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# WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL



## Time for Pakistan to look beyond IMF



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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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# Time for Pakistan to look beyond IMF

Muhammad Asim Nisar

All talk about the economy in Pakistan begins with the IMF and ends with it. All discussions revolve around how much loan we require from it and what conditions the lender imposes on us. The people of Pakistan and their well-being do not figure in these discussions. All the news is about the IMF demanding a raise in taxes and utility charges and there is no mention about IMF's concern over the devastating effect additional taxation measures will have on the lives of poverty-stricken people.

Curiously, while the IMF insists on further raising petrol and electricity prices, one seldom hears about the international lender demanding an end to the royal perks

rank very low in the IMF's list of priorities. The IMF cares too much about economic growth in Pakistan. Stabilisation policies entail economic hardships for the people of Pakistan who have never been able to benefit from the billions the IMF pumps into the economy. On the contrary, every new IMF programme creates a new round of economic woes in the form of higher taxes and an increase in the prices of essential items of daily use.

Normally, the government should first think of the good of the people but there is no sign of it. The main topic that should come under discussion between IMF and government officials should be how to aim at sustainable growth through enhanced exports and increased foreign investment. But all efforts are

and adopt relevant policies for this purpose. It is time we, over and above our dealings with the IMF, should re-strategize sustainable economic growth by addressing structural issues and undertaking long overdue political, economic, and social reforms. We need to mobilise our indigenous resources through the adoption of policies designed to encourage people to save so as to increase investment and savings rates in the country. Since more savings and more investment alone can lift us from the present level of economic slump and decline.

In this context it is relevant to point out here that Pakistan's savings rate is deplorably low as compared to Bangladesh and India. In 2022, India's savings rate was 29.1 per cent, Bangladesh's was 25.2pc and that of Pakistan



and privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes and the rampant corruption at various levels of the government which makes a mockery of the development budget running into billions. The IMF talks of withdrawing subsidies to farmers, it does not insist on an end to the subsidies to higher bureaucracy in the form of free petrol, free electricity and free gas and luxurious transport vehicles. Has the IMF ever asked the government why power rates in Pakistan are so high as compared to those prevailing in the regional states? Has the IMF ever asked for a probe into the capacity payment agreements with IPPs signed by various governments?

The other buzz word in the national debate on the economy is stabilisation. All the emphasis is on stability, not on growth. Stabilisation means keeping interest rates high, raising revenue through higher taxes so as the government can meet its debt servicing obligations. It is clear that the people of Pakistan

centred on reducing the twin deficits — current account and fiscal. All focus on securing IMF loans, not on developing a strategy to get out of the debt trap.

As it is, Pakistan's debt burden has become unsustainable. Needless to say, it is plain dumb to take more loans to pay back old loans because this approach has not worked in the past nor will it do in the future. We have the examples of Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia before us. In these countries too, the IMF imposed conditions linked to raising taxes, abolishing subsidies, maintaining market-determined exchange rates and privatization. Consequently, the economy shrank and these countries could not get out of their economic troubles despite long years of dealings with the IMF.

The IMF is a lender and all it is interested in is getting back its capital with interest. It is for the government of Pakistan to keep the national interest foremost in its calculations

barely 4pc. From 2003 to 2022, India's average was 31.1pc, Bangladesh's 22.9pc and Pakistan's a dismal 8.6pc. Similarly, in 2023, Bangladesh's investment-to-GDP ratio was 31pc compared to Pakistan's 13.6pc. India's 34pc.

There is a dire need for a paradigm shift in our economic policies. Pakistan needs to focus more on fostering investments and technology transfer to boost growth and income. Thus, while dealing with the IMF, Pakistan must develop a comprehensive and coherent economic revival plan for long-term stability. Foreign private investors should be the primary focus of this plan. Lately, efforts have been made to attract FDI through initiatives like the Special Investment Facilitation Council. The Council is doing good work within the limits of its given mandate but in the larger context we must create an investment friendly climate. To this end we must review the policies which are a hurdle in the ease of doing business.



# Pakistan reclassified as authoritarian regime

Nasim Ahmed

A strong democratic system and strict adherence to rule of law and constitution are basic conditions for economic growth and prosperity for a country in today's world. A country which fulfils these conditions also earns the respect of the international community.

How does Pakistan measure up to the world standard on the two above criteria? In this context, a negative report has come from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) which has demoted Pakistan 11 places in the global ranking on the state of democracy and downgraded it from a "hybrid regime" to an "authoritarian regime".

According to the EIU report, democratic standards across the world fell in 2023 amid the spread of wars, authoritarian crackdowns and a decline in people's trust in mainstream political parties. Titled "Age of Conflict", the EIU study evaluates the state of democracy in 165 independent states and two territories. Basing its scores on a range of indicators, each country is classified as one of four types of regime: full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime or authoritarian regime.

The top three places in the index are occupied by Norway, New Zealand and Iceland, while the bottom three countries are North Korea, Myanmar and Afghanistan. While the number of countries categorised as democracies increased, the global average index score fell to 5.23 in 2023 from 5.29 the year before, its lowest level since the first study was published in 2006. According to the EIU report, only 7.8 percent of the global population reside in a "full democracy", and more than one-third live under authoritarian rule.

In this report Pakistan has been shown as suffering the biggest decline in the Asian region — its score falling to 3.25, triggering a downgrade from 'hybrid regime' to 'authoritarian regime' and a loss of 11 places in the global ranking. Interestingly, 15 out of the 28 countries in the region recorded a decline in their scores, with only eight improving their status.

According to the report, Greece, which improved its score, moved up to 'full democracy', while Papua New Guinea and Paraguay

went up from 'hybrid regimes' to become 'flawed democracies'. On the other hand, Angola has been upgraded from its authoritarian classification to 'hybrid regime'.

The EIU report has pointed out that elections in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Russia were flawed as opposition forces in these countries were subjected to state repression and prevented from exercising their full democratic rights. This conclusion by EIU is based on two indicators 'electoral process and pluralism' and 'functioning of government', especially as the "outsized political influence means that elections are far from being free, fair or competitive".

It is relevant to note here that Pakistan's score on the democracy index remained a little over 4 since 2008. It was for the first in 2023

anointed successors are likely to win in these too". The EIU report adds that incumbents are likely to retain power there, and the BJP — termed the biggest political party in the world with over 180m members — is set to win another term after a decade in power. According to the report, Modi's brand of narrow Hindu nationalism has created an oppressive atmosphere for the country's large Muslim minority population which fears gradual erosion of its democratic, cultural and social rights.

The EIU notes that India's scores for 'functioning of government' and 'political culture' improved, but its 'civil liberties' declined. To quote it, "The decline in the civil liberties score was due to the state's failure to protect minority rights amid inter-ethnic violence in the north-eastern state of Manipur between



that the country's score fell to 3.25 during the coalition government comprising the PML-N, PPP and JUI-F. Pakistan's 2023 score on the democracy index is even worse than 2006 (3.92) when military dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf was at the helm of the affairs in Pakistan and had clamped down on political parties.

The EIU report has made some interesting observations on India, which claims to be the world's biggest democracy. India has now been classified as a 'flawed democracy', with the remark that the polls "at least allow for the possibility of change, although incumbents or

the mainly Hindu Meitei and predominantly Christian Kuki ethnic communities that erupted in May 2023. The state government imposed an internet blackout when the violence began."

The EIU report should be a matter of concern for the incumbent government in Pakistan which should take immediate steps to promote democratic culture in the country. Concomitantly, there is a need to establish the rule of law and justice on stronger footing because in the World Rule of Law Index Pakistan has fallen to the same level as Myanmar and Sudan where people enjoy no democratic rights and freedoms.



# Toward a fair and sustainable tax system

Muhammad Ali

In the realm of taxation, the imperative to combat tax dodging, whether through avoidance or evasion, has become increasingly urgent. To ensure fairness and sustainability in our fiscal policies, it is crucial to overhaul the existing tax framework.

Pakistan is confronted with a staggering annual tax evasion of approximately Rs5.8 trillion, constituting 6.9 percent of the GDP. Within this, evasion related to POL products stands at an estimated Rs996 billion, facilitated by smuggling and other illicit means.

In a presentation delivered to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), it was highlighted that the annual revenue lost due to tax evasion amounted to around Rs5.8 trillion, based on fiscal year data from 2022-23. The evasion breakdown includes Rs888 billion from the retail sector, Rs562 billion from the transport sector, Rs498 billion from independent power producers (IPPs), Rs355 billion from items prone to smuggling, Rs342 billion from exports, Rs148 billion from real estate, and Rs1.607 trillion categorized under 'others'. Sales tax evasion emerges as the highest, potentially reaching Rs2.9 trillion annually, while the customs gap is estimated at around Rs0.6 trillion, including under-invoicing and smuggling.

Conversely, the IMF's Diagnostic Report suggests that the policy-level tax gap might not be significantly higher, possibly peaking at 12.9 percent of the GDP. Federal tax revenues stand at 9.1 percent of GDP, federal non-tax revenue at 1.2 percent, and provincial taxes contribute around 1 percent to the GDP, totaling 11.4 percent of the GDP. On the expenditure side, federal expenditure amounts to 12.9 percent of the GDP, provincial expenditure to approximately 6.1 percent, resulting in a total expenditure of 19 percent of the GDP. This leaves a gap of 7.6 percent of GDP between total revenues and expenditures.

Addressing tax compliance alone could close these leaks, injecting 5.8 percent of the GDP annually into the national coffers. However, this tax evasion, also known as the fiscal gap or fiscal deficit, is typically financed through domestic and external borrowing, pushing the country into a debt trap, as per an independent economist.

Given the dire fiscal circumstances, the government is contemplating restructuring the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR). Pakistan not only suffers from chronically low tax collection relative to GDP but also places a disproportionate burden on middle- and lower-income groups. This is exacerbated by a large undocumented or informal economy beyond the tax radar, and certain lightly taxed sectors such as agriculture, property, retail, and finance. Consequently, there's a heavy reliance on consumption taxes like the general sales tax (GST) and excise tax across the economy.

In addressing tax dodging, which encompasses both tax avoidance and tax evasion, it is

vulnerable segments of society.

Taxing interest rates would not only encourage individuals to redirect idle resources from the financial sector to more productive endeavors in the real economy but also foster equitable resource allocation across income groups for funding public goods. This approach would help mitigate income and wealth inequality perpetuated by suboptimal taxation policies influenced by vested interests, often shielded by collusion between these interests and political parties or policymakers.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to adopt a comprehensive tax regime that encompasses all national incomes. Such a system is vital not only



imperative to ensure that all sources of income are taxed. The proliferation of tax loopholes necessitates a crackdown on avoidance before considering higher taxes on the wealthy. Establishing robust institutions is essential for sustaining an effective tax system in the long term. One crucial step towards achieving this is the implementation of a 'national income tax' covering all forms of income.

Rather than relying solely on regressive consumption taxes, there should be a swift transition towards taxing all income in a progressively fair manner. This could involve some direct taxes being levied proportionally or flatly to facilitate ease of administration and promote economic documentation, while others are imposed progressively. Exceptions may be made for transfer payments to safeguard

for reducing income and wealth disparities but also for addressing the issue of undocumented economic activities, as it covers all sources of income—including those of lower-income groups. The proposed 'national income tax' would replace consumption taxes like the sales tax and complement other direct taxes such as wealth tax, income tax, and corporate tax.

In conclusion, the adoption of a national income tax emerges as a pivotal step towards rectifying the flaws inherent in our current tax regime. By targeting all sources of income and promoting progressivity, such a tax system not only addresses income and wealth disparities but also fosters economic transparency and resilience. It is incumbent upon policymakers to heed this call for reform and pave the way towards a fairer and more sustainable future.



# Pursuing another IMF programme

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been a cornerstone of its economic policy, aimed at addressing fiscal vulnerabilities and implementing structural reforms. Over the years, IMF programs have brought about significant changes, particularly in terms of exchange rate policies and subsidy removal. However, challenges persist, ranging from circular debt to loss-making State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), raising questions about the effectiveness of IMF interventions.

Pakistan is currently seeking its 24th successor medium-term bailout package to facilitate a sustained drive towards implementing longstanding structural reforms. The IMF, in its end-of-mission statement, noted that the financially strained nation has expressed interest in such a programme to address fiscal and external sustainability weaknesses permanently. This initiative aims to bolster economic recovery and establish a foundation for robust, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

Discussions regarding the new program are anticipated to commence in the coming months, with primary objectives including:

(i) Strengthening public finances through gradual fiscal consolidation, broadening the tax base (especially in undertaxed sectors), and enhancing tax administration to improve debt sustainability and allocate resources for development and social assistance programs aimed at protecting vulnerable segments of society.

(ii) Restoring viability to the energy sector by accelerating cost-reducing reforms, such as enhancing electricity transmission and distribution, integrating captive power demand into the national electricity grid, improving governance and management of distribution companies, and implementing effective measures to curb theft.

(iii) Stabilizing inflation rates and fostering a more transparent and flexible foreign exchange market to support external rebalancing and replenish foreign reserves.

(iv) Promoting private-led economic activity through the aforementioned measures, as well as eliminating distortionary protections, advancing reforms in State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) to enhance their performance, and increasing investment in human capital to foster resilient and inclusive growth, thereby enabling Pakistan to realize its economic potential.

However, labeling the 24th IMF programme as a permanent solution for long-standing structural reforms might be overly optimistic. Despite successive IMF packages, Pakistan's economic and fiscal indicators have worsened over time. For instance, between the IMF reviews of March 2021 and March 2024, indicators such as power circular debt, national debt, SOEs' losses, and GDP growth have all deteriorated significantly. Despite financial support from the IMF over the past three years through multiple programmes, the intended economic development and fiscal resilience have not materialized for the country.

One aspect that proved effective was the IMF's condition of maintaining a market-based value for the Pakistani rupee against foreign currencies, along with its unwavering policy of



eliminating government subsidies for industries accustomed to such support. The \$3 billion agreement between the IMF and Pakistan, sanctioned in July 2022, mandated the removal of energy and fuel subsidies, transitioning to a market-driven exchange rate, and raising taxes. Consequently, gas and electricity tariffs soared, leading to inflation climbing from 9.5% in 2021 to 25% in 2024 according to government data. This, in turn, escalated the poverty rate from 22% to 40%, while the value of the US dollar surged from Rs163 to Rs278 against the Pakistani rupee from 2021 to 2024.

However, the IMF's agenda regarding structural reforms in Pakistan's fiscal and economic discipline did not yield favorable results. The persistent issues of circular debt and loss-making State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) continued to drain the economy. Despite some superficial improvements, reckless government spending persisted, alongside prevalent issues of poor governance, confusion, and incompetence.

The incomplete reform agenda in Pakistan cannot be solely attributed to the IMF; however, one might ponder if the IMF could

have maintained the same level of stringent oversight on economic and fiscal reforms as it did with subsidies. IMF lending, by its nature, serves as a temporary measure to bridge fiscal gaps and facilitate reforms aimed at enhancing the state's revenue generation capacity through growth, with the intention of repaying IMF loans expeditiously, as witnessed in the successful cases of certain developing nations.

Pakistan's reliance on IMF loans has diminished to a level merely sufficient to prevent default. However, this option may not be sustainable, as approximately 70% of state revenue is allocated to loan repayments, leaving a scant 30% for other essential expenditures. The 24th IMF programme, deemed unavoidable by the current government, may resemble previous IMF packages if the set targets are not met. Currently, there seems to be minimal progress on privatizing loss-making SOEs, restructuring or privatizing power distribution companies, or devising a substantive strategy to address circular debt.

Achieving a targeted 2% growth rate for 2024 appears challenging given the existing circumstances. The anticipated benefits from projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the planned Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, aimed at providing cost-effective energy for industries, may face constraints under the IMF package. With a meager foreign direct investment (FDI) of \$1.3 billion in 2023, Pakistan must expand its diplomatic outreach beyond its current focus on Riyadh and Beijing, particularly towards Western nations. While industrial growth may remain subdued due to high energy tariffs and lending rates, the country could capitalize on the potential in agriculture and information technology sectors.

While Pakistan's engagement with the IMF has led to notable achievements, such as the removal of subsidies and the adoption of market-driven exchange rate policies, persistent challenges threaten to undermine progress. The country's dependence on IMF loans as a temporary fix highlights the urgent need for sustainable economic reforms. Moving forward, Pakistan must address issues such as circular debt and SOE losses while diversifying its sources of investment and fostering a conducive environment for economic growth. With careful planning and concerted efforts, Pakistan can chart a path towards long-term economic stability and prosperity, reducing its reliance on IMF assistance.



# Pakistan's debt: A complex web of challenges

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's foreign debt situation presents a complex web of challenges, influenced by various factors including trade imbalances, debt service requirements, and negotiations with key stakeholders. Despite efforts to manage its debt obligations, Pakistan faces hurdles in balancing its financial commitments while addressing domestic economic needs.

Pakistan's foreign debt obligations may seem manageable at first glance. By mid-2023, the State Bank of Pakistan estimated them at \$124.5 billion, which accounts for 42 percent of the GDP, a figure considered relatively modest on the global scale. However, despite this seemingly low burden, Pakistan faces challenges in balancing its trade. Its annual foreign exchange earnings from exports fall short of covering its import expenses. In the fiscal year 2022–23, Pakistan incurred a current account deficit of US\$30.5 billion, excluding remittances. Nearly 90 percent of this deficit was offset by remittances from Pakistani expatriates, with the remainder primarily covered by new foreign borrowing.

The prospects for increased export earnings in 2024 are dimmed by domestic issues. For instance, the textile industry, which constitutes a significant portion of Pakistan's exports, faced setbacks in 2023 due to factory closures caused by soaring electricity prices, hindering their ability to produce for export. While the Federal Investigation Agency's crackdown on illegal foreign exchange dealers in 2023 stabilized the official rupee–US dollar exchange rate, it also discouraged Pakistani expatriates from repatriating their earnings through formal channels. With little hope for export earnings to rise, Pakistan's government will soon be confronted with the urgent task of rescheduling foreign debt payments after the February 2024 elections. Negotiations with various stakeholders will be necessary, as highlighted in the State Bank of Pakistan's latest quarterly statement. As of September 2023, the foreign debt stood at US\$128.1 billion, with US\$99.1 billion attributed to the government and state-owned enterprises.

Of this amount, the government owes US\$37.1 billion to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, with terms typically featuring low-interest rates and extended repayment periods. Additionally, there is a debt of US\$7.8 billion owed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The

government has also incurred non-concessional debt through Sukuk issuance and Eurobonds, amounting to US\$7.8 billion, likely carrying higher interest rates. Further liabilities stem from arrangements with foreign banks, including those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE), totaling US\$11.7 billion. Additionally, US\$18.1 billion of foreign debt is held by Pakistan's banks and private enterprises. This leaves US\$37.9 billion of external debt held by the government, including unspecified "commercial loans" amounting to US\$6.1 billion and "other bilateral loans" totaling US\$26.1 billion.

Details regarding these bilateral loans are scarce, but many are speculated to have originated from Chinese financial institutions to fund projects under the China–Pakistan



Economic Corridor (CPEC), a component of the Belt and Road Initiative. CPEC, with an expected expenditure of US\$62 billion, represents a significant investment in Pakistan's infrastructure since 2014.

However, the financial specifics of CPEC remain ambiguous. While the China Global Investment Tracker indicates significant investment and contracted work in Pakistan, AidData suggests that Pakistan's cumulative debt to China may be understated. This discrepancy arises from the method of debt reporting, with recipient countries often failing to disclose loans received from China, which are frequently disguised as foreign direct investment into Chinese-owned or affiliated companies responsible for infrastructure projects. In Pakistan's case, many of these entities are independent power producers supplying electricity to state-owned distribution companies.

This arrangement effectively kept the new debt from appearing on the recipient country's government's balance sheet. However, Pakistan's government still bears responsibility for

the foreign debt incurred by independent power producers. These producers earn revenue in Pakistani rupees but must repay their debts to foreign creditors in foreign currency.

The IMF's estimate of Pakistan's debt service requirements for 2023–24, totaling US\$25 billion, is based on Pakistan's official reporting of foreign debt. However, it's unlikely to fully factor in such arrangements, even though they significantly influence Pakistan's foreign exchange needs for debt repayment.

The SBP anticipates a total of US\$11.3 billion to be rolled over during 2023–24. Additionally, Pakistan's 2023–24 government budget forecasts revenue of US\$1.5 billion from the sale of Sukuk and Eurobonds, as well as US\$4.6 billion from new commercial loans. Nevertheless, these measures fall short. Given the persistent negative trade balance, the new Pakistani

government will urgently need to initiate negotiations to reschedule a portion of the foreign debt due in 2024. China is expected to play a crucial role in this effort.

However, with China facing challenges in its financial sector, Pakistani negotiators may find it difficult to secure concessions. While China's debt restructuring efforts in Sri Lanka last year offer some hope, Pakistan's debt obligations to China likely surpass those of Sri Lanka, dampening optimism.

Facing dwindling foreign exchange reserves, Pakistan repaid \$2.4 billion in external public loan servicing during the first quarter (July–September) of the current fiscal year. This included significant payments to the IMF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, as well as bilateral creditors such as Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, and Non-Paris Club countries. Additionally, payments were made to commercial banks and for interest on international bonds.

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a critical juncture in managing its foreign debt burden. With looming debt service requirements and persistent trade imbalances, urgent action is imperative. Negotiations with creditors, particularly with China, will play a pivotal role in reshaping Pakistan's debt repayment strategies. However, navigating through these negotiations amidst China's financial sector challenges poses significant hurdles. Nonetheless, proactive measures, prudent fiscal policies, and effective debt management strategies are vital to steer Pakistan towards financial stability and sustainable economic growth in the face of its formidable foreign debt challenges.

# The implications of continued terrorism from Afghan soil

Raza Khan

Following the terrorist attacks in Mir Ali district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province on March 16, during which six Pakistan Army soldiers were martyred in clashes with an Afghanistan-based Pakistani terrorist group, Pakistan initiated air strikes inside Afghanistan. These strikes were purportedly aimed at targeting the terrorists responsible for the Mir Ali attacks. However, this action has further strained relations between the Afghan Taliban, who currently govern Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

According to Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesperson for the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan's airstrikes resulted in the deaths of eight 'innocent' women and children. He vowed to retaliate against these attacks, escalating tensions between the two neighboring countries. It is worth noting that among those martyred in the Mir Ali attacks were four Pakistan Army soldiers: Havildar Sabir from district Khyber, Naik Khurshid from district Lakki Marwat, Sepoy Nasir from district Peshawar, Sepoy Raja from district Kohat, and Sepoy Sajjad from district Abbottabad. The subsequent clearance operation led by Lieutenant Colonel Kashif successfully neutralized all six terrorists involved, as reported by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR). Tragically, during the operation, Lieutenant Colonel Syed Kashif Ali from Karachi and Captain Muhammad Ahmed Badar from district Talagang demonstrated exceptional bravery but ultimately sacrificed their lives in the line of duty.

In a statement broadcasted on state television, the Pakistani military asserted that 'a recent surge in terrorism has received full support and assistance from Afghanistan.' While the statement did not explicitly mention any airstrikes, it attributed the March 16 attack to militants who were harbored in Afghanistan, enjoying a 'safe haven.'

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry confirmed in a statement that the Pakistan Air Force conducted intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations within Afghan territory. The ministry specified that the target of these operations was the terrorists affiliated with the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, which, along with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has been implicated in numerous terrorist attacks within Pakistan, resulting in the loss of lives of both civilians and law enforcement personnel.

In response to the Pakistani airstrikes, the Afghan Taliban vehemently condemned the actions and refuted any allegations of allowing militant groups to operate from its territory.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson, emphasized that Pakistan should not attribute its internal issues to Afghanistan, asserting that the lack of control and incompetence within Pakistan should not be blamed on Afghanistan. He warned of potential dire consequences resulting from such incidents, which could spiral out of Pakistan's control.

Moreover, Afghan troops retaliated against the Pakistani attacks by engaging in heavy firing within Pakistani territory, resulting in injuries to Pakistani civilians. Afghan officials confirmed this retaliation in a separate statement, with the Taliban defence ministry indicating that their security forces targeted Pakistani troops at the border in response to the airstrikes.

Pakistan has consistently urged Afghanistan to deny sanctuaries and safe havens to the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) within its borders. However, since the Afghan Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in August 2021, they have largely ignored Pakistan's requests. Instead, certain elements within the Afghan Taliban have been seen as encouraging the TTP to launch attacks inside Pakistan while sheltering in Afghanistan. There are several reasons why the Afghan Taliban may have supported the TTP and provided them with safe havens in Afghanistan.

Firstly, the Afghan Taliban owe a significant debt to the Pakistani Taliban. The latter provided crucial military support to the Afghan Taliban, enabling them to overcome the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which numbered over 300,000, and to mount robust attacks against the US-led foreign and NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan. As a result, the Afghan Taliban feel indebted to the Pakistani Taliban and have been hesitant to take action against them at the behest of Pakistan.

Secondly, the Pakistani Taliban have been regarded as 'strategic assets' by the Afghan Taliban, serving to bolster security within Afghanistan. Additionally, they are seen as crucial in maintaining the Afghan Taliban's grip over the country and fending off their militant adversaries.

Thirdly, the Afghan Taliban perceive the TTP as a potential bargaining chip in their dealings with Pakistan. They believe that leveraging the TTP could help counteract Islamabad's pressure tactics, particularly in matters concerning foreign policy. For instance, the Afghan Taliban may seek to use the TTP to push back against Pakistan's efforts to align Afghanistan with its own interests, particularly in relation to India.

Fourthly, certain factions within the Afghan Taliban view Pakistan not just as a rival, but as an outright adversary. Consequently, they see value in supporting the TTP as a means to inflict harm upon Pakistan. In their eyes, the TTP presents the most viable option for launching attacks against Pakistan.

All these factors have contributed to the Afghan Taliban's support for the Pakistani Taliban. However, Afghanistan now faces a crucial question: Will its continued backing of the TTP ultimately alienate its strongest ally, Pakistan? The dilemma for the TTP lies in its need to perpetrate attacks within Pakistan, particularly targeting the country's security forces, in order to justify its existence and further its agenda. Notably, the TTP has outlined a scheme known as 'Jihad-e-Pakistan,' aiming to replicate the Afghan Taliban model within Pakistan.

Despite the Afghan Taliban's official stance that they cannot permit any group to utilize Afghan soil for attacks against Pakistan or any other nation, their actions on the ground have failed to align with this rhetoric. This dissonance raises concerns about the sustainability of Afghanistan's support base, especially considering its historically close ties with Pakistan.

The greatest concern now is that if the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other Pakistan-based terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan continue to carry out terrorist attacks inside Pakistan, regardless of the support from the Afghan Taliban, it will likely exacerbate tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Such a scenario would not serve the interests of either Pakistan or Afghanistan. Pakistan is already grappling with unprecedented political instability and turmoil, exacerbated by questions surrounding the legality of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government. The country cannot afford to face massive waves of terrorism that would further deepen the crisis.

Undoubtedly, terrorists are exploiting the political instability in Pakistan, and the ongoing turmoil has hindered the state's ability to effectively respond to these threats. For the Afghan Taliban and Afghanistan, deteriorating relations between Kabul and Islamabad would deprive the regime of its primary support. After years of turmoil, Afghanistan has begun to experience a relative uplift, with the Afghan Taliban focusing on the country's economic revival. Therefore, any further deterioration in ties with Pakistan would drag the Afghan Taliban regime into an unnecessary conflict, jeopardizing ongoing efforts for infrastructure development and economic revitalization.



# Poverty and literacy share a significant correlation

Rasheed Ali

Provinces or regions in a country with a high literacy rate usually have a high GDP per capita, statistics show. And the assertion stands true for vice versa. Political-economists believe literacy helps individuals better utilise the resources in an efficient way. It results in an increase in production, ultimately leading to more employment opportunities and prosperity in a better literate region.

A study, conducted by the Pak Alliance for Maths and Science (PAMS), making public its results in September 2021, is a testimony to the statements. The findings placed Balochistan on top of the list with the highest proportion of out-of-school children (OOSC), at 47%, followed by Sindh at 44%. It is a tragic fact that Balochistan is listed as the poorest province in the country. According to a UNDP poverty report, Balochistan lacks all basic facilities, and is placed on top of the poverty index. In Qilla Abdullah, 96% people live below their means, making it the poorest part of the country.

The proportion of OOSC at the district, provincial and national level, extracted from the Pakistan Social and Living Measurements Standards survey 2019-20 (PSLM), showed that Shaheed Sikandrabad district in Balochistan has the highest proportion of such children, at 76%, with Sherani district following at 70% of out-of-school children between the ages of five and 16 years.

The study, conducted every two years by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, stated that more than 50% of all school-age children are out of school in 17 out of 28 districts in Balochistan, with Nushki district reporting the lowest proportion of out-of-school children in the province at 23%. It also said that 64% of all out-of-school 16 year olds in Balochistan have never attended school.

According to the findings, the total number of OOSC in Pakistan is 32%, i.e. one third of total school-age children. This amounts to an estimated total of over 20 million. In absolute terms, Punjab has the largest total population of OOSC, roughly estimated at 7.7 million, followed by Sindh at 6.5 million.

In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Kohistan district has the highest proportion of OOSC at 60%. Again, the assertion proved true in the case of this district of Pakistan. The UNDP

report identified Kohistan as one of the most deprived parts of KP, where 95% of people lack basic needs, making it the second poorest rural area after Qilla Abdullah.

The proportion of OOSC is 50% or more in six districts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, with four districts among the newly-merged districts, including Mohmand, Bajaur, South Waziristan and North Waziristan. The other two newly-merged districts, Orakzai and Khyber, have OOSC proportions of 42% and 39%, respectively. Among the settled districts, Kohistan and Torghar fare the worst, while Abbottabad has the lowest proportion of OOSC in the province at 9%.

As far as the situation of poverty in these districts is concerned, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa ranks second on the provincial level with 49%



of people identified as living in poor standards.

Rajapur district in South Punjab has the highest rate of OOSC in Punjab at 48%, followed by Muzaffargarh at 43%. Among the 36 districts in the province, the worst 10 districts in terms of the OOSC proportion are from South Punjab. It is a pity that the South Punjab region is known for its underdevelopment and poverty. The UNDP report placed Muzaffargarh at number 4 of the poorest regions of Pakistan, with 64% people living below the poverty line.

Sindh province has a clear division between rural and urban areas. If Karachi is excluded, the poverty situation in rural Sindh is not much better than Balochistan. The PAMS report says 13 out of 29 districts of Sindh have an OOSC rate of more than 50%. The seven districts with the lowest OOSC rates include six districts of Karachi and Hyderabad. On the other hand, the UNDP report said Tharparkar

district of Sindh was ranked third with 87% people living below the poverty line.

The study also noted an interesting fact which again showed that poverty and literacy are directly interlinked. It found out that the ratio of dropouts continues to rise steadily with an increase in age. That means that as soon as a child gets older and their chances of getting some work somewhere increase, the poor parents withdraw them from school and start sending them to some workplaces. The data identifies the age bracket of eight to 13 years as most vulnerable to dropout. Hence, creating conditions that address factors contributing to dropout around these age groups is critical to reducing the total OOSC population in the country.

The study showed that the first access to education during early years is better in Punjab than in other provinces. Definitely, parents' better financial condition in the most prosperous province of the country is one of the reasons for it.

In Sindh, 63% of all out-of-school 16-year olds have never attended school, which is second only to Balochistan. This means that Sindh has a large population of young adults who have never been to school. One must keep in mind the poverty level in rural Sindh while analysing the study findings.

The study says more than three quarters (77%) of Pakistani OOSC reside in rural areas of the country. These areas account for 15.4 million of the total

OOSC, with 4.6 million (23%) of the children not going to school residing in urban areas.

The reasons listed by the researchers for not attending school, or dropping out, also fortify the assertion that poverty and education have a vital link between them. Eighty-seven per cent of children who have not been to school reported it as "too expensive", while 13% gave other reasons for not enrolling in school. Also, 19% dropping out from school also reported it as too expensive. Thirteen per cent said they wanted to help at home or help with work. If authorities want parents to admit their children to school, and not force them to drop out before completing their education, more funds would have to be allocated for the sector. Enhanced allocations would have to be made in annual budgets not only for students and educational institutions, but also for poverty-hit parents, who find it hard to send their children to school for lack of resources.

# Barriers to girls' equal access to education

Dr. Fatima Khan

In the recent past, some young Pakistani girl students have been honoured and rewarded for their services in the field of education. Top of the list was the world's youngest Microsoft Certified Professional, Arfa Karim Randhawa (1995-2012), who won laurels for the country at a very young age. Various IT parks, scholarships and medals were named after her.

Another brilliant and extraordinary Pakistani girl is Malala Yousafzai, who is an activist for female education and the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Various educational institutions, including Government Mission School, located near Civil Hospital in Karachi, were named after her. The brave girl had raised her voice against extremism in Swat and gave the message to the world that Pakistanis are peace-loving people.

However, these are only a few examples of a bright picture. Overall, the situation of women's education in the country is depressing, and the voices for their equal right to education are almost non-existent. The female literacy rate in Pakistan is among the lowest in the world. The literacy rate for urban women is more than five times the rate for rural women, which shows a huge gap between rural and urban women, as far literacy is concerned. The school dropout rate among girls is also very high (almost 50%), especially in rural areas.

The main reason for lack of parents' interest in their daughters' education lies in the religious and cultural views of the people, and the traditional agrarian economy. Though boys in the rural areas often get a rudimentary, back-to-basics style education, even that is rare for girls, who typically are put to work as young as age 6, cooking, cleaning or working in family fields.

Educationists give various reasons for the low female literacy rate in the country. According to them, the first cause of women's illiteracy is the increase in the population, which is playing a negative role in female education. A family having more children and less income, mostly prefers educating boys only, while girls learn domestic skills.

Secondly, there is also a misconception that women merely have to manage a home after being married, whereas men have to earn; therefore, education matters only for males, and not for females.

Thirdly, it is mostly observed that traditionally, women are considered as the possession of males of the family. So, the males are responsible for taking decisions about their lives. In most cases, males do not allow their sisters or daughters to go to schools or universities. Additionally, some families do not like their daughters to study in co-education institutions, thus depriving them of higher education.

Fourthly, the social setup is dominated by men. Girls cannot move freely; thus, a male

Data from 68 countries indicated that a woman's education is a key factor in determining a child's survival, according to the UN statistics. Children of mothers with no education in developing countries are 3.1 times more likely to die than those with mothers who have secondary or tertiary education, and 1.6 more likely to die than those whose mothers have primary-level education, the report said.

The report added that lack of local schools is one reason fewer girls attend high school. A study in Pakistan showed that the distance from school resulted in a 20% reduction in attendance, while studies in Egypt, Indonesia and Africa show that placing schools closer to home results in higher attendance.

As said earlier, people's religious beliefs and cultural norms prove to be a major hindrance in girls going to educational institutions. A woman researcher quoted a cleric opposing higher education for girls in his Friday prayers sermon. The maulana said that the primary reason why the Muslim world was supposedly headed for rampant decline was because "Muslims have become 'beghairats' (people who lack self-esteem) as they send their daughters abroad to acquire education and invite 'God's wrath'. This claim shows the mindset which is opposed to girls' education. A district



of the family has to take responsibility for her care. This makes it difficult for females to move around. There is also a sharp division between female-oriented work and male-oriented work. Females are not allowed to work in all spheres of life, therefore, their education is not considered important.

According to official figures, only one in three women in rural areas can read, though real figures are far less than that. Overall, education is "a dream" for boys and "unimaginable" for girls, according to a report issued last year by the United Nations.

The UN report said that just around 39% of rural girls attend secondary school in most developing countries including Pakistan. This is far fewer than rural boys (45%), urban girls (59%) and urban boys (60%) among the developing states.

programme manager for an organisation working for women empowerment and female education in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa told this writer that people are scared of sending their girls to school.

It is a tragedy that even women are not convinced of girls' education in our society. It is a fact that every barbaric act perpetrated against women is committed with the help of a 'female accomplice'. Whether it is 'forbidding' girls to attend schools or acts of 'domestic violence', women assist men in building a society which does not serve as a safe haven for women. Perhaps these acts are motivated by vengeance by women who once put up with being deprived of their basic rights when they were young themselves. Girls are only taught by their mothers to be dutiful wives and daughters.



# Censorship is a crucial complement of genocide

Somdeep Sen

Last month on the BBC's flagship news programme, *Newsnight*, author and journalist Howard Eric Jacobson complained that Britain's public broadcaster had been showing too many images of Palestinian suffering in Gaza. He added that in televising Palestinian suffering in this way, BBC was "taking a side" and that while it was "agonising to see what is happening...there are reasons for it".

And this was hardly the first expression of this sentiment. A few weeks prior, a discussion was under way on the professional networking platform LinkedIn on whether there were "too many Israel/Palestine posts" on the site and whether this should change. Many responded that it should – they wanted people to stop talking about Palestinians being starved, bombed and buried under the rubble.

It may seem odd that people like Jacobson are acknowledging the massive levels of suffering in Gaza, but in the same breath demanding the world hears less about it. But this is not at all surprising. Censorship has always been a necessary complement of genocide. With the ongoing genocide in Gaza, efforts to silence those who have sought to raise the alarm have taken a variety of forms.

A lot has been said and written about Israel's refusal to allow foreign journalists to enter freely into Gaza to cover the genocide and its targeted attacks on Palestinian journalists there who risk life and limb to show the world the reality of what is being done to their people. But even the journalists who are thousands of miles away from the Palestinian enclave have been punished for daring to talk about the genocide.

Last December, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) sacked presenter Antoinette Lattouf for re-sharing a Human Rights Watch (HRW) post claiming that "Israel was using starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza". The ABC had itself reported on the HRW claim, which has since been repeated by the United Nations. Lattouf, believed to be the first Arab-Australian woman to work as a reporter on commercial television, says she fears the ABC buckled under pressure from pro-Israel groups who had been accusing her of

"anti-Semitism and bias" due to her support for Palestinian rights and criticism of Israel since she was first hired. She is suing the ABC for unfair dismissal.

Throughout this genocide, teachers and university professors across the world who tried to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians have also been silenced. An Israeli teacher was fired from his job, arrested, and placed in solitary confinement for criticising the actions of Israel's military. Meir Baruchin's only "crime" was a Facebook post he made the day after Hamas's attack on Israel that said: "Horrific images are pouring in from Gaza. Entire families were wiped out ... Anyone who thinks this is justified because of what happened yesterday, should unfriend themselves. I ask everyone else to do everything possible to stop this madness. Stop it now. Not later, Now!!!"

And earlier this month, the Hebrew Uni-

versity of Jerusalem suspended Law Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, for criticising Israel's war on Gaza and Zionism in general.

and in countries backing Israel's war on Gaza, are also not immune to such censorship. In January, Ofer Cassif, a member of Israel's Knesset from the left-wing Hadash-Ta'al party, announced his intention to join South Africa in its legal proceedings against Israel brought under the UN Genocide Convention. In response to Cassif's decision to support South Africa's genocide case, 85 Israeli members of parliament (out of 120) accused him of "treason" and signed a petition to expel him from the Knesset.

On the other side of the world, in Canada, Sarah Jama, who is a member of the Provincial Parliament of Ontario, was forced to apologise for a statement she made in the immediate aftermath of Hamas's attack on Israel in October, where she called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, and an end to Israel's occupation and apartheid. Jama's apology came after Ontario Premier Doug Ford called for her resignation.

A manager of organisational performance and equity for the city of Evanston, Illinois in the US was also fired after he expressed his sympathies for Palestinians in Gaza on social media. In January, Liam Bird filed a federal lawsuit against his former employer. The lawsuit also claims that senior city officials "choreographed" public outrage toward Bird over a proposed resolution calling for a cease-fire in Gaza ahead of its introduction to the Equity and Empowerment Commission in November.

The efforts to censor and intimidate anyone and everyone who speaks up against Israel's

genocide in Gaza are undoubtedly distressing, but they are in no way surprising. A look at global history reveals that such silencing of critical voices has helped create a permissive environment for mass atrocities, and the worst atrocity of all, genocide, since at least a century.

In Slobodan Milosevic's Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, several measures were implemented to suppress and censor all independent publications as well as television and radio stations that dared to speak up against, or even mention in a natural manner, the atrocities being committed by Serbs against Albanians, Bosniaks and Croats across the region. In 1998, five editors of independent newspapers were "charged with disseminating misinformation" because their publications referred to Albanians killed in Kosovo as "people" rather than "terrorists".



versity of Jerusalem suspended Law Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, for criticising Israel's war on Gaza and Zionism in general.

The silencing of teachers and university lecturers has not been limited to Israel, either. In November in the United States, the University of Arizona (UA) "temporarily replaced" Assistant Professor Rebecca Lopez and Community Liaison Rebecca Zapfen for facilitating a classroom discussion on Israel's war on Gaza. Pro-Israel groups claimed that their lecture was "biased, antisemitic, blatantly false and terrorism-supporting". Two first-grade teachers at a Los Angeles-area public charter school were also placed on leave after posting on social media about a lesson they taught on "the genocide in Palestine".

Politicians and civil servants, in Israel

# Taking a page from the French anti-Islam playbook, UK redefines 'extremism'

Omar Suleiman

As the genocide in Gaza continues to be streamed live to our screens, many Western governments are not only refusing to end their complicity in the slaughter, but also trying to silence and demonise the Muslim movements and organisations resisting the Israeli occupation within their countries' borders.

In January of this year, the British government proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir as a "terrorist" organisation, making it a criminal offence to belong to or invite support for the decades-old movement. No matter your view on the movement itself, this proscription is clearly a convenient political play.

In the post-9/11 era, Hizb ut-Tahrir has repeatedly been threatened with proscription and aggressively surveilled under the country's inherently Islamophobic counter-radicalisation programme, Prevent. Former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron tried to outright ban the group, in 2005 and 2010 respectively, but both times Home Office lawyers concluded that the group did not engage with or glorify any form of violence and advised that it should be allowed to continue its activities.

There is no suggestion that the group has since changed its approach to violence, or committed any crime under British law, so its official banning appears to be nothing but a French-style attempt at framing any Muslim movement, ideology or political expression that appears to challenge Western norms as violent and a threat to national security. Last week, the British government took yet another page from the French anti-Muslim playbook, and redefined "extremism" in a blatant attempt to subjugate and marginalise British Muslims who are taking a stance against the genocide of Palestinians.

In a clear attempt to curtail weekly pro-Palestine demonstrations attended by hundreds of thousands, and amid wider attempts to conflate all pro-Palestine activism with extremism, Communities Secretary Michael Gove announced that the state has expanded the official definition of extremism.

The new definition, Gove revealed, would include "the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others" or attempts to "undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights". It would also classify those who "intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve" these aims as extremists.

While the former definition focused on actual acts of violence, this new one is broader and much less precise. It appears to have been purposefully crafted to open the door to loaded, ideologically driven interpretations that could lead to the branding of all Muslim thought and political action not explicitly approved by the government as "extremism". The inclusion into this definition of those supposedly creating

tried to crack down on their basic rights under the guise of secularism, will also be firm in its support for British Muslims as their government attempts to curtail their rights under the guise of "fighting extremism".

In a speech at the House of Commons, Gove suggested that a number of mainstream Muslim organisations, such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), may fall foul of this new definition of extremism and as a result be banned from access to public money, ministers and civil servants. In response, the MAB, known for the extensive role it played in anti-Iraq war protests and movement in Britain, condemned the government's redefinition of extremism as "a cynical move to appease the hard-right, targeting mainstream British Muslim organisations" and challenged Gove to repeat the allegations without parliamentary privilege so they can sue.

Other Muslim media organisations like 5Pillars were under threat of being included in the government's list of extremist groups, only to be eventually excluded. Dilly Hussain, the editor of 5Pillars, responded to the initial suggestion that the media platform would be on the extremist list by saying, "it's not the job of Rishi Sunak, Michael Gove, or [the UK Prime Minister's office] to be labelling and targeting members of the free press [with] whom they ideologically disagree with while claiming to be champions and upholders of "freedom of expression".

Other British Muslim civil society organisations such as Friends of Al-Aqsa, which had a prominent presence in protests against the genocide in Gaza, and CAGE, which led the efforts to challenge France's crackdown on Muslim civil liberties, are also facing the risk of being classified as "extremist" under the new definition. Even a mainstream mosque like the Lewisham Islamic Centre is under threat due to the initial inclusion of its Imam, Shakeel Beg.

The British government's redefinition of extremism requires deep scrutiny because it amounts to a feigned reinvention of what "extremism" actually means. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), a well-established NGO, referred to this in its response to Gove's slander. "Victory for resistance to Gove's extremism, he has NOT placed MEND on an extremism list because the facts don't allow it. Instead, he uses parliamentary privilege to slander."



"a permissive environment" for extremist behaviour is especially dangerous, as it could result in the arbitrary criminalisation of large segments of Muslim civil society in Britain.

For years, France has used a loose, ideologically-driven definition and understanding of secularism to marginalise, criminalise and subjugate its citizens originating from its former colonies, who are overwhelmingly Muslim.

Today, with this new, loose and ideologically-driven definition of extremism, Britain is attempting to do the same to British Muslims, who are standing up in support of Palestinians facing genocide and doing so with ever-increasing support from other Britons of conscience.

The global Muslim community, which stood with French Muslims as their government



## Unpaid PCSIR employees

The Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (PCSIR) is a premier organisation for scientific and industrial research in the country. The total number of employees in PCSIR, both technical and non-technical, is around 2,600. Due to lack of financial discipline and persistent budget cuts on account of austerity, the organisation is facing a financial crunch, which is so bad that even salaries have not been disbursed to the employees for the last two months.

With inflation on the rise and the holy month of Ramazan slowly moving towards the Eid festival, the frustration among the employees is going higher by the minute. The relevant ministry should ensure that sufficient funds are available for the purpose. The salaries of the last two months should be sanctioned through a supplementary grant to do away with the bureaucratic red tape.

Syed Sibghatullah  
Quetta

## Private school teachers' plight

The plight of teachers in the private sector hardly gets the attention that it deserves. A graduate teacher in a private school, barring a few prestigious institutions, barely earns Rs25,000 per month, which is less than the government-designated minimum wage. Making matters worse, some schools retain portions of salaries as security deposits, leaving the teachers with a less take-home pay. The situation is no less challenging in private and semi-government universities. Delayed payments, extending up to seven to eight months in some cases, disrupt the financial stability of faculty members. Expecting educators to endure such prolonged periods without compensation contradicts the very basic principles of fair labour practices.

Many universities adopt a strategy of maintaining a lean permanent faculty, while relying heavily on contractual teachers. However, there exists no robust legal framework governing these contracts, leaving teachers vulnerable to exploitation. Adding to the burdens, the taxation system further exacerbates the financial woes of the teachers. Education reforms can never be comprehensive without addressing the financial insecurity and lack of legal protection faced by teachers in the private sector. Ultimately, the effectiveness of educational institutions hinges on the quality of instruction provided by the teachers. Regardless of the number of schools, colleges or universities, genuine reform remains elusive until teachers' rights and welfare are truly safeguarded through robust legal frameworks as well as equitable compensation structures.

Ayesha Youssuf Abbasi  
Islamabad

## Profiteering: Long-term policy measures needed

While Ramazan is a blessing for us all, the disadvantaged population of the country is once again facing great misery during the holy month, thanks to the hoarding mafia and profiteers, who have made life a nightmare for the common man. The prices of basic utilities have witnessed a sharp hike due to the lust of the profiteers.

Having failed in controlling the price manipulation of basic commodities and artificial inflation in the country, the federal and Sindh governments took the philanthropic route, and announced Rs7.5 billion and Rs22.5 billion relief packages, respectively. Later, the federal government enhanced the amount to Rs12.5 billion.

Such huge amounts, as per reports, will be disbursed through Utility Stores and the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) in the form of subsidy on food items and hard cash through BISP-aligned banks. Since the start of Ramazan, a huge rush of people can be seen outside Utility Stores and the designated banks who gather there in the hope of getting the so-called relief. Although one can assume that such kind of relief packages will help the poor, the way in which the relief is being disbursed is a misery itself for the poor. People spend hours and hours standing in queues, facing rude and abusive behaviour of the relevant staff. Women and the elderly are the ones who suffer the most due to improper management and lack of facilities.

Taking these conditions into consideration, it is difficult to call such an exercise a 'philanthropic act' aimed at providing relief. It is more about visibility with the aim of earning political mileage out of the exercise. Though some may not agree, it is a disgrace to human dignity. It is not the people who should be blamed for compromising their dignity. They are being forced to do that because the governments have failed to deliver, and are now taking the populist route. People simply have no options in these days of hyperinflation.

The relief packages announced by the federal and provincial governments are together worth Rs35 billion. This is a huge amount which could have been spent in so many other, better ways to enable people to be self-reliant in the long run. But the two governments have preferred to opt for providing meagre, short-term solutions. Only long-term policy initiatives can help people earn with dignity, to be self-reliant with sustained income streams improving their social mobility.

The two governments should surely think about creating opportunities for sustained income streams rather than keeping the poor dependent on dole outs.

Zain ul Abdin Jessar  
Larkana

## Education still not our priority

Former President Alvi said he had read 30 to 40 books in a year. As it happened, it was towards the very end of his tenure that the former president found it alarming that 20.62 million Pakistani children were out of school, and he promptly declared it a big challenge for the country. It was as if he had never known it before. However, to be fair, the former president was not the only one with a passion for rhetoric; it is a malaise that is common among the national elite.

The book-loving president had taken pains to visit the Sindh Governor House to launch the first Karachi Festival of Books and Libraries. It can be argued that the ceremony meant for promoting books and reading ought to have taken place preferably in an open space with participation open to all. Or, better still, the activity could have been arranged in some library or school in the interior of Sindh's remote and academically backward districts, like Kashmore, Kandhkot or Shikarpur, that are infested with notorious dacoits and anti-social elements. This would have made it a pragmatic effort towards the promotion of the reading culture in the country.

However, the fact of the matter is that a staggering number of 28 million children, not 20.62 million, are presently out of school as revealed by former caretaker federal education minister in a letter to Punjab education minister not long ago. Every fourth child is out of school. We are globally leading in the race to have the most out-of-school children. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Taiwan are far ahead than us in literacy and ratio of children enrolled in schools.

Moreover, the 'learned' and 'book-loving' former president occupied the coveted seat for more than five years, and, needless to say, he was in a better position to address at least this daunting challenge of illiteracy, especially during his party's tenure. This may have given him an opportunity to say that he did his best to improve enrolment in schools. But all he could do was to say that he read 30-40 books a year.

Regrettably, education remains to be the lowest priority of our ruling elite. They have scant respect, if at all, for this vital aspect that takes nations to glory and can make them stand proudly with advanced, literate nations of the world.

Unfortunately, we, as a nation, often believe more in rhetoric and less in doing something practical for any cause. In fact, a nation that has been groping in the dark for long seeking light at the end of the dark tunnel at least has the right to ask from its educated ruling elite about their own performance and delivery. At least this is its due right.

Qamer Soomro  
Shikarpur

## The raptor that imprisons birds live by stripping their feathers

Megan Shersby

The Eleonora's falcon is a small raptor that takes its hunting abilities to the next level — by catching its prey alive and keeping them imprisoned. It captures small birds, strips their flight feathers preventing them from being able to fly, then stuffs them into rock fissures or deep holes, from which they cannot escape.



Strangely, only one population of Eleonora's falcons is known to partake in this unusual predatory behavior. The behavior was already known to local fishers, but ornithologists first described the hunting technique in 2015 after carrying out a census of the species on the Mogador archipelago, off the west coast of Morocco. Scientists think that by keeping birds captive, the raptors can keep their food source fresh until it's needed. While the majority of the prey are small songbirds, they also eat swifts, hoopoes (*Upupa epops*) and some waders.

The authors believe this behavior is unique to the Mogador population, having found no other reports of live imprisonment among other Eleonora's falcons or raptor species. Their findings, however, were met with skepticism by some. Rob Simmons, a behavioral ecologist at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, told *New Scientist* the imprisoned birds may just be escapees hiding in rocks to avoid being killed. All Eleonora's falcons consume birds during their nesting period, between July and October. They prey on migrating birds that are tired from their long journeys, catching them mid-flight. This feast helps the falcons and their young prepare for their own migration to Madagascar. The rest of the year they feed mainly on insects such as dragonflies and butterflies.

## Strawberries, spinach top annual 'dirty dozen' produce list

Lisa O'Mary

Government chemical testing of fresh produce showed that up to 95% of some of the most commonly purchased fruit and vegetables in the U.S. had detectable levels of pesticides, a new report claims. The findings stem from scrutiny of non-organic produce testing data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the FDA and were published Wednesday as part of an annual ranking called the "Dirty Dozen" by a Washington, DC-based health advocacy organization. Topping this year's Dirty Dozen list are strawberries, spinach, and the leafy greens of kale, collards, and mustard greens. Those top three are followed by grapes, peaches, and pears. The bottom half of the list includes nectarines, apples, peppers, cherries, blueberries, and green beans. To determine the rankings, the advocacy group creates a composite score based on test results that indicate how often a pesticide is detected, the number of detected pesticides, and the amount of each one that is detected. "Before conducting tests, the USDA processes each piece of fruit or vegetable in the same way people tend to do at home. For example, those with inedible peels, like bananas, are peeled, and those with edible peels, like apples, are rinsed under cold water and drained before they are tested. So the test results are a good indication of consumers' likely exposure," the Environmental Working Group explained in its description of how the ranking lists were created. "Emerging evidence suggests many widely used fungicides may disrupt human hormone systems," said EWG Senior Toxicologist Alexis Temkin, PhD, in a statement. "But more studies are needed to better understand the risks they — and all pesticides — pose to humans, particularly children."



## Ancient Chinese burials with swords and chariot cast light on violent 'Warring States' period

Tom Metcalfe

Archaeologists in China have unearthed hundreds of tombs and relics, including several bronze swords, dating from the Warring States period more than 2,200 years ago.



The tombs and artifacts were found at the Baizhuang Cemetery in the village of Dengcheng, which is part of the city of Xiangyang in China's central Hubei province. According to a translated statement from provincial and city archaeologists, excavations in November 2023 unearthed more than 500 cultural objects, including the swords, copper tripods, ritual vessels, pottery, jade rings, lacquerware, boats and a chariot buried beside the skeletons of two horses.

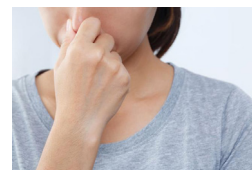
The artifacts were found in 174 tombs in the cemetery that date to roughly between 478 and 221 B.C. The archaeologists also found two tombs from the time of China's Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220). Xiangyang was part of the powerful Chu state at the time. The archaeologists hope the finds will cast light on both the period and the state itself. "This excavation provides a number of new materials for the study of funeral customs in Xiangyang area in the middle and late Warring States period, and also provides important physical materials for the study of Chu culture," the statement said.

Experts consider the Warring States period a formative time in Chinese history, when seven ancient states — Qin, Han, Wei, Zhao, Qi, Chu and Yan — vied for supremacy.

## Study confirms what many know: Babies smell good, teens stink

Ralph Ellis

Have you ever wondered how your sweet-smelling baby changed into a stinky teenager? Scientists in Germany may have come up with an answer, says a small study published in *Communications Chemistry*.



The scientists sewed small cotton patches into the armpits of T-shirts worn by 18 teens between the ages of 14 and 18 and the body suits worn by an equal number of toddlers under age 3. The people in the study wore the garments overnight and were not supposed to eat fragrant foods such as garlic or onions. The patches were taken to a lab and analyzed with chromatography-mass spectrometry, gas chromatography-olfactometry, and the good old human nose.

Researchers found that the teens emitted two steroid compounds the little ones did not because they'd entered puberty and their sweat glands had begun working. Those compounds were described as smelling like cheese, urine, sandalwood, and an animal universally acknowledged as stinky: goats.

Toddlers, in comparison, smelled wonderful — like flowers, soap, and violet. The scientists theorized that changing body odor has a purpose. Parents will want to stay close to a good-smelling baby, which they can usually identify by its smell. But parents may want to put distance between themselves and a teen who craves more independence and doesn't smell exactly great.

"Did you ever hold a baby in your arms and noticed a pleasant odor followed by the urge to hold it closer and cuddle even more?"





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