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Compiled By

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For

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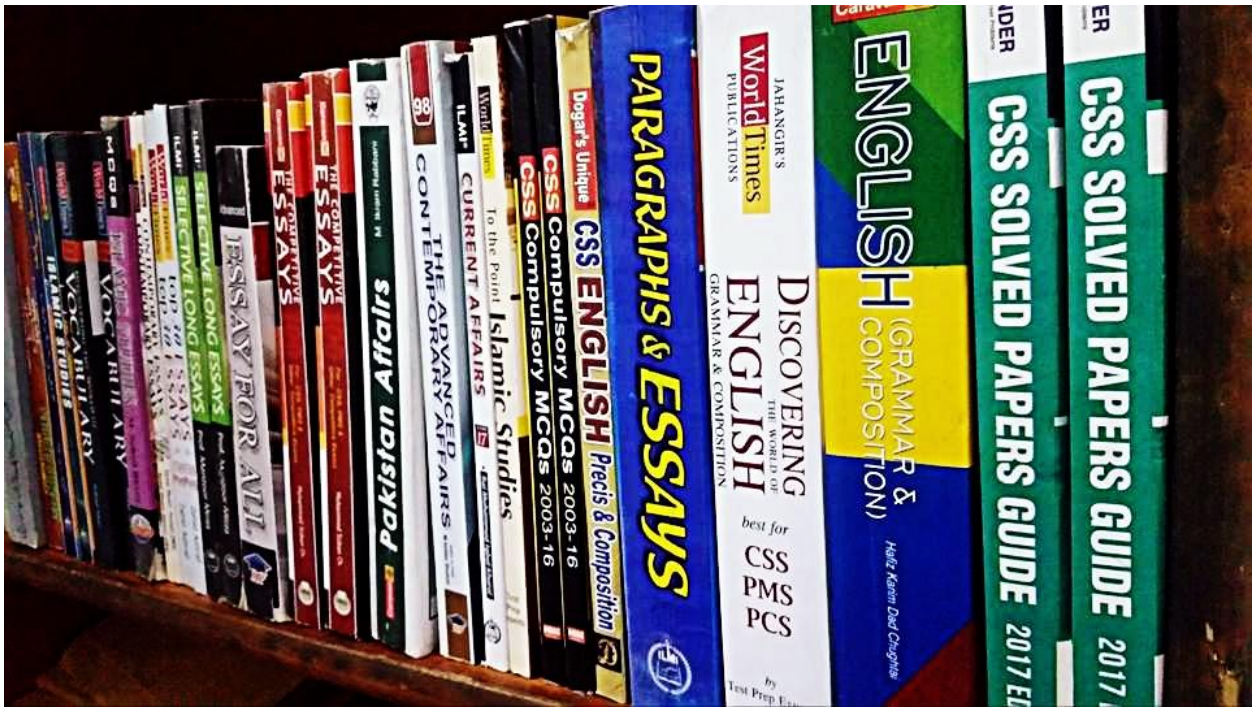

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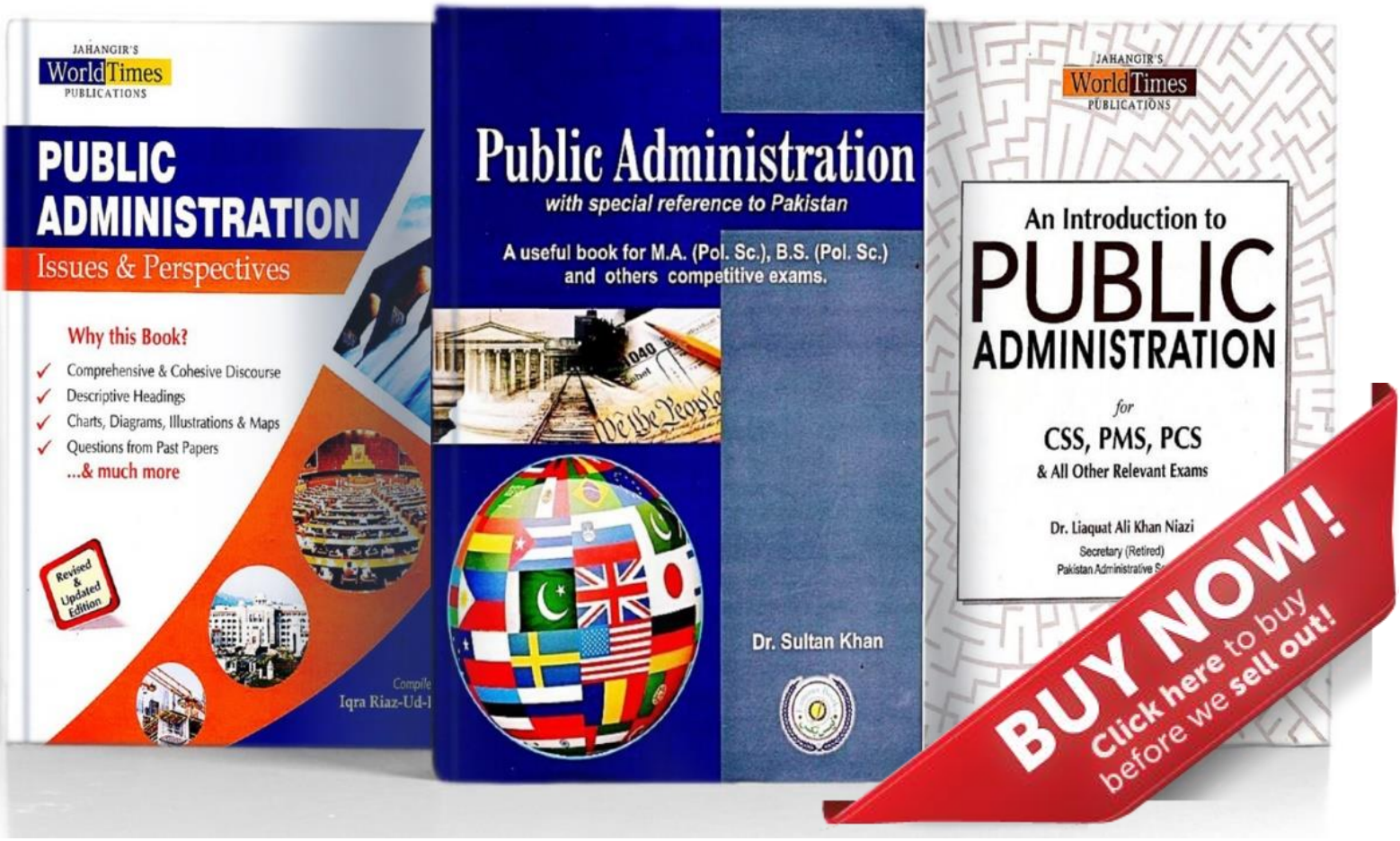

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Word from stones By F.S. Aijazuddin

WRITING my first book, over 40 years ago, was as primitive an enterprise as incising hieroglyphics onto a stone.

All I could afford in those days was a second-hand Remington typewriter — the one with a metal keyboard with round buttons, and an uptight carriage into which one fed a single sheet of paper at a time. Mistakes were unforgivable. One had to start a fresh page. This was brought home to me when my UK publishers demanded an error-free manuscript. Excisions, deletions, tipex-ed corrections were not allowed. Pages with a single mistake had to retyped afresh. The manuscript had to be as error-free as a holy book.

Gradually, technology made the work of authors somewhat easier. Computers replaced the typewriter, floppy disks became the rage until one discovered their mortality. Information on them could be erased as instantly as the name of an out-of-favour pharaoh. Hard disks, external hard drives, and USBs are now as common as ink and erasers were.

To modern authors, it is no longer the printer's devil that shortens their lives but auto-spell. You type a word and move on, little realising that auto-spell has chosen its own alternative spelling. The most clichéd ones are when 'lawfully wedded wife' becomes an 'awfully wedded wife', or 'elected' becomes 'selected'.

A more useful tool is the command that enables one to replace a word or letters with another. Type in 'Replace' and at the click of a cursor, changes that would have taken forever take effect instantly. But like all tools, they should be handled with care. The other day, I thought I was being clever by commanding my computer to replace the word 'Dr' with 'Dr.' On rereading the text, I discovered that every word that began with 'dr' had been converted into 'dr.essed', 'dr.iven', or 'dr.eadful'.

When I bought my first computer in the mid-1980s, I entered the shop in Abu Dhabi as one would a fancy jeweller, distracted by the dazzling choices on display. The Palestinian salesman was compassion itself. He asked me why I needed the computer — for video games or for writing. I told him I needed it for writing a book. Don't waste your money on a coloured screen, he advised. Take

a monochrome screen. I did. He sacrificed his commission so that I could make a purchase I would not regret.

My 22nd book is now in the press. I have been sitting with the compositor at the printers and watching him perform minor miracles with practised dexterity — shifting paragraphs from one page to another, deleting sections without losing them, expanding and shrinking images to fit the space available. Within a couple of hours, he had produced the entire layout of a 160-page book. Labour that took mediaeval scribes a lifetime of scribbling on vellum has been compressed into the span of half a working day.

Someone once observed that time is compressed money. Today, computers compress time into economic efficiency. They enable us to achieve more in less time, and leave us free then to do nothing better with the time so freed.

Certain literary crafts such as proofreading or editing or indexing cannot be replaced by machines. A conscientious proofreader is as difficult to find as water in a stone. A competent editor is an endangered species. And any person who is willing to prepare an index needs to be as familiar with the book as the author is, and few possess such parenting skills. Such crafts require a human mind and super-human concentration. They are, like the rigours of childbirth, a labour of love. The accomplishment is a newborn book that will live hopefully beyond many lifetimes.

Many years ago, during a hiatus, a dear and much missed friend Mr Ijaz Hussain Batalvi asked me why I had stopped writing. I replied that no one reads anymore. You are right, was his sage response. Shakespeare had the same complaint. “Fakir sahib,” he chided, “Your duty is to write. A readership will be born, whenever!”

That unpaid advice has been a lodestone in my life. It spurred me to write and to publish, even when my books have been admired (like Marilyn Monroe) for their good looks rather than their intellectual capacity.

Some critics have complained that they needed a dictionary to decipher my vocabulary. Customers have complained about the prices, little realising that books are the product not of a few months’ sweat but assiduous learning over a lifetime.

Why then does one persist in this Sisyphean task of rolling manuscripts uphill to see them roll down as finished books?

Because one writes for Batalvi's future audience. My appeal to that unborn readership is: please opt for a premature birth. My books are on the shelf, waiting for you.

The writer is an author.

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'Illusion of knowledge' By Fayyazuddin

EDUCATION serves, at the very least, a dual purpose. On the one hand, education creates a skilled and well-trained workforce essential to a thriving private and public sector. On the other, through offering at a single location — the university — a multiplicity of areas of study, a certain sensibility and culture is created that one might call social capital. By bringing together scholars in a variety of disciplines, the university cultivates a citizenry that appreciates the interconnectedness of disparate fields of study and the elements needed to create a vision for the future and to develop a sense of common purpose.

Moreover, in promoting higher education, a nation declares that it values learning for its own sake and welcomes the innovation and creativity that often results from it. Ideally, the university becomes a site that transcends the petty goals of individual careers and helps to elevate the needs of society as a collective body.

Our educational system fails to accomplish either of the goals outlined above. Although we have seen the proliferation of universities over the last few decades, most of them have inadequate academic standards and are run as businesses committed to the mass production of graduates with very little actual education. At a basic level, it is due to the lack of well-qualified faculty but it is also due to a lack of commitment to education as a goal in itself.

Concomitant with the inadequacy of the education provided by these institutions, a second negative development is undermining their purpose: the forced mass production of 'research' papers. This development is taking place due to the

needs of a bureaucratised education system too lazy or incompetent to evaluate the quality of research output by itself. Instead, it has substituted quality control of research with simply counting the number of research papers produced as a metric for evaluating competence. By instituting this easily gamed system, they have set themselves up for widespread fraud.

There is new turmoil in Pakistan's higher education system.

The majority of research papers produced at our institutions do not pass rigorous peer review. If they are published at all, it is in journals with low standards or through the occasional random one passing the filters of peer review despite their low quality. The emphasis in promoting research has thus shifted from quality to quantity and is being used to create what Daniel J. Boorstein has called the "illusion of knowledge" and as he states, it has become an obstacle to discovery and the production of actual knowledge.

The aforementioned imposition of quantitative metrics was introduced by the Higher Education Commission, which was formed during Gen Pervez Musharraf's reign as military dictator. The HEC replaced the University Grants Commission. Dr Atta-ur-Rahman was appointed as the chairperson of the HEC. While the commission did some good work, its impact was overwhelmingly negative due to the policies formulated by the HEC in shifting the emphasis from quality to quantity with the adverse consequences that have been outlined above.

There is new turmoil in the system of higher education in Pakistan. In order to discuss it in proper perspective, it is helpful to revisit The Magna Charta of European universities, which was approved and adopted in 1988 in Bologna. While the entire document is of relevance to thinking about universities and higher education, a particularly relevant part for Pakistan states that the university's "research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power". That is, government and business interests must not interfere in the running of the university.

In the case of Pakistan, one may also add that the university should be free of any externally imposed ideological constraints. Recent changes made by the government in the structure of the HEC has put the system of higher education under government control and is causing turmoil among the educated of Pakistan.

These changes go against the Magna Charta referenced above and are undermining the open and free atmosphere of universities and other institutions of higher learning and research in the country. By constraining freedom of speech and thought, openness to intellectual influence, and by imposing ideological constraints, the government is depriving the university of the essential ingredients it needs to promote a culture of learning, innovation and creativity. Without these elements, it is undermining the very basis for a thriving national culture.

The writer is a physicist who served as professor of physics, and dean of Natural Sciences at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

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A tale of two talks By Khurram Husain

TWO separate talks are being held on two separate tables these days, and it is increasingly likely that the twain shall meet. One set of talks has been in the news a lot lately, between the intelligence, military and diplomatic leadership of the United States and Pakistan. A lot of commentary is revolving around the question of whether Pakistan will grant permission for an American base for counterterror purposes after the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. Clearly, this is a big part of the American ask in these talks.

The ‘leaks’ to the New York Times in which this was first revealed were not fortuitous. Somebody was communicating with someone else through the media in those ‘leaks’. Jake Sullivan, the US national security adviser, did not mention bases, but confirmed that talks are underway on “the future of America’s capabilities” for counterterror purposes in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of forces.

The other table is a more familiar one: the IMF. The new finance minister, Shaukat Tarin, has made it clear that Pakistan will be seeking a renegotiation of the IMF programme that was restarted in April after a year-long hiatus. Specifically, he wants to wiggle out of the commitments given by his predecessor on power tariff hikes, revenue measures through the elimination of tax

exemptions for corporates, curbs on spending and hikes in the petroleum development levy, and, quite possibly, abort the move to usher in greater central bank independence and wind up its refinance facilities. He has also said that he will seek more funds from the IMF, possibly through another purchase under the Rapid Financing Instrument under which Pakistan received $1.4 billion last year as the lockdowns began. To my knowledge the request for additional resources is taking a back seat while the talks continue for changing programme targets and structural conditionalities.

In other remarks, Tarin blamed the IMF for higher inflation in Pakistan, though it was difficult to figure out how the Fund might be responsible, given the government and the State Bank have been describing rising food prices as “temporary supply shocks” in repeated statements. He also said the Fund “held a gun to our head and made us raise interest rates” when the programme began in 2019, which also belies the many on-record comments made by the State Bank governor during the days when the policy rate was pushed up to 13 per cent. By his own telling, the governor used to tell everybody he met in those days that interest rates have to remain pegged to projected CPI inflation by year end. Even now the State Bank describes present interest rates as “accommodative”, meaning they are negative in real terms (below inflation) and must remain so to allow growth to continue.

The IMF has made known its reluctance to make major alterations to the programme. In an on-record interaction with journalists, the mission chief emphasised that sequencing of certain requirements can be changed, but overall programme objectives and targets cannot. This was back in April. Recent press reports, sourced to anonymous finance ministry officials, suggest that amendments to the Nepra Act remain a sticking point, and that the Fund does not seem to be budging on other issues either, such as revenue measures for next year and relaxation of spending curbs mandated under the programme.

With the budget only a day away and talks set to conclude today (Thursday), it is looking unlikely that a breakthrough will materialise across so broad a front, and the government will be in a delicate position to decide whether to announce a budget under the IMF terms or its own and continue with the talks. How that will impact the ongoing sixth review and board approval will be a large question mark.

The prime minister is under extreme pressure to pump growth further next year, as well as enhance spending. Contrary to what the IMF has been asking, the development budget for next year is proposed to be hiked by almost 50pc. Civil servants' salaries have already been committed to be increased, though we will know the exact amount on Friday. And equally important, the defence budget is programmed to be hiked by almost Rs242bn, or 19pc, to Rs1.531 trillion under the medium-term plan released by the finance ministry only a few days ago

So a beleaguered prime minister who has many mouths to feed and is increasingly feeling the heat of public anger as inflation eats away their incomes and wages, cannot afford to walk the line set by the IMF in its latest programme. And his team is finding out that renegotiating these commitments is not as easy as they might have thought initially.

This is the context in which the accelerating pace of contacts between the security officials of Pakistan and the US should be seen. If there is a way out for them, it is to find a way to get White House leverage to apply on the IMF to urge it to first relax the conditions on Pakistan, and then to enhance the access to resources. This may or may not involve granting basing rights to the CIA that the New York Times article talked about. But it will certainly mean taking on an expanded role in ensuring stability in Afghanistan does not deteriorate once the American withdrawal ends in July.

Rarely have I seen things come down to the wire the way they are today. No announcement has come from the ongoing talks with the IMF under the sixth review on the eve of the budget. Meanwhile, the disclosures of the security talks suggest that the US is increasing the pressure behind its ask at the table. At some point soon, a decision will have to be made. If Imran Khan wants his growing economy to continue next year, he will have to find a way to satisfy the Americans in the security talks.

The writer is a business and economy journalist.

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Mountain livelihoods By Zeenat Hisam

MOUNTAINS and valleys evoke beautiful images in the mind of big city dwellers, of peace and quiet, lightness of being, and the absence of the madding crowd. We presume the life of the people who live inside the fascinating landscape to be as blissful. Once you are there, it does not take much to realise that the people living at the edge — where the land merges into mighty mountain ranges — face immense hardship.

Mountain people depend on subsistence agriculture, wage labour, circulatory labour migration, tourism and mountaineering services for survival. Opportunities for government employment are limited. Most households survive on a combination of livelihoods. The people of Shigar and Ghanche districts, whom I met during a trip to Skardu, talked of many challenges. These included the absence of livelihood opportunities except tourism, scarcity of water, poor road networks, inadequate social infrastructure, climate change and frequent landslides.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic impacted the two districts severely in 2020. Tourism came to a halt. Hotels and guest houses in the districts shut down. Due to the countrywide lockdown, circulatory labour migration was not possible. In Shigar and Ghanche, men migrate to Karachi during the winter months for wage labour, leaving women and children behind with just one male family member. The biggest blow was the cancellation of all mountaineering and trekking expeditions, Ali Hassan Shigari, a Balti guide and driver told me.

The area contains four peaks higher than 8,000 metres — K-2, Gasherbrum-I, Broad Peak and Gasherbrum-II — and several above 7,000m peaks. In the pre-Covid period, 25 to 30 international expedition teams, comprising eight to 10 members used to come. About 10 expeditions headed for K-2 and the others went to summit Gasherbrum-I and other peaks. Each team employed 250 local men as porters, helpers, cooks, loaders, assistants, etc. In addition, numerous local and foreign trekking parties came to hike in remote valleys and for glacier trails on the Karakoram range. Expeditions bought food stuff and other essentials from local markets. This has been an important source of livelihood for local people, Hassan said.

The pandemic has extracted a heavy price from the people of Skardu.

During lockdown last year, only a few hotels paid half of the meagre salaries to workers employed as cleaners, waiters, cooks, gardeners and porters. Entry level salary in the hotel industry, I was told, is Rs8,000 to Rs10,000 — much lower than the minimum wages in the four provinces. Despite putting in 10 or more years of service, most of the workers remain on contract without access to any benefits. Due to its semi-autonomous, partially self-governing and uncertain constitutional status, many laws of the country, including labour protection policies and laws, are not extended to Gilgit-Baltistan.

Shahid, who holds a Master's in economics from the Karakoram International University, runs a small dry fruit shop, which he calls a dhaba. He chose economics for he wanted to go into business. But the Master's degree taught him little about running a business. Institutes do not offer entrepreneurship training. The patch of land owned by his family does not produce much, he told me. Though almost every household owns a piece of land, ranging from two kanals (around 0.25 acres) to 10 kanals or more, the terrain is difficult. Often the land is not contiguous but scattered in different places. The main source of water is the glacial melt in summer. The monsoon season is generally dry. Wheat, barley and maize are major crops and only one crop a year is cultivated. "We don't have technology to increase the yield," he said. There are few water storage facilities. Also, lack of modern heating system to keep dwellings warm in the harsh winters has led to dependence on wood for domestic fuel purposes. A single household uses 80 to 100 maund (about 3,000 kg to 3,700 kg) of wood, I was told by a local.

Children's education is highly valued, Farah, the lone female employee in a hotel, told me. Parents would sell their land to provide for higher education to their children. Her daughter is studying at the University of Poonch, Rawalkot, for a BS in agriculture. Women's employment in sectors other than education and health is frowned upon in Skardu. Farah worked for nine years as a teacher in a temporary post at a government school. She was not given a permanent position for she could not pay Rs300,000 as bribe. She left teaching and joined the hotel industry with the approval of her husband. Several people confirmed the culture of extortion money for government service positions in the area.

Compared to men, particularly young men, who own a mobile phone and, many, a shining motorbike, women in Baltistan have a tough life. All along the valley, I saw groups of women squatting on the riverbanks or near streams and nullahs, washing heavy beddings, blankets, rugs, and warm clothes. In summer, women

toil twice as hard to survive the winter. Mammoth washing sessions are combined with wood collecting, fruit drying, farming and daily home chores.

The bright aspect is the literacy rate in the region which is one of the highest in the country and gender parity is rising. According to the ASER Report 2019, 92 per cent of all children aged from six to 16 years are enrolled in schools. Also, 70.8pc of households in rural districts have mobile phones, and 22pc have computers/laptops.

Experts recommend water storage facilities for irrigation, introduction of other crops, and yak and trout farming. The region has abundant fruit produce — apricot, almond, apple, cherries and mulberries. However, modern fruit drying technologies and pre-treatment methods based on quality preservation are not available. There is a need to encourage micro enterprises in fruit drying and processing. The recent five-year development package announced by the federal government needs to prioritise road connectivity, health infrastructure, hydel and solar power generation, and skills training.

The writer is a researcher in the development sector.

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Learning and follow-up By Faisal Bari

MORE than 65 people died in the Ghotki train accident. This is not the first train crash we have had, and, sadly, one has to say, this will not be the last. While there are demands for investigations and accountability, if we go by past government record, it is unlikely there will be much of an investigation and even less likely there will be any accountability for any errors of omission or commission.

How many plane crashes have we had in Pakistan in the last many years? What has been the investigation and accountability process in each? How many train accidents have we seen in the last few years alone? What has been the result in terms of findings and who has been held accountable?

And it is not just in the area of train or air travel. When a bus full of schoolchildren overturned in the Kallar Kahar area and many children died, there was a lot of talk of investigations and accountability to figure out how the chassis of the bus

could collapse so easily and how the regulatory framework around approving bus chassis needed to be improved. Has any action been taken on that front?

Incidents of CNG cylinder explosions take place frequently and we have lost dozens of lives because of that. But has there been any improvement in the process of cylinder installation to minimise the number of such events?

After a mishap, are the relevant authorities able to learn from their mistake and improve the system?

We hear of medical malpractice cases with frightening regularity. How many medical practitioner licences have been revoked or how many errant physicians have been jailed or fined? Even in more critical areas, like policing, we keep hearing about cases of torture and death in custody, fake encounters, illegal shootings and so on, but hardly ever is there any report on investigations and accountability. I am not talking of impunity here, the kind that the security agencies seem to have, as that is by design. I am talking about effective follow-up.

The question is not just about investigations and accountability in terms of firing people or fining them or even putting them in jail. Certainly, that is important. There should be justice after a fair investigation. But there is another important aspect here. We need to know that the relevant authorities, after a mishap, are able to learn from it and devise ways to make systems better so that the probability of the same thing happening again goes down. It is clear that in many of the areas mentioned, this learning does not take place.

Accidents and errors of omission and commission will happen. This is inevitable in any system however well it may be designed. But the question is: after an accident/incident, can the system investigate causes properly and in a fair and transparent manner, can it hold those who made mistakes, or did something on purpose, accountable and can it learn from the accident/incident so that the system is improved over time and the probability of accidents gradually declines? This is where we run into problems of various sorts.

At the investigation stage, there is lack of trust at two levels. One is the concerned agency or organisation, eg railways or PIA etc, trying to hide the facts and protect its people. This is around issues of fairness and transparency. If the agency is trying to protect itself, its reputation, and/or its people, there will be concerns about the fairness of the investigation. If transparency is low, the

concerns will be even larger. Look at how investigations into previous air crashes have been couched in secrecy and mystery. How can the public have any confidence in the process?

Two, there are issues of competence regarding investigations. Do the railways and PIA have the right investigative skills to conduct thorough probes? It would be difficult for outsiders to judge. Both issues could be addressed through the involvement of credible third parties. In most cases we have seen, there has been no effort to address these concerns.

The problem gets more complicated when we move to learning. Imagine there was a fair and thorough investigation and that causes were laid bare in an investigation report. Do these agencies have the wherewithal to be able to learn from their mistakes, the resources to make the necessary corrections, and ensure a feedback loop from outcomes to policy/practice changes that keeps on monitoring and improving outcomes? There do not seem to be many institutions in Pakistan with that ability or that could inspire that kind of confidence. This is the crucial part that is missing in most debates on investigations and accountability in Pakistan.

'Candles in the Dark', a book by colleagues Mahmood Ali Ayub and Syed Turab Hussain, documents cases of well-functioning organisations within Pakistan to show that these organisations can exist as islands. They also document factors that explain how these organisations come about and how they sustain themselves. In a lot of processes that the authors mention, I find that the ability to learn from mistakes is an important factor that distinguishes these ‘candles’ from the larger darkness around.

'Unnatural Causes', a book by Richard Shepherd, one of Britain’s top forensic pathologists, documents how after every accident (in particular he talks about two — railways and ferry) committees that sometimes worked for a decade or more, were formed to ensure that systems were re-engineered to learn from mistakes that had been made so that similar errors would not happen again or would not be as devastating in terms of loss of human life. This, more than even accountability in particular cases, was what made systems better over time.

How do we minimise the probability of Ghotki-type tragedies? This requires fair and thorough investigations that are made transparent for all to see. It requires holding people accountable for their actions or inaction. And it requires creating

learning and feedback loops that allow organisations to improve over time. This last bit is important or we are bound to repeat mistakes. And it is the last part that is the most difficult to see, as of now, in most Pakistani organisations.

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.

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Pakistan's dead capital By Shahid Mehmood

FINANCE Minister Shaukat Tarin recently stated that putting the economy on a higher growth trajectory is the government's top priority, and that plans are afoot to spend a substantial amount of resources on large infrastructure projects to achieve the target. Unfortunately, there is nothing new in this recipe, and as I argued in my last piece (Obsession with infrastructure', April 30) in this paper, it might even end up creating more long-term liabilities.

So are there any alternatives that can help propel the Pakistani economy to higher, sustained growth rates? Yes there are, something that the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) panel and team on growth strategy considered while coming up with ideas/strategies to accelerate the economy's growth. It's not the usual document that is centred upon a few trite ideas, but takes stock of issues ranging from civil service to the judiciary's performance, and how they hamper growth. Amongst these ideas, there is a discussion on the concept of 'dead capital'.

The term is usually attributed to Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto and his famous book The Mystery of Capital. Briefly put, what De Soto and his team found was that lack of formal rights were turning productive assets into 'dead capital' as they could not be traded on formal markets. The blame, De Soto argued, lay not with participants of the informal markets (mostly poor people) but with a plethora of stifling regulations that render productive assets 'dead capital'.

Before De Soto, Adam Smith articulated in his famous Wealth of Nations that the real wealth of a nation is the potential of a particular productive asset to

contribute to the economy. But if such assets are confronted by legal and institutional morass, then they will remain unused and underutilised.

Like physical capital, a lot of intellectual capital-related business ventures die because the laws required to facilitate them are absent.

A particularly striking, and evident, example in an over-regulated economy like Pakistan's is the way real estate is regulated. The procedures surrounding the use and transfer of physical property are so complex that it leads to the loss of millions of real estate-related transactions, thus turning opportunities into dead capital.

Land, for example, remains unsold for decades due to friction created by stringent, archaic regulations. Similarly, investment potential worth billions remains unutilised due to illogical restrictions on vertical expansion. In cities like Islamabad and Lahore, valuable land remains underutilised. A crude estimate by PIDE, for example, suggests that changing regulations and allowing for high-rises in just the GOR Lahore (underutilised, prime real estate) area has the potential to generate economic activity worth billions of rupees while generating more than 100,000 jobs. Similarly, extremely valuable land in Islamabad's sectors like G-6 and Aabpara is in the use of government servants. If it is reserved for private, commercial use and vertical expansion is allowed, then there are investment opportunities worth billions to be had.

The public sector alone, in the form of various government departments, holds property worth trillions of rupees all over Pakistan without any use, thus constituting 'dead capital' since they can't be used in the process of wealth creation. Even the ones that are in use mostly constitute a non-productive venture, and occupation of prime land for nothing. However, the way such assets are administered in Pakistan, they do constitute exceptional rent-seeking opportunities, which is the primary reason why there are so many departments dealing exclusively with matters related to real estate.

Capital, though, is not just physical capital; in fact, in today's world, intellectual capital (ideas, innovations, etc) assumes even bigger importance. People often talk about Silicon Valley and its importance to the US economy. The place is all about ideas and innovation, about intellectual capital. To illustrate, the US government earned $30bn in 2020 as 'charges' for the global use of intellectual property originating within its borders. Further, a 2016 report by the US

Commerce Department (Intellectual Property and the US Economy) found that IP-intensive industries support 45m jobs, plus contribute $6tr to the US economy.

This intellectual capital would be dead if it were not for facilitating business transactions, primarily through laws (patents, trademarks and copyrights). Like physical capital, a lot of intellectual capital-related business ventures in Pakistan die because the laws required to facilitate them are not present. EMI, a music recording giant, wrapped up its business from Pakistan as losses accumulated due to the absence of IP rights, leading to pirated music.

A similar case is that of pharmaceutical products, especially drugs, where patented drugs are easily copied and sold in Pakistani markets, thus limiting the scope of the market for originator brands and proving to be a major detriment to attracting FDI inflows in this important industry.

Perhaps most crucially, we need to be cognisant of the fact that GDP is but a summation of mutually agreed transactions that benefit all the parties involved. A simple rule of thumb for any policymaker, therefore, is that to increase GDP we would need to increase and facilitate transactions. On the flip side, the loss of a probable transaction is a ‘dead’ opportunity.

For a country of approximately 220m, there are potentially trillions of mutually beneficial transactions that can considerably change the economic tide. But given the stifling of economic activities through byzantine regulations, beneficial transactions remain subdued, incomplete and at the mercy of inconsistent economic policies. We do not have a monetary count, but it would not be surprising if such a count comes out someday, informing us that our economy’s opportunity cost of working under stifling regulations runs into trillions of rupees. In essence, the opportunities that can perpetuate exchanges resulting in trillion-rupee activities are killed, hence turning them into dead capital!

It is time, then, to tackle the issue of dead capital seriously. Any attempt at a higher growth trajectory would remain incomplete without it, especially the role of public sector-led regulations that pervade all aspects of our economic activity.

The writer is an economist and Research Fellow at PIDE.

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In times of illness By Nikhat Sattar

THESE are troubling times: a debilitating sickness pervades the world. Many have recovered; others have succumbed to more severe attacks. Governments are scrambling to contain the spread of the virus, trying to restrain people's movement and social interactions. Hospitals are full to capacity; many of the sick are being catered to at home. Amidst the pandemic, other malaises continue to wreak havoc on the human condition. Healthy individuals are suddenly diagnosed with deadly cancer and people meet with accidents on a daily basis.

How should believers handle themselves and their families when faced with such calamities? The answer lies in their understanding of why and who they are. Everything in this world is fleeting and temporary; happiness and sorrow; pain and joy; wealth and poverty; family, friends; health and sickness, all are limited to this earthly existence. Permanence will be achieved only after death, when whatever is awarded to humans will be for eternity.

Whatever happens in the world happens with God's knowledge and command. We may often not comprehend the reasons behind His actions, but we must be certain that He wishes the best for us. He wants to purify us and cleanse us from our wrongs and the sins we have committed. According to the Prophet (PBUH), "no fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that" (Bukhari, Muslim).

If we are firm in this belief, we must bear sickness that comes upon us or our loved ones with patience and gratitude. In times of illness, we must be mindful of the multitude of blessings God has provided us and we must bear our pain with submission and perseverance. Our pain should make us humble so that we may turn to Him for redress and redemption. Often though, we rebel when faced with such tribulation. Why us, we ask? What did we do to deserve this excruciating pain? When our loved ones become ill, we worry ourselves sick. This is where Muslims often misunderstand their standing before God.

When we are unwell, we must be mindful of God's blessings.

He never decrees anything but good for His servants, provided the latter demonstrate patience. The Prophet said: "How wonderful the affair of the

believer is! Indeed, all of his affairs are good for him. If something good happens to him, he is grateful to God, which is good for him. And if something bad happens to him, he has patience, which is good for him" (Muslim).

We exist so that we may become worthy of paradise as our eternal abode. This can happen only if we purify ourselves through constantly meeting the challenges of our lives with strength of spirit, patience and humility. Everything in our lives is a challenge: wealth, family, our relationships with others, illnesses. In sickness, if we moan, cry, curse our fate, complain and become a burden to others, we choose to lose the opportunity to win God's approval and become purified, moving a step forward in our journey to paradise.

Our wailings, on the other hand, would succeed only in making the situation worse. If we bear illness with fortitude, prayer and dignity, we would fulfil God's plans for us. We would come closer to Him and find serenity and calmness. We need to deal with the challenge of illness that confronts us with all the spiritual, emotional and intellectual strength we can muster. Indeed, the Prophet has told us that when God wants to do good to someone, He puts us in a situation of difficulty (Bukhari). There is always some good hidden in our sickness too.

Any illness, particularly of the serious type, must be treated with medical aid. Humans have made tremendous scientific advancements, including in the medical field. All efforts must be made to provide science-based treatment to address human illnesses. This, along with the aforementioned spiritual and religious approach would be the best combination to heal the illness that ails us.

An appropriate treatment, prescribed by authentic medical professionals has the potential to heal, with God's will and command, for it is He who is the ultimate healer. The Quran quotes Hazrat Ibrahim: "And when I am ill, it is He Who cures me" (26:80). The Prophet tells us to seek medical help whenever possible, since for all diseases there is a cure, and to place our faith in God's healing powers. The doctor who treats us and the treatment we will take are only the worldly means God utilises to cure us.

What we should not do is to approach quacks, soothsayers, pirs or anyone other than God; we should not take recourse to any superstitious means for curing illnesses.

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Budgeting hate By Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

WHEREVER one looks, the spectre of hate haunts humanity. The dastardly killing of a Muslim immigrant family in otherwise idyllic suburban Canada is the latest story to dominate the news cycle, preceded by so many we have since forgotten.

Lest we forget, the wanton violence of renegade white Islamophobes is paralleled by 'banal' reiterations of racism, classed and imperialist power at the highest levels of Western officialdom. The recent warnings issued by US Vice President Kamala Harris to immigrant workers seeking to make their way across the US-Mexico border sound an awful lot like what the previous administration in Washington used to spout.

Yes, this is the same Kamala Harris who, along with Joe Biden, was celebrated as salvation for humanity following their defeat of Trump. And yes, you should feel sheepish now if you were wildly optimistic about the 'new' leaders of post-Trump America.

Long before Trump, George W. Bush's neocons initiated what they called a 'New American Century' by occupying Afghanistan. Another history lesson is in order here: does anyone remember the liberal fantasies that were triggered by the US invasion about the Afghan Taliban being obliterated? Twenty years of the 'war on terror' later, those fantasies have evaporated, leaving behind an orgy of hateful violence in Afghanistan. As so many sane voices have been warning to no avail, this hateful violence is slowly spilling over into our own tribal districts too.

The politics of hate thrives because of economic crises.

It is, of course, easy to blame only American Empire, Zionists and various other 'foreign hands' for all of the world's troubles. Pakistan has enough home-grown hate to compete with the best of them. The various hues of Taliban are always near the top of the list. The TLP has emerged in recent years as the newest kid on the block, and can even run Twitter trends to match. More generally, not a day goes by when Ahmadi places of worship, Christian churches and Hindu temples

are attacked, even as members of these communities are falsely framed for blasphemy, forcibly converted, or simply lynched.

All of these manifestations of organised hate, home and abroad, cannot be explained by some overarching theory of intrinsic cultural propensity. What some commentators call ‘culture wars’ have, since the turn of the millennium at least, been propped up by the ‘war on terror’. Put simply, Western governments have given a fillip to Islamophobia and other forms of racism in their own countries by raising the bogeyman of ‘terrorism’ in faraway, often Muslim lands. Meanwhile, the religious right in many Muslim countries, including ours, has in turn indoctrinated young people into thinking that all of ‘America’s wars’ are targeting ‘Islam’, as if the latter is a monolith.

Western leaders talk of ‘multiculturalism’ in their own societies — and this list includes Macron, Trudeau, Biden-Harris, and even the much-lauded Jacinda Ardern — but they refuse to acknowledge the structural racism within, and imperialist policies without, that reproduce hate. Meanwhile, leaders like Imran Khan, Tayyip Erdogan and Narendra Modi have built their entire political careers by playing to hawkish domestic galleries. Now wanting to stay in power, their rhetoric has ramped up further.

Across the world, in fact, the politics of hate thrives because of economic crises endemic to capitalism. Immigrant workers that come into Western countries legally or otherwise are now perceived as taking ‘white people’s’ jobs. When the regime of neoliberal globalisation was thriving, Western governments themselves outsourced jobs and welcomed cheaper labour to keep manufacturing and service industries profitable. With the neoliberal miracle having imploded, compounded by the fallout of Covid-19, xenophobic nationalism covers up failed economic policy.

In our part of the world, as well as other so-called ‘emerging markets’ with youthful populations, the pandemic has put paid to the notion of anyone who works hard enough pushing their way into a mythical ‘global middle class’. In India alone, an estimated 230 million people have been relegated back below the poverty line, their tenuous ‘middle-class’ status in tatters.

There is more to the politics of hate than economic hardship, but combining the latter with toxic ideology certainly produces a potent cocktail. Which brings me, in closing, to the presentation of the federal budget today. This policymaking

exercise used to be perceived as somewhat relevant to the working masses. Is there anything beyond number-fudging, the dictates of the IMF and other creditors, and the ever greater economic desires of a militarised state apparatus, propertied mafias, and the chattering classes that this exercise now represents?

The classed, racialised and imperialised local and global political economy leave only the budgeting of hate for the proverbial masses. And then our rulers tell us to eat cake.

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Decoding Digitisation By Tania Aidrus

WE have all been waiting for the story of information technology in Pakistan to unfold and show its true potential but short-lived plans and senseless bans seem to hold it back.

Log on to Twitter and you'll find the youth helplessly pulling their hair out at yet another policy intervention (or lack thereof) that's completely divorced from the realities of the evolving global digital landscape, and blaming 'boomers' for being in charge. Equally frustrated journalists would club those failures with the broader bureaucratic inefficiencies and inertia of the government towards reform and meaningful change in most sectors. While this criticism does have value in keeping the decision-makers on their toes, pushing them to act and holding them accountable, it does not offer a meaningful insight into the crux of the problem. It's akin to slapping your old, withering computer randomly out of frustration enough times and the computer jerking into action; sure, it'll work for a bit but only to break down yet again. Eventually, you'll have to take a deep breath, pull the computer apart and really troubleshoot to see what's going on in order to fix it for real.

While there is a lot of conversation about what is not working, there is much less about the way forward. As someone who tried to make a dent for this sector in the government — albeit not very successfully — I got a long, hard look at the internal machinery that is meant to be enabling a forward-looking digital ecosystem in Pakistan. Today, I wanted to share why I think things are in a

gridlock and which wires need to be untangled for the system to start working — for good.

What Pakistan must do to accelerate its tech transformation

Precise targets and long-term vision

The scope of information technology or digitisation continues to be discussed in a rather limited manner in mainstream discourse. Reducing it to apps, online portals, start-ups or software houses is a costly injustice. The absence of a broad, comprehensive definition has prevented the development of an overarching, long-term vision for sustainable change. The parochial view has instead allowed policymakers to pat themselves on the back for small, isolated projects and give an illusive impression of real progress. For example, in the past several years, flashy schemes involving distribution of laptops in colleges or grants to start-ups have popped up in various parts of the country. In the moment, they are deemed praiseworthy; it's understandable why that's the case though — given the sheer dearth of resources, any small initiative that solves a problem temporarily for a few people is a welcome 'change'.

However, we now have evidence that such disparate schemes do not contribute to any meaningful, sustainable change. Distribution of grants and creation of fancy incubation spaces (by a debt-ridden government) for entrepreneurs won't help grow the start-up ecosystem unless it is accompanied by bold reforms by the State Bank, the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan and the Federal Board of Revenue. Investors must be able to repatriate their funds. Entrepreneurs should neither have to spend three months setting up a company and getting it registered, nor an additional few months trying to open a corporate bank account and setting up payroll. The distribution of laptops and internet dongles to students, while noble, does not solve the core problem around access. Making access to the internet (both devices and data) more affordable can have a multiplier effect on connectivity, which has been globally proven to be the single biggest democratising force.

Therefore, instead of implementing short-lived plans that momentarily check off buzzwords associated with information technology and make for splashy headlines, we need to decide where we want to see ourselves a decade down the line and then define precise targets that will help us reach that dream in stages. The process begins with expanding the scope of IT and this is an

exercise we conducted in the early stages of the Digital Pakistan initiative. Broadly speaking, five streams need to be running in parallel and complementing each other: 1) access and connectivity, 2) digital infrastructure (which is the most underrated), 3) e-governance, 4) digital skills and literacy, and 5) innovation and entrepreneurship. We need crystal-clear short-, medium- and long-term key performance indicators for each stream and, most importantly, we need to ensure that the relevant stakeholders take ownership so that they can be held accountable against those goals.

Clear ownership and accountability

Both intuitively and officially on paper, it is very clear who has the capacity for and the responsibility to lead the charge of delivering a healthy digital ecosystem: the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MoITT). Currently, however, this easily discernible ownership has become needlessly murky in two aspects.

The first aspect is that there are parallel structures in the form of divisions or advisers that sit outside of the MoITT. The government can bring in the most competent advisers and task forces in the world but they simply won't be able to deliver if their vision is not backed by the relevant bureaucratic machinery and meaningful legal authority. Any new policy or reform is implemented by the government through its Rules of Business. The entity that has the ability to leverage these rules is the relevant ministry and there are no two ways about it.

The second aspect is that there are a variety of sub-bodies under the MoITT or provincial governments that are working in silos.

● There are bodies like the National Information Technology Board, Ignite and Universal Service Fund but between severe resource constraints, delayed decision-making and, in some cases, lack of leadership, they continue to be hamstrung.

● The existence of the KP Information Technology Board and Punjab Information Technology Board (and the lack of equivalent bodies in other federating units) is confusing because they seem to be duplicating some of the work that also seems to be happening at the federal level.

● The role of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority as a regulator is crucial but it needs to have the ability to operate independently with a clear vision on how to reform the sector.

Strong digital Identity and Infrastructure

A critical piece of any type of digital transformation is digital identity, which is why it's unsettling that our mainstream discourse and understanding of the subject hardly ever brings up Nadra.

Success in bringing about reform in any sector depends a lot on your ability to leverage digital identity. This is true for land, education, health, tax — you name it. Are you giving out benefits to the right people? Are you vaccinating the right people? Are you collecting tax from the right people? The list goes on and on.

While it appears simple to talk about leveraging Nadra, it's important to understand exactly what digital infrastructure is. After evaluating case studies from around the world, we believed that in Pakistan we needed to invest in five interconnected areas that can drive true digital transformation:

● Digital identity: A universal biometric digital identity, in line with inter-governmental standards.

● Digital data: A digital repository of personal data and records for every citizen and business, including domicile, property, employment, education, health, taxes, etc.

● Digital signatures: Digital signatures, like wet signatures, that allow digital signoff on documents. The citizen or business is in control of who can access their personal data.

● Digital payments: A real time, low-cost digital payments system that facilitates faster, cheaper and easier commerce between citizens, businesses, and the government.

● Digital services: Infrastructure that allows each citizen and business to approve sharing their data with government and private-sector systems, to receive a variety of personalised, seamless services (eg grants, loans, insurance, taxes, voting etc.)

In particular, the digital services sector offers unique and untapped potential that can help Pakistan accelerate and leapfrog past other countries to become a

global leader in digital government and digital citizenship. With this digital infrastructure in place, developers, start-ups, businesses and government departments can innovate on unique use cases to make citizens' lives easier. So the bottom line is that unless we have an independent Nadra with a visionary leader who understands exactly how important digital identity is for unlocking nationwide cross-sector reform, we will continue being incremental in our approach.

Right people for the right role

We need the right people for the right job not just at Nadra but any institution that's meant to play a crucial role in our digital journey. We need people who are doers and want to get stuff done — people who don't bring politics into delivery and don't chase clout.

It's unfair and unrealistic to expect any government body, new or old, to deliver without the right resources. We have seen time and again across various sectors of government that it's next to impossible to bring on board or, at least sustain, the right people: the long-winded and archaic processes and absurd caps on compensation ensure that those relationships never work out.

It is critical to understand that the wrong person leading an organisation with money at their disposal is more dangerous than not having a leader. We need to champion both meritocracy and open-mindedness in our approach to human resourcing to make a real dent in any sector. Information technology is no exception. In fact, considering that it's a particularly specialised field with constant innovation across the globe, excellent human resource is perhaps all the more important in this industry.

Conclusion

Set a clear vision, break it down into bite-sized goals, assign clear owners to those goals, give them the authority and space to execute those goals (without jumping to premature action based on unverified feedback) and then performance-manage them based on outcomes. It's not rocket science but it's critical to get in place if we want to see sustained performance and results.

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Politics of the budget By Fahd Husain

THE PTI wants to buy its way out of trouble. Who will pay the price?

The federal budget 2021-22 presented by Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin on Friday is the documented evidence of this political strategy. He has rung the bell, and the floor is open for business.

It is this business that the PTI wants to stimulate by aiming for growth touching five per cent next year and crossing this threshold on the eve of elections. The progression in the government's political narrative is already visible. This narrative is telling the voter — yes, the same voter ravaged by inflation and unemployment — that difficult times are almost over and good times, as promised by Prime Minister Imran Khan, are around the corner. This budget is Exhibit A for the new narrative. Government spokespersons will turbo-charge the narrative in the coming days and weeks, and fuel it with data that has nourished the budget document unveiled in parliament on Friday.

The budget tells a story steeped in ambition. The story says the government will now loosen its belt, spend its money, freeze hikes in utility charges, save citizens from further taxation and inject booster shots into programmes like Ehsaas and Naya Pakistan Housing. The growth underway is expected to finance this ambition. Large-scale manufacturing is clocking impressive numbers, agriculture is giving bumper yields, remittances are raining down like never before, tax collection is showing encouraging trends and the twin deficits have been tamed. Well, at least these are the fancy talking points that government spokespersons are carrying in their pockets as they troop out to wage data wars in the cushy confines of TV studios.

Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif and PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zaradari spoke to journalists after the finance minister's speech and trashed the budget and its lofty ambition. However, once the budget sweeteners start to trickle down into the lives of citizens — regardless of the harsh realities of macroeconomics — the opposition will have an uphill task tearing into the government's economic performance from the political angle. Specialists within the opposition ranks will no doubt slice and dice the budget and its fanciful projections through smart financial logic weaved around technicalities,

but if there is a visible easing of the burden on the citizens, the government will be in a comfortable position to fend off the opposition attack.

The PTI government is essentially following the same trajectory: spend, spend, spend and worry about how to pay for it later

This may even entail the government walking out of the IMF programme. No new taxes and no hike in utility rates etc essentially show that the government has calculated it can manage without the IMF till the elections. The massive increase in remittances has stabilised the government's finances and it believes it will not slide back into the red if the IMF tranches dry up. Perhaps it may not need to walk out of the programme officially. Instead, it could just drag the negotiations for as long as needed and use this time to throw money at the electorate. Just like the PML-N did in its last years.

Yes, you heard that right. The PTI government is essentially following the same trajectory: spend, spend, spend and worry about how to pay for it later. Politics invariably overtakes economics. The cost is always a steep one.

But this is a delayed cost, whereas politics requires instant gratification. The government wants to provide its disillusioned, disappointed and dejected voters the gratification they have been denied since the PTI came to power. Fair enough. Is there a financial basis for this though? The theory that the government peddled in the early days — and pretends to believe in it till today — is that a certain linear logic has flowed through its economic policy via Asad Umar, Hafeez Sheikh, Hammad Azhar and Shaukat Tarin; that all these gentlemen have essentially stayed on the original PTI message and plan and this 2021-22 budget is a continuation of this grand plan. 'See we told you we were on the right track', they are now saying with a triumphant smile.

Except, this is not entirely correct.

The fact is that the PTI's handling of the economy has lurched from one experiment to another, from one approach to another, and from one minister sent packing to another. The government has blundered on projects and fumbled on reforms. For three years, it kept burdening citizens with pain without any major corresponding macro benefits to the economy. The FBR was not reformed, the power structure was not restructured and the state-owned enterprises were not privatised. Finally after three years, politics caught up with the PTI's economy. The government realised — or perhaps was made to realise — that if its

economics continued down this path, the voters would take the government to the cleaners in the next elections. Just as they had in the recent by-elections. So a decision was made: enough of economics, let's do some politics.

Nothing does politics better than growth. It doesn't matter how that growth is coming, and where it is coming from, and who will ultimately pay the bills for the growth — none of this matters as long as it is coming fast and strong and flowing thick and lustily like the gravy train it is. It is a familiar path that requires little innovation. The only problem is that elections are still two more budgets away — unless the prime minister pulls a fast one on the opposition — and maintaining this spending spree in the hope that revenue will flow in without further taxation could be a stretch. Economics requires pain, and politics requires a feel-good factor. Feel-good factors win elections. The strategy seems obvious.

Shaukat Tarin may need to thank Ishaq Dar for showing him the way.

The writer is Dawn's resident editor in Islamabad.

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Federal features By A.G. Noorani

ONE of the main architects of India's constitution, Dr B.R. Ambedkar was always at pains to assert that the constitution over which he had toiled was essentially federal in nature. Moving that the draft constitution be taken into consideration, on Nov 4, 1948, he said: "The draft constitution is a federal constitution inasmuch as it establishes what may be called a dual polity. This dual polity under the proposed constitution will consist of the union at the centre and the states at the periphery each endowed with sovereign powers to be exercised in the field assigned to them respectively by the constitution."

These dicta are advisedly quoted at length to demonstrate how a constitution can be deformed and perverted despite the intentions of its framers. Some perversions began early when Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister. Dr Ambedkar was almost in tears a few years later when he told the Rajya Sabha that he was a hack and disowned the constitution.

In this he was being utterly unfair to himself and, indeed, to the text of the constitution. A British scholar on constitutional law opined early enough that

India's was a unitary constitution with federal features rather than a federal constitution with unitary features.

Right now, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, assaults on the few federal features have increased. Truth to tell, the Hindutva parties, the Jan Sangh and its successor, the BJP, were never happy with federalism. For at the core of the concept of federalism is sharing of power.

Debate in India reckons with the union's amassment of power but not with the refreshingly new insights into the concept of 'cooperative federalism'. This implies that all the three tiers of the country's government — union, provincial or state and municipal — cooperate in the national undertaking; each sticking to its own sphere delineated in the constitution. States which resent central dominance cheerfully tread on the domain of the municipalities and local boards, the law regardless. As Jyoti Basu, chief minister of West Bengal discovered, memoranda demanding greater powers for states are one thing. But it is the union which controls the flows of funds to the states.

At the core of the concept of federalism is sharing of power.

The concept of cooperative federalism implies obligation by all to cooperate in the nation-building exercise. As explained previously, "Rather than pitting state's rights against central power, the trend in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe has been towards sharing and cooperation in services and planning. While the federal governments without a doubt have increased their power at the expense of the state level, the state governments have also gained new functions". And "states and local agencies, in particular, have developed ways of participating in the planning and administration of many of the federal activities which at first glance appear to intervene so drastically in their internal affairs".

In Australia, for instance, since 1982, states are to be consulted in advance before the Commonwealth of Australia concludes a treaty with a foreign government which impinges on their interests, although under the constitution foreign affairs is exclusively a union subject.

In Canada, the provinces successfully united to secure greater powers without amending the constitution. It is politics which shapes the working of a Constitution. The All-India Services are another tool of central control. Deputation of an officer belonging to this service is controlled by the centre. Recently, the Modi government sought to punish the chief secretary of West Bengal for being

late, by five minutes for a meeting with Prime Minister Modi. Kashmir has bitterly complained of central control over the so-called All-India Services. They include the Indian Police Service also.

It is, however, in the intellectual realm that the backwardness is more harmful. There exists an international body charged with the study of federalism. The progress which its journals record are unknown in India. We need to think anew. A federal constitution cannot be worked by political parties organised as unitary bodies.

All the political parties are run by their party bosses at the very centre. They award tickets for election to party candidates whom they select. The party members have no voice in the selection. It is the boss who will decide who will be the chief minister and even the composition of the cabinet. In short, a so-called democratic constitution is run by outrageously undemocratic political parties. This is the direct opposite of the situation in Britain, Germany, the US and other democratic countries. This has an impact on the working of the constitution, especially on the functioning of the governor and the president.

The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.

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Missing gender By Roshaneh Zafar

RECENTLY, I came across some disturbing information regarding the self-censorship that is being applied to the biology curriculum in some parts of the country. I was told by reliable sources that in some provinces under the heading “the human reproductive system” only the male reproductive system is being taught, while the female reproductive system has been conveniently removed.

This brings to the forefront several questions. For instance, are the informed bodies that determine curriculum content of the opinion that exposing students to the female anatomy will lead to immoral behaviour or are they of the opinion that understanding female physiology is of no consequence to the study of science and biology?

This would imply that we will produce medical students who are permitted to study the male anatomy and therefore be able to treat male ailments, but will not

be equipped to treat female patients. It would seem that as a society we have deliberately gouged out one of our eyes and like Amartya Sen said, we will continue to have “missing women” as the sex ratio in the country will decline further due to health, nutritional and economic constraints that women face. Apparently, in a country which suffers from a high maternal mortality rate, where anaemia amongst women is endemic, where the ratio of men to women in the population is regressive, where the fertility rate is growing at an untrammelled pace, we certainly don’t need to include the female reproductive system in the biology curriculum at the high school level.

To add insult to injury, some members of the Muttahida Ulema Board have also directed textbook boards to omit diagrams of the human body “without clothes”. It is important to unravel this particular mindset, as it appears on initial assessment that the attitude of conservative Muslim ulema is not only hostile but schizophrenic towards science; they are happy to reap its benefits but not willing to subscribe to the worldview it generates.

Censorship in science raises many questions.

The end result of this thinking would be that medical education should be provided without practical training. In a country where the quality of healthcare and the incidence of quackery is high, we are setting ourselves up for another disaster.

Not only that, there is a disconnect between the golden age of Islam where science and religion were compatible and the current reactionary attitude we see today amongst many religious groups towards all things scientific.

In the past, the appeal of science was mystical and was seen as a way of experiencing the beauty and expanse of creation. As Ibn Rushd the famous 13th-century anatomist is believed to have said, “Anyone who studies anatomy will increase his faith in the omnipotence and oneness of God the Almighty”.’ Many scholars have wondered when this particular connection broke down between the religion and empirical science — was it the destruction of libraries in Baghdad by Hulagu Khan, or was it the subjective patronage of arts and sciences under the Ottomans which limited the domain of scientific inquiry, or was it the onslaught of colonialism and the resulting visceral reaction to all things Western and modern across the Muslim world?

Undoubtedly, science is a way of pursuing truth in order to unmask and unravel the mysteries of nature and to address existential imperatives that confront the human civilisation. The basis of any scientific discovery is the conduct of experiments and the recording of observations. The determinant factor to prove any theory hinges on empirical evidence and hardcore facts.

Marie Curie would have never discovered radium or its source, if she had not conducted painstaking laboratory work over a period of time to separate radium and polonium. The irony about Madame Curie is that she was not allowed to study science in her home country Poland since she was a woman. If by twist of fate, she had not ended up at the Sorbonne in Paris, perhaps the story of radium and the structure of the atom would have been written differently. Not only that, the harnessing of nuclear energy to treat cancer patients may have taken a different trajectory.

There can be no confusion when it comes to teaching students about the human anatomy and using educational tools and content that will enable them to understand these basic concepts and prepare them for future learning. In fact, we need to be thinking of much bigger issues when it comes to determining the science curriculum in terms of aligning it with scientific and technological advances, such as the discovery of DNA and the development of biotechnology and the problems of climate change, overpopulation and habitat destruction.

We need to balance the curriculum to be inclusive of both the science of life and the science of living, something that has become extremely important in the wake of Covid 19. In other words, it's best if the determination of science curriculum is left to the subject experts.

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Sink or swim By Neda Mulji

AS uncertainty looms, schools have opened and shut down several times in the year. They have had to adapt quickly to changes in learning and assessment and, it has become clearer than ever before, that change in how children access education is not only imminent but critical in the evolving landscape of education. Digital literacy is paramount in helping children stay up to speed with tasks and

techniques; a variety of sources of learning is crucial to developing a holistic approach to education, and it is imperative for teachers, school management and parents to work in collaboration to achieve the desired outcomes.

Communication and collaboration have stood out as the primary factors determining how fast and how effectively schools have managed to stay afloat in the face of tough odds. They have had to devise new, often ingenious ways, of reaching students — many have done this through constant communication with the parents, teaching them to use online tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, while others have done it through enlisting the help of parents in disseminating instructional videos and worksheets through WhatsApp etc.

To say the least, our resilience and receptiveness to learning has shone bright through the Covid-19 lockdown. Teachers have not only had to learn to embrace uncertainty but also work quickly and relentlessly towards upgrading their digital skills. What this has shown them, above everything else, is that experience is not the best teacher. New learning, experimentation, uncharted territories sometimes hold a far greater promise and potential than establishing a reputation through experience.

Someone once said, quite aptly, “Experience is another name for repeating the same thing again and again”. Experience may be the best teacher, but it also implies heavy reliance on what works, rather than opening the gateway to the exploration of new directions. Had the lockdown not changed the landscape of teaching so suddenly and dramatically, perhaps teachers would not have recognised how the nature of younger people demands juggling online tools, how their attention spans are geared towards browsing, how they enjoy engaging in online tasks that carry a fast momentum, how they are no longer satisfied with learning from one book or one teacher.

What have schools learnt during Covid?

A wealth of knowledge has surfaced as teachers explored quick, effective methods to sustain learning. For example, Khan Academy has been around since 2017 but had a few hundred thousand users until the pandemic helped steer educators in its direction. It now has over 100 million users. Why are we reluctant to up-level our skills and change our working styles until there is a dire need to do so? Educators and educational advisers across Pakistan have spoken about student-centred classrooms for decades now, they have

demonstrated ways to move away from the stringent chalk-and-talk regime to no avail, and they have reiterated how memorisation leads to surface learning at best. Sometimes the best advice falls on deaf ears, until we have exhausted the possibility of languishing in our comfort zone.

Many who chose to hold on to the tried and tested ways of learning lamented that young people find independent learning challenging. The pandemic has shown otherwise — children are naturally curious and, when steered strategically with a bit of direction, welcome the flexibility where they can learn at their own pace and time. Post-pandemic schools will have to find ways to incorporate asynchronous learning — children cannot be torn away from their online world anymore, be it video games, social media, etc so we might have to find ways to incorporate learning into their technology-mediated world. The old brick-and-mortar schools may survive only if they allow the presence of an online world within their parameters.

Online submission of homework and marking exams have remained a challenge, particularly for schools that found it hard to operate an honour code — with an inherent trust in the students' integrity and honesty — but they too might have to make the reluctant switch from paper to Padlet eventually. Difficulty in conducting physical exams may have taught us a new way of assessing, one that calls for monitoring students' effort and attainment throughout the year, rather than waiting for end-of-year exams when students cram up realms of content presented in textbooks.

There has been a general awareness that the opportunity gap in access to technology needs to be addressed quickly and effectively. Online education has no doubt exacerbated the capitalist divide but it has also shown us that money does not necessarily buy expertise — willingness to explore, learn and adapt to change is essential. More than deadlines, students respond to reassurance and encouragement. Holding on to old ropes isn't a great idea — they will snap eventually or may become entirely redundant.

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Fact-checking 101 By Ramsha Jahangir

IT all starts with labelling. To anyone familiar with Pakistani Twitter, the semantics of political discourse have become predictable — either you are a traitor or you are a patriot.

It is the ‘patriots’ who are often rewarded, while the ‘traitors’ face the brunt of being discredited as propagandists peddling fake news. Waging this information war, is an army of self-proclaimed ‘fact-checkers’.

Proponents parroting Trump’s slogan of ‘fake news’ make relentless attempts to ‘expose’ the media, but often forget that the media, too, is a casualty of information disorder. Journalists try to sift the truth from an ocean of lies, often with the sword of deadline hanging over them. This is why fact-checking has taken root as an independent industry globally.

According to the Duke Reporter’s Lab, a centre for journalism research, there are now 102 countries with fact-checking projects.

Officials weaponise what is global editorial practice.

Over 300 fact-checking projects are active across the world but none are run by supporters of a political party, unless Pakistan wants to join authoritarian regimes such as India, where government-led initiatives exist but have not been accredited by the global fact-checking industry.

To fact-check is a tedious task, one that comes with a lot of responsibility and credibility. The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has introduced a comprehensive code of principles that it requires groups to adhere to in order to be considered qualified for the role.

A foremost aspect of the global standard is non-partisanship and fairness. An individual fact checker’s personal or political biases can influence what they confirm as genuine, and what they even deem worthy of checking in the first place. A fact-checker does not concentrate their fact-checking on any one side. They do not advocate or take policy positions on the issues they fact-check.

Fact-checking groups are also required to explain the methodology they use to select, research, write, edit, publish and correct their fact-checks.

In Pakistan, pro-PTI supporters, some with access to government officials, have proudly taken up the role to correct media coverage. In the global practice of fact-checking, individuals who declare or show support for any party, any politician, or advocate for or against any policy positions on any issues save for transparency and accuracy in public debate, do not qualify for the role.

Government representatives, on the other hand, have spent ample time maligning the press — through hundreds of tweets and fake news stamps, and defamation threats. In their opinion, only they are providing "facts and figures" to counter "propaganda" by journalists.

For instance, providing official information (such as stats on Covid-19) falls under the mandate of a spokesperson. When they present provision of information as efforts to 'counter' the media, officials conflate their role with fact-checking, weaponising what is a global editorial practice partaken of by full-time professionals. Ideally, officials should issue formally worded clarifications, if required, instead of singling out journalists under #fakenews campaigns.

If anybody is genuinely interested in tackling fake news, they should consider how and who should best communicate fact-checks to the public. Partisan supporters casting allegations of bias on journalists not solely focused on 'positive' coverage are serving their own biases. They are not 'fact-checkers', but only serve as mobilisers of the ruling party's narrative. This disclosure of association and political leaning is key to ethics of fact-checking.

Fact-checking thrives when there is accountability within all systems, including the media which is not without its shortcomings. Industry leaders should consider ways to discourage WhatsApp journalism and ticker cultures. By no means should the media, like any other institution in a democracy, escape critical feedback on its performance. It is, however, important to accept that mistakes happen. Newsrooms and those journalists with an active profile online, should carefully consider dealing with errors in reporting and ensure corrections are well communicated to readers.

Recently, IBA'S Centre for Excellence in Journalism and the IFCN signed a partnership to help journalists build fact-checking skills. This is a start, however, a long road until fact-checking becomes a priority within the industry.

Given that fact-checking is based on accountability at the core, the government or its sympathisers cannot be their own judge. The approach to fact-checking lies far beyond merely labelling or running discrediting campaigns.

In the words of author David Patrikarakos, who writes about social media, the more doubt you can sow in people's minds about all information, the more you'll weaken their propensity to recognise the truth. If the idea is to conflate the truth, it appears the government's 'fact-checking' warriors are winning.

The writer reports on disinformation and digital politics.

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PML-N bad cop outfoxed By Abbas Nasir

WITH the budget proposals now in the public domain, for the first time in almost three years, the PTI government and its powerful backers seem to have edged ahead of the PMLN-led opposition in the battle for political ascendancy in the country.

Both the hybrid government, as some of its supporters have called it, and the PML-N-led opposition opted on different occasions to play the good cop, bad cop game and, as things stand today, the former appears to have outplayed the latter. Among the many pointers, let's first look at the budget.

After almost three years of IMF-mandated 'stabilisation' and 'austerity' (read pain inflicted on the people), the emphasis has shifted to a growth strategy à la Ishaq Dar and, within 24 hours of Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin's speech in the National Assembly, a 'feel-good' effect is being talked about.

Inevitably, experts will quibble with the figures. They will also point out the consequences of the IMF not agreeing with the budget proposals but it seems that risk has been considered by Mr Tarin's team and all officials express optimism that the Fund will be brought around to their point of view.

The feel-good factor can cancel out some of the very negative perceptions about the PTI among low-income voters.

An added bonus has come Pakistan's way in the shape of America's needs in the run-up to, and after, its troop pullout from Afghanistan. These needs can't be broken down only in terms of the political hot potato, the issue of a US base on Pakistani soil, and whether Islamabad will say yes or no.

There are other areas such as air corridors to facilitate aerial reconnaissance and ground support missions if the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces are faced with a rout post US pullout. Equally, there is an expectation Islamabad will use its 'considerable' influence over the Taliban.

This will need to manifest itself in the militant group agreeing to be a part of a broad-based Kabul government. Who knows whether Pakistan can deliver on these demands? But if it is established it is trying in earnest, respite is likely to come from the IMF as well as the easing of challenges like the FATF.

This environment seems so favourable to the current dispensation compared to the trouble it appeared to be in when the PDM campaign was in full swing. The fact is Nawaz Sharif's hard-line narrative came at that Gujranwala rally a mere nine months ago and found traction in the support base in Punjab.

The mobilisation that followed and how Maryam Nawaz Sharif was feted by throngs of supporters wherever she went particularly in Punjab and a string of by-election wins created the impression that the party was on an upswing. And, at some point, it would deliver the coup de grâce on the incumbents and pave the way for change. Nawaz Sharif's naming and shaming looked like a winning strategy. When former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was elected by the National Assembly to the Senate, the opposition's euphoria was expected.

Just a few days later, other more potent players showed they were in the game too. And soon demonstrated that they still held the key to the corridors of power and pulled the rug from under the 'unified' opposition in the shape of the PDM which fragmented.

Subsequent developments showed that PML-N 'bad cop' Nawaz Sharif ceded space to his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif, the avowedly confrontation-shy good cop. On the opposite side, the prime minister was left to play the bad cop all by himself as he continued his 'I'll get them all' tirade.

And the perennial 'bad cop' convinced everyone that counts in the political system that it was actually the 'good cop'. All those who favoured a

rapprochement that many identified as capitulation happily went along, Shehbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-led this group.

So, a prime minister they dubbed 'selected' will complete his term and before the next election many other key offices will be filled by a secure Imran Khan as the challenge from the opposition has fizzled out due to the extraordinary play by the born-again good cop.

With elections due in two years, the government's budget seems aimed at ensuring growth. One can be sure that targeted cash relief will continue to be delivered to the very poor via income support programmes whether they are called BISP or Ehsaas.

Even if the macro-strategy is to make the size of the cake so big that everyone gets a slice and not striking poverty at its roots, the 'trickle down' effect will be lauded by those who control so much of the discourse in the country via TV shows.

The resultant feel-good factor can cancel out some of the very negative perceptions about the PTI among low-income voters who are in dire straits due to the inflation post-devaluation, belt-tightening due to the so-called stabilisation and then the pandemic-triggered contraction of the economy.

So, the respite won by their 'good cop' for the incumbent set-up for another two years can effectively mean that if the economy shows signs of a turnaround and the next budget, the final one to have an impact before the 2023 elections, is made truly people-friendly, the PML-N will face the toughest challenge in Punjab even if powerful quarters stay true to their pledged neutrality.

The likely result: a weak, coalition government in Islamabad in 2023. That, in turn, means that issues close to some of our hearts like human rights and media freedoms, free speech and most of all the supremacy of elected civilian institutions will have to wait yet another five years. If not longer, that is.

The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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FATF compliance By Muhammad Amir Rana

THE government is anticipating substantial relief for Pakistan in the Financial Action Task Force's upcoming plenary meeting scheduled at the end of the month. The official statements give the impression that Pakistan is successfully approaching full compliance on most FATF recommendations. They also believe that the international political environment on the eve of American forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan is in Pakistan's favour.

Although the Asia-Pacific Group (APG), a FATF affiliate on money-laundering issues, has retained Pakistan on its Enhanced Follow-Up list in its second follow-up report, it has issued a positive evaluation of Pakistan's overall compliance. The APG has evaluated that the country is now "largely compliant" with 24 FATF recommendations, "compliant" with seven, "partially compliant" with another seven and still "non-compliant" with two. It has acknowledged that Pakistan has made progress in addressing technical compliance deficiencies that has helped the country improve its compliance, in all, to 31 recommendations out of a total of 40.

The officials, too, believe that the APG's evaluation report has almost overruled the option of putting Pakistan on the FATF blacklist. However, as the report has come out only a few weeks before the FATF's plenary meeting, it may not have any immediate bearing on the upcoming FATF assessment of Pakistan, mainly in terms of keeping or moving it out of the grey list.

In its last meeting in February, the FATF had urged Pakistan to address three strategically important deficiencies related to investigations and prosecutions of terrorism-financing cases. The FATF also demanded proof and most importantly asked for the effective implementation of targeted financial sanctions against all UN Security Council-designated terrorists. Apparently, the FATF will mainly review progress on these three aspects. The APG report has also noted that Pakistani authorities considered 12 terrorist organisations for threat profiles but only in terms of inflows and not the outflow of funds to support terrorist activities.

Pakistan has made serious efforts to address the deficiencies in its CFT/AML regime because of FATF pressure.

On the FATF's last three apprehensions, the federal government submitted its compliance report last month. After the submission of the report, optimism increased among the authorities concerned as the compliance report indicated that the government had further strengthened its Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) regime.

According to media reports, the federal government has devised a strategy to implement the CFT and anti-money laundering (AML) laws including for regulating the forfeiture, management and auction of property and assets related to money-laundering cases. The government will form specialised bodies to deal with instances of money laundering and terrorism financing. These bodies are intended to work with agencies like the National Counter-Terrorism Authority, the Federal Board of Revenue, and the Federal Investigation Agency, among others, to successfully meet FATF requirements and fulfil the remaining three tasks. Cases pertaining to money laundering will be transferred from police and provincial anti-corruption agencies to these new specialised bodies. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the FATF members express their confidence in it.

Apart from the APG evaluation, and Pakistan's compliance report submitted to the FATF, the government is also confident that the international political scenario has changed since last year, elevating Pakistan's political position and reducing Indian pressure. The US and its Nato allies need Pakistan during and after the withdrawal of their forces from Afghanistan. If Pakistan anticipates some relief from Western countries, it should not ignore the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan factor, which has annoyed not only France but also its allies. The government's move on the TLP's demand to initiate a debate in parliament on the question of expelling the French ambassador to Pakistan has created real concern in Western capitals. France is an effective member of the FATF and along with its allies it could make Pakistan's position weak. Recently, the UK placed Pakistan on its list of high-risk countries for money laundering and terror financing, and official circles are linking this development with the TLP and the UK's solidarity with France.

No doubt, Pakistan has made serious efforts to address the deficiencies in its CFT/AML regime, but it has largely happened because of the FATF pressure. The government has evolved multiple initiatives to address FATF's concerns, but a comprehensive institutional response mechanism will take time to become fully functional. It will require strengthening regulatory frameworks and bodies and

effective coordination among institutions dealing with CFT and AML, along with a zero-tolerance policy against all radical and violent religious groups.

The government has formed a 12-member National Coordination Committee on the FATF. The members of the committee include the federal finance minister and the federal secretaries of finance, foreign affairs and interior, besides the heads of all the institutions and regulators concerned with money laundering and terror financing.

They include the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, chairman of the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan, director general of the Federal Investigation Agency, member (Customs) of the Federal Board of Revenue, and DG of the Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU). A FATF Secretariat was also established for coordination purposes among the stakeholders.

Though the committee is not functional yet, it has brought security institutions' oversight into the implementation process. The security institutions are trying to pursue the implementation plan, but this is not a permanent solution. Fulfilling FATF compliance is not a one-time task; instead, it is about regulating financial flows and the regulations will need a permanent mechanism. This can be achieved by removing overlapping institutions and multiple regulators. For example, the interior ministry has formed its own dedicated FATF sections that directly coordinate with FMU on operational matters, but they also coordinate with the secretariat if the latter requires some information.

Apparently, banned outfits like the Jamaatud Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammad have disappeared from the scene, but many experts believe these groups are in hibernation and will become active whenever they find a conducive environment. Meanwhile, the TLP has emerged as a new challenge, which is making Pakistan's task to get out of the grey list a difficult one.

The writer is a security analyst.

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Domestic workers By Usama Khilji

IT is no secret that domestic workers in Pakistan work overtime, are underpaid, and often mistreated. It is also tragic that most who employ domestic workers do not view them as equal human beings, and often believe they are doing them a favour by offering employment; never mind the acute dependence on them. Treating domestic workers with respect includes paying them at least the minimum age, not just polite conversations.

It is therefore necessary that the rights of domestic workers, like any other workers, be regulated in Pakistan and enforced by law. This is exactly what the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Bill 2020, proposed by elected MNA Mehnaz Akber Aziz of the PML-N and passed by the National Assembly seeks to do. The bill now awaits approval in the Senate of Pakistan.

There are several important stipulations in the bill. It prohibits bonded labour, and outlaws discrimination “on the grounds of religion, race, caste, creed, sex, ethnic background, and place of birth/residence/domicile, migration or any other reason”. It stipulates referring to domestic workers as that and not “servants”, and requires employers to “provide dignified working conditions and occupational safety and health measures” to domestic workers, as well as “sickness benefits and medical care during sickness and injury”.

It seeks to enforce minimum wage for domestic workers, a critical responsibility of the government which it so far has not been enforcing and in effect perpetuating poverty and exploitation of the working classes. The federal government has set the minimum wage at Rs20,000 per month in the 2021-22 budget presented this week; it’s essential that this is enforced for full-time work which is defined as eight hours a day. If the minimum wage requirement is violated, employers face a fine of Rs10,000 in addition to compensating the domestic workers the difference between the amount paid and the minimum wage.

A bill to protect domestic workers is awaiting Senate approval.

There is also a very important clause related to the gender pay gap whereby women cannot be paid less than men for the same work, and vice versa. Moreover, it stipulates six weeks paid maternity leave for women, as well as maternity benefits.

The bill also proposes a mandatory letter of appointment through a prescribed form which must be filled and signed by the employer and domestic worker which

will specify the terms of conditions of employment including the nature of work and wages amount. It says no domestic worker can be asked to perform duties beyond what is stated in the letter of appointment, which must be registered with the commissioner of Islamabad or any other official appointed by the government.

The bill also seeks to enforce a cap on the maximum number of working hours for domestic workers, which is eight hours a day, with at least one full day off in a week, and a maximum of 56 hours worked in a week if overtime work is solicited, which must be compensated by additional wages.

The maximum age of domestic workers is to be set at 16 years, which is important considering the high incidence of cases where children are employed in homes, with several cases of torture as well, as, for instance, in the Tayyaba case. This is in line with the amendment pushed for by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari to the Employment of Children Act, 1991, passed in August 2020 whereby child domestic labour was proscribed for the first time, something that provincial assemblies can also adopt through a resolution.

It is encouraging that the government supported and helped pass a bill moved by an opposition member, under the policy that human rights bills will not be opposed by the government.

This bill, once passed by the Senate, will only apply to Islamabad Capital Territory because of devolution of power to the provinces post 18th Amendment. Sindh already passed a law in 2018 to protect domestic workers, followed by Punjab in 2019. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan do not have laws protecting domestic workers yet.

It is of utmost importance that these laws now ensure protection of domestic workers across the country. A starting point would be to take steps to inform both employers and domestic workers about the existence of these protections through mass media, apart from encouraging unions of domestic workers that can enable a network of workers to collectivise to push for ensuring protection. The first domestic workers union was registered in Lahore in 2015. More need to be registered.

Enforcement of these laws are fundamental to making the elite and middle class realise that they cannot exploit the poor anymore through meagre pay and long working hours which constitute modern slavery. The poor are impacted the most

by rising inflation, the least they deserve is dignified workplaces that value their hard work.

The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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Vaccine hesitancy By Huma Yusuf

MY mother was excited to hear about discounted fares on PIA for over-50s who were vaccinated. Here's the rub: she's still too anxious to get on a plane because she doesn't trust the level of protection offered by the vaccine she received. Her conundrum highlights the flaws in carrot-and-stick approaches to public vaccination.

We are not the first to think of incentives. From gold nose studs in Rajkot to cows in Thai villages, creative efforts to accelerate the pace of vaccination are underway. But there are mixed views on the extent to which incentives work. A Boston University study found that cash incentives boosted uptake among rich and poor alike, but that higher amounts of cash did not further increase take up. Additionally, those who were reluctant at the outset were not noticeably swayed by cash. States may be emptying their coffers to reward members of the public who would have come forward for a jab anyway.

True vaccine sceptics are unlikely to be incentivised. They may see rewards as cynical ploys or outright bribes. The challenge is greater in countries like Pakistan where vaccine hesitancy predates the Covid-19 pandemic. A recent study by Monica Martinez-Bravo and Andreas Stegmann showed that after the CIA ploy to find Osama bin Laden using health workers pretending to carry out vaccinations, child vaccination rates decreased by between 23 per cent and 39pc in areas with support for religious groups (used as an indicator of exposure to anti-vaccine extremist narratives).

And that's where the stick comes in. Punjab plans to suspend the SIM cards of the unvaccinated; Sindh plans to pause the salaries of government employees until they're jabbed. People will be held economically hostage until they relent. This may prove more effective than incentives, but how much more?

True vaccine sceptics are unlikely to be incentivised.

There is a lively global debate underway about the human rights implications of mandating vaccinations. Some argue that getting vaccinated is a personal decision, and people have rights to liberty, privacy, protections against discrimination (different treatment for the unvaccinated), and freedoms of thought, conscience and religion (drivers of vaccine refusal). Others argue that these rights can be infringed upon for the public good. And what about the rights to health and safety for those who must mingle with the unvaccinated?

Pakistan is unlikely to engage in a profound debate about such rights implications. But the government will have to deliberate the pros and cons of different approaches if vaccine take up stalls even after supply issues begin to be addressed.

In an LSE blog, Saher Asad, Javaeria Qureshi, Mariam Raheem, Taimur Shah and Basit Zafar cite a December 2020/January 2021 Economic Vulnerability Assessment survey run by the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan in which one-third of respondents said they would not get vaccinated. The authors' analysis of this and other surveys did not find any correlation between vaccine hesitancy and respondents' socioeconomic status, location (urban or rural), or level of education. The analysis found that most hesitancy was driven by concerns about vaccines' safety.

This suggests that rather than push rewards or penalties, the government should double down on efforts to get broad public buy-in for a national vaccination programme. Existing plans for a billion-rupee awareness campaign are a good start, as are plans to 'push' vaccinations to people, for example, outside shrines.

But more is needed. Asad et al's finding that fear is a key driver for slow take up emphasises the need for awareness. This means more transparency (and less politics) about the efficacy of different vaccines. Credible interlocutors — not only doctors and scientists but also well-briefed community leaders such as imams — should also be tasked with promoting vaccination. Info sessions about vaccines should be planned at diverse locations: factories, mosques, construction sites. Simple explanations about how vaccines work, and why they matter, should be broadcast relentlessly on television and radio.

Asad et al also recommend that the government devise ways for people to publicise their vaccination. Social media hashtags would work for an online audience, but something with wider public appeal — a badge or reusable water

bottle — would be more effective. This is important because the researchers found a significant discrepancy between the number of people willing to get vaccinated, and respondents' perceptions of how many will go for a jab. What better motivator could there be than a hearty recommendation by a cousin, colleague or co-congregant?

Finally, the government must clamp down on any risk of corruption or favouritism in the vaccine roll-out. Fears that a vaccine is expired, or that certain brands will only be available to 'first-class' citizens, will undermine the initiative's credibility. That's not a risk Pakistan can take.

The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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Populism and Pakistan By Umair Javed

FOR the past decade, the rise of reactionary and regressive forms of populism across the globe have remained a source of anxiety for progressive and liberal quarters. The paradigmatic cases of such populism include Modi in India, the Brexit movement in the UK, Trump and the Tea Party phenomenon, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, and Duterte in the Philippines. These leaders and their movements have either led or enabled the rise of anti-minority (especially anti-Muslim) sentiment, centralisation of power, and the steamrolling of institutional norms.

In Pakistan's context, the rise of Imran Khan and the PTI's win in 2018 has been clubbed by some commentators as part of the larger populist shift in global politics. The reasons for this classification are obvious, even if the judgement itself is flawed. Imran Khan's accountability rhetoric was populist in nature, his leadership of a coalition of status quo elites posed against the status quo is very similar to what the Conservative or Republican parties did in the UK and US respectively. Similarly, the larger cultural appeals to the 'nation' as a whole, rather than specific subgroups of the electorate are all commonly associated with populism as a particular aesthetic of politics.

Where the comparison falls is on more substantive parameters, such as what's being done while in government, and the underlying basis of the ruling party's appeal. On the former, as the upcoming year's budget and its architects demonstrate, there is little to distinguish this particular dispensation from previous ones that have attempted to kickstart growth through enhanced corporate profitability and consumption. The clubbing of various social protection schemes under one umbrella, and the lack of a sizable increase in its budget over last year's, show that there are little attempts to widen the fiscal relationship of the government to the citizenry.

Similarly, the ruling party continues to struggle in developing an independent political organisation that can override more sectional interests within the party and outside of it. It is also still reliant on the military establishment for some aspects of its political survival, including the degree to which the opposition is allowed space in vulnerable spaces like the province of Punjab. This is unlike other populist movements that have actually transformed or reconfigured older hierarchies and orders within party organisations, and replaced them with newer ideologues or loyalists. The rise of the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party is a particularly pertinent example of this phenomenon.

The less discussed point is how the rise of populism and reactionary politics in the region and beyond has actually impacted our domestic situation.

What is an underappreciated and less discussed point though is how the rise of populism and reactionary politics in the region and beyond has actually impacted Pakistan's domestic situation. The most obvious spillover has come from the east, with Modi's rise and Hindutva's entrenchment in India recalibrating Pakistan's domestic political dynamics in a number of ways. The first is the strengthening of the security state and a doubling down on the rationale for its existence in the face of Indian militarism on the border and in Kashmir.

A second spillover, though less obvious, has been the delegitimisation of what one can broadly call the liberal foreign and cultural policy segment in Pakistan, represented by groups and activists seeking greater normalisation of ties with India, and improved people-to-people contact. With increased communal violence against Muslims and other minority groups, and the chauvinism of the Hindu right wing becoming more abrasive online and in India's domestic politics, the narrative of normalisation and of revisiting statist discourse on India stands on considerably weaker grounds. This is in stark contrast to the previous decade,

when these positions — usually well established in academic and intellectual discourse — were also more assertive in domestic politics.

Finally, a third spillover of global populism in Pakistan is its help in the revitalisation of what one could call Muslim modernism as cultural identity for the state and for large parts of urban middle-class society. While the roots of this lie in the attendant anxieties around the global war on terror, and the conflation of entire communities with fundamentalist violence, in recent years the populist assault on minority rights and cultures has made Islamophobia an even more pertinent question for diasporic and migrant populations. The adoption of those battles as Pakistan's foreign and cultural outlook by the state is an important happening linked deeply to these broader global issues.

At the same time, this adoption has strong domestic roots. There is a renewed orientation by political elites towards reviving statist identity around cultural questions of what it means to be Muslim and how that is linked to being Pakistani — whether that's through pan-Islamic cultural consumption in the shape of TV shows, or the heightened oversight being granted to religious leaders in the way that textbooks are developed, or even more simply, what types of religio-cultural endeavours that the leadership (including the prime minister) seek to patronise and promote. One should situate the announcement of an institute devoted to the study of Sufism and science at the intersection of personal beliefs and cultural assertion of Muslim identity being shaped by global conversations around Islam and its adherents.

In sum, it's not necessarily accurate to argue that Pakistan is experiencing its own populist moment in exactly the same way as right-wing populists in other parts of the world. The differences in sources of power and actions in government point to an important divergence that should be kept in mind. What should be acknowledged, however, is that the country's politics is not immune to being shaped by regional and global populisms in a myriad of ways, and that this influence will assert itself in a variety of possibly conservative (or even autocratic) tendencies.

The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

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Not by words alone By Maleeha Lodhi

THERE have been a series of official pronouncements that the government is shifting the focus of Pakistan's foreign policy from geopolitics to geoeconomics. This 'shift' was first announced in March during the 'Islamabad Policy Dialogue' organised by the National Security Division and addressed by Pakistan's political and military leaders.

As summarised on a government website this 'dialogue"' outlined a 'new' policy direction that involved prioritising economic security, changing the "narrative of geopolitical contestation to geoeconomic cooperation", increasing "Pakistan's economic footprint globally" and promoting "regional connectivity". The foreign minister stated several times since that the government is working on transforming the country's "geopolitics to geoeconomic policy".

If these assertions mean that Pakistan will henceforth subordinate its geostrategic aims to strengthening its economy and reorient foreign policy to serve the country's domestic economic interests and promote growth and prosperity then it is a welcome shift. However, any policy shift must have substance and clarity otherwise it remains a declaration of intent. As these official statements have yet to be elaborated or specify the means by which the policy is to be pursued, the 'shift' is, for now, a desire not a strategy.

Conceptual and operational clarity is essential before announcing a policy change as is its timing. It is questionable how geoeconomics will be separated from geopolitics as the two are interrelated. Moreover, at a time when Pakistan is confronted with more than one geopolitical storm — regional and global — how exactly will the country negotiate geopolitical challenges while pivoting to geoeconomics? Afghanistan is at an inflection point facing the growing danger of descending into chaos with serious ramifications for Pakistan's security. Relations remain tense and unpredictable with India which continues on a repressive course in occupied Kashmir with demographic changes and further bifurcation of the state looming, which is bound to further inflame the situation. US-China confrontation is casting a shadow over the region posing a challenge for Islamabad that wants to avoid getting into its crosshairs but may find that a tough balancing act. Thus, geopolitics and Pakistan's security dilemmas cannot be wished away by declarations alone. A new strategy or policy shift has to be matched to reality. More on this later.

A policy shift must be backed by substance otherwise it is a statement of intent not a strategy.

What is really meant by geoeconomics? The international literature on this is instructive. There is little agreement on how to define geoeconomics with the term used in different ways. Definitions include the geostrategic use of economic power, using “economic tools to advance geopolitical objectives”, achievement of foreign policy outcomes by economic, not military, power projection, and “use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and produce beneficial geopolitical results”. Some see geoeconomics as a form of statecraft that deploys geopolitical power and leverages geography to achieve economic ends.

Edward Luttwak, a US strategic thinker, first forged the term geoeconomics in 1990 in the Cold War’s aftermath. He argued that commerce was displacing military power as a tool for countries to deploy with geoeconomics emerging as an “admixture of the logic of war with the methods of commerce”. Building on previous scholarly works, the book War by other Means by Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris contributed to the global debate on the rising role of geoeconomics in the international arena by examining the means adopted by the US, China and others to accomplish foreign policy goals. More and more states they wrote “are waging geopolitics with capital, attempting with sovereign checkbooks and other economic tools to achieve strategic objectives that were in the past the stuff of military coercion or conquest”.

In a recent book titled Geoeconomics and Power Politics in the 21st Century, one of its writers points out that geoeconomics has not entirely replaced military means of statecraft. Both instruments coexist and are deployed by countries depending on what they consider appropriate for the challenges they confront. The book emphasises that in making use of economic tools the factors that count in geoeconomic strategies include markets, resources, and ability to control and direct investment to compete effectively.

Almost all the recent literature identifies China as the world’s leading exponent and “practitioner of geoeconomics”. With ample justification. China’s Belt and Road Initiative is the biggest and most ambitious geoeconomic enterprise of this century. Encompassing over 70 countries and engaging 138 states it aims to build land and maritime networks involving infrastructure, power projects and telecommunications to promote trade and resource flows, achieve economic integration and boost economic growth and development. In Africa and Latin America, Chinese influence has expanded through targeted investments giving it unprecedented strategic outreach.

Geoeconomics has been successfully pursued not just by big powers but smaller and medium-sized countries too. The crucial and obvious requirement is domestic economic strength and resources. Does Pakistan have the economic attributes regarded as prerequisites to pursue a geoeconomic policy? The most fundamental requirement is a strong economy. With an economy perpetually burdened by crises in public finance caused by chronic budget and balance of payments deficits, Pakistan has yet to seriously address these structural problems to achieve sustainable growth. A narrow tax base and failure to mobilise domestic resources has inevitably meant growing indebtedness and reliance on frequent IMF bailouts. A limited and undiversified export base plus lack of innovation has also prevented the country from becoming a player in global markets and economy.

Therefore, if Pakistan wants to pursue a geoeconomics policy in any meaningful way it has to transform its economy, ensure a stable political environment and reorder its internal priorities and budget allocations. Economic power and capability cannot be ‘borrowed’ or ‘imported’ from outside but built at home by undertaking long postponed structural reforms. The essential ingredients of a strong economy are internal.

If by geoeconomics the government means leveraging the country’s location to become a regional hub that vision has been projected by every government since the 1990s. It was never realised because of regional geopolitical tensions and the country’s weak economic fundamentals. And that too requires a strong economic foundation including efficient and attractive markets.

No country can talk its way into effecting a policy shift. Unless it is backed by substance and reflects reality it remains a vision on paper, not in practice.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

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Debating the budget By Arifa Noor

HAVING spent 19 years editing stories in this newspaper or that, I have to confess that the budget ‘days’ are my least favourite. Come to think of it, reading the paper, during this period, is a close second. Of course, this is mainly due to

my illiteracy, or innumeracy, where numbers of any kind are concerned, a fatal flaw if there was one for a sub-editor to have.

Our written-for-experts-coverage doesn't help. The receivables, slippages, surcharges and SROs have been my Waterloo since the day I slipped into a chair in front of the Apple computer in the offices of The News, almost two decades ago.

But I have a feeling I wasn't the only one. Most ordinary readers, aside from the finance ministry bureaucrats, consultants and economics graduates, were just as confused — they just had the luxury to ignore these stories, unlike me.

Over the years, our papers have added a few graphics — just a few — to add a bit of pizzazz to our news pages, though the old-style stories are still there. Television has brought some change to this coverage with its focus on ordinary citizens and the budgeting woes of the ordinary housewife or the single earner with a large family but for the large part it continues to be a jumble of arabs and kharabs being spouted by anchors such as Shahzeb Khanzada (if I ever get reincarnated, I can only hope I return with his grey cells and comfort with numbers) and finance whiz politicos, with nary a pause. But on a more serious note, there has been considerable change too in the recent past. In some ways, the debate on our economy has become more meaningful as we discuss the budget.

The debate on our economy has become more meaningful as we discuss the budget.

Indeed, Pakistan is no stranger to IMF programmes and boom-and-bust cycles but rarely before did we discuss this in such great detail and dissected it in such depth.

Consider the 2008 election: in the time leading up to this key election, the then government, helmed by Shaukat Aziz, had artificially propped up the dollar, frozen utility prices and focused on growth through borrowing. Despite Pakistan's relatively warm relations with the US, the incoming PPP-led government had to put in place an adjustment programme similar to the one implemented by the PTI, which too led to high inflation and considerable pain for the people, but somehow the discussion then rarely focused on our toxic policies, and few asked why we begin negotiating with the IMF with nearly each election cycle.

The blame was simply put on the bad, bad, non-democratic government run by a dictator and the rest went to the PPP, whose governance skills, as perceived, are second only to the PTI's. Indeed, for many, the inflation back then was mostly seen as a failure of the PPP.

The PML-N came to power and also went to the IMF, quietly and without much fuss. Perhaps, the only issue seriously highlighted in public debate during these five years was the NFC award passed in 2010 that increased transfers to the provinces, and how debt and borrowing was becoming a serious challenge. This was because of the PML-N which raised this issue, highlighting the need to address it in the long run.

By the time, the PTI took over, politics had become extremely polarised. This coupled with its confusion over going to the IMF led to a heated political debate and perhaps for the first time, there was a wider questioning (and understanding?) of our unsustainable growth and constant dependence on the IMF.

Thanks to prime-time news shows where equally vocal government and opposition figures were compelled to blame each other for the economic mess, a range of technical issues turned into drawing room discussions — the exchange rate, government spending, current account deficit. Indeed, the major contradictions in our state policies (pursued by government after government) became a topic for widespread discussion. For once, even our long-held policy of asking 'friends' to deposit foreign exchange in our bank became headline news, something which earlier was rarely noticed.

The PTI was forced to acknowledge that it was easier to talk about reform than to implement it and how it dumped its earlier 'idealism' to bow at the IFI altar. On the other hand, the PMLN also — quietly — distanced itself from its policy on keeping the dollar stable. Parties, too, have grown, it seems, and are being compelled to think about their problematic economic policies.

Hence, on Friday, when the budget was presented, relatively new questions were being asked — about sustainability, about how we would pay for this 'growth' and how this was different from what the previous government had done. Questions were asked about exports and why the government had projected higher numbers but was falling short, all reflecting the larger awareness about our need to grow exports.

Perhaps, it wasn't just the polarisation or the channels which led to this awareness but also the dire straits we were in and the reluctance of the IMF to write us a cheque without expecting much in return (now that our relations with the US are not as warm as they were in the first decade after 9/11). Perhaps, it was a combination of all. But despite its shortcomings, the debate on the economy and the budget has moved far beyond simply discussing income tax slabs, pensions, subsidies and the inevitable side story on the allocations for the Prime Minister and President House.

But there is more to this growing debate for the polarisation was also there when Musharraf was ruling. It is about three elections, three changes of governments and space for the supporters and critics of all colours to ask questions of the political parties, who are here to stay. If the 2002 government made wrong policies which created problems in the long run, it is no longer around to be questioned, and no one is being forced to confront its mistakes. But the PML-N is, perhaps the PTI will be also (if it makes it to the opposition benches as a unified force). Do we need further proof that democracy and elections, however flawed, can and do make a difference?

The writer is a journalist.

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A ventilator for democracy By Jawed Naqvi

WHEN Russian tanks bombarded the country's elected deputies inside the besieged Duma, and Boris Yeltsin was declared a hero for ordering the assault, the Western world called it a triumphant moment for democracy. The states that spilled out from the demise of the USSR were flaunted as beacons of hope for democracy. They are anything but. Our expectations and even the definition of democracy seem to have shrunk with time.

The Knesset's vote in Israel, for example, ended the 12-year violence-filled rein of Benjamin Netanyahu and brought in an even more far-right prime minister to replace him. The change of guard from one right-winger to another created a compelling reason nevertheless to heave a collective sigh of relief. Likewise, who could have thought that many Indians still tethered to the struggle for secular democracy would be forced by political circumstance to cheer for a notoriously right-wing Shiv Sena all because it leads a strident anti-Modi coalition in Maharashtra.

The fact that agreeable people find themselves in a desperate bind, reminds one of a comment Fidel Castro made to an Indian journalist. Asked if he found himself lonely or sticking out like a sore thumb when other communist countries had moved to the right, he said: "The more the world moves to the right, the more I move to the left by standing where I was." It could be a lesson for the Israeli left or India's who have become marginal onlookers in a political game they had once led.

US President Joe Biden is a beneficiary of a similar circumstance. He is at least better than Donald Trump, goes the familiar sigh of relief. And so he arrived in Europe last week. As the world gasped for oxygen and battled a steadily mutating coronavirus, Biden landed in Cornwall in southwest England with a focused mission: to resuscitate democracy and boost human rights where they are faltering. Coming from one involved in bombing Libya into a mangled wreck, it seemed a strange quest. Luckily, Syria managed to dodge him, not without a little help from Russia's Putin, for which he must be made to pay.

Chomsky has analysed Biden's foreign policy succinctly, which is essentially not very different from Trump's in most ways.

In Cornwall, Biden's cup of passion to do a good turn was overflowing but there were glitches in the script. He, however, ignored them. For all the talk of democracy, he was about to hand over Afghanistan to the Afghan Taliban come Sept 11 leaving its terrified ethnic minorities, its women and schoolchildren to the mercy of those whose religious bigotry was once fanned by the United States.

The 500 million free jabs against Covid-19 Biden offered the poorer countries in the bargain fared badly against the trillion dollars his predecessors — including his own tenure with Barack Obama — had squandered for 20 years. The

occupation was explained to the world as a worthy one with claims of working for women's rights and democracy in Afghanistan.

It was of course a bold lie about a country where women were going to universities before US intervention destroyed their lives. Afghanistan was, after all, where Vilayat Khan had woven magic with the sitar for the discerning music buff that King Zahir Shah was. That's where Mohammed Husain Sarahang honed his craft of classical singing even during the reviled communist rule. Biden can, of course, take comfort from the fact that at least Malala Yousafzai stood her ground and survived the Afghan Taliban's soulmates in Pakistan.

Happily, several G7 leaders gathered in Cornwall to watch Biden pour venom on China and Russia seemed mostly unmoved by his enthusiasm. But India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi stepped in with firm commitment to defend "democracy, freedom of thought and liberty". Biden has company. "As the world's largest democracy, India is a natural ally for the G7 and guest countries to defend these shared values from a host of threats stemming from authoritarianism, terrorism and violent extremism, disinformation and infodemics and economic coercion," Mr Modi declaimed.

One thing has become clear. Not for no reason has Biden kept a low profile on Kashmir or over a range of human rights violations reported from across India. Western newspapers have catalogued many of them. Biden's gaze is fixed on Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Don't try to remind him of the rights and dignity for Julian Assange when the freedom of Alexei Navalny is being suppressed by Vladimir Putin.

Noam Chomsky has analysed Biden's foreign policy succinctly, which is essentially not very different from Trump's in most ways, barring perhaps the nuclear arms talks with Russia. It may be also true that Netanyahu would have survived as prime minister had Trump been around instead of Biden.

Hopes were raised in Kashmir and among human rights activists, many of them languishing in Indian jails, when Biden defeated Trump who was then considered close to Modi. It proved to be a false hope. India was a crucial part of Trump's anti-China strategy and remains so under Biden's watch. At least, when Trump was pressed to act against the Saudi crown prince for the brutal murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, he was honest in admitting he didn't want to lose a hundred billion dollars worth of military hardware ordered by Riyadh.

"What we generally find, I think, is that Russia and China sometimes deter US actions to enforce its global hegemony in regions on their periphery that are of particular concern to them," says Chomsky. "One can ask whether they are justified in seeking to limit overwhelming US power in this way, but that is a long distance from the way the challenge is commonly understood: as an effort to displace the US global role in sustaining a liberal rule-based international order by new centres of hegemonic power." Luckily, at least some at the Cornwall summit who came to hear Biden's petition for democracy, seemed inclined to agree with Chomsky.

The writer is Dawn's correspondent in Delhi.

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State of IKonomy By Dr Niaz Murtaza

PTI SUPPORTERS say the economy is better off now than before and on to durable growth, although some have used iffy data. Many cheer an all-time high tax revenue of Rs4.1 trillion. New highs mean little. Even if revenue grows by 0.001 per cent, it hits highs annually. It should have hit Rs4.1tr in 2019 and be near Rs6tr now at 2013-18 growth rates.

One also sees uneven comparison bases, cherry-picked or bad data, minor measures and contrasts with low-base 2020 data. To fact check claims, I compare the PTI's, PML-N's and PPP's last eras on 16 key measures using their mean annual growth or ratios to GDP via the Economic Survey and State Bank data.

GDP growth and inflation directly affect the masses. Even with an iffy initial GDP growth estimate of 3.9pc, its annual rate is 1.8pc vs 2.8pc for the PPP and 4.7pc for PML-N. Our GDP has a premature services bent which offer less jobs than industry. Their share has gone up under the present government to 61.4pc and industry's down by 1.2pc to 19.3pc (South and East Asia averages: 25pc and 35pc).

Low investment but high public/private consumption hurt too. Mean investment was 16pc of GDP for the PML-N, 15.4pc for PTI and 11pc for PPP (Saarc average: 29pc). So the consumption bias is up again. Inflation was highest under the PPP (12pc plus) and lowest under the PML-N (about 5pc).

PTI's economic record is not rosy as some say it is.

External and fiscal deficits cut GDP growth. The PTI sees current account deficit (CAD) cuts as its top feat. Its annual CAD of 2.07pc of GDP beats PML-N's 2.8pc but nearly equals PPP's 2.16pc, which inherited a bigger CAD of 8.2pc of GDP from 2007-08 (vs 6.1pc by the PTI from 2017-18) due to an overvalued rupee under Musharraf.

The PTI cut CAD more via anti-growth import cuts; PPP by upping exports 4pc annually vs PTI's 0.3pc and PML-N's -0.02pc. Even IT exports grew much faster under the PPP. It gave higher growth than the PTI despite facing similar devaluation and higher interest rates under IMF's watch, much higher oil prices and terrorism and a big global crisis. The PTI claims big remittances growth. Its 13.3pc annual growth beats PML-N's 7.4pc but not the PPP's 16.7pc. Its mean annual foreign investment is lower than the PML-N's and about the same as PPP's. CPEC investment fell by 40pc from peak 2016-18 levels. It upped public external debt by 6.8pc annually vs 8pc and 3.5pc under the PML-N and PPP and grew foreign reserves faster than the other two.

Fiscally, its nominal tax-to-GDP ratio beats PPP's but is 2pc lower than PML-N's despite similar nominal GDP growth due to higher inflation. So mean annual fiscal deficit by the end of 2020-21 may cross 7.5pc vs 5.5pc for the PML-N and 7pc for PPP. Barred by the IMF from attaining growth via CADs as the PML-N did in 2018, it got low growth via big fiscal deficits like the PPP. The PTI's mean total of fiscal deficit and CAD ratios is the worst, as are its development outlay and indirect tax ratios (67.5pc vs 66pc for the PML-N and 65pc for PPP). It grew domestic debt faster than the PML-N but slower than PPP.

On 16 measures then, PTI did best only on reserves. But they less clearly show economic prowess than, say, exports. The PML-N did best on nine measures (GDP, investment, inflation, FDI, taxes, fiscal deficit, development outlay, local debt and twin deficits total) but PTI reversed its gains while doing better than it only on four (CAD, exports, remittances and external debt). While facing more exogenous and 'same-page' issues than the PTI, PPP did best on six (industry share, CAD, exports, remittances, external debt and direct taxes).

The PTI's recent pluses are mostly against its own worst results, ie, PTI beat PTI only. The economy is not better off than before nor on to durable growth. It has used big fiscal deficits to give low-level and also low quality growth:

deindustrialisation; low investment; more consumption, inflation and indirect taxes; near-flat exports, FDI and real wages; and high poverty and job losses.

The fiscal deficit is less hard a bind than CAD. So fiscal stimulus helps in recession. But we see stagflation. Hence inflation limits its value. We have precious fiscal space too given high debt and must use it wisely for big impact. But the big fiscal deficits gave low-quality growth worse than even the PPP's.

Faced with data, fans blame bad outcomes on the PML-N and Covid-19. A 2pc growth in 2018-19 reflects PML-N's actions as PTI had to devalue the rupee from 123 to 155. This cut growth and upped inflation. Still, its team choices, lack of policy, late IMF deal, CPEC drift, etc hurt too. We had -0.5pc growth in 2019-20 but the rupee only went from 155 to 165, and by then more from the PTI's actions than PML-N ones. Covid-19 hit last year. But even in 2019-20, the initial GDP growth rate based on the July-March data with only a week of lockdown was -0.4pc. So the PTI government had a big hand in our first minus growth since 1952.

The writer is a political economist.

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Vaccine passport By Arif Azad

SCENES of Pakistani labourers demonstrating outside a government office in Multan demanding to be inoculated with AstraZeneca, one of the approved vaccines for travel purposes to Saudi Arabia, shows how proposed travel-specific vaccine passports can furnish entry tickets to the West and other rich countries. Such a move can have a disproportionate impact on travellers from the Global South where, alongside poor rates of vaccination, largely non-Western vaccines (Chinese and Russian), seen as travel-unworthy, are being administered.

This spotlights the serious issue surrounding the use and abuse of vaccine passports to bar people from travelling to the West for the simple reason that

they have not been vaccinated with Western vaccines considered travel-worthy and currently not available in the Global South. Yet vaccine passports for travel purposes are one thing; vaccine-immunity passport for accessing reopened social and commercial space in the Western hemisphere another. Both, though often bearing the same name, have been assigned different purposes locally and internationally.

Ever since Covid-19 struck, discussion has been underway on how to ensure that public, social and business spaces are kept free of infected individuals. The idea mooted since early this year has been that of immunity certificates — sometimes called vaccine passport — containing details of a Covid-free, Covid-negative test or recent vaccination. This immunity certificate allows you to enter restaurants and other spaces.

Covid-immunity certificates can take the shape of either a digital app or paper-based document issued by the relevant department. New York has been trying out a version of the immunity certificate called Excelsior Pass, which lets vaccinated people attend music concerts and other social events. The UK first floated the idea of immunity passport as a means of getting entry into public spaces in a rushed bid to restart the economy. However, the proposal has been shot down by MPs for its civil liberties implications.

Entry restrictions are being further tightened.

Other use of vaccine passport is for travel purposes. The final shape of the vaccine passport is far from settled. However, there is speculation that it is likely to contain a combination of vaccination status and negative Covid test status. While these details are being hashed out, vaccine passports are already being rolled out by different countries as trial balloons. Further, concerns centring on vaccine passports' disproportionate effects are being debated, too. Covid-19 has put an end to foreign travel as we know it. In recent months, restricted travel has been allowed but mostly for returning citizens or residents trapped abroad. Another wave further tightened entry requirements with many countries such as Pakistan finding itself on a red list introduced by the UK. Being on the red list means that returning citizens and residents are required to spend time in self-financed and considerably policed hotel quarantine.

Pakistan raised a hue and cry over India's exclusion from the red list while Kenya accused the UK government of displaying discrimination in parachuting Kenya

onto the list. From the public health viewpoint, though, the vaccine passport represents a raft of additional measures to insulate local populations from the ingress of the mutated virus such as the Indian variant found to be more lethal and transmissible than the original virus.

The EU is also opening up to foreign tourists provided they present the vaccine passport. It has rolled out its own green digital passport to facilitate freedom of movement within the EU. Britain's NHS has also launched a digital application meant to serve as a vaccine passport. However, objections are being aired, too. They cover a spectrum of personal data and privacy concerns, the potential of vaccine passport to accentuate existing vaccine and health inequalities and its perceived use to restrict travel, access to knowledge and movement of people from the South to the West.

Unless vaccine equality is established and all WHO-approved vaccines find favour with the West, the introduction and roll-out of travel-specific vaccine passports will continue to sow doubts about the intentions of Western countries, further reinforced by vaccine hoarding and vaccine nationalism. That is why the roll-out of the vaccine passport, a sensible idea in the given circumstances, must be harmonised with the perspective of the Global South under the aegis of WHO to ensure that safe and equitable travel remains the overarching aim. Handled insensitively with the already existing vaccine inequality between the jab-have and the jab-have nots, the vaccine passport can have a serious a political and reputational fallout for Western countries advocating it.

The writer, a public health consultant, is the author of Patient Pakistan: Reforming and Fixing Healthcare for All in the 21st Century.

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Countering 'Islamophobia' By Zahid Hussain

LAST week's incident in Ontario, Canada, in which four members of a Muslim family were crushed to death in a premeditated attack has once again raised concerns over the rising incidence of 'Islamophobia'. It was perhaps the most gruesome murder of innocent people motivated by anti-Muslim hatred in Canada.

There has been a significant rise in such crimes with the ascendancy of ultra-right forces in many Western societies. The incidence of attacks on Muslims and their places of worship has become more frequent. It may not be the first time Muslims have been targeted in Canada but it was certainly the most heinous attack.

It was an act of terrorism driven by Islamophobia, declared Justin Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister. The 20-year-old suspect who mowed down the Afzal family had reportedly been motivated by the anti-Muslim campaign run by racist and white supremacist groups which have become increasingly active over the past few years. The tragedy has shaken Canada, which is one of the most culturally and racially inclusive countries in the world. The cabinet includes Muslim ministers.

What is described as 'Islamophobia' has, in fact, existed for a very long time in many Western countries. But anti-Muslim movements have seen a marked rise after 9/11 and have been further strengthened over the past few years with the surge of right-wing racist ideology. The anti-immigrant campaign has intensified anti-Muslim sentiments. The rise of Trumpism in the US and the emergence of populist nationalist regimes have also given impetus to hate-based politics.

Individual terrorist actions must not be allowed to strengthen extremist ideology on the other side.

'Islamophobia' is generally defined as "an outlook or worldview involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination". But it has taken a more violent turn in recent years with terrorist attacks targeting the Muslim community and mosques. There are political as well as economic reasons for the rise of the anti-immigrant movement particularly in Europe that often takes an anti-Muslim turn.

Some violent actions by Muslim individuals influenced by extremist ideology too have been used by racist and ultra-right groups to whip up anti-Muslim sentiments as seen in France. Terms, like 'Islamic terrorism' are used in right-wing propaganda literature. Surely in some cases the state's policy of cultural discrimination has also contributed to anti-Muslim sentiments.

It's not just in the West; anti-Muslim politics have also gained momentum in other parts. For instance, India is one of the few countries where the government itself is directly involved in an anti-Muslim campaign. It is not just discriminatory

policies but also the violence perpetrated by the ruling party that seeks to marginalise the Muslim population.

The rise of violent anti-Muslim movements and the hate campaign run by racist groups on social media have certainly been a serious challenge for democracy around the world. But such hate campaigns and actions by extremist groups must not be equated with religious and civilisational wars. Individual terrorist actions must not be allowed to strengthen extremist ideology on the other side.

It should also be recognised that the strongest resistance to this violent ideology based on anti-Muslim prejudice has come from within Western democracies themselves. The strong public and government reaction against the 2019 Christchurch mosque killings carried out by a supporter of a white supremacist group is a case in point. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's handling of the horrific shootings won her widespread appreciation by the Muslim community. It was a terrorist attack and didn't involve any religiously motivated group.

Similarly, the Ontario killing has united in grief the widest section of Canadian society across religious and racial divides. Justin Trudeau's passionate speech condemning the incident as an act of terrorism and his government's pledge to take the toughest action against the hate campaign has certainly reassured the vast Muslim community in the country.

Of course, there is a need for a coordinated and concerted effort to counter the anti-Muslim campaign, but it should also be linked to the struggle against all other violent religious ideologies. Sadly, killing in the name of faith is far more prevalent in our country.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for an international effort to counter growing 'Islamophobia' and has also raised the issue at various international forums including at the UN General Assembly. In a recent interview to a Canadian TV channel, he lamented the lack of response to the move for an internationally coordinated effort to combat 'Islamophobia'.

Of course, one cannot agree more with the prime minister that hate literature and anti-Muslim websites should be banned but his call would receive a greater response if he too made some efforts to curb the continuing rise of extremist faith-based ideology in the country. A policy of appeasement has given greater space to the groups openly preaching violence in the name of faith.

While the prime ministers of Canada and New Zealand stood with the Muslim community in their time of grief and took decisive actions against the perpetrators of the crime, our leaders are found missing when such tragedies occur in the country. How can we forget the time when the prime minister refused to meet the mourners of the victims of a Hazara massacre in Quetta declaring he would not be 'blackmailed'?

He finally went there to meet some members of the victims' family after the funeral had taken place. Such a callous attitude in the face of tragedy could hardly give him the kind of moral high ground needed to lead an international campaign against 'Islamophobia'. Hundreds of Hazaras have been killed over the last few years in this country in the name of faith.

The international community constantly censures Pakistan for victimisation of religious minorities. The growing misuse of blasphemy laws targeting both Muslims and non-Muslims are also cited as a manifestation of the extremist ideology gaining ground in the country. The PTI government's overdose of religiosity has imparted a sense of impunity to extremist religious groups. Will the international community heed the prime minister's appeal given this situation at home?

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Modi's movies By Rafia Zakaria

THE world knows India through its movies. For more than a century, most of South Asia has been humming Bollywood tunes, mimicking Bollywood actors and awaiting the next blockbuster with rapt anticipation.

The reach of Bollywood stretches beyond the subcontinent; diehard (and rude) American fans gang up and troll people who do not agree with their choice of the best Bollywood film of all time, and Egyptians, Nigerians and millions of others around the world have similarly gyrated to its dance numbers. Obviously, they have also gotten to know, at least to the extent possible through the screen, the country that exports such rousing entertainment to so many.

This may all change very soon. In the weeks and months to come, operatives of Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party are increasingly throttling India's multibillion-dollar film industry that makes more movies a year than even

Hollywood in the United States. Specifically, there are two things that the BJP does not quite appreciate about the movies these days. First is the fact that the triumvirate of the Khans — Shahrukh, Aamir and Salman — have ruled the roost, wielding enormous power over what movies get made, who makes it big and what themes are emergent in India's film industry.

Over the years, since the inception of Prime Minister Modi's government in 2014, and with much greater zeal since his re-election in 2019, the BJP has gone head to head against Bollywood. Movies which tell the stories of Muslim conquest and Mughal rule (such as Jodhaa Akbar) are not easy to do, and ones such as Padmavaat have garnered tremendous controversy.

An entertainment machinery is required to distract such a stricken population; the answer, Godiwood.

Bollywood movie producers have learned the hard way that the easiest way to get a movie past meddling BJP censors is to please the BJP. As a consequence, low-budget films regurgitate improbable dramas in which India dominates over Pakistan; the patriotic and heroic are, all of them, Hindu and fanatically so.

In recent days, as the Modi government has confronted the latest deadly and crushing surge of the coronavirus pandemic, the demand to have helpful instruments of propaganda has surged. Like Goebbels, the Nazi administrator who presaged the use of moviemaking as part of an ideological agenda, Modi bhakts seem to have reached similar, if belated, conclusions. The television and print media in India has already been beaten into submission such that the slang term for it is 'Godi' (lap) media', referring to how cosy Indian journalists have become with Modi's Hindu supremacist agenda.

Now Bollywood megastars and mega producers must be transformed into 'Godiwood'. It would be led by someone other than the Khans and their ilk and would produce endless hours of formulaic movies whose entire purpose would be to extol the virtues of Prime Minister Modi and his government and re-familiarise a once-secular Indian audience with arcane myths and tales that could be connected to the Vedas or the BJP agenda. It is likely that Kangana Ranaut, who has expressed a desire to go to the border and attack Pakistan, and Priyanka Chopra, who has hugged and giggled with Modi at one of 20 wedding-related events, could star in the ones that were left.

It would be funny if it were not true. When protests broke out over India's new citizenship laws, the Khans for all their power were afraid to speak out despite the fact that the new law primarily snatches citizenship from India's Muslims. Whatever little they could say was useless in sating the bhakts; needless to say, the citizenship law passed.

Modi needs to produce a distraction for his long-suffering and Covid-19 traumatised Indian population. For weeks, so many have had to endure more tragedy and loss of life than most people see in a lifetime; worse still, from the BJP perspective, all Indians who had happily drunk the Modi miracle potion have had a bitter dose of reality. The country still has millions of poor, the health infrastructure is non-existent, there is corruption at every level; these are just some of the truths they may have become reacquainted with.

An entertainment machinery is required to distract such a stricken population; the answer, Godiwood. With celebrities frightened away by intrusive audits, threats of arrests, censorship, etc., Godiwood could produce the same song and dance spectacles but with a pointed goal: the glorification of the Hindu supremacist state that the prime minister has almost created.

Fascists always seek to control cultural production in a country in order to realise the complete and centralised control of power that permits them to dominate everything. If one watches the Godi media, it is difficult not to wonder how so many in the Indian population can swallow such obviously concocted praise songs being presented as the day's news. The time between newscasts is taken up by bizarre and seemingly endless 'debates', in which nearly everyone screams at each other in their efforts to show just how much in Modi's godi they are.

Godiwood will be very similar, one assumes; there will more of a focus on religious themes, the ills of 'Hinduphobia' (which, by definition, could not exist in a Hindu-majority country where Hindus control everything), the depredations of Pakistan, the ignominy of all Muslim rulers of the past. If Bollywood was light and entertaining, funny and seductive, Godiwood, designed to please its audience of one, promises to be tedious and banal. You can force creative people to do what you want them to do, you cannot force them to love it.

Ironically, then, while the independent Bollywood was a fantastic and ubiquitous emblem of India's cultural depth and relevance, Godiwood will likely be exactly

(and boringly) just the opposite. If the former stood for a democratic and endlessly fascinating country, the latter is but a hideous and apologetic husk of a project presented to a duped population and those who best do their master's bidding.

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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The game changers By Sharmeela Rassool

WOMEN'S economic empowerment is not just a buzzword, it's a game-changing concept. Women's economic participation, financial inclusion, and labour force contributions have a direct influence on socioeconomic outcomes, prosperity and growth, and democratic resilience of nations. Financial autonomy empowers women to claim their agency in the private and public spheres of their lives. As women with financial autonomy, we can vouch that this is true. SDG 5 and Pakistan's principal planning document Vision 2025 emphasise enabling women's economic empowerment. The logic and arguments are clear.

The human development, economic, and business gains from empowering women are substantial — it is the right and smart thing to do since it has been proven to benefit everyone. When more women are economically empowered, economies grow, and nations are better placed to reap positive developmental outcomes. Take the example of Razia Sultana. "With my husband's salary as a factory worker, we were barely able to make ends meet. I started stitching footballs to raise my five children. Today, I run what is becoming an international business of producing sports uniform/wear now. My clients include football and basketball teams in the US, and rugby clubs in Australia. From 25 to 30 pieces a month initially, I now make 350 a month, turning a handsome profit of $1,000. I did not allow the empowerment I gained to stay within the confines of my home. I have trained more than 200 other local women."

With increased access to economic resources, Razia was able to access better schooling for her children, go beyond earning a daily livelihood, and through her

skills and learning, work towards breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and opening her own business.

One woman's story has set the momentum of social change in the lives of other women and the community.

Razia's story is typical for many women-owned businesses in Pakistan. They tend to be smaller in size, falling within the category of micro, small, and medium enterprises. For many women, entrepreneurship offers a path to economic empowerment, and it is incumbent upon the global community, including corporations, banks and governments, to help create the conditions that permit this. Public procurement spending ranges between 15 per cent and 30pc of the GDP of countries and corporate procurements are on average 64pc of the enterprise spending.

In my (Sharmeela Rassool) role as country representative of UN Women Pakistan, I very much look forward to engaging with multiple interlocutors to explore how we can together make our procurements more gender responsive.

To realise women's economic empowerment, efforts must go beyond increasing female labour force participation or giving more quota-based participation opportunities to women, eg in parliament. It must include providing women control over their time through the distribution of domestic care and family care duties, control over resources including inheritance and property rights, equal value for equal work — reducing the gender wage gap. A gradual change in women's employment trends is a positive wave slowly taking over Pakistan. Women are now working in banking, journalism, tourism, hospitality, IT, etc. and this is visible in job markets, particularly in urban centres and on online job portals. In the EU-Erasmus scholarship programme for Pakistan where candidates are selected purely on merit there were equal numbers of men and women being selected even though there were three times more men applying, indicating the high success rate of the women candidates.

As a female diplomat heading the Delegation of the European Union to Pakistan, I (Androulla Kaminara) believe that Covid-19 has exposed structural inequalities in every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection and this has disproportionately and negatively affected women. Hard-fought gains for women's rights and empowerment are being reversed. At the EU, responding to the pandemic is not just about narrowing long-standing inequalities, but also

about building a resilient world with women at the centre of the economic recovery. So, through our collaborative efforts with the government and civil society, we are focusing on rebuilding livelihoods and uplifting vulnerable communities, especially women and youth. Our upcoming seven-year work plan also puts women and girls at the centre of our programming as this has been proven to produce the fastest development growth for all. I believe that growth is best when it is inclusive and sustainable.

Women's economic empowerment is indeed the way forward. Women's empowerment should be the centre of the agenda of the government and development partners as the development case is clear: When women are empowered, nations become more prosperous, the region more stable and the world a better place to live in.

Sharmeela Rassool is country representative, UN Women Pakistan. Androulla Kaminara is EU ambassador to Pakistan.

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Bye bye Bibi? By Mahir Ali

AMONG the various heads of state and government who have seemed like permanent fixtures on the international political landscape in the past decade or so, no one's perch has looked as precarious as that of Benjamin Netanyahu. There's a degree of irony in the fact that Israel's longest-serving prime minister apparently ran out of steam midway through the presidential term of the most fervent White House admirer he could conceivably have attracted.

It's all relative, of course. Ever since its inception, Israel has never not had an ally in the White House, and occasional tensions have scarcely dampened US enthusiasm for — let alone hindered its munificence towards — what was identified early on as an invaluable satellite in a region once deemed broadly hostile to US interests.

The Obama administration, for instance, set a record in generosity, notwithstanding the toxic personal chemistry between Bibi and Barack. By then, it hardly looked like a case of the tail wagging the dog. The transformation may not have been sudden, but Netanyahu had few qualms about treating America as the tail.

He was happy to do most of the barking until another top dog chimed in, determined, as the leader of the pack, to be louder than anyone else. And loyally tagging along behind Donald was Jared Kushner.

Netanyahu's ouster doesn't really spell change.

Even Trump and Kushner apparently baulked, however, when Netanyahu talked about fulfilling his dream of annexing much of the occupied West Bank. Had the US flashed the green light, enabling him to pursue this project, Netanyahu would probably still be prime minister, and Israel would almost certainly be embroiled in a military campaign far more vicious than its most recent assault on the Gaza Strip.

The latter did not suffice to keep him in power — not least because a substantial proportion of Israelis are under the impression that he chickened out. Unable to pull together a coalition after Israel's fourth election in two years, Netanyahu predictably ranted against the alternative regime that was taking shape.

In the past couple of weeks he has ludicrously labelled his opponents as dangerous and far left. The new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, is an extremist all right, but on the other end of the ideological spectrum. He has served Netanyahu as chief of staff and in various ministerial capacities, and throughout his political career has been described as even more right wing than his former master.

In the past he has not only enthusiastically hailed the idea of West Bank annexation but also proudly boasted about seeing "no problem" having "killed lots of Arabs in my life". Now, as a prime minister at the head of a disparate — and desperate — eight-party coalition, whose Yamina party boasts only six seats in the 120-member Knesset, he has indicated that there will be no movement on the Palestinian front.

The idea that the status quo can indefinitely be maintained while the state-sponsored settlers (whom Bennett has been proud to represent) keep gnawing away at what's left of the diminishing Palestinian territories is one of Netanyahu's proudest achievements. There's no need to bother with a deal, not even with an eagerly compliant Palestinian 'authority' in place under Mahmoud Abbas, who put off his elections to ward off the likelihood of another triumph for Hamas.

That likelihood has only increased in recent months, but yet another Israeli election before the end of the year cannot be written off. After all, the Bennett-led coalition has the bare minimum parliamentary support necessary, and Netanyahu as opposition leader will no doubt continue trying to topple his rivals. The 'Bye bye Bibi' placards displayed by jubilant demonstrators after his comeuppance may prove to have been premature.

Does any of this matter very much? Not for the Palestinians. Sure, there is an Arab Islamist party on the fringes of the Bennett coalition, playing pretty much the sort of collaborationist role that the odd relatively unrepresentative black organisation did under South African apartheid. It also includes the Meretz and Labour parties, which remain wedded, at least formally, to the fantasy of a two-state solution.

What's far more important is that the political centre has shifted sharply to the right — Netanyahu deserves some of the credit for that, but the narrowing of the political spectrum from the centre right to the far right is by no means an exclusively Israeli phenomenon. Hardly anywhere, though, is the political system more fractured: what once were factions have evolved into a plethora of parties, and one-party majorities are now a thing of the past.

Netanyahu has hitherto thrived on this dysfunction, but whether he can exploit it much longer remains to be seen. The criminal justice system may catch up with him. One thing that won't change, however, is what Joe Biden reiterated last week: "Israel has no better friend than the United States." Which in effect means nothing will really change.

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Controversial poll reforms By Ahmed Bilal Mehboob

ARGUABLY the most controversial package of electoral reform proposals in the history of Pakistan is halfway through the parliamentary cycle to become a law. The Elections (Amendment) Bill, 2020, comprising 49 amendments to Elections Act, 2017, was introduced in the National Assembly on Oct 16, 2020. The bill sailed through the Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs on June 8, 2021,

when only eight out of the total 21 members were present. The bill came up before the National Assembly on June 10 and was passed the same day without any debate. This was the day when the National Assembly passed 20 other bills while the opposition had walked out after unsuccessfully trying to seek a debate.

Another bill — the Elections (Second Amendment) Bill — which was originally promulgated as an ordinance on May 8, 2021, and covered two very important electoral reforms — the introduction of electronic voting machines (EVM) and enabling overseas Pakistanis to cast their vote from their countries of residence — was also passed the same day — again without any debate.

The two bills are now before the Senate where these may either be forwarded to a standing committee and then be taken up by the full Senate or the rules may be suspended and the Senate may directly take them up. Although, the opposition constitute a majority in the Senate, the defeat of the bills in the Senate is not a forgone conclusion. Even if the bills are defeated in the Senate, the ruling coalition will most likely take the two bills to the joint session of parliament where the ruling coalition has a numerical edge over the opposition and, therefore, there are brighter chances of the passage of the electoral reforms bills in the joint session.

Although these laws may be technically passed by parliament by a majority of votes, these are not ordinary pieces of legislation, and the lack of consensus between the opposition and the ruling party may seriously, in fact critically, undermine the implementation of the reforms and the successful conduct of the next general election. The very rationale of electoral reforms, as often reiterated by Prime Minister Imran Khan, is that all political parties should have trust in the electoral process and accept the results of the next election. How can this trust be created and the acceptance of the result of the next election ensured if there is such a wide gulf between the treasury benches and the opposition?

The controversy may escalate to a point where the holding of elections itself may be jeopardised.

Out of a total 50 proposed amendments to the Elections Act, 2017, quite a few are controversial at more than one level. There has been almost no meaningful consultation with the opposition on these reforms, and the opposition, including the major political parties PML-N and PPP, have openly rejected the bills, especially the two key proposals regarding EVMs and voting by overseas

Pakistanis. If the government doesn't go the extra mile to involve the opposition in developing a consensus on the electoral reforms even at this late stage, the remaining two years of the federal government may largely be consumed in dealing with a controversy over the hotly contested electoral laws. The controversy may escalate to a point where the holding of elections itself may be jeopardised let alone reaching an agreement on the outcome.

The second and probably more serious controversy arises from very grave objections and concerns expressed by the Election Commission of Pakistan on at least some of the proposed reforms. The seriousness of the differences between the government and ECP can be gauged by the fact that the ECP made its concerns public through a candid press release on June 15. It is true that only parliament has the prerogative to legislate and other organs of the state should follow and implement the framed laws and policies but what makes these differences more serious is the ECP's opinion that many of the proposed reforms are in conflict with the Constitution. The ECP also feels that some of the proposed laws, if passed, will dilute its powers which is also a violation of the Constitution. If these differences, especially with the ECP, persist, the chances are that the matter may end up in court. In that case, if the ECP contention is accepted, even passed laws found to be violative of the Constitution may be declared void.

The government's package of electoral reforms is not all controversy. Several proposed amendments are meant to enhance the protection of the rights of women, minorities and transpeople. Several other provisions of the bill further reinforce the transparency of such documents as legislators' statements of assets and liability. In all likelihood, such provisions would have received bipartisan support had the bitterness in political relations not precluded this possibility.

Four key areas of reforms are extremely contentious and there is a dire need for dialogue on these: the multimillion-dollar EVM project; the reportedly insecure system of voting for overseas Pakistanis; the indirect dilution of ECP authority to prepare electoral rolls by transferring some of its constitutionally mandated functions to Nadra; the delimitation of constituencies based on the number of voters rather than total population. These are some of the key areas of divergence between the ruling party and the opposition on one hand and between the government and the ECP on the other.

The ruling party may have its reasons to feel uncomfortable dealing with the ECP but this important constitutional body can't be wished away. The chief election commissioner and two of the ECP members are here to stay till after the 2023 general elections. The government must make its peace with the ECP and engage with it, making a genuine effort to address its concerns. The only way out of the impasse with the opposition is an open-hearted initiative by the government to engage with them and for the opposition to reciprocate before the passage of the bills. In a democracy, dialogue should never break down.

The writer is president of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency.

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A dangerous bargain By Khurram Husain

IN a couple of television appearances, Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin quietly dropped a bombshell of an announcement and hurriedly moved. He said the IMF has postponed the ongoing sixth review of the facility Pakistan just restarted in April and decided to let the government first demonstrate the viability of its budgetary projections and assumptions before returning to the review "in two or three months".

Here's why this is a bombshell. The budget he has just announced has a deficit of almost Rs4 trillion, and more than a quarter, Rs1.056tr, of the net financing for this is supposed to come from floating international bonds and the IMF. Without satisfying the IMF and successfully concluding the sixth review it is highly unlikely that they will be able to realise these funds, as well as the many others that are subject to successful implementation of the Fund programme, such as disbursements from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. And without these funds the budget — with all its tax cuts, subsidies and elevated development spending — could well be in jeopardy.

Without IMF support they cannot pull off what they are trying to do in this budget, which is to use government resources to push economic growth. From the Fund they have programmed Rs496 billion as budgetary support (the Fund usually

does not lend for budgetary support, but they are confident they will get the permission to use Fund resources for this purpose). But for now they have failed to satisfy the Fund that they have a credible plan to raise the resources domestically through revenues. On top of that, the budget is built on an assumption that remittances next year will be $31.3bn (the figure has been shared with me by the finance minister himself).

They are trying to sell a story but their creditors are not buying it. All we have to work with at the moment is the short remark put out by the finance minister, that the Fund has said they will return for the review in “two or three months” and in the meantime they have asked the government to go ahead and walk the path they have chalked out for themselves and demonstrate the viability of its underlying financing plan. Now they have a few months in which to show that their measures for curbing the growth of the circular debt without raising tariffs, and their plan to increase revenues while cutting taxes, can actually produce real, tangible results that can be measured in rupees.

The path they are planning to walk next fiscal year is a very risky one, but they are determined because they feel external support will come.

But something is amiss. This budget faces massive risks such as inflation and a resurgence of the trade deficit, but the government is confident. All through FY21 inflation has been steadily rising, but with oil prices nearing two-year highs, the circular debt marching on, prices of miscellaneous goods such as palm oil, coal and various industrial raw materials also increasing, and an impending massive increase in the petroleum development levy (up to Rs30 per litre where it currently stands at less than Rs3), could all provide significant impetus to inflation precisely as growth gets going. For many months now, interest rates have already been negative in real terms and the State Bank has been sending muted signals that this situation may well need to be reversed at some point. A pick-up in inflation could push their hand.

Despite the mounting risks the government is determined to power on with its growth-oriented budget because that is the only way for them to win back the street. And the finance minister is supremely confident that he will win over the creditors soon, led by the IMF.

To understand this, consider developments on two other fronts. First is renewed talk of a new oil facility from Saudi Arabia details of which are still awaited.

Second consider the article that appeared in the Financial Times on the day of the Economic Survey last week, headlined 'Pakistan leverages US military cooperation to win IMF concessions' in which Tarin himself was quoted as saying his government does not want to burden the people of Pakistan any further and "we have been talking to the American officials and they're willing to help".

During his press conference unveiling the Survey, he was asked about this and he angrily denied that he said any such thing and promised that a clarification will be issued later in the day. But it has been seven days since then and no clarification has come, and issuing one now will have no impact anyway. It gives the impression that the denial was meant for domestic consumption, while the minister winked at his foreign creditors as if to say 'don't worry about the IMF'.

The path they are planning to walk next fiscal year is a very risky one, but they are determined and confident because they feel external support will come. They probably have good reasons to feel this way, because the Americans are desperate to make their exit from Afghanistan without that country falling to the Afghan Taliban too quickly. Pakistan holds the key to this like it always has, but first wants to know 'what do we get out of this?'

If our own past is any guide, they will get their way. The Fund will return, the oil and dollars will flow, and whatever inflationary consequences there are to gunning growth in one year will be offset by the massive public spending that will be unleashed. But our own past also tells us that such gambits end in tears. Long after the oil and the money have been burnt to fuel the engines of the economy, the burden of the responsibilities they would have signed off on will remain, and weigh heavier and heavier. If the government is seeking to shore up its electoral prospects by taking on the responsibility to prevent Afghanistan's descent into chaos, they should know this is a devil's bargain. And the devil always comes for his due.

The writer is a business and economy journalist.

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The Falmouth diet By F.S. Aijazuddin

WITH the decline of Christianity, new faiths have sprouted in its place. The altars of previous beliefs are being rearranged.

At the G-7 summit concluded recently at Falmouth (UK), Great Britain genuflected yet again to the United States. Germany and France shared the same catechism. Their parent body the EU joined in the chants on behalf of its other absent 24 member states. Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa were invited to Falmouth to witness but not participate. China, Russia, the body of Africa and the whole of South America found no place in that exclusive congregation.

At Falmouth, the tousle-haired British Prime Minister Boris Johnson used the G7 gathering to revive the 'special relationship' between his country and its former colony, the United States. He sought a 'new' Atlantic Charter, to be signed between himself and US President Joe Biden with ink more permanent than the fading brine with which the original Atlantic Charter of 1941 had been inscribed.

That document was signed 80 years ago, on Aug 14, between US president Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston S. Churchill, while World War II was still ongoing. Its aim, in summary, was to affirm that the US and the UK nursed no territorial ambitions post-war, that every nation had the right of self-determination, that territorial realignments must be with the concurrence of the peoples affected, that trade barriers would be lowered, and that there would be disarmament (preferably universal) after the war.

The Charter is an obsequious affirmation of US's papacy.

In reality, the Charter tilted one way acknowledged the supremacy of the United States as the leader of the Free World. Tilted another way, it foretold the dismemberment of the British Empire. Through it, the US forced the imperial octopus to chop off its own colonial tentacles. One beneficiary of that amputation was Pakistan, created exactly six years later, to the day.

Historians may detect a parallel with another such meeting of import — the Diet of Worms, held in 1521, 500 years ago. Then, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sought to reassert his 'special relationship' with Pope Leo X by mobilising the Roman Catholic Church against Martin Luther's challenges. As a result, the Pope's authority over doctrinal matters stood reaffirmed; the Roman Catholic Church fell victim to the Reformation.

This 'new' Biden-Johnson Atlantic Charter must cause Brexiteers (even Nigel Farage) some discomfort. It is too obvious an obsequious affirmation of US's papacy.

Hidden in the small print of its xenophobic text is the West's fear of "the peril of emerging technologies" (ie China), its defensive determination to "oppose interference through disinformation or other malign influences, including in elections" (ie Russia), and its resilience "against the full spectrum of modern threats, including cyberthreats" (ie from any malevolent hacker operating from anywhere in the borderless world of IT).

What PM Johnson could not do at Falmouth was to convert President Joe Biden. Biden is the second US president — after John F. Kennedy — who is an avowed Roman Catholic with Irish lineage. In 2015, Biden, then vice president, acted as co-host to Pope Francis I. The following year, Biden visited Ireland. To Biden, the RC Church and Ireland are beads on his daily rosary.

It is interesting that in the US — a potpourri of immigrants from almost every corner of the world — only two nations dominate its politics: Israel and Ireland. Not Italy which gave them its Mafia, nor Greece which inspired its public monuments. Not even Mexico, even when Mexicans constitute 25 per cent of its immigrant population.

Unlike Jack Kennedy, Joe Biden has seen fit to remind 10 Downing Street that Northern Ireland is not a colony but geographically an integral part of the island of Ireland, just as Scotland and Wales are physically part of the British Isles.

This has touched a raw nerve in the British psyche. To them, Northern Ireland, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands, even Hong Kong (returned to China almost 25 years ago), are inalienably British. To the rest of the world, however, they are dregs, left after the cup of empire had been drained.

If hamstrung giants like the UK cannot withstand US pressure, what chance does a small nation like Pakistan have? Our response to the US's ongoing proposal to use Pakistan territory as a monitoring post will be a test of our much-vaunted 'sovereignty and territorial integrity'. We should, however, remember USAF-CIA Badaber base outside Peshawar from which U-2 aircraft flew across Russian airspace in the 1960s, recall Mr Bhutto's offer to the US in 1973 of a port in Balochistan, and our role as a profitable conduit to Afghanistan in the 1980s and thereafter. Nor should we forget Gwadar.

We sell our subservience too cheaply. Its cost converts poorly into US dollars or Chinese renminbi.

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Creating a lasting legacy of collaboration across South Asia By Mushfiq Mobarak , Maha Rehman And Satchit Balsari

IN February 2021, Covid-19 numbers started rising again in South Asia with official daily case counts rising beyond 400,000 in India, 6,000 in Pakistan and 7,500 in Bangladesh, straining health systems. The massive surge in India soon spilled over across the border into Nepal, leading to 'apocalyptic' scenes of overwhelmed hospitals.

The deadly surge in 2021 makes a regionally coordinated, evidence-driven strategy even more critical. If we are to move at the speed of the virus, it is necessary to construct multi-stakeholder regional coalitions to devise new solutions and frugal innovations that can be applied across South Asia. Is that possible, given the troubled history South Asian countries share? Today we write a positive, hopeful story about a new consortium we are involved in, with core team members from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh jointly developing Covid-prevention strategies. The emerging consortium provides an example of how neighbours can work together for mutual benefit, despite political differences.

Every country in South Asia has struggled to ensure consistent mask-wearing to stem the spread of Covid. Beliefs, priorities, traditions and aversions to behaviour change are more similar across South Asia than we care to admit. These commonalities mean that interventions that are successful in changing behaviour in one place are highly likely applicable in other parts of the subcontinent. We have experienced this with the Grameen Bank microcredit model which was an indigenous South Asian innovation that spread rapidly. India's digitised social protection ecosystem with Aadhar IDs and Jan Dhan accounts serves as a model (albeit with cautionary notes) for other countries in the region. E-governance programmes in Pakistan, like eVaccs and Citizen Feedback Model have been

replicated and provide strong models ready to be deployed regionally and globally.

The new pan-South Asian consortium in response to Covid-19 evolved out of an experiment conducted in Bangladesh, that successfully changes social norms around mask-wearing in rural communities. The four-part NORM intervention was originally examined in a cohort of 350,000 individuals across 600 villages. A combination of free mask distribution, information, reinforcement in public spaces, and role modelling by community leaders led to large, sustained increases in mask usage that persisted beyond the period of active intervention. BRAC is implementing the model to reach 81 million people across Bangladesh.

Partnerships are necessary to beat the virus.

The team is now partnering with several organisations across Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh to start adapting the model to fit each country's context, and set up partnerships to pilot, implement, tinker and learn. The Self Employed Women's Association quickly implemented the model to reach over 1m members in Gujarat. An additional 1.5m masks were shipped from Bangladesh to support SEWA's outreach to other states. Lahore's commissioner worked with our research team to adapt the NORM model to an urban setting, and devised new creative ideas to improve effectiveness. For example, they have prepared to deliver masks at doorsteps using Pakistan's postal service, and are targeting beneficiaries on the basis of billing information from utility companies. Philanthropists and private corporations are sponsoring the masks. We are re-importing some of these innovations back to Dhaka, inspiring further scale-ups in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Kathmandu.

Effective mask promotion requires visits to thousands of remote villages, and those same visits can be used to prepare for more effective community-based healthcare responses. To that end, a host of physicians, scientists and community-based organisations created the Swasth Community Science Alliance, committing to pragmatic, science-based protocols to manage mild and moderate cases of Covid-19 in rural India, where institutional healthcare access is limited.

NORM implementation teams based in Lahore, Ahmedabad, Peshawar, Hyderabad, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Delhi are learning from each other's successes and failures. The process usually starts with the the original research

team sharing evidence-based insights with implementing agencies, as the implementers adapt the design, co-create localised implementation protocols, and are threaded together in a collaborative environment across countries where each implementing team iterates while learning from others' prior iterations, and all our sub-teams are connected in an active learning system that allows us to course-correct in real time. This coalition is poised to change mask-wearing norms amongst hundreds of millions of people across all of South Asia.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased policymakers' appetite for evidence-informed policy measures that can be quickly implemented to stem transmission. This drive for quick action has created some unprecedented opportunities for enhanced cross-country collaborations that are normally hampered by politics and mistrust. We hope that the consortium that first formed around mask-promotion, and now around science-based treatment approaches, and that developed quickly and organically without regard to national boundaries, can serve as a model for a broader and deeper collaborative ecosystem that endures. We need to come together to solve problems that affect us all. Let the lasting legacy of this pandemic be a new era of partnership in social innovations that can benefit all South Asians.

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Budgeting with constraints By Sakib Sherani

PAKISTAN has been struggling with low economic growth for three decades. Since 1990, real GDP growth has averaged 4.2 per cent. By comparison, South Asia has averaged economic growth of 6pc over the same period. In the past

three years, Pakistan's annual GDP growth rate has fallen even further, to an average of 1.9pc, due to the combined effects of the 2018 balance of payments crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hence, there is a dire need to put the economy on a high growth path that is sustainable over the long run. Growth is a necessary condition for many good things to happen not just for the economy, but politically for the PTI as well before the 2023 elections. For the first time in years, a budget has been presented that is loaded with incentives for industry, agriculture and SMEs along with potentially game-changing documentation measures. Even its underlying fiscal stance is fairly realistic, with the revenue target not completely implausible, and the fiscal deficit target broadly achievable given available cushions on the expenditure side.

Not surprisingly, the federal budget has been well received. Yet, it has a potentially fatal flaw. The problem is that budget strategy, however apt on its own, cannot operate in isolation. Entrenched constraints in the economic environment cannot be ignored or wished away, none more so than the impact of economic growth on the balance of payments.

Pakistan has a low export base and a relatively high income elasticity of imports. While various published estimates for the latter range from 0.5 to 3.2, it is relevant to note that since 2005, while real GDP growth has averaged 4.5pc, annual import growth in terms of value has averaged over 11pc. This yields an imports to GDP growth ratio of 2.5x.

The budget strategy will deliver growth but raises the risk of external account stress.

Using this ratio implies that for the projected 5pc growth rate for the next fiscal year, import growth could be around 12.5pc. Hence, imports next year could well be in the vicinity of $63-65 billion. Exports are not as responsive to domestic growth, and are likely to be around $27bn in 2021-22. With worker remittances expected to plateau at around current levels, the gap between projected imports and exports for next year yields a current account deficit of around $7bn.

Factoring in the projected external debt repayments, Pakistan's gross external financing requirement for 2021-22 thus stands at an estimated $25bn. With an expected oil facility on deferred payments from Saudi Arabia of around $2bn, and

other sources of external financing, the next year will not pose a problem. The problem could arise on current trends, however, in 2022-23 — the election year.

With GDP growth projected to accelerate to close to 6pc in 2022-23, imports could rise a further 15-18pc — on an elevated base. Of course, international energy prices, among other factors, will have a large bearing on the actual increase in import value. Nonetheless, with external debt repayments expected to remain elevated, a sharp spike in the current account deficit could produce a difficult-to-manage situation.

The risks to Pakistan's external account from the global economy over this timeframe are not insignificant, and are probably rising. A super-cycle in commodities is already playing out, which is expected to lead to sharp spikes in the prices of commodities that Pakistan imports such as petroleum products, RLNG, coal, palm oil etc. The second risk emanates from a potential tightening bias by the US Federal Reserve. With muscular spending plans by the Democrats increasing the risk of overheating in the US economy, even a change of language by the US Fed could lead to a repeat of the 'taper tantrum' the markets experienced in 2013, and a flight-to-safety of global capital that could starve external financing for countries such as Pakistan.

The government is absolutely on the right track by focusing on removing the constraints to economic growth imposed by the balance of payments. The finance minister has rightly identified exports, agriculture, ICT as the drivers of growth going forward, adding to the prime minister's focus on tourism.

The problem is that these sectors have suffered policy neglect for years, or active anti-growth policies such as in the case of exports. The reforms required to make these sectors growth drivers are not just structural in nature, but also involve very substantial institutional and governance elements. By definition, these reforms take several years of consistent and coherent implementation before they deliver results.

The process cannot be short-circuited, no matter how pressing the economic or political need for growth in the economy. The extent to which the growth versus imports trade-off has been ignored in the budget is evident from the incentives given to small cars — an industry that relies on billions of dollars of imports annually. (There is also a completely unnecessary sop to a small band of stock market speculators).

A second potential issue with the budget strategy is the instrument used for stimulus. While a slew of incentives and some business-friendly changes to the tax code could have been enough to solidify the economic momentum, the federal budget incorporates a 43pc increase in development spending. Despite the conventional wisdom, both the economic as well as political benefits of muscular development spending are questionable.

First, the spending under PSDP/ADPs suffers from large 'inside' as well as 'outside' lags. Second, the efficiency of spending under PSDP has fallen drastically since the 1990s, as measured by the IMF's Public Investment Efficiency Index, and its boost to growth as well as distribution of benefits is moot. Even politically, the strategy has been seen to be ineffective, as both the PML-Q and PML-N governments discovered to their chagrin in 2008 and 2018 respectively.

All in all, the federal budget lays an excellent foundation for growth in the short run, but ignores very real risks on the external account front.

The writer is a former member of the prime minister's economic advisory council, and heads a macro-economic consultancy based in Islamabad.

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Disrupted rhythms of the Indus By Hassan Abbas And Asghar Hussain

IN their natural state, the rivers of the Indus basin have four distinct mechanisms of water supply — snowmelt, glacial melt, rains and groundwater seepage. Snowmelt starts adding water to the tributaries of the Indus in March and April. By the time the snowmelt wanes, glacial melt kicks in in late April, reaching its apogee by late June. When the glacial melt is at its peak, the monsoon sets in too.

Between July and early September, the rivers flow to their brim and spread out wide in the floodplains, recharging the aquifers adjacent to the rivers. October through December, the rainfall is negligible and there's no snowmelt/glacial melt feeding the river, but the groundwater recharged into the aquifers starts seeping

into the river. Winter rains from January to March, along with groundwater seepage, continue to feed the river system until the cycle of snowmelt begins again. The glaciers, the monsoon, the snowmelt and the aquifers evolved over millions of years and created one of the most reliable and consistent hydrological miracles of nature.

Alexander Burnes, in his book Travels into Bokhara, describes the Sutlej river at its confluence with the Beas in the dry month of December 1831 thus: “These united rivers form a beautiful stream which is … 275 yards wide [and up to 12 feet deep]… the water was running at the rate of two miles and a quarter an hour, and was at this season perfectly clear, and free from … muddy waters [as in] the mountains. The … river had retired to its summer bed, and the melting snow had ceased to feed it.”

Conservatively, the river was carrying more than 20,000 cusecs of water when Burnes saw it. The Sutlej, Ravi, Jhelum, Chenab and Indus, at their confluence in Mithankot, used to have well over 100,000 cusecs even at a minimum. The perennial nature of the lower Indus is also evident from the Report of the Indian Irrigation Commission, 1901-03, which stated: “The Indus in Sind contains the combined waters of all the Punjab rivers, and is naturally a much less uncertain source of supply for inundation canals than any of its tributaries. The difference between a bad and a good year are much less marked; and many of the most important canals in Sind — the Sukkur, the Eastern Nara systems, and the Fuleli — have moderate perennial supplies, which are generally sufficient.”

The glaciers, the monsoon, the snowmelt and the aquifers evolved over millions of years and created one of the most reliable and consistent hydrological miracles of nature.

The agronomy and culture of Sindh evolved with the rhythms of the river. Aloys Michel, in his 1966 book The Indus Rivers describes this rhythm as: “This practice in the subcontinent … refers to a Rabi, or … crop sown early in the fall after water levels have begun to fall … cropping works in most years because evapotranspiration rates fall at the same time and because the crop is ready for harvest before the warm spring winds desiccate it.”

The Indus basin irrigation system, as developed and envisaged by the earlier British planners, was primarily a run-of-the-river system. It was fed by monsoon rains and was naturally regulated by glacial and aquifer storages. Ideas of

building dams to supplement irrigation supplies were always defeated due to the perennial nature of the river already in harmony with irrigation needs.

After independence, however, India rudely demonstrated its intentions to cut off the water supply of the Ravi, Sutlej and Beas to Pakistan, which was not possible without building dams. If that was not enough of a disruption in the natural rhythm of the Indus, Pakistan insisted on building its own dams as part of replacement works, despite technical assessments suggesting that Pakistan's irrigation system could effectively work as a run-of-the-river system, without the need for dams.

In its natural state, snowmelt and glacial-melt waters were always available in the river in the early hot and dry months of summer. However, since the plugging of five large dams in the system, dam managers today have to follow their dam manuals which mandate them to fill the reservoirs as early as possible when the summer flows start. Consequently, every year in early summer, when farmers are yearning for water for summer sowing, the dam managers are blocking the snowmelt/glacial melt in their reservoirs, creating artificial water shortages downstream.

Since 1974-75, Wapda's data on the inflow and outflow from the Tarbela reservoir shows that the dam has never been able to transfer waters collected in a wetter year over to the next year. The data shows that the dam has released an average of just over 5.5 MAF of water in winters which was collected in summers. Given 10 per cent ecological consumption in the riverbed, and the irrigation system's conveyance losses of 50pc, a little over 2 MAF of water released from Tarbela reaches the farm gate. In other words, out of a total of 104 MAF of water diverted for irrigation, Tarbela's effective contribution remains under 3pc. Such a meagre contribution is statistically insignificant as it is well within the natural variability of the system. The data from Wapda, therefore, clearly demonstrates that, one, our irrigation system is sustained by run-of-the-river systems and not dams, and two, that the earlier analysis that dams are not required in the system is validated. The story of Mangla is no different.

Politically, those dams may be touted as 'monumental achievements'; scientifically, however, they are massive plugs choking nature. Economically, they drown us in debts; and socially, they are an engine of discord among the denizens of the basin.

The society and agronomy of the Indus basin evolved in harmony with the rhythms of the river. The disrupted rhythm of the river has disrupted society. The disputes over water between the inhabitants of the upper and lower basin will continue as long as the rhythms of the rivers are not allowed to be in sync. Treating the symptoms with accords, treaties or telemetries will never resolve the Sindh-Punjab or Pakistan-India disputes. Let's address the cause. Let's restore the river's rhythms, and thus of the people around it.

The writers are experts on hydrology and water resources.

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Quest for truth By Zubeida Mustafa

IN media parlance what would the Bahria Town Karachi incident that took place on Sunday, June 6 be called? It was not fake news, considering that a large number of protesters and the police were involved and some violence also occurred that day on Super Highway. But the way the facts were twisted by a section of the media, both social and mainstream, one would certainly call it a case of misreporting.

The impression was sought to be created that the protesters — including various civil society groups and people who have been struggling to save their ancestral lands from the avarice of the land grabbers — resorted to violence and arson. But from the accounts of those present on the scene (I spoke to Sheema Kermani of Tehreek-i-Niswan and Khuda Dino Shah from the Indigenous Peoples) an altogether different picture emerges: it was clearly a false flag operation to vilify the protesters and spread dissension among the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Sindh's population.

The truth is that this is nothing new. Efforts to subvert the true picture have always existed. What has changed is the scale and speed at which news circulates. The advent of the social media has virtually freed information from editorial intervention. This makes the reader/viewer/listener vulnerable to false information. And how devastating this can be is absolutely stunning.

Others prefer to label this phenomenon 'misinformation' or 'disinformation', or, simply, 'myths'. In my days of active journalism such news was 'planted' invariably by the powers that be. When Noam Chomsky wrote about this issue he

termed it as ‘propaganda’ which was a popular term during World War II as it was almost as effective a tool of war as weapons that destroyed human life. Though known by different names the phenomenon of deception and deliberately misleading readers/viewers/listeners has existed ever since modes of mass communication came into being for news and messages to immediately reach people in massive numbers.

News travels quickly and without any editorial checks.

New devices and portable technology have made the transmission of news an operation fraught with potential risks. News travels without any editorial checks and to such huge numbers that the damage when it is done is almost irreversible.

To give an example, there are fake stories doing the rounds on WhatsApp and Facebook, and sometimes on TV channels as well, about the coronavirus vaccine. Science celebrities are wrongly quoted as warning the people not to get themselves vaccinated as the consequences could be lethal. With low levels of education and lack of awareness, it is not surprising that a large number of people end up believing this misleading information instead of trying to verify the facts, and are hesitant to get themselves vaccinated. Sections of the mainstream media itself are often found lacking in their role as a link between the government and the people in terms of disseminating information that is factual, or correcting misconceptions.

This kind of reporting — if it can be described as such — spreads confusion and instability. People do not know what to believe and what not to believe. They are confused and this causes anxiety and even paranoia.

In fact, the damage that this phenomenon has caused to mental health, as it is now emerging, is a major destabilising factor in our environment. For years, health professionals have been warning about the rise of mental illness in the country. The general deficit of trust that this leads to has resulted in a breakdown of discipline which is so evident in our national life.

We have lived in this atmosphere of falsehood and chicanery for ages. Not that we have not struggled against it and tried to neutralise its impact. But clearly the perils of ‘fake news’ are growing. This should not be allowed to go on. How? By spreading awareness and reducing the craving for sensationalism by involving non-media institutions such as universities and students groups in a campaign against fake news. It is true that some political thinkers and analysts have tried to

create awareness about this bombardment of misinformation and suggested ways and means to combat it. But a concerted effort on this front is lacking.

Last week, at an HRCP webinar, a speaker suggested that the commission should set up a website to verify any news that is doing the rounds and has the potential of being fake. This is a commendable and doable recommendation as the HRCP has traditionally investigated incidents related to human rights in order to verify them. The website could just carry the verified report without any editorial comments. People hungry for truth will find it there as well as peace of mind because the HRCP carries credibility. It would a positive step towards lessening the impact of fake news.

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Food insufficiency By Tasneem Noorani

IT was sobering to learn that Pakistan had imported $6.12 billion worth of foodstuff in the first nine months of the current financial year, up 54 per cent from last year. This includes (in rounded figures) $1bn of wheat, $2bn of palm oil, $0.5bn each of pulses, tea and milk products and $127 million of sugar.

If you extrapolate that for the last quarter of the year and add $2bn of cotton (we already imported $1.5bn in nine months), we reach a conservative figure of $9.5bn imports of agricultural products. This is appalling. Despite the trillion-rupee concession to our export industry, we will hardly reach an export figure of $24bn. For a country where 70pc of the population is engaged in agriculture is it not shameful we spend almost 40pc of what we earn in importing agricultural produce, supposedly our area of strength?

The Federal Committee on Agriculture says that despite an unprecedented good wheat harvest (28.75 million tons), exceeding the target by 2m, we will still need to import 1m ton for strategic reserves, a requirement that will rise further when

we consider the needs of 1.5m Afghan refugees and 300,000 tons of smuggling to Afghanistan. The centre is reportedly planning to import 4m tons to play it safe; it is likely to cost $1bn.

Is anyone doing anything to address this? We have the Ministry of National Food Security and Research at the centre, with agriculture departments in each province and an equal number of irrigation departments, plus provincial food departments, research institutes, the Zaria Taraqiati Bank etc. Yet we spend 40pc of our export income on importing food and agricultural products.

Agriculture is only paid lip service.

One reason for this is the romance of past governments and the present government with infrastructure projects and the complete lack of priority for agriculture, only paying it lip service.

I heard the speech of an MNA in parliament where he informed the house that the Punjab government wants to convert the Bahawalpur Research Institute into the provincial secretariat of the proposed government of South Punjab. The Multan Cotton Research Institute has been closed and large swathes of land of the Cotton and Textile Institute Karachi were handed over to the US Embassy.

The contempt and low esteem that the government holds agriculture research institutions in is evident in these actions. This contempt for research is seen across the board. Rather than improve research in the country the solution seems to be to close down such institutions and leave everything to either the private sector or imports.

The management of wheat, which is the main staple of the masses, has been the responsibility of the provincial food departments. Their responsibilities entail how much to procure; at what support price; the timing of the announcement of the support price; the pace of release of stock to the flour mills; keeping a watch over wheat across the district to provincial boundaries to check hoarding and smuggling; and when and how much to import in case of a possible shortage.

A lot of these decisions have financial implication worth billions. Because of the risk involved and the fear of blowback, officers and ministers have stopped taking timely decisions. Resultantly, avoidable shortages occur leading to an increase in prices and panic imports.

While we talk about water shortage, and see squabbling among the provinces we rarely hear about water-saving schemes. The practice of flood irrigation, a luxury for those with ample water supply, continues unquestioned. Drip and sprinkle irrigation schemes were introduced some years back but implementation remained on a pilot project scale. Methods like furrow irrigation, which can save up to 50pc of water, with enhanced production, are not even on our radar screen.

Controlling the population increase, or the number of mouths to feed, is nowhere to be seen. Bangladesh started off with a larger population 50 years back and today has 37m less mouths to feed than us.

I am no expert on agriculture but my heart cries when we spend precious foreign exchange on buying food while we claim to be an agricultural country. Rectifying the problem is a complex matter entailing adequate water supply, producing quality seed, making adequate amounts of fertiliser available at an affordable price, effective agriculture extension to impart best practices, good research institutions to innovate based on local conditions, providing correct and unadulterated pesticide, and other interventions.

A range of government ministries, departments and corporations are responsible for various aspects of agriculture. In order for all of them to function simultaneously to make an impact, we need a supra body for agriculture like the NCOC, which has done good work to control Covid. It is only when all aspects of agriculture and food production, especially for import substitution, are kept on our radar screen that we may have success.

The writer is a former civil servant.

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Cost of enforced modesty By Pervez Hoodbhoy

IMPLEMENTATION of the PTI's Single National Curriculum has started in Islamabad's schools and for students the human body is to become a dark mystery, darker than ever before. Religious scholars appointed as members of the SNC Committee are supervising the content of schoolbooks in all subjects

including science. In the name of Islamic morality they have warned textbook publishers not to print any diagram or sketch in biology textbooks that show human figures “sans clothes”.

For the teaching of biology this surpasses existing de facto prohibitions on teaching evolution, the foundational principle of biological sciences. Illustrations are crucial to explain the digestive system (with both entrance and exit points) and human reproduction, as well as the mammary gland. Diagrams, sketches and human skeletal forms cannot be draped. Excluding these from schoolbooks reduces the teaching of biology to a farce.

Inhibitions about the human body, of course, have been around for much longer than SNC. It’s just that henceforth there will be still more. I have looked at a few biology textbooks published in past years by the Punjab and Sindh Textbook Boards and could not find meaningful accounts of mammalian organs and processes needed to sustain life on earth.

In one book from 1996 I did find a diagrammatised rabbit. But with essential parts fuzzed out, it is difficult to figure out whether it was male or female or the equipment that rabbits need to reproduce themselves. That someone should think an un-fuzzed diagram of this little animal would titillate students or stimulate promiscuous behaviour stumps me.

When enforced, clerical interpretations of modesty — translated as sharm-o-haya — cause people to suffer grievously. For example, ex-senator Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan, former provincial secretary of the MMA, roundly condemned diagnostic devices that can look inside women’s bodies because, “We think that men could derive sexual pleasure from women’s bodies while conducting ECG or ultrasound”. Claiming that women would lure men under the pretext of medical procedures, the maulana’s party banned ECG and ultrasound for women by male technicians and doctors when in power in KP. Trained females, however, were not to be found.

By inviting mullahs to regulate biology textbooks the PTI government has put Pakistan in reverse gear.

While sharm-o-haya applies to all, females bear the brunt. Culturally, ‘breast’ is a taboo word and so breast cancer cannot easily be called ‘breast cancer’. This makes early detection hugely difficult and accounts for Pakistan’s rate of breast cancer being the highest in South Asia. Most women feel embarrassed in coming

forward; only when the pain becomes unbearable and when the cancer metastasizes does a woman finally confide in someone. By that time it is too late. Ovaries? Thousands of Pakistani women die yearly of ovarian and cervical cancer but ‘ovaries’ and ‘cervix’ are words too delicate to ever mention.

With such deep social inhibitions, should women become doctors? This appears an odd question. Presently, about 70 per cent of medical students in Pakistan are female. Our brightest girls get sent to medical college by their parents but mostly to become trophy brides who never practise their profession. Nevertheless, this begs the question: can females become real doctors with their restricted medical knowledge? Would they ever be permitted to study the whole body, including the male anatomy? Or are women doctors only to treat sore throats or become midwives?

Over time the clerically supervised PTI school curriculum will magnify body-related taboos. Even today no one in government dares talk openly about population planning or contraceptives except with bated breath and only after looking over their shoulder. Although Pakistan produces as many people as the state of Israel every two years, yet it abolished the ministry for population planning long ago. It was replaced with some obscure, non-functioning organisation in each province.

Called the Population Welfare Department, the replacement was named to suit our ‘cultural sensitivities’. The name implicitly suggests welfare for Pakistanis is possible irrespective of how many of us there are. PWD websites have fancy graphics but no content because ways to limit conception would violate sharm-o-haya. How the human species propagates appears to be a dark national secret that must be kept under wraps. Presumably, the morals of Pakistani society will be wrecked if we discover how babies are made. Somehow it’s okay to breed like rabbits but not okay to know how rabbits breed.

Denying basic anatomical knowledge keeps minds clean, say our clerics. This could not be more false. Unsated curiosity and sexual repression drove internet pornographic traffic from Pakistan so high that PTA finally blocked porn sites. Until November 2011 internet cafes were principal porn dispensers and these promptly collapsed after the ban, ruining their owners. One hears, however, that paths to proscribed materials have simply shifted elsewhere. Who knows?

Sharm-o-haya makes protecting children from sexual predators much more difficult. Sometime ago, the PTI minister for human rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, declared at the launch of the Child Protection Campaign that 'Pakistan was ranked as the country with the largest numbers of child pornography viewers'. She suggested that campaigns should be launched at the school level to sensitise students to the menace.

Mazari is, of course, very correct. Her proposal would work far better at protecting children than having child killers and rapists swing from lamp posts, a popular demand. But such educational campaigns require making children aware of basic biological facts so that they can tell between proper and improper behaviour. How can that possibly square with Imran Khan's and Shafqat Mehmood's clerically supervised SNC?

The guardians of sharm-o-haya find undraped diagrams shameful. Yet, to protect their own kind, they suppress every scandal that might implicate them. Earlier this week, unchallengeable video evidence emerged of a mufti's sexual wrongdoing with a madressah lad. While he was stripped of his madressah teaching post after investigation, no cleric suggested Sharia punishment and all religious parties stayed mum.

Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries used to be the world's most stoutly conservative countries while Pakistan was counted among the more open, relaxed ones. This has changed. Presently, Pakistan is not just in reverse gear, it is hell-bent upon moving backward as fast as possible. The kind of mixed-up, confused and ignorant generations PTI's curriculum changes will produce in times ahead is absolutely terrifying.

The writer is an Islamabad-based physicist and author.

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ECP roars back By Fahd Husain

WHEN sanity returns, it does so with whispering feet.

The electoral reforms bill bulldozed through the National Assembly by the government is a dangerous legislation that bodes ill for our democratic system of checks and balances. The bill dilutes the power of the Election Commission of

Pakistan (ECP) while ordering the implementation of half-baked measures like the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and the right of vote to overseas Pakistanis. It is also scarred with reckless amendments like basing delimitation of constituencies on the number of registered voters instead of the population as is the standard.

In other words, the bill is a shocking manifestation of the PTI government's unilateral push to have its way regardless of the consequences for the system as a whole. But now, finally, it appears that the government may stand chastened.

Or almost.

Much has happened since Dawn published a detailed story on the ECP's objections and reservations on the electoral reforms bill. The story brought into public view the gravity of the ECP's concerns and the consequences — including constitutional ones — of barrelling ahead with the bill and making it into law. Since its publication, there has been a flurry of activity in Islamabad with both the government and the opposition reaching out to the ECP for greater consultation. A delegation of the ECP has also briefed President Arif Alvi on the commission's reservations and the president, according to a press release, has emphasised that ECP should have a major say in what is included in the bill.

On Friday, leader of the opposition in the National Assembly and PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif fired off a letter to Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja in which he wrote: "The Election Commission of Pakistan has itself expressed serious concerns regarding the recent election bill bulldozed through the National Assembly in an objectionable manner. Any election-related legislation must be based on broad-based consensus … It is thus responsibility of ECP to hold an inclusive dialogue with all political parties … I urge you to invite all opposition parties for consultation to achieve a consensus-based reform plan, which can then be presented before the parliament for passage, to ensure that future elections are fair, transparent and reflect the genuine will of the electorate."

The bill is a shocking manifestation of the PTI government's unilateral push to have its way.

In a latest compilation of its reservations on the bill, the ECP has quantified its response to the amendments and the numbers tell their own story. The total number of amendments in the Election Act 2017 are 72. Of these 72, the new ECP document breaks down its response as follows:

Amendments not supported by the ECP for being inconsistent with the Constitution/Powers of ECP — (15)

Amendments not supported by the ECP for being inconsistent with the Elections Act 2017 — (5)

Amendments not supported by the ECP on administrative and general grounds — (17)

Amendments supported by the ECP but with some further amendments — (8)

Amendments supported with no objections — (27)

The numbers tell a grim story indeed. Out of the 72 amendments drafted by the government, the ECP does not support, fully or partially, 45 of these amendments. The equation 45/72 should give the government's drafters of this controversial bill some serious food for thought. This is not how you make laws that are meant to improve on the electoral system. We need to be looking not just at the 2023 elections but the many ones after that. Who was it high up in this government who recently bemoaned the lack of long-term planning?

The president has set a constructive tone with the ECP. The leader of the opposition has made a sensible demand. The ECP has done its homework. The bill that has been bulldozed through the National Assembly should not be forced through the Senate in its present form. People involved in the negotiations — belated as they are — over the fate of the bill now say the bill will be debated afresh in the Senate standing committee. It is here that the opposition will get a chance to propose further amendments and have the controversial — and unconstitutional — clauses removed. According to these sources, the Senate committee is also expected to invite officials from the ECP to the meeting and these officials will then present the detailed analysis of the flaws in the bill that have already been reported by Dawn. The government has shown some flexibility on the matter. We may see some constructive headway in the coming days.

But don't get your hopes too high. The PTI government's obsession with EVMs and overseas Pakistanis enfranchisement may yet play the spoiler in this endless drama. The ECP's analysis and opinion does not reject these two amendments in totality but says certain steps have to be taken before these amendments can become feasible. These steps will require debate, and patience and

accommodation and, yes, some give and take. Knowing PTI, none of this would be easily digestible. So the chances of a solution emerging from this controversy versus the whole thing going up in flames is, well, fifty-fifty.

These odds don't work too well when the future of free and fair elections are at stake. Such is the state of democratic politics in Pakistan today that something as basic as constructing a solid electoral game plan remains a toss-up. The ECP has done well to assert itself. This is the commission's moment. It must not compromise on its constitutional mandate, and it must not — for any reason — allow its powers to be diluted. If anything, we need the ECP to be more strong, more empowered and more willing to flex its muscles to ensure that the will of the people is reflected accurately through the ballot box.

Sanity is good. Perhaps though it is time to stop whispering it, and start shouting from the rooftops.

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Meeting at the top By A.G. Noorani

SUMMITS, as meetings between heads of state and government are called, are as old as mankind itself. The recent summits which President Joe Biden undertook hold lessons in summitry which has provoked a mass of literature of uneven quality. On his visit to the UK, he was treated to all the pageantry for which the British are famous. Of his 'summit' with Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the less said the better.

The entire objective of Biden's excursion was to repair the damage which Donald Trump had inflicted on America's ties with Western Europe and with Nato. "I want all Europe to know that the United States is there." He amplified "Nato is critically important to us" and that Article 5 is a "sacred obligation".

This provision of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 embodies the pledge that a military attack on a member of the alliance will be regarded as an attack on each and all. This was not evident after 9/11. The allies rushed to declare their responsibility. President G.W. Bush decided to go it alone while asking for the allies to contribute their troops.

On June 16, Biden went to Geneva to meet Russia's President Vladimir Putin but not before he had let loose a volley of epithets on Putin. He had referred to him as a "killer".

It was Winston Churchill who first used the word 'summit' in 1953 soon after Stalin's death. He proposed that "a conference on the highest level should take place between the leading powers without long delay". He added that "if there is not at the summits of the nations the will to win the greatest prize ... doom-laden responsibility will fall upon those who now possess the power to decide". After this speech the word became part of political vocabulary.

There must be the will to listen, to confer and to compromise.

However, Churchill's own foreign office baulked at the idea. The US secretary of state was cool to it. Accordingly, only a foreign ministers' conference took place that year. The only postwar Big Four Summit to meet was the Geneva Conference from July 18 to 23, 1955.

On the one side are those who regard summitry as a panacea for all international ills. On the other stand the critics who condemn it as worse than useless, as in fact positively dangerous.

There are examples of successful summits held not after some improvement in relations but while the countries were tottering on the brink. The Nehru-Liaquat meeting in 1950, for instance. What distinguished them was that, although the objective situation was bad, there was on both sides such an overwhelming desire to mend matters as to make the summit worthwhile. There must be at least the will to listen, to confer and to compromise. Without these, the best prepared summit will fail.

However, such is the complexity of most modern problems that even where the will to meet does exist, the summit would be futile if the diplomatic groundwork is not done well and in advance.

Lack of prior preparation is the principal ground of expert criticism of summits. George F. Kennan has explained the necessity for such preparation: "The multitude of ulterior problems that press upon a prime minister or a head of state is so great that no single subject, especially one not regarded as of primary importance, is apt to receive detailed and exhaustive attention. Nor can the

senior statesmen stay with a problem for any great length of time. Their time is precious, other responsibilities take them away."

There has, however, recently come into being a new variant of the old summit. It is a summit at which you just get to know and to understand without professedly negotiating. Winston Churchill himself wanted a conference which "should not be overhung by a ponderous or rigid agenda, or led into mazes and jungles of technical details, zealously contested by hordes of experts and officials drawn up in vast, cumbrous array. … It should meet with a measure of informality and a still greater measure of privacy and seclusion". There is little question that where there exists some misunderstanding as to each other's intentions such talks could be useful. President Kennedy wanted to size up his man and warn him of the dangers of miscalculation at Vienna in 1961.

But such is the charm of the summit that these hazards are often lost sight of. The summit becomes an end in itself. The instrument of policy becomes its master.

The result is a complete absence of policy and a corruption of diplomacy. This then is the balance sheet. There are advantages and disadvantages. Whether a summit should be held or not is a purely practical question which should be answered without any sentimentality. Heads of state can resolve impasses better than officials. But preparation and a spirit of compromise are a must especially if problems are complex.

The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.

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Honouring diversity By Farhan Anwar

THERE are few cities in the world hosting such rich cultural diversity as Karachi — a diversity reflected in the multiplicity of languages spoken across cultural and ethnic divides. Karachi always had been a cosmopolitan city, hosting at the time of Partition people belonging to the Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Jain, Jewish and other religious identities. While religious plurality declined after independence, Karachi soon started attracting people from all parts of Pakistan because of the economic opportunities it had to offer. It assumed the title of 'Mini-Pakistan' — a pulsating crucible of sociocultural, linguistic and ethnic pluralities.

In such cities, efforts are made to leverage demographic diversity to create a vibrant, resilient society. Unfortunately, now for reasons mostly political, this diversity, instead of acting as a source of celebration is increasingly serving as the fault line of contestation and fragmentation, reflected not just in social and communal distancing but also in spatial segregation.

This growing fragmentation often manifests itself in violence. The Afghan war gave birth to the 'Kalashnikov' culture. One damaging consequence of our involvement in the war was that Karachi became a hotbed of religious extremism, where radical forces with political agendas tried to pit communities against each other based on religious identity, the most common being efforts to distance the Sunni and Shia communities.

These fissures were instigated by fringe elements within the religious divides and not reflective of the views of the larger communities. However, a fear scenario was created, resulting in social and spatial distancing. Religious minorities, while less a victim of actual violence in the city, nevertheless are discriminated against in matters of access to housing, employment and education. Of late, a troubling element adding fuel to this divisive scenario is that political parties are being associated with ethnic identities with the costs manifesting themselves at the policy and institutional level such as in preferences in public hiring and contracts, control over land, services and violence.

Few cities are as culturally diverse as Karachi.

These are troubling scenarios. However, cities in much greater stress have bounced back, leveraging 'culture' as a 'bonding' force. One example is that of Medellin City in Colombia. Medellin, not too long ago, was known as the 'Machine Gun City' — the base of Pablo Escobar, head of a leading global drug cartel and considered the most violent city in the world. However, after undergoing an urban transformation based on the philosophy of 'social urbanism', it is now a tourist haven. The conflict the city faced was largely rooted in the decades-old civil war fought between government forces, far-right military groups and crime syndicates that had engulfed Colombia, pitting communities against each other. A major catalyst for the successful social urbanism experiment was a cultural policy introduced by the government to leverage Medellin's cultural diversity for bonding communities that were earlier in conflict.

The cultural policy, a participatory initiative, based within the framework of cultural, territorial and city planning, created an interface of political and cultural thinking. Specific objectives included consolidating a culture of peace, based on dialogue, andpeaceful resolution of social conflicts, promoting access to cultural goods, services and ensuring policy, financial and institutional spaces for the creation and dissemination of productions and copyright. At its core was a conscious effort to promote tolerance and facilitate emerging expressions with active engagement of multiple actors in urban cultural development.

Another successful case study is that of Los Angeles City, the first US city to have a non-native mayor and where 56 per cent of the population speak a language other than English at home. Various initiatives had been taken to use diversity as a force of bonding rather than conflict. In April 2017, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission (now Department of Arts and Culture) released the Cultural Equity & Inclusion Initiative report to ensure that everyone in LA County had equal access to arts and culture, improving inclusion in the wider artistic community. The Countywide Cultural Policy was enacted to foster an organisational culture that values and celebrates arts, culture and creativity, strengthening cultural inclusion. LA has proven to be a city that builds resilience and vibrancy through celebrating cultural diversity.

We can take inspiration from such cities that, in terms of cultural diversity and a history of violence, probably exceed even the Karachi experience. Policy-based initiatives, followed by appropriate financial, institutional and programmatic arrangements can help heal the growing societal fissures that threaten this city's peace and future sustainability.

The writer is an urban planner and CEO, Urban Collaborative.

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No choice but to leave By Usama Khilji

REFUGEES are amongst the most vulnerable groups of people by virtue of being at the mercy of other states when it is no longer safe for them to remain at home. It is an uprooting process that is painful and tragic, and must be made as easy as possible by host states on purely humanitarian grounds. History shows that one never knows when they may become a refugee.

Refugees bring in new ideas and skills, contribute to the economy, and expand the market base in a host country, apart from having a high success rate due to the fact that they often have to work extra hard to prove their value as well as to settle in a new country. It is important to note that all refugees leave their homes not by choice but by compulsion, and most would rather be back at home.

This World Refugee Day (June 20), it is important to consider the state of refugees residing in Pakistan, the refugees created due to the policies of the Pakistani state, and prepare for the influx of displaced people that Pakistan may get in the near future.

The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan is likely to increase again with the US withdrawal.

Pakistan has been recognised for opening up its borders to Afghan refugees in the past three decades, which is highly admirable, and playing host to the largest refugee population in the world for the longest time. However, legal issues have persisted for Afghans in Pakistan since the beginning, especially in the absence of any specific legal protections. Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Optional Protocol, and hence does not even have the word ‘refugee’ mentioned in any of its laws.

Afghans who have lived here all their life including an entire generation that was born here and has known no other country as its home continue to be governed by the Foreigners Act of 1946 which sees them as ‘aliens’. This has meant a lot of police harassment, social prejudice and discrimination in basic services such as banking. The lack of a refugee law has also meant that refugees can be asked to leave Pakistan at any point, without any legal protection under the international humanitarian law principle of non-refoulement. Under this, states cannot forcibly send back refugees to their home country where there is a credible threat of persecution.

The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan is likely to increase again with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan scheduled for September, and the corresponding increase in violence in Afghanistan, which never really stopped. In fact, the Afghan Taliban are taking over more territory, terrorising Afghans, and continuing to target women, journalists, judges and humanitarian workers amongst others. Pakistan’s historical relationship with the Taliban, whereby their government was recognised in the 1990s, and the links the state continues to enjoy with them,

must be leveraged to stop the violence in Afghanistan for peace to materialise there, and to prevent Afghans from having to seek refuge in other countries again, including Pakistan.

Pakistan must also keep its doors open for refugees from Myanmar who are being persecuted by a violent military dictatorship; the same military has been involved in the genocide of the Rohingya community. Moreover, Pakistan must stop supplying weapons and air force supplies to Myanmar until the dictatorship ends as Pakistani exports should not be used to further massacres abroad.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's promise to Afghans born in Pakistan that they will get Pakistani citizenship — the Citizenship Act 1951 stipulates that anyone born in Pakistan will be a citizen — is yet to materialise. It must be speeded up. However, Pakistan's arrangements to include Afghans in the Covid-19 vaccination campaign is admirable, and worthy of emulation in Europe and elsewhere where refugees are struggling to get inoculated due to their immigration status. Pakistan must also expand the vaccination campaign to unregistered Afghans in Pakistan, which number around 1.5 million currently.

Pakistan also needs to focus its human rights strategy to protect religious minorities, dissidents, and ethnic minorities — groups that are compelled to leave this country for asylum abroad due to threats to their life and safety. This includes Ahmadis, Hindus, members of the Hazara community, Christians and political and other dissidents. Most end up in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Australia, Sweden, Italy, Greece, Australia, Canada, etc. In 2019, more than 33,000 Pakistanis applied for asylum abroad, of which 21.3 per cent were accepted, and another 20pc of the rejected applications were accepted in review, numbering a total of 7,554, as per World Data.

Prosecution of those who threaten, discriminate against and persecute religious minorities must be ensured under the law quickly, and the abuse of the blasphemy laws and Ordinance XX to persecute minorities, and settle personal scores must be discouraged and prosecuted too.

The highest number of Pakistani asylum seekers are going to Europe, where they are often smuggled in by mafias who profit off the despair of the poor or marginalised by charging exorbitant amounts. I had a chance to interact with Pakistani refugees in northern France where they often camp for months and are mistreated by the local authorities. They face a similar situation in Greece.

Another major factor causing Pakistanis to take great risks to migrate is economic hardships; though not life-threatening in an immediate sense it is gravely impacting the quality of life of citizens. The government has not helped this situation much by boasting about the high amounts of remittances by overseas Pakistanis and the increase in 'export' of labour from Pakistan. Instead, the government should be improving the economic situation in Pakistan so that citizens can stay at home, be employed or set up businesses and be able to earn and contribute to the economy.

To conclude, it is essential that Pakistan signs the Refugee Convention 1951 and brings laws up to date to protect refugees, takes measures to improve the situation of minorities so they are not compelled to leave, and leverage a peaceful policy in the neighbourhood to prevent the further influx of refugees in the region.

The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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Train crash tragedy foretold By Abbas Nasir

MEDIA is often slammed for focusing on far too many negative things but even if we were to ignore in the name of 'positivity' the governing PTI's appalling conduct in the National Assembly and the unsavoury PML-N reaction it triggered, there is an issue that can't be brushed under the carpet.

We would if it were not absolutely unambiguous criminal conduct that led to yet another train disaster costing dozens of lives, destroying as many families and plunging them into grief and despair earlier this month. I say "absolutely unambiguous criminal conduct" with great responsibility.

In the June 17 issue of Dawn, exactly 10 days after the train tracks near Ghotki resembled killing fields with human blood splattered all over with dozens of dead bodies and the injured being cut out of the mangled mass of steel that were once carriages, Dawn's Muhammad Hussain Khan broke the story that higher-ups had been warned of an impending disaster but did nothing to prevent it.

I am taking the liberty of reproducing some parts of that news story which, though the top story on Page 15 (the South region page), may have been missed by readers who did not go through each page. On a different news priority day, it may have made the outer pages.

Just a reminder, PR is Pakistan Railways and FGIR is Federal Government Inspector of Railways. Both are mentioned in the report that underlines the callous disregard for human life:

Higher-ups had been warning of an impending disaster but did nothing to prevent it.

“Sukkur Division superintendent Tariq Latif’s letters, available with Dawn, which were sent in quick succession to PR authorities point out issues confronting tracks’ condition, unwilling permanent way staff, lack of human resource, machinery and ‘missing’ staff in the division.

“He had faced severe criticism from PR management for speaking to media following the tragedy as he had told television channels and correspondents that he had already cautioned authorities against the danger and sought rehabilitation of tracks.

“Surprisingly, the officer in his April 7, 2021, letter addressed (in the wake of derailment of Karachi Express’s coaches near Mando Dero on March 3) to the FGIR stated he (FIGR) harboured grudge against him for reporting against him about purchase of material for railway stations’ establishment.

“FGIR Farrukh Taimoor arrived at Daharki railway station and then visited Sukkur railway station on Wednesday in connection with the inquiry. FGIR’s team, which conducted inquiries into train accidents, would carry out the probe on June 16-18.

“The superintendent’s last letter dated May 26 was addressed to chief executive officer (CEO) of PR in which he mentioned ‘during inspection ever since taking over the charge he had found the track in a dilapidated state’.

“The letter said: ‘Running was found very much rough, oscillatory, jerky, bumpy, camel riding and fittings, fastenings, joint bolts, fish plates were found missing and loosely packed and not tightened properly.’

“He explained that it depicted the track was not maintained as per required standard specification, track geometry and way and works manual. ‘God forbid, any eventuality may take place. It reflects permanent way subordinate staff is not taking interest in performance of their duties properly although they have been reprimanded time and again and served with show-cause notices and explanation calls.

“He said: ‘They have lost interest in their work and have ceased to be efficient employees as they have been posted in this division since decades’.

“Concluding the letter he sought intervention of CEO in ‘this important safety related issue. Existing permanent way subordinates may be replaced with experienced and skilled ones to ensure proper maintenance of the track, safe train operation and avoidance of any incident on this account’.

“On May 24, the officer drew the CEO’s attention towards ‘dearth of operational officers and officials and staff of essential categories in Sukkur division that is adversely affecting performance, punctuality and safety of trains. Sukkur division has concentration of work during night. Human resource at least in essential categories of the division highlighted earlier has to be as per sanctioned strength,’ ” he said.

“He requested filling essential operational vacancies on priority as this state of affairs had rendered the division vulnerable and said ‘it was difficult, if not impossible, to ensure punctuality, safety and routine administrative work’.

“He went on to state: ‘If any operational hazard takes place, its responsibility will rest with headquarters office in Lahore as posts of 10 permanent ways inspectors (PWIs) grade-II, two PWIs in grade-I and 11 AWIs are vacant and ‘condition of the track is terrible’.

“Earlier on March 11, 2021, while referring to his previous letters of February and November last year, the officer submitted to CEO that ‘in view of safety of train operation, it is again suggested that a comprehensive plan for rehabilitation of track infrastructure may be prepared so as to ensure safe train operation, efficiency of department and to avoid any incident on this account’.

“About the rails, he mentioned that the rails mostly laid between 1962 and 1989 on main line had outlived their useful track life and needed urgent replacement.

Mostly sleepers had also outlived their usefulness as they were laid in 1964-1984, he said.

“Citing major issues, he said, ‘high capacity wagons and increase in frequency of trains have reduced maintenance time and is affecting track infrastructure. Old aged track infrastructure needs complete renewal on entire section’.”

The official reaction so far: PR Chairman Habibur Rehman Gilani told Geo TV that the tracks repairs required billions of rupees that can’t be spent as the ML-1 (the fast-train infrastructure under CPEC) will require that this track is discarded and a new one laid at a huge cost.

And the incorruptible and efficient Railways Minister Azam Swati says ‘as the minister’, he does not drive trains or runs the railways on a day-to-day basis so won’t accept responsibility, won’t even consider resigning.

Some of Mr Swati’s illustrious colleagues blamed the PML-N for the tragedy which left office in August 2018. Need one say more? No. Or we might be told how things are done in the West.

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Courts & the poor By Arif Hasan

THE judgement of the Supreme Court permitting the demolition of houses along the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs has reinforced the opinion of a number of civil society organisations that Karachi’s planning and policy decisions are governed by a strong anti-poor bias including by the judicial system. For one, it is almost impossible for low-income communities to access the justice system and were it not for a few public-spirited lawyers, they would probably remain unrepresented. Even when they raise funds to hire lawyers, they are treated with indifference and with hostility and suspicion by the court staff. They are asked to attend hearings which are often rescheduled without notice. Petitioners also complain that they are often not allowed to enter the court to participate in the proceedings.

The Supreme Court has also ordered the demolition of leased houses along the nullahs because it thinks that these leases are fake. One is at pains to understand how it knows this without an investigation. It is also pertinent to ask

here if it would also order the demolition of leased houses in middle-income or elite settlements without investigating their leased status.

There are also different criteria for judgements related to the poor and those related to the rich. For example, Bahria Town was fined Rs460 billion, and the land that it illegally occupied was regularised at a fraction of its market value. Nobody associated with this enormous land scam has been arrested or charged. Members of the police force and civil administration that coerced landowners to surrender their lands to Bahria Town and against whom FIRs for murder have been registered, are free for the last many years and proceedings against them do not take place.

Justice eludes those whose homes have been demolished.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's Bani Gala residence was regularised at Rs6.66 per square yard and so were the Hyatt Regency violations of the Islamabad Master Plan. Meanwhile, demands of katchi abadi residents for the regularisation of their homes in informal settlements have been consistently denied.

The demolitions along the Karachi nullahs are not purely based on technical issues but are also political in nature. The number of demolitions that were supposed to take place along the Manzoor Colony nullah were 1,205. However, they have been reduced to 56 because the nine-metre roads that were to be built on either side of them are no longer being built. This change, according to the local population, has taken place because the local MPA is from the PPP and he had the ear of the provincial government.

The demolitions along the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs are in PTI constituencies and the residents claim that the PTI have not intervened on their behalf. The reason why the number of houses to be demolished is so high on these nullahs is because nine-metre roads are being built on either side of them. First of all, these roads are illegal because they do not form part of any larger plan for the area. The Supreme Court has ordered the demolition of settlements but has not ordered to stop building of illegal roads. Residents claim, with considerable logic, that they are being built because the Gujjar nullah links the Northern Bypass to the Lyari Expressway and this makes land on either side of it prime property that the developers are anxious to grab. Meanwhile, so far no demolition has taken place, or even officially identified, of illegal construction by elite and government encroachments on the natural drainage system of the city.

The Supreme Court has also not commented on the inadequacy of the compensation being provided to the victims which is Rs15,000 per month as rent for two years. This cannot provide them with a home and after two years of living in insecurity and misery, they will probably find a home along some other nullah thus adding to homelessness in Karachi.

However, the Supreme Court has directed the Sindh government to take appropriate steps to rehabilitate the affected population. But the time period for this or its nature has not been defined. In the case of the Circular Railway demolitions in 2018, the Supreme Court had also directed the administration to provide alternative accommodation to the affectees within a year. However, three years have elapsed and no such action has been taken, nor has the Supreme Court demanded compliance for its orders.

The PTI government wishes to provide housing to the homeless but it is making more people homeless. It also stresses the importance of education but over 30,000 students will not be able to attend school anymore as a result of the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs' demolition.

Small wonder that Pakistan's legal system has been rated at 120 out of 128 by the International World Justice Programme. Its reform and a change in its anti-poor bias is necessary for a conflict-free Pakistan and should be treated as a priority.

The writer is an architect.

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On parliament By Asad Rahim Khan

WHEN signing off on this country's sacred document, Zulfi Bhutto said, 'No Constitution is ever workable without the patience, the tolerance, the search for accommodation that is necessary to the preservation of democracy.'

It was April 10, 1973, and it was the high-water mark for our parliament: the first constitution put together by the people's directly elected representatives.

But that 'search for accommodation' soon went out the window. Over the next several years, the Constitution weathered Mr Bhutto's own amendments, Gen

Zia's deep freeze, and Sharifuddin Pirzada's science lab. Pakistan became a presidency, and the results were uninspiring.

By 2010, the need to heal gave us the Eighteenth Amendment. Parliament returned to its rightful place at the heart of our democracy. The GIK button — a presidential itch for sacking the assemblies — was scrapped. Empowering the provinces acknowledged the sins of One Unit and the horrors of East Pakistan.

Undoing Fata some years later was the next huge step for our elected reps (sans the rather nauseating role of Messrs Fazl and Achakzai), and it enfranchised millions. As of this writing, greater rights for Gilgit-Baltistan also seem in the offing. No less is needed; its people fought and died to become part of Pakistan proper.

None of this was harmless fun.

All this brings us to a striking conclusion: at its finest, parliament mends the soul. It also decides the destiny of this country in ways that can be both legitimate and enduring — qualities that evade martial law and its generalissimos (this writer recommends Gabriel Garcia Marquez's beautiful The Autumn of the Patriarch, where the centuries-long reign of a Caribbean despot is revealed only to have lasted seven years).

This is all the more important to remember after the events of the past few days, with the usual suspects sneering at the whole project — first came the treasury benches sparking chaos in Islamabad, and then the opposition blockading the Balochistan Assembly. The parliamentary secretary for law was injured, as was a security staffer.

The visuals, too, were depressing: the PTI's Ali Awan was seen playing volleyball with budget books, while letting off a fluent stream of abuse. For reasons yet to be known, the gent behind him started blowing a whistle, presumably to direct traffic.

There was also the defence minister's defence. With one arm on each banister like Kitchener at Gallipoli, Pervez Khattak watched motionless as the pawns marched ahead. He then sauntered forward, gently tossed some confetti into the fray, and shuffled right — a battle manoeuvre for the ages.

Over on the other side, the PML-N's Rohale Asghar picked up his foot and reached for his mouth, pegging his naughty words to 'Punjab ka culture'. Mr

Asghar thus does a disservice to the 98,205 sons and daughters of Lahore that elected him.

At the same time, those calling all of this unprecedented are mistaken. Uneasy frenemies today, the PPP and PML-N's cavalries charged each other in '94, after Tehmina Daultana rushed at PM Benazir. Further back, one author describes the scenes in the East Pakistan Assembly in '58, "Chairs sailed through the air … even the national flag was transformed into a potentially lethal, freewheeling lathi."

None of this was harmless fun: such violence would take the life of deputy speaker Shahed Ali, prompting this paper's editorial to go as far as urging the Constitution's suspension. That diagnosis has proven wrong, yet it speaks of the sacred trust our parliamentarians hold, and its hard lessons along the way: for any crisis of democracy, there can only be more democracy.

On that note, the buck stops with the ruling party. The PTI must let the opposition speak, it must shut down its ordinance factory, and the prime minister must start attending sessions and fulfilling his promise of Westminster-style Prime Minister's Questions.

The opposition, for its part, has to do the hard work of shadow budgets and policy alternatives. But it must be wooed or debated, not bulldozed.

Second is rejigging lawmaking and quorum. As Justice Fazal Karim has written, a 446-member parliament can get away with passing a law "with as few as 58 members". Meanwhile, Article 63-A makes independent backbenchers impossible, as does the latest drive against the secret vote.

Third, parties must evolve beyond blood dynasties in favour of primary elections; Aimal Wali is set to smash all records as Khan IV of the ANP. The Muslim Leagues are adopting the same Bhuttoist model, in thrall to a single royal family: Sharif, Pagara, Elahi. While promising a break from bloodlines, the PTI flubbed its own intra-party elections; the gents that the clean and honourable Justice Wajihuddin pointed out as riggers remain unpunished.

Finally, in the Quaid's words, "Remember that you are now a sovereign legislative body, and you have got all the powers. It, therefore, places on you the gravest responsibility…"

That's the original mission. Our parliament must rise to it.

The writer is a barrister.

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America's China preoccupation By Maleeha Lodhi

THE already fraught relationship between the US and China has plunged to another low in the wake of President Joe Biden's first foreign trip that took him to Europe. The visit turned out to be more about containing China than other issues on the global agenda. The US president used the trip to build support among America's Western allies to counter China.

The meeting of the Group of Seven in Cornwall, the 30-member Nato summit and even the first US-EU summit saw much of the focus on China. During the G7 parleys the US pressed European countries to join it to censure Beijing on several counts including human rights and trade practices. Dialling up pressure on Beijing evoked a strong response from Chinese officials who accused the G7 of slandering their country's reputation and declared that "the days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone".

Differences between US & European allies on China will not constrain America from a confrontational path.

Even as the G7 tackled a slew of issues ranging from Covid-19 vaccines to climate change and global economic recovery it was China that seemed to dominate the agenda. This was evident from the communiqué as well as announcement of an ostensible answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that envisages raising private capital for infrastructure projects in developing nations. Biden set the tone by framing the competition with China as a 'contest' between Western democracies and autocrats and urging G7 countries to harden their position on Beijing. As a result, the communiqué assailed Beijing on human rights in Xinjiang, called for greater autonomy for Hong Kong and demanded an investigation into the origins of Covid-19 in China.

Writing in The Guardian, Rafael Behr portrayed "Biden's mission" in Cornwall as an effort "to recruit allies for the next cold war". Whether or not a new cold war is

an apt description, Biden's anti-China diplomacy seemed to go into overdrive. This became more obvious at the American president's next stop in Brussels for the Nato summit, where the stance got even tougher.

The communiqué issued after Nato's annual summit pronounced China as a security challenge and declared that China's "stated ambitions and assertive behaviour" that included building a nuclear arsenal and space and cyber warfare capabilities "present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order". Chinese officials shot back to furiously denounce the communiqué for the China threat theory and portrayed it as being the "continuation of a Cold War mentality".

Driving this hardline US approach is its growing fear of a rival superpower's increasing global economic, military and technological power. It reflects the political and popular consensus in the US — fuelled by years of former president Trump's actions and rhetoric — that sees China as an adversary who has to be contained rather than engaged. Recently the White House's top official for Asia asserted that the "the period that was broadly described as engagement has come to an end". Kurt Campbell, coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs also said that US policy towards China will now be pursued within a "new set of strategic parameters" in which "the dominant paradigm is going to be competition".

The latest act in this competition was G7's unveiling of a US orchestrated infrastructure plan — billed as a "Green" development initiative — to challenge China's BRI, the biggest and most ambitious economic enterprise of this century. The 'Build Back Better for the World' initiative was however long on rhetoric and short on specifics. No details were forthcoming either about its scope or funding. This left it open to question whether it would materialise at the scale envisioned. There was also a touch of irony in the fact that while the US was rolling out a global infrastructure plan the administration had failed to get its domestic infrastructure legislation approved by Congress.

The two key questions raised by Biden's Europe trip are how far European allies will be willing to go beyond tough words and sign up to an adversarial policy with China and what is the outlook for the future course of US-China relations. With some exceptions most European allies are sceptical about a confrontational policy especially as they have key economic equities in ties with China. Last year China became the EU's top trading partner surpassing the US. Germany's top export market and biggest trading partner happens to be China, which is why Chancellor Angela Merkel once said that EU and US interests on China are "not

identical". Italy is part of BRI and is reported to have agreed with Merkel during the G7 summit that action against China should be avoided.

Other than perhaps France and Belgium, most EU countries prefer a more measured approach to China. Washington's closest ally, UK may also be reluctant to adopt too antagonistic a policy especially as it wants to expand trade and investment with China. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was quoted as saying when he arrived for the Nato summit that "When it comes to China, I don't think anybody wants to descend into a new cold war."

Differences between the US and its Western allies on China policy will not however constrain Washington from pursuing the path it has chosen. Turbulence in Sino-US ties will persist as competition intensifies between them. Cooperation will nonetheless be sought in limited areas of common interest — such as climate change. But volatility is inescapable when there is unmanaged competition and an explicit 'adversarial' dimension in US policy.

Can the relationship be stabilised? A prudent response to this has been offered by a Chinese academic in an article in Foreign Affairs titled 'New engagement consensus'. Professor Wang Dong argues that a new cold war is neither inevitable nor desirable. He proposes a new approach to engagement involving strategic reassurance among other things. China, as a rising power, would need to credibly reassure Washington that "it is neither pursuing a sphere of influence by pushing the US out of East Asia" nor aiming to replace the existing international order". The US for its part would have to "resist pursuing a containment strategy and seeking to mobilise the US public and its allies for a new cold war". Whether this sensible advice will be heeded remains an open question.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

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Reservations about SNC By Yasmin Ashraf

I AM an educationist with experience of teaching in primary grades for more than 20 years.

I have looked into the Single National Curriculum and the relevant Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board's (PCTB) books in considerable detail. It makes me sad to think of the future of the students now that most schools will be forced to study from the PCTB-prescribed textbooks.

I wish to express my apprehensions about the PCTB textbooks.

Firstly, the sheer volume of the subject matter to be covered in an academic year which is usually seven and a half months long is frightening.

For example, on average, there are about 23 chapters in the Urdu books of Grades 2 to 6. If we include the grammar units in the review exercises of each lesson, the number of chapters doubles to 46. Generally, one 40-minute period in a day is dedicated to languages. Five periods in a week means that the teacher gets 130 to 150 periods in a year to cover the given content. That comes down to three periods for each chapter, which is obviously insufficient.

No one disagrees that the SNC Islamiat curriculum is massive, much larger than ever before. Nazra, that starts with the Noorani Qaida, has been extended from a few siparas to the entire Quran, accompanied by the memorisation of several surahs, ahadith and numerous duas, in addition to Islamiat books. The new Islamiat curriculum is likely to exert a lot more strain on primary students than before.

Shafqat Mehmood and Murad Raas have said that private schools are free to use materials of their choice. But are they?

Religion is a very delicate matter. How an 'aalim' from a madressah system or a teacher approaches a topic concerns me. It is yet to be seen whether guidelines will be given to the aalims and teachers to ensure the correct interpretation. One has, however, to give credit to the hierarchical and methodical compilation of the five books, as each book builds on the knowledge given in the previous one, unlike the random collection of topics in the science books.

Next, if we delve deeper into the content matter of general knowledge, we see that it lacks creativity, is repetitive, and does not encourage critical thinking. Considering the average age of the children at this level, they are already aware of most of the topics included in the general knowledge books. They are curious

little creatures. We give very little credit to children who by the age of five have already mastered a language, in many cases two or more with correct syntax without being tutored.

If the general knowledge textbooks are to serve as the foundation course for Science in Grade 4, they lack logic and ignore the mandatory principle of hierarchy that states that the introductory topic must serve as the basis for the next more complex topic. Missing links or mediatory pieces of information lead to confusion and is akin to climbing a ladder with missing rungs in order to reach the top of a tall building.

If on the other hand, the intended outcome of the general knowledge books was to create awareness of oneself and an understanding of others then too the content matter is lacking.

When studying a language, grammar supplies knowledge of the syntax and structure and literature serves as a vehicle for a number of different things. Not only does it encourage students to appreciate words, literature helps them to grow as individuals and lets them develop a deeper understanding of the people and the world around them.

Urdu textbooks from Grades 1-5, however, lack depth and diversity. They do not encourage analytical thinking and individual perspectives. They lack the very aesthetics that make Urdu the ornate language that it is.

Interestingly, all the essays and stories in each book have been written by the same author. For example, one writer has written all the content of Grade 1 except for the poems, another of Grade 2 and so on.

One fails to understand why this was done. Clearly, single authorship doesn't ensure diversity of perspective.

For an enriching reading experience, excerpts from the writings of well-known Pakistani writers like Kishwar Naheed, Maqbool Jahangir, Imtiaz Ali Taj, etc. could have been included. As educationists, we all know that for any type of learning to happen, the students must first enjoy the materials presented to them; the rest will flow smoothly. Including a diverse collection will not only enrich the students' language skills but will also help them have a more rounded outlook on life.

One writer, one style, one agenda will inevitably get tedious and boring. No wonder, repeated surveys by National Education Assessment System (NEAS) as well as Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and Alif-Ailan all show the widespread poverty of language skills among school students.

Moreover, instead of enriching the students' Urdu, the Urdu books seem supplement to Islamiat in defiance of Article 22-1 of the Constitution.

Inclusion of religious matter in general knowledge, Urdu, and English is worrisome too. Excessive religious content can inadvertently inculcate a sense of self-righteousness and lead to bias. Is this what we really want?

The PCTB books may be perfect but the insistence that only these books or books with similar content be used by all the schools reminds me of these lines (translated) from Hukamnama by Javed Akhtar sahib: "Someone has decreed, that the winds confirm their direction before they even begin to blow."

Shafqat Mehmood and Murad Raas have reiterated that private schools are free to use materials of their own choice. But are they?

Page 6 of the minutes of the meeting of PCTB held on Jan 7, 2021, states otherwise: "No private or public school shall prescribe or suggest any kind of book or reading material without getting its approval from the government or its authorised officers/department/organisation and in case of its violation, all kinds of legal action shall be taken."

Most countries agree that curriculum outcomes should be decided by the state, but they do not insist on using only the state-prescribed or similar books designed by any single authority.

The writer is an educationist.

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The roots of hate By Zarrar Khuhro

THE brutal murder of a Pakistani-origin family in the city of London, Ontario, by 20-year-old Nathaniel Veltman caused a wave of outrage in Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau openly condemned it as an act of terror and thousands rallied to pay respects to the slain members of the family and to pray for the

health of nine-year old Fayez, the sole survivor of this hate crime. There is no doubt this was a genuine outpouring of revulsion at the crime, and of sympathy for those so brutally slain.

But beneath the surface is a miasma, the odour of which leaked out even during this time of tragedy.

Soon after the attack, a TikTok video was uploaded in which a man records three Muslim women walking down the road. As they stroll down the sidewalk, the man is heard saying: “Where’s Nathaniel Veltman when you need him?” Then a truck passes by and the man exclaims: “Buddy, you missed them. Back up,” before bursting into laughter.

In another video, a man named Craig Harrison said “he was surprised it [the attack] hasn’t happened sooner”, adding that “Canadians are rightfully getting upset about being out-populated in their own country by people from different cultures who don’t respect Western values”. Harrison, who has a criminal history that includes racially motivated attacks, was once the mayoral candidate for Georgetown, Ontario.

Anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise.

The reference to being ‘out-populated’ is a popular theme in modern neo-Nazi and white supremacist thought, and revolves around the belief that white people are being ‘outbred’ by other races in the West, and that this is both part of and a precursor to what they call the ‘Great Replacement’. This was also the title of the manifesto published by Brenton Tarrant, the terrorist who massacred 51 worshippers at a Christchurch mosque in New Zealand in 2019.

As investigations continue, one question that will be asked is ‘where was Nathaniel Veltman radicalised?’ And one can safely surmise that perhaps more so than his immediate ‘real-world’ social circles, he was introduced to and indoctrinated by white supremacy online. That was the case with Alexander Bissonnette, who shot and killed six people at a Quebec City mosque in 2017, and was known to be a right-wing troll in online spaces.

How poisonous is this online discourse? In an analysis for the Globe and Mail, Amarnath Amarasingam and Jacob Davey write that in 2020 they examined close to 2,500 accounts, channels and groups on various social media platforms

that disseminated extremist right-wing propaganda, producing “nearly four million pieces of individual content”, that were spread far and wide.

These groups, they concluded, were resistant to attempts to de-platform them and were incredibly resilient and determined in their effort to “drive hatred against minority communities and polarise Canadian society”.

More, despite their ideological differences, these groups converge on their shared hatred from immigrants, and in particular, their hate for Muslims. And they are increasing in both number and appeal.

Much like a plant needs suitable soil and conditions in order to be able to thrive, so too does the seed of hate need an enabling environment to be able to bloom into a bloody harvest. Across the Western world, we have seen a steady rise in right-wing ideology to the extent that many of the talking points of what was once the extremist fringe have become part of mainstream political discourse, which in turn legitimises the views of the (once) far right, bringing them closer to the centre and thus to wider acceptability. This, in turn, drives more and more people into their ranks, and by and large they avoid the label of ‘terrorist’ even when they carry out politically motivated attacks, simply because the diffused nature of the white supremacist movement means that individuals may not subscribe to, or be members of, specific organisations.

Canada is no exception; In Canada, as in much of the West, Muslims remain the most common target of online hate, outstripping any other group and the attacks are increasingly moving from online spaces to real life. This isn’t taking place in a vacuum: a 2020 report on Islamophobia in Canada submitted to the UN revealed that 46 per cent of Canadians have an ‘unfavourable’ view of Islam — more than for any other group. More than half of the people living in Ontario felt that Muslim doctrines ‘promote violence’ while 42pc of Canadians think that discrimination against Muslims is ‘mainly their fault’.

The report also points out the role of the media in creating this environment, noting that while negative stories about Muslims abound in Canadian media, attacks on Muslims receive relatively less coverage; the Quebec mosque shooting for “five minutes of airtime” on CBC the night it occurred while the 2017 London Borough attacks in the UK were covered for hours with live commentary. No wonder, then, that for too many Nathaniel Veltman is not someone to condemn, but to emulate.

The writer is a journalist.

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Virtual parliament By Idrees Khawaja

THE hooliganism witnessed on June 15 in the National Assembly was the culmination of a sequence of events that began with the deafening noise during the prime minister's first speech to parliament, after he was elected leader of the house in 2018. The fact that no group seems to be winning in the tit-for-tat game should theoretically help calm things down. But that can only be the case if all groups are interested in an orderly house. Does an orderly house suit all groups? If the answer is 'no' then we have to look for an alternative solution instead of attempting — and failing — to forge cooperation between the groups to run the house in a disciplined manner.

A parliament in which legislators participate virtually would help prevent hooliganism and not affect the potential of a healthy debate. All mikes are muted at the beginning of the session and the Assembly staff would unmute the mike of the member whom the speaker allows to speak. If parliament went virtual it would lead to several benefits apart from preventing unruliness.

Quite often, in more than one political dispensation in Pakistan, a question has been raised: why does the prime minister not come to parliament more often? Why is the prime minister not present to answer questions asked by the lawmakers or to express his government's stance on important domestic and foreign policy issues? Perhaps, it is the prospect of an unruly environment that has made the prime minister go back on his promise of answering questions asked by members of the house.

How about lawmakers making a virtual appearance?

So how about the prime minister making a virtual appearance to answer questions?

Going a step further, can a parliamentary session be held over Zoom or some other digital forum with members participating from the comfort of their homes? Will a virtual session serve the purpose of an on-site session?

In a parliamentary session, legislators including the prime minister do not address each other directly. Rather, all of them address the speaker of the house. With one-to-one interaction among members not required, the loss of an on-site facility will not cause problems.

Imagine the savings in terms of costs. Without in-person sessions the federal government would no longer need the Parliamentary Lodges. The maintenance expenditure incurred on the upkeep of the lodges would not be required either. The national exchequer would register huge savings incurred on transport and daily allowances of the members. The staff hired to cater to the travel and transport needs of the members would not be required either. Savings would also be recorded in the maintenance and upkeep of the parliament building. Subsidy on food served to the members in the parliament's cafeteria would not be required.

Not required to attend sessions in Islamabad, members of parliament would have more time to address the needs of their constituents while still managing to participate in parliamentary sessions. There will be fewer instances of quorum breakdown.

When a vote is to be taken on a crucial issue, parliamentarians find reasons to stay away from Islamabad and hence the parliamentary session. The absence of crucial votes means that one side, despite having the numbers to win, faces defeat. On a virtual platform, such surprises can be minimised.

Parliamentary rules generally followed by democracies were developed in England which produced the mother of parliaments. In the beginning, the problems, demands, and wishes of the electorate spread across the country could be conveyed to the government only by the representatives of the people residing in their areas. Similarly, before the advent of the print and electronic media, the response of the government could be conveyed to the masses only through representatives present in parliament.

All this has changed. Members of parliament are no longer the best medium available to carry the government's stance to the electorate — many members may not visit their constituency for years, let alone speak to the people there. In fact, it is possible to disseminate the response of the government to the entire electorate through print and electronic media. With mobile phones available, even sending messages directed at specific persons or voters of a specific

constituency is possible. It would be more useful if the prime minister or a minister answers a question raised by a member of parliament, by addressing the entire nation through the medium of television. The members can always ask a supplementary question virtually using the parliamentary medium and the response of the minister or the prime minister can be heard by the entire nation instead of just the members. The virtual parliament is a win-win situation for all except those interested in pandemonium.

The writer is a researcher at PIDE.

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Loss of homes By Dr Noman Ahmed

WITH Supreme Court instructions to proceed with demolitions along the Orangi and Gujjar nullahs in Karachi, more and more families will find themselves on the streets. The ML-1 railway upgradation project could result in evictions from 22 katchi abadis in Karachi. Those previously evicted are still sitting on the rubble of their homes. The court has ordered rehabilitation which must be carried out without delay.

Housing is the foremost need of the urban poor who do not possess bankable assets. Incentive-based government initiatives such as the Naya Pakistan Housing Scheme are inaccessible because the poor have no tangible assets to pledge to obtain housing loans. Most are employed in the informal sector where documented evidence of income is impossible to provide. Many such households take the risk of building informal homes in invisible, difficult locations, often next to nullahs as they have no other place to live.

For the vulnerable, a shelter is much more than a dwelling.

There have been past precedents of katchi abadi regularisation and the Sindh Katchi Abadis Act has been in place since 1987. But legal provisions are entirely subject to the political dynamics of the city. The PPP apparently believes that katchi abadi dwellers are not necessarily its voters and that extending dwelling rights may change constituency politics. Interestingly, the local party claiming to represent urban Sindh also appears against regularisation. Off and on, political leaders make populist announcements. In 2016, the Sindh chief minister directed

the concerned departments to transform 100 katchi abadis into model settlements. One hardly heard more about this afterwards.

For the vulnerable, a shelter is much more than a dwelling. It constitutes their right to exist in the city. It provides our rural folk with a chance to free themselves from the shackles of a mediaeval culture and feudal order. In cities, there is better access to education, healthcare, interactions with people from other socioeconomic brackets and livelihood opportunities. The benefits of diversity in a city cannot be realised if the administrative and judicial machinery embark on an anti-poor enterprise.

It is also worth mentioning that the opulent lifestyle of our elite is possible only because of the work of the so-called menial workers around them. A household in any affluent neighbourhood employs more than half-a-dozen full-time or part-time domestic workers to shore up the pomp they wish to display. Now those involved in maintenance services such as plumbing, electrical and air-conditioning repairs etc that are necessary for the rich to maintain their 'image' are being rendered homeless.

Thanks to the high prices of formal housing, many low-scale government employees, contract workers, vendors, small-scale shopkeepers, primary school teachers and others also have no option but to live in katchi abadis. Our small-, medium- and large-scale manufacturing enterprises derive their labour force from these expanded settlements. If evictions continue, trade relations and the social structure will be greatly impacted. As land has become highly contested, low-income settlements are becoming very overcrowded. Orangi, Korangi, Baldia, Landhi, Qasba Colony and many other neighbourhoods have small plots accommodating tall buildings with weak foundations.

Cities that only look after their rich are bound to fail. But wise rulers can learn from past initiatives. There are many examples from within the country and continent which can provide policy inspiration to our decision-makers.

The poor require a targeted supply of land for housing on which they can incrementally construct and add in accordance with what is convenient and affordable. Housing credit must be modified with special packages for the urban poor. The banking sector must intervene to extend loans for the purchase of land for housing through specially devised tools. At present, housing credit is only available to those who either own a titled piece of land or possess another

bankable asset. The poor possess neither. If access to land is not made possible, housing will remain a distant dream.

Finally, this situation offers a strategic opportunity to the federal government to extend relief to the affected people. The Naya Pakistan Housing Authority can come up with a pilot project to accommodate the evicted families. Federal sites such as the Federal Capital Area near Liaquatabad could possibly absorb the population in multistoried housing. With proper targeting to identify the real beneficiaries, a housing programme can be devised. This initiative can be replicated in several other locations in the city with proper feasibility studies, planning and execution with community participation.

The writer is an academic and researcher based in Karachi.

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Ailing farm sector By Aijaz Nizamani

EVERY government in Pakistan invariably describes agriculture as the key to ending our economic woes and leading the country on the path of economic development. And they are not wrong. But the question is one of how this must be achieved.

Efforts to improve the agricultural economy have met with consistent failure over the last 70 years. In our neighbourhood, the BJP went into the 2004 elections with its 'India Shining' slogan. The country had stellar economic growth rates due to its fast-growing IT sector. The Congress, largely representing the rural electorate, challenged the slogan, saying that IT was benefiting just one per cent of the population and could not lead India on the path of economic development. It defeated the incumbent BJP (despite the higher economic growth rates) and ruled 1.25 billion people for the next 10 years.

But all the Congress party could do for rural India was to write off $15bn of farmers' loans (the worse possible gift) and enact the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, a conditional cash transfer scheme. One may not doubt its intentions but the party's knowledge of the rural economy was an issue.

(Obviously, it was voted out of power.) This can be said for Pakistan's agricultural, and wider rural economic issues, too.

The formal financial sector does not exist for farmers.

Everyone knows Pakistan is an agricultural country but few appreciate it is an irrigated-agriculture country. Irrigated agriculture is a sort of semi-industrial agriculture with modern financial requirements. The country is one of the most endowed in terms of natural resources particularly its fertile alluvial (river-depositing) soils and freshwater resources. It has a vast geography including different elevations and four growing seasons. Pakistan has over 41 million acres of irrigated land (not including areas in the riverine belt and mountain valleys) commanded by 19 barrages from up country to the delta in the south.

It is important for national policy planners to have a true perspective of what an ordinary farmer faces regarding basic production — ie raising his crop, managing an orchard or running a livestock farm or a combination of activities. We are not talking about intermediate activities such as processing or hi-tech activities, but just basic economic functions. Finance is the single-most important issue affecting agriculture as the lack of it affects farmers' choices and the level attained by agricultural development and modernisation. This does not mean there are no other development constraints.

Finance to business is like air to lungs and this also applies to farmers' business. The greatest challenge to improving and modernising farming is access to competitive sources of credit. It can be safely said that for farmers and agriculture, the formal financial sector does not exist, no matter what policymakers claim or what banks report to the central bank about their agri-credit disbursements. Sadly, for policymakers the culprit are the middlemen and arthis. This is too simplistic and flatly wrong. Who can believe Rs1.5 trillion farm credit disbursement (for 2021-22, there is talk of Rs2.7tr!) when the total private-sector credit take-off is far less than shown as agri-credit disbursement?

Being non-taxed, agricultural land's asset values are astronomical and provided as collateral for agri-financing. When excellent collaterals are available — sometimes land values are Rs10m an acre — all bankers need to do is to assess, one, the social and business reputation of an aspiring farmer client and, two, the quality of the business plan. Both issues require the knowledge to ask the right questions. However, the problem is related to the banks' urban culture,

capacity and mindset, resulting in the failure of the formal financial system to respond to the financing and business needs of farmers.

In an age said to define 'the knowledge economy' how can one expect to respond to agricultural business needs without understanding them or having knowledge about them. This lack of knowledge is manifested in demonising the middlemen or arthis. If they are powerful and controlling farming in Pakistan, it is even more imperative that farmers have access to formal finance sources so that the 'stranglehold' of the middlemen and arthis on farming is curtailed.

The finance minister is speaking of interest-free loans to farmers. They don't need dole outs. They need capitalism to work for them and that is only possible when those who are in the engine room of capitalism — the bankers — understand it. The finance minister, Shaukat Tarin, when he owned a bank in the early 2000s started the Kissan credit card, a financing product. The latter was funded through a UK government grant. It proved a spectacular failure. When asked a question related to agriculture by this writer at a seminar he said that 'we bankers do not know the ABC of agriculture'.

The writer serves as additional secretary in the forestry department, Sindh.

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Story of the last tamarind leaf By Jawed Naqvi

THE World Press Freedom Index listed by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) ranks India at an embarrassing142 out of 180 countries, actually two places worse than Myanmar (140). There's respite here for Hindutva nationalists. India is three notches better than Pakistan (145). Bangladesh (152) is the worst performer from South Asia. The global field bottoms out with Eritrea (180), making it the one country worse than North Korea (179). Intriguingly, Afghanistan (122), currently, seems more agreeable for journalists than the world's chest-thumping largest democracy. Conversely (or perversely), a redeeming feature about the likelihood of the Afghan Taliban taking over in Kabul is that it could help make India, Pakistan and Bangladesh look better on the freedom ladder, who knows.

It was heartening, therefore, but also puzzling that Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week spoke up for values enshrined in healthier democracies. Addressing the G7 leaders in Cornwall in a virtual appearance from Delhi on June 13, Mr Modi described India as a natural ally of the group. He saw himself as the G7's partner in "defending democracy, freedom of thought and liberty from a host of threats stemming from authoritarianism, terrorism, violent extremism and economic coercion".

As Modi spoke, the police in Uttar Pradesh under the watch of his handpicked chief minister were framing charges of conspiracy to stir communal violence against leading media figures critical of the BJP's polarising politics. The RSS mouthpiece Organiser described the journalists as propagandists, but the RSF stood firm against the "absurd" charges.

It's a fraught turn of events for secular journalists critical of the Modi government.

The RSF being a respected body to protect journalists — from recalcitrant states among other detractors — was clear that mischief was afoot. It urged the Uttar Pradesh police "to immediately withdraw the absurd charges, including criminal conspiracy". The charges were framed against three journalists for tweeting about a video of an elderly Muslim man being beaten up by other men.

The accusation clearly bordered on harassment, RSF said. Brought in the form of an FIR on the evening of June 15 by the police of Ghaziabad, bordering Delhi, the accusation named three journalists — Washington Post columnist Rana Ayyub, writer Saba Naqvi, and Mohammed Zubair, one of the founders of the Alt news website. It also named The Wire, an outspoken news website, and Twitter India.

The journalists, the RSF noted, were accused of conducting a "criminal conspiracy" although all they did was post tweets about a video showing an elderly man identified as a Muslim being badly beaten in Ghaziabad by several other men. The claim that the men shaved his beard and forced him to chant 'Jai Shri Ram', a Hindu chant that has become a rallying cry for religious extremists, is being contested. The RSS paper claimed the video was faked to help an opposition party.

Before the three journalists named in the FIR tweeted about the video, which went viral on the evening of June 13, it was widely shared and commented on by India's leading media outlets, including, according to RSF, The Times of India.

"The Uttar Pradesh police nonetheless decided that the three journalists' tweets sufficed to order their arrest under six articles of the Indian penal code named in the FIR."

The police charges are instructive because they represent accusations that had been hitherto levelled at the accusers, including by Uttar Pradesh police involving the current chief minister as opposition leader. Provocation to cause riot, promoting enmity between religious groups, insulting religious beliefs, public mischief, criminal conspiracy and common intention to commit a crime, are charges that the BJP and the RSS themselves have had to face in the not very distant past. According to RSF's research, each of the journalists is facing a possible combined sentence of nine years and six months in prison.

"The accusation brought about by the Uttar Pradesh police is based on absolutely no tangible element and clearly amounts to judicial harassment," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk. "We urge Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath to recover a semblance of credibility by ordering the immediate withdrawal of the charges against the journalists named in this absurd First Information Report."

The RSS version quoted state police as speaking of two videos, one in which the elderly man was assaulted, and another in which he blamed his assaulters, who the RSS story says were mainly Muslim, of forcing him to chant a Hindu chant. It may all look absurd but that's the official view from the police. "The second video, where Saifi could be heard saying he was forced to chant 'Jai Shri Ram', was shot in the presence of a maulana in the house of [an opposition politician]," the RSS report said. The police believe the chant angle was brought in to polarise society.

It's a fraught turn of events for secular journalists critical of the Modi government. The few still standing their ground belong to the league of courageous public intellectuals one of whom — Romila Thapar — I had once likened to the last tamarind leaf from a story one heard as a child from Najman Bua. A beautiful princess called Prem Rani had seven brothers who protected her from lurking danger. When out on their hunt, the brothers would leave her in the care of the large tamarind tree outside their home. "It's the bandits knocking at your door, Prem Rani. Do not let them in," the tree would warn. The bandits hacked down the tree and removed it. Yet when they went for a final assault on Prem Rani's

house, there was still a tiny tamarind leaf that called out to warn her. The brothers then arrived and slayed the bandits.

One is inclined to see the journalists under assault from the government as crucial to democracy, like the last remaining tamarind leaf was to Prem Rani. These journalists speak for all the troubled features of India's democracy that Mr Modi didn't tell the G7 about.

The writer is Dawn's correspondent in Delhi.

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Understanding abuse By Arifa Noor

THERE is a compelling documentary on Netflix titled The Keepers. It begins with an unsolved murder mystery, a theme which has become rather popular for documentaries on streaming websites and elsewhere. The murder is of a nun back in 1969, who taught at a high school in Baltimore, US. After her disappearance one night, her body was found two months later but the perpetrators were never identified or found.

But within one episode, it is clear the series, and the story it was following, was so much bigger than the murder of a young nun, who taught English at a Catholic school. By the time the viewer clicks on the second episode it turns into a story of abuse carried out at the school by a priest; as the survivors tell of their experiences; it turns out that some of them had confided in the nun and there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that she wanted to protect the girls, which may have led to her unexplained disappearance and death. By then the nun, despite the documentary returning to her time and again, is a side story. The main focus are the survivors and their trauma, and their later efforts in the 1990s to sue the church for the abuse.

The series touches upon the larger context in which the abuse took place — Baltimore was a deeply Catholic city and the school was run by the diocese. Securing admission to it was no small matter, especially for the blue-collar families, who aspired to send their daughters there. The clergy running the school were a figure of authority in more ways than one. A sibling of one of the survivors says in the film; "Priests were the authority."

Condemnations have been rare while there is no debate on the prevalence of such abuse beyond this case.

As the survivors tell their story, one wonders if, apart from the deference to religion, class also played a role. Other accounts of such abuse have highlighted that many of the victims came from less privileged backgrounds and hence were elated by the initial attention paid to them by their abusers.

Later, the same inequality is used to scare them into silence as well as provide protection to the abuser. For example, in The Keepers, the accused's close relationship with the police adds to his perceived invincibility; the survivors speak of policemen abusing them, having been invited to do so by the priest.

The documentary came to mind last week when the story of a student being raped by a teacher at a madressah came to the fore. So heinous was the story that it made headlines and Twitter trends, despite the budget excitement and the antics of our worthy parliamentarians.

As pointed by many, the crime was carried out because the student was from a less privileged background, dependent on the madressah, where he lived, and its administration and his suspected abuser. Apparently, the abuse had gone on for three years, according to one account, while it has been reported that he complained more than once to the madressah authorities as well as the Wafaqul Madaris about the abuse but to no avail. No one paid any attention to him. There are also some reports that the abuser may have victimised others. As The Keepers suggests, none of this is unique to Pakistan. (Or for that matter any institution, religious or otherwise. I quote the The Netflix documentary because we do not have any such detailed reporting of local cases which can foster a deeper understanding.)

Nor is this limited to religious education systems, though the deference inculcated towards religious figures makes it easy for those within the system to carry out such abuse. As we well know, such figures of 'authority', for many children who are abused exist within the family network.

But there is a second part to this Baltimore story. In the 1990s, two of the survivors tried to sue the priest. They faced hostile defence lawyers, laws which discourage the examination of crimes committed so long ago, medical experts who question their accounts and memories, and what appears to be an uncooperative church. The court case was eventually dismissed. However, some

of the accusers did reach an out-of-court settlement with the church in Baltimore around 2016.

The documentary also raises questions about the police's efforts to investigate the murder as well as accusations of the students. A detective whose identity is kept hidden in the documentary even alleges the local authorities were involved in the efforts to stall the investigations. In the aftermath of the documentary, fresh investigations began.

It is this second part which perhaps is relevant as we clamour for condemnation from the seminaries and the religio-political parties. Much has been said about the silence from these quarters after the video came forward — except for a few, most high-profile figures connected to the madressah system and religio-political parties have ignored the matter. Condemnations have been rare while there is no debate on the prevalence of such abuse beyond this case. Neither is anyone asking what the responsibility of the seminary, where such rape takes place, is.

It is not just about religious elements. Little has been said about how law-enforcement personnel treat such matters — in this case, the evidence and the reaction were compelling enough for the police to spring into action. But what happens in cases where the victim approaches the police directly, with or without video evidence? Even in this case, what will happen to the accused once the attention dies down, which it will, sooner rather than later? At the end of the day, once the case is in court, everything may end up depending on the video being considered as sufficient evidence for conviction.

Indeed, there is far more at play than an institution going into defensive mode at the fear of a public assault which can damage its credibility and existence? It is also about how society at large views this abuse and its prevalence. And this includes those who are paid to investigate and prosecute it. Indeed, a society can begin to address abuse only once there is awareness about it and this is a process which is yet to begin here.

The writer is a journalist.

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Cold war II By Mahir Ali

THE North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the People's Republic of China share a year of inception — 1949 — but beyond that have hitherto largely stayed out of each other's way. Until this month, when China was singled out as a potential strategic threat at the latest Nato summit in Brussels.

Given that Nato was set up essentially as a means of intimidating the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it may have been wise to fold it up and reimagine collective European military mechanisms when the Warsaw Pact — the Soviet-dominated eastern European bloc's 1955 response to West Germany's induction into Nato — went out of business 30 years ago.

But the determination to demonstrate the West's ascendancy as the Cold War victor entailed not only Nato's survival but its eastwards expansion, notwithstanding Washington's promises to Moscow that no such thing would occur. If anything, Nato's military adventurism has spiralled since the demise of the Soviet Union, albeit with unimpressive or grim consequences, from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Libya.

China and the West must find a better way.

China, though, was ostensibly not on its radar until recently. European nations, by and large, were prepared to make the most of their economic relations with China. It was the US — the dominant power in Nato and the broader Western alliance — that threw a spanner in the works, with the presidential candidate who claimed in 2016 that China was economically "raping" his country being voted into power.

Donald Trump's charge was unfair. If China's gain has been America's loss in terms of corporate investment and jobs, it's largely because all too many US corporations were eager to avail of profit maximisation opportunities. Considerably lower wages and the lack of labour unionisation made production in China an irresistible prospect.

The realisation has been seeping in for some years, though, that the boons of globalised capitalism are restricted to the privileged few. China's overworked and underpaid labourers are hardly a concern, but the vote-wielding Western working

class is a different matter, not least in the US — especially when jobs are scarce and all too many consumer goods are stamped ‘made in China’.

That helps to explain why the US approach to China has barely shifted this year, even as Joe Biden parades his ‘America is back’ mantra across European cities — including Geneva, where he traded both niceties and barbs with Vladimir Putin. As the main Soviet successor state, Russia is a direct descendant of the chief adversary of the first Cold War, and has never dropped off the Nato radar.

In fact, from the vantage point of Nato’s headquarters in Brussels, it is probably still seen as a more alarming adversary than faraway China. But in the US, it no longer registers all that highly on the Richter scale, barring occasional tremors involving cyberattacks and virtual interference in electoral affairs. Although Russia remains the second largest repository of nuclear weaponry (after the US), it rarely figures anymore as an ‘existential threat’.

Unlike China, a considerably smaller nuclear power, which (much like the US) throws its weight around in its backyard, but whose occasionally belligerent rhetoric does not extend to the folly of risking a military confrontation with America.

What the West probably sees as more worrisome is Beijing’s economic outreach. At their summit in Cornwall earlier this month, the Group of Seven powers even came up with a riposte to China’s sporadically successful Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The G7’s version bears the awkward title Build Back Better World (B3W), and may well turn out to be yet another box-ticking exercise with little or no follow-through.

B3W is supposed to be friendlier to both human rights and the environment than the BRI, which often entails cosy deals with unpalatable regimes and debts that many of the supposed beneficiaries will be unable to repay. If these are neocolonial ambitions, it’s a concept the Western powers are thoroughly familiar with; loans from the likes of the IMF still come with usually neoliberal conditions attached.

China understandably bristles at being urged to play the trade game by the ‘rules-based system’, given its minimal involvement in the evolution of those rules.

None of the foregoing is intended to suggest that China is always, or even usually, in the right, in the economic or any other sphere. But its flaws do not automatically elevate its would-be adversaries to the status of angels.

Opinions differ on whether a second cold war is already underway or merely an increasingly likely prospect. Either way, it would be unwise to forget the grievous harm wreaked by the first one. It tends to be recalled mainly in European terms as an ultimate triumph for the West, although even that was a pyrrhic victory. It's vital to remember, though, that for many countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, it was an experience no one should wish to repeat.

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Benazir's advice By Sameena Nazir

IN October 1991, I went to the Rawalpindi Bar Association to cover an event for my newspaper, The Muslim. As a young reporter at my first job, it was a very exciting event for me because the chief guest was Benazir Bhutto. Earlier in the day, I had argued with my editor A.B.S. Jaffery to let me cover this event. "You always allow the male reporter to cover political events but give me boring assignments. Let me go to this one at least. She is a woman politician," I protested. My editor smiled and said, OK you can go this time, and told a senior photographer to accompany me. All the way from our rundown newspaper office in Aabpara to the crowded Rawalpindi courts, I could not contain my excitement. I wrote about 10 questions that I was going to ask Benazir Bhutto and planned how I would take many pictures with her.

The meeting hall was already full when we arrived. Full of men. The experienced photographer led me to the front of the room where two rows were marked 'For Ladies'. A little later, a wave of excitement rippled through one side of the room. I got up in anticipation and looked. And there she was! The most elegant woman I had ever seen in my life, tall and beaming with confidence. She sat in the middle chair on the stage. I just kept looking at her and forgot to take notes.

'Don't ever leave your space during a protest.'

The host then began the meeting but in the middle of his welcome address loud voices started coming from the back of the room. The voices turned into angry shouting and a loud commotion took over the room. I got up in panic and was

about to run when my eyes met Benazir Bhutto's. "Don't leave your seat," she said loudly from the stage. "Keep sitting," she said firmly, looking at me. I sat down immediately. Still looking at her, I held the hands of two women, as young as me, on each side. They held my hands even harder.

While sitting I turned my head back slightly and could not believe what I saw. Lawyers in black jackets throwing chairs at each other and shouting all kinds of swearwords. What's going on? I asked. A lawyer Baber Awan is saying that Benazir Bhutto is not a member of the bar so she cannot speak here, was the reply. I started looking at Benazir Bhutto again. She was sitting with her head held high and looking at the events playing out in front of her with a poker face.

A little later, the noise died down. The event started and Benazir Bhutto spoke at the end. I listened to her in awe and admiration and kept on clapping after her speech even when everyone had stopped. As she was stepping down from the stage to leave, I suddenly remembered I had to do an exclusive interview with her. I ran to her but her security ladies stopped me from getting close to her. She suddenly stopped, turned to me, bent her head as if she was going to whisper something and said, "don't ever leave your space during a protest". Before I could say a word, she was out of the room.

Her brief whisper has stayed with me all these years. I left journalism a few years later and have worked in women rights organisations in many countries. I have attended hundreds of protests in 30 years. Every time there was trouble at a protest, I remembered Benazir's words "Don't ever leave your space".

For the last few days, I have been watching the budget debate taking place in parliament. I can sum it up in one word. Disgusting. While watching, I kept on thinking, how it would look different if the parliamentarians had stayed in their seats and protested. The government side could shout from their seats and the opposition from theirs. It would have been more civilised if they had not thrown the budget books but even if they had simply remained seated and shouted their lungs out, the optics of all that would have been much more peaceful than what we saw on TV. The youth that makes up 60 per cent of Pakistan's 220 million population would have learnt what is a peaceful way to protest.

For years, I have seen many donors give large amounts of funds for 'training of parliamentarians' in Pakistan. I suggest one more topic for such training: 'How to protest peacefully as a parliamentarian'. A session on the history of global

protests would show that the most successful agitations were peaceful in nature. From the March on Washington by Martin Luther King Jr to the hunger strikes of Nelson Mandela and the most recent inspiring protests of Greta Thunberg's school strikes for climate, one thing is clear. The moral voice of peaceful protest is much louder than the angry shouts of irresponsible political leaders who leave their space to disrespect the very office they have gained with the sacred vote of their citizens.

The writer is president of PODA, a women's rights organisation and a former journalist.

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Fear and abuse By Rafia Zakaria

IT happened every Friday. According to the statement recorded when the complaint was lodged with the police, Mufti Azizur Rehman, who is accused of sexually assaulting a madressah student, did it every Friday. The victim had gained admission in the Jamia Manzoor-ul Islamia in 2013 when he was a child. A few years ago, when he was sitting for exams, Mufti Rehman accused the victim and his friend of cheating. This led to the victim being banned for three years from taking exams at any madressah in the Wafaqul Madaris.

Facing this difficult situation because of which he was not able to take his exams and graduate, he begged Mufti Rehman to allow him to take his exams but was told by the latter that he would consider doing so only if he would 'make the mufti happy'. This, the victim learned, was a euphemism for letting the mufti sexually assault him. The assaults continued for years. According to the victim, the mufti had recently also begun to blackmail him. When he complained to a madressah administrator, he was not believed. It was only when the video surfaced, clearly showing the mufti assaulting his teenage victim that action was finally taken and the mufti was told to leave on June 3.

Yet even while the administration had seen clear evidence of the sexual assault, no FIR was registered. That did not happen until June 17 after the video was leaked on social media and went viral with stunned viewers calling for action against the perpetrator. For his part, the mufti himself issued a video statement in which he swore on the Holy Quran that he did not commit the acts. According to

him, he had been drugged with some substance and then made to commit the deed. But that was exposed as a mistruth in another video where he is reportedly seen talking on his mobile phone in the same room and fully in control of his faculties.

Child sexual abusers are present in many places but clerical sexual abuse is of a particularly egregious character.

Even though all of this material was available on June 17, 2021, when the video became public, the police did not arrest the mufti and his sons who had taken part in blackmailing the victim by threatening to kill him and his family. When questioned, Arif Rana, a spokesperson for the Lahore Police, said that the mufti had somehow “escaped”. It was likely because of the outcry following the reporting of the incident in the media that they finally located the mufti and his sons and all three were arrested and taken into police custody. Since then, the police say that the mufti has confessed to assaulting the student.

There are Mufti Rehmans everywhere in Pakistan and their continued existence is owed in no small part to the denialism regarding the issue among the general population. A saddening number of people, for instance, will not read an article like this simply because it has to do with clerical abuse. The consequence, as was noted in a 2017 exploration by the Associated Press of clerical abuse, is that there are hundreds of such cases in madressahs. Boys from poor families, like the victim in this particular case, are largely left under the supervision of men like the mufti. There are no checks and no accountability. The paedophiles victimise the youngest and ‘groom’ them for the abuse and it continues, as it did in this victim’s case.

For every case that is reported, there are likely thousands that are, under an efficient mechanism of cover-ups, never reported at all. As the AP investigative report says, such crimes are rarely prosecuted and police are often bribed not to pursue their investigation into the abuse perpetrated by the clerics. Some do not even register FIRs. The crimes take place but the law-enforcement system completely and shamefully fails the victims.

Paedophiles and sexual abusers are present in many professions but clerical sexual abuse is of a particularly egregious character. This is because while all sexual abuse is terribly traumatic, these people use their power as religious and spiritual leaders to make their victims obey them. It’s not just their power as

adults that is at play but also their power as religious leaders whose purpose is to guide people towards the right path. In this sense, such abuse involves not only the desecration of the person but also the desecration of faith itself.

Keeping silent about this particular sort of child abuse is also tantamount to desecrating religious and moral principles. The paedophiles and sexual abusers will continue committing their nefarious deeds but it is incumbent on every single Muslim to stand up and call out clerical abuse.

One immediate step that absolutely must be taken is the installation of CCTV cameras in all madressahs. This will provide victims a means to prove their allegations and just as importantly it will help protect the faith from men who claim to spread Islam but instead are spreading the most depraved kind of abuse one can imagine.

Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that Mufti Rehman chose to abuse his victim on Fridays, the holiest day of the week in the Islamic calendar. All of this must be stopped immediately and the only way to impose accountability on such monstrous clerics is to demand that Prime Minister Imran Khan and parliamentarians in the national and provincial legislatures pass laws that require all the thousands of madressahs registered with the government to immediately instal CCTV cameras in places where children and clerics interact, as well as to crack down on the huge numbers of unregistered madressahs. The fear of God has not deterred these men from abusing our children, perhaps the fear of CCTV cameras will force them to leave our children alone.

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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Diplomatic blundering By Zahid Hussain

A SERIES of gaffes by our foreign minister has caused utter embarrassment. His penchant for media attention has landed the country in a diplomatic predicament often enough. His mixing of sensitive foreign policy issues with constituency politics has been damaging. There is a reason why foreign ministers are

supposed to speak less, but that wisdom has fallen on deaf ears where our foreign minister is concerned.

It's not just about Shah Mahmood Qureshi's almost daily appearances on local TV channels. Lately, his interviews with the foreign media have lacked the nuance and diplomatic skills needed to tackle complex foreign policy issues. With the country facing multiple foreign policy challenges in the fast-changing geopolitics of the region, one expects the country's top diplomat to show prudence.

His latest interview with an Afghan TV channel in which he seemingly struggled to answer a question — whether he considered Osama bin Laden a martyr — exposes a more serious problem. In the past, Prime Minister Imran Khan had declared the Al Qaeda leader a martyr. It was certainly not a slip of the tongue and reflected his convoluted views on militancy.

That discretion is the art of diplomacy must be learned by the FM.

Qureshi's floundering too was apparently not accidental. His pause before bypassing the question showed deliberate ambiguity on an issue that demands a clear answer: how can a terrorist be a martyr? Yet he would not say that perhaps out of fear of a backlash from PTI ranks and his conservative constituency. His non-committal stance on a person responsible for thousands of deaths is damaging.

It is not just the blunder over the bin Laden issue but also his handling of some other sensitive foreign policy issues that have raised questions about his command of the subject he speaks on. Populism should be kept out of the realm of diplomacy. The foreign minister's public statements on foreign policy seem to be largely for domestic political consumption, but such comments often carry serious implications for our relations with other countries.

Maintaining a delicate balance in matters of international relations requires nuanced responses that are often missing from his populist rhetoric. His recent response to Afghan officials was also uncalled for, however provocative their statements may have been. There was no need for it after the foreign ministry's appropriate reaction to the Afghan side's invective.

Such trading of barbs only serves the purpose of those elements that seek to vitiate the atmosphere between the two countries. One has to be more careful in

the face of the fast-changing situation in Afghanistan that should soon see the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from its territory. There may be some vested interests trying to spoil moves to get a political settlement in Afghanistan but any misstep could pull us deeper into the quagmire.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan has played a significant role in getting the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table that led to the Doha peace agreement, clearing the way for the withdrawal of American forces. But the situation is extremely volatile with the intensification of the fighting in Afghanistan and no signs of the cessation of hostilities. The looming civil war in Afghanistan will have direct and serious security implications for Pakistan.

Surely, we can still play a role in any peace process in Afghanistan, but it is not in our interest to be seen to be aligned with any one side in the conflict. Despite frequent clarifications, there is still some doubt over our claims of neutrality. This is largely so because some of the statements emanating from Islamabad are exaggerating our role. Such statements are giving the impression that we can get the Taliban to negotiate. They are causing resentment. The foreign minister's warning that Pakistan would not take responsibility if blamed for the deteriorating Afghan peace was unnecessary. It's not for someone in that position to react to every statement that comes out of Kabul.

Whatever role we can play should be discreet. That discretion is the art of diplomacy must be learned. It is even more important given our geopolitical and geostrategic situation. Peace in Afghanistan is vital for Pakistan as well as the region. Surely it's a very complex situation for Islamabad with its increasingly tense relations with the Afghan government.

Another tendency is to depict Pakistan at the centre of international politics, giving one an exaggerated sense of our influence. Intriguingly, at one point in time, the foreign minister even took credit for the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Supporting Palestinian rights is one thing but otherwise we don't have a role to play in the Middle East conflict.

We have offered to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, for a country that confronts enormous domestic and external challenges the best policy is to maintain a low profile in international conflicts that do not directly affect us. With the economy in a perpetual state of crisis and serious internal security problems we need to look inward rather than seeking to stretch our footprint outside.

A major problem plaguing our external policy is the absence of clear direction. There is no coherence among the various stakeholders on key policies. The disarray was evident in the so-called backchannel contact with India. While the establishment appeared euphoric over the progress, the civilian government didn't seem to have any clue about the development. Although there is now silence on the issue, there is still no clarity on the India and Kashmir policy beyond rhetoric.

Similar confusion was witnessed over counterterrorism cooperation with the US as foreign forces started withdrawing. True there is now a bit of clarity after the prime minister's unequivocal statement that there was no question of providing any base to the American forces for any counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan. But some confusion still persists on how to redefine our relations with the US.

What we need is to focus more seriously on policy and the art of diplomacy rather than populist rhetoric for local consumption. Foreign policy is too serious a matter to be left to an individual's political ambitions.

The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow.

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Judging without law By Faisal Siddiqi

"A judge trying to do justice by ignoring or disregarding the law does so at the peril of shaking the very foundation of the judicial system itself as such an approach destroys certainty and predictability of judicial response." — Former Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa

KARACHI feels like a conflict zone. Properties worth billions of rupees are being damaged. Thousands of people are being dispossessed and thousands being rendered unemployed or seeing their businesses negatively impacted. Most importantly, the dignity of such affectees, belonging to all economic classes, has been damaged as they are labelled 'encroachers' and 'land grabbers'.

What has caused this? Surprisingly, all this is the consequence of the Supreme Court's exercise of its jurisdiction under Article 184(3), of the Constitution, in CP No.9 of 2010, known as the 'SC Anti-Encroachment Case'.

But how did a constitutional provision like Article 184(3), whose sole purpose is the protection and enforcement of fundamental rights, such as dignity, property, a fair judicial process and protection of livelihoods, lead to damaging the very fundamental rights it seeks to protect? Is this because certain judges may have misapplied this constitutional provision? Or does the real reason lie in certain institutional defects, or omissions in this very constitutional provision, which leads certain judges to misapply it? In short, the fault lies not in individual judges but in the very structure, or lack of structure, of Article 184(3).

How did Article 184(3) end up damaging the very fundamental rights it seeks to protect?

No fair hearing: The SC Anti-Encroachment case arises out of CP No.9 of 2010 filed for the main purpose of rectifying the encroachment of amenity plots in Karachi but on any given date of the hearing of this case, more than 90 applications are fixed for adjudication dealing with everything under the sun concerning the province of Sindh, especially Karachi. This leads to a denial of the fair right of hearing primarily for two reasons.

Firstly, in view of the complexity and volume of such problems, including alleged encroachments, before the Supreme Court, the latter appears to have adopted a hurried judicial process in hearing these issues in order to achieve the desired results; at times, orders relating to demolitions and dispossession are passed without hearing the multiple persons who would be affected by such drastic orders. In short, justice becomes a victim of judicial efficiency.

Secondly, since these are complex and structural problems, the court is seen to act on preconceived (though not mala fide) notions, such as the poor encroaching on land, builders and businessmen being part of a mafia and public servants being incompetent or corrupt. In other words, cases are seen as being partially predetermined, with hearings a mere formality. Therefore, these proceedings lead to a violation of the cornerstone of all judicial systems, namely a fair hearing ie a judicial adjudication which is calm, well considered and without preconceived notions.

No procedure: An examination of Article 184(3) as well as the Supreme Court Rules shows that the apex court has yet to formulate a detailed procedure, including procedural safeguards, to conduct such crucial cases that have far-reaching impacts on people's lives. Even though various judges over the years including Justice Faez Isa, Justice Mansoor Ali Shah and Justice Yahya Afridi in various judgements and dissents, as well as former chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa during his tenure, have emphasised the importance of following and evolving a procedure to exercise this original Supreme Court jurisdiction, till today no detailed procedure has been evolved to exercise this jurisdiction under Article 184(3).

This is especially surprising because nearly every other judicial power exercised by the magistrate up to the appellate jurisdiction exercised by the Supreme Court itself is subjected to a detailed civil and criminal procedure as to when, how and to what ends such powers are to be exercised. Judicial procedure is critical because it gives certainty and predictability to the judicial process as well as controls the misapplication of judicial power.

No appeal: Proceedings under Article 184(3) begin and end at the Supreme Court. There is no right of appeal nor any right of challenge before any other independent judicial forum. Only a limited right of review is given before the very same judges who passed the original order. It is precisely for this reason that Justice Faez Isa and Justice Yahya Afridi in their judgements and dissents have advised caution in the exercise of this jurisdiction. Even otherwise, such judicial adjudication without the right of appeal is an anomaly in our judicial system.

Rights or desires: The sole purpose of Article 184(3) is to enforce fundamental rights in matters of public importance, and even though projects like the Karachi Circular Railway or fixing encroachment problems in Karachi may be desirable, the Supreme Court is the highest constitutional court and should not be converted into a development or anti-encroachment department, which is within the domain of the executive. More importantly, while pursuing these desired judicial projects, it is imperative that the fundamental rights of property, dignity, fair judicial process and protecting livelihoods should not be ignored. In short, judicial desires should not trump fundamental rights.

Discretionary constitution of benches: A fair decision about which judges will hear a particular case has a dramatic effect on justice in any case. Thus, Justice Yahya Afridi notes that "there is an inherent and dire need for judicial

introspection; to structure the unfettered discretion of the worthy Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to constitute benches of the Supreme Court to hear and decide cases under Article 184(3), and in particular, suo motuactions,lest the exercise of such jurisdiction may be seen to have been abused". Considering the far-reaching implications of this jurisdiction, it is imperative that such cases should be heard by a larger bench of five judges (eg as in the Indian Supreme Court), preferably by the senior-most Supreme Court judges, and furthermore, the sole power of the chief justice of Pakistan to constitute benches needs immediate reform.

No one doubts the bona fide intentions of the chief justice to reform Karachi or Sindh but in a country where there are over 51,000 cases pending before the apex court (the highest pendency in the court's history), is it impolite to request that such reformation should begin first at the Supreme Court?

The writer is a lawyer.

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Between boom and bust By Khurram Husain

A MASSIVE bet has been placed. The forthcoming fiscal year, that begins in July 2021 and runs till June 2022, could either prove to be the turning point the government is placing all its bets on, or the year in which the hybrid experiment unravels. It is hard to see a middle course at this time, although it's still possible for this set-up to limp along and scrape out another year for itself.

The turning point will come if the bet pays off. The bet is that outside help is about to arrive in quantities large enough to underwrite a boom in the economy. We got a first glimpse of this when the government proudly announced that a $1.5 billion "oil facility" from Saudi Arabia has been agreed and will begin from July. Pakistan imports anywhere from $6bn to $10bn of petroleum products (including crude) in a year, so the amount of the facility is barely enough to cover two to three months of our requirement, but when spread out over a longer

period, it will certainly take some pressure off the import bill and allow the government some room to keep oil prices relatively stable at the pump while at the same time increasing the petroleum development levy, perhaps not by the amount required to meet the target of Rs610bn collection from it this year. But it is entirely possible that the size of the facility will be increased down the road.

These 'administrative measures' they're talking about are the policy equivalent of a red herring.

It is worth noting that the government of Pakistan announced the deal a day after the outcome of the election in Iran was announced, in which hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi won and is set to be sworn in as president in August, the same month in which the Saudi Arabian crown prince is likely visit Pakistan. That visit was originally supposed to take place after Eid, according to word put out by senior government ministers after the prime minister's visit to the kingdom in May, which was itself preceded by a visit to Tehran by Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi by a few weeks.

A diplomatic game seems to be on and Pakistan has succeeded in breaking the ice with the kingdom for now, and the oil facility appears to be a token of acknowledgement of this. But the real prize will come from the US and for that all eyes are on the IMF at the moment, since that is where the first hint of another icebreaker event will come from.

Today (Thursday) at 6:30pm local time the IMF is holding its first press conference since the budget was announced and the ongoing review talks between the government and the Fund ended without an agreement. The IMF spokesperson will be taking questions from journalists around the world on all issues that the Fund is involved in, but undoubtedly he will say something about why those talks ended inconclusively. This will be our first indication on where exactly things stand. In the past, the IMF has felt free to talk about where problems have arisen during these reviews, especially where they failed in reaching an agreement. We know this time there are problems, which is why the review was left inconclusive, the tranche not released. What we don't have are specifics, and it is possible we will get some clues to that in the press conference later today.

But if Gerry Rice, the spokesperson of the IMF who will be conducting the presser, sugar-coats his answer or sidesteps the question of what specific

problems prevented a staff-level agreement from being reached in these talks, it will be our first clear indication that geopolitical muscle is being applied on the Fund. If that happens we can be reasonably certain that the government is going to get its way, and that includes not just significant modifications to the programme as envisioned in the last staff report, but quite possibly also an augmentation of funds of around $2bn by August or September this year. Nothing less will do.

The problems will arise if the bet fails. For some reason, if they fail to secure the external support that they need to pull off what they are trying to do — spend their way out of the doldrums — then this may well be the year the experiment begins to unravel. Their own budget is unravelling fast, starting less than 24 hours after its announcement on the floor of parliament, when the finance minister admitted the next day that a particular tax on internet and cellular services was included by accident even though it was not approved by the cabinet. That tax was supposed to bring in around Rs100bn, but when it was withdrawn and reporters asked how they intend to fill the hole left behind in the revenue plan, the only answer they got was “it will be done through administrative measures”.

That, of course, is no answer. These ‘administrative measures’ they’re talking about are the policy equivalent of a red herring. Since then, one after another revenue line is coming under attack and industry players are betting that those will also be withdrawn, given enough pressure. Ultimately the budget, and its aim to pump growth, will be left standing on two legs only: free oil and free dollars from abroad.

All they need is two years — 2023 is when the hybrid experiment has to turn to the people for a new mandate. From the way they are behaving it is clear that losing is not an option for them. And they cannot win on the strength of their own track record — they themselves know that. They will do whatever they have to do to win the next round. That is the game that has just been launched with the budget, and that is the path they are now gearing up to walk. The oil facility was the first milestone. The IMF is the second.

The writer is a business and economy journalist

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Another's eyes By F.S. Aijazuddin

WHEN our leaders are being manufactured without any quality control, it helps to examine them through another's eyes, rather than the mirror of self-adulation.

In 1958, the governor general, Ghulam Mohammad, attempted to hand over authority to Gen Ayub Khan. He "commanded him to produce a Constitution within three months". "You wicked old man," Ayub Khan muttered to himself.

When Ayub Khan did take over, British high commissioner Morrice James wrote: "Ayub and his British-oriented colleagues were relics of a departed order of things: some of them were military officers who had been trained at Sandhurst and in the old Indian Army."

James's opinion of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was more trenchant. Bhutto had "the rank odour of hellfire about him. It was a case of corruptio optime pessima [the corruption of the best is the worst of all]. He was a flawed angel … [lacking] a sense of dignity and value of other people; his own self was what counted".

In 1971, Dr Henry Kissinger used president Yahya Khan as a bridge into communist China but saw him no more than a "bluff, direct soldier of limited imagination". Premier Zhou Enlai thought Yahya Khan "probably a good man, a man of good intentions, but he didn't know how to lead an army, how to fight". Dr Kissinger was equally dismissive of US generals: "There are very many intelligent colonels and very few intelligent generals."

Being PM involves more than facing fast balls.

Gen Ziaul Haq understandably got scant compliments from the Indians. The BJP leader L.K. Advani thought "there was something artificial in his cordiality"; the journalist Kuldip Nayar rued calling him a "ruthless dictator"; and a former India ambassador Natwar Singh recalled that Ziaul Haq "had power, but not personality. There was something misshapen about it [.] His lack of charisma was made up for by a stunning display of tahzeeb, tahammul and sharafat (politeness, patience and civility). Like Chou En-lai, he was a master at public relations".

His fellow general Pervez Musharraf had no time for Nawaz Sharif nor his brother Shehbaz, who, he observed, in their late father's presence "behaved more like

courtiers than sons". Now that both he and Nawaz Sharif are 'incarcerated' in Dubai and in London, perhaps Musharraf might like to revisit his words: "Exile and isolation are an opportunity for introspection and critical self-analysis. Nawaz Sharif apparently learned nothing from his exile and failed to grow intellectually or politically."

Another former prime minister and London resident at Her Majesty's pleasure — Shaukat Aziz — might prefer not to be reminded when, as prime minister, he "tried this Saville Row-suited gigolo kind of charm" on US secretary of state Condoleeza Rice. She "stared him down. By the end of the meeting, he was babbling".

The US saw and sees Pakistan quite differently, less long-term. Condoleeza Rice's summation of US-Pak relations could have been written for today: "Pakistan is like a critically ill patient. You know, you get up every day, you take the pulse, you deal with whatever fever has set in overnight and you just try to keep it alive for the next day."

Another playboy-turned-prime minister published his memoirs as a prelude to assuming office. It contains unvarnished sketches of today's leadership. Of Asif Ali Zardari, he wrote that he became president through the words of a testamentary will "that no one has been able to authenticate". He castigated Zardari for importuning the Americans to give him "economic resources so that I can win over the people, so that there is something in it for them".

Imran Khan's choicest contempt is reserved for his immediate, elusive predecessor Nawaz Sharif. In clinical notes of which Dr Freud would have been proud, PM Khan analysed that Nawaz's "real dream was to have been the captain of the Pakistan cricket team". And in a hilarious dismissal of Nawaz Sharif's cricketing pretensions, he described how Nawaz Sharif volunteered to be the opening batsman against the West Indies fast bowlers, facing them with nothing more than "his batting pads, a floppy hat — and a smile". Mercifully, Nawaz Sharif was bowled out on the second ball.

Being prime minister, as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and now Imran Khan have discovered, involves more than facing fast balls, googlies, bouncers, and bruisers. When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to roll back our nuclear programme, Dr Kissinger threatened to make "a horrible example" of Pakistan. When Nawaz Sharif detonated the first nuclear explosion at Chagai in 1998, he braved US

sanctions. Refusal to allow US monitoring windows could invoke similar retaliation.

One wonders whether Imran Khan had foreseen such a spectre when, as he says, he day-dreamed that one day the Pakistan Test Team would discover that they were a player short, and that he would put up his hand, be selected “and be brought on to suddenly become a hero”.

The writer is an author.

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Budget protests By Maryam Zia Baloch

THE events of this year’s budget will haunt us going forward. During a general debate on the federal budget last week, lawmakers, including ministers, hurled budget books at each other in the National Assembly. We had yet to recover from this shocking behaviour when another violent episode in Balochistan shook us. Opposition members of the Balochistan Assembly locked the assembly gates to prevent the presentation of the budget. An armoured police vehicle rammed into the gate to make way for the chief minister to enter the premises and present the budget. Four opposition members were injured. Shoes were hurled at Chief Minister Jam Kamal Alyani as he entered the building. These were scenes nobody wanted outside the assembly on budget day. Lawmakers are expected to be inside for this important session.

However, this time the opposition chose to protest outside as the past two budgets were enough to inform them of the government’s unfair approach towards their constituencies. Most of the development funds were directed to districts where the Balochistan Awami Party won in the 2018 elections. The development needs of the rest of the province were ignored. A repeat of this discriminatory exercise was feared when the opposition saw no signs of a pre-budget session happening. Apprehensions increased and the result was chaos at the assembly gate. The protests over the government’s ignoring the constituencies represented by the opposition in the development budget started five days before the session, and the main highways of the province were

blocked on Thursday. Opposition members also alleged that schemes proposed by unelected individuals from their electoral areas were made part of the development plan.

These were scenes nobody wanted outside Balochistan's legislature.

Another debate on social media was that the government was using the development budget to support death squad members by allocating funds to their specific areas, so that they could win seats in the provincial assembly in the next elections. This claim can't be verified by looking at the budget document. People living in these areas can't be left out on the pretext that death squads operate there. And a ruling party utilising funds to boost its chances of winning the next polls is nothing new and happens across Pakistan.

But the story gets dirtier in Balochistan because Shafiq Mengal, allegedly linked to a death squad in Khuzdar, contested the 2018 polls from the district for a National Assembly seat as an independent candidate. The opposition fears that BAP is allocating funds to Khuzdar to boost his chances in 2023. Mengal was reportedly seen in March at a dinner in Islamabad with three BAP senators, following which rumours circulated that he was being brought into mainstream Baloch politics.

Interestingly, a Twitter account purporting to be the official account of Shafiq Mengal tweeted against the opposition's protest, calling them Indian agents. This shows the extent of the politicisation of the province's development budget, and how it is used as a tool to reach the echelons of the provincial and national assemblies.

What is disappointing is that the opposition hasn't presented any shadow budget or policy alternatives to the government's budget figures. During the five-day protest no opposition member named specific development projects that had been rejected by the government. Debating outcomes of the projects proposed in development plans wasn't on the opposition's agenda either. The clash between the government and opposition seems to be over who gets what and an increase in the share of constituency funds.

When annual development plans are used for enhancing election chances and favouring political opponents of lawmakers through uplift funds, development outcomes and service delivery for the general population remain missing from the agenda. The sole objective is to secure as many funds as one can. This

reduces the effectiveness of development expenditure, and the development needs of the province remain unmet. For example, Gwadar University, for which people campaigned online and offline, wasn't made part of the development plan this year. It suggests that the government does not care about the demands and needs of Gwadar's youth.

By looking at the budget's size and the number of schemes planned, one can tell it wasn't made to fulfil the development needs of the province but to satisfy ministers and assembly members. The communication and education schemes give an idea of this. The roads proposed are only a few kilometres long and not enough for the upgradation of Balochistan's communication infrastructure. The same goes for education as most of the schools in the plan have few classrooms and this will hardly help improve educational outcomes. As long as the development budget remains a ground for political and personal gains, public money will not be spent on the welfare and well-being of society.

The writer is a research analyst at the World Bank and a Fulbright alumna.

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Laws for people? By Faisal Bari

JAVED was never well off but he was able to purchase a six-marla (151.7 square metres) plot of land during his lifetime. Over time he married off his two daughters. He had four sons. One of the sons moved to another city. As his other sons grew older and got married, he allowed each of them to have one and a half marla of land to make their own homes: usually a couple of rooms, kitchen and bathroom.

Javed passed away two years ago. Even in Javed's life the understanding was that each son would inherit 1.5 marlas of land. The daughters did not figure in in this allocation. The son who moved out eventually 'sold' his portion to one of the brothers. So, when Javed passed away there were three sons living in the six-marla space. Two brothers had control over 1.5 marlas each and one had three marlas. Towards the end of his life, Javed had been unhappy with the son who had possession of three marlas and had threatened to disown him but no formal proceedings were ever started.

It has been two years since Javed passed away. The three brothers living on the six marlas have started fighting with each other. Since the proper division of space was never done they share access routes and even electricity, water and gas connections. There is plenty to fight over in terms of who should be paying for what and who should give access from their space to whom. There are intra-family rivalries between the children of the brothers too — the usual dramas of friendship, rivalry, love and hate, of cousins living in close proximity.

The land continues to be in Javed's name and has not been formally transferred to the children and has never been formally divided. With daily infighting the situation has deteriorated to the point where the quarrels of brothers and children have turned physical on a number of occasions. They have cut off electricity, gas and water connections of each other's household, and have tried to restrict access of household members to their own houses. They have even given written complaints against each other in the local police station. Since the fighting has not gone beyond their threshold, the police has done nothing so far.

The gap between the formal legal system and what the people face is large.

If the brothers and their children could be good neighbours, that would be the best solution. But that option is out: too much has happened to expect improved ties now. And none of the other solutions are easy or cheap either. Each of the warring brothers has offered to sell his 'share' to any one brother so that one person can have the run of the entire six marlas. But none of the brothers has the financial strength to be able to buy out the others as each marla of land in the area costs around Rs6 lakhs to Rs7 lakhs or more.

The only other solution is for all the siblings, including the sisters, to first go to court to get recognition as official inheritors, then to figure out who gets a share and who does not and to get that legally recognised and then to get the law to divide the land according to the shares worked out. But this requires a level of cooperation, sustained over a period of several months, that the family is clearly not capable of. How can they work with each other when they are fighting each other? Will the sisters be willing to leave their shares formally and in front of the law as was the prior understanding? Will the brother who 'sold' his share to another brother live up to his part of the bargain?

Apart from the infighting, the delays and expected cost of the legal procedures is another impediment. The family is looking at a good year or two of legal

processes. Who is going to bear the cost and the time needed to organise the effort? And how? The brothers are not doing too well in economic terms.

An even bigger impediment is that it is not clear if the 'title' that Javed held to that six-marla piece of land is even legal and duly registered. This requires another level of preliminary work. The land is in an area of the city where land titles have lots of problems. Though the family has possession of the land, it is not clear if they have all the paperwork for a land title in place. But without this paperwork how can they even approach the law for getting the land recognised in their names? And if that cannot be done, how can they apply for division of this land? They cannot. Talk about a difficult situation.

The fear of most of the siblings is that violence or the threat of violence will eventually force two of the brothers to leave the land to the third brother. The stronger brother, with control over three marlas, senses that as well. He has been increasing the pressure on the other two brothers and their families. There has been some violence against the sons and there have been threats against the daughters as well. The fear of escalation is quite real.

If there were alternative dispute resolution mechanisms in place, they could possibly help. But none are available. The weaker parties have tried to involve elders of the family and of the neighbourhood to try and reach some sort of agreement, but the stronger brother has been openly defying the advice of these elders: it is in his 'interest' not to have a fair solution to the issue.

The gap between the formal legal system and what the people face is large. This is just one instance, there are too many that illustrate the point. In this case the formal system really seems too ill-equipped to address the issues at hand — too distant, too slow, too costly and too bureaucratic. We do not have any recognised ADR mechanisms in place and the counsel of elders in urban living can be ignored. How do we make the law and the legal system more responsive to the needs of the people? Laws are supposed to be for the people and not the other way round.

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.

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Will the budget deliver? By Rashid Amjad

THE good news — though dampened by continuing high inflation — is that the economy is showing distinct signs of moving out of the deep downturn caused by the Covid-19 crisis, and is generating growth momentum and rising business confidence. The challenge now is to ensure that this economic upturn is converted into not just sustained and higher growth, but also inclusive growth that generates jobs with rising wages and incomes.

Experience suggests that the odds are stacked against it. Over the last three decades, successive governments have raised hope, only to have it dashed by the very policies they have followed to stimulate growth. What is the government doing differently this time to avoid a similar outcome?

To start with, economic policymakers have been prudent in setting for next year a modest growth target of 4.8 per cent against the estimate of 3.94pc this year. This should allow Pakistan to avoid some of the pitfalls of the past and grow at a pace at which macroeconomic indicators are carefully monitored and the overall goal of growth with macroeconomic stability maintained.

But even this modest target has set alarm bells ringing in some quarters on two counts. The first is that even this growth rate will raise our current account deficit to unsustainable levels due to far higher corresponding growth in imports, even with the continuing high level of remittances, especially if oil prices continue to rise as expected.

The second concern is that the stimulus provided to accelerate growth rests heavily on increasing government development expenditures significantly, both at the federal and provincial levels. To meet these, the government has set for itself an ambitiously high revenue target, which critics believe will be difficult to achieve. If not met, this could further push up the already high fiscal deficit of 6.4pc set for next year.

Economic policymakers have been prudent in setting for next year a modest growth target.

Let us address the concerns over the reappearance of the feared twin deficits with the seriousness they deserve.

To start, there are some newly inbuilt stabilisers already in place as part of the government's policy reform measures to correct for macroeconomic imbalances as they arise. The most important of these is a market-driven exchange rate that should come into play — albeit at a price — if the current account deficit begins to widen, for then the exchange rate will depreciate and make imports more expensive and exports cheaper. This will help reduce the trade deficit.

For this corrective mechanism to work, the State Bank must be given freedom to adopt the necessary monetary and exchange rate corrective policies as the economic situation demands. Indeed, the success of ensuring a smooth transition to higher growth will rest critically on the State Bank being allowed — especially by the finance and planning ministries — to play its due role. It will also assure the IMF that the government is committed to ensuring macroeconomic stability in its quest for higher growth and lower inflation.

Our economic policymakers are, of course, aware that the market-driven foreign exchange rate mechanism cannot be the sole defence against a widening trade deficit, given our historically low export price elasticity. In addition, it could trigger rising inflationary pressures if the exchange rate were to depreciate significantly.

The budget has, therefore, introduced many important reforms to boost and diversify export growth, the most prominent of which are to remove or drastically reduce import duties on raw materials that feed our major exports. This should make exports more competitive and domestic industry more efficient. Additional measures include a fuel subsidy to put fuel costs at par with our competitors as well as the timely refund of import duties and sales tax on imported inputs. These measures are not just restricted to our traditional cotton-related exports, but also to the rapidly growing IT sector, the high-potential pharmaceuticals industry, light engineering, leather products, and tyres.

If China could now join this export thrust by transferring its labour-intensive export industries to the industrial zones set up under CPEC, it could finally move the economy onto an export-led growth path.

These government support measures are already evident in rising business confidence, with a large increase in new investment, which is, in the end, the surest way of ensuring higher and sustainable growth.

Turning now to the other twin — the fiscal deficit. The targeted 6.4pc is already high and therefore meeting the Rs5.8 trillion tax target (an increase of around 1pc of GDP) becomes critical.

Reliance is being placed here on higher growth (and unfortunately inflation), new technology to track incomes and sales and, through it, on enlarging the tax net and bringing new undocumented sectors within its ambit. But most importantly, it is my firm belief that people's willingness and capacity to pay taxes is much higher in a growing economy and amid rising incomes than in a stagnant one. Add to this a no-nonsense results-oriented finance minister and the IMF on our tail, and there is every hope that the FBR — given its very creditable performance last year — will deliver.

On the third pillar of inclusive growth, the Ehsaas programme has built a reputation on well-targeted and timely delivery of direct income support to those most in need. But there is growing concern that the government is spreading itself across too many new initiatives and that some of these need more careful thinking to ensure results.

Finally, if there is a weakness in its proposed growth strategy, it is that the government's support policy measures for agriculture need closer coordination and integration between the federal level (research and overall incentives structure) and the provinces (direct support, including extension services). If food inflation is to be controlled and food security ensured, growth in agriculture is critical.

The budget, on balance, has launched the economy in the right direction and the government now needs to display the action and will to implement it.

The writer is professor of economics at the Lahore School of Economics and former vice chancellor of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.

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Window to the soul By Amin Valliani

EYES are a precious gift from Allah, without which we cannot see anything. They help us to see the external environment all around us.

We perceive up to 80 per cent of all impressions through our eyes. If other senses such as taste or smell stop working, it is the eye that protects us from danger. Therefore, eyes are the most important organs of our senses.

The function of the eyes is far superior in scope to any of the other senses. We usually apprehend the existence of each individual thing through our eyes. All the other senses are subordinate to it.

They are mainly responsible for vision, differentiation of colours and maintaining the biological clock of the human body. With the help of eyes, we remember and recognise the faces of near and dear ones around us while also appreciating the wonders of Allah's creation.

Allah says "Have We not made for him a pair of eyes?" (90:8). Therefore, we must thank Allah for rewarding us with an important organ. We mostly think of the world in terms of visual images and the large number of pictures which enter our memory and imagination are visual ones.

Eyes have a fundamental role in building character.

Eyes signal the emotional condition of an individual. If a person is upset, feeling pain or undergoing trauma, the eyes shed tears and indicate the level of pain, demonstrating how much the person is emotionally disturbed. Similarly, if a person is happy, his eyes glow and indicate his happiness. There are other irritants when the eyes shed tears — such as when one is cutting onions or standing in the midst of a smoke-filled room etc. Similarly, when a person is acrimoniously arguing over some matter, his wide-open eyes reflect his level of anger, or if a person is in front of his seniors, he lowers his eyes in humbleness.

Eyes also have a fundamental role in character building. What we see through our eyes the heart preserves and that ultimately impacts our character. For example, if one constantly watches negative things such as violence, indecency, killings and other crimes directly in society or indirectly through movies and pictures, this will make an adverse impact on his character and eventually become a part of his personality, desensitising him to those things that are hazardous.

According to the Quran (25:74), one of the attributes of believers is that they seek comfort and coolness of the eyes of their family members — spouse and

offspring. This is a much-needed element for a happy, prosperous, stable and peaceful life. This makes their living worthwhile and enhances their quality of life.

Reflecting on the nature of the environment we live in, one can say that this world has two types of things — visible and invisible. If we meet a person, we see his body, face, clothes and movements but cannot see his soul, intellect, heart and thoughts.

Modern science has discovered that all visible things have inner aspects, invisible to our physical eyes. For example, we see water as liquid but inwardly water is a combination of two gases called hydrogen and oxygen. Sometimes, human eyes do not see things as they really are. We perceive things according to our inclination and make judgements. Unless our inner eye is open, we may not be in a position to see things as they really are. Here one should remember the powerful prayer, attributed to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) saying “O’ Allah! Show me the things [as] they really are”.

In order to see things as they are, the Holy Quran has emphasised that one should observe and reflect on the workings of nature; this would pave the way to discovering the truth.

A disciple goes to seek the blessing of his Sufi master. During the visit the master inquires about his daily routine. The disciple says that he has many free hours as he does not have a busy schedule. However, he wants to spend his time in some useful way.

The Sufi master advises him to see the beauties of this world, the exquisite scenery of various places that invite us to reflect. You may visit places of scenic beauty, lush green meadows etc, to gain perspective and an understanding of faith.

In the Quran, Allah describes the great signs of nature for reflection. He says: “Do they not look at the Camels how they are made? And the Sky, how it is raised high? And at the Mountains, how they are fixed firm? And at the Earth, how it is spread out?” (88:17-20).

The master says that if someone observes nature and reflects on it, this will lead to the discovery of truth. It will enable him to see things as they really are. Therefore, reflection is a part of faith and it must never be forsaken.

The writer is an educationist with an interest in religion.

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Colonial frontier By Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

FOR hundreds of years, the western ‘frontier’ of the Indian subcontinent has been the staging ground of a bloody game without end. Chroniclers have called it the Great Game. I do not think there is anything great about a game that has taken the lives of unnamed millions.

Only those privy to the dark smoky rooms inhabited by spymasters and other profiteers of war could equate ‘greatness’ with strategic control of territory. For the ruling class, both past and present, the lives, well-being and future of the peoples who have occupied these territories for centuries has always been of marginal significance.

Usman Kakar is the latest son of this brutalised soil to have his life taken away in a mist of intrigue, like so many other Pakhtun, Baloch and Hazaras before him. The shock and grief which followed his mysterious death — which his family is claiming was no accident — metamorphosed into a mammoth funeral in his native Muslim Bagh, a forceful cry for both justice for the departed, and a lasting peace for the region at large.

Usman Kakar was of course one of the few mainstream politicians who dared to speak the truth about the games our strategic planners play. This is why he has in death secured the adulation of so many who cannot dare to ask for accountability of our rulers and their imperial patrons.

Today we are at yet another historical crossroads that brings together Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, US, India and Central Asian states like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in a cynical competition for bloody spoils.

There is no shortcut that will disappear all of the bigots and guns.

Afghanistan is the primary staging ground, and while it has not seen lasting peace for decades, the dramatic spike in violence portends even worse to come. But the rest of the region is hardly a haven for peace. A combination of ethnic

and sectarian conflict afflicts Iran, Pakistan, India, China and Russia. Not all of these notionally internal conflicts are directly connected to the fires engulfing Afghanistan. But all these states are autocracies with visions of regional and even global assertion, and their shared desires for 'greatness' mandates perpetuation of bloody conflicts at the expense of ordinary people.

I do not think that the Pakistani state is any more or less cynical than any other actor in today's version of the 'Great Game'. Pro-people and emancipatory principles do not inform the policies of the vast majority of contemporary states or the capitalist world-system as a whole. The resurgence of ideological justifications and support for the Afghan Taliban in the Pakistani mainstream must therefore be set against the backdrop of the US agreeing to acknowledge the Taliban as a major stakeholder in Afghanistan and Washington wanting military presence in Pakistan to monitor the post-withdrawal phase.

Let us not forget the militant religious right wing is a mainstream force in India too, one of Washington's prized allies. Progressive Indians are challenging the xenophobic Modi regime despite untold repression. Pakistani progressives are tasked with the same in our own country. To push back against Shah Mahmood Qureshi's ambiguous take on Osama bin Laden, and recent speeches welcoming the Taliban by PTI lawmakers in the KP Assembly is necessary and urgent.

But nuance is essential. Restricting ourselves to binaries by insisting that Osama bin Laden be called a 'terrorist' and not a 'martyr' reinforces the hegemonic mainstream. It cannot be stressed enough that 'terrorism' remains a bogey that all states deploy to serve their own cynical interests; every day the state slaps anti-terrorism charges against dissidents whilst suppressing peaceful protesters like at Jani Khel. The sufficient long-term condition for a lasting peace in Pakistan and the region at large is for ideologies of hate to be blunted at source.

The state, needless to say, is not about to spearhead this effort. The carryover of selective history and exclusionary notions of citizenship into the Single National Curriculum make this clear. With a handful of notable exceptions, the corporate media apes the 'official' narrative. This leaves progressives to use social media platforms and other offline forms of organising to slowly make a dent in what is a pervasive ideological apparatus.

There is no shortcut, no quick-fix 'counter-terrorism' operation that will disappear all of the bigots and guns, thereby bringing peace to our country and the region

at large. A progressive political project for our times must recognise that we are in an establishment-shaped quagmire long in the making, and so we too must dig in for the long haul.

Banking on other states to do our work, especially those with imperialist intentions, is a non-starter. As the stakes in the Washington-Beijing rivalry increase, courting either or both in this game without end will compound the miseries of the people of the colonial frontier.The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

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A torturous wait By Rimmel Mohydin

IT has been 11 years since Pakistan ratified the UN Convention Against Torture, over five since the National Action Plan on Human Rights was developed, four since it committed to enacting legislation criminalising torture during its state review under the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), almost a year since Senator Sherry Rehman's Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Bill was approved by the Senate Human Rights Committee and about nine months since Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted that he had asked the interior ministry to expedite his party's anti-torture bill.

So why are we commemorating yet another International Day in Support of Victims of Torture (June 26) without making torture a crime?

The answer is simple. While there has been political momentum towards making torture a crime in Pakistan, efforts have stalled. Commitments have been repeatedly contradicted by frequent incidents of torture by the police, which in turn seem to be oblivious to the conversations taking place at the top. And for conversations they have heard many times before, there is little surprise that they are not listening.

The delays exact a heavy toll. People keep being tortured in custody with authorities resorting to this barbaric practice as a tool for extracting information, trampling on the protections supposed to be afforded by the criminal justice system and undermining the rule of law. In some cases, it even leads to custodial deaths.

There is no political will to end torture.

Cases are often adjudicated based on confessions that are obtained by causing grievous physical or mental suffering including danger to the life of a person (despite the Code of Criminal Procedure stating that it would be inadmissible), deepening the rot in our criminal justice system. Last year, Pakistan bolstered its election to the UN Human Rights Council by stating that its 2018 anti-torture bill had reached the National Assembly for consideration. However, according to a report by Justice Project Pakistan and OMCT (World Organisation Against Torture), a government bill has still not been tabled in parliament. Diplomatic efforts and human rights credibility do not fly in the face of false flags.

Torture is perceived as a by-product of resource-strapped, overburdened and frustrated policing. Combine that with a general overarching fear of law enforcement in ordinary people, and you see torture become a professionally sanctioned practice. It is a manifestation of the deep divides in Pakistan's economic classes and discrimination against certain groups. It is also exactly what happens when human rights violations go unpunished.

A lack of a specific criminal offence of torture and adequate sanctions that reflect the gravity of the crime creates an environment that fosters impunity. The evidence of torture is well-documented in many forms. As bruises and broken bones. As medico-legal certificates. As recalled testimonies. As forwarded videos. When the police in Rahim Yar Khan filmed themselves mocking and beating up Salahuddin Ahmad, a young man with a mental disability, they made him look right at the camera before he died from his torture-inflicted injuries.

Just this month, fast-food workers were threatened and then taken into custody for not offering officers free burgers. They were held overnight at a police station in Lahore where, they reported to the press later, they were harassed and shoved around. The nine officers who were involved have been suspended. As senior police official Inam Ghani tweeted, "No one is allowed to take the law into their own hands" but we do not know how effective such a disciplinary measure will be to stop the same hands from wielding batons, shoes, and hot skewers to hurt detainees in the future.

If Pakistan is serious about weeding out the use of torture from its policing methods, it must begin by dismantling the impunity with which the practice is carried out. Genuine prosecution is the clearest possible sign of an official policy

that torture will not be tolerated. And for that, we need legislation which captures the offence, clarifies effective complaint and investigative procedures and stipulates express penalties. A new standard of relationship between the state and the people is required, one that ensures public officials are not above the law.

The government of Pakistan knows this and yet, it has failed to move the needle. The only thing that keeps changing is the number of victims, and the number of times authorities promise to do more. There is a failure by way of inordinate delays, bureaucratic sludge, political infighting and the lack of will to push this through.

Pakistan's next review under the UN Convention Against Torture is in 2022. It can either choose to be haunted by the ghosts of all the people who have been tortured to death, or it can make good on its promises and release itself from its own haunted past.

The writer is the South Asia campaigner for Amnesty International.

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Kashmir alive By A.G. Noorani

THE conference of Kashmiri parties convened by the Indian government in New Delhi on June 24, 2021, proves once again that Kashmiris cannot be crushed into obedience. Jawaharlal Nehru imprisoned Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah for 11 years only to invite him to New Delhi as his guest for talks. In between, he had sent his Dr P. Subbarayan to the Jammu Central Jail to sound out Sheikh sahib. He discovered that the prisoner had not changed his convictions.

In 1965-66, Jayaprakash Narayan sent his emissaries to Kodaikanal to sound out Sheikh sahib who was in internment there with Mirza Muhammad Afzal Beg. Nothing came out of it. Released in 1968, it took prime minister Indira Gandhi seven years to conclude an accord with her former friend Sheikh Abdullah whose imprisonment in 1953 she had opposed vehemently.

Those who criticise Sheikh sahib for the 1975 accord with Indira Gandhi should remember that the ground had been cut under his feet by the Shimla Pact of

1972. It congealed the status quo but also provided for talks on Kashmir to which she never agreed.

Insurgency erupted in 1989. At its peak, prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao said that the sky was the limit if violence was eschewed. On the India-Pakistan plane, two major developments took place. The Agra summit was aborted by L.K. Advani for spurious reasons. An agreed draft was ready but was rejected by India at the very last minute.

What does India have to offer to Kashmiris after it wronged them?

At the domestic level, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference was wrecked by its foremost leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani. His was an impossible formula — all or nothing. Coupled with this was the personal angle. He wanted to be the leader and was foolish enough to declare this ambition twice. On each occasion sharp reactions by his colleagues compelled him publicly to withdraw his demand. In truth, he wrecked the Hurriyat. Sadly, he is now a broken man in poor health and has all but withdrawn from politics. Two presidents of Pakistan discovered his limits. Farooq Laghari was taken aback at the residence of Pakistan's high commissioner to India in New Delhi by how Geelani reportedly offered him sharp criticism of the apparel of Pakistan TV's anchors. President Pervez Musharraf reprimanded Geelani when he took up Balochistan and North Waziristan.

On the wreckage of the Hurriyat, a diminutive Joint Resistance League was formed comprising Geelani, Yaseen Malik and Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, the most sensible of the lot. He is under house arrest still and was not invited to New Delhi.

Why has New Delhi taken the initiative now and what has it to offer to the Kashmiris after it wronged them in 2019?

Restoration of statehood had been offered by India since 2019. Restoration of Article 370 of the constitution, which was supposed to guarantee Kashmiris special autonomous status, is a different issue. Its abrogation had been demanded by the BJP. The government received public support in 2019 when it abrogated Article 370 though its action was shamelessly unconstitutional and the reasons for it were patently dishonest.

The Congress chief Sonia Gandhi has her ears transfixed to the ground and her eyes fixed on Hindu voters. She is desperate about retaining her diminishing

flock. It is difficult to see how any Kashmiri with self-respect can possibly support the abrogation of Article 370.

But apart from Article 370, New Delhi's real concern is with fresh determinations of assembly constituencies so that Jammu acquires a majority in the assembly. This is Narendra Modi's game — settle the Kashmir dispute once and for all 'on the ground', as they use the expression. Next confront Pakistan with a fait accompli — 'see it is all over. We have nothing to talk about now'.

There is a fatal flaw in this cynical reasoning. There is a powerful pro-Pakistan constituency in Kashmir. Mufti Mohammed Sayeed could not resist paying tribute to Pakistan the day he took the oath of office as chief minister in December 2014 in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He was riled because Mufti Sayeed thanked Pakistan for allowing elections to be held in Kashmir. This revealed a lot more than he intended.

The question is: what result can an open conference of 14 parties possibly yield? The centre has consistently kept its stooges in Kashmir well supplied with funds. Among the invitees to the New Delhi conference were at least two who are notorious as New Delhi's paid agents.

It may be recalled that the cruel blow which New Delhi inflicted on Kashmir had three dimensions — abrogation of Article 370, wipe out of Kashmir's identity and delimitation of assembly constituencies.

It is the last which lies at the core of New Delhi's foul deed. On June 22, Mehbooba Mufti, president of the People's Democratic Party said: "Delimitation is part of the same process used to break the state. This wasn't reorganisation, it was disorganisation. That way it is illegal and done with a certain purpose."

The writer is an author and lawyer based in Mumbai.

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Kidding with SNC By Imran Munir Awan

A GREAT deal of controversy surrounds the Single National Curriculum (SNC), a project highly espoused by the PTI government and proudly owned by the prime minister himself. The government plans to implement the SNC in all public and private schools as well as madressahs across the country.

Shafqat Mehmood, the federal minister for education, as well as a number of other government officials are waxing lyrical about the supposed fruits the whole nation will reap following its implementation.

The reality on the ground, however, presents a very different picture. A number of points are screaming for attention when it comes to implementing the SNC.

The chief aim behind the SNC is to ensure that “all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high-quality education”.

It is no doubt a noble objective, provided the promise of “high-quality education” for all children actually translates into upgrading the overall academic infrastructure in schools, especially those in the public sector. Doing this would involve, among other things, delivering a world-class curriculum, professional development and training of teachers, modern classroom and campus facilities, and a conducive environment which encourages inquiring minds and free debate.

A number of points are screaming for attention when it comes to implementing the Single National Curriculum.

Surely, this would be asking for the moon in a country like ours. So instead, what we get is a mere curriculum document peddled to the nation as the panacea for all of its educational woes. It is not hard to see why the government is so keen to equate high standards with the SNC alone. Most other steps to improve standards of education in the public sector would involve doing something about the measly education budget, not to mention a long-term commitment to rescue a state school system in tatters.

Indeed, if it was really about raising standards for all, the government would actually do something about making the public sector schooling more competitive, which would give the private sector a run for its money. To the contrary, the generally high-performing private sector is being put under pressure to downgrade its standards in the name of a uniform curriculum. In other words, instead of improving its own game, the government is asking the private sector to shift the goalposts.

Then there's the issue of textbook production in line with the SNC. Normally, this would not be a problem if the usual definitions applied. National curriculum, by definition, is aimed at providing general guidelines, standards and framework of concepts and themes to be studied, while accommodating a variety of approaches to develop and deliver content in schools.

But the province of Punjab takes the cake here for its unique interpretations, diving in to suppress all attempts at quality textbook development. It's worth bearing in mind that Punjab took the lead to formally adopt the SNC soon after it was approved by the federal government. Sindh has not come on board yet, which leaves one wondering about the 'national' part of the curriculum.

In a bid to be more loyal than the king, the Punjab Curriculum & Textbook Board (PCTB) took it upon itself to be the ultimate arbiter and judge of all textbooks to be published in the province. On the other hand, the 'model' textbooks produced by PCTB provide a rather scandalous model in terms of content quality and pedagogical approach. Moreover, it appears that the PCTB regards a good dollop of religion and patriotism, even in language subjects such as Urdu and English, an important benchmark to judge the textbook quality.

Off the record, a number of high-ranking officials overseeing the development of SNC and textbooks agree that it's a messy situation. However, their lack of concern at this half-baked experiment is also obvious.

In a meeting at the PTCB office, a top-level official smiled at a group of academics representing various school systems and told them not to be overly concerned at the haphazard nature of plans concerning SNC and textbooks. "In time, everyone will adjust and the brouhaha will stop," he said, laughing.

Right now the greatest concern for all serious educationists is that some of the most clueless government functionaries might hold the power to damage the future of education in this country.

As things stand now, no textbook can be published or prescribed for any public or private school without an NOC from the PCTB. Not only are the private publishers expected to conform to the shoddy standards used in the model textbooks, there is a lengthy three-tiered review system in place to get the NOC. To date, no NOCs have been issued by PCTB.

No wonder a great deal of uncertainty persists for all private schools in the province. They are still trying to figure out which books can or cannot go on the book lists for the next academic session due to commence in August.

The SNC has already come into effect for classes Pre I — Grade 5. Any experienced educationist will attest that this is not how you implement large-scale changes for so many grade levels simultaneously. Ideally, you start with the first level (Pre I in this case) and add the next class each successive year to keep the learning process progressing organically.

It is no coincidence that the PTI government has committed to implementing the SNC for all levels up to Class XII by March 2023, the year it is expected to complete its five-year term. Clearly, this is a political timeline more than anything else. It would take about 12 years to accomplish this the proper way.

Taking the gradual and evolutionary route would not be politically convenient. After all, much of politics is about scoring points in the short term. But the education of millions of children is too important a matter to be trifled with. It's high time some concrete steps were taken to fix the crises facing education in Pakistan.

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Little progress against torture By Reema Omer

PAKISTAN ratified the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) in 2010. In doing so, Pakistan committed to preventing torture and other ill-treatment, and ensuring all acts of torture be made criminal offences under its laws, punishable by appropriate penalties commensurate with their gravity.

More than 10 years later, Pakistan has failed to specifically criminalise torture and other ill-treatment. Moreover, the legal framework applicable to torture and ill-treatment perpetrated by public officials, including members of security and intelligence agencies, clearly falls short of the convention's requirements.

In 2016, in its report to the Committee against Torture on its implementation of the CAT, Pakistan claimed that "the rights embodied in the CAT ... have always been part of the substantive law of the country and have, thus, been enforced by the administrative and the judicial arms of the state accordingly".

The CAT committee, however, was not convinced. In its concluding observations, it expressed concern about Pakistan's inadequate legal protection against torture and at the lack of accountability for perpetrators. Notably, the committee highlighted how only disciplinary measures were taken against police officers for their "involvement in torture" and other misconduct, as well as Pakistan's failure to provide any "information ... indicating that criminal proceedings were opened against any of the police officers concerned".

There have been many regressive developments since the CAT committee's review of Pakistan's record.

In the case of members of security forces, the committee's findings were even more scathing. It expressed serious concern about reports that military and intelligence officials were "implicated in a significant number of cases of extrajudicial executions involving torture and enforced disappearances", and regretted "that the State party provided no information suggesting that members of the military, intelligence services, or paramilitary forces have been prosecuted and punished for acts amounting to torture".

In 2019, Pakistan submitted a follow-up report to the committee, which also failed to satisfactorily address the latter's concerns. In a letter to the government, the Rapporteur for Follow-up to Concluding Observations of the Committee against Torture once again requested Pakistan to provide data on prosecutions, convictions and sentences for offences related to torture and other ill-treatment. The letter also expressed regret that Pakistan had not provided any plan of action to implement the committee's other recommendations.

Troublingly, there have been a number of regressive developments since the CAT committee's review of Pakistan's record under the convention that clearly flout its recommendations and call into question the government's commitment to its human rights obligations.

Take, for example, the committee's concern about military trials of civilians for terrorism-related offences. In October 2018, the Peshawar High Court set aside the convictions of over 70 people who were tried and convicted by military courts

on various terrorism-related charges. The court ordered their release after finding the proceedings had been conducted in bad faith and that there was effectively no evidence against them.

The court questioned how the primary source of evidence was “confessional statements” in all cases. It then described in detail the way in which these were recorded: confessional statements of all defendants were in the same handwriting and in the same “tone and style”; accused persons were handed back to military authorities after their statements were recorded; a number of “confessions” were recorded years after the accused were first arrested; and before and after their “confessions” the accused were detained in internment centres where they had no access to their families, lawyers, or the outside world. In light of these factors, the court expressed concern that the “confessions” were “concocted”, and possibly obtained after torture.

The Supreme Court, however, suspended the Peshawar High Court’s judgement, and there has been no independent inquiry regarding the court’s findings that the people convicted by military courts were possibly subjected to torture.

The committee also highlighted impunity for acts of torture by military and paramilitary forces as well as intelligence agencies. The impunity still remains, even in cases where there are credible allegations of the involvement of security officials in torture and enforced disappearances.

As recently as December 2020, a number of UN human rights experts, including the special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment, expressed concern about the “scourge of enforced disappearances and torture in Pakistan”. The experts highlighted the government’s failure to fully investigate the case of human rights defender Idris Khattak, who was taken into custody by Pakistani Military Intelligence on Nov 13, 2019 and held incommunicado for over seven months. In June 2020, the authorities finally acknowledged his detention.

The experts stated that “unacknowledged detention exposes both the victims and their loved ones to severe and prolonged suffering that may well amount to torture or to other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”, which is in clear violation of Pakistan’s obligations under international law. However, no action has been taken against perpetrators and Idris Khattak is still in detention, facing a trial before a military court on charges of espionage.

The committee also called upon Pakistan to ensure that officials "at the highest levels … unambiguously reaffirm the absolute prohibition of torture and publicly condemn all practices of torture". In the last few years, however, government officials, including members of the cabinet, have made public statements calling for their opponents and "anti-state" individuals to be subjected to torture. In 2019, for example, Senator Faisal Vawda, the then federal minister for water resources, speaking in parliament expressed his desire that 5,000 people who had "looted" the country and committed corruption be tied to cars and dragged on the streets before being publicly hanged.

Finally, Pakistan has still not enacted legislation to bring its domestic legal framework in conformity with the CAT. A number of drafts of such bills have been tabled over the years, but for inexplicable reasons, they have been held up by various committees.

As the world commemorates the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture this year, Pakistan has embarrassingly little to show for its commitment to eradicate torture and provide justice for victims and survivors of this grave human rights violation.

The writer is a legal adviser for the International Commission of Jurists.

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Time to make clear choices By Muhammad Amir Rana

THE deadline for US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan is approaching, and major international stakeholders are looking towards Pakistan to play a leading but voluntary role in bringing stability to its neighbourhood with the US particularly expecting a lot from the country in terms of short-term mutual interests.

Apparently, Pakistan wants a much longer partnership and restoration of the strategic cooperation between the two countries. Though nothing can be ruled out, at this point Washington's strategic priorities in the region appear to have changed. This is not the Cold War era, where conducive political and ideological

environments had brought the two countries closer. Nor is the situation like it was after the events of 9/11, when Pakistan abandoned its weak allies in Afghanistan.

The current scenario is different, and in this changed environment the political and strategic priorities of the US revolve around confronting China or dealing with Iran's challenge in the Middle East. Pakistan cannot even think of undermining its friendship with China and cannot play a dominant role in any coercive policy against Iran. Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent op-ed published in the Washington Post said that the interests of Pakistan and the US in Afghanistan were the same, but shared interests in a country that is fast drifting into another phase of chaos cannot become the sole reason for a long-term strategic partnership between Islamabad and Washington.

Who could be more concerned about instability in Afghanistan than its neighbours Pakistan and China?

Where the US is concerned, the Afghan Taliban cannot pose any threat to its internal security or global interests. Al Qaeda has weakened and undergone certain changes, with the result that it now focuses more on the 'near enemy', or the Muslim states, as described by its ideologues.

The Afghan leadership also believes that the Taliban and Al Qaeda factor can force the US to review its decision to withdraw its troops from the country. The Ashraf Ghani-led delegation is in Washington in a last-ditch effort to delay or slow down the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan on the grounds of their perception of the threat. US economic and security cooperation is crucial for Afghanistan, and it can make a commitment to the transitional phase, which has already been pledged.

Many strategic thinkers in Islamabad still believe that Pakistan can extract its strategic and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, and it can repair its relations with the West. Perhaps, the heart of the Pakistani power elite is still with the West, but its mind is divided between the latter and China.

Who could be more concerned about instability in Afghanistan than its neighbours Pakistan and China? Such an environment would hurt their security and geoeconomic and political interests. The scenario was in sight long before the decision to withdraw the US troops was made; it was clear that if foreign troops left Afghanistan without defeating the Taliban decisively, stability in the war-torn country would not be possible, and the chances of a negotiated

settlement between the Taliban and other stakeholders would difficult, and that external support, including from Pakistan, would be needed.

Almost all the assessments had indicated that without a negotiated settlement, the Taliban's power would grow and other local and international terrorist groups too would become more influential. Likewise, it was foreseen that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan would deteriorate, triggering strategic animosity between the two nations.

The current discourse indicates Islamabad lacks clarity about its strategic priorities, and many in the policy corridors believe that providing bases to the US in Pakistan can help restore Washington's confidence in Pakistan. Though Prime Minister Imran Khan has categorically declared that his government will not provide any bases to the US forces for any purpose, many think this is an attempt to increase Islamabad's bargaining power, partly by allowing the opposition to build pressure on the government which has a thin majority in parliament. The view in Washington about the Pakistani power elite is also negative and it is perceived that with Pakistan desperate for US cooperation, the US is in a position to get Pakistan to agree to the former's terms of cooperation. Many see the same logic behind President Joe Biden's reluctance to contact Prime Minister Khan directly.

China is closely observing the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The growing instability in Afghanistan is a nightmare for Beijing as it conceives that it can seriously affect China's internal security, hinder the Belt and Road Initiative and increase uncertainty in its neighbourhood. Had the US and Pakistan been able to establish peace in Afghanistan, it would have been a great relief for China because in that case China would only have to contribute more politically, despite its apprehensions about the US bases in Pakistan.

Alternatively, China will have to play a lead role by invoking multiple channels — bilateral and multilateral — engaging not only Afghanistan and Pakistan but also other regional countries like Russia and the Central Asian nations, in addition to focusing on the Shanghai Organisation Cooperation, where India is an important member.

These are testing times for the Pakistani leadership that must make clear choices, either going with the US or China both of which expect Pakistan to facilitate the peace process among the Afghans. Almost everyone believes

Pakistan can influence the Taliban, notwithstanding the complications involved in the relationship. Following the Doha deal, the Taliban's confidence has grown and they have become more assertive. Their recent military triumphs in Afghanistan have further boosted their morale. Their growing power will decrease Pakistan's influence over them, and Pakistan will have to make some immediate decisions and clearly choose a side. Otherwise, it will walk on a tightrope trying to balance its relations with other players.

No doubt, Pakistan and China have many political and strategic convergences, but both need to develop a certain level of mutual trust where the two feel comfortable about each other's international and regional engagements.

The writer is a security analyst.

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Not all is doom and gloom By Abbas Nasir

IT has been more than two weeks since the news broke that a Pakistan Railways official posted in Sukkur had warned his bosses multiple times before the Ghotki rail tragedy that there were serious issues with the tracks in the area, but nobody paid any attention.

At least 65 passengers lost their lives in the tragic accident and more than 100 were injured, some gravely. And was there even a perfunctory apology from the minister concerned or an offer to resign? No. In fact, he disavowed all responsibility, saying that the day-to-day running of the railways was not his job.

Against this backdrop, I feel even more grateful for the presence in society of individuals who have committed themselves to the betterment of their fellow humans and made service to humanity so central to their lives.

Let's travel westwards from Ghotki to Shahdadpur and on to Larkana and Qambar-Shahdadkot. In this upper Sindh belt (and Jacobabad-Kandhkot-

Kashmore above it), are some of the roughest and poorest parts of the province known more for gangs of robbers and tribal feuds than anything else.

And yet one individual's dedication is making a dent in the abysmal poverty that entraps large swathes of people in Shikarpur, Larkana and Qambar-Shahdadkot districts. I have known Naween Mangi since she was in school with my nephew. She was always exceptionally bright and driven.

Communities are assisted in building infrastructure they think they need.

After getting her first degree in economics from the London School of Economics and a Master's in business journalism from New York University, she worked in London and New York as a journalist and trained in Tokyo, Singapore and Delhi.

Having established herself as a business-economy writer of excellence with her work appearing in Pakistani and foreign publications of repute, she was head-hunted by Bloomberg and appointed as the Pakistan bureau chief while still in her 20s.

While travelling in her native Sindh on assignment, she saw abject poverty and want. This moved her to a point that she gave up her silver-lined career path and committed herself to helping those who had nothing to improve their lives with or to dream of a better future for their children.

Thus was born the Ali Hasan Mangi Memorial Trust, named after her maternal grandfather whose rags-to-riches story is for another time but whose commitment to the public good both as a teacher first and then as legislator and entrepreneur-philanthropist of considerable standing was what inspired Naween.

Starting in 2008 with the slogan 'one village at a time' in the Larkana village of Khairo Dero, the trust has now expanded its integrated development model to some 90 villages in the three districts. Naween Mangi tells me the details of some of their activities.

The trust helps families build/instal essential facilities they need at home; clean water through hand-pumps, toilets, cooking gas, solar-powered fans and lights, kitchens and rooms to live in. Hundreds of families in dozens of villages have been helped in getting access to these vital services through a combination of materials the trust provides and labour they put in.

Families put in between 15 and 40 per cent of the cost of projects which is vital for development (as opposed to charity) and thereby for their dignity and ownership. The ideas for all of the trust projects come from the communities themselves.

That's why nothing's been built that is fancy, that looks great, costs a lot and is never used.

Communities are assisted in building infrastructure they think they need. Many have put in applications for village boundary walls for security against livestock theft.

Some others have asked for a network of sewerage drains for the entire village and others have wanted culverts so that women and children aren't falling into water courses while getting into and out of their villages. In all these projects, Naween says, the trust has partnered with communities to provide materials while they put in the labour and coordinate the effort.

In village Khairo Dero, where it is based, the trust procured and donated land as well as funded the costs of building a school with The Citizens Foundation that now has almost 800 children from nursery to Matric.

A community centre has been built that includes a public park and children's playground, a public library, skills training classes, a children's activity and game room and a public art hall that offers free arts and crafts classes.

Outside the premises, there is a public water stand that offers a cool shady place to rest and ice-cold drinking water to schoolchildren, labourers, farmers and passers-by throughout the eight summer months when temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius.

The trust runs a 'Public Pukaar Office' in Khairo Dero where members of the public can come to apply for various facilities they need help with. There is a free clinic at that location that provides consultation and medicine to about 800 patients a month.

A medical and disability assistance programme is also up and running that funds specialist care and surgery, in particular complex heart surgery for children with congenital heart disease, at the Aga Khan Hospital in Karachi. The organisation also has a scholarship programme for girls.

Social activist Naeem Sadiq has just reported on Facebook that Naween Mangi has “single-handedly helped construct 1,500 toilets in Sindh villages each at a miniscule cost of Rs 11,125”. This is unimaginably cheap.

Individuals such as Naween Mangi can show governments the right way to do things but cannot impact large swathes of the population; that is solely in a government’s gift with its vast resources. Naween’s trust runs on donations from friends and family and other funders.

Hence, her resources remain meagre. Having abandoned New York and London for Khairo Dero and Karachi, the wide smile on Naween’s face as she interacts with bright young students and budding artists in the village tells you she has no regrets. I wish I had the means to support her cause.

The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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Teachers’ power By Madeeha Ansari

AS a young child growing up in Pakistan, respect for teachers is a thread woven into both culture and mainstream religion. Reaching into memory, I can pull out entire essays about ‘ustaad ka ihteraam’ (respect for teachers), quoting their status as equal to that of parents in Islam, tasked as they are with the responsibility of nurturing guidance.

There is an extraordinary power that the teacher, the keeper of knowledge and wisdom, can wield in the life of a child. It is when that power is free from accountability that it can be truly, terrifyingly dangerous. What is learnt in the classroom and how, both can make or mar the life of a child.

The recent incident involving sexual abuse in a madressah has shaken Pakistani society to its core because of the graphic, viral nature of the record. What should shake us is the fact that it is neither new nor isolated. The harrowing stories of children who cannot look their interviewer in the eye are vastly outnumbered by those that will never be told. The existence of child abuse in spaces designated for learning and protection overturns the very purpose of those institutions — and yet it remains unchecked.

According to the World Health Organisation, 'child abuse' or 'maltreatment' constitutes "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power". Those last three words — responsibility, trust and power — are key when it comes to the relationship between a teacher and student.

The sanctity of a space of learning must be preserved.

In Pakistan, the time has come to begin to redefine the parameters of that relationship, and to establish clearer boundaries around what is permissible behaviour for an adult in a position of power, where trust can be abused. This should include restrictions around all forms of violence and harm: physical as well as psychological.

There is a huge body of evidence to show the lifelong consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Children who experience physical or sexual violence or psychological abuse are more likely to perpetrate it, and to turn to high-risk behaviours including substance misuse — or in extreme cases, suicide. They could become physically more prone to obesity and heart disease. And if the violence comes from peers or teachers in an educational setting, then they are more likely to turn away from learning itself.

The sanctity of a space of learning is something that needs to be preserved by all who enter it — students, teachers, principals, administrators. In much of the world, it is now mandatory to have a set of policies around child protection or safeguarding in educational institutions. This does not only involve a theoretical commitment to safety, but a clearly defined code of conduct laying out what is not acceptable.

Most importantly, it should involve real mechanisms for reporting as well as redress. No child would be willing to come forward unless confidentiality is guaranteed, and unless there will be real consequences. If the mechanisms for redress within an institution are compromised by corrupt or complicit administrators, then there have to be external possibilities for reporting — and children need to know they exist.

Some positive steps have already been taken in the form of helplines set up for women and children by the Ministry of Human Rights. However, for these to be

accessed by children they need to know that they are available for them, and for what kind of complaint. They need to know that they have the tools to break the culture of silence, which is a culture of impunity.

In the UK, there is statutory guidance for schools and colleges on safeguarding children. In fact, it is one of the criteria used when inspecting schools and educational settings. While the diversity of educational spaces and lack of regulation of institutions like madressahs pose a challenge for Pakistan, it is in the interests of all stakeholders — government, schools, clerics — to put in place minimal standards for child safeguarding. This is what needs to be highlighted as the message of the moment — to combat reputational risk, what we need is not less transparency but more.

We must find allies among the ulema, and the whole spectrum of stakeholders involved in a process such as formulating the Single National Curriculum. If certain standards are being created for education right now, the protection of children in spaces of learning should be aligned with that process — even incorporated into pre- and in-service training.

We need to be able to respect our teachers. We need to choose them well, train them well, and hold them to account — lest the pedestal should crumble.

The writer is founder of Cities for Children, a non-profit that focuses on street-connected children.

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Tax giveaways By Abid Hasan

PAKISTAN is ruled by rich leaders ever eager to recklessly spend tax money collected from the poor. And even more eager to foolishly spend borrowed money. Their motto is ‘no money, no problem’. Our leaders don’t feel the pinch of rising debt or lose sleep over wasteful expenditures.

As a result of this attitude, which has been deeply embedded in generation after generation of civil and military leaders, we have today a culture of entitlement. Every segment of society, especially the privileged private sector and those getting their salary from the government, feels that every year their entitlements must increase. The recipients of largesse are shamelessly oblivious to the fact

that each additional rupee spent, or exempted from taxes, is borrowed or begged.

One egregious example — little noticed by the media or debated in parliament — is the tax revenue that is lost as a result of tax incentives given to the business sector. Tax revenue losses are taxes that would have been collected had normal tax rates been applied but that are, instead, exempted with the objective of increasing growth and investment.

Trillions of rupees could have been spent on the welfare of citizens.

The IMF/World Bank had been pressing Pakistan for years to include an estimate of 'tax revenue loss' in the budget to enhance the transparency of such giveaways, but more importantly, to enable parliament to discuss and question this at the time of the budget discussion. Since last year, the Federal Board of Revenue has been providing in budget documents the estimated revenue loss from tax incentives. Alas, our parliament of the rich has so far not shown any interest in such stuff. In fact this year, parliamentarians found an ingenious and fun way to avoid reading the budget documents — they threw them at each other.

In FY20, 'tax giveaways' (identified as 'tax expenditures' in the Finance Bill) amounted to a whopping Rs1.3 trillion, or almost one-third of the taxes collected that year and three per cent of GDP. Had these taxes been collected, Pakistan could have doubled its annual health and education expenditures. Even if half of these had been collected, the Ehsaas programme could have been increased three times. If two years of exempted taxes were collected, we could build the Bhasha dam from our own resources. Each year, tax exemptions approximately equal what we spend on defence. Any way one looks at the giveaways, Pakistan could do so much more for its citizens by collecting some or all of these taxes.

So who benefits from these tax exemptions? Mostly, politically well-connected businesses producing for the domestic market. According to the details in the Finance Bill, the main beneficiaries in FY20 were general industry (Rs110 billion), poultry (Rs100bn), textiles (Rs80bn), pharmaceuticals (Rs70bn) edible oils (Rs80bn), dairy (Rs50bn), fertiliser (Rs70bn), the petroleum sector (Rs50bn), independent power producers (Rs30bn), agriculture (Rs70bn) and the auto industry (Rs80bn).

There is a tax loss of Rs40bn resulting from the free trade agreements with China, Indonesia and Malaysia — all three countries with whom our imports far exceed our exports. Other businesses which are provided tens of billions of rupees worth of tax breaks include the construction and sugar industry and the stock market.

Global experience indicates the limited benefits of tax incentives. Because of special-interest lobbying and corruption, the incentives tend to be overly generous and persist because they succeed as a political tool instead of being an effective economic tool. There is little credible evidence that the trillion-rupee tax giveaways, year after year, are having any significant impact on employment, growth, investment, consumer prices or workers' incomes in Pakistan.

Given Pakistan's grim fiscal situation, we can no longer afford to provide generous giveaways without robust evidence that they are good for the economy, and are not just for the owners of businesses. It is imperative that parliament reviews the proposed tax incentives and obligates the government to conduct a cost-benefit evaluation before the next budget. The findings of such evaluation would inform decision-makers whether to continue or withdraw individual tax incentives. A credible evaluation would also draw attention to, and publicise, revenues forgone from wasteful tax incentives that could free up resources for development.

Even if parliament does not take the initiative, the prime minister must require the Ministry of Finance to conduct prior to the next budget an independent cost-benefit evaluation of tax giveaways. The evaluation must determine whether the tax giveaways yield the stated objectives and deliver on the promises made by businesses when lobbying for the tax breaks.

The writer is a former adviser at the World Bank.

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Unparliamentary politics By Maleeha Lodhi

IN recent weeks the National Assembly has been the scene of shouting matches between members, exchange of insults and copies of the budget being flung at one another. A truce was eventually reached between the government and opposition only to be breached a few days later when some lawmakers again reverted to conduct unbecoming.

This triggered considerable debate on television and comment in the social media. Much of this assumed a partisan nature. It was said this wasn't the first time parliament had seen such a fracas and mayhem. Examples were cited of the past as also of brawls in the legislatures of other countries. But this missed the point. Past uncivil behaviour doesn't make it any more acceptable today. Nor does the breakdown in norms and civility elsewhere mean that it is alright to repeat the same conduct here.

Members of parliament have a responsibility to the people who elected them; to do the job for which their constituents have sent them to the legislature. They have a responsibility to the country's taxpayers too. After all it is taxpayers' money that pays for their salaries and the many perks they enjoy. Therefore, they also have a responsibility to the country, not just to their political constituency.

Of course, it is the deepening political polarisation in the country which often drives unparliamentary conduct. The unrestrained and intemperate language used by many MPs is a reflection of this as well as the dominant political culture that sees the ethic of war — to subdue the 'enemy' — rather than the ethic of competition as their guiding 'principle'. This rules out efforts to engage rivals or show them any respect.

Unseemly conduct by members of the National Assembly has political costs for all sides.

What gets lost in this deeply polarised environment is the obligation to work parliament in the public interest. If parliament's role is to legislate, debate and inform, then disorderly behaviour is tantamount to a dereliction of duty and responsibility. Political leaders and members of the assemblies never cease to declare their commitment to parliament's supremacy, but these claims sound hollow coming from those who engage in rowdy behaviour on the floor of the House.

The Senate has demonstrated more sobriety in the conduct of its business. Debates in the Upper House are often substantive. Several members of the National Assembly have also been diligent in their work and have acted with dignity. But the behaviour of some of their colleagues in the Lower House has been anything but civil.

It is the majority party that sets the substance and tone for parliamentary activity. Thus, its attitude is fundamental for the smooth — and peaceful — functioning of the Assembly. But if the treasury benches and their leadership regard all those sitting on opposition benches as venal politicians who should be in jail rather than parliament that makes for a charged environment. It also obviates efforts to elicit the cooperation needed to carry out parliament's actual functions.

Moreover, if the ruling party treats parliament as a means only to maintain the government in power rather than as an instrument of governance this has a bearing on parliament's functioning. Its role as a forum to initiate and shape laws, articulate and debate policy is left diminished. When the leader of the House barely comes to parliament this not only signals lack of interest but also sets an example for senior ministers to routinely skip attending the Assembly.

Lawmaking by executive fiat also marginalises parliament's role. The PTI government has relied more on promulgating ordinances for its legislative agenda than legislating by parliament. It may be following an inglorious tradition but it has now beaten the record of two predecessor governments in issuing ordinances, according to an assessment by Pildat. The great value of parliamentary debate is that it mobilises consensus, builds legitimacy for government measures and galvanises support for its policies. Lawmaking by ordinance denudes the government of these benefits and prevents wider ownership of laws that are decreed in this manner or rushed through parliament without discussion.

The opposition too has an obligation to participate with earnestness in parliamentary proceedings. But the major opposition parties have not engaged in a sustained or consistent way in the Assembly. They have often swung between boycotts, walkouts, disruptive actions and even threats to resign from membership. The opposition should use parliament as a forum to articulate policy alternatives and present solutions to national problems in addition to subjecting government measures to critical scrutiny. Irrespective of how treasury benches act, opposition members can seize the initiative by proposing legislation, initiate

debate on key issues and vigorously perform the function of oversight of executive actions.

On occasion this has happened but not often enough. Significantly, female lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have made a greater contribution in terms of agenda setting and attendance according to a recent Fafen report. Some of the NA committees have also taken their role seriously, often due to the interest and activism of individual members rather than their party's directives.

There is another reason for the diminished role of parliament as a debating chamber. 24/7 television news channels with their proliferation of talk shows have increasingly become the main platform for political debate. Appearing on television gives instant, high visibility, and is therefore prioritised over Assembly attendance by most political leaders. This affects parliament's deliberative role. Media engagement is of course essential in politics today but that should not mean lawmakers treat television appearances as a substitute for parliamentary duties.

It is the unseemly behaviour witnessed recently — not for the first time — that is the most unedifying aspect of many members' participation in parliament. This entails political costs for all sides. While members indulging in this may think this plays to their political base, and arguably pleases their leadership, it does nothing to earn the respect of the public at large. The conduct of parliamentarians matters and unseemly conduct has consequences for how they are perceived by people. If anything, it generates public disillusionment and brings parliament into disrepute. Not only is the Lower House's credibility eroded but democracy too is debased.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

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Land struggles By Umair Javed

THE most widespread form of political conflicts taking place across the country these days are struggles over land. Within this larger category, there are three types: disputes over the acquisition and conversion of rural land into (mostly) higher-end residential real estate; displacement from urban informal settlements; and the right to use urban public space.

In a few cases, the antagonists seeking to repurpose land are state actors on behalf of private sector actors, in others it is private actors on behalf of the state, and in some it is state and private actors working collectively. On the other side of these conflicts are people fighting to retain their source of livelihood, their source of shelter, or, failing that, obtain just compensation from public and private authorities.

Some of these struggles have made it to our television screens. The case of Bahria Town's takeover of goth lands in Karachi's outskirts (type 1), the proposed acquisitions for the Ravi Riverfront project (type 1), the Gujjar nullah demolitions (type 2), and the anti-encroachment operations around Empress Market (type 3) are high-profile cases. In previous years, katchi abadi displacements in Islamabad received some attention too.

In other countries, local movements around land and housing have received tremendous support from political parties and civil society.

But there are many more such cases taking place at a reduced scale across the country. Almost every announcement or press release of a local bureaucrat claiming success in 'freeing up xyz billion rupees of land', or the launch of an 'exciting new investment opportunity' in a housing development is likely on the back of something similar.

Pakistan's experience with this is not unique. Land struggles are a common feature in countries of the Global South. Previously, it used to be the state taking over land for some large infrastructure project like a dam or a highway. In the present, it is usually demographic pressure, the value of land and the desire to profit off it, and the kickbacks, benefits and rents that can be obtained from it that make it a lucrative commodity and a source of conflict. What takes it one step further in Pakistan is land's role as a source of saving and speculative gain, and the attendant societal greed that flocks to it.

Whatever the configuration, the basic story remains that some people need land to ensure their very existence, either as a source of livelihood, or as a source of shelter, while others desire land to line their pockets. And in most instances, it is the latter that prevail.

Urban public opinion, while being charitable to the poor in rhetoric, is generally ambivalent or indifferent to these struggles. Some go as far as to proclaim the inevitability of such transitions. This almost Darwinian argument suggests that

coercive or 'market-based' displacement of rural populations and informal settlements is inevitable and even desirable. Take the defence being offered for the Ravi Riverfront project by well-heeled supporters of the current government, for example. Their argument is that Lahore is facing tremendous amounts of population pressure so establishing a new city on arable land is the right decision for the greater good. Or using a similar logic, how Bahria Town is catering to growing housing demand in Karachi.

Missing from both conversations is a concern over what happens to the literally thousands that are being displaced and who have, through their resistance against the Punjab and Sindh governments respectively, made it clear that they are not on board with this 'greater good'.

The argument that they're getting money for selling their land doesn't hold at all either because it equates a one-time payment that is usually much less than the actual value of the land with a perpetual source of livelihood/shelter. And this does not even hold in the case of those being displaced from informal settlements who are often denied any type of compensation.

That said, the burden of taking a morally and ethically justifiable position does not fall on random citizens on Twitter. It falls on political parties who are, on paper at least, supposed to represent the interests of all citizens, not just property developers and their investors.

It is here where Pakistan's case really stands out in stark contrast to most other countries of the Global South. In other places, local movements around land and housing have received tremendous support from political parties and civil society, often forming a key component of their support base. In Brazil for example, the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra/MST) has grown to be a formidable political and social force in rural areas. In urban areas of the country, activism for the right to decent housing and adequate public services in informal settlements now forms the backbone of support for the Workers Party (the PT), and has led to pro-poor policies being adopted by municipal governments.

Within Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood, the Trinamool Congress, whose victory over the BJP in recent Bengal state elections was being (rightly) celebrated by all and sundry here, became popular because of its defence of

rural communities in Nandigram against forceful acquisition of land for private companies by the government.

Contrast this with Pakistan, where land developers of all stripes are facilitated by all mainstream political parties and the judiciary. Where sitting provincial and federal governments go to great lengths to point out how this rampant conversion of people's livelihoods and shelter for profits of the few is a central plank of their development strategy. Where the laundered proceeds of real estate development are given safe passage and an 'agreeable adjustment', and where those resisting this injustice like activists of the Awami Workers Party, the Sindhi rights movements, and the farmers' movements in Lahore and Sheikhupura, are subjected to repression, imprisonment, and coercion. There are many aspects of inequity and injustice in Pakistan's political economy, and perhaps no other phenomenon puts them in as sharp a focus as these struggles over land.

The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

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B3W vs BRI By Huma Yusuf

THE developing situation in Afghanistan has once again triggered an existential crisis in the US-Pakistan relationship. Forget years of mumblings about making the relationship more holistic, we're in a back-to-the-future scenario with a focus on security and anti-terrorism.

But the conversation is a bit different (so far, at least). Pakistan has refused to host US bases, and has made clear it will not engage in military conflict with the Afghan Taliban. US President Joe Biden continues to give Pakistan the cold shoulder, and has yet to speak with our prime minister. When they do speak, expect throwback discussions, with Washington asking Islamabad to 'do more', even though the limitations of Pakistan's leverage over the Afghan Taliban are clear.

It seems difficult to imagine how the two countries might argue over anything other than Afghanistan — and potential regional or global terrorism threats

resulting from instability across the Durand Line — over the coming decade. But there may be another conversation in the offing.

Both initiatives are likely to be complementary.

The G7 recently announced the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W), a commitment to invest up to $40 trillion to plug the infrastructure gap in low- and middle-income countries exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. This initiative gives Islamabad a new framework within which to engage with Washington beyond the security realm.

The B3W is pitched as a challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a key part of the US plan to counter China's growing global influence. There is therefore a knee-jerk sense that there will be no place for Pakistan in B3W planning, especially given that CPEC is among the most strategic and well-developed aspects of the BRI, mounting challenges and disruptions notwithstanding. Biden's snub to Pakistan at a recent environmental roundtable also suggests B3W talks may be a non-starter.

But speaking to the New York Times last week, Imran Khan got it right when he asked "why do we have to choose sides — either it's the US or China? I think we should have a relationship with everyone". Balancing relationships between competing superpowers is the only viable option for Pakistan.

It helps that despite a B3W versus BRI media narrative, the initiatives are likely to be complementary. BRI's focus is on strategic infrastructure such as ports, and most expenditure to date has been on transport and power. The B3W, meanwhile, will focus on climate, health, digital technology, and gender equity and equality.

It remains to be seen whether China embraces a parallel approach or seeks to clamp down B3W ambitions by tramping on the same terrain. China has since 2015 been pushing for a 'Digital Silk Road' that would overlay traditional infrastructure projects developed as part of the BRI. Since the pandemic hit, Beijing has also started to speak of a 'Health Silk Road'. But with 20 per cent of BRI projects affected by Covid-related delays and financing constraints, Beijing may need to prioritise BRI projects over the coming years. This leaves countries like Pakistan with an opportunity to participate in both BRI and B3W in an optimal service of domestic needs.

Moreover, the fact that B3W is a G7 initiative, and not solely a US enterprise, also tempers dangers that a zero-sum mentality will dominate. B3W has its origins in a Trump administration plan to counter Chinese influence through a rival to BRI. It also had the dual goal of reducing US development expenditure by ramping up private sector investment. The initial focus was on hard infrastructure such as electricity projects.

But the idea has evolved under Biden, and will be further shaped by the inclusion of other G7 countries with less polarised views of China. Public statements emphasise that B3W is a 'green BRI', implying a complementary rather than hostile track. Given that the EU has recently negotiated a trade agreement with China, and Italy, a G7 member, is a BRI participant, the either/or dimension is unlikely to materialise as bluntly as some are forecasting.

B3W may also create opportunities for regional integration, as both India and Afghanistan are likely to participate in some projects. This would be a welcome alternative to current projections, which see the Pakistan-India rivalry deepening in an echo of China-US tensions.

Key challenges will result from how B3W is structured. To work, the initiative will need to corral multiple governments and mobilise multiple sources of private capital, a slower and messier approach than BRI's bilaterally negotiated, largely state-funded projects. But post facto complications and renegotiations linked to many BRI projects may have increased appetite for better planned projects at the outset.

As always, the ultimate onus lies on Pakistan to map its needs, clarify its values and priorities, and participate in international initiatives so as to serve public needs.

The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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Asking for it By Shimaila Matri Dawood

LAST year a short clip by comedy trio Muriel She's Asking For It became the most-watched BBC3 video on Facebook and Twitter, racking up a combined 45 million views in just 10 days. It shows two British lads in a cafe as one of them puts down a local tabloid on the counter. "That's awful," he says, pointing to the headline, 'He Said She Said, University Sex Scandal', with a splashy image of an ample bosomed young lady in tight jeans. His friend scoffs derisively: "Yeah, but look at what she's wearing. She's asking for it."

This insensitivity infuriates the waitresses who begin to imagine 'asking for' something without saying it. One barges into another company's conference room in a red pantsuit, expecting a promotion; the other starts her vacation in the middle of a working day as she is in a sarong. The camera then zooms back to the offensive lad whose slice of chocolate cake is knocked off his plate by his server. "You won't want this then," she says, pointing to his Arsenal top. "I'm not a footballer," he protests before the girls retort: "Well what did you expect us to think when you're wearing that! Asking for it?"

Nothing that our PM said was factually wrong, just incomplete.

The link between sexual assault and dress results in heated debate in patriarchal societies but it turns out that even one of the most liberal needs media reminders to state the obvious: women are never asking to be raped.

The furore over our prime minister's answers to questions posed by Axios's Jonathan Swan reflects some of this justifiable outrage. But overlooked in the ensuing reactive conversation is that the prime minister was right about some of the causal pathways to rape: society's sexual scripts and beliefs. In his signature frank and open style, he explained how exposures not dangerous in some societies are dangerous in different cultural constructs. Despite a disclaimer that his choice of word 'purdah' did not refer to 'the veil' but to its Islamic meaning 'avoiding immorality', an outcry ensued.

Part of some unfair criticism stemmed from the public reluctance to distinguish between the acknowledgement of the existence of certain erroneous sexual scripts and a belief in their veracity. One may, for example, believe that certain offenders see choice of dress as incitement to rape or the signalling of sexual availability, but not condone these myths.

Confusion also occurs because of an over-reliance on the teachings of Western feminist literature of the 1970s, especially Susan Brownmiller's Against Our Will,

which cited misogyny/power play as the only factor behind rape. While this undoubtedly benefited the cause of gender equality, it remained incomplete as an explanation of why men assault women. Scientific literature today proposes multiple linkages, including a perpetrator's neurophysiology, alcohol consumption, psychopathology, personality, attitudes to gender, the socialisation taught by families, schools and religion, the media watched (violence on TV, pornography) and sexual scripts (men as sexual aggressors; women, gatekeepers) taught by cultural mores.

Richard Felson of Penn State and Richard Moran of Mount Holyoke College state most rape victims in the US, where one in three females are assaulted, are young women, which means the motive of sexual gratification cannot be dismissed. "Most rapists force victims to have sex because they want sex," they conclude. Even within the network of contemporary feminist scholarship, more nuanced and empirically based studies are being published. Beverly McPhail of the University of Houston says rape "occurs due to multiple motives ... sexual gratification, revenge, recreation, power and attempts to achieve masculinity".

Protective measures play a part in minimising rape in any society, especially those with a problematic socialisation of males. These include recommendations to dress modestly, educate children in safe and unsafe touch and advisories to not venture out alone. 'Purdah' for men is refraining from viewing indecent media and lowering their gaze.

Moving towards systems protective against sex crimes involves realising that acknowledging rape myths exist does not mean believing them. Recommending protective measures never negates the importance of other preventative strategies. One rape causation theory is not an attempt to explain all forms of sexual violence.

Nothing that our prime minister said was factually wrong, just incomplete. Understanding multiple factors behind assault is imperative if we are to devise effective strategies: establishing awareness programmes for reformed police, a rescue and response action, more child courts and prohibitive penal punishments.

Hot button discussions must be covered in layers of scientific fact and theory. Otherwise like exposed bodies in ignorant societies, speakers can expect to be mauled publicly. And they'd be asking for it.

The writer is an award-winning journalist and heads a child welfare advocacy group, Kasur Hamara Hai.

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The new Wild West By Arifa Noor

IT'S now universally acknowledged in casual conversations that fewer people are watching news channels. Each time I am forced to tell someone new I meet what I do for a living, they confess (sometimes nonchalantly and sometimes self-consciously) their lack of interest in news channels. Anecdotally, this appears to be a sea change from, say, 2007, when everyone was glued to the television screens, as Pakistan went through one of its most tumultuous years.

If the conversation continues for a bit, many even go so far as to explain they don't read newspaper either. News is now delivered to them from their smartphones — it's where they find out about breaking news, where they read analyses and even see the viral clips from talk shows or parliament which are the talk of the town.

It is now not unusual to come across journalists who are willing to admit they don't read newspapers every morning! (My skin crawls when I hear this.) Clearly, technology is changing our lives for sure but also journalism, and the way journalists behave.

But bad habits are not all the digital revolution has allowed us to acquire. Like the Wild West, cyberspace has also allowed many to dream (and sometimes big). Young reporters have quit their jobs at news channels and turned their YouTubing into a steady source of income — the prime minister has even interacted with them, something which was once only a privilege reserved for newspaper correspondents or television stars. It is worth wondering if other political parties follow suit.

It seems that digital websites are not attracting the kind of investment still pouring into TV channels.

Some of the bigger, established, and enterprising, names from television have also turned to social media for a sideshow on YouTube, which must be doing well, as they continue to pour in the effort and time.

But cyberspace talks or discussions are also now proliferating, far beyond physical studios. Websites, individuals, think tanks — encouraged by the distancing set in place by Covid-19 — have all taken to the format once seen as the domain of news channels. Sometimes, this allows discussions on taboo subjects not allowed on mainstream; sometimes it allows 'taboo' people to discuss politics or interview politicians; and occasionally, it has led to discussions which then made their way to the mainstream — the spirited debate between Mariam Chughtai and Pervez Hoodbhoy on the Single National Curriculum first took place online before it was then replicated on mainstream channels.

But how much has this impacted news channels? It is hard to say for accurate information about viewers and advertising is hard to come by in Pakistan. Anecdotally, the reach and influence of mainstream news outlets — be they newspapers or channels — has been impacted greatly but who knows what this means in real terms.

However, the adventures in the digital Wild West in Pakistan have led to many YouTube pundits but few website ventures. This is intriguing to say the least. For the experience elsewhere has been a bit different. In the US, when newspapers were first impacted by the digital world, websites such as Huffington Post and BuzzFeed were the talk of the town. Next door, in India, websites such as ThePrint, Scroll and TheWire have acquired a name as well as a reputation. Many of the big names from the days of print are now found on these websites.

At home, we do have a few examples of news websites but with fewer financial resources than what appears to have gone into their Indian counterparts. So far, it seems that digital websites are not attracting the kind of investment which is still pouring into television channels — just this week, everyone has been talking of the sale of one of the biggest news channels of the country.

Perhaps this will change in the coming days because India usually is ahead of Pakistan in terms of changing trends. I remember by 2000 news channels were proliferating in India (Barkha Dutt was already a household name by then), two years before Geo came on air, revolutionising the news landscape in Pakistan.

It interests people such as myself because the proliferating YouTube channels have only further blurred the line between news and opinion. Twitter, talk shows, blogs and now YouTube have made it harder for the older, more traditional

outlets to ensure editorial checks and inform readers and viewers about opinion versus fact.

For example, talk shows often begin with counsel about the difference between opinion and fact but participants routinely offer a mix of the two. 'Khabars' are offered during the discussion and no one is in a position to ask if it has been vetted or double-checked. One-man YouTube channels don't have the luxury of editorial checks. Journalism used to be about individual as well as institutional credibility but in the modern day, only the former seems to be of importance. In the digital Wild West, the celebrity journalist on YouTube and Twitter, is now the Frontier Hero, the stuff of legends.

But it may not last, partly, because regulations are inevitable, though it's hard to say what shape they will take. The efforts are ongoing in most countries in the West. For example, the UK introduced an online safety bill in parliament just last month, which was criticised by rights activists. Germany is reviewing a law passed two years ago. Australia passed a law earlier this year which will compel social media giants such as Google and Facebook to pay news outlets for using their content; it's the first law of its kind and is being seen as a harbinger for what may follow in other countries. All these are pieces of a bigger puzzle, which will fit together to introduce rules to a largely unregulated space.

In the developing world, these regulations will not be entirely consensus-based or for the greater good, unfortunately.

But the changing face of journalism will eventually be influenced by (and even influence) these regulations. Whether these will strengthen institutional journalism or lead to more proliferation of individual efforts is hard to tell. But the Wild West can't last forever.

The writer is a journalist.

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About the only sensible news By Jawed Naqvi

LOOK at it dispassionately. The world, led by the United States, has agreed to accept the deeply misogynistic Taliban as the next rulers in Afghanistan, reneging on lofty promises made to Afghan womenfolk as well as the country's ethnic minorities. On what grounds then can one expect a different yardstick from the self-proclaimed guardians of democracies for other countries, for example, India, or even Pakistan?

So many of our friends in Pakistan are struggling for more democratic space than they find under Imran Khan. That's what their counterparts in India are fighting for, hoping to deny Narendra Modi a third term in 2024 and in the short term to defeat him in key state polls next year. Marvel at the irony the hectoring world throws at us. Pakistan is facing severe financial scrutiny linked to its progress (or failure) with the fumigation of terror groups in the country. The same world has quietly put a world champion of ethnic and religious violence — the Afghan Taliban — in Pakistan's care.

Such realities are innately offensive and difficult to swallow. In India, when anti-Muslim pogroms were in full cry in Gujarat in 2002 under then chief minister Modi's watch, did the US utter a word in protest? As far as one can remember ambassador Robert Blackwill, representing George W. Bush, didn't lift a finger leave alone visit Gujarat to comfort the victims, not that he was sleeping at the wheel. Following a violent incident in Jammu and Kashmir, which the Indian government described as an act of terror, Mr Blackwill was issuing forth his strongest condemnations against terrorism. But he remained scrupulously silent on Gujarat. Some laughably call it pragmatism, but that's how it works.

A fatal flaw in democracies is that they may not always suit the needs of free markets.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in the saddle in Delhi, which shielded Mr Modi from deeper international censure. When Manmohan Singh took over from Vajpayee, Modi's US visa was promptly cancelled followed by other countries, but not China. Pragmatism.

Now, under Modi's leadership, India is a member of the Quad, supposedly a group of four democracies out to tame authoritarian China. Some even call the group Nato of the Pacific. There's a larger factor protecting Modi from global disapproval — his two main corporate supporters. The Ambani brothers were exclusive invitees — one each at the Bush and Clinton inaugural. Obama was

Modi's guest twice. China of late invites an opposite approach. The world tried to teach China a trick or two in capitalism and China got itself a PhD in the theory and practice of capitalism. This was not part of the script and there's global discomfort all round.

Barring China and Russia, the two countries contrived to remain in adversarial stand-off with the world, for a variety of reasons, every other non-democratic system is kosher provided it keeps faith with the free market. During the Cold War the tussle was projected as a contest between democracies and authoritarianism, the predatory nature of capitalism neatly masked. Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, the preferred term was deftly changed to 'free market democracies'.

If, God forbid, one has to choose between the two, free markets would override democracy hands down. An illustration was right there. Donald Trump's indulgence of the killing of a Saudi dissenter was a crude example of an otherwise concealed nexus between rogue wealth and lawless plunder that drives world economies. The system has its unconscionable rules. Afghan Taliban are agreeable, but the Mynamar military is not. There wasn't a whiff of democracy in Hong Kong under British rule; after its 1997 handover to China the terms of endearment changed.

Against this self-absorbed and self-obsessed global backdrop, it is meaningless to think of any respite coming to the besieged Kashmiris in the Valley from any foreign shores. There was a time when the US embassy in Delhi was a second home for Kashmiri dissidents, and chiefly for the Hurriyat group. The equation changed overnight after the Cold War ended. Ditto for Palestinians. After the Shah's ouster, the Saudis stepped up as the US anchor in the region. They quickly led a call to recognise Israel at the Arab League summit in 1981. Iraq, Syria, Libya and Marxist Yemen opposed the move. All four were destroyed after the USSR broke up but not before the Saudi deal was accepted in a dressed-up format in Oslo.

A fatal flaw in democracies is that they may not always suit the needs of free markets. The Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas were elected by every possible definition of democracy, in Egypt and Gaza respectively. Before that Muslim nationalists were elected in Algeria. Their victories were annulled, not very different from the Anglo-American coup staged in the 1950s against Iran's

elected former prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. He had nationalised the oil industry.

To crush the Muslim Brotherhood and keep its leaders in jail, the Saudis have bankrolled Gen Sisi of Egypt. Earlier, Riyadh helped destroy Kuwait but used Saddam Hussein to do the hatchet job. Kuwait was resented (like Qatar today) by the Saudis for its liberal ethos in which Palestinian migrants played a role in setting up a nascent parliament. The parliament was seen as a threat to Riyadh and other feudal heads. Margaret Thatcher had her own reasons to frown at Kuwait. She forced the emir to return 26 per cent of shares Kuwait had bought in British Petroleum.

The recent meeting of Kashmiri leaders with Prime Minister Modi has triggered considerable speculation. Was it linked to Afghanistan? Was it international pressure? The idea is far-fetched. Only India's supreme court or Indian voters can change the current order in Kashmir. And Indian people alone can bring all round relief by changing the government in New Delhi. That's where Sharad Pawar's assertion that no opposition campaign against Modi can be successful without involving the Congress party is the best news in recent days for the return of democracy to India.

The writer is Dawn's correspondent in Delhi.

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Small-ideas budget By Dr Niaz Murtaza

OUR long desire to emulate the Asian Tigers' progress remains unsuccessful so far, reflecting an inability to craft a viable development strategy. So our budgets too, like the new PTI one, don't reflect an underpinning grand strategy to upgrade the economy, but are more collections of small ideas to reward key political and economic allies for short-term gains. They fail to give sustainable progress and often cause fiscal and current account deficits.

East Asian development strategies targeted higher-end industries, especially export-oriented ones. States supported local entrepreneurs on R&D, marketing

and technical issues to penetrate these industries. But support was tied to technical upgrading and exports growth by firms. This not only helped companies grow, it also ensured rapid national progress. Such measures are missing from the budget. As with the ones over the decades, it provides no clarity on likely progress on the key criteria that budget measures should be rigorously tested against: upping tax and exports revenues, upgrading the economy technically and upping social equity.

The budget provides no clarity on likely progress on key criteria.

Measures predictably reflect old ideas. There is relief for public servants, pensioners and labour that may foster some social equity. There are relief measures for numerous industries rather than a few key ones the state chooses to upgrade the economy. Some measures aid the politically favoured rather than the economically promising. They largely include tax breaks industries have devoured for decades without attaining much technical upgrading or expansion. One sees few support measures on R&D, marketing and technical issues and no performance links.

There is the BISP-related programmes expansion that may foster some social equity. Finally, there is a large increase in the development budget. But this is subject to cuts if tax targets are not met. Such state projects have low efficiency, high leakages and dubious links with economic upgradation or tax or export revenue expansion. Thus, the budget may fuel the twin deficits by wasting precious fiscal resources on small ideas that may neither increase tax or exports revenues sufficiently nor upgrade the economy.

While past regimes have all fed the twin deficits, the PTI has done especially badly on fiscal deficits, giving the largest fiscal deficit-GDP ratios over three years (7.5-9 per cent) seen since 2000 at least. While the PTI showcases PML-N's reliance on high current account deficits to deliver high GDP growth and its own current account deficits cuts, its own much lower GDP growth has come via very high fiscal deficits, mainly due to its failure to attain tax revenue targets. The gap in 2019-20 was 30pc, the highest since 2000 that widely beat the 15pc gap in 2012-13.

Tax revenue growth is measured in nominal terms and is thus close to nominal rather than real GDP growth. Since 2008-09, our annual real GDP growth has been 3.3pc, nominal GDP growth 12pc and FBR revenue growth 12.5pc. Under

the PPP, it was 2.8pc, 15.7pc and 16pc. Even in 2008-09 when real GDP growth was near zero due to a global crisis, tax revenue growth was close to nominal GDP growth. Under the PML-N, real GDP growth was 4.7pc, nominal growth 8.5pc and tax revenue growth 1.5 times higher at 13pc.

Under the PTI, annual real GDP growth is 1.8pc, nominal growth 11.5pc, but tax revenue growth is only 6pc. Tax revenues did grow by 20pc this fiscal year but only after the low base effect of two years of near-zero growth. So by failing to equal tax revenue growth even to its nominal GDP growth, let alone the 1:1.5 ratio of the PML-N, the government has seen the national treasury lose nearly Rs2 trillion in tax revenues since 2018-19. The effects of having six FBR heads in three years, infighting and incompetence, and a lack of tax strategy are clear. With a high tax target 25pc higher than this year's actual, it will very likely run a fiscal deficit of above 7pc next year too.

Even external deficit cuts may vanish given rising oil prices, stagnant exports and uncertain remittances levels. While a floating rupee will cut current account deficits, it will fuel inflation too and won't end external deficits fully. The rupee lost nearly 60pc value from 2008-13. Yet reserves fell by $4 billion in 2012-13 despite faster exports and remittances growth under the PPP than now and a current account deficit-GDP ratio of only 1.1pc. So we were back with IMF in 2013. Oil prices are now above $75 per barrel. Our imports may again cross $50bn this fiscal year. So we may suffer high twin deficits soon while economic upgrading remains elusive. But given team incapacities and looming elections, there is little hope that the PTI can quickly change track and undertake reforms to deliver sustainable, equitable economic upgrading.

The writer is a political economist with a PhD from Berkeley.

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Labour reform By Zulfiqar Shah

THE federal government has announced a multibillion package for the agricultural sector to boost a neglected part of our economy. The plan includes Rs110 billion direct investment and 80 per cent increase in agro credit to bring it to Rs2.7 trillion over the next three years.

The government claims that the much-awaited package would help alleviate rural poverty and increase household incomes. But it fails to explain how it would change the current labour situation in the sector. Of Pakistan's 65 million-strong labour force, 38pc are employed in the agricultural sector and are considered marginalised and vulnerable.

Though the portion of wage labour in the sector has increased in the last couple of decades, a majority still work under sharecropping arrangements regulated under a 70-year-old piece of legislation called Tenancy Regulations in Sindh and Punjab, the two provinces employing 80pc of farm labour.

Rights must be given to those who feed the nation.

The latest amendment in the Sindh Tenancy Act, 1950, made in 2013, was to regularise begaar (unpaid work). Fortunately, the Sindh High Court in October 2019 struck down the exploitative amendment and asked the provincial government to update the law taking into account fundamental rights in the Constitution. The judges in their detailed verdict reproduced excerpts from a decades-old hari report highlighting the fact that the situation of the sharecroppers has not changed much as their working conditions resembled slavery.

These observations are supported by international and national reports. The Walk Free Foundation's Global Slavery Index estimates 3.1m people are working in bonded labour in Pakistan, the majority of whom are in agriculture. The Hari Welfare Association's annual report documented that over 2,000 people were released from bonded labour only in Sindh in 2020.

Successive governments have acknowledged the presence of labour bondage particularly in the agricultural sector by enacting specific laws. However, they have miserably failed to implement these laws as there are hardly any prosecutions on record under the Bonded Labour Systems (Abolition) Act, 1992, or the Sindh Bonded Labour Systems (Abolition) Act, 2015. Wage labour in the agricultural sector is increasing particularly in medium and large farms in northern Sindh and southern Punjab. However, they also remain without any legal protection.

None of the over 100 labour laws is applicable to agricultural labour. The current minimum wage legislation doesn't cover wage labour in the sector and the same

is the case with social security and pension laws as they only cover industrial and commercial workers.

Without proper laws and rules outlining terms of employment and health and safety mechanisms or a policy and provision of social dialogue, there is a clear deficit of decent work in the sector which is a significant source of revenue for the foreign exchequer. Pakistan is the fifth largest producer of cotton and over 60pc of its export comprises textile and related value-added products. However, workers in the sector are deprived of their basic rights.

The Pakistan Labour Force Survey estimates a nominal 22pc female participation in the country's workforce. Experts believe that the actual economic contribution of women, particularly in agriculture, is over 40pc. This valuable contribution is diluted as unpaid family work. Sindh has promulgated a specific law to protect the rights of women agricultural workers, but implementation remains a challenge.

Of the estimated 12m child labourers in the country, 60pc are in agriculture and allied activities, many of them engaged in hazardous work.

The federal government's current agricultural package or even similar packages and policies at the provincial level are labour blind. How can a vital sector of the economy progress if the lack of rights of the people in the sector is not rectified? This reflects the ignorance of our policymakers who miss the point that development and economic progress is all about people, not solely money and machines.

If the intention is to improve the agricultural sector then the package needs to be revisited and must start with labour reforms that include bringing in new legislation to extend fundamental rights to the agricultural workers eg right to association, access to remedy by establishing hari/kisan courts, a time-bound plan to eradicate bonded labour and reduce child labour. The extension of a minimum wage labour law to the agricultural sector and social security coverage is equally important. Women workers may need special attention on the pattern of the Sindh law along with a practical implementation plan.

The sector has the potential to bring the economy out of the current crisis as well as generate employment, but the only way to make it happen is through a combination of economic investment, technological innovation and labour reforms.

The writer is a human rights and labour rights activist based in Karachi.

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Peruvian paralysis By Mahir Ali

IT'S not unusual for battle lines in the class war to be delineated more clearly in Latin America than elsewhere, and the fault lines have deepened in recent decades. Yet the stark contrast between the competing candidates in Peru's presidential run-off earlier this month was nonetheless remarkable.

It pitted a rural primary school teacher born to illiterate Andean peasants, with little political experience beyond organising a union and spearheading a successful teachers' strike, against the very epitome of entrenched privilege, a would-be dynast whose father misruled Peru for a decade and is paying the price with a 25-year prison term.

The votes have all been counted, but more than three weeks after the election no result has been declared. According to the tally, endorsed by a variety of international observers, Pedro Castillo — the teacher — won by a margin of more than 44,000 votes. A close but clear result.

He has not formally been declared the president-elect, though, because his opponent has played the Trump card, alleging electoral fraud and attempting, with the assistance of some of the most expensive legal firms in Lima, to throw out more than 200,000 votes? "The election will be flipped, dear friends," Keiko Fujimori told her supporters.

Election win isn't enough for a left turn.

Whether it will be depends on the National Elections Jury, which is examining the fraud claims, and is expected to deliver its verdict within days — or possibly weeks.

Fujimori has twice before narrowly lost run-offs, to Ollanto Humala in 2011 and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in 2016 — both of whom face pretrial detention relating to bribery charges stemming from the activities of the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. On neither occasion did she challenge the result.

Unrelated charges of money laundering and corruption led to Fujimori herself confronting pretrial detention, and even as a presidential candidate she required special permission to campaign outside Lima.

Her father, Alberto Fujimori, who ruled Peru for 10 years from 1990, was in 2009 sentenced to 25 years in jail for authorising death squads as well as charges relating to kidnapping, vote-rigging and corruption. His legacy includes the forced sterilisation of 270,000 mostly indigenous women. His daughter's electoral platform included a vow to set him free.

The key factor in her desperation to win the presidency, however, may well be the fact that if she were to become head of state her own legal woes would be postponed.

Keiko Fujimori is not a particularly popular figure even among mainstream conservatives, most of whom voted for her chiefly to stave off the prospect of a Castillo presidency.

Racism undoubtedly plays a part: the contempt in which the European-descended elites and their peripheries hold indigenous populations is a continent-wide phenomenon reflecting its conquistador past and the settler colonialism that ensued. Before the advent of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, it was all but unknown for Native Americans to rise to positions of power at a national level.

Racism, though, may not be the paramount reason behind the resistance among Peru's entrenched vested interests to the very idea of a Castillo presidency. For them, a bigger issue is his election platform, which has included talk of nationalisation, higher taxation of lucrative mining interests, and improved funding for health — Peru has endured the world's highest per capita death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic — and education.

It is fairly common across the world for panic buttons to be pushed as soon as the slightest prospect of wealth redistribution rears its head. The neoliberal model of capitalism, for which Chile was chosen as a laboratory by the US almost half a century ago, thrives on the sacred notion that the rich will keep getting richer — which in turn entails any trickle-down effect being restricted to a minimum.

Castillo hails from Cajamarca, one of Peru's poorest regions, which is also home to South America's largest gold mine. It would be odd if his ideas about who

should benefit from Peru's natural resources did not differ substantially from those of the mine owners. In recent weeks, however, he has felt obliged to curb his enthusiasm, to declare: "We are not Chavistas, we are not communists, we are not going to take away property from anyone … we are democratic."

The trouble, of course, is that nowadays even a mildly social democratic agenda tends to be vilified as communist — and the manifesto of Castillo's Peru Libre party does indeed refer to Marx, Lenin and Peruvian Communist Party founder José Carlos Mariátegui, although its aims could hardly be construed as revolutionary.

Castillo's unfortunate social conservatism, meanwhile, won't cut much ice with those on the right who share his views. There are dark rumours of a military coup, should he be declared president, and he would anyhow face a hostile congress. Change will eventually come to Peru, but probably not this year.

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State of disunion By Shahzad Sharjeel

PAKISTAN has historically relied on two centres of power, ie, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia — both as original benefactor and a US proxy — and China. It takes a feat of jugglery to accommodate these two seemingly disparate worldviews. It is, however, when KSA and China get their ducks in a row that our goose gets cooked. Don't get me wrong, there definitely will be winners on our side too, but most likely, it won't be us common folk. Why? For the simple reason that most of us are neither property tycoons, nor captains of industry salivating at the prospect of free ports from Karachi to Gwadar. No Mehran-Bolan conspiracy here, it's just that the rest of the country is landlocked.

Many a Karachi businessmen, 'sick and tired' of the rent-seeking behaviour of everyone who is someone in the province, including the treasury, opposition, saviours and the para-saviours running everything from water hydrants to housing societies in the megapolis dream of a 'free' Karachi. The question is, free from what — or should it be whom?

Hain kawakib kuch; nazar atay hain kuch (The stars are not what they appear to be). What can be more German than Mercedes or more Saudi than the Red Sea Gateway Terminal? Should Pakistan be wooed by such behemoths, would it

rankle our Chinese friends? No. Because they are both partially owned by our Chinese friends.

“Declare Karachi or at least Port Qasim and the adjoining 50 square kilometres as a duty-free zone, and businesses from across the world would rush to invest there even if you ask $100,000 for one square metre of land’, the head of a leading conglomerate was repeatedly heard saying. Asked who would run this proposed duty-free zone, he named the institution that knows how to run everything.

Pakistan suffers from an extreme trust deficit.

Does the tug of war over Sindh’s coastal islands, the size of Malir District, and the brouhaha over the proposed creation of another district (Keamari) in Karachi begin to make sense?

Ties between the province and the centre have hit a tense low. A flurry of missives by the chief minister underlining Sindh’s complaints regarding the apportionment of resources, from funding to water have reportedly irked the prime minister. During a recent meeting, when the chief minister repeated his misgivings, the prime minister is said to have thumped his desk and shouted, ‘enough is enough’.

After the utter unruliness in the National Assembly during the budget and post-budget sessions and its replication in the Balochistan Assembly, not much is left to the imagination where the effects of polarisation are concerned. It cannot be denied that the various stakeholders are not even trying to find a neutral, civil space, away from the media glare to have a working relationship at least on a handful of issues of national interest.

Pakistan suffers from an extreme trust deficit between organs of the state, apex institutions and the federating units. These differences range from collection and redistribution of fiscal resources, extraction of natural resources and distribution of their dividends to water. The portfolio of inter-provincial coordination assumes immense importance in view of these schisms. However, instead of using it to at least narrow down differences among the federating units before only the most intractable ones are elevated to the Council of Common Interests, it is entrusted to someone who seems more interested in matters of the Pakistan Sports Board, and for reasons of capacity and space to operate, would rather meet kabaddi teams.

At a recent Indus River System Authority meeting, the member representing Sindh reportedly had an object thrown at him by the body's chair for having the temerity to repeatedly raise the issue of release of water to Punjab from the Chashma and Taunsa link canals. According to the rules, link canals can only be operated in case of surplus flows.

The issues between the provinces and centre are issues of power differential as they are replicated between provincial headquarters and their own administrative units such as divisions and districts. The rural-urban chasm in Sindh is widening. The misgivings of south Punjab against a powerful central Punjab represented by Lahore regularly brim over. Not all is well between the erstwhile Fata, the Hazara Division, and Peshawar. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan will only complicate things in KP. Balochistan, besides the forced disappearances and security establishment-led semblance of order, has Baloch-Pakhtun issues, sectarian violence and its own variant of cross-border challenges such as the Quetta Shura to worry about.

All of this, and the centre, according to the opposition, is busy planning another elections robbery. Not willing to solely fly on a wing and a prayer, the PTI is now betting on the EVMs along with the AVMs. Remember, our friends KSA and China have no opposition and a one-party rule respectively.

The writer is a poet and analyst.

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On shaky ground By Rafia Zakaria

IT was 1:30 in the morning on June 24, 2021. The tide was low and the moon was full. Hundreds of people were sleeping in their beds in Champlain Towers South. The 12-storey building faced the ocean in Surfside, a strip of reclaimed land off the Atlantic coast in Florida that is dotted with similar high-rise dwellings. Witnesses say that a rumble was heard before the actual collapse. The middle of the building fell first and then in 30 seconds, moments which must have been excruciating for those awoken by the crash in the portion left standing. Then another portion of the building collapsed. If those sleeping in the part that fell died without realising the horror of the moment, those in the part that fell down next would have known just what was happening.

Rescuers have searched the rubble for survivors — a near futile quest. News has now emerged that a report prepared in 2018 found major structural damage in the building. In the parking lot that was under the building, load-bearing beams and pylons had cracks in them. The pool deck was leaking water to the parking level below it causing damage to the very beams that were holding up the building. Lawsuits have been filed and Miami-Dade County where Surfside is located as well as the federal government plan an inquiry. The investigation, National Public Radio reported, is expected to go on for years.

It is impossible to watch the coverage of this ill-fated ocean-facing building without shuddering at what (quite literally) lies beneath similar high-rises being constructed along the Karachi coast. Building collapses are not unusual in Pakistan. Most occur in poor slums and hovels where seamy contractors use degraded material to erect structures — that second floor or that third addition. All this is done without attention to any sort of public safety regulations or concerns. Last year, a building fell in Sukkur, followed by a five-storey building in Karachi's Lyari area. Other buildings also collapsed after last year's monsoon rains including one that killed 10 people. Those rains promise to return this year but the Sindh Building Control Authority has (like all other agencies in Karachi) made few efforts to ensure that buildings with structural problems are condemned and evacuated. There is no preparation or inspection.

Even more concerning is the situation of the multistorey developments that are popping up along the Karachi coastline. Last year, a report in this paper titled 'Reclaiming Karachi's edge' laid out the problems with building structures on coastal reclaimed land including in Defence Housing Authority Phase VIII. Here there are a number of hugely well-advertised, upscale high-rises, like the one that tumbled to the ground in Florida. It is unclear what sort of safety standards have been set for these structures in their plans and how well these have been implemented in their construction. Nor is it clear if any continuing inspections are planned so that the building structures are safe for habitation even when they are no longer new.

It is impossible to watch the coverage of Champlain Towers, Florida, without shuddering at the thought of what lies beneath Karachi's coastal high-rises.

There's little evidence of what the high-rise planners are doing to ensure that the proliferating projects along Karachi's coastline don't sink into the shifting sands on which they are constructed. Structures that face the ocean undergo relentless

battering by the wind, sea and sand. Buildings in Dubai, (which some emerging building projects have been designed to mimic) very likely have funds on hand to maintain the facades and structures of buildings against the relentless corrosion caused by saltwater.

Pakistanis, however, are used to cutting corners, and what they do everywhere they will likely also do in the construction of coastal high-rises. This can result in buildings that are just a bit unstable, a bit shaky, even as the political players that collaborate to make them possible are as entrenched as ever.

It is too late for Champlain Towers and Condominiums in Surfside, Florida. The husk of the building that still remains standing features eerie scenes of a disrupted existence. One visible bedroom shows bunk beds with sheets and pillows, an office chair. Firefighters who are searching through the rubble and finding stuffed toys are lining them up in an impromptu shrine to the children that have perished. It's a tough task; the day after the building collapsed, rains soaked everything making it harder to dig into the rubble. Then a treacherous fire broke out filling up the wreckage site with smoke and further hampering efforts to find any possible survivors.

The tragedy in Surfside should be a warning to coastal developers in Karachi. If the government of Sindh, the Defence Housing Authority or any other relevant authority has the plans filed prior to construction they need to be made available for any member of the public to see. Particularly helpful would be a recounting of the measures taken to ensure that there are open and unobstructed exits that people could access in case of a fire or an earthquake.

Over 100 people who lived in Champlain Towers (most living in units that are on the opposite side of where the collapse took place) did manage to escape via the stairwell. Wide, unobstructed and well-marked exits are rare in any building in Karachi and this represents an opportunity for tragedy.

It is unlikely that anyone will be found in the tightly packed rubble that the Champlain Towers now is. A lot could have been done to save the building and the people in it, but it wasn't. Repairs continued to be delayed. Cracks, fissures and even loud noises coming through the walls were ignored. The result is there for everyone to see. Karachi's high-rise dwellers, particularly those close to the ocean, should take heed. The magnetism and majesty of the ocean lulled the inhabitants of one ill-fated coastal high-rise to ignore the signs and the warnings

that were all around them. The rest of us must not be so mesmerised, so oblivious to the cruelties of the ever-shifting sands and the buildings that are constructed upon them.

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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Looming Afghan civil war By Zahid Hussain

WITH the revival of armed regional militias to stop the Afghan Taliban offensive, Afghanistan is edging towards a new civil war. Headed by old mujahideen warlords, these armed bands are fighting along the Afghan government forces in some areas, but in many cases they are defending their own regional fiefdoms.

It appears that we are returning to the 1990s following the downfall of the Najibullah government when several mujahideen groups fought each other, plunging Afghanistan into a devastating civil war and killing thousands of Afghans. Those events saw the rise of the Taliban movement, which swept away warlord rule and established the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. But the warlords returned to power after the American invasion. The withdrawal of the foreign forces and the looming threat of a Taliban takeover compelled them to raise their own forces. They don't seem to have much faith in government security forces to protect them. Some three decades later, the same former mujahideen commanders are once again arrayed against their old nemesis.

Most prominent among them are Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan and Ata Muhammad — the same old faces that symbolise four decades of conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban offensive in northern Afghanistan in recent weeks has been a major reason behind the revival of the militias representing different ethnic groups, particularly the Tajik and Uzbeks.

Over the past weeks, the insurgents have achieved some spectacular successes in the region that has never been considered their stronghold. The Taliban have generally been seen as a Pakhtun-dominated movement, with eastern and southern Afghanistan as their main support base.

In recent weeks, the Taliban have achieved some spectacular successes.

The Taliban have overrun many northern districts and have besieged some major towns. They now control major roads leading to Mazar-i-Sharif. In many areas, Afghan government soldiers have abandoned their posts without any fight. In some cases, the soldiers have joined the insurgents. The Taliban now control the main border crossing with Tajikistan, a main trade route.

While these militia movements have helped reinforce the government forces fighting the Taliban in many northern districts, they have also strengthened the warlord fiefdoms, thus weakening the authority of the government in Kabul. These armed groups are nominally aligned with the Afghan government and their organisation could further fracture the war-battered country along ethnic lines and empower regional strongmen.

Some analysts, however, contend that these militias may eventually serve as the last line of defence, with the security forces unable to counter the Taliban onslaught. But there is also the question of whether these ragtag armed groups can stand their ground against a more committed enemy. Many believe it could be a repeat of the events of the late 1990s when local strongmen were swept away by rampaging Taliban forces.

For many analysts, the Taliban's success in the north has not come as a surprise. While consolidating their military and diplomatic gains, the Taliban have also sought to secure the support of communities it had fought in the past in order to present themselves as a national movement. The Taliban had traditionally relied on ethnic Pakhtuns, but made a clear shift to recruit members of other ethnic groups with a view to expanding their area of influence.

Over the years, the insurgent group made significant inroads into the non-Pakhtun belt in northern Afghanistan and inducted several Tajik and Uzbek commanders in its ranks, giving them more operational autonomy. The non-Pakhtuns assumed important positions in the Taliban leadership and held key posts in the provinces.

The changing ethnic profile of the group was evident in the fact that non-Pakhtuns now constituted a quarter of the Taliban leadership council and its various commissions. Members of ethnic minorities were also handed out senior positions as provincial and district shadow governors and zonal commanders. By inducting Shia Hazaras, the Taliban wanted to make themselves more

acceptable by presenting themselves as a multiethnic, multi-sect force in order to make themselves more politically acceptable.

As an example, the Taliban appointed a Shia ethnic Hazara as its shadow district chief before the intra-Afghan peace talks. The hard-line Sunni Taliban had been previously blamed for persecuting the minority group during its stint in power. The Hazaras largely inhabit the central Afghan provinces.

Moreover, the Taliban also exploited the fissures in northern Afghanistan to win over tribal chiefs who felt marginalised by the government in Kabul in terms of political representation. Some of them had joined the Taliban for protection since they could not rely on the Afghan security forces anymore. The Taliban approach has benefited the group as several minority ethnic groups joining them.

The Taliban also leveraged the peace deal with the US to their advantage in order to woo regional ethnic groups. With the withdrawal of US forces, joining the Taliban had once again become a serious option for many people and groups in Afghanistan. While internal discord has further weakened the Kabul government's position, the Taliban have shown a greater degree of pragmatism. Some warlords and power groups have reportedly struck separate deals with the insurgents, which has further weakened the Kabul government's position amid the American pullout.

With the latest military setback, the Afghan government has increased its reliance on regional militias. The growing dependence on the warlords is seen as a sign of the government's desperation. A US intelligence report says the Ghani government in Kabul could collapse within six months of the US withdrawal. That could further aggravate the power vacuum and lead to the fragmentation of the country along ethnic lines, with dire consequences for the entire region.

What is most alarming is the prospect of the disintegration of the Afghan army and the trained soldiers joining different warring factions. Although the Biden administration assured President Ghani during his visit to Washington last week of continued US financial, political and moral support, that may not be able to save Afghanistan from the looming civil war. It could be an unending war with no winner.

The writer is the author of No-Win War — The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow.

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