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# WEEKLY CuttingEdge

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## THE ECONOMY IS NOT YET OUT OF THE WOODS

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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](http://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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# The economy is not yet out of the woods

Farhan Khan

Despite a decline in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the State Bank of Pakistan has decided to keep the discount rate unchanged at 11 percent.

It may be added here that the CPI has been on the downtrend since November 2024 — from 4.9 percent, to 4.1 percent in December, 2.4 percent in January, 1.5 percent in February, 0.7 percent in March and 0.3 percent in April. Previously, the SBP reduced the discount rate to 13 percent on December 16, 12 percent on January 12 and 11 percent on May 5.

Explaining the decision, the SBP Monetary Policy Statement (MPS) has pointed out that there are emerging signs of a global economic recovery. The MPS has also underlined notable year-on-year growth in automobile sales, fertilizer off-take, credit to private sector, imports of intermediate goods and machinery. At the same time, private sector credit rose from 323.5 billion rupees in 2023-24 to 676.6 billion rupees in July-June 2024-25 with the rise associated with the stock market rather than the LSM.

However, the MPC has failed to take notice of the fact that the large-scale manufacturing (LSM) growth was at negative 1.52 percent during July-April 2025 against 0.26 percent in the comparable period of the year before. In this context, it is relevant to take note of the observation by the IMF in its May 2025 documents

uploaded on its website titled the first review under the extended arrangement: “while the reduction in headline inflation has been impressive, core inflation remains elevated, and the SBP should continue to calibrate monetary policy carefully, removing monetary constraint gradually and contingent on clear evidence that inflation is firmly anchored within SBP’s target range”.

According to experts, the central bank has taken a cautious approach with a view to ensuring price stability amid a surge in energy prices that has worsened the inflation outlook.

On the other hand, the finance ministry’s Monthly Economic Update and Outlook for July, the first month of the ongoing fiscal year,

presents a mixed picture of the economy. Firstly, it fails to reconcile budget deficit data — citing it as 3.1 percent at the outset and 3.7 percent on the next page, which is a difference of 0.6 percent with major implications on inflation data claimed by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. Secondly, the report maintains that total expenditure rose by 16.3 percent last fiscal year to 14,053.1 billion rupees from 12,086.5 billion rupees in 2023-24 — a rise primarily attributed to Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), which increased by 44.1 percent compared to a moderate increase in current expenditures (13.1 percent).

But there are some contradictions involved in these numbers. The budget documents for 2025-26 show total expenditure at

billion rupees — a target that he confirmed would also not be achieved.

According to the ministry, large-scale manufacturing (LSM) registered positive 0.86 percent July-May 2024 against negative 1.21 percent in the comparable period 2025. However, the July-March 2024 LSM data was earlier cited at negative 0.22 percent against negative 1.47 percent in 2025. In this context it is relevant to note that in 2024 the growth in the LSM was noted in the July-May data at positive 0.86 percent as the July-March LSM growth was cited at negative 0.22 percent.

In the given situation, two positive economic indicators are a rise in remittance inflows and foreign exchange reserves. The former rose by about 8 billion dollars in 2025



17,249 billion rupees in the revised estimates of 2024-25 against the budgeted 18,877 billion rupees and not 14,053.1 billion rupees. Again, the budgeted federal PSDP for 2024-25 was 1,400 billion rupees, which was downgraded to 1,100 billion rupees due to lack of funds — a decline of 21.4 percent. By the end of May 2025 the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives stated that it authorised 1,036 billion rupees for PSDP; however, disbursement was acknowledged at 596 billion rupees, an amount that was upped to 662 billion rupees by Secretary Finance on 13 June 2025 during the parliamentary standing committee meeting on Finance convened to discuss the budget proposals. The secretary also revealed that PSDP had been further downgraded to 967

compared to 2024. It is reported that in June 2025 the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment registered 51,072 workers, a 17.8 percent increase from 43,356 in June 2024. The June 2024 emigrants no doubt contributed to higher remittance inflows. As for the USD 14.5 billion reserves, they are primarily debt-based.

The State Bank Governor himself recently stated that the rollovers from friendly countries, for one year, are about USD 16 billion. The upshot is that the economy is not yet out of the woods. For long-term economic revival, apart from structural reforms, the authorities concerned need to take appropriate and timely policy decisions in response to the emerging challenges.

# Sugar crisis: a recurrent phenomenon

Nasim Ahmed

With each passing year, the sugar crisis in Pakistan has been getting worse with no solution in sight. With the never-ending export-import cycle, prices have been rising without any check. The Auditor General of Pakistan recently revealed a staggering Rs300 billion profit made from recent sugar price hikes, during a meeting of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

This highlights the corruption in the country's sugar industry, involving top political families and elite businessmen who have been profiting at the expense of the public. According to PAC member Riaz Fatyana, the public was cheated out of Rs287 billion through manipulation of sugar prices. PAC member Sanaullah Mastikhel pointed out that every Re1 increase in sugar price brings in Rs44 billion in profit for the mill owners. The Public Accounts Committee has now sought records of sugar mill owners and exporters to determine the cause behind the escalation in the price of sugar in the domestic market.

It is being widely questioned in the country why sugar was exported only to be imported back in the same year, and from the same countries in some cases. Some observers have rightly called it a deliberate ploy to manipulate supply and pricing. As per media reports, President Asif Ali Zardari is the largest sugar mill owner in the country, followed by Jahangir Tareen and the Sharif family. Fifty percent of sugar mills belong to industrialists, and the other 50% are owned by the political elite.

It is no secret that the names of the sugar mill owners, who profit from sugar price hikes, are never disclosed. It is also a fact that when political families, who own sugar mills, are in power, sugar is first exported and then imported and the Pakistani consumers are made to pay more per kilogram. Last week, Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) officials submitted a list of sugar mill directors across the country, while the Ministry of Industries confirmed that the cabinet had approved the import of 500,000 metric tons of sugar -- of which 300,000 metric

tons were imported immediately.

The Sugar Advisory Board first approves the sugar export policy which is then endorsed by the ECC and the federal cabinet. This means that the entire government machinery is involved in the process. The Sugar Advisory Board (SAB), headed by the Minister for Food Security and Research, with provincial cane commissioners and representatives from the politically powerful Pakistan Sugar Mills Association with 80 plus members reviews the sugar stocks to determine scarcity and or surplus. The SAB recommends exports to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, the highest economic policy making forum, only if there is an assurance that there are surplus

0.450 million MT). These exports were allowed on falsified data as proved by the subsequent rise in domestic prices reaching a high of 210 rupees per kg.

The root of the sugar crisis is the careless and cavalier attitude of mill owners towards sugarcane growers. At the start of every season, the growers can be seen lined-up with their canestocks outside the sugar mills which are not accepted by the mill owners due to various reasons ranging from a deliberate delay in the start of crushing due to price disputes, capacity limitations of mills and the middlemen who cheat the farmers. The cane is accepted after hard negotiations driving the price downward. The next stage is payment by the sugar mills



stocks and exports would in no way impact domestic prices. But these assurances are often based on falsified figures. In past years, allowing exports has been accompanied by a subsidy paid at the taxpayers' expense on the plea that the international price of sugar is lower than the cost to the mill owners.

In mid-October 2024, the Sugar Monitoring Committee, under Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, allowed export of 0.500 million metric tons (MT) of sugar, in addition to the already approved 0.140 million MT, based on the following data: 2.054 million MT of sugar was available with 5.465 MT consumed domestically in ten months, 0.900 million MT was projected to be used in the next two months premised on the September data (which was

which is unduly delayed in most cases.

Opposition parties have demanded the formation of a high-powered judicial commission to investigate the sugar scandal but no action has yet been taken. Expert opinion is that the sugar scandal is a planned plundering operation orchestrated by those sitting in the corridors of power. The sugar export policy is so designed as to generate exorbitant profits through price manipulation, hoarding, export and re-importation.

As pointed out by experts, it is important to fix the sugar price once during the crushing season to protect consumers and prevent undue profiteering. The sugar sector is in need of a complete overhaul and the sooner it is done, the better.

# Signs of cautious revival

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's economy is showing signs of cautious revival as key indicators reflect stabilization. A notable drop in average inflation, a rise in remittance inflows, and improved external account dynamics have all contributed to renewed optimism. While challenges remain—particularly in managing rising imports and external debt—proactive policy measures by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and the government have fortified the country's financial footing.

The International Monetary Fund has recalibrated Pakistan's growth trajectory for the fiscal window of 2025–26, slicing its projection to 3.6%, a more restrained benchmark than Islamabad's spirited anticipation of 4.2%. Unveiled in its newly circulated dossier, World Economic Outlook Update: Global Economy—Tenuous Resilience amid Persistent Uncertainty, the Fund nudged its FY2024–25 foresight upward—albeit marginally—by 0.1%, repositioning it at 2.7%.

This subtle upward shift echoed the recent communique issued by Pakistan's Finance Division in June 2025, which documented a realized GDP progression of 2.68% for the preceding financial epoch—lending numerical credence to the Fund's tempered recalibration. In kindred assessments, the World Bank has mapped Pakistan's upcoming GDP augmentation at 3.1% for FY2026. The Asian Development Bank mirrored this tempered buoyancy, anchoring its forecast at 3%. Notably, ADB's earlier projection for FY2025—previously at 2.5%—was modestly uplifted to 2.7%, signaling a guarded confidence in economic stabilization amid stormy fiscal currents.

Casting the lens globally, the IMF foresees the planetary economic engine to hum at a consistent 3% in 2025, inching toward 3.1% by 2026. These tweaks—an elevation of 0.2 and 0.1 percentage points respectively—mark a slight divergence from the IMF's April 2025 foundation.

Driving this tempered uplift are a medley of coalescing factors: agile preemptive responses to trade tensions, relaxed global liquidity settings stirred by a softening dollar, and fiscal infusions in major economies. These influences, braided together, lend modest vitality to a still-fragile global economic skeleton.

The bulletin further divulged that worldwide headline inflation is set to deflate to 4.2%

in 2025, tapering further to 3.6% in 2026. These trajectories largely hew to April's prognosis, though the report cautions that such averages obscure dissonant national realities. For instance, the United States is forecasted to breach inflation targets, whereas other economic titans may experience more subdued price flux.

Still, the specter of risk looms large. The IMF reiterated its caveats from April 2025, underscoring that downside hazards—ranging from geopolitical disarray to tightening financial conditions—remain a constant shadow to these figures.

Back on home soil, the State Bank of Pakistan has opted to tether the policy interest rate at 11%, attributing this decision to stable

\$25.9 billion due this fiscal year. However, debt servicing costs have decreased due to lower interest rates on new loans and longer repayment terms.

International credit rating agencies have upgraded Pakistan's credit rating, reflecting improved debt sustainability. Governor Ahmed said the SBP and the government successfully managed external payments last year, with reserves increasing by \$5 billion despite \$10 billion in debt repayments.

The central bank has actively intervened in the interbank market to stabilise the exchange rate, and the banking sector has fully met import and foreign exchange demands.

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves currently exceed \$14 billion, surpassing the country's debt obligations for this year. The reserves are projected to reach \$15.5 billion by December, with the central bank setting a target of \$17.5 billion for June 2026.

The issuance of Euro-bonds could further boost these reserves. The SBP regulates and monitors two legal foreign exchange markets: the interbank market and exchange companies. However, an illegal currency market also operates in the country, which falls outside the SBP's juris-

diction and is controlled by law enforcement agencies. The SBP said it actively supervises the legal markets and intervenes promptly when necessary. Any information regarding illegal market activity is promptly shared with security agencies for action.

The government will take strict measures to control gold smuggling at the national level. He stated that policy actions related to remittances will be implemented to support and regulate the flow of funds from abroad. The government will continue its supportive schemes aimed at facilitating remittances. Additionally, law enforcement agencies have been tasked with preventing illegal activities.

With inflation under control, remittances hitting historic highs, and reserves on an upward trajectory, Pakistan's economic narrative is shifting from volatility to cautious optimism. Sustained focus on curbing illegal financial flows, supporting formal markets, and incentivizing remittance channels will be pivotal in maintaining this momentum. As the government and SBP steer through complex fiscal terrain, the groundwork laid today may pave the way for broader macroeconomic stability and growth in the near future.



price indices and glimmers of fiscal vitality. Governor Jameel Ahmed disclosed that inflation now rests at 7.2%, with faint upticks traced in the months of May and June.

The average inflation rate for the last fiscal year was 4.5%. Food inflation and core inflation both saw reductions last year, although core inflation is expected to rise again in the coming months. Exports have increased modestly, growing by 4%, while remittances rose by \$8 billion last fiscal year, supporting the country's external account surplus for the first time in 14 years. Imports grew by 11%, with non-oil imports rising 16%, driven by stronger economic activity.

Despite a current account surplus in 2023, the SBP projects a deficit of up to 1% of GDP for the current fiscal year, mainly influenced by rising imports. Remittances are expected to exceed \$40 billion this year. Economic growth is forecast between 3.25% and 4.25% for the ongoing fiscal year, with improvements expected in the agricultural sector due to favourable rainfall and water availability.

The industrial and services sectors are also expected to perform well. Pakistan's external debt repayments remain substantial, with

# Pakistan's spiraling food crisis

Muhammad Zain

Amid persistent currency depreciation and entrenched inefficiencies in the food system, Pakistan is teetering on the edge of a full-blown nutritional crisis.

The latest global food security report, authored by leading UN agencies, casts a harsh spotlight on Pakistan's worsening hunger metrics—where food price inflation continues to outstrip income growth, shrinking household access to even the most basic diet. Vulnerable populations—particularly rural families, women, and children—are bearing the brunt of this slow-burning catastrophe. While global hunger has seen fractional improvements, Pakistan's situation reveals a distressing contrast: rising food costs, high child malnutrition, and a widening gap between necessity and affordability.

Pakistan remains ensnared among the nations most bruised by the international surge in food-related prices. Between 2021 and 2024, the nation saw exponential hikes in the cost of basic food items—wheat and cooking oil being emblematic of this hardship. This food-driven inflation has jeopardized nutritional access, rendering wholesome diets unattainable for swathes of the populace, and has intensified already critical levels of child malnourishment. A comprehensive UN-led dossier—*The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025*, co-authored by FAO, UNICEF, WFP, IFAD, and WHO—notes that although global hunger has nudged downward slightly, food insecurity continues to fester across low and lower-middle-income brackets.

Within this framework, Pakistan is flagged for its uniquely steep food price trajectory—outpacing general inflation metrics—resulting in a constricted household buying capacity and an alarming erosion in dietary breadth. The period from 2021 through 2024 marked Pakistan—alongside Nigeria and Mexico—as enduring the most jarring upswings in prices for carbohydrate-rich staples and cooking oils, both cornerstones in subsistence-level diets. These price tremors, often seasonal and sometimes sudden, destabilized food affordability, especially for impoverished demographics.

In consequence, the accessibility of nutritionally sound diets has undergone significant deterioration. Globally, the population unable to afford such diets shrank marginally—from 2.76 billion in 2019 to 2.60 billion in 2024. However, for lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), excluding India, the figure actually swelled—from 791 million to 869 million over the same period.

In Pakistan, the brunt of this inflationary burden has disproportionately weighed down on the economically vulnerable—especially women and those in agrarian hinterlands—deepening socioeconomic fissures and reducing meal variety to bare sustenance. Pakistan finds itself grappling with compounded vulnerabilities—currency debasement and long-standing fissures in its agrifood architecture—which have steadily corroded the affordability of nourishment for its populace.

The report underscores that the trajectory of food prices in Pakistan has outpaced the broader inflation arc, amplifying the already formidable specter of food insecurity. A stark correlation emerges: every 10% surge in food costs aligns with an estimated 4.8% to 6.1% uptick in acute malnutrition—or "wasting"—among children under five, a trend that continues to afflict the country where both wasting and stunting are persistently elevated. Globally, the average cost of a nutritionally adequate diet climbed to \$4.46 per person per day in 2024, ascending from \$4.01 in 2022. In Asia, the regional average hovered close to \$4.43. For millions in Pakistan, where earnings remain stagnant and inflation remains voracious, this threshold is financially unscalable. Ironically, even agrarian communities—ostensibly shielded by proximity to food production—are adversely affected, as a majority of rural households are net purchasers rather than producers of food.

The report delineates that rural populations remain more susceptible to food insecurity than their urban counterparts—an imbalance Pakistan epitomizes. In 2024, 32% of rural inhabitants globally faced food insecurity, in contrast to 24% among urban dwellers. Women, entrenched in systemic income inequality, compounded caregiving obligations, and fragile access to welfare scaffolds, endure a disproportionate burden. Child undernutrition looms as a grim national concern. While South Asia has eked out modest gains in nutritional metrics, Pakistan continues to post troubling rates of wasting among children—driven by both economic fragility and the inaccessibility of wholesome diets. Worldwide, the prevalence of child wasting was estimated at 6.6% in 2024. Exclusive breastfeeding rates fared slightly better, rising from 37% in 2012 to 47.8% by 2023. Yet, Pakistan trails behind on both counts, highlighting a persistent lapse in health and nutrition systems. The regional panorama presents a patchwork of progress and regress. India has buttressed food security via expansive subsidies and an entrenched public distribution system. Bangladesh has tamed food inflation more effectively, while Afghanistan languishes

under the weight of protracted conflict, humanitarian breakdown, and economic disintegration.

Globally, despite minor improvements, the landscape remains grim. An estimated 673 million individuals—8.2% of the global populace—suffered from undernourishment in 2024, a modest decline from 8.5% in 2023. Alarming, roughly 2.3 billion people—equating to 28% of humanity—grappled with either moderate or severe food insecurity. Although portions of Latin America and Asia show signs of improvement, the crisis deepens across Africa and Western Asia, enveloping nations like Pakistan in its wake.

The report issues an unequivocal warning: without urgent, transformative policy realignment, the world is poised to fall short of the Sustainable Development Goal 2—Zero Hunger—by 2030. Projections suggest that by the decade's end, 512 million individuals will remain chronically underfed, nearly 60% of whom will reside in Africa. Pakistan, unless it reverses the tide of inflation, poverty, and systemic weaknesses, risks derailing its national progress and undermining global hunger eradication ambitions.

UN agencies call for an integrated and forceful policy mosaic—temporary tax reprieves on essential foods, inflation-adjusted safety nets, targeted investment in durable and equitable food systems, streamlined trade logistics, and bolstered transparency across markets. For Pakistan, seamless coordination between fiscal, monetary, and social policy spheres is imperative to shield its most vulnerable citizens and inoculate against future food shocks. The overarching conclusion is sobering: global food price inflation is now among the most urgent threats to human security. For countries like Pakistan, inaction will not merely prolong hardship—it may calcify a humanitarian crisis with enduring impacts on health and economic stability.

The warnings are unambiguous: Pakistan's path toward economic and social stability will remain blocked unless food system fragilities are urgently addressed. As the cost of a healthy diet surges and income stagnation persists, more households will descend into food insecurity, triggering long-term consequences for public health, child development, and national productivity. Without targeted fiscal relief, smarter safety nets, and investment in resilient agrifood infrastructure, the country risks derailing its development goals and contributing to the global shortfall in achieving Zero Hunger by 2030. Pakistan must act—decisively, inclusively, and immediately—to prevent its hunger crisis from becoming an irreversible tragedy.

# The myth of economic recovery

Shahid Hussain

Despite official assurances of fiscal progress, a deeper dive into the government's latest economic update unveils a narrative riddled with inconsistencies, missed targets, and questionable optimism. From unachieved development spending to suspiciously inflated remittance figures, the July report paints a picture far less stable than the one promoted publicly. As cracks in data credibility widen, scrutiny of the state's financial management becomes not just necessary—but urgent.

The Ministry of Finance anticipates July's consumer price inflation to oscillate within a narrow band of 3.5% to 4.5%, attributing this tempered trajectory to placid pricing trends and a noticeable revival in supply-side efficiencies. This follows a considerable moderation in inflationary tides, seen after a stark descent through the preceding fiscal year.

The report conveys cautious optimism for the ongoing fiscal cycle, forecasting a sustained economic rejuvenation in the early quarters of FY2026. This prognosis is anchored in the foundation of a firmer macroeconomic lattice and a palpable resurgence in investor sentiment.

Momentum in large-scale manufacturing, the ministry noted, appeared resilient in June, buoyed by an uptick in private sector credit absorption and amplified industrial throughput. This resurgence is projected to catalyze import volumes of raw and semi-finished inputs, potentially invigorating value-added export streams.

The strengthening pulse of internal consumption, coupled with a stabilized exchange regime and largely inert global commodity indices, is also expected to underpin external trade matrices—bolstering exports, inward remittances, and import activity alike, thus reinforcing the robustness of the external account.

However, the ministry flagged an emergent vulnerability: torrential downpours and their cascading floods may imperil agrarian yields and disrupt logistical arteries, thereby clouding the inflation trajectory in subsequent periods. Since June 26, hydrometeorological calamities have inflicted grievous human and infrastructural tolls. The National Disaster Management Authority documented over 280 fatalities and 630 injuries nationwide, alongside the obliteration of at least 1,557 dwellings.

The July edition of the Monthly Economic Update—marking the inaugural issue of the fiscal year—presented discordant datasets that cast a pall over the report's coherence. Chief among them was a glaring inconsistency in

budget deficit disclosures: one section stated a 3.1% shortfall, while another quoted 3.7%, a dissonance of 0.6 percentage points with significant ramifications for the credibility of inflation statistics espoused by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. Additionally, the document asserts that aggregate government spending surged 16.3% in the prior fiscal year, reaching Rs14,053.1 billion from Rs12,086.5 billion in FY2023-24. This upsurge is credited mainly to the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), which recorded a 44.1% escalation, eclipsing the relatively restrained 13.1% increase in recurrent expenditures. However, a deeper excavation reveals discord with official budgetary filings. The FY2025-26 budgetary compendium places total revised expenditure for FY2024-25 at Rs17,249 billion—down from a budgeted Rs18,877 billion—contradicting the Rs14,053.1 billion cited in the report. Similarly, the federal PSDP allocation, initially pegged at Rs1,400 billion, was curtailed to Rs1,100 billion amid fiscal stringency—a 21.4% contraction. By late May 2025, the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives disclosed authorization of Rs1,036 billion for PSDP initiatives; however, actual disbursements stood at a mere Rs596 billion, later marginally revised to Rs662 billion, as clarified by the Finance Secretary on June 13, 2025, during a legislative finance panel discussion on the national budget.

This montage of data irregularities and expenditure mismatches underscores the necessity for greater fiscal transparency and synchrony, especially when inflation narratives are intrinsically tethered to such pivotal macroeconomic indicators. The secretary further divulged that the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) allocation had been trimmed once again—this time down to Rs967 billion—though he conceded that even this diminished target would remain unmet. By mid-June 2025, approximately 62% of this revised allocation had been disbursed. The Finance Division must now explain the fate of the unutilized Rs440 billion: Was this sum redirected elsewhere? If not, where are the supposed savings recorded? Could these unspent funds have been used to partially reconcile the revised expenditure figure of Rs17,249 billion for FY2024-25, against the originally budgeted Rs18,877 billion?

Meanwhile, large-scale manufacturing (LSM) recorded a marginal 0.86% uptick during July–May 2024, contrasting a contraction of 1.21% over the same interval in 2025. But this seemingly encouraging data invites scrutiny. The ministry's updates had previously shown LSM declining by 0.22% during

July–March 2024, compared to a steeper 1.47% decline in 2025. Yet, the July–May positivity in 2024, juxtaposed with negative growth earlier in the year, may not point to a genuine rise in industrial output. Instead, it could reflect increased consumption or inventory drawdowns. Supporting this view is the fact that LSM showed sharper decline in 2025's early months: the July–January segment saw a greater fall than the corresponding period of 2024, despite November figures indicating LSM contraction of 1.9% in 2024 versus 1.25% in 2025. Among the few bright spots were remittance inflows and foreign exchange reserves. In 2025, remittances surged by roughly \$8 billion compared to 2024. The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment recorded 51,072 workers leaving the country in June 2025—an increase of 17.8% from 43,356 in June 2024. While this rise in outward migration may have added to remittance flows, the magnitude—likely in millions rather than billions—suggests that this inflow boost may stem less from overseas workers and more from domestic non-filer transactions. The foreign exchange reserves figure of \$14.5 billion also deserves contextualization: they are primarily debt-backed. The State Bank Governor has acknowledged that rollovers from allied nations total nearly \$16 billion for a single year, underscoring the borrowed nature of the reserves. Additionally, non-tax revenue witnessed an extraordinary leap—up by 62% from Rs2,805 billion to Rs4,564 billion in the July–May period. Yet, over Rs1,161 billion of this came from the petroleum levy—an indirect tax whose weight falls disproportionately on lower-income groups. Another Rs119 billion came from profits surpassing projections by the State Bank of Pakistan.

In sum, while selective metrics may suggest recovery, the broader economic tableau remains precarious. It is imperative for policymakers and economic stewards to abandon self-congratulatory narratives based on disputable data. Instead, they must bolster institutional capacity for evidence-based, responsive policymaking—rooted not in convenient optics, but in credible and consistent statistics.

The economic outlook remains fragile, veiled by selective statistics and opaque reporting. Lofty declarations of progress are undermined by inconsistencies in expenditure figures, mismatched remittance logic, and debt-driven reserves. Rather than rely on refutable narratives, the country's economic managers must confront the hard truths—rebuilding trust through transparent data and policy agility. It is only through genuine course correction and accountable governance that sustainable recovery can be realized.

# Old thinking, new problems

Raza Khan

The Economic Survey 2024–25, released ahead of the federal budget, reveals troubling downward trends across key national indicators.

Notably, Pakistan fell short of its GDP growth target of 3.6% for the outgoing fiscal year, achieving only 2.7%. Sector-wise performance was similarly subdued: agriculture grew by just 0.56%, industry by 4.77%, and services by 2.91%. These figures paint an alarming picture, despite official claims of recovery in select sectors.

While the economic reasons behind this sluggish growth are significant, it's equally important to understand that the root of the problem lies in the broader governance crisis. Governance experts often categorize governance into three key areas: political, administrative, and economic. The current economic decline must be understood in the context of a deep-seated failure across all three.

Pakistan today is grappling with multidimensional conflicts and crises, and the challenges faced by ordinary citizens are compounding by the day. Among the most pressing issues are widespread poverty, extremist social attitudes fueling terrorism, economic fragility, rising incidents of child sexual abuse, honor killings, and violent disputes over property. Despite the willingness and commitment of many state functionaries, the institutions of the state are failing to respond effectively to these challenges.

A striking example is the state's partial success against religious terrorist groups such as the Taliban. While their operational capabilities have been degraded, the underlying mindset of extremism and intolerance—whether among clerics, youths, or professionals like doctors, lawyers, and teachers—remains largely unaddressed.

One fundamental reason behind the state's inability to resolve these issues lies in the outdated thinking and operational methods of top decision-makers and civilian bureaucrats. The crises Pakistan faces are not unique; many modern states have confronted similar challenges. However, today's societies—especially urban and peri-urban mass societies—are built on impersonal, need-based interactions. These societies require institutionalized mechanisms for conflict resolution and service delivery, rather than traditional,

personalized approaches.

This shift necessitates a new kind of governance—radically different from the conventional systems still in place. Scholars refer to this model as “new governance.” The term gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s when many hierarchical states began failing to meet the needs of their populations. As public trust in governments waned, the focus moved from “government” to “governance”—emphasizing broader, more participatory, and responsive systems for managing societal affairs.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's political leadership—past and present—has failed to embrace the model of new governance. Our politicians, whether in power or in opposition, have largely remained entrenched in a retrospective, backward-looking mindset. Every successive government, including the one led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has relied heavily on rhetoric about past “achievements,” offering little in terms of meaningful solutions for the present or vision for the future.



What Pakistan desperately needs is a shift toward a new governance approach—one that focuses not on legacy or personality politics, but on the structure, effectiveness, and responsiveness of state institutions. New governance is about how well the governing system addresses citizens' policy demands and solves real-life problems. Tragically, this aspect of governance has been consistently ignored or sidelined by every administration.

Yes, history matters—and addressing historical injustices is necessary for genuine progress—but the state appears paralyzed, unable to clean its metaphorical Augean stables. This paralysis stems from a continued reliance on outdated governance frameworks, which in turn have led to weak state capacity, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a disturbing lack

of sincerity in public service.

Contemporary challenges—whether in Pakistan or elsewhere—require a holistic, multi-jurisdictional, and networked response. Take youth unemployment, for example. It is not a problem the Ministry of Finance or Economic Affairs can tackle in isolation. Addressing it effectively requires coordinated action among the ministries of education, social welfare, youth affairs, and foreign affairs, as well as engagement with local and regional governments, the private sector, and civil society. This networked problem-solving lies at the heart of new governance.

Unlike the rigid, hierarchical model of traditional governance, new governance is adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative. It demands a shift in mindset from top-down authority to shared responsibility. Unfortunately, many of our ruling politicians and bureaucrats remain deeply wedded to the old “chain of command” mentality, making them resistant to reform.

Worse still, there is a personal incentive for many civil servants to avoid new governance. Embracing it would mean relinquishing some authority and collaborating with non-state actors, such as NGOs, community groups, and the private sector. This power-sharing threatens the monopoly of control long enjoyed by the political and bureaucratic elite—and thus remains unpalatable to them.

However, meaningful governance in the 21st century requires exactly that: power-sharing and stakeholder inclusion. Without it, the mounting challenges Pakistan faces—economic stagnation, institutional decay, environmental degradation, and growing social unrest—will only intensify.

It is deeply disheartening that while many countries, including war-torn states like Afghanistan, are making some headway in improving living standards and economic outcomes, Pakistan continues to fall behind. A large segment of the population still lacks access to clean drinking water, proper sanitation, quality education, or basic healthcare. Our current governance model has failed them.

The only path forward is to adopt a new governance paradigm—one rooted in collaboration, responsiveness, institutional reform, and public accountability. If Pakistan's leadership remains trapped in the comfort zone of outdated practices and refuses to think beyond conventional solutions, the looming crisis will only deepen. We are running out of time.

# Beyond the verdict: Confronting legal misogyny

Dr. Fatima Khan

The Supreme Court's recent ruling in defense of a woman's legal rights against the cruel weaponization of her infertility marks a powerful repudiation of entrenched patriarchal norms. But a singular judgment — no matter how progressive — cannot dismantle a system that still subjects women to legal re-victimization and cultural degradation. If justice is to become more than an abstract ideal, both our courts and our society must undergo a fundamental transformation.

For generations, the venomous roots of toxic patriarchy have rendered womanhood in Pakistan an unending ordeal — suffocating liberties, extinguishing autonomy, and denying elemental entitlements in every arena from domestic confines to judicial halls and governing echelons. This ceaseless tyranny calls not merely for awareness but for redress at the structural core.

In this context, the Supreme Court's landmark pronouncement on July 23 emerges as an inflection point, courageously unmasking one grotesque manifestation of gendered injustice — the malignant use of a woman's infertility as a cudgel to disenfranchise her of her lawful rights. The court's voice rings with uncommon candor and indignation.

Presiding over the matter, Chief Justice Yahya Afridi dismantled the petitioner husband's callous campaign to deny his estranged spouse her rightful maintenance and dower. Withering in his condemnation, the chief justice rebuked not only the man's desertion of his wife within a year of their marriage — and his chronic refusal to support her thereafter — but also his malevolent orchestration of prolonged judicial harassment.

Years after abandoning her, the petitioner slithered back into the legal sphere, contending that his wife was biologically inadequate, medically unfit for marital intimacy, and unable to bear offspring. He invoked these fabrications to attack her very legal identity as a woman — a ploy laced with vindictiveness and cruelty. His assertions, unequivocally discredited by medical evaluations, became the grotesque centerpiece of his legal stratagem. Through this, he subjected his wife to years of public

vilification, psychological torment, and deeply invasive gynecological examinations, rendering the courtroom an arena of humiliation rather than justice.

In his seven-page decree — which included a punitive fine of Rs500,000 for the petitioner's slanderous posturing — Chief Justice Afridi laid down an unambiguous legal ethos: a woman's fertility, or the perceived lack thereof, can never serve as grounds to invalidate her entitlement to dower or maintenance. Nor can it be wielded to question her femininity in the eyes of the law.

This verdict delivers more than judicial clarity — it signals a resolute moral stance. In a nation where countless women are routine-

defend her very womanhood. This indignity, a byproduct of the lower judiciary's procedural insensitivity, underscores the urgent need for foundational reform. While the apex court has in recent years emerged as a rare citadel of gender justice, it is in the trial courts — the first interface for most litigants — where compassion, nuance, and gender literacy are most desperately required. Without it, the legal process degenerates into a re-traumatization chamber, compounding the very harm it is meant to remedy.

Hence, the time for cosmetic pledges is long past. There must be institutionalized training for judges and legal officers in gender-responsive jurisprudence, airtight

procedural safeguards, and an overhaul of adjudicatory ethos that centers empathy and dignity for female litigants. Justice must not come draped in procedural cruelty.

Equally imperative is a societal reckoning with the archaic fixation on fertility — a patriarchal specter that haunts countless women. The reduction of a woman's worth to her ability to conceive is a barbarism cloaked in tradition. This stigma, baked into familial expectations and cultural folklore, silently empowers structural misogyny, turning personal

health conditions and life choices into cudgels for shame and exclusion.

To unravel this deeply embedded bias, society must abandon its fetishization of reproductive capability. Only then can women move through their lives — and the courts — without being measured, judged, or discarded on the basis of their biology. The path to justice begins not only in the courtroom but also in the dismantling of every cultural edifice that denies women their full and equal humanity.

The court's decision offers more than legal relief — it offers hope. But hope must be followed by systemic change. Legal institutions must be restructured with gender-aware safeguards, and the cultural script that equates womanhood with fertility must be torn down. Until then, women will continue to be judged in courtrooms and households not by their character or rights, but by their wombs. Justice demands more — and so should we.



ly dispossessed of economic sustenance on threadbare or fictitious pretenses, this ruling fortifies the legal bulwark against misogynistic manipulation. It affirms with irrefutable authority: the days of weaponizing a woman's body as legal ammunition must end.

Though the Supreme Court's verdict stands as a beacon of moral clarity, it remains but a single strike against a far-reaching architecture of injustice. The rot runs deeper. Legal machinery, weaponized by malicious intent, still permits women to be dragged through agonizing procedural labyrinths that should have never existed in the first place. As Chief Justice Yahya Afridi rightly observed, women in our social fabric remain an imperiled cohort whose dignity demands vigilant, unwavering guardianship.

In a system that truly honors justice, the respondent — already wronged and abandoned — would not have been compelled to publicly

# The real reason the West is warmongering against China

Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan

Over the past two decades, the posture of the United States towards China has evolved from economic cooperation to outright antagonism. US media outlets and politicians have engaged in persistent anti-China rhetoric, while the US government has imposed trade restrictions and sanctions on China and pursued military build-up close to Chinese territory. Washington wants people to believe that China poses a threat.

China's rise indeed threatens US interests, but not in the way the US political elite seeks to frame it. The US relationship with China needs to be understood in the context of the capitalist world system. Capital accumulation in the core states, often glossed as the "Global North", depends on cheap labour and cheap resources from the periphery and semi-periphery, the so-called "Global South".

This arrangement is crucial to ensuring high profits for the multinational firms that dominate global supply chains. The systematic price disparity between the core and periphery also enables the core to achieve a large net appropriation of value from the periphery through unequal exchange in international trade. Ever since the 1980s, when China opened up to Western investment and trade, it has been a crucial part of this arrangement, providing a major source of labour for Western firms – labour that is cheap but also highly skilled and highly productive. For instance, much of Apple's production relies on Chinese labour. According to research by the economist Donald A Clelland, if Apple had to pay Chinese and East Asian workers at the same rate as a US worker, this would have cost them an additional \$572 per iPad in 2011.

But over the past two decades, wages in China have increased quite dramatically. Around 2005, the manufacturing labour cost per hour in China was lower than in India, less than \$1 per hour. In the years since, China's hourly labour costs have increased to more than \$8 per hour, while India's are now only about \$2 per hour. Indeed, wages in China are now higher than in every other developing country in Asia. This is a major, historical development.

This has happened for several key reasons. For one, surplus labour in China has been increasingly absorbed into the

wage-labour economy, which has amplified workers' bargaining power. At the same time, the current leadership of President Xi Jinping has expanded the role of the state in China's economy, strengthening public provisioning systems – including public healthcare and public housing – that have further improved the position of workers.

These are positive changes for China – and specifically for Chinese workers – but they pose a severe problem for Western capital. Higher wages in China impose a constraint on the profits of Western firms that operate there or that depend on Chinese manufacturing for intermediate parts and other key inputs.

The other problem, for the core states, is that the increase in China's wages and prices is reducing its exposure to unequal exchange. During the low-wage era of the

constant threat of military escalation.

Ironically, Western governments sometimes justify their opposition to China on the grounds that China's exports are too cheap. It is often claimed that China "cheats" in international trade, by artificially suppressing the exchange rate for its currency, the renminbi. The problem with this argument, however, is that China abandoned this policy around a decade ago. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) economist Jose Antonio Ocampo noted in 2017, "In recent years, China has rather been making efforts to avoid a depreciation of the renminbi, sacrificing a large amount of reserves. This may imply that, if anything, this currency is now overvalued." China did eventually permit a devaluation in 2019, when tariffs imposed by the administration of US President Donald Trump increased pressure on the renminbi. But this was a

normal response to a change in market conditions, not an attempt to suppress the renminbi below its market rate.

China's technological development is now breaking Western monopolies, and may give other developing countries alternative suppliers for necessary goods at more affordable prices. This poses a fundamental challenge to the imperial arrangement and unequal exchange.

The US has responded by imposing sanctions designed to cripple China's technological development. So far, this has not worked; if anything, it has increased incentives for China to develop sovereign technological capacities.

With this weapon mostly neutralised, the US wants to resort to warmongering, the main objective of which would be to destroy China's industrial base, and divert China's investment capital and productive capacities towards defence. The US wants to go to war with China not because China poses some kind of military threat to the American people, but because Chinese development undermines the interests of imperial capital.

Western claims about China posing some kind of military threat are pure propaganda. The material facts tell a fundamentally different story. In fact, China's military spending per capita is less than the global average, and 1/10th that of the US alone. Yes, China has a big population, but even in absolute terms, the US-aligned military bloc spends over seven times more on military power than China does. The US controls eight nuclear weapons for every one that China has.



1990s, China's export-to-import ratio with the core was extremely high. In other words, China had to export very large quantities of goods in order to obtain necessary imports. Today, this ratio is much lower, representing a dramatic improvement in China's terms of trade, substantially reducing the core's ability to appropriate value from China.

Given all this, capitalists in the core states are now desperate to do something to restore their access to cheap labour and resources. One option – increasingly promoted by the Western business press – is to relocate industrial production to other parts of Asia where wages are cheaper. But this is costly in terms of lost production, the need to find new staff, and other supply chain disruptions. The other option is to force Chinese wages back down. Hence, the attempts by the United States to undermine the Chinese government and destabilise the Chinese economy – including through economic warfare and the

# Forced back from Iran, Afghans face drought, poverty and repression

Alexander Matheou

At the transit camp in Islam Qala in western Afghanistan, Fatima steps out of the bus into the blazing heat and an uncertain future. She is one of 10,000 people who has arrived from Iran that day and one of 800,000 who has arrived over the last six months. She hurries her three children to an empty spot, slumps onto the dusty ground, and shelters her family with bed sheets. When asked where she goes from here, she says a brother might take them in in her home town.

The IFRC supports the Afghan Red Crescent Society to provide hot food and healthcare at the camp. UN agencies provide some cash. But within a day, it's time to leave. Bus drivers call out the names of Afghan cities and towns. Fatima lugs her cases towards a bus to Owbeh, in Herat province. Her three children trail behind her. She explains that she learned carpet weaving in Iran, but wasn't allowed to bring any materials or instruments with her. How can she start from scratch without money, she asks. And who would buy her carpets in her village anyway? They have nothing. Not even to eat.

The departure from Iran has been traumatic, but her real challenges start now. When she arrives in her hometown, there will be no jobs in the public sector for her. Men will be reluctant to hire her because of the rules and regulations associated with employing women. Her one chance to cope will be to get her own enterprise going. For that, she'll need start-up capital. She may also need assistance from her brother to access markets. It will be a struggle, but increasing numbers of Afghan women are rising to this challenge. Fatima could, too. If only she could get access to credit.

But will anyone in her community be able to buy her products? Like most Afghans, her neighbours will largely depend on agriculture, which will depend on irrigation and rain. In much of Herat province, and across the country, irrigation is becoming impossible because of drought. Rivers are dust. Underground water

sources are drying up. With no possibility to farm, men are pouring into the cities in search of daily labour, only to find the battle for water is raging there, too. Mercy Corps has claimed that half of the boreholes in Kabul have dried out and the city could run out of accessible groundwater in five years. This trajectory could be slowed down or reversed, but only with major investment in water conservation, rain vats, storage dams, and check dams. Just the sort of investment that Afghanistan is struggling to raise.

If Fatima can earn a little money and live close to water, then she can focus on her children's schooling. Her daughter will have to attend a madrassa. This will be a significant downgrade from her education in Iran. But if she's lucky, it will be one of the many madrassas that are already introducing more varied subjects and offering classes until 12th grade.

for her children. The alternative is grim, and sadly, much more likely. Like most new arrivals, she will probably be destitute within weeks. She won't access the rare opportunities for business support. Lack of water will empty the villages around her. If she stays put, her health will fail. Medical care will be too far to reach or too expensive. She may be forced to marry her daughter off early and nudge her boys away from school into some cheap, daily labour. This is what is happening across the country. If she can, to avoid such a terrible fate, she will try to get back to Iran.

Can foreign aid play a role in supporting Fatima and the millions like her? Despite all the reservations, humanitarian funding has been generous in the last four years. More than \$7bn has been spent on assistance. Enough to have helped tens of thousands of women to

start small businesses. Enough to have irrigated farms, deepened boreholes and stored water across the country. Enough to have created thousands of alternative learning options for children. Humanitarian agencies have tried to assist in all these areas, but the demand for emergency relief has taken the bulk of the funds, and many donors have been reticent to invest in anything longer term for fear of appearing to legitimise those in power.

The need for a new approach is compelling. There is less money available now

due to aid cuts, but what little is left can still be invested into locally led strategies for livelihoods, water infrastructure, health and learning. This may give people like Fatima a spark of hope in their futures. This is what IFRC will focus on, as much as its resources allow.

If the moral case for that is not compelling enough, it is worth reflecting that on the current trajectory, the historic repatriation to Afghanistan taking place this year is likely to be a prelude to a much bigger exodus in the years to come. It would be far wiser to invest now and give people a chance to thrive in their home country than to invest much more in refugee camps and anti-trafficking work in the near future.



If she's resourceful and can invest some funds, there may be other options too, including vocational training and online courses. The restrictions she will have to navigate are extreme, but not new. They reflect a long-running struggle between cities and the countryside, between desires for self-realisation and deeply rooted patriarchy. Foreign aid may help by quietly creating multiple and flexible opportunities to exchange and learn, while recognising that the ideological battles are for the Afghans themselves and will take time. Some organisations are trying to do this, but not to scale.

It will take a lot of luck for Fatima to get investment in her social enterprise, to access clean drinking water and to get an education

# I may starve to death before I am able to graduate in Gaza

Ahmad Abushawish

On July 27, the Palestinian Ministry of Education released the results of the secondary education certificate exams, also known as tawjihi. Like every year, families sat together, eyes fixed on phone screens, hearts pounding, everyone hoping to be the first to access the ministry's website and break the news with a jubilant shout. There were joyful tears and celebrations.

Thousands of students, who had endured months of pressure, sleepless nights and fragile hope, had the exam results in their hands that would determine whether and where they could continue their education.

But thousands of others – those in Gaza – were sitting in their tents and ruined homes in despair. I am one of them. This is the second year I, along with 31,000 other Palestinians born in 2006, was unable to take the tawjihi. For another year, we have been stripped of our right to continue our education and of the hope to build a future beyond the ruins. Now, we are joined by almost 40,000 students born in 2007, who are also stuck in this dreadful limbo.

Last year, when the tawjihi results were announced, I was huddled in front of a crackling fire near a tattered tent, far too small to hold my big dreams. The deep frustration I felt didn't fade – it settled in my mind and stayed. All I could think about was how all my sacrifices, tears, and relentless effort during a full year of studying under difficult circumstances had been for nothing.

This year, it feels even worse. Not only are my dreams of education crushed, now I struggle to flee myself and my family alive, as Gaza is starving to death.

In these two years, I have watched our education system destroyed, classroom by classroom. My school, Shohada al-Nusierat, once a place of learning and dreams, first became a shelter housing displaced families and then a target for Israeli bombing. My schoolbag – once filled with notebooks and study materials – now carries essential documents and a change of clothes, always packed and ready in case we are forced to flee our home again. The academic calendar, with all its important dates, has been replaced by a grim schedule of air strikes, displacement, and

loss of friends and loved ones.

Amid this devastation, the Education Ministry has struggled to keep an educational process going. Wanting to give Gaza's children and youth hope, it has undertaken various initiatives to try to keep students motivated. Makeshift schools have been organised wherever possible, while some university students have been able to continue their education online.

For us, the tawjihi students, efforts were repeatedly made to set up our exams. Last year, the ministry announced it would conduct the exams in February. I kept studying, despite the harsh reality and the collapse of everything around me, believing this was my chance to move forward.

February passed, and nothing happened. The ministry then announced that the exams would be held in April. But once again, they were postponed due to the unsafe conditions. Then, in June, the ministry scheduled an online exam

next five years. It determines whether we can pursue our education in the field we desire and gain admission to top universities.

But beyond academics, tawjihi carries a much deeper cultural and emotional weight. It is not just an educational phase – it is part of our identity, a symbol of perseverance. In a place where the occupation closes nearly every door, education is able to keep a few doors still open.

That's why we celebrate it like a national holiday; the day tawjihi results are released feels like a third Eid for Palestinians. It gives families hope, brings pride to entire neighbourhoods, and keeps alive the dream of a better future.

Over the many months I waited for the tawjihi, I held on to my dream to study medicine at a prestigious university abroad. I kept applying for scholarships and sending emails to universities across the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, hoping for special consideration as a student affected by war. I

pleaded with university administrators to waive the tawjihi certificate requirement.

But the responses were painfully consistent: "Unfortunately, we cannot consider your application unless you provide your final diploma."

Today, despair and helplessness are not the only unwanted visitors I have. Hunger is another one. The starvation has destroyed not only my body but also my mental health.

Most days, we manage to have one meal. We survive mostly on canned beans, dry bread, or rice without any vegetables or protein. Our bodies are weak, our faces pale, and our energy almost nonexistent. The effects go beyond the physical. Hunger fogs the brain, dulls memory and crushes motivation. It becomes nearly impossible to focus, let alone study for a life-changing exam like the tawjihi. How can I prepare for the most important exam of my life when my stomach is empty and my mind clouded by fatigue and worry?

It feels as though my youth has been stolen before my eyes, and I can do nothing but watch. While my peers around the world are building their futures, I remain stuck in a place of overwhelming pain and loss.



for July for students born in 2005 who had either failed their tawjihi or missed some of its exams; they were supposed to have done this exam in December 2023. Some 1,500 students were able to take the tests online.

This gave me a bit of hope that my turn would also come, but that quickly faded. The Ministry of Education hasn't given us any updates on the process, and it feels like we've been completely forgotten in the shadow of war and starvation.

Some readers may ask themselves, why amid a genocide are Palestinians so preoccupied with an exam? You have to understand, tawjihi is a milestone in every Palestinian's life – a decisive moment that shapes future paths for at least the

## Pakistan's democratic illusion

A federal minister recently made a striking admission: while the hybrid system is not an ideal form of democratic governance, it is still 'doing wonders' for the country. This candid statement acknowledges what many have long understood, but few in power have openly admitted; Pakistan's governance has for years been guided by a carefully managed partnership between civilian leadership and the military establishment.

From economic mismanagement to institutional decay, the list of shortcomings is long and familiar. Each failure has provided a convenient justification for the military to step in sometimes overtly, often covertly. The hybrid model has emerged as a compromise: civilians serve as the face of democracy, while unelected power centres retain control over national security, foreign policy and, increasingly, economic direction. This arrangement offers the illusion of civilian supremacy while keeping the real levers of power elsewhere. For a public wary of democratic chaos, this model may appear stable. But, make no mistake, it is a democratic illusion, not democratic evolution.

Neither the Constitution nor its founding fathers envisaged a hybrid system. It clearly outlines a parliamentary form of democracy, based on civilian supremacy and checks and balances. However, constitutional ideals require capable custodians, and successive civilian leaders have struggled to uphold those ideals. Instead, political parties have often become dependent on the same forces they claim to resist. Very few political leaders have shown the courage or the capacity to lead without crutches.

When the country's political leadership repeatedly falters, the temptation to turn to technocrats grows stronger. However, while technocrats may offer short-term efficiency, they lack public legitimacy and political accountability. In the presence of weak political institutions that are simply unable to function independently or assertively, there is public disillusionment with politics and politicians. The failure of democracy has become the justification for its dilution. If the hybrid system is allowed to cement itself as a permanent feature, Pakistan risks drifting further from the democratic ideals that inspired its very creation.

If our politicians want to reclaim their constitutional space, they must demonstrate competence, unity and courage. They must show that they have the capacity to govern without backchannel support, that they can disagree without paralysing the system, and that they can prioritise national interest over personal gain.

Mukhtar Ahmed Butt  
Karachi

## Family storytelling

For centuries, family stories have been the living thread that connects past to present, weaving together lessons of resilience, honour and hope. These tales, told with laughter and tears, have nourished souls and built a sense of belonging. Today, in many homes, the glow of the screen has replaced the warmth of a shared story.

Storytelling is more than entertainment; it is an act of love, a means to preserve dignity, identity, and a shared history that defines who we are. Nuclear families need to bring the elders back into the circle by setting aside some part of the weekend to hear their stories and preserve them. A single story shared at the dinner table can bridge generations, planting roots of wisdom and love in young hearts.

Schools and community leaders should also step in to nurture this tradition, turning it into a vibrant, living part of our culture once again. The time to protect our stories is now because without them, we lose ourselves. The fading away of family storytelling is more than silence; it is the gradual loss of our shared wisdom, our cultural roots, and the bonds that hold families and communities together.

Laraib Fatima  
Karachi

## Lakki Marwat security crisis

The Lakki Marwat district in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) is facing a grave security crisis. The unrest stems from a combination of deeply rooted structural issues and the intensifying threat of terrorism, with both feeding each other in a destructive loop.

Since the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan has witnessed a steep rise in militant violence. Lakki Marwat and neighbouring districts of Dera Ismail Khan, Tank and Bannu have become hotspots of terrorist activities. In Lakki Marwat, attacks have become an almost daily occurrence, often targeting government installations and security personnel. The atmosphere is so perilous that even law-enforcement officials avoid returning to their homes for fear of targeted attacks and abductions by the militants.

What is even more concerning is the increasing sophistication in the militants' operational abilities. In addition to their arsenal of automatic weapons, the militants have reportedly begun deploying quad-copters in certain operations. Besides, years of administrative neglect and corruption have allowed the region to evolve into a hub for drug trafficking. The profits from narcotics sales are believed to help fund terrorist operations, while smugglers benefit from the protection and operational cover offered by the militants.

Without immediate and coordinated action — both in restoring security and addressing socioeconomic grievances — the situation

may spiral further out of control.

Ziaullah Marwat  
Islamabad

## Unauthorised construction

The Sindh government has recently asked people to remain vigilant while purchasing apartments, and approach the relevant authorities to be sure that the projects have been officially approved. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure that no unauthorised construction is taking place within its jurisdiction. It reflects badly on the government when it advises people to get the housing projects verified instead of making sure that no housing scheme is illegal.

Salar Lateef  
Karachi

## Internships or free labour?

It is saddening to see how internships in Pakistan have become equated with free labour instead of genuine learning opportunities. What was originally intended as a formal, guided process for new graduates has now become a cycle of exploitation where interns are over-worked, underappreciated, and often unpaid.

In all the different fields — the media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), information technology, education and even government offices — the interns are increasingly being asked to act like full-time workers.

They post on social media, craft lengthy reports, update databases, or even fetch coffee, but are given neither a stipend nor some meaningful guidance. The employers often hide behind the façade of 'providing exposure' to the interns. Even if they are right and sincere, this exposure does not cover travel costs, food, or college fee. Does it?

This mentality deters talented students who cannot afford to work for nothing. Internships, as they stand now, have turned into favours granted only to those with financially secure backgrounds. The problem also stems from the absence of regulations. Pakistan does not have any law that safeguards the rights of interns. Universities hardly step in, and companies do not face any consequences for ill-treating interns. Some do not even provide certificates, let alone something in the name of career guidance or feedback.

We urgently need a national policy that standardised internships. Companies should be required to pay a minimum amount as stipend, provide a learning plan, and formally acknowledge the contributions made by the interns.

Interns, we must remember, are the future of the labour force, and they deserve to be treated fairly with respect and dignity.

Arshad Ali Katper  
Jamshoro

## New research shows eggs don't raise your cholesterol

Kristen Fischer

Eggs likely aren't responsible for high cholesterol—but new research may have found the real culprit behind rising cholesterol levels. The study, published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, found that the saturated fat in food, not dietary cholesterol in eggs, was linked to higher cholesterol levels. In fact, participants who ate two eggs a day for five weeks actually saw improved cholesterol levels. "When it comes to a cooked breakfast, it's not the eggs you need to worry about—it's the extra serve of bacon or the side of sausage that's more likely to impact your heart health," Jon Buckley, PhD, senior study author and executive dean of the University of South Australia Allied Health and Human Performance Academic Unit, said in a press release. For years, researchers have gone back and forth on whether eggs raise low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol—the "bad" kind that can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. This is because eggs are packed with cholesterol. One large egg contains around 200 milligrams (mg) of dietary cholesterol, two-thirds of the previously recommended daily limit of 300 mg. But more recent research has found that it's actually the saturated fat in foods that raises LDL cholesterol. Most high-cholesterol foods are also high in saturated fat, Buckley told Health, but eggs have very little (1.6 grams), which sparked the debate. "For much of the past two decades, we've had a pretty strong feeling that it's saturated fat, far more than cholesterol [that raises LDL levels]," Sean Heffron, MD, preventive cardiologist at the Center for the Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease at NYU Langone Heart, told Health. The new study put this theory to the test.



## These 3 foods may spike your risk of life-threatening diseases

Julia Ries

How many processed meats, sugary drinks, and foods containing trans fatty acids are safe to eat? According to a new analysis, not very much.



The paper, published in *Nature Medicine*, found that consuming even less than a strip of bacon or a can of soda per day was linked to a higher risk of type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, or ischemic heart disease. Several studies suggest that processed meats, sugar-sweetened beverages, and trans fats contribute to chronic disease, but few have investigated how much of these substances is safe to consume.

The researchers determined that minimizing your intake of each of these food groups can significantly reduce your risk of life-threatening illness. "It is important to not eat these types of foods regularly, and certainly not daily," McKale Montgomery, PhD, RD, LD, a registered dietitian and assistant professor of nutritional sciences at Texas Christian University, told Health. To assess how much these items contribute to disease risk, researchers evaluated over 60 studies that previously investigated the relationship between the three food categories and a person's risk of type 2 diabetes, colorectal cancer, and ischemic heart disease. A higher intake of each group was consistently linked to a significantly increased risk of chronic disease. More specifically, consuming very little amounts of processed foods and drinks upped the risk, and the more you eat, the greater your risk. When it came to processed meat, consuming as little as .6 grams to 57 grams (about five slices of bacon) a day was associated with an 11% and 7% greater risk of type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer, respectively. Eating 50 grams a day (roughly one hot dog) was linked to a 30% higher risk of type 2 diabetes and 26% increased chances of colon cancer.

## 'Sleeping giant' fault beneath Canada could unleash a major earthquake

Stephanie Pappas

A major fault in the Yukon, Canada, that has been quiet for at least 12,000 years may be capable of giving off earthquakes of at least magnitude 7.5, new research suggests.



Based on the amount of strain the Tintina fault has accumulated over the past 2.6 million years, it is now under an amount of stress that could lead to a large quake within a human lifespan, researchers reported in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*. The finding may require experts to rethink the earthquake danger in the region, the study authors said.

A magnitude 7.5 earthquake would threaten a few small communities within the remote Yukon. But the finding that the Tintina fault may be capable of such a large quake is notable because the fault has been quiet since before the last ice age ended. "Major ancient faults like that can remain as weak zones in the Earth's crust and then focus ongoing tectonic strain," Theron Finley, a geoscientist who conducted the research while earning his doctorate at the University of Victoria in Canada, told *Live Science*.

The Tintina fault is over 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) long and stretches from northeast British Columbia through the Yukon and into Alaska. On its southern end, it connects to the Rocky Mountain Trench fault, which creates a huge valley through southern Canada and northern Montana.

## Tomatoes randomly mated with another plant 9m years ago. The result? Potatoes

Sascha Pare

Random mating between wild tomato plants and potato-like species 8 million to 9 million years ago may have given rise to one of our favorite carbs: the potato.



Together with 107 extant, wild potato species, the cultivated potatoes we know today (*Solanum tuberosum*) belong to the lineage *Petota*. New research suggests that this lineage, or group of closely related species, emerged from interbreeding between the ancestors of two other lineages: Tomato, which consists of 17 living species, including the salad essential *Solanum lycopersicum*, and *Etuberosum*, which has three living species native to South America. "From an evolutionary perspective, we had an unresolved [disagreement] in the relationships between Tomato, *Petota* and *Etuberosum* lineages," Sandra Knapp, a research botanist at the Natural History Museum in London and co-author of the new study, told *Live Science* in an email. The importance of interbreeding in this case, Knapp said, is that it created new combinations of genes in the *Petota* lineage, giving rise to tubers — the swollen, underground organs that store water and nutrients, which humans eat. The ancestors of modern Tomato and *Etuberosum* plants did not have tubers, and these structures have not appeared in either lineage since they interbred to produce a hybrid. "Our findings show how a hybridization event between species can spark the evolution of new traits, allowing even more species to emerge," study co-author Sanwen Huang, a professor of agricultural genomics at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, said in a statement. "We've finally solved the mystery of where potatoes came from."



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