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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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Without structural reforms, the economy will continue to sink

Farhan Khan

The World Bank's latest assessment of Pakistan's economy paints a mixed picture. While growth is stabilising and inflation declining, the economy lacks long-term resilience. The hopeful signs include a projected 2.7 percent GDP growth in FY2024-25, lower inflation, better credit access, and a recovery in private sector confidence. The revival of agricultural productivity is driven by investment flows back into farming and towards higher value-added crops.

But this growth story is incomplete as it is not financially sustainable unless it is accompanied by serious and long-overdue reforms. The State Bank of Pakistan's latest Financial Stability Review once again makes it clear that beyond short-term adjustments and tactical recoveries, the country's economic future depends on sustained and credible structural reforms.

Without them, growth will continue to be weak, and vulnerable to external shocks.

has ever been taken against it.

Energy sector reform has been repeatedly promised, with tariff adjustments made here and there, but with little real success in addressing the fundamental issues — inefficiencies and circular debt. The IPPs scandal stinks to the high heavens but nobody dares to touch the vested interests. On the other hand, the authorities have persistently failed to collect taxes from the most dynamic economic segments with the result that revenue generation remains low, undermining long term economic resilience. According to the Bank's regional development update, Pakistan's growth over the past decade has been driven mostly by under-taxed sectors, including agriculture and services. The informal segments also remain outside the tax net, despite their growing weight in the overall GDP. All the burden of direct taxes is on the salaried class, while around 80 percent is collected from indirect taxation which hurts the poor sections of the population more.

short-term fixes. The result is that Pakistan remains highly exposed to any external or internal shock — global commodity price surges, interest rate hikes, supply chain disruptions, natural disasters and political crises. Credit growth, investment expansion, and financial deepening ultimately depend on an underlying economy that generates sustainable incomes and savings. Without that, even the best-regulated banks will find themselves operating in a volatile market.

The global economic landscape is under a shadow. External financing conditions are tightening, global competition is increasing. The old model of seeking periodic IMF programmes and ad hoc rollovers from friendly countries is no longer sustainable. Our traditional lenders and donors are showing signs of weariness and reluctance to continuously bail us out.

The way forward is wide ranging structural reforms all across the economy. The



The main problem is that Pakistan's growth model is flawed — because it is consumption-led and import-dependent. This is the underlying weakness of the economy. This imbalance can be corrected by broadening the tax base, restructuring the energy sector, boosting exports through productivity rather than subsidies, and bringing informal sectors into the formal economy.

The problems are all well known but there is lack of implementation rooted in lack of political will. Whichever government is in power, there is no long-term reform plan on the anvil and instead the politics of patronage continues unabated. The top leadership at any given time is afraid of displeasing powerful lobbies and confronting entrenched interests. For example, the shenanigans of the sugar lobby are no secret but beyond verbal avowals no action

Over the years tax revenues have not grown proportionately with GDP growth. This is because large segments of the economy are not within the tax net. There is an urgent need to bring the retail and wholesale trade within the formal tax system as well as stricter corporate income tax enforcement. Pakistan's tax problem is structural. The major issues are widespread and excessive exemptions and limited financial development accountability for persistent revenue shortfall. Tax reform has been talked about for decades but with little follow-up action. As such the economy remains under-taxed and is dependent on a narrow, overburdened formal sector.

Successive governments in Pakistan, instead of mobilising indigenous resources, have relied on external bailouts, managed devaluations, consumption incentives and other

first step towards this should be a charter of economy designed with the concurrence of all political parties and the establishment. Agricultural tax should be at the top of the list of priorities followed by retail and wholesale tax. At the same time indirect taxes should be reduced to give some relief to the common man. In the energy sector, IPPs pose a serious problem.

All their agreements should be renegotiated to reduce the burden of capacity payments. Similarly, all state run enterprises should be privatised because they are a big hole in the national exchequer. The ultimate solution lies in rapid industrialisation coupled with export diversification. To this end, the government must make it easy to do business by cutting red tape and bureaucratic hurdles which discourage entrepreneurship.

World press day: a timely reminder

Nasim Ahmed

World Press Freedom Day, observed on May 3, focussed attention on the rapidly deteriorating state of media freedom across the globe. The day is celebrated annually to highlight the important role a free press plays in upholding democratic values and promoting public interest in all domains of life. It is also a day to honour journalists who risk their lives while performing their professional duty of which the latest example is Gaza where many media persons have been killed in the last two years.

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) published a depressing report on the state of the media in the world. According to the RSF, not only have media freedoms receded rapidly in many countries where civil liberties and democracy were already in retreat, but they are also facing mounting pressures in places long considered havens of free speech and independent journalism.

In its latest index, released on the eve of World Press Freedom Day, the RSF has classified the international media freedom situation as 'difficult'. This denotes a deteriorating situation, a downgrade from the previously 'problematic' status and the second-lowest classification possible. This shift, according to the RSF, is driven by unprecedented economic pressures on news organisations worldwide, coupled with political interference and increasing violence against journalists.

According to the RSF, over half the world's population — 56.7 percent — lives in regions devoid of press freedom and where journalism remains a dangerous profession. The report says that the global media landscape is under unprecedented economic pressure, with financial constraints being the most serious threat to press freedom, even in established democracies like the US and the EU.

As in previous years, press freedom has the highest score in the Scandinavian countries. Touching a new low, the US dropped to 57th position on the World Press Freedom Index 2025, with its media environment categorised as "problematic". According to the RSF, the US is undergoing an unprecedented and sustained decline in press freedom, which is likely to worsen further with Donald Trump's return to power. What is concerning, media ownership in both the US and the EU is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, with their focus more on

maximising profits than supporting journalism that serves the public good. Most disturbingly, the conflict in the Middle East has completely exposed the limits of media independence in many Western democracies, where criticism of the Israeli government or Zionist ideology is often equated with antisemitism, whose purpose is to silence dissent and discourage truthful reporting.

The fact that Pakistan has slipped six spots to rank 158 out of 180 countries in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index reflects the growing crisis the media in the country faces in its day to day working. According to a recent report of the Pakistan Press Foundation, the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes

Act (PECA) 2025 has greatly increased fears of concocted and misdirected legal actions against journalists — especially in the digital sphere. This has been described as an encroachment on media freedom by the authorities concerned. Proponents of a free press have rightly pointed out that although PECA legislation is purported to curb fake news and negative impact of social media, it has been increasingly used as a tool to stifle dissent and suppress criticism of the powers that be. Overall, PECA has created a climate of fear which discourages investigative journalism, abridging the public's right to access to information.

The PFUJ has condemned the recent legislation enacted by the federal and Punjab governments "to stifle the freedom of expression". It has strongly criticised the changes in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2025 made by the federal government and the Defamation Law passed by the Punjab Assembly and said that they were aimed at controlling the media and stifling the freedom of expression. The PFUJ has also criticised the government



for using high-handed tactics like kidnapping of journalists, implicating them in false cases, blocking their bank accounts and those of their family members. As per many world reports, Pakistan remains one of the most dangerous places for journalists globally, with reporters frequently facing threats, harassment, abductions, and even deadly violence, often with little accountability for the perpetrators, fostering a culture of awe and fear.

Since a free press is the foundation stone of a true democracy, it is important for those in power as well as the political class as a whole to take urgent action to provide an enabling environment in which independent journalism can function and grow contributing its bit to the building of a stable democracy and progressive society. This is the resounding message of World Press Freedom Day.

On World Press Freedom Day, both President Zardari and PM Shehbaz Sharif issued official statements reiterating the government's commitment to upholding media freedom. But on the ground, the government measures tell a

A shaky recovery at risk

Muhammad Ali

The World Bank's latest report on Pakistan's economy paints a picture of cautious progress teetering on a fragile foundation. While inflation eases and private investment shows signs of life, a broken tax system—plagued by informality, exemptions, and weak financial structures—threatens to unravel even modest gains.

With Pakistan's revenue gap among the worst in South Asia, the stakes are high. This is a pivotal moment: reform now, or slide back into a cycle of borrowing and stunted growth. The World Bank's latest take on Pakistan's economy strikes a cautious tone—neither alarmist nor rosy, but urgent in its call for change. The country is clawing its way out of last year's economic rut, with GDP growth pegged at a modest 2.7% for FY2024-25. Falling inflation, easier credit, and renewed business optimism are helping, as is a rebound in agriculture, where smarter investments and policies are pushing farmers toward higher-value crops. But the Bank is clear: this flicker of progress could fizzle out without bold tax reforms.

The real issue isn't just how much the economy is growing, but what's fueling it. For years, Pakistan's growth has leaned heavily on sectors that barely pay taxes—agriculture chief among them, taxed at a fraction of other industries. The service sector and informal markets, which make up a growing slice of the economy, also slip through the tax net. The result? Tax revenues are stuck in the slow lane, failing to match the pace of economic growth.

This isn't about tax rates being too low. It's about entire chunks of the economy skating by without contributing their share. The government's vow to boost tax revenue by 4–5% of GDP sounds ambitious, but pulling it off means tackling tough reforms—like cracking down on personal and corporate tax evasion and bringing agriculture and retail into the fold. These are politically thorny moves, and history shows they've been sidestepped time and again.

Without fixing this, Pakistan's recovery risks being a house of cards—growth that looks good on paper but lacks the foundation to last. Pakistan's tax woes are deeply rooted in its economic structure. A sprawling informal sector, generous tax exemptions, and underdeveloped financial systems are starving the country of revenue—not just from income taxes, but from consumption taxes too. Compared to its South Asian peers, Pakistan's revenue gap is among the widest, a stark reminder of how much potential is slipping through the cracks.

Inflation is cooling faster than anticipated, and private investment is picking up, fueled by imported capital goods and better access to

the country risks sliding back into its old trap: growth that lifts a few but leaves most behind, and an economy that can't pay its own way.

Growth is driven by recovering private consumption and investment, fueled by lower inflation, interest rates, and improving business confidence, yet remains weak due to tight monetary and fiscal policies. Agriculture faces limited growth from weather and pest issues, industry declines due to high input costs and taxes, and services see muted growth from weak sectoral spillovers. Growth is projected to rise to 3.1% in FY26 and 3.4% in FY27, but these rates are insufficient for significant poverty reduction given high population growth. Tight policies constrain activity, while uneven



connectivity and high broadband costs hinder digital economy development, despite Digital Public Infrastructure progress. Risks include fragile recovery, high debt, policy uncertainties, global trade volatility, and climatic shocks. Delays in reforms or stabilization shifts could intensify external pressures, and Digital Public Infrastructure implementation needs strong federal-provincial coordination. Recommended reforms include an efficient, progressive tax system, market-determined exchange rate, lower import tariffs, improved business environment, and streamlined public

sector to attract investment. These aim to signal credibility but require consistent execution. Pakistan's stabilization shows progress, but structural reforms are critical to sustain growth, reduce poverty, and build resilience. If deeper analysis on reforms or risks is needed, I can search the web or X posts or provide a focused breakdown.

credit. But storm clouds loom large. A global economic slowdown, rising trade barriers, geopolitical tensions, or supply chain disruptions could easily derail this fragile recovery, blowing fiscal deficits wide open again.

Even if everything goes right—IMF support holds, debt rollovers succeed, and reforms inch forward—growth is projected to limp along at 2.7 to 3.4% over the next three years. That's too sluggish to dent poverty, especially with Pakistan's booming population. Without a tax system that can keep up, even these modest gains will lean on borrowing, not self-sustaining progress.

Pakistan stands at a tipping point. The economy is steady, but it's far from secure. This fleeting moment of stability is a chance to tackle long-overdue tax reforms. Miss it, and

Pakistan's economy is at a crossroads, stabilising but not yet secure. The window for bold tax reforms is narrow, and the risks—global slowdowns, trade barriers, or geopolitical shocks—are real. Without a tax system that captures the country's economic potential, growth will remain too slow to lift millions out of poverty. The choice is clear: tackle the structural flaws head-on, or stay trapped in a cycle of fleeting recoveries that never truly deliver.

Can Pakistan break the cycle of fragility?

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's economy is at a tipping point, as the State Bank of Pakistan's recent Financial Stability Review makes abundantly clear. For too long, the country has relied on short-term fixes—bailouts, currency tweaks, and superficial incentives—that offer momentary relief but fail to address deep-rooted vulnerabilities. Without courageous, sustained structural reforms, Pakistan risks perpetual instability, exposed to global shocks and internal crises with dwindling defenses.

Pakistan's economic trajectory underscores a truth that's hard to ignore: without bold, consistent structural reforms, the nation's growth will remain shaky, its financial reserves vulnerable, and its exposure to global shocks ever-present. While quick fixes and temporary recoveries may offer fleeting relief, they're no substitute for the deep, systemic changes needed to secure a stable future.

Successive governments have leaned on a familiar playbook: short-term patches like foreign bailouts, controlled currency adjustments, consumer subsidies, and minor bureaucratic tweaks. These measures might deliver a brief period of calm, but they leave the economy's core weaknesses untouched. As a result, Pakistan remains perilously exposed to disruptions—whether it's spiking global commodity prices, rising interest rates, natural calamities, or domestic political turmoil—with scant reserves to cushion the blow.

The banking sector, to its credit, has shown resilience, holding up under rigorous stress tests. Yet, even a sturdy financial system can't mask the economy's underlying fragility forever. Well-capitalized and tightly regulated, Pakistan's banks can weather near-term storms, but their long-term health hinges on a vibrant economy that fosters steady incomes, savings, and investment. Without that, credit growth and financial innovation will remain stunted, confined to a volatile and shallow market.

For years, the State Bank, alongside local and global institutions, has sounded the same warning: Pakistan's economic model is too reliant on consumption, imports, and a narrow growth base, leaving it perpetually at the mercy of external pressures. Fixing this requires tough, decisive action—expanding the tax net, overhauling the energy sector,

driving export growth through innovation rather than handouts, and integrating informal markets into the formal economy. These ideas aren't new; they've been outlined in countless government plans and reform agendas, some dating back decades, yet progress remains sluggish.

The challenge isn't a lack of expertise. Pakistan's policymakers, economists, and bureaucrats are more than capable of crafting well-thought-out reform strategies. The issues are clear, the solutions well-studied. What's missing is the political courage to act—leadership willing to confront entrenched interests, challenge powerful groups, and endure the inevitable short-term backlash that comes with change.

It doesn't seem to matter who's in charge—elected officials or transitional setups. Time and again, reform efforts lose steam



as political expediency and patronage take over. Take the energy sector: despite repeated promises and occasional tariff tweaks, inefficiencies and mounting circular debt persist. Tax reform, a topic of discussion for generations, has barely dented the economy's dependence on a small, overtaxed formal sector. Export growth remains more aspiration than reality, and privatization, a staple of reform rhetoric, continues to stall regardless of who holds power.

The window for meaningful change is shrinking fast. Global financing is tightening, competition is fiercer, and domestic demographic pressures are mounting. The old strategy of relying on periodic IMF lifelines or emergency loans from allied nations is losing viability. Even traditional lenders are growing frustrated with unfulfilled commitments.

Structural reform isn't just desirable—it's critical for survival. But it demands leadership that can look beyond immediate political gains, communicate the urgency of change to the public, forge consensus where feasible,

and weather resistance when needed. Empty promises and symbolic gestures won't cut it; only concrete, measurable progress will.

The State Bank's analysis is clear and urgent. The real question is whether those in power are truly listening—and whether they have the resolve to act before time runs out. Without that commitment, Pakistan risks repeating a familiar cycle: missed opportunities and crises that were all too predictable.

The warnings are both timely and sobering, laying bare the stakes for Pakistan's future. The question now is whether those steering the nation will heed the call and muster the political will to act decisively. If they falter, Pakistan faces a familiar fate: a cycle of squandered potential and crises that could have been avoided. The path to stability demands bold leadership and unwavering commitment—anything less will keep the nation tethered to fragility.

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Fixing this requires tough, decisive action—expanding the tax net, overhauling the energy sector, driving export growth through innovation rather than handouts, and integrating informal markets into the formal economy. These ideas aren't new; they've been outlined in countless government plans and reform agendas, some dating back decades, yet progress remains sluggish.

Without a genuine commitment to change, Pakistan's economy will keep treading water—resilient enough to survive, but not strong enough to thrive.

Pakistan's import surge tests economic nerves

Shahid Hussain

Beneath the surface of Pakistan's economic pulse, fault lines are widening. As imports surge on the back of monetary loosening and rekindled consumer appetite, a familiar specter looms: the reawakening of the current account deficit.

Recent data underscores an unsettling reality—petroleum demand and vehicle purchases are swelling import bills, while the remittance stream, once a dependable anchor, shows signs of ebbing. These simultaneous pressures are forcing a recalibration of optimism around fiscal recovery, illuminating the fragility of the external sector's newfound stability. Pakistan's import-reliant fiscal framework has encountered a daunting expansion in its trade chasm, now gaping at \$3.4 billion as of April 2025 — a figure that has roused trepidation among financial strategists. Despite a steady flow of remittances from approximately 2.4 million overseas workers over the past three revolutions of the calendar, apprehensions persist that the current account may once again veer into a deficit cycle, echoing past economic unease.

Latest disclosures from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics unspool a disquieting tableau of trade erosion. The April external trade gap swelled precipitously to \$3.39 billion — a daunting 55.2% leap from the prior month — etching the highest monthly disparity since August 2022. The fissure in balance stems from a stark retreat in export revenues, counterweighted by an aggressive upswing in importation, thus exacerbating strain on the already-fragile foreign reserves and fiscal equilibrium.

Outbound trade contracted to \$2.14 billion — a 19.05% plunge on a monthly basis and an 8.93% year-on-year tumble. Conversely, inbound consignments vaulted to \$5.53 billion, marking a 14.52% ascent month-over-month and a 14.09% escalation from April of the preceding annum. This divergence precipitated a \$1.2 billion inflation in the trade gulf when juxtaposed with March. In domestic valuation, exports amassed Rs601.4 billion, while imports towered to Rs1.55 trillion, thus crafting a deficit nearing Rs952 billion.

Scrutinizing the ten-month fiscal span of 2024-25 (July through April), the cumulative trade imbalance has amplified to \$21.35 billion — an 8.81% upsurge from the analogous period of the prior year. In that interval, export earnings crept up 6.25% to settle at \$26.86 billion, while import expenditures climbed 7.37%, culminating in \$48.21 billion in aggregate. The seismic \$3.4 billion gap posted in April — underpinned by a 19.1% slump in exports and a vigorous 14.5% surge in imports — constitutes the most severe monthly discrepancy since August 2022. This data accentuates a dire imperative for recalibrating trade protocols to preclude further economic destabilization.

The composite trade synopsis for the initial decagon of FY25 unveils a deteriorating trajectory. During this stretch, outward ship-

ping multiple economic fronts, hinting at latent demand resuscitation.

A marked uptick in the use of petroleum derivatives, coupled with a resurgence in automobile acquisitions, appears to be propelling the ballooning import expenditure. This resurgence seems intrinsically tied to recent monetary loosening — where a downward slide in lending rates has rekindled appetite in core consumer and industrial spheres. The ripple effect of this revitalized domestic momentum is unmistakably reflected in the heft of goods entering the country's ports during this span.

Externally, the bulwark against a widening trade void remains the tide of remittances. In the prior month, a historic influx of \$4.1 billion cascaded in — the highest remittance ever clocked in a single month — underscored

by the consistent backing of a 2.4 million-strong expatriate labor force cultivated over the last triennium. Nonetheless, expectations are tilting toward a mellowing of this inflow in the current cycle, thereby trimming the cushion available to offset the surging trade disequilibrium.

The convergence of swelling imports and a probable dip in remittance lifelines may reverse the fleeting current account surplus, ushering in a deficit once again. The sustainability of such an import-heavy trajectory warrants vigilant scrutiny. While some import acceleration may be defensible amid signs of industrial

rejuvenation — especially when linked to machinery or foundational inputs — a tilt toward consumption-driven or frivolous imports, bereft of matching export vitality or continuous remittance support, could deepen external fragilities.

The trajectory unfolding in Pakistan's trade and financial landscape suggests a precarious balancing act. While increased imports may signal an economy stirring from slumber, their composition—and the context of potentially softening remittance flows—raises pressing concerns. Without a counterweight in the form of robust exports or sustained inflows from abroad, the resurgence in consumption-fueled imports could easily tip the scales back into deficit territory. Vigilance, policy recalibration, and a sharper focus on long-term trade sustainability will be crucial to steer clear of another economic inflection point.



ments reached \$26.9 billion, registering a 6.3% increase year-on-year. Meanwhile, the import ledger soared to \$48.2 billion, advancing 7.4%. The resultant divergence — a \$21.4 billion trade gap — marks an 8.8% elevation from the equivalent corridor in FY24.

This persistent widening of the trade schism, underscored by a relentless import swell, signals an intensifying strain on the nation's external financial position. The PBS notes that the April deficit reached \$3.4 billion — a staggering 55.2% increase over March — thus pushing the 10-month cumulative void to \$21.4 billion, up 8.8% year-on-year. Of critical note in PBS's fresh figures is the reemergence of an import invoice surpassing the \$5 billion watermark — \$5.5 billion for April — the loftiest since August 2022. Though granular specifics await unveiling, the upswing is broadly ascribed to renewed domestic appetite

Neglected and exploited: The roots of extremism in Pakistan's tribal belt

Raza Khan

Over the past year, the security situation in Pakistan's northwestern Pakhtun tribal regions has significantly deteriorated. Many observers attribute this worsening situation to the return of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the country's largest terrorist-militant network, from Afghanistan to the adjacent tribal areas of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province.

The immediate cause of the deteriorating law and order in these tribal regions—formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) before their 2018 merger into KP, and now referred to as the Merged Tribal Districts (MTDs)—is the resurgence of the TTP. Following extensive Pakistani military operations between 2014 and 2016, the TTP's leadership and fighters had fled or relocated to Afghanistan. However, the return to power of the Afghan Taliban in 2021 gave the TTP new life, providing it safe havens in Afghanistan and encouraging cross-border attacks into Pakistan.

Given the geographical proximity of the MTDs to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the TTP has been able to launch frequent attacks, taking advantage of sanctuaries across the border. The group's operational focus on the MTDs is driven not only by logistical and strategic considerations but also by demographic ties: many of its members hail from these areas. Key TTP leaders—founder Baitullah Mehsud, his successor Hakimullah Mehsud, and current leader Noor Wali Mehsud—are all from South Waziristan, previously known as the South Waziristan Agency in the former FATA.

This raises an important question: why has the TTP taken root and flourished in the MTDs? While several factors may contribute, the most critical explanation lies in the region's extremely underdeveloped physical, economic, political, and social conditions. Despite intense national debate in recent years over whether to hold "peace talks" with the TTP, there has been little public or media focus on the socio-economic and cultural context of the tribal areas that allowed such groups to emerge in the first place.

Media coverage has often focused disproportionately on TTP-related terrorism, with insufficient attention to the local socio-political dynamics and the real challenges faced by the people. Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasp how extremism and terrorism have taken hold in the region.

One key reason for the lack of nuanced media discussion is that most analysts and

commentators on the region are non-locals who lack deep familiarity with its context. There is thus a pressing need to engage more directly with the lived realities of the people of the MTDs—to understand their grievances and how these are connected to the rise of extremism. Without this understanding, any attempt at governance or development in the region will remain ineffective.

For example, during the PML-N government (2013–2018), the then Minister for States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), Lt. General (R) Qadir Baloch, informed the Senate Standing Committee on SAFRON that billions of dollars in international aid intended for development in the region were misappropriated by corrupt officials, NGOs, and tribal elites. This case underscores why repeated government claims of development and mainstreaming of the MTDs have largely been superficial.

One of the most pressing grievances of the inhabitants of the Merged Tribal Districts (MTDs) is the lack of economic opportunities and avenues for earning a decent livelihood. Residents argue that in a region where industries are virtually non-existent and agriculture is severely limited, the government and international donors should have taken substantial steps to create job opportunities, support land development, and offer alternative sources of income. In the view of many locals, the only viable path to alleviating widespread poverty in the tribal belt has always been through consistent government intervention and targeted international aid. According to various government estimates, the poverty rate in the former FATA exceeds 70%, with the majority of the population earning less than two US dollars a day (approximately 560 Pakistani rupees).

Another major concern among residents is the outdated and inadequate physical infrastructure, coupled with the absence of essential public services. The people of the MTDs continue to struggle with the lack of well-equipped hospitals, schools, universities, clean drinking water, functional roads, bridges, recreational facilities, and sports centers. Although various development projects were initiated before the 2018 merger under the FATA Annual Development Programmes (ADPs), and later continued under the Accelerated Development Plans (ADPs), insufficient funding and rising project costs have led to significant backlogs. Massive "throwforward" liabilities—a legacy of earlier FATA ADPs—persist today, and with the current level of financial commitment from the federal and KP governments, it may take years to complete ongoing projects. As a result, the development impact

remains minimal and poorly visible. Despite a relative increase in allocations since 2002, the per capita government-funded development investment in FATA remained at a meager Rs. 905 for many years, and it still remains critically low.

The failure to implement functioning local government structures in the MTDs is yet another key grievance. Without operational local bodies, basic civic issues cannot be addressed effectively. Although elections have been held for National Assembly and KP provincial assembly seats in the MTDs, the representatives have had little power or resources to resolve the pressing concerns of their constituents, let alone drive meaningful development.

The grievances of ordinary tribesmen and tribeswomen are both longstanding and legitimate. For decades, successive Pakistani governments—either by design or neglect—kept the tribal areas on the Afghan border underdeveloped and marginalized. During British colonial rule, FATA was deliberately maintained as a buffer zone between British India and competing regional powers like Czarist Russia and later the Soviet Union (1917–1947). After independence, Pakistani authorities continued this policy, preserving the region's status as a strategic buffer with Afghanistan, which has historically made territorial claims on Pakistan, including the FATA. In pursuing this narrow strategic approach, decision-makers failed to recognize the ground realities and the long-term risks of neglecting development in the area. As the population of the MTDs has grown and society evolved, this policy has begun to backfire. Disillusionment with the state and growing sympathy for militant groups like the Taliban are, in large part, consequences of the state's failure to deliver even basic services.

Militant groups operating in the MTDs have been adept at exploiting these grievances. They have tapped into local frustrations over poor governance, a dysfunctional justice system, and the dominance of entrenched tribal elites. The post-merger situation has only added layers of complexity. By promising a justice system characterized by swift trials and equality before the law—sometimes even establishing Islamic Qazi courts and resolving disputes quickly to public satisfaction—groups like the Taliban were able to win popular support between 2007 and 2013. While the grievances of the general population are distinct from those of the militants, the latter have skillfully manipulated public dissatisfaction with the state to carve out space and legitimacy for themselves in the region.

PPP's Sindh and education crisis - A quarter century of neglect

Rasheed Ali

Since its formation in 1967, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) has remained a dominant political force in Sindh, holding power in the province for over 26 years. From the early days of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ambitious reforms to the current leadership of Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, the party has had every opportunity to transform Sindh's public sector—especially education. However, after more than five decades, the state of the province's education system paints a bleak picture of missed priorities and persistent neglect.

The PPP's rise in Sindh began with the 1970 general election, following which Mumtaz Bhutto and then Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi served as chief ministers during a period of foundational reforms under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The 1973 Constitution was enacted, promising social progress and public welfare. However, the military coup of 1977 abruptly ended that chapter. In 1988, the PPP returned under Benazir Bhutto, with Qaim Ali Shah as Sindh's chief minister. Yet, the government was short-lived, dismissed in 1990. A similar pattern repeated in 1993 with Syed Abdullah Shah leading Sindh until the federal PPP government was again dissolved in 1996. After the end of General Musharraf's regime, the PPP came back with force in 2008. Qaim Ali Shah served two more terms, followed by Murad Ali Shah, who remains in power today. The PPP retained Sindh in both the 2013 and 2018 elections and secured another victory in 2024 despite rising competition in urban centres like Karachi.

Despite this long-standing rule and repeated assurances of democratic values and people-centric governance, the condition of public education in Sindh reveals a deep and structural crisis. In 2024, the province reported a literacy rate of 61.8%, the second highest among provinces, yet far from acceptable for a province governed by the same party for most of its existence. An estimated 6.4 million children in Sindh are out of school. Among the poorest children, 52% remain unenrolled — 58% of them girls. Boys outnumber girls at ev-

ery educational stage, highlighting entrenched gender disparities that remain unaddressed.

The situation worsens when examining the condition of public schools. Out of approximately 49,000 government schools in Sindh, around 12,444 are completely non-functional. Over 31,000 schools do not have electricity, while 26,260 lack access to safe drinking water. Nearly 19,469 schools have no toilets, and more than 21,000 schools operate without boundary walls, putting the safety of students at risk. As far as academic resources are concerned, 47,000 schools have no science

extreme weather conditions. These are not isolated cases — they reflect the norm across many parts of Sindh.

This crisis unfolds despite the Sindh government's commitment of 27% of its annual budget — approximately Rs208.23 billion — to education. The disconnect between fiscal allocations and on-ground implementation continues to widen. While planning documents like the Sindh Education Sector Plan (SESP) and quality assurance frameworks exist, they remain ineffective due to inadequate financing, poor enforcement of policies, and



laboratories, and the same number are without libraries. Additionally, more than 36,000 schools do not offer playgrounds, severely limiting students' physical and extracurricular development.

The infrastructure of schools that are functional is also under serious threat. About 14,977 school buildings require repairs, and 8,426 are in a dilapidated state, unsafe for children to study in. With over 4.5 million students and only 133,000 teachers, the province faces an alarming student-to-teacher ratio, severely compromising the quality of instruction.

In many areas like Malir, Gadap Town, and Manora Island, children attend schools without roofs, electricity, water, or sanitation. Some makeshift structures made of steel sheets are used as classrooms, exposing students to

lack of equitable implementation.

The PPP leadership has long claimed to uphold democratic values and the right to education as a pillar of their governance model. Yet, after decades of uninterrupted rule in Sindh, the ground reality of empty classrooms, crumbling infrastructure, and out-of-school children raises pressing questions about political priorities. The numbers are not just statistics — they represent millions of futures compromised by chronic inaction.

As the party continues its rule into 2025, with Murad Ali Shah once again at the helm, the fate of education in Sindh remains uncertain. Without immediate, accountable, and transparent reforms, PPP's legacy in Sindh may be remembered not for the promises it made, but for the generations it failed.

No, Trump is not a fascist. He is a hypercapitalist and just as dangerous

Santiago Zabala and Claudio Gallo

Since taking office in January, United States President Donald Trump has undertaken policy after policy that has shocked Americans and the world. From launching an immigration crackdown and persecuting legal residents sympathetic to the Palestinian people to dismantling diversity and inclusion programmes and assaulting higher education and free speech, Trump has fully embraced far-right agendas. His critics at home and abroad have readily called him a fascist.

But fascism is not the ideology of choice for the US president. Fascist movements varied in their approaches to political and economic issues, but they have had several elements in common: The good of the nation is elevated above all, and the state plays an overarching role in society and the economy.

In other words, fascism was an attempt to reformulate the socialist ideal into a strong nationalistic framework. And as a historical reaction to communism and liberalism, it remains exiled in the 20th century, in “the age of extremes,” as the British historian Eric Hobsbawm famously called it. Trump may be using the language of “America first” in his rhetoric, but he is not really pursuing the “good of the nation”. He is pursuing the good of the 1 percent.

Trump and his cheerleaders want to go beyond neoliberalism, which maintains that a minimal state is ideal for economic prosperity, and establish hypercapitalism by dissolving any controls the state has over the accumulation of wealth by the extremely rich. They understand that we are living in times when extracting profit from society is not as easy, so they want to free capitalism from the hindrances of democracy and the demands of the people that their rights – political, social and human – be protected by the law and by the state. The tech bros that Trump has surrounded himself with have wrapped this hypercapitalism in a technological cover, claiming that technology can solve all woes and unlimited

growth – read unlimited profits for the rich – is the only way to progress.

This is clearly outlined in writings produced by the likes of Marc Andreessen, a Silicon Valley billionaire, who penned a Techno-Optimist Manifesto a year before US elections brought Trump to power for a second time. With an almost religious conception of technology and markets, he wrote: “Techno-Optimists believe that societies, like sharks, grow or die. ... We believe in ambition, aggression, persistence, relentlessness – strength. ... We believe in agency, in individualism. ...



We believe that there is no material problem – whether created by nature or by technology – that cannot be solved with more technology.”

This view combines unrestrained capitalism with transhumanism – the belief that humans should use technology to enhance their abilities – and an individualistic interpretation of Charles Darwin’s survival of the fittest. It is easy to see that this sharp individualistic vision is the opposite of historical fascism, which prioritises the nation and the community over the individual.

Some may point to Trump’s tariff policies as proof that he has statist tendencies. But if you scratch the surface, you would see that the trade war the US president is waging is really not about “bringing jobs back”, “defending national interests” or reversing globalisation. Trump is using tariffs as a coercive tool to force various countries into negotiating with him. When he announced a 90-day pause on some

tariffs, he himself bragged about 75 governments reaching out to his administration. It is far more likely that these bilateral talks will be used to extort concessions that will favour big capital closely associated with the Trump administration rather than to defend the rights of American workers and to create the conditions for the return of manufacturing jobs to the US.

It is true that Trump has attracted the support of postfascist politicians in Europe and uses fascist language and tools, but that is not enough to brand him a “fascist”. European postfascists, like Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, have themselves veered away from fascist conceptions of state and economy. Meloni and others have readily embraced “free market” policies of cutting taxes for the rich and wiping out social security provision for the poor. Her economic policies differ little from Trump’s.

The US president has fully embraced xenophobic and racist language reminiscent of fascist rhetoric and launched a vicious campaign against immigrants. He does so not only to scare and win over marginalised parts of society but also to divert their growing discontent towards a racialised “other” rather than

the wealthy class. This strategy is working not only because of the growing resentment for liberal elites that the impoverished majority has accumulated but also because the left has failed to act.

Leftist and progressive politicians have condemned themselves to fruitlessly repeating the old right and left clichés, going on tirades about “Trump’s fascism” and debates about the Nazi or Roman salutes of his associates. Engaging in such rhetoric is futile and a waste of time and energy. Instead, the left should focus on developing concrete strategies to counter Trump’s popularity and hypercapitalist drive. It should go back to the root of problems that ordinary people face in their lives: jobs, healthcare, education and the ever-deepening cynicism about politics. It needs to not only expose Trump for who he really is – a champion of big capital interests – but also to provide a solid, realistic alternative.

Reparations for empire: What the new pope owes to Africa

Tafi Mhaka

The late Pope Francis, who came to be known as a strong voice for the poor, oppressed and the marginalised during his tenure as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, had a keen interest in Africa.

Throughout his papacy, he demonstrated a deep commitment to the continent, talking about its problems and strengths often. He consistently denounced the exploitation of African resources and people in speeches and statements, called for peace and reconciliation between African nations, and highlighted the importance of respecting and preserving the continent's rich cultural diversity and local traditions. He visited 10 African countries during his 12 year tenure, and treated each one of these widely publicised and celebrated visits as an opportunity to highlight Africa's significance to his Church and the world.

Francis had ample reason to keep his attention firmly on Africa; it is, after all, the region where the Catholic population is growing the fastest. In 1900, there were just 9.6 million or so Christians across the continent. As of 2025, Africa is home to approximately 750 million Christians. Of this total, some 281 million are Catholics, accounting for 20 percent of the global Catholic population.

As such, the successor of Francis, must continue to maintain a firm focus on Africa. But as Africa fast becomes a main population centre for the Church, African Catholics will be expecting more than frequent visits and complementary speeches from their new leader. Despite its growing popularity on the continent, the relationship between the Catholic Church and Africa has not always been straight forward. For many years, the Church inflicted unimaginable horrors on Africans, and benefited handsomely from their suffering, with consequences that stretch well into the present.

If he is to continue building on Pope Francis' legacy, and demonstrate his commitment to Africa and Africans, the new Pope must address the role the Catholic Church played in the transatlantic slave trade and the colonisation of the continent. Three years ago, in July 2022, the Global Circle for Reparations and Healing (GCRH), a coalition of reparations advocates, scholars, artists, and activists from around the world, met with Bishop Paul Tighe, secretary of the Pontifical Council of Culture, to make this very point. With this meeting in Vatican City, the coalition aimed to spark a discussion with the Church about the significant, long-lasting damage its extensive involvement in the trans-

atlantic slave trade inflicted on Africa and its global diaspora.

To facilitate a collaborative process for healing, GCRH representatives shared with the Church a comprehensive 15-page presentment that chronicles its historical abuses in Africa. It is no longer possible to brush the sins of the Catholic Church on the continent under the carpet. Beginning in the 15th century, Portuguese monarchs sought the approval and assistance of the Popes of the Roman Catholic Church to advance their territorial ambitions in Africa. In response to these royal requests, several pontiffs – who claimed to be the earthly representatives of Jesus Christ – issued papal bulls, or official public decrees, that sanctioned military actions in Africa and supported the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the ongoing enslavement of Africans. These bulls provided the moral and legal justification for the trafficking and enslavement of Africans, as well as for European imperialism and colonisation in Africa, all purportedly in the name of Jesus Christ. After the slave trade ended, the Church shifted its focus on supporting the colonisation of the continent. It was, for example, critical to the colonisation of my country – Zimbabwe – functioning both as a catalyst and a beneficiary of its blood-soaked benefits.

Missionary initiatives, frequently linked with the expansion of colonial territories, sought to convert “primitive” indigenous populations and validate European dominance. In 1890, two chaplains – one affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church and the other with the Anglican Church – became part of a “Pioneer Column force” that engaged in military conflict against African communities, leading to the colonisation of Mashonaland in present-day Zimbabwe. After the conquest of Mashonaland, the Catholic Church promptly created mission stations on land stolen from local communities. With time, Catholic missionaries played a dual and often conflicting role. They provided moral and cultural justification for violent European expansion but also founded mission hospitals and schools in areas devoid of such services, including the renowned St. Francis Xavier's Kutama College and Gokomere High School. Nevertheless, their positive contributions in areas of healthcare and education failed to erase the damage they inflicted on the land and its people by backing and participating in their colonial takeover.

The enthusiastic support the Church provided to western imperialists not only proved instrumental in the colonisation of the continent, but also served to establish a racial hierarchy that deemed Africans inferior and legitimised white supremacy. Even centuries after the

abolition of slavery, the impact of this once Church-approved racial hierarchy continues to shape social systems, governance, law enforcement and economic opportunities for Africans in the diaspora—from South America to Europe and North America. The police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in the US, which gave way to the emergence of the global Black Lives Matter movement, was just one example of the enduring consequences of these racial hierarchies the Church actively helped built. The situation is not much better outside the US. In August 2024, Ashwini KP, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, said people of African descent in Brazil also “continue to endure multifaceted, deeply interconnected, and pervasive forms of systemic racism, as a result of colonialism and enslavement legacies.”

The Church must urgently take meaningful action to make up for its historic sins, and help Africans enduring their deadly consequences on the continent and in the diaspora. In March 2021, The Jesuits, a major Catholic order, made a groundbreaking commitment to raise \$100 million for the descendants of 272 enslaved people they once owned and to foster racial reconciliation projects. Although this amount is much less than the \$1 billion initially requested by the descendants, the pledge is a step in the right direction, as it signifies the most significant effort by the Roman Catholic Church to confront its historical role in the enslavement of Africans.

The Vatican, while not outright speaking against reparations for historical wrongs, has always contended that any such actions should be managed in a decentralised manner. The little progress made on this front in many years, however, suggests a new approach is desperately needed. The National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) and GCRH are calling for a programme endorsed by the Vatican that comprises acceptance of total accountability, a full formal apology, formal reparations, and bona fide healing processes. This echoes the yearly demands for reparations made by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the African Union.

The new Pope will have a unique opportunity to improve on the close rapport Pope Francis had developed with Africans. He can go down in history as the Pope who finally made the Church a true friend of Africa and helped it make up for its worst mistakes by establishing a comprehensive global reparations initiative. African Catholics have become an important source of the Church's power and influence in the 21st century. They would expect nothing less from their incoming leader.

Canada's Carney should thank Trump for his victory

Andrew Mitrovica

'Tis the season of resurrection. The Liberal Party of Canada, led by Mark Carney, has risen from the dead – politically speaking – and will form the next federal government in Ottawa.

This is in remarkable contrast, of course, to the harrowing fate Liberals faced under Justin Trudeau's premiership only a few months ago, when Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives were cruising to an impressive mandate. The Liberals, unlike the cocksure Poilievre, pivoted. They dispensed with the jejune Trudeau and turned to Carney, a former banker, as their saviour.

The calculated gamble paid handsome dividends last night with the Liberals winning a fourth consecutive term, while the perpetually crestfallen Tories will return, yet again, to the purgatory of the Opposition benches. Carney owes an electoral debt to New Democratic Party leader, Jagmeet Singh, for resisting the unrelenting pressure – inside and outside the House of Commons – to withdraw his parliamentary support for the Liberals until Trudeau succumbed to a caucus coup. Otherwise, Poilievre would likely have prevailed had an election been called earlier. But above all, Carney owes the deepest debt of gratitude to US President Donald Trump.

The instant Trump was restored to the Oval Office and began musing publicly about his imperial plans for Canada and its abundant natural riches, the political terrain moved, inexorably, in the Liberal Party's favour. Carney and his handlers understood that the only question that would determine the outcome of perhaps the most consequential election in Canada's often-turbulent history was who would best confront the existential threat to its sovereignty, posed by a mercurial American president intent on annexing a proud neighbour to the north.

Trump injected himself so brazenly into the Canadian consciousness – never skirting the delicious chance to remind voters of the tall, ominous shadow he has cast over a fretting country's destiny. Indeed, when polls appeared to tighten on the eve of the election, Trump broke his uncharacteristic silence to give renewed life to his feverish desire to gobble up Canada. While Carney may have fallen tantalisingly short of a coveted majority, he was able to convince a plurality of Canadians that

a dour technocrat was the “serious” antidote to a profoundly unserious president. So, given the happy circumstances, Prime Minister-elect Carney should pen a handwritten thank-you note to Trump for parading madly around as the cartoonish villain that Canadians – including a fair share of once separatist-leaning Quebecers – recoiled from and were eager to defy at the polls.

For Carney and grateful company, Trump was an irrepensible gift who could not resist the ego-gratifying temptation of confirming his power to shape not only American history, but Canada's, too. Still, Trump represents a singular and grave challenge to Canada's suddenly precarious future. He is an inveterate troll, leveraging his potent pulpit and an addiction to social media to stir chaos and disturb the

he must tackle as prime minister is turning rhetoric into reality.

He will also be required to address quickly the affordability crisis that dominates the day-to-day concerns of Canadians – young and old – who are preoccupied with the ever-rising costs of living, from groceries to housing. Towards that equitable end, Carney will have to disabuse his detractors of their reasonable conviction that he is an establishment man – through and through. He will have to renounce the Liberal Party's demonstrable habit of reneging on its egalitarian promises in the pursuit of so-called “fiscal responsibility”.

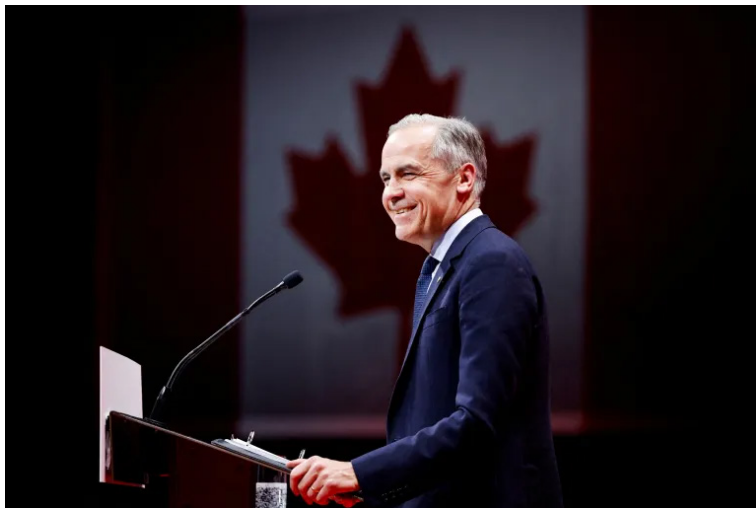
Yet, the success or failure of Carney's improbable tenure as prime minister will rest on one, overarching test: Can he unite a divided people to fashion the essential resolve to beat back a president intent on destroying a place called Canada? It will be a tough task.

Aside from his crude, intimidating bluster, Trump knows he can exploit the tools, capacity, and influence enjoyed by an American commander-in-chief to bend others to his will, by force if necessary. Despite its immense size, Canada is, in truth, a small land, dwarfed by the unrivalled presence and pervasiveness of the United States. Carney will need to employ all the ingenuity and imagination that he and his cabinet can muster in order to prepare and gird Canadians for the battle of

survival that will last, undoubtedly, for years. Carney will have to convince many wary Canadians, discouraged and disillusioned by a decade of Liberal Party arrogance and rule, of his chosen course. That hard work begins at this vital moment.

In the end, crises can, in able hands, create opportunities. If Carney is genuinely committed to loosening Trump's fierce grip on Canada, then he should seize the opening to distance the confederation he leads from the United States economically, and chart an independent foreign policy that rejects wanton international-law-desecrating militarism and the coddling of indicted war criminals in Tel Aviv.

Mark Carney has won the day. He has earned the pleasure and privileges of victory. His sweet triumph may prove brief and hollow if he cannot defeat, in due and deliberate course, a decidedly more stubborn and formidable foe – Donald Trump.



bearings of his supporters and adversaries alike. Last week, in an interview with Time magazine marking his 100 days in office, Trump insisted that his quest to convert Canada into America's 51st state was sincere. “I'm really not trolling,” he said. “The only way this really works is for Canada to become a state.”

For his part, Carney has repeatedly warned that the decades-long, reliable compact between Canada and the United States has ended. “America wants our land. Our resources. Our water. Our country. These are not idle threats. President Trump is trying to break us, so America can own us,” he said recently. “Our old relationship with the United States is over.” As a tangible result, Carney has argued that Canada will be obliged to wean itself from its entrenched economic dependence on America in order to rebuff Trump's colonial designs, and to forge new trading relationships with other, more dependable partners. The central dilemma

Rethinking workplace culture in Pakistan

A workplace is more than a mere brick-and-mortar structure; it is the ecosystem where individuals, day after day, invest their mental, physical and emotional energies. Yet, in Pakistan and many other developing nations, work-spaces remain fundamentally flawed — devoid of compassion, basic comfort and scientific rationale. Despite the fact that modern lives are accelerating at an unprecedented pace and workers are perpetually overburdened, the prevailing ethos among employers and organisations continues to reflect an archaic mindset: one that prizes prolonged physical presence over genuine productivity and output. This outdated culture suffocates creativity, and contributes to burnout, declining mental health, and a rapid deterioration in an individual's potential. Even when most workers happen to be underpaid and overworked, there is little conversation — let alone action — about creating a humane, healthy and productive work environment. We should at least be talking about such matters on occasions like Labour Day.

Many employees operate out of suffocating spaces, with improper ventilation and lighting. The culture of mistrust between employers and workers has led to a deep disconnect and deterioration in both morale and efficiency. Workers continue to suffer in silence, delivering output under inhumane conditions and getting paid a pittance for it — robbed of dignity, rest and even respect. As such, countries around the world have acknowledged direct links between on-the-job rest and overall mental wellness, job satisfaction, and productivity. To ensure work-life balance, workers get ample breaks, paid vacations, and flexible hours. These countries understand that employees are not machines, and they need periodic recharging during the day. Wellness spaces are not frivolous luxuries; they are strategic tools aimed at harnessing peak performance and preserving talent. The logic is simple: a contented, well-rested employee will outperform a stressed, sleep-deprived one. Productivity does not come from pressure; it stems from psychological security, physical wellbeing, and a sense of being valued. The scene in Pakistan is quite different, with most workspaces failing to meet even the basic standards related to occupational health and safety. A rational approach would be to introduce scientifically supported policies tailored to our context. Implementing such policies does not require astronomical budgets. All it requires is a shift in mindset. It is high time we acknowledged the cruelty embedded in our work culture, where an honest day's work often demands more than what any worker should have to give; and give without gratitude, without comfort, and with-

out dignity. Pakistan must catch up with the world, and begin treating its workforce with the respect, care and compassion it deserves. Anything less is both a moral failure and a recipe for national stagnation.

Majid Burfat
Karachi

The struggles of self-published authors in Pakistan

In Pakistan, those who write and publish should be celebrated, especially women, but the lack of institutional support is staggering. Bookstores rarely market self-published works, and a social media post from a major retailer — something that could greatly boost independent writers — is almost unheard of. Literary festivals exhibit a similar exclusivity, repeatedly featuring the same established figures, old literary elites, or even politicians, while fresh voices struggle to be heard. Literary awards also lack diversity. Fiction spans multiple subgenres — historical fiction, legal thrillers, horror, mystery, science fiction, and romance — but Pakistani awards fail to reflect this creative spectrum.

As a barrister from Lincoln's Inn, I have dedicated my career to addressing human rights violations, but my true passion lies in writing Victorian Gothic fiction. As a self-published author, I recently launched my fifth book, *Tainted Whispers of Eden*, a legal thriller set in colonial India and Victorian London. Storytelling has been my lifelong dream. My debut novel, *The Rose Within*, won a Silver Award at the Global eBook Awards 2017, *Vernon Hall & Other Stories* was a finalist at the Wishing Shelf Book Awards 2019, and *The Raven's Call* was nominated for the UBL Best English Fiction Award 2024. None of this would have been possible without resilience, and the encouragement of my mentors in Pakistan and abroad. I say this out of personal experience that the challenges for self-published writers in Pakistan remain immense, and demand urgent attention.

What pains me the most is the media's approach to books and authors. When invited to cover a book launch, media houses are more concerned with the 'guest of honour' than with the authors and their work. This is as frustrating as it is disgraceful. Pakistani television channels continue to be saturated with cooking shows, fashion segments, and endless dramas, but books and authors are seldom given a platform by those managing the channels. Ironically, I have found greater support abroad. British and American writers and lawyers — many whom I have never met in person — have read, appreciated and even reviewed my work without charging a penny. This is the literary culture Pakistan desperately needs — one of encouragement rather than exclusion. I once had faith in Pakistan's literary commu-

nity, but its exclusionary, politicised system has eroded that trust. If literature is meant to elevate thought and enrich society, we must fundamentally change how we support and promote writers. Pakistan's literary world must evolve. And, it needs to do so right now.

Sana Sharifuddin Pirzada
Karachi

No justice, no progress

When the rule of law is disregarded, progress becomes unattainable. Regrettably, those entrusted with upholding the laws, like the police force, are undermining them. Justice, equality, and the rule of law are fundamental pillars of any society without which it has practically no hope of making any worthwhile progress. Laws and regulations are intended to be enforced, not trampled upon. We must uphold them and ensure they serve everyone, regardless of one's political, social, ethnic or economic background.

Dr Ashraf Ali Jafrani
Sujawal

Broken exam system

The examination process in Sindh is plagued by poor management and corruption. Cheating and bribery have become routine affairs. Moreover, exams are held in overcrowded, poorly maintained centres, often lacking basic facilities. To add to the distress, the frequent delay in examination results causes anxiety and chaos among the students. The government must implement urgent and effective reforms to restore people's trust in the system.

Maryam Malik
Karachi

Justice delayed, fear sustained

Armed criminals launched a brazen attack in Mehr Khan Rustamani village in Nawabshah. Although an FIR was registered, no significant action has been taken against the culprits. The suspects continue to harass the villagers by firing indiscriminately and issuing threats. The higher authorities should take action against the criminals and their influential patrons.

Asad Rustamani
Nawabshah

Power outages, powerless students

Lengthy loadshedding at examination centres in Karachi is a serious challenge to overcome for those involved. Students are drenched in sweat while trying to finish their exam. It leads to frustration, irritation and discomfort. It is crucial for K-Electric (KE) to ensure smooth supply of electricity at examination centres. The government should monitor the situation actively.

Navera Naem
Karachi

Self-driving cars can tap into 'AI-powered social network' to talk to each other

Lisa D. Sparks

Researchers have discovered a way for self-driving cars to freely share information while on the road without the need to establish direct connections.

"Cached Decentralized Federated Learning" (Cached-DFL) is an artificial intelligence (AI) model sharing framework for self-driving cars that allow them to pass each other and share accurate and recent information. This information includes the latest ways to handle navigation challenges, traffic patterns, road conditions, and traffic signs and signals.

Usually, cars have to be virtually next to each other and grant permissions to share driving insights they've collected during their travels. With Cached-DFL, however, scientists have created a quasi-social network where cars can view each other's profile page of driving discoveries — all without sharing the driver's personal information or driving patterns.

Self-driving vehicles currently use data stored in one central location, which also increases the chances of large data breaches. The Cached-DFL system enables vehicles to carry data in trained AI models in which they store information about driving conditions and scenarios. "Think of it like creating a network of shared experiences for self-driving cars," wrote Dr. Yong Liu, the project's research supervisor and engineering professor at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering.



'Annoying' version of ChatGPT pulled after chatbot wouldn't stop flattering users

Patrick Pester

OpenAI has rolled back on ChatGPT updates that made the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot too "sycophantic" and "annoying," according to the company's CEO, Sam Altman.

In other words, the chatbot had become a bootlicker. ChatGPT users reported that GPT-4o — the latest version of the chatbot — had become overly agreeable since the update rolled out and was heaping praise on its users even when that praise seemed completely inappropriate. One user shared a screenshot on Reddit in which ChatGPT appeared to say it was "proud" of the user for deciding to come off their medication, BBC News reported. In another instance, the chatbot appeared to reassure a user after they said they saved a toaster over the lives of three cows and two cats, Mashable reported.

While most people will never have to choose between their favorite kitchen appliance and the safety of five animals, an overly agreeable chatbot could pose dangers to people who put too much stock in its responses. Altman acknowledged that there were issues with the updates.

"The last couple of GPT-4o updates have made the personality too sycophant-y and annoying (even though there are some very good parts of it), and we are working on fixes asap, some today and some this week," Altman wrote in a post on the social platform X. OpenAI released a statement that confirmed an update from the week prior had been rolled back and that users were now accessing a previous version of ChatGPT, which the company said had "more balanced behavior."

"The update we removed was overly flattering or agreeable — often described as sycophantic," OpenAI said in the statement. Related: GPT-4.5 is the first AI model to pass an authentic Turing test, scientists say.



Will food dye bans really make your diet healthier?

Debbie Koenig

The U.S. government is planning to phase artificial dyes out of the food supply — and it's reigniting public concern over potential health risks linked to these additives, like behavioral problems and hyperactivity in children.



Right now, eight dyes are approved for use by the FDA: Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Blue 1, Blue 2, Citrus Red 2, Orange B, and Green 3. (A ninth, Red 3, was banned this year, at the end of the Biden administration, after two studies found that exposure to high amounts of it led to tumors in lab rats.)

Most additives fall into a few basic categories: preservatives, flavor changers, and added vitamins and minerals to supply extra nutrients. But how worried should you be about these dyes? And will banning them really help your health? Here's what to know — and what you can do now.

The FDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced they'd be working with food manufacturers to ban or eliminate all eight synthetic dyes. They hope to replace them with natural dyes by the end of 2026. Whether or not that's doable remains unclear. But these chemicals have sparked controversy for decades, after researchers linked them to behavioral issues in children in the 1970s.

Study links plastics to 350k heart deaths — but is it accurate?

Lisa O'Mary

Does exposure to chemicals in plastics cause deadly heart disease?

A new study suggests that 350,000 heart-related deaths may be due in part to exposure to high levels of phthalates — chemicals used to make plastic soft and flexible.



But before you throw out every piece of plastic you own, it might help to know some context. New York University researchers estimated that in 2018, worldwide, about 13% of deaths from heart and blood vessels problems among adults ages 55-64 may have been partly because of exposure to phthalates. That's 356,238 deaths total.

The findings reinforce just how important it is for scientists to better understand how phthalates affect our health — because if this theory turns out to be right, then the scale of the chemicals' impact would warrant changes. The researchers used a statistical model built on some assumptions (since they don't know each person's actual exposure to phthalates). They pulled large data sets from other studies about phthalate levels in people's body fluids, and they also used a suggested formula relating phthalate exposure to deaths from problems with the heart and blood vessels. This kind of analysis has important limitations: The study shows association, not causation. In other words, it can't prove that phthalates cause deadly heart problems, only that there's a link between the two.

Fact: Scientists still don't fully understand the relationship between phthalate exposure and heart problems — or whether there even is one. It doesn't factor in other variables that might affect the results. The statistical methods simply cannot account for certain environmental or lifestyle influences.



100%
MAINTENANCE
FREE BATTERY



PAANI DALNAY KI NO TENSION