's other signatories would now have to convince a conservative, sceptical government led by Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran. To reiterate, there must be give and take in this scenario for the deal to succeed. Tehran should allow the UN to access all its sites and cooperate with the IAEA. On the other hand, Iran must be able to freely sell its petrochemicals to international buyers, while foreign parties should be allowed to trade with Tehran without fear of attracting sanctions of any sort. The small breakthrough over the weekend can be worked on to build confidence between both sides, while those looking to play spoiler must be ignored by the international community.

Affordable power

PEOPLE need reliable and affordable electricity. While the government has for the most part contained long blackouts — thanks to the addition of new and large generation projects under the multibillion-dollar CPEC initiative in the last few years — it still is struggling to tackle affordability issues. Power tariffs in the country remain stubbornly high, no matter what the government says or does. A media report the other day claimed that power prices in the PTI's three years of rule so far have surged by a whopping 30pc. The PTI leadership blames the expensive power purchase agreements the previous government had made with the generators for high electricity tariffs, which is true, but only partially.

It is correct that the capacity payments, or fixed costs, paid to the generation companies form the bulk of power tariffs in Pakistan, and that the consistent increases in such payments with the addition of new generation capacities are proving to be a major impediment to ensuring affordable retail electricity prices.

At the same time, losses on account of transmission and distribution inefficiencies, as well as widespread power theft, constitute a big part of retail tariffs for households, industry and other consumers. In other words, electricity prices will continue to remain at elevated levels unless the government improves power transmission and distribution. That is not all though. The 50pc increase in generation cost — which is passed on to consumers on a monthly basis — in the last one year owing to surging international coal, gas and oil prices underlines the need to encourage cheaper solar and wind power sources. With baseload energy already ensured, a shift to renewable power in order to reduce retail electricity prices should not be too difficult. Indeed, the incumbent government has recently taken a few initiatives to reform the power sector and slow down the build-up in circular debt. However, it has yet to come up with a holistic plan to restructure the entire power-sector supply chain to ensure affordable electricity to consumers.

‘Unjust’ allotment

LAND is a much prized and contested commodity in the country. In the process it has also come to be perceived as a political tool favouring certain individuals, an impression that can be particularly damaging to the system of checks and balances in a democracy. The judiciary must therefore tread particularly carefully in such matters when it comes to members of their fraternity to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

On Monday, the Islamabad High Court suspended the allotment by the Federal Government Employees Housing Authority of 4,723 plots in Islamabad’s F-14 and F-15 sectors, including 1,704 plots allotted to top judges and senior bureaucrats, until its next hearing on Oct 14. The court observed that the “distribution of acquired land by the Authority is not in accordance with a policy based on public interest”.

The IHC’s interim order was issued on an appeal against a single-member bench directive in September 2016 to the FGEHA to consider around 30,000 applicants who had been waiting for a decade to be allotted plots in two other sectors of the city. The two-judge bench asked the government to explain its preferential treatment of a few while ignoring over 30,000 others. In fact, as the court noted in its order, the beneficiaries of the balloting on Aug 17 also “included those who

have been convicted or dismissed from service on charges of corruption or misconduct”.

Last month, the IHC had declared illegal the policy — which dates from the time of Gen Musharraf’s regime — of allotting more than one plot to superior court judges and senior bureaucrats. Justice Kayani in his order, however, directed the government to develop a policy in this regard “in clear non-discriminatory manner so that confidence of citizens of Pakistan is restored upon the entire system of governance”.

In recent years, these citizens have watched in alarm and, indeed, resentment while the authorities have parcelled out land to influential members of society. Those sentiments have been further sharpened when people such as themselves have been deprived of their homes, built with their hard-earned money, because the courts in their wisdom have put a strict application of the law above the public interest. It does not help matters when, as in the present case, land is distributed at rates much lower than the market price, that too to well-remunerated individuals who can look forward to a decent pension on retirement.

In October 2020, in a Supreme Court case, Justice Faez Isa in an additional note wrote that under the law of the land, chief justices and judges of the superior courts are not entitled to plots of land. “The aphorism that, justice must not only be done but be seen to be done, is undermined if people perceive that cases are not decided without fear or favour. The executive giving plots to judges constitutes a favour.”

Election trends

THE cantonment board elections are over and their results offer an opportunity for introspection to all major political parties. The unofficial election results show that the major parties have made some gains but also suffered losses. Even though the ruling PTI was ahead of its rivals in the Sunday election and won the most seats, 63, from 212 wards of 41 cantonments, emerging as the only party with a presence in all four provinces, its showing in Punjab and KP — the two provinces it rules — left much to be desired. There are a number of reasons for the PTI’s poor performance in Punjab ranging from a leadership crisis to infighting to the negative impact of bad economic conditions and inflation on the people. It was therefore no surprise that it trailed far behind its main rival, the

PML-N, in the province with 31 seats. Though the PML-N surprised many by bagging the most seats, 48, from the most populous province, it needs to analyse the factors for its defeat in places like Gujranwala. That is not all. The party, which has thrice won the national elections since the early 1990s, should be deeply concerned about its relegation to the status of a regional party by clinching just 11 seats from outside Punjab.

Likewise, the PPP, which has improved its standing in Karachi in recent months, essentially remains a party confined to Sindh since the 2013 general elections. Would it succeed in upturning its fortunes outside Sindh in 2023? Not many expect the party, which once took pride in being a unifying national force, to pull it off any time soon. Surprisingly, the independents have emerged as the third biggest group with 51 seats, grabbing 29 more seats than the combined tally of the smaller political parties, including MQM, BAP, the Jamaat and ANP. The voting trends emerging from the cantonment polls may not hold in the next general elections. Yet these are largely consistent with and reflect the current standing of different parties. It is now up to the leadership of these parties how they intend to change voters' perceptions about them for improving their chances in the next polls. More importantly, the smooth organisation of the cantonment polls is expected to push the demand for the revival of local governments across the provinces. After all, what justification do the provincial governments have for further delaying the revival of local democracy when cantonments can have it?

Grace marks

THE decision to promote all students awaiting the results of their board exams by awarding grace marks is likely to raise doubts. Though the move may appear fair to many in light of the current situation in which frequent school closures have disrupted studies, there is also the issue of how well the students — or at least a number of them — can cope in a higher grade. The Inter-Provincial Education Ministers Conference decided on Monday to award students who had appeared in their board exams for Matric or Intermediate but who scored below the pass mark, 33pc to make them eligible for the next stage. It was also decided that students would be awarded 50pc grace marks in practical examinations. This was a decision taken by education ministers in all the provinces. There is no doubt that students, teachers and the education authorities have faced unprecedented challenges in the outgoing academic year, but there is now a

greater challenge to face as unprepared students are thrust into the next academic session which will obviously require a more advanced understanding of their subjects than they had in the previous grade. Besides, it will be seen as unfair by those students who, despite the difficulties, worked hard to earn their grade.

Surely this state of affairs should lead our education departments to think deeply about how to deal with a challenge that is likely to recur if the Covid situation does not improve and school closures remain frequent. In addition to devising a marking scheme that is more reflective of students' true capabilities, it might want to take lessons from other countries whose solid educational infrastructure has made access to remote learning via laptops, smartphones and high-speed internet easy for secondary students. This will not be easy in our context and new, innovative ways of teaching large numbers of students will also have to be found. The awarding of grace marks must be a one-time concession. Education departments know the challenges of Covid by now and should plan accordingly.

Aid for Afghans

THE guns have at last fallen silent in Afghanistan, but spiralling poverty and hunger are giving rise to a humanitarian crisis. Soon after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government, the US froze \$9.5bn in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank on its soil to prevent a Taliban-led regime from accessing it. At a UN conference in Geneva on Monday, called to raise \$606m to help meet the country's most immediate needs, donors pledged more than \$1.1bn.

Speaking at the event, UN Secretary General António Guterres warned that food supplies could run out by the end of the month, and cited the World Food Programme's estimate that 14m people are on the brink of starvation. Several speakers mentioned a "moral obligation" not to turn their backs on the shattered country after a 20-year engagement. At the same time the UN human rights chief voiced Western suspicions that the Taliban were not honouring their promises to respect human rights.

Afghanistan is poised on a knife edge, and the international community will need to exercise patience and prioritise correctly if it does not want the war-torn country to descend into chaos. The Taliban know well that governance is not possible without financial resources, and that malign actors are ready to

capitalise on recruitment opportunities offered by a devastated economy. On Tuesday, Amir Khan Muttaqi, the regime's acting foreign minister thanked the world for pledging hundreds of millions of dollars in emergency aid to Afghanistan and vowed to use the money wisely and in a "completely transparent manner". He also called upon the US to show some "heart", and appreciate the manner in which the Taliban had last month allowed the American troops' withdrawal and evacuation of over 120,000 people.

For over two decades, even while being embroiled in conflict, Afghanistan was the recipient of a multilateral aid effort to mitigate the suffering of its people, assist refugees and internally displaced persons. While there is a critical difference now — the war is over and the country no longer being run by a US-backed government — the Afghan people must not be abandoned. They should not have to pay the cost of the world's antipathy towards the Taliban, however justifiable it may be. Humanitarian aid can resume even if the world decides to hold back on formal recognition of the regime for now.

Moreover, despite outward appearances, the Taliban are not a monolith. There are hardliners and (comparative) moderates among them. With the benefit of hindsight, the global powers should not repeat the mistakes of the past. In 2000, the first Taliban regime had banned poppy growing in a bid to gain international legitimacy. When the world refused to take notice, the hardliners within them gained the upper hand. That had a profound effect on how events played out after 9/11 and rewrote the course of history.

Wheat price

THE government's decision to raise the wheat release price, or the rate at which provinces issue their grain stocks to flour mills to control retail flour prices, by almost a third to Rs1,950 per 40kg from Rs1,475 last year is consistent with its policy of slashing open-ended food subsidies to lessen the burden on its budget. Also, the government did not have much of a choice but to jack up the issuance price after increasing the commodity's procurement price to Rs1,800 per 40kg from Rs1,400 for the last harvest earlier this year. Last year alone, the provinces collectively bore a subsidy bill of nearly Rs100bn on account of the expenditure on procurement and storage of their wheat stocks. According to the federal finance minister, the government stood to lose Rs650 per 40kg this year if it did

not enhance the wheat release price. Even now, he contended, the provinces would still be 'bearing nearly Rs100 per 40kg in subsidy' to hold the retail flour prices.

Given the provinces' growing accumulation of debt on account of food operations, the need for wheat procurement and pricing reforms cannot be overemphasised. In Punjab alone, the food circular debt has jumped to Rs560bn, equal to its development expenditure target for the current fiscal. Unless the provinces restrict their wheat operations to purchasing minimum quantities for maintaining a reasonable buffer stock for market interventions in times of shortages and start recovering their costs in full, it may become impossible for them to manage their food debt. But such reforms are difficult to implement and sustain in the absence of a strong mechanism to provide targeted food subsidies to low-income households suffering because of rising inflation. The average wheat flour price has shot up by 20pc in the last one year despite government subsidy. Likewise the prices of other kitchen essentials consumed by low-income families have risen by over 13pc in one year, according to official inflation data, at a time when the public's purchasing power is under stress. Undertaking pricing reforms in such circumstances can prove to be tough and backfire if those who need to be shielded against inflation are not properly protected. The idea to give additional targeted cash subsidies on wheat flour, sugar, ghee and pulses under the Ehsaas programme is commendable but it offers only a temporary respite. It needs to be followed up by concerted steps to alleviate poverty and boost incomes through restructuring of the economy and job creation.

Keeping the press out

ON Monday, the government yet again displayed its rising contempt for the freedom of press — this time in parliament. When reporters arrived, by special invitation, to cover the joint session of parliament and President Arif Alvi's speech to mark the new parliamentary year, they were shocked to find both the press lounge and gallery locked, apparently on the specific directives of National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser. Later, in an attempt to justify his action, Mr Qaiser stated he could not afford to have "two groups" fighting in the House and admitted to a 'misunderstanding'. He was referring to a call for a symbolic walkout given by the Parliamentary Reporters Association to register their protest against the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority. However, Mr

Qaiser also asserted that the decision to lock the gallery had been taken in consultation with the PRA, a claim the body has categorically denied. The speaker's actions have been roundly condemned for undermining press freedom. It is hard to recall when in the country's history the coverage of parliamentary proceedings has been out of bounds for the press, perhaps not even in the dark days of military dictatorship. In fact, a look of utter bewilderment on the president's face was apparent when he saw an empty press gallery during his address. Journalists later protested outside the speaker's chamber. Another protest by the media was being held outside parliament against the PMDA.

Such a contemptuous attitude towards the media is hardly worthy of a democratic government that the PTI claims to be. That journalists have resolved not to take this attack on their freedom to write and report lying down shows how keenly aware they are of their own years-long struggle to break free from censorship and of the fundamental rights the Constitution gives them. In these times of political tumult and polarisation in society, an independent media is all the more necessary. It is time to let the journalists do their job.

TTP amnesty?

DISTRESSING signals from the highest quarters of the land indicate that an amnesty is being considered for the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, one of the nation's most feared terrorist groups — should members of the outfit mend their ways. While speaking to The Independent, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said that if TTP members renounce violence and respect the nation's Constitution, "we are even open to giving them a pardon".

The minister's comments are apparently linked to reports that TTP members had been set free from Afghan prisons after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, and that the militants may be headed to Pakistan. A few days earlier President Arif Alvi had made similar comments, telling Dawn News that TTP members not involved in "criminal activities" could be forgiven.

Before the pros and cons of any amnesty offer are considered, it would be wise to briefly examine the major 'achievements' of the TTP. The group combines jihadist ideology with a sectarian worldview and has waged war against Pakistan and its institutions. Many thousands of Pakistanis have been slaughtered by the group. The numbers include civilians as well as soldiers, paramilitary and police

personnel. In a bloody campaign, the group has attacked security installations, public venues as well as places of worship, while not expressing an iota of remorse for these murderous activities. The country's leadership has of course added the warning that an amnesty would only be offered if the TTP renounces violence. But the group's latest attack in Balochistan — in which a number of FC personnel were martyred — indicates that it has yet to abandon its old, brutal ways.

If the government is seriously considering an amnesty, then there are some basic facts that should be kept in mind. Firstly, an amnesty should be for some individuals, not the entire outfit, as a general amnesty is a dangerous idea. For example, low-ranking cadres that may have been 'misguided' and agree to lay down their arms and live according to the law of the land can be considered for an amnesty. They would need to be deradicalised and taught skills so that they can contribute to society. But even these individuals would have to be watched by the state, for there are examples from foreign countries' deradicalisation programmes that indicate some 'rehabilitated' extremists often relapse into violence.

As for the hardcore militants of the TTP that played major roles in the planning and execution of some of the worst acts of terrorism this country has seen, there should be no amnesty. The state needs to bring these individuals to justice; the heirs of countless civilians and security personnel must be assured that the killers of their loved ones will face the law. If the state fails in doing so, other extremists will be emboldened by the belief that they can indulge in murderous violence, and get away with it.

Media regulation

THE needless controversy over media regulation may finally be heading for a resolution. In a meeting with Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry, representatives of various media bodies termed the PMDA 'unacceptable' in clear terms. However a committee comprising members from both sides has been constituted with the aim of finding a solution and looking into the issues of social media regulation as well as workers' issues.

It is now fairly obvious that the proposed regulatory body, which would have been armed with draconian powers to fine and imprison journalists, will not see the

light of day. The misplaced idea of PMDA has hopefully been buried. It should not have come so far and created such unnecessary controversy had the government given it deeper thought and understood that in this day and age, no one genuinely invested in the democratic system in Pakistan would ever agree to support such drastic curbs on the freedom of expression. It took sustained pressure from the media, opposition parties, civil society organisations, and various other stakeholders for the government to finally see reason and agree to set it aside. This is not to deny that there could be better regulation of the media industry and there exists scope for policies aimed at reforming archaic structures and outmoded rules and regulations that govern the rapidly expanding sector. In particular, the social and digital media require some regulation that can help sift genuine information and opinion from fake and manufactured news. In this respect, it is a welcome development that the government and media bodies have agreed to sit across the table and find a convergence of views that can ultimately translate into policy. This will be easier said than done though. Social media regulation is not just a challenge for Pakistan but for all countries that are grappling with the explosive, unplanned and unstoppable growth of digital media. In an attempt to regulate this space, governments can very easily skew the balance and end up putting curbs on the freedom of expression. Those undertaking the quest to find these elusive answers should therefore not rush matters. Every step has to be taken with a lot of thought and consideration, and wherever possible, global comparisons should be made to keep abreast of mainstream developments in the sector. Similarly, workers' rights should also be debated threadbare so that their interests are held supreme while deciding on the necessary regulation.

Refusing audit

THE continuous resistance put up by several public-sector organisations to submitting their accounts for audit by the auditor general of Pakistan is hard to comprehend. The AGP office has informed a Senate panel that more than two dozen public-sector entities, including federal, provincial, autonomous and semi-autonomous companies, are refusing audit, prompting the parliamentary committee to start a debate on the issue of the constitutionally mandated scrutiny of their accounts at length in its next meeting. These entities, which include a commercial bank, oil and gas firms, railway, investment companies etc, as well as certain ministries and entities under them, have so far not come up with any

substantive reason for their refusal to submit to the inspection of their accounts by the AGP. This is in spite of the law ministry's opinion that every rupee paid by or due to the state is subject to audit under the Constitution. The law ministry has also pointed out that the Public Finance Management Act, 2019, mandates that wherever exchequer money is involved it should be open to audit. The refusal of some of these entities like the National Bank to submit to AGP scrutiny is even more perplexing since their accounts are audited internally and externally every year to meet the regulatory requirements.

Scrutiny of accounts of any public-sector organisation is essential for ensuring that the taxpayers' money is used in a transparent and efficient manner, as well as to protect them against fraud, corruption, extravagance and bad governance. Thus, the periodic assessments by the AGP to ensure that state resources are being deployed by a particular entity responsibly and effectively are necessary to hold them accountable to the public, improve their operations and governance, and bridge the trust gap between them and the taxpayers. In recent years, the world has moved beyond financial audits of the public-sector organisations to the scrutiny of their performance and efficiency. Pakistan also needs to move in this direction for effective use of the taxpayers' money.

Special needs

THE fact that only 3,653 children with special needs, out of some 300,000 in Sindh, are registered with the government speaks volumes about the apathetic attitude of the state towards differently abled people. It is obvious that in our society, very few differently abled people are able to access education and opportunities for growth to hone their talents and become independent and productive members of society. Public and civic spaces, educational institutions and government offices are not designed to facilitate or accommodate people with disabilities, leading to their exclusion from mainstream society. The recent order by the Sindh High Court directing the provincial government to make an effort to provide facilities to the differently abled is a reminder of this grim reality. The two-judge bench stated that by not registering people with disabilities and special needs, and by not taking any steps for their inclusion and growth in society, the Sindh government was in effect closing the door of education on them.

According to different media reports, registered differently abled children are enrolled in 66 special schools set up across the province. In view of the total population of these children in the province the number of schools is very low. However, it also emerged that the department for empowerment of differently abled persons has been severely understaffed. Out of a total of 176 posts of BPS-17 for teachers and officials, only 50 positions were filled. Without trained human resource, the department will obviously encounter problems in establishing and operating new schools and vocational centres for children with special needs. The same is true for special education departments in the other provinces, which remain isolated, underfunded and understaffed, and therefore, unable to cater to the needs of differently abled children. In 2020, Punjab became the first province to introduce a special education policy focusing on the inclusion and economic development of children with special needs. Other provinces need to follow suit, while integrating special education projects into mainstream education and health initiatives.

Blinken's remarks

PERHAPS it was his country's chaotic, humiliating recent withdrawal from Afghanistan — and the attendant war weariness that comes with occupying a country for two decades — that made US Secretary of State Antony Blinken blame Pakistan for America's failures in the Afghan theatre.

While speaking at a public hearing in Congress, America's top diplomat made highly uncharitable remarks about Pakistan, accusing this country of "harbouring members of the Taliban" and "hedging its bets constantly about the future of Afghanistan". In the same breath, Mr Blinken admitted that this country has cooperated "with us on counterterrorism" at "different points". He added that Washington would be reassessing its ties with Islamabad.

It was a confused tirade on Mr Blinken's part. As the Foreign Office has noted, the comments are "surprising" and "not in line with the close cooperation" between the two states.

It is indeed unfortunate that such a high-ranking US official has publicly berated Pakistan over what is, basically, a massive foreign policy failure of his own government. The fact is that even voices within America are criticising the US government for the debacle in Afghanistan. As Democratic Senator Chris Van

Hollen pointed out recently, it was the Trump administration that had asked Pakistan to release top leaders of the Afghan Taliban.

The fact is that the US establishment cannot scapegoat Pakistan for two decades of bad policy in Afghanistan. Whether or not it made the right policy move, this country has cooperated with America from the days of the Afghan 'jihad', through the 'war on terror'. It has also helped foreigners safely exit Afghanistan after the Taliban's recent takeover. But the refrain from Washington remains a familiar one: do more.

America must look within and see what went wrong in Afghanistan, why its nation-building experiment crashed, and why the army it had built and the administration it had nurtured with billions of dollars fell like a house of cards the moment the Taliban neared Kabul. Moreover, looking back into history and examining other foreign policy blunders — Iraq, Vietnam etc — may also help give America a clearer understanding of the situation.

It is easy to blame Pakistan or other states for one's own failures. But to ensure that these mistakes are not repeated requires Washington to examine its own policies. After all, it was not Pakistan, but former president Trump, who decided to pull out of Afghanistan. Trump may not have been known for his statesmanship and foreign policy vision, but it should be acknowledged that he realised the Afghanistan war was unwinnable.

It would be better for the US to move forward in its ties with Pakistan and to try and build a positive, mutually respectful and beneficial relationship. Blaming Pakistan for America's failures is unlikely to help improve relations. A fresh approach is needed from Washington, not veiled threats to 'reassess' relations.

Worrying survey

THE findings of the Labour Force Survey 2018-19 indicate that some important headline trends have already taken or are taking firm root. That shouldn't be surprising as the structure of the country's labour markets and its economy remains unchanged. Primarily, the report gives us an overview of economic conditions and the state of employment during the government's first year in power. To begin with, unemployment jumped to 6.9pc from 5.8pc the year before, betraying the economy's weakening capacity to create jobs because of

emerging macroeconomic imbalances, which pulled down the growth rate to less than 2pc that year. Many would argue — and not without reason — that ‘real’ unemployment would have surged to 8pc-9pc if the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics hadn’t shown a significant rise in the number of self-employed and unpaid family workers to project an additional 2.3m new jobs at a time when economic distress was forcing businesses to reduce jobs. Further, the survey data depicts an increase in labour force participation in agriculture, implying the sector had emerged as an employer of last resort. This shift in the labour movement from a high-productivity industrial sector to low-productivity sectors should be cause for concern. More worrying is the very low participation of women, underscoring the social and legal barriers to their entry into the labour force. Not all of them are able to get jobs and most of them are employed in low-paid and informal sectors of the economy or as unpaid family workers. The paid work participation rate of below 10pc for women in the urban labour force compared with 65.1pc for men speaks volumes about the gender gap in employment. Equally disturbing is the increasing number of child workers in the age group of 10-14 years as well as older teens.

Another important development underlined by the survey is the 16pc unemployment among those with 14 years or more of education, amplifying the huge disconnect between the education system and the changing job market. The survey results further emphasise the limited capacity of the formal, documented sector in employment generation, a major reason for low economic productivity and growth. Last but not the least, the report claims nominal wages to have grown during the survey year by more than 13pc. That seems unlikely given the large-scale lay-offs and pay cuts implemented by businesses to bridge the gap between their rising costs and shrinking revenues.

Talking to the Taliban

PRIME Minister Imran Khan has announced that he has started a dialogue with the Taliban for the formation of a broad-based and inclusive government. This important statement came after his meeting with regional leaders at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

The Taliban government is yet to be recognised by any country and the major obstacle remains the Taliban’s refusal to accommodate other ethnicities as well

as women in the newly formed set-up. Pakistan has maintained from the start that the Taliban must make the government a broad-based one if they want to become part of the international community. So far the Taliban remain unmoved.

This intransigence will have consequences. Afghanistan is facing a humanitarian crisis in the absence of any significant financial and technical assistance. The UN secretary general has warned of a severe impact on the people of Afghanistan if the international community does not provide relief and money on an urgent basis.

UN estimates predict that the country could be facing poverty rates upwards of 90pc by next year if swift measures are not taken to alleviate the situation. The UN chief has also urged the world to delink humanitarian assistance from the issue of recognition of the Taliban government so that aid and assistance can be dispatched without delay.

Mr Khan has said correctly that the world has two choices with Afghanistan — either engage with it or abandon it. We have seen in the past how abandoning the country led to the rise of terrorist groups with disastrous consequences for everyone. Therefore engagement is the only real option. A lot will of course depend on how the Taliban behave and govern. If they continue with their exclusionary approach, it would become very difficult for the world to engage with them. They must listen to reason, and change accordingly. If they do not, their government will find it very hard to remain sustainable. The ensuing crisis could lead to a fresh wave of instability that could, among other things, trigger a greater exodus of refugees into Pakistan. The head of the UN refugee agency has urged Pakistan to accept refugees if such a situation arises but he should also realise that this is a burden that Pakistan has been shouldering for decades. It is very hard to do this now without the help of other countries. It is unfair to expect that Pakistan will bear the financial, political and social cost of more refugees knowing that it has paid a steep price for doing so in the past.

To avert such a crisis in Afghanistan, the international community has to move decisively to help the people of the country. Pakistan has played an effective role in coordinating the efforts of regional countries to deal with the challenges emerging from the unstable situation in Afghanistan. The prime minister's latest initiative is a welcome one.

New Zealand's departure

THERE was chaos and despair when New Zealand decided to call off their tour of Pakistan barely minutes before the scheduled start of the ODI series in Rawalpindi on Friday. After all, this tour had been 18 years in the making. But, unlike in 2002, when they had to cut short a visit following a bomb blast outside their hotel in Karachi that killed 11 French engineers amongst others, this time New Zealand pulled out because of a threat that was unknown to Pakistan's security agencies.

Perhaps its concerns were rooted in its past trauma and the fear of cross-border militancy following Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban. However, New Zealand did visit Pakistan the next year to complete the series. Six years later, the attack on the Sri Lankan cricketers' bus in Lahore made Pakistan a no-go country for international teams. Things have improved since then and international cricket has returned to the country which has safely hosted South Africa, Bangladesh, West Indies, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe in recent times. But uncertainty may continue as long as the situation in Afghanistan remains precarious. One hopes it won't affect England's scheduled tour in October.

Independent security consultants had given New Zealand the all-clear to tour Pakistan. New Zealand had even attended training sessions at the Pindi Cricket Stadium; their team was given the level of security usually reserved for visiting heads of state, including armed guards escorting their bulletproof buses. Prime Minister Imran Khan gave all the assurances he could to his New Zealand counterpart Jacinda Arden, yet they did not change their mind. In fact, Pakistan itself toured New Zealand after the 2019 massacre at two mosques in Christchurch by a lone gunman — several Bangladesh players had a narrow escape.

The new Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ramiz Raja has said that the issue will be raised at the International Cricket Council. But, going by past experience, there is little chance of Pakistan getting any comfort there. They might be able to recover from the financial impact of the series' cancellation, but the reputation and sporting damage has already been done. As things stand, Pakistan seem likely to be heading to October's Twenty20 World Cup without any competitive matches. And if New Zealand can be spooked by what has since then emerged

to be a routine threat advisory by Rawalpindi's IG Police, the PCB should harden its stance when it sends teams for tours abroad.

Crucial polio campaign

THE national vaccination campaign that kicked off in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Friday is being described by experts as crucial for maintaining the progress made towards polio eradication in the country. With only one case of wild poliovirus reported in the country so far this year, as compared to 84 in 2020, and a marked decrease in detection of the virus in environmental samples — from 55pc to 12pc — consistent efforts by the national polio programme seem to be showing results. However, with the high-transmission season coming up, experts assert that this window of opportunity is crucial for doubling the ongoing immunisation efforts and reaching as many children as possible, especially newborns and infants. In the other three provinces, the vaccination drive will begin on Sept 20. More than 290,000 Sehat Tahaffuz workers will go door to door across the country to vaccinate around 40m children younger than five years. A commendable initiative being taken in this campaign is the administration of supplementary doses of Vitamin A to children, in addition to polio drops. Experts involved in the national programme say that this step has been taken because nearly 50pc of children in the country have Vitamin A deficiency that leaves them vulnerable to illnesses such as measles, night blindness, diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Pakistan and Afghanistan remain the only two countries where the poliovirus is still endemic. With the prevailing tenuous situation in Afghanistan, the authorities need to accord high priority to the goal of eradicating polio quickly to minimise the chances of cross-border transmission of the virus. Prime Minister Imran Khan is cognisant of the situation as indicated by his meeting with the deputy commissioners of 20 high-risk districts to personally instruct them to intensify their efforts against polio. Notwithstanding the progress in polio eradication made so far it is crucial that the authorities ensure that the ongoing immunisation campaign achieves all its targets while also taking steps to monitor cross-border movement and enhancing security for health workers in high-risk areas.

What's the game?

THE PTI government's attacks on the Election Commission of Pakistan are getting more scathing by the day. On Monday, Railways Minister Azam Swati unleashed a verbal offensive against the chief election commissioner and crossed the line of decorum. The same minister had last week indicated that the ECP should be set on fire.

A day earlier, ministers Fawad Chaudhry and Shibli Faraz had also targeted the ECP and its chief for criticism and had accused him of toeing the opposition's line. It is fairly obvious that these are choreographed, orchestrated and synchronised attacks on the commission and they have a clear outcome in mind. This outcome may or may not have anything to do with the various ministers' verbalised desires that the chief election commissioner should resign, but it does point towards an obvious government intent to drag the commission and its chief's name through mud and make it controversial.

This is dangerous brinkmanship which can rattle the foundations of the constitutional system that holds the national structure together. Such brinkmanship is being fuelled by incendiary rhetoric as well as inflexible demands of a unilateral nature. Nothing illustrates this approach more than the government's hardening position on the use of electronic voting machines. It is perplexing that the PTI is insisting on using these machines in the next elections when logic and reason dictate that any electoral reform must be the result of a consensus between all those who will be participating in the elections. This is a self-evident principle for any act that involves more than two participants and entails them agreeing on the rules that would accord legitimacy to the said act.

The government appears to have cast aside this principle knowing full well — one assumes — that the other participants, namely the opposition, will not play by the electoral rules as framed by the EVM issue. This means the next general elections are already under a cloud. More so when we factor in the statement by Planning Minister Asad Umar that these elections will be held on the basis of a census which for now is nowhere on the horizon. This being the case, we may be looking at a scenario where the general elections due in 2023 will either be severely controversial, and possibly unacceptable, or may not be able to take place until these controversies are resolved. Does the PTI government realise it

is putting the entire system at stake by resorting to such dangerous and unnecessary brinkmanship?

Pakistan's democracy cannot afford such jolts. It has traversed a rough and bumpy road to reach where it is and no person or party should be allowed to reverse this progress. All stakeholders need to come together to somehow save the system from further collision. Everything must be done to make the next elections free, fair and transparent in the true sense.

Gas price hike

THE proposed hike of 24pc-37pc in the gas price of the top 23pc residential consumers, who account for 43pc of the total volumes sold by the two public gas utilities, will adversely affect most such households. That is not all. It will also affect the household budget and erode the purchasing power of smaller, low-income gas consumers — who the government claims it is trying to shield by cross-subsidising their fuel costs — through inflation. After all, even a small hike in energy prices tends to create pressure on the cost of everything else and triggers more inflation. The inflationary burden on people is already very high. A further increase will crush millions of households that have been struggling to make ends meet in the last three years because of repeated increases in energy prices, harsh economic stabilisation policies, currency devaluation and the pandemic.

Ostensibly, the proposal is part of a plan to introduce 'seasonal energy pricing' for residential and commercial consumers to boost electricity sales and discourage gas consumption for heating purposes during winter when power demand plunges and gas usage spikes to unmanageable levels, raising the government's energy supply costs and creating countrywide gas shortages. But the plan's success hinges mainly on a concomitant and proportional reduction in power tariffs in the colder months. Can the government achieve this given the IMF pressure to raise power prices for full-cost recovery and reduction in the power-sector debt? It looks unlikely. If the choice for consumers is not profitable enough and if the cost of the required shift is not affordable, they will continue to resist the required switchover. If they do switch, the energy ministry expects the electricity usage during off-peak months to rise by up to 300MW and gas demand to drop by 50mmcf. Does that make the trade-off attractive enough? Another

view is that the two gas companies, SNGPL and SSGC, are asking for this hefty price raise mainly to help meet their own expenditure and cover the costs of their inefficiency and gas theft, which has been the primary reason for previous tariff hikes. The utility companies need pricing and governance reforms. Periodic tariff hikes without tackling the deep-rooted rot will not work. The government needs to carefully weigh the proposal as well as the trade-offs involved before making its final decision since it is going to have quite a deep impact on the vast majority of people and not just affluent gas consumers.

Green Line buses

At long last, the first batch of vehicles for Karachi's Green Line bus project arrived from China on Sunday, accompanied by much fanfare. The multibillion-rupee scheme — launched during the PML-N rule in early 2016 — finally appears to be nearing fruition, over five years since its inception. While Lahore, Islamabad and even Peshawar have witnessed dedicated public transport schemes up and running during this period, Pakistan's biggest city has had to make do with rickety smoke-emitting jalopies from a bygone era, in which commuters risk life and limb simply to get from Point A to Point B. Cynics will say 40 buses, soon to be upped to 80, are a drop in the ocean for a city of millions. However, if one is to take an optimistic view, the arrival of the buses should be the starting point of a planned public transport infrastructure overhaul for Karachi, whereby this forsaken city gets the buses and trains it needs and deserves.

The truth is that unless the federal government, which was responsible for Sunday's arrival of the buses, as well as the Sindh government, along with an elected local administration, work together for a proper transport plan for Karachi, matters are unlikely to improve. For example, the centre is in charge of the Green Line project, while the Sindh administration is yet to complete the Orange Line bus corridor. Several other bus lines are in the works, some of them with foreign funding. Instead of going their own way, the centre and Sindh need to hammer out a unified transport plan for Karachi through which there is connectedness between various lines and modes of transport, so that the commuter in this huge metropolis has a safe, comfortable and affordable journey. The KCR — which at this point seems like it may not see the light of day for some time to come — must also be incorporated into this grand plan, so that Karachi is given a 21st-century public transport system.

Interest rate hike

THE State Bank's decision to raise its key interest rate by 25bps to 7.25pc underpins its acceptance of emerging upside risks to external-sector stability and the inflation outlook going forward. Yet this slight hike signifies that the bank doesn't intend to put the brakes on economic recovery; the shift from an accommodative policy to a somewhat tighter monetary stance will be gradual. This means that the real interest rate will remain negative at least in the near term, with future hikes largely depending on how the economy moves and how well the government manages the fiscal front. So, what has changed in the last couple of months to force the bank to send signals to the market that it could change the monetary policy's direction? Primarily, the bank seems worried about the growth in domestic demand and imports driving up the current account deficit and weakening the exchange rate in response to balance-of-payment pressures.

This has triggered concerns that higher imported inflation and a potential increase in the administered prices of energy could push up the headline inflation reading further later this fiscal year. Apart from worries over the widening current account deficit and higher inflation expectations, the decision to move up the rate after a pause of 15 months is also driven by the bank's reading that "economic recovery now appears less vulnerable" to Covid-related uncertainty as the latest wave in Pakistan remains contained. Hence "...at this more mature stage of economic recovery, a greater emphasis is needed on ensuring an appropriate policy mix to protect the longevity of growth, keep inflation expectations anchored, and slow growth in the current account deficit". Thus, the priority of the policy from now on has to be to sustain growth by decelerating the pace of increase in domestic demand rather than catalysing recovery from the Covid shock.

The pressures on the balance-of-payments position are not unexpected. With growth in imports on strong domestic demand supported by an expansionary budget and a loose monetary stance outstripping the increase in remittances and exports, many experts had been warning of a negative impact on the current account deficit and exchange rate. Although the bank's revised growth projection is 4pc-5pc this fiscal, despite the potential uncertainty spillovers from Afghanistan, the deficit on the current account is anticipated to shoot up beyond the initial estimates of 2pc-3pc of GDP. With foreign exchange reserves not

enough to sustain large current account deficits, the growth story may unravel unless measures are implemented. Still, the 'directional' rate hike can do only so much to curb domestic demand and imports unless it is accompanied by fiscal actions to slow down the pace of economic recovery by the government. As warned by the bank, any unforeseen slippages in the fiscal stance would further bolster domestic demand, imports and inflation, necessitating abrupt rate hikes.

PCB chief's challenge

RAMIZ Raja was distraught, frustrated and angry. And the Pakistan Cricket Board chairman made no attempt to hide his emotions in a video message after England called off their October tour to Pakistan on Monday night, three days after New Zealand had pulled out of their own commitment hours before the start of the ODI series in Rawalpindi. Unfortunately, even if he did not intend to politicise the matter, he very nearly ended up doing so when he said that the Western bloc had banded together to isolate Pakistan. Mr Raja repeated the same views at a virtual news conference on Tuesday.

Such remarks deviate from the professional standards that an individual in Mr Raja's official capacity must uphold. It is regrettable that ministers and prime ministerial advisers are also claiming the teams' refusal to play in Pakistan to be part of a conspiracy. Surely disappointment and rage can be channelled in a constructive way to avoid further damage.

In what has been a rocky start to his chairmanship, the PCB chief now faces a challenge that it seemed the country had overcome. International cricket had largely been restored to Pakistan, thanks to the work of his predecessors. Mr Raja headed into the job tasked with making decisions to raise the team's performance. However, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has propelled fears of regional insecurity.

In their announcement, England did not mention any security threat to its team but said there were increasing concerns about travelling to the region and that it would mean added mental pressure on their players who already had to cope with the Covid-19 situation. New Zealand's abrupt pullout without clarifying the reasons had already left Pakistan cricket in the lurch and England aggravated the injury.

The PCB and Mr Raja are faced again with the arduous task of convincing the top world teams that Pakistan is safe for cricket. Mr Raja said that there were lessons to be learnt, and that Pakistan would put its interests first in the future while adding that the PCB would go all out in seeking compensation for the cancelled tours. He also spoke about building a cricket economy and making the national team the best in the world. That is the right approach and should be the way forward for Pakistan cricket which has had many problems to contend with. A chance for Pakistan to make its worth known will be at the Twenty20 World Cup next month.

No need for secrecy

THE government should not make a mountain out of the Toshakhana molehill. That would only encourage speculation of something being amiss in the department where precious gifts given to rulers, parliamentarians and officials by heads of other states and foreign dignitaries are stored. The kerfuffle was sparked by the Pakistan Information Commission's order seeking details of the gifts presented to Prime Minister Imran Khan since he took office in 2018 and the refusal of the Cabinet Division — which controls the Toshakhana — to divulge the information. The government has now filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court on the grounds that the PIC order is “illegal, without lawful authority”, claiming that such disclosure would jeopardise international ties. In its order, the PIC had requested “...description/specification of each gift, information about the gifts retained by the PM and the Rules under which gifts thus received are retained by him”. The Cabinet Division was asked to provide the information within 10 working days.

One fails to understand the government's insistence on keeping this information outside the public domain. The gifts have been given to the prime minister not in his personal capacity but as the representative of the people of Pakistan. In fact, according to the Toshakhana rules, articles likely to depreciate in value if unused are to be disposed of through public auction, with the proceeds deposited in the government account. Secondly, the rules also say that the people receiving the gifts can retain them by paying a percentage of their actual cost determined by an evaluation committee. It is believed however, that this facility is widely misused by undervaluing the items in question. In fact, the 'Toshakhana reference' pending in an Islamabad accountability court alleges that former prime

minister Yousuf Raza Gilani relaxed the rules of procedure to enable Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif to acquire luxury vehicles from the depository by paying only 15pc of their value. Surely Mr Khan's reputation for integrity would only benefit from disclosing the information asked for by the PIC.

Dialogue, at last

SANITY appears to have at last prevailed in the matter of electoral reforms. On Tuesday, at a meeting of National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser with parliamentarians from the treasury and opposition benches, both sides agreed on the formation of a parliamentary panel to work on the issue. The welcome development has not come a moment too soon.

For the past few months, the ugly war of words between the government and the opposition, particularly regarding the proposed use of electronic voting machines and the enfranchisement of overseas Pakistanis through i-voting in the next elections had reached fever pitch. It was difficult to see where the confrontation would lead especially if the government opted to bulldoze the two contentious election-related bills through a joint sitting of parliament as was being speculated. What is beyond doubt, however, is that extreme polarisation over such an important issue as electoral reforms weakens the already not very robust foundations of democracy in the country.

Most unfortunately, the government has attempted to make the Election Commission of Pakistan controversial at a time when its input is critical for the poll reforms under consideration. Sitting ministers launched blistering attacks on it in the wake of the ECP listing 37 objections to the use of EVMs in the next election. Railways Minister Azam Swati accused its members of taking bribes to rig polls while Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry alleged that the chief election commissioner — whose name was among the government's suggested nominees to the post — was "a mouthpiece for the opposition". The ECP rejected the allegations as baseless and issued notices to the ministers to produce evidence to back their claims.

Now that both sides have opted to take a more considered course of action, they must avoid name-calling and questioning each other's motives. That would only vitiate the atmosphere and intensify the trust deficit between them. The ECP's feedback would be integral to the discussion; it must have confidence it can

conduct free and fair polls under the amendments proposed to the election law. It is not yet known whether the parliamentary panel will take up only the amendments dealing with EVMs and i-voting for overseas Pakistanis or examine all the proposed electoral reforms. In any event, decisions must be taken with consensus.

The objective must be to arrive at comprehensive and far-reaching reform; past reports of foreign election observers could also be consulted to this end. All the political parties in an election must have trust in the process under which it is being held. Otherwise, we will simply have more elections that are contested, with the fallout poisoning the political arena. A working relationship between the government and opposition is essential to legislative work and governance, both of which are adversely affected due to the ensuing rancour — as we have seen most recently after the 2018 election.

AUKUS controversy

THE AUKUS military pact signed last week between Australia, the UK and the US has created major fissures between apparent allies within the Western bloc, while also drawing censure from China, whom the pact is supposed to target. The new grouping came to light when it was revealed that Australia would receive nuclear-powered submarines from the US and UK. However, this has come at the cost of a French-Australian deal through which Paris was supposed to provide Canberra with conventional subs.

France, which is a Nato partner of the US and UK, has accused its allies of “duplicity” in scuttling its multibillion-dollar deal with Australia, with the French foreign minister saying that the relationship was going through a “serious crisis”. Moreover, it is quite clear that the nuclear submarines are directed at China; there is no reason for Australia to make the purchase, as it faces no great defence perils from the Pacific microstates that surround it.

The AUKUS controversy illustrates that even the closest of allies can become estranged when commercial concerns are at stake. After all, the French defence industry would have gained a profitable deal if the Australians had gone ahead with it. Obviously, the UK and US had other ideas, as their own military industrial complex will surely benefit from manufacturing subs for Australia. But the more troubling reality emerging from this controversy is the deployment of nuclear

vessels in the Pacific. It appears that in their desire to hem in China, the Western bloc is prepared to open up a new front in the Indo-Pacific.

While US President Joe Biden had just a few weeks ago announced that Washington's days of foreign nation-building projects were over, clearly the Americans have not lost their appetite for global military adventurism. China has accused the AUKUS powers of having a "Cold War mentality" while North Korea has said the deal for nuclear subs could spark a regional arms race. Malaysia has also said the deal serves as a "catalyst for a nuclear arms race". Unfortunately, after unsuccessful military adventures in the Middle East and Central Asia, it appears the Western bloc is looking to test the waters in East Asia and the Pacific Rim, perhaps to take forward Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy. Instead of flexing its military muscle, the Western bloc needs to engage China at the negotiating table — for once sparked, an arms race will be difficult to contain.

Provocative act

MAULANA Abdul Aziz appears to relish provoking the state — and getting away with it. For the third time since Aug 21, flags of the Afghan Taliban were found hoisted on his Jamia Hafsa seminary in Islamabad last Saturday. The cleric, his wife and several madressah students were booked under the Anti Terrorism Act as well as various sections of the Pakistan Penal Code dealing with sedition, rioting armed with a deadly weapon, criminal intimidation, etc.

Videos on social media showed Maulana Aziz openly threatening the police with dire consequences at the hands of the Afghan Taliban. The flags were taken down after senior officers of the Islamabad administration and police held negotiations with the cleric. The FIR, meanwhile, was sealed but the government has decided not to pursue the case.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid told a press conference that out of the 511 mosques in the capital, "we have only had issues with one which we resolved through dialogue".

Where is the writ of the state when it comes to Maulana Aziz?

While the hoisting of any flag is not a crime per se, in the case of the Afghan Taliban's flag, the matter is a delicate one with international ramifications and the

potential to deeply embarrass the government. But it seems that yet again the maulana, one of the principal figures in the infamous Lal Masjid siege, has been allowed to get away with actions that in the case of 'ordinary mortals' would have elicited far harsher reprisal.

The hard-line cleric has managed to evade the law with the dexterity of Houdini. In September 2013, he was acquitted of the last of 27 cases registered against him between 2001 and 2007. He has not kept a low profile since. Several times, he has defied the ICT administration to deliver incendiary sermons at the Lal Masjid, and even allowed the Jamia Hafsa library to be named after Osama bin Laden. Kid glove treatment will only embolden him and others of his ilk.

Costs of growth

IS Pakistan's growth party over? Not yet. But both the State Bank and government are now cutting down on the items on their menu relating to the unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus provided over the last 18 months "to mitigate the adverse impacts" of the Covid lockdowns in order to rapidly grow the economy. The goal is to prevent the economy from 'overheating' by restricting the expected growth rate to 5pc or below this fiscal year, easing pressure on the balance-of-payments position, and protecting the exchange rate and foreign exchange reserves which cover only three and a half months' imports. The first hint of this shift came this week when the central bank slightly hiked its key rate by 25bps to 7.25pc with a view to slowing down the robust growth in domestic demand and imports which have widened the current account deficit and weakened the home currency. Apart from that, the bank has also signalled macro-prudential restrictions on auto and personal financing for cooling domestic demand. More importantly, the bank emphasises that the future pace of tapering off the monetary stimulus largely hinges on fiscal consolidation by the government since expansionary impulses could lead to bolstering demand for imports and push up inflation.

The government has responded by tinkering with its fiscal stimulus through the implementation of such measures as regulatory duty and 100pc cash margin requirements to restrict non-essential imports in a bid to cool an overheating economy. At best, the measures taken by the bank and government are inadequate to deal with the emerging upside risks that recovery poses to

macroeconomic stability and, at worst it sounds like the ‘beginning of the reversal of the growth story’.

Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin’s concern that “the economy may overheat and there could be exchange rate-related problems if the GDP growth rate exceeds 5pc” shows that policymakers have woken up to the reality. They had been warned against the potentially negative impacts of their procyclical strategy on the balance of payments and advised caution. Until recently, neither the State Bank nor Mr Tarin was prepared to see the danger of an overheated economy. They have seen it at last as in their blind pursuit of growth, the current account deficit rose to \$2.3bn during the July-August period with the rupee dropping to above 169 to a dollar from 152.28 in May. The upcoming review of the IMF programme, which has been in limbo since April, may have played a role since Islamabad knows it can’t afford to lose the lender’s support. The return of external vulnerabilities underpins the challenges of growing the economy without jeopardising external stability. These challenges cannot be overcome without tackling the structural issues, implementing governance reforms, boosting exports and reducing reliance on foreign debt. Till that happens, we’re stuck in low-growth mode and exposed to the perils of expansionary policies.

Smear campaign

PAKISTAN has presented details of how the threats made to the New Zealand cricket team leading to their cancelling the tour emanated from Indian accounts and were part of a conspiracy to damage cricket in the country.

In a detailed presser, the information minister shared evidence pointing to an elaborate scheme that included fake accounts generating threatening emails using VPNs and other diversionary tactics. The minister stated that the chain of events started with a social media post from what he termed as a fake account belonging to the former spokesman of the banned TTP, Ehsanullah Ehsan. However, in a message widely circulated on various platforms, a man claiming to be Ehsanullah Ehsan said he had indeed posted the message from his genuine account to warn the New Zealand team that there was a threat from the IS-K. The veracity of the claim is yet to be established.

The evidence shared by the minister is cause for alarm. There is no proof yet that the Indian government may be involved in this conspiracy but it is fairly clear that

some elements in India are responsible for orchestrating the campaign to discredit Pakistan. Many may claim this to be a far-fetched idea, but ever since the EU DisinfoLab's revelations, it is quite evident that such organised smear campaigns against Pakistan have Indian roots.

It is commendable that the government has taken the matter as seriously as it has, and delved deep into cyber investigations to determine the real story behind the threats.

The New Zealand authorities should have displayed greater responsibility instead of panicking and taking a decision without consulting the hosts. Had they done so, Pakistani authorities would have had an opportunity to explain to them how the elaborate scheme behind the threatening emails was part of a larger trend against Pakistan.

Rising dengue cases

THE dengue monster is once again rearing its head in different cities of Punjab. More than 820 cases have surfaced so far this year, 687 of them in Lahore. The city appears to be bracing itself for yet another major dengue outbreak as health experts warn of the increased presence of dengue larvae following the recent spell of rain in Lahore. According to news reports, dengue has claimed at least one life in Lahore while scores of people are testing positive on a daily basis. On Wednesday alone, at least 126 people tested positive for dengue, indicating that matters could spiral out of control if effective preventive measures are not taken immediately. Meanwhile, more than 50 cases have been reported from Rawalpindi where 36 patients are reported to be receiving treatment at three government hospitals. Cases also seem to be on the rise in the KP city of Mansehra that has reported at least two fatalities.

The Punjab chief minister on Monday issued instructions for mobilising field teams and stepping up surveillance of both public and private places, especially tyre shops and graveyards, to carry out fumigation and drain stagnant water from these areas to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. However, a large-scale public awareness campaign is also needed to prevent misinformation about dengue and to encourage people to take precautions. For example, many people believe that the dengue mosquito is active only at dawn and dusk. But research suggests that the Aedes mosquito responsible for the spread of dengue bites during the

day as well, especially two hours after sunrise and before sunset. Immediate action is needed to ensure that the outbreak is contained as soon as possible and does not reach the near-epidemic proportions of 2019, when cases in Punjab rose to more than 8,670 with over 50,000 reported from all of Pakistan. In the middle of the Covid pandemic the already overstretched and rickety health infrastructure cannot take the stress of another outbreak of disease.

In any case now that the matter has been unearthed, Pakistan should double its efforts to foil such cyber conspiracies and expose them before they can lead to greater damage. It should also engage with all cricket boards to inform them of the orchestrated campaign that led to the hasty decision by the New Zealand team and triggered an equally irresponsible decision by the England cricket board. The international community should also take note of these vilification campaigns that are launched with ulterior motives to damage Pakistan's global standing. The matter should be taken to its logical conclusion.

Quorum malady

LACK of quorum has become a chronic problem for the present National Assembly which is in the process of becoming a redundant institution. Friday was the fifth consecutive day that the chair adjourned the sitting for the same reason—within minutes of the start of proceedings. The quorum issue has already marred the proceedings of the entire first week of the fourth parliamentary year of the Assembly. This should be embarrassing for the government, but there is no such realisation in the ruling party. It is also a matter of concern that this should be happening at a time when the fourth Assembly is moving towards the completion of its five-year term. In its report on the completion of the third parliamentary year of the National Assembly, Pildat, an independent forum focusing on democracy and governance in Pakistan, stated that the Lower House “failed to see any improvement in the attendance of members, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, as 24 out of the 79 total sittings were adjourned due to lack of quorum”.

It appears that the lawmakers have lost interest and faith in the institution perhaps because of the government's heavy dependence on ordinances instead of parliament for lawmaking and taking key policy decisions on other forums. Although ensuring quorum — for which the presence of 86 members, or one-

fourth, of the 342-member House is required — is primarily the responsibility of the government, the opposition has frequently used the lack of it as a means of disrupting proceedings even during Question Hour. It is time for Prime Minister Imran Khan to intervene in his capacity as the Leader of the House. If he himself does not have time for parliament, he must at least issue directives to his ministers and the party's chief whip to ensure the presence of at least the required number of members to keep the parliamentary system functional and prevent the alienation of Pakistanis from the democratic process which may well be the wish of certain elements that are against democracy.

NAB controversy

THE completion of the four-year term of NAB chairman Javed Iqbal early next month has afforded Prime Minister Imran Khan an opportunity to restore the public's confidence in the accountability process by following the law for appointing his successor. But will he? Recent signals sent by some of his ministers suggest otherwise. Their statements indicate that the PTI government intends to retain Mr Iqbal for another term via extension or reappointment. The problem is that the law doesn't provide for either of these actions. In order to get around the limitations under the existing law, the government is thinking of changing NAO 1999 either through a presidential ordinance or by bulldozing an amendment bill in a joint parliamentary session. However, the two options risk an immediate and strong legal challenge to the government since they would be a gross violation of previous Supreme Court rulings against laws intended to profit a specific person.

Both the information and law ministers have made it clear that the government would not engage in 'meaningful consultations' with opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif to fulfil constitutional requirements. The government's argument that the opposition leader is facing NAB cases and consultations with him on the next NAB chief would be a case of 'conflict of interest' also doesn't have a leg to stand on. The law doesn't forbid the prime minister from consulting the opposition leader facing trial. The condition for bipartisan consensus was added to the law and endorsed by the apex court with a view to protecting the office of the NAB chairman from any political controversy. Circumventing this condition will make any new appointment controversial and raise more questions about the neutrality

of the anti-corruption watchdog. Such actions would not only bring the government face to face with the opposition parties but also with lawyers.

The government's apparent attempt to retain the current incumbent is understandable. After all, his successor chosen through bipartisan consensus may not risk his reputation by indulging in a witch-hunt against the opposition as is being done currently. Since its creation, NAB has been in the middle of one controversy or the other. But it has lost whatever credibility or semblance of neutrality it had more rapidly in the last four years under the outgoing chairman than ever before. The way the agency has gone after the opposition ignoring the unscrupulous elements in the ruling party has tarnished the organisation's image and eroded public trust in its actions. Indeed, the bipartisan selection of the new chief of the accountability agency won't be sufficient to redeem it. Still, it can be a first step in that direction. Any attempt to keep the opposition out of the process, and retain the incumbent for yet another term will only make NAB more controversial and raise more questions about the government's claims of across-the-board accountability.

Cabinet 'inclusivity'

WITH the Afghan Taliban now firmly in charge of the country, voices are being raised within and outside Afghanistan questioning when the much-hyped inclusivity the armed group had talked about will materialise. Up till now, it appears that the group is sticking to its narrow vision.

Recently, the Taliban cabinet was further expanded, and now includes a member of the Shia Hazara community as deputy minister, and apparently some members from the Tajik and Uzbek communities though matters are still unclear on this front. What has been of concern is the fact that even in the cabinet expansion, women have been kept out of decision-making circles. This, coupled with the fact that the Taliban have not allowed girls to return to secondary schools (the group says they will be allowed back 'soon') very much harks back to the Taliban of old, when women were practically excluded from public life.

As Prime Minister Imran Khan rightly pointed out while speaking to the BBC, the Afghan group's decision of disallowing girls from attending secondary school would be "un-Islamic", while adding that unless the Taliban forged a genuinely inclusive government, the risks of civil war would be very real.

Ideally, the Taliban should learn from history, especially the past few decades which have seen Afghanistan torn apart both by external meddling, and internal power struggles. Warlords, representing different tribes or ethnic groups, had carved out their own fiefdoms and even during Ashraf Ghani's rule, backed by the firepower of Nato as it was, the central government's hold over the country was tenuous at best. Moreover, going back even further, after the mujahideen had ousted the Soviets and the Najibullah government with Western, Arab and this country's help, their internecine squabbles led to more civil war and lawlessness.

If the Taliban want to prevent repeating these mistakes, they need to take all ethnic groups, tribes and sects on board. Instead of tokenism, they need to form a broad-based set-up that can pave the way for representative rule. Moreover, unless women are allowed to fully participate in national life, Afghanistan will not be able to progress. There is no justification for stopping girls from getting an education whatsoever. Even Saudi Arabia and Iran — which are religious states — place no bars on female education. Moreover, these states and other Muslim countries also allow women in the workforce. Therefore, if the Taliban are serious about inclusivity, they need to walk the walk.

Intransigent Taliban

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has delivered an effective speech at the UN General Assembly session detailing the salient points of Pakistan's policy on varied subjects like India, Afghanistan, Covid-19 and climate change. All these topics resonate with an international audience to differing degrees, but it is Afghanistan that is the centre of attention for obvious reasons, and more so the words of the prime minister of the country that arguably command the highest relevance in matters relating to Afghanistan.

The prime minister had a mixed bag of arguments in his speech. These are worthy of debate in terms of their utility for Pakistan. He was correct in saying that if the international community did not engage constructively with the Taliban government, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan would become even grimmer with poverty rates shooting beyond 90pc in the near future. There is no doubt that unless urgent financial aid is provided to Afghanistan, the economy

will struggle to sustain itself and the citizens would face the brunt of the hardships that ensue.

While Mr Khan may be sincere in urging the international community to lend a hand, the Taliban government is doing itself no favours by refusing to accommodate any demands of the international community, including Pakistan. Not only is the Taliban leadership showing reluctance to include other ethnicities in its governing set-up, it has flatly declined to entertain the idea of having women representation in government. To add insult to injury, the Taliban are cracking down on girls' education and restricting women from working in offices.

This is contrary to what they had promised before taking over Kabul. At that time, many officials and other stakeholders from relevant countries and organisations had expressed the optimism that the Taliban appeared more pragmatic and flexible than they were in their previous stint in power. The initial statements from various Taliban spokesmen also gave the impression that they were desirous of joining the global mainstream. These hopes are now dimming with each passing day. In the latest regressive move, Taliban officials have declared they will start harsh punishments including executions and amputations. All this means that the Taliban are gradually reverting to their old ways and there is little chance that they will show flexibility to global demands.

This intractability may appeal to the Taliban hardliners but it will ensure that their government will not get the recognition they want any time soon. Pakistan should also not press for it if the Taliban refuse to bend. The international community is justified in using recognition as a pressure tool to extract some fundamental reforms from the Taliban. Pakistan should do its part to persuade the Taliban to see reason. Pakistan should also spell out for them in no uncertain terms that without recognition and financial assistance, the Taliban will struggle to sustain themselves in power.

Deadly misinformation

THE distinction between 'fake' and 'authentic' news is now a concept impossible to escape. In an unprecedentedly hooked-up world, everyone knows the news of the day. But what to trust and what not to trust — there's the rub. Even as the internet generation comes fully into its own, the world has watched while unverified 'news' has caused unforgiveable mischief ranging from rumour-

mongering (the surmised plots behind the 9/11 attacks come to mind), to the spread of hateful ideologies (such as notions of white supremacy that proliferate in online echo chambers), to planet-endangering misinformation (including conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 vaccines that continue to confuse, or climate change), and everything in between. This is precisely why it is of seminal importance for news consumers to be intelligent and aware; to be fully cognisant of the fact that when the world lies at our fingertips, it also takes the touch of just one fingertip to upload for a potentially worldwide audience anything that may take one's fancy — good or bad or ludicrous. In a praiseworthy effort to address exactly this, last year the All Pakistan Newspaper Society declared Sept 25 as National Newspaper Readership Day, reminding news consumers in Pakistan that the charms and ease of social media notwithstanding, it is newspapers that can be fully relied on for exactitude because of the extensive process of fact-checking, cross-checking and unquestionable verification that goes into the process of production. Newspapers are the Fourth Estate that not only demand accountability and truth from power, but also have over the centuries developed into a model that offers itself up for accountability through the fact of being a permanent record — as opposed to the ephemeral nature of online content, be it on 'news' sites, or social media sites whose messages can potentially spread nationally or globally like wildfire.

That said, the newspaper model must also look within and adjust in the face of contemporary realities. The World Association of Newspaper and News Publishers recognises as a 'definite' newspaper — as opposed to newsletters — The Relation of Strasbourg, dating back to 1609. What is published for the permanent record after extensive verification can unavoidably not compete with the immediacy of the internet — but its value is contained in precisely this verification process. The centuries-old model of immediate news may have become outdated, but newspapers can provide unmatched context and meaning. Trustworthiness and verification will always trump immediacy.

Covid arrests

THE unilateral decision taken by Karachi's East Zone police to arrest citizens without Covid vaccination cards from the streets was utterly ridiculous. Thirty-three people were picked up on Friday and 18 were booked under Section 188 of the Pakistan Penal Code and also under Section 4 of the Sindh Epidemics

Disease Act, 2014, for disobeying a public order. The East Zone police sprang into action after a letter was issued by the Sindh home department to the IGP, DG Rangers and the Karachi commissioner conveying the chief secretary's concerns at the non-implementation of SOPs and demanding action against those violating them. The letter made carrying proof of vaccination to certain public places mandatory, entrusting the law-enforcement agencies with the responsibility of carrying out inspections to ensure compliance with these directives. The letter noted the concern of the Sindh chief secretary that the Karachi Police in particular did not appear to be interested in inspecting vaccination cards.

What exactly were the police authorities in the East Zone thinking? Safety in these days of Covid must be a priority. But it is one thing to ensure that people at workplaces and educational institutes are vaccinated and quite another to pick up people from the streets on flimsy legal grounds. Moreover, where would they keep those detained? In special cells with proper ventilation while ensuring a distance of six feet between 33 detainees and carrying out regular disinfection of the premises? It is rather unlikely. The Karachi Police is within its rights to ask the public to carry their vaccination cards with them when visiting restaurants and marriage halls and other public places; however, it should consult the provincial government and devise a new strategy for dealing with violators of Covid-related SOPs, rather than detaining people en masse. High-handed actions are not likely to persuade people to queue up to get their Covid jabs. Better results might be achieved through a sustained awareness-raising drive and by denying unvaccinated individuals entry to venues where the virus is likely to spread.

Phasing out coal

IN what is seen as one of the most significant developments on the climate front this year, China has pledged to end public financing for coal-fired power stations overseas ahead of the COP26 UN climate change summit beginning in November. The announcement is in line with global efforts aimed at reducing the sources of dirty energy in order to cut down carbon emissions and arrest global warming.

China has for some years been under tremendous pressure to up its game to help the world control climate change. The pressure increased after Japan and

South Korea, the other two major financiers of overseas coal power projects, announced they would stop funding such projects earlier this year. China has vowed not only to halt its funding for coal power overseas but also to help developing countries build green energy production. That is good news since China has now become a leader in cheaper solar and wind power technology.

What implications will Beijing's decision to turn off its taps for coal energy have for several countries, including Pakistan where it has already committed heavy financing of \$50bn for both under-construction and planned projects?

The answer is unclear at the moment as the details of China's plans are not available. It is also not clear if the prohibition applies to private Chinese investment in coal overseas as well. China is Pakistan's largest investor and contractor of energy projects, most of which are coal-fired plants. Priority CPEC power schemes total 11.1GW in capacity and \$18.6bn in investment, with almost three quarters or 8.22GW based on coal involving a debt of \$8.7bn from Chinese banks. The main repercussions are likely to affect CPEC and non-CPEC projects totalling 4.1GW in Gwadar, Thar, Jamshoro and Arifwala involving Chinese and local investment of over \$5bn.

Even if the new Chinese policy doesn't affect these future investments in coal energy, it has afforded Pakistan an opportunity to renegotiate these deals with Beijing to convert them into cheaper, clean energy projects. Islamabad should take up this matter with China since Prime Minister Imran Khan has already pledged to phase out coal power and shift to greener energy production by 2030. He had announced a moratorium on coal at the Climate Ambition Summit held to mark the fifth anniversary of the Paris Climate Agreement in December last year where the world had pledged a stronger climate action. His statement had received international acclaim but nothing has so far been done on this front at home.

The emerging global situation and China's exit from coal offers a wide open window for Islamabad to start implementing the promised phase-out. Renegotiating to replace coal power deals with green energy agreements may not be easy. But it will not be impossible to convince Chinese firms. After all, it will be a test of their commitment to the world as well.

Poor online score

A RECENT report by Freedom House, the US-based watchdog that assesses democratic trends around the world, has placed Pakistan among the top 10 countries where digital freedoms are being curtailed. Covering the period from June 2020 to May 2021, the latest findings are consistent with previous assessments. They show that internet freedom continues to decline in the country where digital space has been characterised as ‘not free’ for some years now. In the latest report, of the nine internet controls listed, Pakistan has escaped only two categories, as it did in the previous review: there has been no ‘new censorship law’ and no ‘new surveillance law’. In the 2019 report, it had also managed to avoid the ‘social media platform blocked’ and ‘internet user physically assaulted’ categories. In fact, in 2016, Pakistan had lifted a three-year ban on YouTube. Unfortunately, there are few positive signs now. A TikTok ban continues and the PTA, which itself admits to having blocked thousands of websites, has refused to lift it saying that it won’t do so until the social media platform removes ‘unlawful content’. Given this trend, where the government invokes controversial online rules to clamp down on digital space, it is no wonder that Pakistan has scored a mere 25 out of 100 on internet freedom.

In fact, while the number of digital users is growing in the country, internet access itself remains limited. Even without the state’s curbs and constant meddling for reasons of ‘security’ and ‘morality’, citizens have to deal with a range of difficulties. For instance, slow internet speed is a norm as are frequent power outages that disrupt connectivity. Large areas remain without internet connections and thousands of students pursuing their studies from home on account of Covid lockdowns have found it hard to keep up with online classes. The pupils of many low-income schools without internet facilities have fared even worse. Similarly, there is inequality of access along gender lines. Freedom House points out that this digital divide “is among the highest in the world”, with conservative traditions prohibiting many women from owning a mobile device, let alone accessing a world of information that even the unlettered among them could have benefited from. How disturbing it is then that the state should choose to overlook these glaring deficiencies in its quest for digitisation. Instead, it polices the digital space through draconian cyber laws in the misplaced belief that its actions will keep Pakistan ‘safe’ from evil intentions.

Child's mental capacity

CONVERTING to another faith is one of the most consequential decisions an individual can make in their lifetime. It must therefore be undertaken with a certain level of maturity and an appreciation of the long-term impacts on one's relationships with the immediate family, standing in the community, inheritance rights, etc. Youth is synonymous with impulsivity and immaturity. However, the Lahore High Court, while dismissing a petition for the recovery of a minor girl who had converted to Islam from Christianity, has ruled that the mental capacity of a child is of crucial importance when considering the question of his/her conversion. The case had been brought by the 17-year-old's father, a rickshaw driver who alleged that his daughter had been kidnapped and married to her abductor after being forcibly converted. As to whether the conversion was forced, the court has held that it cannot undertake the evidence-based inquiry required to determine that question. At the same time, it correctly pointed out that while Article 20 grants the right to citizens to propagate their faith, that right does not include converting anyone to another religion through coercion or inducement.

In recent years, the allegedly forced conversions of many minors, particularly females, have created a sense of insecurity among non-Muslim communities in Pakistan. The LHC's verdict will do nothing to dissipate that fear, and indeed may embolden those who support such unethical acts. In its verdict, the court cited an example from Islamic history in support of its contention about child converts and said that neither the Quran nor any hadith stipulates a minimum age for conversion. The fact is, however, one would be hard-pressed to find another exceptional minor who could display the level of circumspection required to make such a life-changing decision. Moreover, neither source of Islamic law also sets a minimum age for marriage. But a minimum age for marriage is nevertheless on the statute books as a consequence of modern legislation that does not in any way contravene religious precepts.

Intra-party discord

AT a party convention in Rawalpindi, PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif declared that the cantonment board elections had shown that his party would defeat the ruling PTI if the polls were held in a free and transparent manner. Addressing a

charged audience, Mr Sharif proclaimed that fair elections were not a mere demand but a right. It was noteworthy that the party president did not call for the immediate ouster of the PTI government, which was the original goal of the opposition alliance PDM, but asked the workers to get ready to 'bury' the PTI in the general elections.

Mr Sharif's confident tone was a reflection of the political buoyancy that he has gained after an impressive showing in the cantonment polls. The campaign for these polls, as well as the candidate selection and other organisational matters, was overseen and supervised by party leaders who are considered close to the younger Sharif. The success in the polls is therefore attributed to the Shehbaz Sharif camp and has increased his weight in the intra-party tussle between the so-called pragmatists and hardliners.

However, the cleavage between the two camps appears to be widening, as evidenced by the latest public disagreement between two key party leaders on a matter of critical importance. Last week, Maryam Nawaz Sharif told journalists she had not been part of the "sin" of supporting an extension for the army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa. However, shortly thereafter Hamza Shehbaz said in a media interaction that the party decision in favour of the extension was the correct one. While the party struggles with this dual narrative, it appears that Shehbaz Sharif is getting more assertive in party affairs and galvanising the rank and file to buckle up for the elections. He is also said to be making an effort to build bridges with the establishment to ensure that the PML-N gets a fair shot at victory in the general elections.

Still, it remains unclear whether former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is on board with the efforts of his younger brother. The widening differences within the party show that Nawaz Sharif is taking a back seat and allowing the intra-party tussle to gain traction. His inaction on this front may be linked to some political strategy but the immediate fallout is that the leadership is working at cross purposes while the rank and file grows more confused by the day.

The organisational meetings underway since the last few weeks, and frequently addressed by Nawaz Sharif himself, point to a concerted push towards political mobilisation at the local level, but unless the strategic orientation of the party leadership does not become clear, the PML-N will continue to remain distracted fighting its own demons. The sooner the party can untangle these contradictions,

the more prepared it will be to go into the electoral battle with its focus and clarity restored.

Auto finance revisions

THE State Bank's decision to revise its prudential regulations governing consumer financing to limit car sales is a desperate move to moderate growth in domestic demand and curb burgeoning imports to control the current account deficit, which widened to \$2.3bn in July-August from a surplus of \$838m a year ago. The import of both CBUs and CKDs during the last fiscal had grown to \$2.142bn from \$1.276bn the previous year. During the first two months of this fiscal, CBU/CKD imports surged to \$495m from \$160m a year ago. The revisions may not have a drastic impact on the overall import bill — and consequently on the trade deficit — but they will certainly dent domestic car sales. With the current account projected to beat the central bank's optimistic projection of 2pc-3pc of GDP for the present fiscal by a wide margin, both the bank and government have from last week begun to temper their monetary and fiscal stimulus to shift the economy back into lower gear in order to ease pressures on the precarious balance-of-payments position.

The State Bank's revised auto financing policy tightens regulatory requirements for procuring loans for domestically assembled cars of more than 1000cc engine capacity through reduction in lease tenures, increased minimum down payment and a cut in maximum debt burden ratios for borrowers. The new policy effectively prohibits financing for imported vehicles and fixes the maximum amount of outstanding auto loans at Rs3m at any given point. Locally assembled electric vehicles, hybrids and cars under 1000cc have been insulated from the changes with a view to encouraging environment-friendly technology and middle-income car buyers. Overseas Pakistanis with Roshan Digital Accounts will also remain unaffected by the amended regulations. Until recently, ministers had been jumping up with joy, citing the increasing car sales as a benchmark for the economy's return to the path of recovery. The warnings from experts that the nascent economic upturn on the back of procyclical economic policies would bring the current account under immense pressure were brushed off with scorn. The recent developments have, however, proved critics of the unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus correct. It remains unclear as to how far the government will go to cool the overheating economy. But it is quite certain that it

may soon run out of time if it does not move swiftly to shield its debt-based foreign exchange reserves and reach an understanding with the IMF in the upcoming October review of its suspended programme.

Karachi tax collection

THE Sindh government's decision to collect two municipal taxes through electricity bills from consumers only in Karachi is likely to be seen as discrimination by the dwellers of the megacity. In its attempt to make the Karachi Municipal Corporation financially strong, the provincial government earlier this month proposed the collection of conservancy and fire taxes through K-Electric bills from consumers in Karachi. According to the details, Rs100 and Rs200, respectively, will be charged from two categories of 2.56m electricity consumers in the city. It is believed that this will enable KMC recoveries to increase drastically — up to Rs9bn per year as compared to the present collection of Rs210m from these two taxes. The Sindh government took a similar step earlier this year in February when it mandated the Sindh Revenue Board to collect local taxes on KMC's behalf. Though these taxes are not new, it is too early to say whether their collection through electricity bills will prove effective. Part of the reason is that the authorities have not yet made available the details of the two categories of consumers mentioned. Meanwhile, even if the financial targets are met, it is unclear how the money raised will be used to improve civic facilities in Karachi. The 20m-plus people of Karachi, whose large, medium and small businesses drive the country's economy, are left to cope with natural and manmade disasters practically on their own. Certainly the comatose KMC seems to be providing little to no civic amenities. Secondly, the same PPP leadership that now appears so concerned to prop up KMC was the same one that originally stripped the body of many of its powers. Moreover, why shouldn't the same methods be employed to boost tax collection via municipal bodies in other cities of the province, including Hyderabad, Sukkur and Larkana? Will financial autonomy for these municipal bodies not benefit the Sindh government too? Taxing is essential but its application needs to be fair across all settings, rich or poor, urban or rural.

No funds for Fata

IT has been a little over three years now since the Federally Administered Tribal Areas were merged in KP with the commitment to correct 70 years of historical wrong done to its more than 5m people and to bring the latter's lives at par with the rest of Pakistan. The 2016 Fata Reforms Committee led by senator Sartaj Aziz had pledged 3pc of the National Finance Commission award or Rs100bn per annum to improve infrastructure and create job opportunities for the tribespeople in a region with the lowest socioeconomic indicators in the country. Despite having across-the-board endorsement from the civil and military leaderships, that recommendation was never implemented. Finding lack of support from other provinces for the recommendation, a meeting held under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Imran Khan in December 2018 decided that the federal government together with KP and Punjab would provide 3pc of their share of the federal divisible pool to former Fata. Sadly, neither the federal government nor Punjab honoured their commitments, leaving KP to pick up the tab.

A report in this newspaper lays bare this stark reality. Not only did Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan fail to live up to their word, the federal government too fell short of its commitment by providing only 37pc of its promised uplift funds in the last three years. To rub salt into the wound, ex-Fata's share in the seventh NFC award has been going to other provinces since the merger in May 2018. If there is growing impatience and dismay in the now merged tribal districts of KP, it is but understandable. The merger plan had raised hopes and expectations in the area and had held out the promise of a quick and visible turnaround in the lives of the people who had lived through decades of neglect, terrorism and displacement. The centre and the provinces need to realise the criticality of ex-Fata in view of the evolving situation in neighbouring Afghanistan and chip in — or else feel the impact of the negative fallout yet again.

An olive branch

THE acrimony that has marred the centre-Sindh relationship during the PTI government's tenure will likely not be overcome with one conciliatory statement,

but Prime Minister Imran Khan has made a welcome overture befitting of his office.

If the Sindh government reciprocates, which it should, there can be a more substantial engagement on Karachi to the benefit of its long-suffering citizens. The premier extended the olive branch, so to speak, during the groundbreaking ceremony of the Karachi Circular Railway on Monday for which he made a daylong visit to the city. He said the federal and Sindh governments would have to set aside their political differences and work together for the sake of the people living in the metropolis, which in turn would benefit the province and the country. Highlighting Karachi's central role in Pakistan's overall prosperity, he said: "We can't do anything without the full cooperation of the provincial government, and there are several things the provincial government can't do without the federal government."

In a refreshing departure from the past, Mr Khan desisted from excoriating the Sindh government in his trademark rough-and-ready style. Moreover, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was present at the groundbreaking ceremony, unlike on the premier's other recent visits to Karachi when he was pointedly excluded from Mr Khan's engagements, even those pertaining to development projects in the city.

Such an approach created suspicions within Sindh — already touchy about its place in the federal pecking order due to historical reasons — that the centre intended to rule the province by fiat, thereby undermining the spirit of the 18th Amendment. The tussle over the administration of three key hospitals in Karachi has still not been fully resolved and remains a bone of contention between both sides. The different approaches by Sindh and the centre towards the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in its early days, also led to friction that unnecessarily politicised the issue.

There appears to be some realisation in Islamabad that an adversarial relationship with the province whose principal urban centre generates the lion's share of federal tax revenue, is a self-defeating strategy — especially with an economic crisis at hand. Last year as well, after unprecedented monsoon downpour and urban flooding in Karachi, Mr Khan had said he would work with the Sindh government to address the metropolis' multiple problems.

However, that effort too — accompanied by the announcement of a “historic” Rs1.1tr package for the city’s uplift — has largely fallen victim to the mutual antipathy. The atmosphere of mistrust that has been festering since long will not dissipate easily but it is high time to establish a more productive relationship. Both sides must keep their lines of communication open, steer clear of impolitic speech against each other and work together to help Karachi achieve its potential as the financial and industrial heart of a prosperous Pakistan.

Respite for Sharifs

A BRITISH court’s order to unfreeze two bank accounts of Shehbaz Sharif and his younger son Suleman after the UK’s top anti-corruption body, the National Crime Agency, concluded that there was no evidence of money laundering, fraud and criminal conduct against them has come as a big blow to the government’s ‘accountability drive’ against opposition politicians. The findings of the NCA inquiry, which was launched on a request from NAB’s Asset Recovery Unit, and spanned a period of 17 months across Britain, Pakistan and Dubai, has by implication further discredited the anti-corruption watchdog, and weakened the ongoing money-laundering and corruption cases against the Sharif family at home. After all, NAB has, prima facie, failed to produce and provide the British agency with convincing evidence to back up its allegations of criminal conduct against Mr Sharif and his son that were levelled in the ARU letter that is believed to have led to the NCA probe. While the PTI government’s influential accountability czar Mirza Shahzad Akbar has frantically been trying to undo the damage ever since the decision became public, most remain unimpressed by his rhetoric regarding the matter. His contention that a suspicious banking transaction had triggered the NCA inquiry — which had thoroughly looked into the transactions made by the PML-N leader and his son over the last 20 years — and not an ARU/NAB request is solidly contradicted by the contents of the ARU letter obtained and produced by a London-based Pakistani journalist.

Even though the entire episode has brought nothing but embarrassment to the government, it does provide a chance to the ruling PTI to rethink its controversial accountability campaign, stop indulging in a witch-hunt against its political foes and critics, and build a bipartisan consensus on multiple economic and foreign policy challenges confronting the country, especially in the wake of the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. The government can begin by giving up its plans to

amend the law to retain the controversial NAB chairman in his office for yet another four-year term via extension or reappointment. The start of consultations with the opposition to select the outgoing chairman's successor as required under the existing law should create a favourable environment for future cooperation between PTI and the opposition. But Mr Akbar's aggressive statements about pursuing corruption cases against critics indicate that the government is not in the mood to move away from its confrontationalist political stance. That is not good news for the country and its people.

HIV cases in Sindh

THE 2019 Ratodero HIV outbreak had brought to the fore the worst aspects of Pakistan's ailing healthcare system. Criminal negligence of this sector had led to the rampant reuse of syringes by one 'paediatrician', which ended up infecting hundreds of children with the potentially deadly virus. Till October 2019, around 1,100 residents of Ratodero taluka in Larkana district had tested positive for HIV out of whom at least 900 were children. Almost two years later, by June 2021, the number of infected patients swelled to 1,500, according to the Sindh health department's figures. But there are fears that the tragedy is far from over. Health experts have raised the alarm over reports of an increasing number of HIV cases reported not only from the 'HIV-positive taluka' as Ratodero has now come to be known, but also the adjoining localities. According to local and foreign experts, at least 52 HIV-infected children have died in the last two years, while new cases are still being reported in both adults and children. All this is happening while quackery and the damaging practice of reusing syringes, which led to the initial outbreak, continue unabated in the area. The transmission of the HIV virus is now being witnessed in adjoining areas including Sijawal Junejo taluka in Larkana district and Garhi Yasin taluka in the neighbouring district of Shikarpur. However, most of the new patients, including children, belong to Garhi Khairo taluka in Jacobabad district, which reportedly has only two qualified doctors. It is frightening to think of what damage is being inflicted on the health of patients by the large number of quacks that must exist in the area.

Considering its commendable, proactive response to the Covid-19 threat, the PPP-led provincial government's continued apathy towards this situation in its stronghold defies logic and gives credence to allegations of misgovernance by its

political opponents as well as ordinary citizens. The situation must be rectified. The authorities must crack down on quacks and end medical malpractice.

Seeking sanctions

THE blame game with regard to the Afghan Taliban's stunning takeover in Afghanistan has gone a step beyond rhetoric in the US corridors of power.

On Monday, a bill was moved in the US Senate seeking to impose sanctions "with respect to the Taliban and persons assisting the Taliban in Afghanistan". It calls for a report on what transpired in the decades since the first Taliban government was ousted in 2001, the support extended by non-state and state actors — including the Pakistan government — to the insurgent group, the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government and the Taliban offensive in Panjshir Valley.

The precipitous collapse in August of the US-backed Afghan government was a humiliating coda to America's longest war, and it was expected that the superpower would seek to deflect responsibility for its own policy failures onto other stakeholders. Pakistan's unnecessary drum-beating about the Taliban victory is not helping its case either, and is in fact making the Western world nervous. Nevertheless, it is critical that more level-headed views on the matter prevail in the US legislature rather than those seeking punitive action.

The situation in Afghanistan is extremely delicate: skill and patience are required to extract from the Taliban something resembling even a modicum of respect for universal human rights. They are looking to the world to help their war-ravaged country which is in the throes of an economic meltdown. The announcement that the regime will "temporarily" and "with amendments" adopt the constitution of 1964 that ushered in nearly a decade of parliamentary democracy during King Zahir Shah's reign indicates its desire to project the image of a legitimate government the world can do business with. But there are also signs of friction among the Taliban leadership, possibly between the hardliners and those somewhat 'mellowed' by diplomatic engagement with the international community.

It is essential for the world to strengthen the moderates' hand. Sanctions and global isolation will only provide space for hard-line Taliban to prevail, and maybe

even push disillusioned Afghans towards violent extremist groups like the Islamic State.

The US must also review its strategic blunders before unjustly singling out Pakistan to blame for how the situation unravelled in Afghanistan. To mention but a few of these, taking the eye off the ball in the early days of the invasion expanded the theatre of war to Pakistan and made the situation far more complex; the 'weapons of mass destruction' red herring was the pretext for a unilateral invasion of Iraq, which provided a boon for recruitment by extremist outfits and opened up new fronts in the 'war on terror'. Last but not the least, the security and governance apparatus propped up by the US was an artificial construct hollowed out by corruption, a fact acknowledged by top US generals at a Senate hearing on Tuesday. It was a house of cards destined to collapse.

Imported inflation

THAT rising global commodity prices are feeding domestic headline inflation is not unusual for an economy like Pakistan that is heavily reliant on imported energy, food, industrial raw materials, capital goods, etc. What is odd is the fact that the government believes that imported inflation is feeding into only urban prices and the situation in the rural areas has been relatively better. It is true that the urban and rural markets in Pakistan largely remained 'segregated' until a couple of decades back, resulting in significant urban-rural price differences. But the structure of the economy has fundamentally transformed in recent years, with the rural population aspiring to and consuming the goods and services once typically consumed by the urban middle classes. The transition to the market economy has thus significantly reduced differences between urban and rural prices. Global commodity price changes, therefore, impact rural inhabitants as much as their urban counterparts — despite the latter's much higher consumption of food and energy compared with the former. CPI readings indicate there have been times in the recent past when food price inflation was more rigid and on the higher side in the rural areas. That makes sense because the prices of locally produced agricultural commodities also move up and down in sync with changes in the international markets.

Having said that, it is important to note that the surging global commodity prices pose serious downside risks to the inflationary outlook as well as the

deteriorating current account balance as pointed out by the State Bank in its last monetary policy statement. That much is conceded by the finance ministry as well. Its latest monthly economic outlook report also admits to the potential risks to the economy associated with the geopolitical uncertainties in the wake of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan and the possible resurgence of a fifth Covid wave in the country. Both the State Bank and government have implemented some steps, eg a nominal increase in borrowing costs, tightening of consumer-financing regulations, and imposition of regulatory duties on certain non-essential imports to moderate aggregate demand with a view to mitigating the risks. But these measures are unlikely to significantly impact the prices of most goods and services consumed by low-middle-income segments as long as international energy markets keep moving up and we remain a net food importer. Or, as claimed repeatedly by the finance minister, the government can keep enhancing its subsidy bill to absorb imported inflation.