

■ A tepid and listless  
election campaign - Page 5

■ Transformative reforms: Seizing the  
historic opportunity - Page 6

■ Unprecedented economic crisis  
and rights challenges - Page 7

# WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

## IMF flags risks to economic stability



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# Index

# CUTTING EDGE

4

Economy  
**IMF flags risks to economic stability**

10

Agriculture  
**Smart agriculture is the key**

5

Analysis  
**A tepid and listless election campaign**

11

War  
**A new plan in Gaza**

6

Economics  
**Transformative reforms: Seizing the historic opportunity**

12

Conflict  
**Where is the 'never again' for Gaza?**

7

Opinion  
**Unprecedented economic crisis and rights challenges**

8

Economics  
**Persistent risks**

9

Opinion  
**Shaping a new democratic era: The crucial role of upcoming elections in Pakistan's future**

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## About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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# IMF flags risks to economic stability

Muhammad Asim Nisar

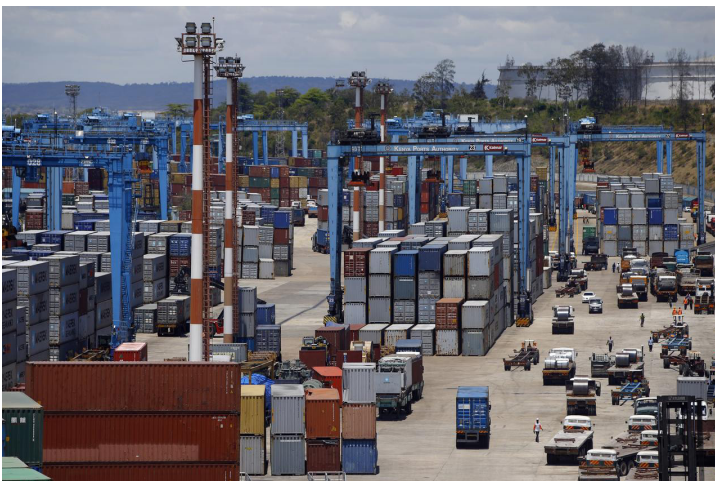
The latest IMF report on Pakistan's economy needs to be read closely by the country's economic managers in order to chart out their future course of action. According to the lender, Pakistan's economy has achieved a degree of stability but there are serious risks to Islamabad's debt sustainability and its ability to pay back foreign loans.

In its recently released staff report the Fund has appreciated the caretaker government's policy reform efforts, and given it credit for stabilizing the economy. The IMF also noted that the caretaker government has stayed in office beyond its constitutional period of 90

The lender has also highlighted that debt sustainability faces many medium term risks, including uneven program implementation and lack of access to adequate multilateral and bilateral financing. In other words, in the near future Pakistan will face difficulties in fulfilling its foreign payments obligations due to low foreign exchange reserves and scarce market financing. Further, delay in disbursement of planned financing from international financial institutions or bilateral partners could pose major risks to the government's debt retirement programme. To quote the IMF, "Higher commodity prices and tighter global financial conditions, including due to the intensification of geopolitical conflicts, could put pressure

vide the government much needed fiscal space. Also, the central bank's foreign exchange reserves have risen to \$9.1 billion following the receipt of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) loan tranche of \$700 million last week.

According to the caretaker finance minister, Pakistan would achieve 2-2.5% economic growth, supported by the agriculture sector growth of 5.6% in the wake of a turnaround in major crops, and the industrial sector expansion by 2.5%. Also, there has been significant improvement in the rupee-dollar parity in recent months. Shamshad Akhtar a few days ago expressed apprehensions about the current account balance. This is a sore point for Pakistan's economy which has to be



days due to issues relating to the re-demarcation of constituency boundaries on the basis of the latest 2023 census.

In the opinion of the IMF, Pakistan's medium-term challenges remain acute which cannot be tackled effectively without a firm commitment to serious policy reforms. The IMF report has also highlighted governance and transparency risks emanating from the new Sovereign Wealth Fund and the Special Investment Facilitation Council. Of special concern is the rising financing needs which seem difficult to meet, given a weak reserve position, fiscal slippages, significant sovereign exposure of domestic banks and global economic crunch. All these factors combine to complicate the problem of debt sustainability. The overall risk of sovereign stress is also high, reflecting a high level of vulnerability from elevated debt and gross financing needs and low reserve buffers.

on the exchange rate and external stability. Additionally, political tensions ahead of the upcoming elections may weigh on policy decisions and reform implementation".

The economic outlook is further clouded by factors like a persistent current account deficit, a difficult external environment for Eurobond and Sukuk issuance, and limited reserve buffers in case of delays to anticipated inflows. As of now, the IMF total lending to Pakistan amounts to \$8 billion which would increase to \$9 billion by March this year. Pakistan will also have to line up a further \$15-20 billion to make repayments in the coming fiscal year.

In the ultimate analysis, everything will depend upon how the economy performs, not on the inflow of external loans. On this score the two pieces of good news is that Pakistan's economic growth may rebound by 2% in the ongoing fiscal year while tax collection could hit a record at Rs10 trillion. This would pro-

addressed quickly and effectively. The main issue is the ever widening trade gap caused by our stagnant exports. More foreign investment is one way to redress the imbalance but, as experts have repeatedly pointed out, the main hurdle in the way is the current environment of high costs of doing business and bureaucratic snarls that discourage investors. A bloated government structure is another problem.

Overall, there is a great need to cut the number of ministries to stop financial leakage and wastage of funds, bring down energy prices, and privatize loss making enterprises like the Steel Mills and the PIA. To boost revenue, the agriculture and retail sectors need to be brought into the tax net – an overdue reform neglected by successive governments in the past. Needless to say, we have to lift up the economy by our own efforts. The IMF and World Bank cannot provide long-term solutions to our problems.



# A tepid and listless election campaign

Nasim Ahmed

Although elections are only three weeks away, political campaigning by various parties remains subdued and tepid. One reason is that PTI supporters are not being allowed sufficient space to hold rallies and organise public meetings. On the other hand, the PML-N, carrying the baggage of the disastrous PDM regime led by Shehbaz Sharif, is not attracting the mass support that it did in earlier elections. As for the PPP, Bilawal Bhutto has made several forays into Punjab but is yet to elicit the kind of public response he expects.

An example of how the PTI is being prevented from full-scale election campaigning is the disruption of the party's virtual event last week. According to media reports, the internet services were interrupted an hour before the 'virtual power show' of the PTI broadcast on social media websites, particularly YouTube. Netblocks, a global internet monitor, tweeted that live metrics showed "a nation-scale disruption to social media platforms across Pakistan, including X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The incident comes as persecuted opposition leader Imran Khan's political party, PTI, launches its second virtual gathering." In light of these blackouts, some internet service providers (ISPs) informed their customers through text messages that they might experience internet issues due to a "degradation" in their network.

The PTI charged that the authorities concerned deliberately interrupted internet services to disrupt its online event. The party spokesperson said, "Shame on the caretakers that are causing damage to Pakistanis only, and this was the proof of what they intend to do on February 8, but the people are aware of all such moves." However, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority ascribed the internet disruption to a "technical fault".

The crackdown on the PTI after the unfortunate incident of May 9 followed by the arrest of party workers and snatching of nomination papers from their candidates, coupled with forfeiture of the party's iconic symbol hat, has rightly raised questions about the fairness and credibility of the coming elections. Speaking to reporters at Adiala Jail after the hearing of the Toshakhana case last week, the PTI leader pointed out that PTI candidates "are being harassed and detained" by the authorities to stop them from contesting elections. He also claimed that the Election Commission of Pakistan had

deliberately delayed the matter related to the PTI's intra-party elections to take a sudden and uncalled for action to deprive the political party of its electoral symbol. He warned that if fair polls were not conducted then it would lead to further "instability and uncertainty".

On the other hand, while the PML-N has not yet been able to put together its election manifesto causing murmur in political circles, PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto continues to attack its main rival, saying that leaders tried and tested in the past cannot solve the problems Pakistan faces today. He has said how long the people of Punjab would endure the alternating rule of PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif and Wasim Akram plus (PTI's Usman Buzdar) in Lahore. Accusing the PML-N of engaging

political temperature but to no avail.

According to political observers, Imran Khan's offer of an olive branch opens a window of opportunity to start a process of dialogue and reconciliation among various political parties which have for long been engaged in a war of words and exchange of poisonous rhetoric, much to the dismay of a large majority of people in the country who wish to see democracy flourish to pave the way for economic reconstruction. Wild allegations and inane controversies have cast a shadow over the political landscape blocking the way for a rational debate and positive engagement among the country's political forces.

In the past, he had obstinately refused to hold any talks with the opposition parties. But



in vengeful politics and terrorising workers of the PTI, Bilawal urged PTI supporters to rally behind his party in the upcoming general elections, pledging to put an end to the politics of revenge and division.

In an interesting development, the PTI founder while talking to the media last week expressed his readiness for talks with other political parties, insisting that a politician is "always ready to hold dialogue". In this connection, he referred to President Arif Alvi's several efforts to mediate and bring down the

trials and tribulations of the last few months have made him a wiser man. He seems to have learned his lessons and now realizes that politics is not a cricket match but a game of compromise and accommodation conducted through a continuous process of dialogue and engagement. But it remains to be seen how the other political forces in the country react to his offer. It would be unfortunate if they took the same hard line which he previously did and came to grief. They should not miss the opportunity to put democracy on a strong footing in the country.



# Transformative reforms: Seizing the historic opportunity

Muhammad Zain

In the wake of a commendable period of declining poverty rates, Pakistan's economy currently faces one of its most challenging crises. Poor policy decisions, compounded by external shocks like COVID-19 and catastrophic floods, have slowed economic growth, increased poverty, and brought the nation to the brink of debt default. This juncture demands bold and sustained reforms.

According to the World Bank, this time, the call for transformative change is urgent, as the risks of short-term fixes loom larger than ever. After a commendable period of sustained reduction in poverty rates, Pakistan's economy is currently grappling with one of its most severe crises. Poor policy decisions, coupled with a series of setbacks—namely, the impacts of COVID-19, the catastrophic floods of 2022, and adverse global conditions—have resulted in a slowdown in economic growth, an increase in poverty levels, and pushed the country perilously close to debt default. Furthermore, human development indicators linger at levels comparable to much poorer nations, while per capita income growth has dwindled due to low productivity and high fertility rates.

These challenges necessitate profound and sustained reforms. Although the proposed reforms are not groundbreaking, what sets this moment apart is that the alternative of managing through short-term solutions and external financing is riskier and more difficult to execute. Historically, many countries have emerged stronger from similar crises. For Pakistan, this could be an opportunity to address deeply entrenched issues that have hindered the country's development for far too long.

Firstly, Pakistan must tackle its human capital crisis. A staggering seven percent of children in the country do not survive beyond their fifth birthday, a rate multiple times higher than in comparable nations. Additionally, 40 percent of children under the age of 5 experience stunted growth, surpassing 50 percent in impoverished districts. Reducing stunting rates by half within a decade is plausible, but it requires a shift from the conventional emphasis solely on nutrition and health to ensuring broader access to clean water and sanitation, birth spacing services, and improved living and hygiene conditions. Achieving this goal demands robust cross-sectoral and local coordination, a nationwide mobilization, a behavioral change campaign, and annual investments of nearly 1 percent of GDP.

A weakened education system compounds the effects of stunting, with 78 percent of 10-year-

old children unable to read age-appropriate text, and over 20 million children out of school.

Secondly, to finance improvements in service delivery and human capital development, Pakistan must create more fiscal space. Tax collection has stagnated at a low 10 percent of GDP for decades. Swiftly abolishing costly tax exemptions and reducing compliance costs could generate approximately 3 percent of GDP in added revenues. Additional funds could be raised at provincial and local levels from undertaxed sectors like real estate, agriculture, and retail, potentially adding another 3 percent of GDP. Efficiency in managing public resources could result in expenditure savings. Privatizing most loss-making public enterprises, cutting poorly targeted subsidies in agriculture and energy while safeguarding the poorest, and reducing overlaps between federal and provincial spending could yield savings of another 3 percent of GDP annually. Over time, bold fiscal reforms could potentially generate more than 12 percent of GDP in new fiscal space—three times the additional resources needed to address human development gaps, leaving ample resources to boost public investments in infrastructure and reduce public debt. However, putting Pakistan's public finances on a more sustainable path will ultimately require stronger economic growth.

Thirdly, Pakistan must strive for a more dynamic and open economy. Current policies distort markets to the advantage of a few, hindering productivity growth. Frequent overvaluation of the currency and high tariffs lead firms to focus on domestic markets, discouraging exports. A challenging business environment deters investment, exacerbated by a strong state presence in contested markets. Tax distortions also discourage productive investment, favoring non-tradable sectors such as real estate. While expediting the sale of productive assets or selectively attracting foreign investment may provide short-term forex reserves, addressing the core issues behind low investment and declining productivity growth—leveling the playing field, spurring competition, reducing bureaucracy, and enhancing policy predictability—is crucial for lasting impact.

Fourthly, the agricultural sector must undergo transformation to ensure food security amid climate change and rising water scarcity. Current subsidies, government procurement, and price restrictions confine farmers to low-value, undiversified farming systems and water-intensive crops.

Redirecting subsidies toward public goods, such as research on seeds, veterinary services, irrigation, drainage services, promotion of regenerative agriculture, and the establishment

of integrated agriculture value chains, could lead to increased productivity, higher on- and off-farm incomes, and enhanced resilience against climate shocks. In the fifth aspect, inefficiencies within the energy sector must be swiftly and consistently addressed, as they have long been a drain on public resources. While recent tariff increases have helped curb losses and protect low-income consumers, substantial distribution and transmission losses, coupled with high generation costs, need to be minimized for the sector's sustainable future.

Fortunately, Pakistan possesses access to some of the most cost-effective hydropower and solar resources. Realizing these benefits requires substantial investment, achievable only through addressing longstanding issues in distribution and transmission systems, particularly through increased private participation. Tariff adjustments essential for cost recovery must be insulated from political influence to provide credible incentives for long-term investors.

Implementing these policy shifts necessitates collaboration at all levels. Local governments must be empowered with the capacity to raise and efficiently allocate funding for essential local services, necessitating a revival of decentralization. Moreover, while a more dynamic economy presents opportunities for most Pakistanis, ensuring that no one is left behind requires the expansion of social safety nets, along with improvements in targeting and coherence across federal and provincial instruments.

By undertaking these fundamental reforms in the coming years, Pakistan has the potential to achieve upper-middle-income status by its centennial in 2047. There is confidence in the country's human capacities and proven implementation abilities to reach this ambitious goal. Instead of letting the economic crisis go to waste, Pakistan can turn it into a historical turning point, marking the year 2024 as 'Pakistan's moment.' In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a pivotal moment in 2024, poised to turn its economic crisis into a historic opportunity. By redirecting subsidies, addressing energy sector inefficiencies, empowering local governments, and expanding social safety nets, the country can pave the way for a resilient and dynamic future. Decentralization, coupled with private sector engagement, holds the key to unlocking potential in agriculture and energy. If these fundamental reforms are implemented diligently, there is a realistic path for Pakistan to attain upper-middle-income status by its centennial in 2047. 'Pakistan's moment' is not just a phrase but a tangible prospect, achievable through strategic and transformative measures.



# Unprecedented economic crisis and rights challenges

Muhammad Hassan

In the tumultuous year of 2023, Pakistan found itself in the grips of one of its most severe economic crises, marked by soaring levels of poverty, inflation, and unemployment. The Human Rights Watch's extensive 'World Report 2024' delves into the multifaceted impact of these challenges on millions of people, raising concerns about the compromised rights to health, food, and an adequate standard of living.

The report underscores the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exacerbating the situation, emphasizing austerity measures and subsidy removal without adequate compensatory actions, particularly affecting the nation's vulnerable low-income groups. In 2023, Pakistan grappled with one of the most severe economic crises in its history, witnessing a surge in poverty, inflation, and unemployment, thereby jeopardizing the fundamental rights to health, food, and an adequate standard of living for millions, as outlined in a report by the Human Rights Watch.

The HRW conducted a comprehensive review of human rights practices in over 100 countries. The report underscored that the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) insistence on austerity and the removal of subsidies, without adequate compensatory measures, inflicted additional hardship on low-income groups in Pakistan. The nation remained exceptionally vulnerable to climate change, experiencing warming rates well above the global average, resulting in more frequent and intense extreme climate events, according to the report.

The HRW highlighted the increasing repression by governments in Asia, impacting human rights both locally and internationally. In contrast to Europe, Africa, and the Americas, Asia lacks a meaningful human rights charter or regional institution to safeguard human rights standards, the report added.

It revealed a climate of fear among journalists and civil society groups due to government threats and attacks on the media. Many resorted to self-censorship, and authorities pressured media outlets not to criticize state institutions or the judiciary.

Government intimidation, harassment, and surveillance of various groups, as well as impediments to the registration and func-

tioning of international humanitarian and human rights groups under the pretext of regulating INGOs, were reported by NGOs.

The report also highlighted the pervasive issue of violence against women and girls throughout Pakistan, encompassing rape, murder, acid attacks, domestic violence, denial of education, sexual harassment at work, and child and forced marriage. Approximately 1,000 women were estimated to be victims of "honour killings" annually.

In Punjab alone, a local NGO reported 10,365 cases of violence against women in the first four months of 2023. The actual number is likely much higher due to reporting barriers, harmful social norms, and inadequate police responses. Pakistan's conviction rate for rape was reported to be less than three percent.

A staggering number of children, both primary and secondary school-age, were out of school, with girls facing barriers such as the lack of schools, associated costs, child marriage, harmful child labour, and gender discrimination.

The report also highlighted the lack of awareness about mental health in Pakistani society, contributing to the abuse of individuals with psychosocial disabilities and mental health conditions. Transgender women, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, remained under attack.

Food insecurity affected nearly 37% of Pakistan's 230 million people as of 2018, yet only 8.9 million families received assistance to mitigate the impact of rampant inflation.

In 2018, almost 37% of Pakistan's massive population of 230 million people grappled with the harsh reality of food insecurity. This pressing issue was exacerbated by various factors, with rampant inflation playing a significant role in exacerbating the challenges faced by vulnerable communities. Despite the pervasive nature of food insecurity, only a fraction of those in need, specifically 8.9 million families, received any form of assistance.

The widespread prevalence of food insecurity underscores the deep-seated challenges facing a substantial portion of the Pakistani population. This predicament is not only a consequence of economic fluctuations but is also influenced by factors such as climate variability, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities. The disparity between the high percentage of people affect-

ed and the relatively low number of families receiving assistance highlights the existing gaps in the distribution and accessibility of support mechanisms.

Efforts to address this issue must go beyond short-term assistance and focus on implementing sustainable solutions. This may involve a multi-faceted approach, including economic reforms to curb inflation, investments in agricultural resilience to mitigate climate-related risks, and the development of social safety nets to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources. By addressing the root causes of food insecurity and implementing comprehensive strategies, Pakistan can work towards creating a more resilient and food-secure future for its population.

In July, the European Union proposed extending Pakistan's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status by another four years, allowing Pakistan to benefit from trade preferences and access to the European market. Despite the domestic challenges, Pakistan and China strengthened their economic and political ties in 2023, with ongoing efforts on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, involving the construction of roads, railways, and energy pipelines.

Elaine Pearson, Asia director at HRW, emphasized the need for bold new approaches from rights-respecting governments and democratic institutions in response to the threats posed by abusive governments in Asia to human rights, both domestically and internationally.

As the report sheds light on the economic turmoil and human rights violations, it paints a stark picture of Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change and the increasing repression faced by journalists and civil society. The lack of a robust human rights charter in Asia further compounds the challenges. Despite these grim realities, there are also glimpses of geopolitical engagements, such as the extension of Pakistan's trade preferences by the European Union and the deepening economic ties with China. In the face of these complex dynamics, the call for bold new approaches to safeguard human rights remains, echoing the sentiment expressed by Elaine Pearson, the Asia director at HRW. The path forward demands concerted efforts from rights-respecting governments and democratic institutions to address the pressing human rights issues both within Pakistan and on the international stage.



# Persistent risks

Shahid Hussain

The International Monetary Fund has declared that Pakistan's economy is now stable. However, it has cautioned that Islamabad faces serious risks related to debt sustainability and the repayment of loans. It acknowledged the caretaker government's efforts in maintaining economic stability through decisive policy measures, crediting them for their steadfast implementation.

It emphasized that the caretaker government has exceeded its constitutional period of 90 days, initially causing controversy. The Election Commission of Pakistan justified the extension, citing the need to redraw constituency boundaries following the decision to base elections on the new 2023 Census. While the caretaker government's achievements in stabilizing the economy are recognized, the IMF highlighted persistent medium-term challenges. The report emphasized the need for ongoing policy efforts to address these challenges sustainably. Governance and transparency risks from the new Sovereign Wealth Fund and the Special Investment Facilitation Council were also pointed out.

The IMF raised concerns about elevated gross financing needs, posing significant risks to debt sustainability, especially with depleted fiscal and reserve buffers. Timely disbursements of committed bilateral and multilateral support were deemed crucial. The report highlighted the high risk of gross financing needs materialization, given the significant sovereign exposure of domestic banks and limited policy flexibility.

Sovereign stress risks were identified due to high vulnerability stemming from elevated debt and gross financing needs, coupled with low reserve buffers. Medium-term risks to debt sustainability, such as uneven program implementation, political risks, and access to sufficient financing, were considered high.

The IMF warned that policy slippages, insufficient financing, or increased gross financing needs could undermine the path to debt sustainability. With low foreign exchange reserves and limited market financing, foreign payments were projected to remain a persistent challenge. Delays in the disbursement of planned financing from international financial institutions or bilateral partners were highlighted as major risks, given the limited buffers. Higher commodity prices and tighter global financial conditions, including geopolitical conflicts, can exert pressure on the exchange rate and external stability.

Political tensions leading up to the upcoming elections were identified as potential

factors influencing policy decisions and reform implementation. The IMF also noted substantial public sector external rollover needs, a persistent current account deficit, challenges in the external environment for Eurobond and Sukuk issuance, and limited reserve buffers in case of delays to expected inflows. The IMF's total lending to Pakistan was stated to be nearly \$8 billion, expected to increase to \$9 billion by March of the current year.

Recently, caretaker Finance Minister Dr. Shamshad Akhtar projected a rebound in the country's economic growth by 2-2.5% in the current fiscal year. She estimated a 5.6% growth in the agriculture sector and a 2.5% growth in the industrial sector for the year. She

trend at the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) since the beginning of the current fiscal year. The PSX provided a 55% return in 2023, with the benchmark KSE 100 Index closing at over 62,450 points in December 2023.

However, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has voiced apprehensions regarding the creation of Pakistan's new Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF), citing potential governance risks. Established in August 2023, the SWF, which comprises seven profitable State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) valued at \$8 billion, presents challenges in terms of governance and public financial management. The IMF highlights exemptions granted to these SOEs from the best practice structure outlined



is also optimism about revenue collection as the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) is likely to collect Rs10 trillion in FY24, surpassing the set target of Rs9.4 trillion. She highlighted the growth of the country's foreign exchange reserves, reaching a recent high of \$9.1 billion from \$4 billion at the beginning of her term. Regarding monetary policy, she mentioned that the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) recognizes the need to lower the benchmark policy rate, currently at a record high of 22%, to support economic activities. However, the decision to cut rates depends on a deceleration in the inflation rate, which has spiked recently. The minister pointed out that the cut-off yields on Treasury bills have fallen below the central bank policy rate, indicating a potential interest rate cut.

The minister acknowledged the upward

in the SOE Act, raising concerns about corporate governance, monitoring, transparency, and accountability. While the interim government assures the IMF of addressing these concerns, the spotlight remains on the governance landscape surrounding the SWF.

In conclusion, the IMF's cautionary stance on governance risks in Pakistan's new Sovereign Wealth Fund adds a layer of complexity to the economic landscape. As the interim government pledges measures to address these concerns, the nation's economic trajectory remains a focal point. Additionally, the optimism expressed by Caretaker Finance Minister Dr. Shamshad Akhtar regarding economic growth, revenue collection, and monetary policy provides a nuanced backdrop to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Pakistan's financial landscape.



# Shaping a new democratic era: The crucial role of upcoming elections in Pakistan's future

Raza Khan

While it is now evident that national elections are scheduled for February 8, 2024, uncertainties persist, reminding us that unforeseen obstacles may still arise. Nevertheless, the prospect of holding elections at this juncture is a positive step forward, even amidst the undeniable controversy surrounding these elections in the history of Pakistan.

The occurrence of national elections on February 8 holds significant promise for the country. It signifies the potential formation of a government comprising both seasoned politicians and those perceived as pseudo-politicians. Despite the dominance of personality and egos in Pakistani political culture, there remains optimism that these leaders could embark on a grand reconciliation dialogue. This initiative is crucial for the stability, social cohesion, and overall development of the state and society, given the current conditions in Pakistan.

Another vital aspect of these national elections is the revival of the policy-making process, which has been stagnant for months, if not years. The incoming government, whether in economic, security, foreign affairs, or social welfare, will need to reevaluate existing policies and propose new, dynamic, and achievable objectives. The current Caretaker Prime Minister, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar, despite efforts to portray himself as a statesman, lacks the legitimacy to rule beyond his constitutional mandate, as argued by many jurists.

Once an elected government assumes power post-February 8, there is an expectation of accountability for any wrongdoings in the country. In recent months, gross human rights violations have occurred, with the caretaker prime minister and his cabinet members either feigning ignorance or, more unfortunately, being held responsible for these acts of cruelty. The upcoming elections offer the prospect of a government directly responsible for addressing such issues and providing symbolic leadership to the nation.

Moreover, the elected prime minister would serve as a rallying point for state apparatus, government departments, and agencies to receive direction. The extent to which such direction is permitted by the powers-that-be remains uncertain.

The paramount outcome of these upcoming national elections lies in the potential to steer the ship of democracy in a country

still grappling with a rudderless and turbulent situation. The argument that even the worst democracy is preferable to dictatorship becomes pertinent. While the recent political landscape in Pakistan may not entirely resemble a democratic process, there has been no declared derailment of democracy either. The elections and the subsequent assumption of power through the electoral process mark the initial steps toward the restoration of democracy, emphasizing that a bloody revolution is not necessary for this goal.

The upcoming elections hold the poten-

signify a mature electorate, signaling that Pakistanis recognize the critical juncture to either shape or reshape the destiny of their nation.

Historically, Pakistan has witnessed voter turnouts below 40 percent, with exceptions in the 1970 and 2018 national elections when turnout exceeded 50 percent. Given the current political and economic crises, coupled with heightened politicization among the masses, it is reasonable to anticipate a turnout exceeding 60 percent in the upcoming elections. Such a turnout could herald the beginning of a new democratic chapter in the country.



tial to be a significant stride in the ongoing process of restoring democracy, provided they are conducted in a genuinely free, fair, and transparent manner. However, the prevailing consensus is that these elections lack the essential qualities of fairness and transparency, dampening expectations for them to serve as a substantial leap forward in the restoration of democracy. Nevertheless, they can still play a role in this process.

The pivotal factor in this equation is the Election Day itself and the dynamics surrounding it. If citizens flock to the polling stations to exercise their voting rights, irrespective of party affiliations, it could not only contribute to the restoration of democracy but also mark the dawn of a new democratic era. The responsibility now rests with the people of Pakistan, determining whether they will actively participate in shaping the leadership of the country. A voter turnout of around 70 percent would

The initiation of this new era of democracy is imperative for the survival of the state and the cohesion of society. With insurgency in Balochistan and religious extremist activities nationwide, social cohesion has nearly dissipated due to polarization and conflicts at various societal levels. Thus, a massive voter turnout on Election Day would signal that the populace is ready to take the necessary steps to address the profound crises facing the country.

To achieve this, voters must act with wisdom and maturity, recognizing that the upcoming elections will not only determine the fate of the government but, more importantly, the fate of citizens and society at large. History attests that active participation by the masses has been instrumental in pulling countries out of crises and steering them towards stability and development. The question that remains is whether we have gleaned insights from history and are prepared to take collective action.



# Smart agriculture is the key

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

It was for the first time in the history of Pakistan that so much loud and persistent voices were raised about the ill effects of climate change on the country's environment, agriculture, industry, health and other sectors after the monsoon rains struck the country on a large scale and floods washed away human dwellings as well as hundreds and thousands of acres of farmlands in 2022.

From academics to the common people, and policymakers to big landholders, not only came across the nomenclature but also complained about it as per the level of their understanding of the issue. Now almost all concerned know it well that climate change is a long-term change in the average weather patterns that have come to define Earth's local, regional and global climates. These changes have a broad range of observed effects that are synonymous with the term.

About the causes of climate change, experts say human activity is the main cause. People burn fossil fuels and convert land from forests to agriculture. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, people have burned more and more fossil fuels and changed vast areas of land from forests to farmland. In developed countries, people are more aware of causes and impact of climate change, but small farmers were taken aback by the super-floods in Pakistan. They mostly took it as Allah's anger and nature's fury. There is a need for creating awareness among them about the impact of climate change on their crops and the methods to deal with it effectively in future.

Jahan Ara Wattoo, vice president of the Pakistan Businesses Forum (PBF), believes that community-based organisations must be contacted to create awareness among farmers about the phenomenon of climate change and the importance of water for their crops.

In a telephonic talk with Cutting Edge, she said that changing climate had long been threatening the productivity of the agriculture sector, making it vulnerable economically, socially and in cultural perspective. She said that Pakistan had significant variations in rainfall and temperature; therefore, its agriculture was relying heavily on river supplies.

Jahan Ara Wattoo, who herself comes from a strong agricultural and political background, said that climate shift had squeezed the monsoon pattern to two months with heavy to very heavy rains in Pakistan, thus leading to more incidents of floods. The

unusual rains caused significant erosion of soil, inundation and medium to high floods in canal-irrigated areas and flash floods in hilly areas.

She believes that the country's agriculture sector could be saved through community participation initiatives, in collaboration with federal and provincial governments and by improving the application of balanced nutrition, especially potash application, pest scouting, promotion of mechanization, introduction of short-duration varieties, stress management against heat and drought, fortification of crops through breeding and continuous reviews of production plans by learning through best practices.

According to the Pakistan Businesses Forum vice president, other issues of the crop



sector include inadequate mapping of soil health for each agro-ecological zone for the promotion of climate-smart to eco-friendly crops. Also, the country severely suffers from insufficient farm community storages and availability of climate-smart on-farm water management technologies, she adds.

The crop simulation model-based studies by the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) proved that there would be significant reductions in wheat, rice and maize yields in the arid, semi-arid and rain-fed areas of Pakistan under various scenarios by the mid and end of the century.

Jahan Ara Wattoo says climate smart agriculture is an integrated approach to develop technical, policy and investment conditions to achieve sustainable agriculture development for food security under climate change by adopting and building resilience and reducing carbon emissions. She stresses launching national agriculture emergency plans for wheat, sugarcane, rice and oilseed crops and a special plan for the revival and promotion of cotton and pulses through input-based incentives on the use of certified seeds, micro-nutrients, agriculture machinery with the use of all extension tools to maximise productivity and profitability.

The PBF vice president is appreciative of the Punjab government efforts, which have resulted in improvement in agriculture productivity in vulnerable areas like Thal and Pothohar through command area development. By building small dams, farm ponds, lined water courses, dug-wells, enhancing farmers' capacity and laser land levelling, the cultivated area had been enhanced there, leading to an increase in yield by 20-25 per cent. However, these efforts were not sufficient and a lot of work was needed to be done for farmers of those agroecological zones that were under the continuous threat of climatic vagaries, she believes.

Ishfaq Ahmad, resilient agriculture specialist at the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, says that smart management practices for today's farms should be able to reduce the negative impacts of climate change, improve yields in current conditions, and reduce future vulnerabilities.

Suggesting solutions to the agricultural problems of different regions, he says that in southern Punjab, better methods of fertilizer application, improving sowing density and early sowing dates, as well as cultivation of heat- and drought-tolerant plant varieties will support climate-resilient wheat production.

Also, for cotton, a balanced application of fertilizers (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium), widening row spacing to 15 per cent more than is recommended, cultivating resilient varieties, and providing cash subsidies to small-holder farmers during cultivation periods would have a positive impact on farm returns and per capita income.

The agriculture specialist believes that if applied correctly, such interventions could increase wheat production by 21pc and cotton yield by 33pc.

As far as the central Punjab is concerned, the application of nitrogenous fertilizer with irrigation water, sowing 15 days early, increasing nitrogen fertilizer and plant populations by 10pc each, and developing heat-tolerant cultivars would be supportive to maize and pearl millet.

Ishfaq Ahmad also has a special plan for northern Punjab. Sowing of high yielding varieties, increased plant populations by up to 30pc for wheat and up to 15pc for rice, shifting sowing dates earlier by about 15 days for wheat and 5 days for rice, increasing fertilizer up to 25pc for wheat and 15pc for rice would be the best practical responses to climate change in the area. He believes that if farmers adopt these interventions, poverty in the area might be lessened by about 13pc by the 2050s.

# A new plan in Gaza

Faheem Amir

The New Year has brought with it new hopelessness and passivism as Israel's incessant killings of innocent people, including children and women, in Gaza has no end in sight. Israel has refused to listen even to the International Court of Justice and categorically announced that it would continue its war against Palestinians.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the PM of Israel, has declared that "Israel will pursue its war against Hamas until victory and will not be stopped by anyone, including the world court". As the fighting in Gaza approached the 100-day mark, in his speech, Netanyahu suggested that Israel would ignore the international court's ruling ordering a Gaza ceasefire. "No one will stop us, not The Hague, not the axis of evil and not anyone else," Netanyahu said in televised remarks, referring to Iran and its allied militias.

South Africa has launched an application at the International Court of Justice in The Hague accusing Israel of breaching the 1948 Genocide Convention. "The court is the UN's principal judicial organ. Its role is to settle, in accordance with international law, legal disputes submitted to it by states, and to give advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by UN entities and agencies. After two days of hearings, the world now waits to see how much power the court actually has. In its request, South Africa asked for provisional measures to "protect against further, severe and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people under the Genocide Convention" and "ensure Israel's compliance with its obligations under the Genocide Convention not to engage in genocide, and to prevent and to punish genocide."

It should be noted that the Court's rulings are binding but very difficult to enforce against Israel because Israel has the support of America and other European countries. Due to this unwavering support from these powerful countries, Israel has already killed around 23,000 Palestinians in Gaza. More than two million people are suffering in the besieged enclave. There is no country, organisation like the UN and OIC, that could force Israel to halt the slaughtering of Palestinians, including children and women.

In fact, the silence of the world over the killings of Palestinians, their forcible eviction, displacement, homelessness, starvation, thirst and disease is in itself a criminal act. Israel has reduced the entire Gaza to rubble, rendering the area uninhabitable. According to various reports, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have started to take water from the Mediterranean Sea and hose it into underground tunnels. The

plan is to flood the vast network of underground shafts and tunnels Hamas has reportedly built and used to carry out its operations.

"I won't talk about specifics, but they include explosives to destroy and other means to prevent Hamas operatives from using the tunnels to harm our soldiers," said IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi. "[Any] means which gives us an advantage over the enemy that [uses the tunnels], deprives it of this asset, is a means that we are evaluating using. This is a good idea..."

Israel's current strategy to drown Hamas's tunnels will cause irreparable damage. "It is important to keep in mind," warns Juliane Schillinger, a researcher at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, "that we are not just talking about water with a high salt con-

Gaza. After filling the tunnels with polluted water, the remaining residential buildings will have structural problems and Palestinians will also have problems rebuilding.

Israel has already uprooted olive groves. Now, it is poisoning Gaza from above. According to Amnesty International, Israel has used white phosphorus bombs on densely populated urban areas, which is considered illegal under international law. "Any time that white phosphorus is used in crowded civilian areas, it poses a high risk of excruciating burns and life-long suffering," says Lama Fakih, director for the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch (HRW). White phosphorus also has deleterious effects on plants, animals and soil composition.

These facts clearly show that Israel has



tent here — seawater along the Mediterranean coast is also polluted with untreated wastewater, which is continuously discharged into the Mediterranean from Gaza's dysfunctional sewage system."

This plan has been made not only to dismantle Hamas's military capabilities but also to further degrade and destroy Gaza's area. Israeli officials have already declared that their goal is to make sure that Gaza will be an unlivable place once they end their ruthless military campaign. "We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly," Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said shortly after the Hamas attack of October 7. "We will eliminate everything — they will regret it."

Israel is now fulfilling its promise in front of the entire world. It has already damaged or destroyed up to 70% of all homes in

a plan to turn Gaza into a barren and unlivable land for Palestinians. The Gaza war has unmasked the hypocrisy of the West, helplessness of the UN, OIC, and other Human rights organisations and international law.

However, it has also exposed that America's political leverage is waning in the Middle East. Simon Tisdall writes, "after 45 years of trying, Iran is finally the big kid on the block. Sanctioning, ostracising and threatening Tehran hasn't worked. The US, Britain – and Israel – face a formidable opponent, part of a triangular global alliance backed by powerful militias and economic might. A fresh diplomatic approach is urgently needed if a wider conflict is to be avoided."

This new reality also shows that more wars are coming in the region, a very bad omen for humanity and the people of the region.



# Where is the ‘never again’ for Gaza?

Afaf Al-Najjar

Last week, we passed the 100th-day mark of Israel’s latest episode of aggression against the people of Gaza. It was a depressing milestone to consider. A hundred days of Palestinians being mercilessly exterminated in all kinds of brutal ways: Israeli bombs ripping them apart, Israeli bullets piercing their skulls, and the Israeli-imposed siege starving them or killing them through otherwise treatable infections.

A hundred days in which the countries that said “never again” almost 80 years ago did nothing to stop our extermination. A hundred days in which we pleaded, humanitarian organisations pleaded, the United Nations pleaded and people in the streets across the world pleaded, but we were all ignored. Perhaps we should not be surprised at the silence. After all, Israel’s brutal and illegal occupation was allowed to go on for decades till it beat all records and became longest-lasting in modern history. Throughout this time, the Israeli occupying state, its governments and army have controlled virtually every aspect of Palestinian life: political, economic, social and – you may not believe it but – love life, too.

Israel has been telling us what we can eat, what we can drink, what we can buy, where we can go, where we can travel, where we can live, where we can garden, where we can graze our cattle, where we can fish, where we can go to school, where we can get health services (if at all), and yes, who we can fall in love, get married to and settle with. Israel has even tried to tell us who we are as a nation. It has told Palestinians that they are Arab, Muslim, Christian, Druze or Circassian, but not Palestinian. It has done everything and anything to break up the Palestinian social fabric.

Israel has also persistently sown divisions between political forces in Palestine; in the past 15 years, it has made sure that any mediation seeking a unity government between the two biggest Palestinian parties, Hamas and Fatah, has failed. Political disunity has caused immense damage to the Palestinian community, ultimately leading to conflict and weakness from within.

Israel has also made sure that we remain poor and vulnerable not only through continuous dispossession – land theft, expulsions, and home demolitions – but also through economic dependence. It has purposefully kept the Palestinian economy on the brink of collapse, suffocating economic activity and private business. This has resulted in high unemployment rates and forced many Palestinians to work for the occupiers – sometimes even in illegal Jewish settlements literally built on their stolen land.

Israel has also consistently undermined

Palestinian agriculture – traditionally one of the strongest economic sectors in Palestine. Restricted access to land and water resources has led to a dramatic reduction of Palestinian agricultural output, fundamentally disrupting traditional livelihoods. In Gaza, the economic devastation has been even worse, courtesy of the 17-year-long blockade imposed by Israel. It severely restricted imports and exports, effectively killing most trade with the outside world and wrecking the manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Israel even counted the calories of foods it was allowing into Gaza to ensure we barely have enough to survive.

When we have resisted – peacefully or otherwise – the Israeli occupation has shown no mercy. It has killed, maimed, imprisoned, tortured and collectively punished. In the ongoing aggression against the Gaza Strip, this drive to decimate the Palestinian people has taken on genocidal proportions.

In 100 days, in the killing fields of Gaza, Israel managed to slaughter at least 31,000 Palestinians – 23,000 who have been officially counted and at least 8,000 who could not be because their bodies are still under the rubble with no one to take them out. The rest of us, who have survived, have faced the deadly combination of fear, hunger and thirst under Israel’s indiscriminate bombardment and total siege. Over the past 100 days, the Israeli occupation has denied the entry of food, water, and medicine to the Gaza Strip. Not only that, but Israeli air strikes have targeted every source of life. From water wells and water treatment plants to bakeries, farms, electricity generators, and solar panels, Israel has systematically targeted any means of relief for the people of Gaza.

It is important to note that the aid that comes into the Gaza Strip right now cannot cover the needs of even a small proportion of the population. People have become so desperate due to hunger and thirst that aid trucks that come in are sometimes attacked and ransacked. These goods are then sold in the streets for three to five times the regular price and thus never reach the most vulnerable who desperately need them.

This is, of course, one of the intended outcomes of the siege. Another one was outlined by Member of the Knesset Tali Gottlieb in October. “Without hunger and thirst among Gazan population, we will not be able to recruit collaborators, we will not be able to recruit intelligence, we will not be able to bribe people, with food, drink, medicine, in order to obtain intelligence,” she said, demonstrating just how emboldened Israeli officials have become in displaying their genocidal goals in public and how secure they feel in their impunity ensured by the backing of the United States.

To aid the process of “obtaining intelligence”, the Israeli occupation forces have regularly dropped leaflets from the sky, offering Palestinians food, medicine and safety in exchange for “cooperation”. But there is another even more sinister goal that Israel is pursuing. The unpredictability and harshness of daily life in Gaza are producing a sense of helplessness and despair. Many Palestinians, especially children, suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress disorders; many had not healed from traumas from past aggressions before this one started. Israel wants not only to break and destroy our bodies; it wants to break and destroy our minds and souls.

If we dig a little into history, we will find that these brutal tactics have been used before. The ancestors of part of the Israeli population experienced them during the Holocaust. In the 1940s, Jews across Europe were forced into ghettos and concentration camps where they faced starvation, abuse and mass death. The Nazis used hunger as a method of control and dehumanisation. The constant threat of violence, deportation, and death destroyed bodies and souls. Tales we have heard about the ghettos and concentration camps echo today in Gaza, where 2.3 million of us are crammed into ever-dwindling areas and forced to endure unliveable conditions. When you put side by side the accounts of atrocities both of these peoples faced, you will see that history is repeating itself, only this time the entire world is watching and it is doing nothing to stop it.

The solemn vow of “never again”, birthed from the ashes of the Holocaust, was meant to prevent the repetition of its horrors. The commitment etched into the collective conscience of the world was a promise to vulnerable peoples across the world that they would be protected, that their tormentors would be stopped.

Yet, as we turn our gaze towards the ongoing Palestinian struggle, this pledge rings hollow. The shadows of past atrocities linger in the present-day experiences of the Palestinian people.

Still, as we marked 100 days of relentless slaughter, there was a spark of hope. South Africa stood up for the principle of “never again” and took the state of Israel to court, accusing it – before the eyes of the whole world – of committing genocide. South Africa has our eternal love and gratitude for standing up for what is right, for giving us hope when we had fallen into despair.

In these dark times, “never again” cannot remain a mere phrase of remembrance; it must become a call to action. The world must act on its pledge to uphold the dignity and rights of all people, in every corner of the world and prevent yet another genocide from taking place.

# For the Indian Muslim, Ayodhya is everywhere

Insiyah Vahanvaty

Flipping through the radio channels on my drive to a meeting, I notice four out of the nine pre-sets blare triumphant tunes celebrating the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. As I turn onto the road that connects Delhi and Gurgaon, I am confronted by an overwhelming burst of saffron.

Illegal squatters who have long since taken over the pavements across this stretch of road have now been roped into peddling saffron flags. Larger-than-life posters depicting a muscular Ram wielding a bow and arrow dominate the streets. Street hawkers eagerly offer smaller versions of the flag adorned with Ram's visage. Swords, paintings of deities and cut-outs of Ram punctuate every street corner. I greet the housing society guard with a nod, he responds with a delighted "Jai Shri Ram" (Glory to Lord Rama). The mood is that of a religious carnival rather than an ordinary day of business in the city.

I learn from an enthusiastic WhatsApp message from an eager uncle in our housing society group that cinema chain INOX and Aaj Tak TV channel have tied up to livestream the triumphant inauguration of the Ram Mandir in 160 cinemas and more than 70 cities in India. Complimentary popcorn will be offered. My news app informs me that the Chairman of the Bar Council of India has requested the Chief Justice of India to declare a holiday in the Supreme Court and High Courts as a gesture "acknowledging the cultural and national significance of the event". Further, I read a bizarre news item about flight attendants on an Indigo flight dressed up as Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman, greeting passengers at the gate. Apparently, a Lord Ram read out the boarding announcement.

One has to wonder what truly devout Hindus feel about their beloved gods being reduced to a collection of cheap costumes at an airport or bout such blatant politicisation of religion that has little to do with true devotion. As an Indian Muslim who grew up in the 1990s, this is all simply bizarre to me. In my view, the significance of a temple – or indeed, a mosque – lies in matters of personal faith and worship and should not be transformed into a political

symbol of national pride in a secular country.

The purported "cultural significance" of the Ram Temple appears to be immersed in the murky waters of the polarisation we are currently navigating. Secularism, once a proud virtue every politician embraced, tucking it safely into his political repertoire, appears to be buried so far below the mountains of saffron-tinged communalism, that I fear it may never be recovered. Never before has my generation seen such a complete capitulation of the state to religion, nor the complete invis-

is to be built over its ruins – a monument to Hindu supremacy.

Browsing Twitter in the morning, I read a tweet by a Muslim influencer, appealing to Muslims in India to practice restraint. To lie low, stay home and not become provoked by the insulting messages and visuals they are sure to encounter. Predictably, the tweet was followed by an onslaught of precisely the kind of offensive messages they had cautioned against. Among those living abroad, some have opted to cancel their annual visits to



ibilisation of the Indian Muslim – evident in the fact that for the first time in independent India's history, India today has no Muslim Chief Ministers, Cabinet Ministers or MPs in the ruling party.

In a simpler time, the very act of a sitting prime minister inaugurating a temple in secular India would have been considered improper and inappropriate. What is also missing is an acknowledgement of the bloody past that has led to this moment. For India's Muslims, these celebrations are a painful demonstration of majoritarianism and polarisation. The demolition of the Babri Mosque is still a collective memory of grief and loss. Many of us remember those killed in the riots that followed the destruction. Despite political promises, the mosque was never restored, and now, a grand temple

India, gripped by the fear of potential violence. Others, living in Ayodhya speak of removing their loved ones from the town for some time. Weddings have been postponed or scaled down. Mosques lay eerily quiet on Friday as local Muslims chose to pray in their homes.

Yet, media channels are falling over themselves to report that a majority of Muslims are "happy" and "emotional" at the construction of the temple. As Indian journalist Betwa Sharma put it: "If you celebrate while someone else is in pain, something is broken in our society." And yet, peace is the most precious commodity, clung to desperately. When something is too painful to endure, one simply awaits its passing, hoping for some form of closure. The Indian Muslim has become used to this. The winter has been a long and intimidating one.



## Visionless political leaders

Pakistan has rather unfortunately been witnessing a variety of challenges since independence. It has been, however, a nation of such wonderfully resilient people that it has always emerged and bounced back from the abyss of political instability and economic downfall. Having been betrayed by visionless political leaders, the country is once again at a crossroads as it approaches another general election.

It is an undeniable fact that Pakistan is currently faced with a plethora of acute challenges, including skyrocketing food inflation, power outages, horrible political instability and an upsurge in terrorism. The upcoming general elections have rekindled a gleam of hope among the masses to choose their representatives and install a government representing the genuine sentiments of the people to solve their chronic issues through concerted efforts.

It is imperative to stress that the people have an enormous opportunity to vote for the progress of the country by electing patriotic and pragmatic leadership.

But, at the same time, it is quintessential that people reject such nefarious elements who have played with the interest of the country for their personal vested interests, undermining the sanctity and security of the country.

Such Mephistopheles are present in our society who have been projecting themselves as the true representatives of the people. They brand themselves as 'revolutionaries', but are nothing more than cults that promote a culture of sheer anarchy in the country.

The responsibility now is undoubtedly of the rational and sane people in the country to exercise their franchise to vote for peace and prosperity, and not for political invectives and abuse. This is a decisive moment in the history of the country, and we must seize it. We must use our franchise wisely in the interest of the country, keeping everything aside, including personal likes and dislikes. We must remember that Pakistan is, and must remain, above all cults and personal interests. Long live Pakistan!

Sajjad Khattak  
Attock

## Pak-Iran tension

The whole region must have heaved a sigh of relief as the crossborder military operations by Pakistan and Iran ended as quickly as they had started. While it lasted, the skirmish took me back to my childhood days when, as children, we would sometimes quarrel and then some elder would intervene to sort things out. And, of course, at age 85, I am the elder one now, and know what it feels like when one sees children picking up unnecessary fights.

My first reaction was that both the

countries had been naughty, though Iran was definitely the naughtier one, which had initiated the episode. The obvious thing to do in the scenario was to use the diplomatic channels available to resolve whatever the matter was.

However, I do feel that there may have been frustration both in Pakistan and Iran that the other country was perhaps not taking its complaints seriously enough regarding cross-border attacks launched by militants based in the other country. By having manifested their anger in a more pronounced manner, the both countries might be feeling a lot better now.

Perhaps now, their complaints will be taken up seriously, and some mechanism will be developed to deal with the matter appropriately. If that happens, the recent incidents would not be remembered as such a bad thing because it would have prevented worse things from happening in the future.

I feel both Pakistan and Iran should join hands and persuade/pressure the government in Afghanistan to keep its militants under control and not to let them create violence elsewhere. In fact, the three countries may develop a joint task force to deal with such matters. This would help them all.

Our relations with Iran go back centuries. The Shah of Iran was the first head of state to visit the country. I also vaguely remember that Pakistan had ordered fighter jets for its air force for which it had to wait for some years, but the Shah had diverted to us the jets that had been ordered by Iran earlier and which were ready for delivery.

In fact, our relations with Iran have been excellent all along, with the country strongly supporting us on various regional and international issues. With both Pakistan and Iran having given vent to their anger, the two countries should now be able to plan ahead without letting the past baggage come in the way.

Pakistan and Iran, being two major Muslim-majority countries, must join hands to unite the larger Muslim world. It is a shame that at a time when Israel is continuing to kill hundreds of Palestinians every day for the last more than 100 days with absolute impunity, countries in the Muslim-majority world are fighting among themselves. What can be worse?

S.R.H. Hashmi  
Karachi

## Gas crisis

The people of Karachi have been facing issues with the supply of natural gas for a long time. Problems like infrastructure limitations, low gas pressure, and loadshedding continue to cause great inconvenience to those residing in the city, especially in Clifton, Korangi, Defence, Nazimabad, Gulistan-i-Jauhar and such other areas. The shortage makes it difficult for the people to cook, heat water, and perform other daily tasks. Moreover, scheduled and

unscheduled gas outages and unexpected gas leaks also disrupt normal life, especially during winter months when the demand for natural gas goes up really high. The government and the Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) management should work together to resolve the issue.

Eeman Asad  
Karachi

## Tackling obesity

Obesity is a condition indicating excessive body weight. It can cause many health problems, including, but not limited to, hypertension. Obesity is more commonly found in children as they tend to be couch potatoes in today's world. The problem can be managed naturally through lifestyle modifications as well as medically. Natural ways to handle obesity include eating healthy food, adopting a healthy lifestyle, and, indeed, exercising. Making people aware of how to adopt a better lifestyle and proper eating habits can reduce the chances of obesity, specifically in children.

Muqaddas Mumraiz  
Karachi

## Pak-US relations

With a history of being a 'close ally' of the United States behind us, Pakistanis should really think hard about whether this status has helped us or has worked against us in the long run. There may be any number of relevant examples from the history of bilateral relations to suggest that we have been taken for granted by the superpower, but the episode involving Dr Aafia Siddiqui, who has been detained in a US prison for years without legal recourse, is a graphic case of how wrong things can go when the 'ally' goes whimsical.

There are civil society individuals and organisations in both the countries that advocate universal application of human rights, but when it comes to Dr Aafia, the massive majority prefers silence. She has major health problems, and, because of her confinement, her children are constantly deprived of their mother's presence, love and affection. What is happening to her inside the prison is something that we come to know of every now and then owing to some leaked information.

Are prisoners not humans? Are they not covered by the umbrella of human rights? Does the US have any idea about the rights of the prisoners? The answer to all these questions is in the affirmative, but, intoxicated with power, the US thinks it can afford to be whimsical.

Millions of Pakistanis will have a more favourable perception of the US if Dr Aafia is released even on purely humanitarian grounds. Is the US at all interested in what Pakistanis think of it?

Khadija Bibi  
Rawalpindi

## Why does Norway have so many fjords?

Laurel Hamers

Norway is known for its stunning fjords — long, sinuous coastal inlets with steep sides. It's no wonder that these geological features, which are filled with sparkling water and often lined with rugged cliffs, headline so many tourism ads.



Although fjords are found along coastlines around the world, from Alaska to Scotland to New Zealand, Norway has more than 1,000 that are substantial enough to have names, according to the country's official tourism board. So why are there so many fjords in Norway? "The fjords are the product of repeated glacial cycles and ice-sheet-scale glaciation," Anna Hughes, a paleogeologist at the University of Manchester in the U.K., told Live Science. Like other places with fjords, Norway's geographic location has put it in the path of many cycles of glaciation since the beginning of the Quaternary period, some 2.6 million years ago. The most recent of these cycles, from roughly 120,000 to 11,700 years ago, is sometimes colloquially referred to as the "ice age," but it's just one of many ice ages. Although ice sheets may look static, they're actually quite dynamic. "Ice flows and moves from high points to low points, either through its own internal deformation, or it can also slide with the underlying sediments," Hughes said. Their movement pulls along rocks underneath, abrading the sediment or bedrock beneath. Over time, they carve U-shaped valleys. When one of these steep-sided valleys forms via a glacier flowing into the ocean, the seawater rushes in as the glacier melts away. This formation is known as a fjord.

## Weight gain in children linked to drinking fruit juice: study

Lisa O'Mary

Limiting the amount of 100% fruit juice that children drink could be a way to help combat childhood obesity, particularly among young children, new research suggests.

The study was published in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*. The findings are important because past research has shown that children who are overweight or obese during childhood are likely to continue to remain so during adulthood. The authors of this latest study recommended limiting "consumption of fruit juice to prevent the intake of excess calories and weight gain."

Led by researchers from the University of Toronto in Canada, the team looked at data from 42 past research studies, looking for links between drinking 100% fruit juice and weight gain in adults and in children. They also found evidence that drinking 100% fruit juice was connected with adult body weight gain but said more research is needed in the area. The researchers did find clear patterns between children's juice intake and weight gain. The 100% fruit juice in the study was defined as having no added sugar, and a serving was 8 ounces. The researchers analyzed data for nearly 46,000 children ranging in age from 1 to 15 years old. They found that each additional serving of 100% fruit juice was linked to an increase in body mass index, which is a measure of height and weight used to determine whether someone is overweight or obese. Compared to whole fruit, juice contains little or no fiber and drinking it can result in not feeling full despite drinking a high number of calories, the authors noted. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends not giving fruit juice to infants under 1 year old and limiting it to 4 ounces per day as part of a meal for toddlers and young children. Children between 1 and 6 years old should not drink more than 6 ounces per day, the group recommends.



## The brutal 'butcherbird' that impales its prey on barbed wire

Megan Shersby

The loggerhead shrike is nicknamed the "butcherbird" thanks to its rather gruesome practice of impaling its prey on sharp thorns, twigs and barbed wire.



This little songbird, which can take down prey heavier than itself, waits patiently on high perches — sometimes using telephone wires — and keeps a look out for a potential meal. Once it spots a victim, it swoops down and uses its raptor-like hooked beak to make the kill — repeatedly biting the back of its neck to paralyze it. A study published in 2018 also found that for larger prey, loggerhead shrikes will hold its prey by the neck and shake it with force equivalent to a human experiencing a slow rear-end car crash. By shaking its prey like this, the bird damages the spinal column — essentially using the victim's body weight against it. Impaling prey may also act as a way for males to show off their hunting capabilities to females. A 1989 study on a related shrike species in Israel found that a male's cache increased prior to the breeding season and that males with the largest caches bred first and sired more offspring. Another study found that impaling prey can help reduce the toxicity of a kill. The highly toxic eastern lubber grasshopper (*Romalea guttata*), for example, causes gagging, regurgitation and even death in some predators. But when a loggerhead shrike impales the insect and returns a couple of days later, the bird can consume it safely.

## Virus soup: many respiratory viruses peaking in early 2024

Carolyn Crist

The familiar symptoms are back again — a runny nose, coughing, aches, congestion, and maybe a fever. When the at-home COVID-19 test comes back negative, you head to the doctor to see if they can figure out what you've caught. At the doctor, though, the typical COVID and flu tests also come back negative. It could seem like a new mysterious respiratory illness is making the rounds.



Instead, several typical respiratory viruses seem to be peaking at once. Doctors are reporting high levels of COVID, the flu, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), as well as other "flu-like illnesses" that cause similar symptoms, such as the common cold, other coronaviruses, and parainfluenza viruses (which cause typical respiratory symptoms such as a fever, runny nose, coughing, sneezing, and a sore throat).

"Respiratory viruses are still very high right now, as you would expect at this time of year," said Brianne Barker, PhD, who researches viruses and the body's immune response as an associate professor of biology at Drew University in New Jersey. "Also, a fair number of patients seem to have multiple infections at once, such as flu and strep, which may cause confusion when patients consider their symptoms." So, what should you do? Wear a mask in public if you think you have symptoms, Barker said. Stay home if you feel sick, particularly if you have a fever over 100.4 F and signs of contagiousness, such as chills and muscle aches. Antiviral medications — such as Tamiflu for the flu and Paxlovid for COVID — may help if you catch it soon enough, but otherwise, it's most important to stay hydrated and rest at home.





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