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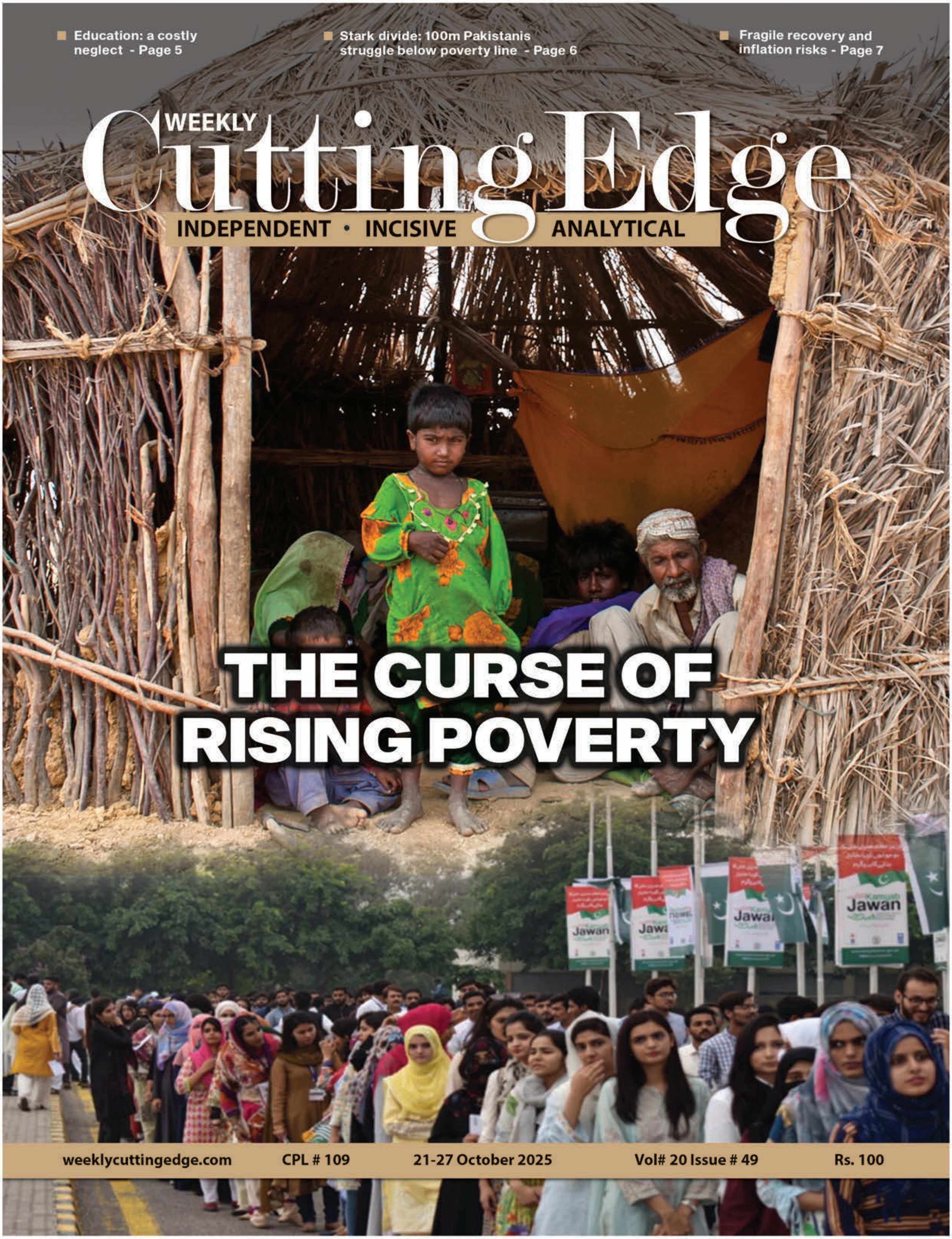

THE CURSE OF RISING POVERTY

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Founding Editor
Dr Niloufer Mahdi
Sub-Editor
Rizwan Ahmad
Communication Manager
Usman Riaz
Webmaster
Imran Shoukat

Editorial Office:
Treet Corporation Limited
2-H, Gulberg-II, Lahore
Phone +92-42-35817141-47,
Fax: +92-42-35817138
weeklycuttingedge@gmail.com
editor@weeklycuttingedge.com
info@weeklycuttingedge.com
Printed by Creative Vorks,
Plot# 203, Green Light Street,
Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact
info@weeklycutting.com

The curse of rising poverty

Farhan Khan

Contrary to official claims of economic recovery and progress, poverty levels in Pakistan are on the rise. According to the World Bank's new report entitled 'Pakistan's poverty, equity and resilience assessment', which is the first comprehensive evaluation of poverty and welfare trends in the country since the early 2000s, the national poverty rate, which declined from 64.3% in 2001-02 to 21.9% in 2018-19, began to increase in 2020.

A more recent assessment by the World Bank estimates Pakistan's poverty levels at 44.7 percent by using the lower middle income poverty level line at 4.20 dollars per day. According to the World Bank, rural poverty is double the urban poverty and levels vary from one region to another — a low of 3.9 percent in Islamabad and 71.5 percent in Khuzdar district of Balochistan.

Poverty is not just about low income. In its wider sense, it is about access to economic opportunities and social welfare facilities, particularly in the education and health sectors. In 2018, just over half of working-age Pakistanis were economically active. Even among those who work, over 85% of employment is informal, and among the poorest, it's more than 95%. Jobs in agriculture, construction, and low-end services often offer very low wages and contribute to family poverty.

The WB report draws on official household surveys, educated projections and various administrative data sources. As is well known, official poverty estimates are based on the Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES), using Pakistan's national poverty line and methodology. For the sake of comparison, the report applies global poverty thresholds updated in June 2025. Beyond 2018-19—which is the latest available survey—it uses microsimulation models to project poverty estimates.

The rise in poverty in Pakistan is ascribed to various factors, including COVID-19, inflation, floods, and macroeconomic stress. Another important element in the situation is the short-sighted consumption-driven growth model pursued over the last few years. According to experts, another reason for rising poverty is incomplete devolution of public services leading to poor service delivery, regressive taxation, accounting for nearly 75 to 80 percent of all tax collections, rampant corruption and weak accountability.

The WB report finds that in the past two decades, poverty reduction in Pakistan was achieved by rising non-agricultural labor income, as more households shifted away from farm work to low-quality service jobs. However, built-in structural weaknesses have hindered new job creation and inclusive growth. As a result, low productivity across sectors has constrained an increase in income, deepening poverty.

The report also refers to human capital gaps which are a major reason for poverty. About 40 percent of Pakistani children are stunted; one-quarter of primary school-age children are out of school; and 75 percent of children who do attend primary school cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of the primary cycle. Public service deficits are widespread, with only half of all households having access to drinking water in 2018, and 31 percent lacking safe sanitation.

As part of the overall solution to the problem, the report calls for sustained and people-centered reforms to protect poor and vulnerable families, improve livelihood opportunities, and expand access to basic services for all. To quote the report, "It will be critical to protect Pakistan's hard-won poverty gains while accelerating reforms that expand jobs and opportunities—especially for women and young people. By focusing on results—investing in people, places, and access to opportunities; building resilience against shocks; prioritizing fiscal management; and developing better data systems for decision-making—Pakistan can put poverty reduction back on track."

The report emphasises the need for systematic and persistent spatial disparities in welfare across Pakistan. Rural poverty remains more than twice as high as urban poverty, and many districts that lagged behind decades ago continue to do so today. Furthermore, unplanned urbanization has led to overcrowded settlements with low living standards.

The report outlines a detailed programme for poverty reduction. First, the government should invest in people and opportunities to close human capital gaps, particularly for the most disadvantaged sections. Investments in public services such as health, education, housing, water, and sanitation, need to be accompanied by strengthening local governance. Second, the government should adopt measures to strengthen household shock-resilience by making safety nets widely available. Third, progressive fiscal measures should be adopted by improving municipal finance, phasing out inefficient and wasteful subsidies, and prioritizing targeted incentives for the poorest.

Last but not the least, a strong machinery should be set up at various levels to ensure rigorous implementation of the poverty reduction initiatives. To generate resources for the above programme, the government should curtail current expenditure which is budgeted to account for 93 percent of total outlay in the current year. Simultaneously the taxation system should be revamped to collect more revenue from the wealthy, especially the feudal class which pays very little tax at the moment.

Education: a costly neglect

Nasim Ahmed

In his message on World Teachers' Day observed recently, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed his government's resolve to reform Pakistan's education system focussed on maximising knowledge, innovation and employable skills as per the demands of the modern job market.

He also said that the education sector should be aligned with contemporary scientific and technological standards which is essential to prepare the country's youth to compete globally. He added that Pakistan's economic well-being depends on preparing a cadre of well-qualified and trained teachers capable of teaching youth for a rapidly evolving future.

No one can dispute the validity of these observations but the question is whether these ideas are reflected in the policy of the government. The answer is no. Last year, the prime minister had declared an "education emergency" and promised greater investments in education, as well as steps to bring Pakistan's 26 million out-of-school children into classrooms. But no action was taken in this direction. Budgetary allocations for education continue to be abysmally low. During July 2024-March 2025, allocations for education fell by 29 percent. Education is the most neglected sector in Pakistan today.

Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) with an estimated 25 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44 per cent of the total population in this age group. In the 5-9 age group, 5 million children are not enrolled in schools and after primary-school age, the number of OOSC doubles, with 11.4 million children between the ages of 10-14 not receiving formal education.

There are glaring disparities as regards gender, socio-economic status, and geography. In Sindh, 52 percent of the poorest children (58 percent girls) are out of school, and in Balochistan, 78 percent of girls are not attending school. Socio-cultural barriers combined with economic factors are among reasons causing education deprivation for certain groups of children in Pakistan, particularly girls. These barriers are further exacerbated by a lack of parental awareness of early learning and lack of social protection schemes.

About 10.7 million boys and 8.6 million girls are enrolled at the primary level but this figure drops to 3.6 million boys and 2.8 million girls at the lower secondary level. Further, those who are enrolled in schools are not achieving the desired learning level. Over 75 percent of children in Pakistan are facing what the World Bank defines as a "learning poverty," the inability of a child to read and understand a simple text by age ten. Over 82 percent of grade three children are unable to read a story in Urdu, with over 87 percent unable to do a two-digit division. A research study by the Pakistan Foundational Learning Hub identified such learning shortcomings as a crisis where children are denied an opportunity to gain foundational learning skills in the early years.

The problems that hamper progress include poor infrastructure, untrained and ghost teachers, ghost schools, children not learning in their mother tongue, and limited resources and budgetary allocations. With the quality of education in public schools going down, parents are not willing to send their children there. The public sector education system suffers from numerous shortcomings, including untrained and under-qualified teachers, staff shortages, inadequate infrastructure, absence of electricity connections, lack of toilets and even missing boundary walls, and outdated curriculum. This is the reason why private schools have come into business. As a result, even basic good education is available only to the well to do now.

To fill the gaps in the sector, UNICEF has come into action. In order to ensure the equitable expansion of quality education, it is supporting the government in a variety of ways. This has helped to significantly reduce the number of OOSC at pre-primary, primary and lower secondary levels. UNICEF's education programme is focusing on Early Childhood Education (ECE) to improve school readiness; expansion of equitable and quality alternative learning pathways (ALP) at basic education levels; and nurturing of school-community linkages to increase on-time enrolment, reduce drop-outs, and ensure completion and transition for all students. UNICEF is also contributing to more equity-focused provincial sector planning and budgeting; strengthening data and assessment systems; and evidence-based policy advocacy.

But outside help has limited utility. It is the government of Pakistan that has to shoulder the responsibility of educating the people. Without making education the number one national priority, we cannot make progress in the sector. To this end, the budget for education should be aligned with international standards to ensure adequate resources and facilities. A prime need is to raise public spending on education and skill development from 2.7% of GDP to 5% and eventually to 7%. At the same time, more focus should be placed on improving the overall quality of education, with special emphasis on scientific and technical education to meet global standards.

A new system should be devised to offer technical and vocational training programs at the secondary school level to equip students with practical skills. The experience of the past decades underlines the need for a strong monitoring system to ensure that educational policies are implemented promptly and consistently to achieve the desired results.

Stark divide: 100m Pakistanis struggle below poverty line

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's poverty crisis has reached a breaking point, with the World Bank's latest report delivering a gut-wrenching verdict. In 2023-24, poverty surged to 25.3 percent using the $3.20 per day line—a shocking reversal from the dramatic drop between 2001 and 2018, when it plummeted from 64.3 percent to 21.9 percent.

At the more relevant lower-middle-income threshold of $4.20 per day, a staggering 44.7 percent of Pakistanis—over 100 million people—are now trapped in poverty. This isn't just a statistic; it's a humanitarian emergency unfolding in real time, where families in Khuzdar, Balochistan, face 71.5 percent poverty rates while Islamabad's affluent bubble hovers at a mere 3.9 percent. Rural areas, home to most of the poor, suffer double the urban hardship, painting a nation fractured by geography, inequality, and neglect. For a country of 240 million, this ticking time bomb of despair threatens spontaneous socio-economic unrest unless bold, home-grown reforms shatter the status quo.

The World Bank lays bare the roots of this catastrophe: an outdated economic model that delivered early wins but has since hit a wall. Back in 2018, 14 percent of Pakistanis teetered on the edge of poverty, vulnerable to any shock. Then came the compounding nightmares—COVID-19's lockdowns, economic freefalls, 2022's floods that swallowed billions in damages, 2025's deluges that ravaged Punjab and Sindh crops, and inflation that peaked at 38 percent, turning staples like wheat into luxuries with a 50 percent monthly spike. These external blows exposed systemic rot: incomplete devolution of public services leaving schools and clinics underfunded, regressive taxation that squeezes the poor while elites evade, and zero accountability for the powerful. Agriculture, employing 40 percent of workers, limps along in low-productivity traps, with flood-damaged irrigation turning fertile fields into wastelands.

At first glance, one might think the IMF's $7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) is tackling this head-on. After all, it promises stabilization. But peel back the layers, and the program's flaws stare back like a bad deal dressed in reform rhetoric. First, it obsesses over revenue targets without fixing sources—75 percent of "direct" taxes are regressive withholding levies baked into sales tax, hitting the poorest hardest while the rich yacht away untaxed. Second, current expenditure gobbles 93 percent of the budget this year, with pension reforms delayed until 2024 inductees retire in 25-30 years—a lifetime away for today's desperate families. Third, the policy rate towers at 11 percent, double regional peers, choking credit and growth. Fourth, sky-high utility rates make Pakistani factories uncompetitive globally, exporting jobs instead of goods. And fifth, borrowing addiction persists: foreign reserves are debt-fueled, with servicing costs devouring current spending like a black hole. The EFF stabilizes macros—3.6 percent GDP growth per IMF, reserves at $19.8 billion—but leaves micro misery untouched, widening the chasm where nine in ten live below $4.20 a day.

The human toll is heartbreaking. In Balochistan's dusty hamlets, a 71.5 percent poverty rate means children drop out of crumbling schools to scavenge, dreams drowned in inequality. Urban Karachi's informal workers, 44.7 percent poor, juggle multiple gigs amid 21 percent female labor participation. Floods didn't just destroy crops; they shattered lives, pushing 10 million more into poverty since 2022. The World Bank warns of "sliding back into poverty during shocks," a cycle where one disaster erases years of progress. Without action, this brew of despair—youth unemployment at 10 percent, food insecurity for 40 percent—ignites unrest, as seen in past riots over wheat queues or power cuts. Pakistan isn't just poor; it's a powder keg, with rural twice-urban poverty fueling migration, crime, and radicalization.

The Bank's prescription—"bold policy reforms"—is spot on, but the IMF's script falls short. Pakistan must break free and craft in-house, out-of-the-box solutions starting with a radical slash in current expenditure. This demands elite sacrifice: trim bloated perks, freeze non-essential hires, and auction idle state assets for two to three years. A 20-30 percent cut could free billions, easing tax pressure and allowing a shift to ability-to-pay principles—progressive income slabs topping 45 percent for the ultra-rich, wealth taxes on feudal lands, and capital gains hit at 30 percent. No more 75 percent regressive burden; instead, document the 60 percent informal economy through incentives, not whips. Pair this with service devolution done right: block grants tied to outcomes, like clinic attendance or school enrollment, with community audits for accountability.

Empower the vulnerable directly. Triple Benazir Income Support to $10 billion annually, targeted via digital Aadhaar-like IDs, covering 50 million with $50 monthly cash—proven to boost nutrition and girls' schooling by 15 percent. For floods, launch a $2 billion resilience fund: community-managed irrigation, drought-resistant seeds, and micro-insurance covering 80 percent of farmers. Unleash women: $500 million for safe transport, creches in factories, and anti-harassment laws with teeth, potentially adding 10 million jobs. Revive manufacturing with 50 percent utility rebates for exporters, slashing policy rates to 6 percent to spark credit—Pakistan's low 20 percent credit-to-GDP could double, fueling 5 percent growth.

These aren't dreams; they're doable. Elite sacrifice unlocks fiscal space: if generals and bureaucrats trim 20 percent perks, that's $3 billion saved yearly. Progressive taxes could raise $10 billion more without hiking sales VAT. The payoff? Poverty halved to 22 percent in five years, unrest averted, GDP per capita up 25 percent. But it demands political guts—facing down feudal lobbies, media barons, and military brass.

Pakistan's poverty isn't inevitable; it's a choice. The World Bank's alarm is a lifeline: reclaim momentum by slashing elite excess, taxing the rich fairly, and investing in people. Act now, or the time bomb explodes, turning fragile stability into chaos. Bold reforms aren't optional; they're the bridge from despair to dignity, proving Pakistan can rise not despite its poor, but because it lifts them all.

Fragile recovery and inflation risks

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's economy is showing tentative signs of stabilization, but the State Bank of Pakistan's (SBP) latest Annual Report on the State of the Economy for 2024-25 serves as both a pat on the back and a stern warning.

Real GDP growth for the just-ended fiscal year has been revised upward to 3.02 percent from an earlier 2.68 percent estimate, thanks to a robust rebound in the final quarter. Looking ahead to FY26, the SBP projects growth hovering near the lower end of its previous 3.25 to 4.25 percent range, while flagging risks of headline inflation breaching 7 percent in the second half—pushing it above the medium-term target of 5-7 percent. For a nation still scarred by floods, debt pressures, and global trade jitters, these figures capture a fragile recovery where every gain feels hard-won, and setbacks could unravel progress overnight.

The report paints a picture of an economy that defied early pessimism in FY25. Growth accelerated progressively across quarters, culminating in a sharp 5.66 percent expansion in April-June, up from modest 1.8 percent in Q1, 1.94 percent in Q2, and 2.79 percent in Q3. This late surge was fueled by the services sector, which grew 3.72 percent, and a dramatic industrial rebound. Industrial output rocketed 19.9 percent in Q4 after tepid gains earlier—0.3 percent in Q1, 0.2 percent in Q2, and 1.2 percent in Q3—driven largely by value addition in electricity, gas, and water supply, which soared 121.38 percent amid subsidies and a low base effect. Construction also picked up, bolstered by public development spending, though private activity lagged due to soaring input costs and higher property taxes. Small-scale manufacturing chipped in positively, but mining and quarrying contracted for the fourth straight year, highlighting persistent vulnerabilities in resource extraction.

Agriculture, the backbone for 40 percent of Pakistan's workforce, managed a slim 0.18 percent growth in Q4 despite a 17.55 percent slump in major crops like wheat and cotton, battered by floods and erratic weather. Bright spots included double-digit rises in onions (12.6 percent), mangoes (26.4 percent), and green fodder (14.2 percent), alongside modest gains in livestock (1.44 percent), forestry (3.60 percent), and fishing (2.23 percent). These offsets underscore the sector's resilience but also its fragility—agriculture contributes a fifth of GDP, yet remains at the mercy of climate whims that recent floods in Punjab and Sindh have only amplified.

For ordinary Pakistanis, the revised 3.02 percent growth might sound like abstract good news, but it's a lifeline after years of contraction. Yet, the SBP tempers optimism with a call for deep structural reforms to unlock sustainable high growth. Key priorities include boosting savings and investment—Pakistan's low savings rate hampers both public and private spending—improving resource allocation, and advancing regulatory tweaks to sharpen competitiveness. Without these, the report warns, the economy risks stagnation, trapped in a low-growth trap that erodes jobs and widens inequality.

Looking to FY26, the outlook is cautiously balanced. Increased economic activity and agricultural shortages could swell imports, pressuring the external sector. But tailwinds like lower US tariffs on Pakistani exports and steady remittances—projected to remain robust—should keep the current account deficit (CAD) tame, between 0-1 percent of GDP. Remittances, a quiet hero at \$38.3 billion in FY25, surged 26.6 percent last year, cushioning trade gaps and stabilizing the rupee. On the fiscal front, tax reforms and economy-wide documentation efforts, plus a windfall from SBP profit transfers in August 2025, point to a deficit narrowing to 3.8-4.8 percent of GDP. This consolidation, alongside a multi-year low of 5.4 percent in FY25, reflects disciplined policy, but the SBP stresses vigilance against fiscal slippages.

Inflation, however, looms as the biggest shadow. After plummeting to 4.5 percent in FY25—the lowest in eight years, down from 23.4 percent—the report foresees a resurgence. Headline NCPI could top 7 percent in H2 FY26, driven by flood-damaged agriculture and infrastructure, before easing back into the 5-7 percent band in FY27. Upside risks include supply disruptions from climate shocks, while downside threats to growth stem from geopolitical tensions and trade uncertainties, like US tariff hikes that could clip exports by 1.5 percent. Global commodity prices remain subdued, and domestic demand is soft, but the SBP urges a data-dependent monetary stance to anchor expectations. The policy rate, slashed 1,100 basis points from June 2024 to June 2025, has spurred private credit, but sticky core inflation in H2 FY25 prompted a slower easing pace.

Structural cracks in financial intermediation add another layer of concern. High government borrowing—though down to 74 percent of banks' deficit financing from nearly 100 percent—has crowded out private credit, with banks favoring safe, high-yield government securities. This keeps Pakistan's credit-to-GDP ratio low compared to peers, stifling savings, investment, and financial deepening. The report calls for reforms to redirect capital toward productive sectors, fostering an environment where businesses can thrive without state dominance.

In a small but symbolic boost, the SBP reported its foreign exchange reserves edging up \$21 million to \$14.441 billion for the week ending October 10, pushing total liquid reserves to \$19.811 billion, including \$5.369 billion held by banks. This modest climb, amid an IMF staff-level agreement for a \$1.2 billion tranche, signals building buffers against external shocks. Reserves have trended upward since early October, offering about three months of import cover—a far cry from the near-zero days of 2023's crisis.

For Pakistanis navigating daily life, the SBP report is a mixed ledger. The upward GDP revision and reserve gains evoke relief after a grueling FY25 marked by floods that submerged dreams and livelihoods. Inflation's potential spike threatens to claw back the wins, hitting the poor hardest in a country where nine in ten scrape by below \$4.2 a day. Women, with labor participation at a dismal 21 percent, remain sidelined, squandering potential GDP boosts of 20-30 percent.

The SBP's message is clear: macroeconomic stability is a foundation, not a finish line. Structural reforms— from climate-resilient agriculture to export diversification beyond textiles—must take center stage. The National Tariff Policy's cuts could help, but only with logistics and energy fixes. Empowering women through safe transport and skills training, expanding safety nets like Benazir Income Support, and investing in innovation can turn projections into prosperity. As global growth slows to 3.2 percent in 2025 per the IMF, Pakistan can't afford half-measures. By heeding the call for resilience, it might not just stabilize but soar, ensuring that growth touches every roti on every table.

Growth hopes and fears

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy is facing a delicate balance between recovery and looming threats, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects 3.6 percent GDP growth for the current fiscal year—optimistic compared to the World Bank's more cautious 2.6 percent forecast.

Yet, this projection excludes the yet-to-be-finalized damages from summer 2025 floods, alongside expected rises in inflation to 6 percent and a shift to a 0.4 percent current account deficit. Released at the outset of the IMF and World Bank annual meetings, the October 2025 World Economic Outlook (WEO) paints a global picture of slowing growth, from 3.3 percent in 2024 to 3.2 percent in 2025 and 3.1 percent in 2026, underscoring the headwinds Pakistan faces in a fragmenting world economy. For a nation still mending from crises, these numbers aren't just forecasts—they're a reminder that stability remains fragile, and ordinary Pakistanis bear the brunt when the numbers falter.

The IMF's review of Pakistan's economy offers a brighter outlook than the World Bank's earlier assessment, which factored in flood damages reducing agricultural output by nearly 10 percent. Without those losses tallied, the Fund sees growth at 3.6 percent, inflation climbing from 4.5 percent last year, and the current account tipping into deficit from a slim surplus. These estimates feel tentative, like a weather report before the storm hits, because the full flood impact—devastating crops, infrastructure, and rural livelihoods—remains unquantified. In Punjab and Sindh, where floods submerged fields of wheat, rice, and cotton, farmers are already counting losses that could shave billions from GDP and spike food prices further. For families reliant on these staples, the abstract 6 percent inflation projection translates to harder choices at the dinner table, echoing the 50 percent wheat surge that already pushed CPI above 5 percent last month.

Globally, the WEO reveals a world slowing under the weight of trade fragmentation and policy uncertainty. Advanced economies like the United States are projected to grow at just 1.5 percent in 2025-26, down to 2 percent for the U.S., while emerging markets moderate to above 4 percent. World trade volume, boosted by front-loading in 2025, will average 2.9 percent growth—slower than 2024's 3.5 percent—as protectionist measures, including US tariffs hitting Pakistan's exports, disrupt supply chains.

Inflation eases to 4.2 percent globally in 2025 and 3.7 percent in 2026, but for Pakistan, domestic volatility from floods and supply snarls keeps pressures high. The IMF warns of downside risks: escalating trade barriers could stifle investment, while labor shortages from immigration curbs hit aging economies. An abrupt tech stock correction, if AI productivity disappoints, might end the investment boom, rippling through global markets to emerging players like Pakistan.

These global currents amplify Pakistan's vulnerabilities. The country's export base, concentrated in low-value textiles battered by new tariffs, faces a projected 1.5 percent contraction—the steepest in its region. Agriculture, employing 40 percent of the workforce, struggles with damaged irrigation and water shortages, threatening food security just as poverty surges to engulf nine in ten citizens below $4.2 per day. Fiscal strains mount as debt servicing consumes revenues, leaving little for rehabilitation or social safety nets. The IMF's call to rebuild fiscal space rings urgent: with lower growth prospects, higher real interest rates, and new spending on defense and security, Pakistan's equation is precarious. Low-income nations like its own face reduced aid flows, heightening risks of social unrest among jobless youth—a powder keg in a country where unemployment already fuels frustration.

The IMF notes pressures on institutions like the State Bank of Pakistan, where hard-won credibility in anchoring inflation expectations could crumble under political strain. During the recent cost-of-living crisis, trust in central banks kept prices from spiraling; losing that now would be catastrophic, inviting the volatility that has plagued past recoveries.

Yet, the IMF offers a roadmap out, emphasizing predictability and credibility. For Pakistan, this means independent monetary policy focused on price stability, transparent communication to anchor expectations, and stabilizing trade ties to counter fragmentation. Fiscal policy must shrink vulnerabilities: rationalizing spending, broadening the tax base without burdening the poor, and prioritizing investments in education, infrastructure, and innovation over sectoral subsidies. Empowering private enterprise through smart regulation could unlock growth, while multilateral cooperation rebuilds eroded trust. Longer-term, broad-based policies—skills training for youth, climate-resilient agriculture, and barriers broken for women—harness Pakistan's demographic dividend, potentially boosting GDP per capita by 20 to 30 percent.

Pakistan stands at a pivot. The IMF's 3.6 percent growth projection, unscarred by flood data, is a vote of confidence in reforms under its program—timely debt servicing, revenue hikes, and energy fixes. But floods could drag it closer to the World Bank's 2.6 percent, widening deficits and inflation. Success hinges on sequencing: immediate flood relief without derailing fiscal discipline, followed by investments in storage, irrigation, and export diversification. The National Tariff Policy's tariff cuts must pair with logistics reforms to revive trade. And critically, social protections—expanding Benazir Income Support—must shield the vulnerable as growth trickles down.

In a world tilting toward downside risks, Pakistan can't afford complacency. The IMF's warning about fiscal vulnerabilities and social unrest is a clarion call: rebuild credibility, invest in people, and favor cooperation over isolation. By heeding the Fund's advice—transparent policy, innovation, and inclusion—Pakistan can turn tentative projections into tangible progress, proving that in a fragmented global economy, resilience isn't just survival; it's the path to shared prosperity.

Why Pakistan needs a new model of governance

Raza Khan

In Pakistan, people are deeply disturbed by the economic crisis and inflation, which have severely impacted the common person, as well as by the ongoing political instability and social degeneration. Despite the widespread concern, the root causes of these issues remain unclear to many. While strategic and societal factors contribute to the current economic and political turmoil, there are significant problems at the operational level—specifically in governance.

Our society is currently facing a range of conflicts and crises, with the challenges multiplying daily. Several issues are contributing to these multifaceted conflicts and crises, including but not limited to widespread poverty, the prevalence of extremist social attitudes that fuel terrorism, economic collapse, increasing cases of child sexual abuse, honor killings, and violent disputes over minor property matters. The state, its apparatus, and its institutions are failing to address these issues effectively, despite the commitment and desire of many of its officials to rise to the challenge. For example, while the state has managed to defeat religious terrorist groups like the Taliban, it has been unable to control the spread of extremism, fundamentalism, and intolerance, whether among clerics, young people, or professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

One significant reason for the state's inability to address these conflicts and crises is the outdated approach of top decision-makers and civilian bureaucrats, who are often bound by conventional idiosyncrasies and practices. The conflicts and crises mentioned above are not unique to Pakistan; many societies and states have faced or are facing similar challenges. In today's world, most states have developed mass societies with non-traditional and complex problems. These societies, which are predominantly urban and peri-urban, require institutionalized rather than personalized mechanisms for conflict resolution and need fulfillment. This necessitates a new kind of governance that is fundamentally different from the conventional systems and structures in place.

Since the 1980s, "good governance" has been a key phrase in international organizations, encompassing aspects like transparency, accountability, rule of law, consensus-building, and access to justice. However, a new concept has emerged that goes beyond good governance, known as "new governance." The term "governance" itself gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s when many hierarchical states increasingly failed to address the needs and problems of their populations, leading to a decline in public trust in the state. As a result, the focus shifted from traditional government structures to the broader concept of governance.

In Pakistan, policymakers, political parties, politicians, and civil servants have a limited understanding of this novel concept of "new governance," let alone its implementation. Even if some are aware of it, they struggle to adopt it due to their retrospective approach. Our ruling politicians, including Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, are often stuck in the past, repeatedly highlighting dubious "achievements" and accusing each other of financial corruption, rather than embracing forward-looking governance practices.

The new governance approach emphasizes the importance of systems and structures in addressing the policy demands of the people and solving societal problems. Unfortunately, this aspect of governance has been largely overlooked by our government departments. While history is important, and addressing past wrongs is essential for progress, the state's focus on traditional governance methods has left it ill-equipped to tackle the deep-rooted issues within its institutions. This focus on outdated approaches has led to a lack of capacity and, at times, a lack of sincerity among state functionaries.

The challenges facing Pakistani society—or any society in the contemporary era—are complex and require a holistic, multijurisdictional, and networked approach. For example, the issue of youth unemployment cannot be effectively addressed by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs alone. It requires collaboration among various ministries, including education, social welfare, youth affairs, and foreign affairs, as well as coordination between governments at local, regional, national, and international levels, along with civil society and the private sector. This networked approach is at the core of "new governance."

However, because this new governance approach is non-hierarchical, it clashes with the traditional mindset of our ruling politicians and civil servants, who are accustomed to chain-of-command authority. As a result, they have been unable to adopt the new governance model, and the issues and problems that require abandoning conventional governance methods remain unresolved. Consequently, we are witnessing an ever-increasing multiplication of social issues and problems.

There is also a personal interest for civil servants in resisting new governance models because adopting these would require them to share their authority and power with other stakeholders, such as the private sector, non-profit organizations, and the market. This power-sharing is generally unacceptable to both ruling politicians and civilian bureaucrats. However, society desperately needs this collaboration between state functionaries, civil society, and the private sector to effectively address issues, solve problems, and meet the needs of the people.

The world is changing rapidly, and its challenges are growing at the same pace. The demands of contemporary life are significant and complex. To meet these demands and address the concerns of society, the state, along with its institutions, must embrace new governance models. If they fail to do so, they will struggle to manage the political, economic, and social instability that continues to grow.

AI's hidden cost in higher education

Rasheed Ali

When the teacher entered the class and asked a routine question about business models, half the students at the University of Engineering and Technology (UET) instantly bent their heads — not in thought, but to type a query into their phones. Within seconds, answers flashed on their screens. Some students confidently read them aloud, word for word. Others covertly murmured AI-generated responses, hoping to sound spontaneous. The teacher, well aware, could only sigh in disappointment.

"Students never prepare for their quizzes anymore," said Eman Fatima, a student of BBIT at the Institute of Business Administration, UET Lahore. "Whenever the teacher asks a question, we just use ChatGPT or other AI tools, copy the answer, and read it out. Hardly anyone studies the topic in advance."

Her observation is echoed across campuses. At the College of Ophthalmology and Vision Sciences, affiliated with King Edward Medical University (KEMU), a similar pattern is emerging. "Students reach classes unprepared, and when teachers ask them something, they either openly or secretly consult AI tools on their phones," said Afshan Ahmad, a student of the college. "They don't even bother to read the material later. The knowledge they gain this way vanishes quickly — and they need AI again to answer the same questions."

Artificial Intelligence, once hailed as a tool to enhance learning, is now being used as a shortcut to bypass it. The convenience of instant answers is cultivating a new kind of dependency among university students — one that is quietly eroding their capacity for deep learning and independent thought. From business studies and computer science to medicine and engineering, students are increasingly outsourcing their thinking to machines.

"AI tools like ChatGPT are wonderful for brainstorming, but they are also dangerous if used uncritically," remarked Dr Ayesha Naseer, Assistant Professor at UET. "Students no longer engage with the subject matter. They don't analyse, reflect, or form opinions — they just reproduce what the AI tells them. That's not learning; that's parroting." She noted that this trend accelerated after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning became the norm and digital tools became integral to education. "What began as support during remote education has now turned into an addiction," she added. "Many students can't even write a paragraph without seeking help from AI."

Teachers across institutions have started to notice an alarming gap between the quality of written assignments and the depth of understanding displayed during classroom discussions. "At first, I was impressed with the improvement in students' written work," said a lecturer at the University of the Punjab's Department of Mass Communication. "But when I started questioning them orally, they couldn't explain even the basic concepts they had written in their assignments. It became clear that AI was doing the heavy lifting."

He believes that this reliance is undermining critical thinking — the very foundation

of higher education. "Education isn't about just finding the answer. It's about exploring why that answer matters, what alternatives exist, and how it connects to other ideas. AI can provide information, but it cannot replace human reasoning and curiosity."

For students, however, the temptation to depend on AI is difficult to resist. University life is fast-paced, demanding, and often stressful. With tight deadlines, part-time jobs, and social commitments, many view AI as a time-saving companion. "It's just faster," admitted Hassan Raza, a computer science student at Lahore Garrison University. "If I need to write an essay or prepare for a quiz, I can ask AI to summarise the topic or even generate complete notes. It saves me hours."

Yet even he concedes that over-reliance has consequences. "Sometimes I don't remember what I submitted the next day," he said with a laugh. "It's like borrowing knowledge — not owning it."

Teachers are increasingly frustrated as they struggle to balance the integration of AI into learning with the need to preserve academic integrity. Some have started conducting oral tests and surprise quizzes to assess genuine understanding, while others have resorted to AI detection tools — though their accuracy is still questionable. "Universities need clear policies," argued Dr Rabia Malik, a senior educationist and curriculum expert. "We can't ignore AI, but we must regulate its use. Students should learn how to use it responsibly — as a research assistant, not a crutch."

She believes that institutions should introduce AI literacy courses to help students understand the ethical and intellectual boundaries of these technologies. "They must be trained to verify AI outputs, think critically about its suggestions, and use it to enhance creativity, not to replace learning. That's the only way to coexist with it productively."

The issue is particularly worrying in professional disciplines like medicine and engineering, where practical application of knowledge is vital. "If a medical student memorises AI-generated answers without understanding anatomy or pathology, that's dangerous," warned Dr Sajid Latif, a professor at KEMU. "You can't Google your way through a surgery or a diagnosis." He stressed that professional competence depends on deep understanding, not quick retrieval. "AI can assist professionals, but only if they already possess the foundational knowledge to judge its accuracy."

Experts agree that banning AI altogether would be both impractical and unwise. Instead, the goal should be to encourage ethical and informed use. "AI should be used to enhance creativity, to analyse data, or to simulate complex systems," said Dr Naseer. "But it should not replace reading, reflection, and reasoning."

Back in her BBIT class, Eman Fatima acknowledges the dilemma many students face. "We all know it's wrong to depend too much on AI," she admitted. "But everyone's doing it, and teachers don't always stop us. Maybe if we had more interactive classes or practical projects, we'd study more on our own."

Her words capture the heart of the problem. The issue isn't technology itself — it's how it's being used. Without conscious efforts from both students and educators, Pakistan's higher education system risks producing graduates who can skillfully prompt an AI for answers but struggle to think, analyze, and create on their own.

Interests and flattery in Gaza diplomacy

Faheem Amir

It is often said that in politics and diplomacy there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests — pursued through various tools of power: economic leverage, political manoeuvring, religion, media influence, threats, sanctions, war, terrorism, nationalism, and flattery.

The recent spectacle at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit revealed how, from Washington to Islamabad, political actors have turned the tragedy of Gaza into a stage for self-promotion, applause, and power games. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's effusive praise of Donald Trump — calling him a "man of peace" and suggesting a Nobel nomination — was not merely a moment of enthusiasm but a calculated gesture rooted in Pakistan's political culture. In a country where survival depends less on merit and more on appeasing the real centres of power, such displays of flattery are not accidents; they are political rituals — a defining habit of national politics.

Before astonished world leaders and billions of bewildered viewers watching through the media, a prime minister from a financially indebted nation declaring, "I like to salute President Trump for saving millions of lives," revealed less about statesmanship and more about survival in a system where sycophancy replaces merit. In Pakistan's hybrid political order, those who salute the "real powers" — whether military, bureaucratic, or foreign — are elevated through Form-47s, while dissenters are crushed beneath the machinery of control. The system rewards obedience, not intellect; allegiance, not competence. History offers ample proof of this truth. Those who dared defy the powerful — Liaquat Ali Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, and Nawab Akbar Bugti — paid with their lives. Others, like Imran Khan, now face prison for challenging the invisible hands that shape Pakistan's political destiny.

In such a landscape, sycophancy becomes a survival strategy. As Dostoevsky wrote, "Nothing in the world is harder than speaking the truth, and nothing easier than flattery." In Pakistan's corridors of power, this truth resounds daily. Flattery requires no courage — only a keen instinct for submission. Through this performance of praise, the prime minister not only startled the hall filled with the world leaders but also sought to win American favour for his deeply unpopular government. After all, in Pakistan's political system, no leader can rule securely without a nod of approval from Washington.

On the other hand, Donald Trump's so-called "golden age" of peace, as celebrated in Sharm el-Sheikh, reflects less of humanitarian compassion and more of calculated self-interest. Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch (1993-2022), writes: "Trump's conversion from embracing the Israeli far right's goal of ethnic cleansing of Gaza to accepting the right of Palestinian civilians to remain was probably driven by a remarkable shift in US attitudes toward Israel. Young Christian evangelicals, a core Maga constituency, had become sickened by Israel's genocide, which was aimed at inducing the forced deportation that Trump had endorsed with his vision of a Gaza "Riviera". Always concerned foremost with himself, Trump could see the political costs of the largely unqualified green light that he had given Netanyahu and his quest for endless war. This is something Netanyahu has needed to maintain his governing coalition and avoid pending corruption charges and a political reckoning for the intelligence failures that Hamas exploited ruthlessly on 7 October 2023.

The straw that broke the camel's back was Netanyahu's belief that, having gotten away with genocide, he would have no trouble attacking and trying to kill the Hamas negotiators in Qatar. That outraged the Gulf Arab leaders, whose combination of wealth and autocracy plays to Trump's sweet spot. He read Netanyahu the riot act, forcing him to accept a plan that fell far short of his maximalist wishes...It is disconcerting to have to rely on Trump, whom Netanyahu just called "the greatest friend of Israel", to advance the Palestinians' cause. But Netanyahu's gushing praise cannot obscure Trump's repeated willingness to break from Israel's far-right government and impose better behaviour. He has just taken a big step toward ending the unspeakable suffering of the Palestinian people. We must keep up the pressure for him to finish the job."

It is also a fact that Trump thrives on praise. He is less a statesman than a celebrity-CEO, governing more like a brand manager than a peacemaker. His so-called "20-point Gaza plan," though hailed as historic, lacked substance. It was policy as performance — a humanitarian gesture carefully scripted for applause. As Marina Hyde observed, everything Trump does "is redolent not of a politician, but an ego-driven entertainment industry behemoth." His peace summit in Egypt resembled "The Official Release Party of a Peace Process" — a global photocall for applause. Obsessed with ratings, allergic to rivals, and addicted to spectacle, he governs less through ideology than performance.

In the end, both Gaza diplomacy and Pakistan's political theatre share a moral vacuum. The world's applause for Trump's ceasefire echoes the hollow cheers of Pakistani elites congratulating themselves on "saving democracy." Both are performances — driven not by principle, but by calculation. Both rely on flattery to mask failure and self-interest to sustain power. Until nations learn to speak the truth without fear, peace and stability — whether in Gaza or Islamabad — will always be for show.

Blood for honour: Pakistan's karo-kari crisis

Dr. Fatima Khan

In the dusty villages of Sindh, where the sun beats down on mud-brick homes and family ties bind tighter than chains, a mother's scream echoes unanswered. In the first nine months of 2025, 142 lives were snuffed out in the name of "family honour"—karo-kari, they call it here—a brutal pretext that has claimed 105 girls and women at the hands of those who should protect them most: husbands, fathers, brothers, sons.

These weren't random acts of strangers in the shadows; they were betrayals in broad daylight, triggered by whispers of illicit relationships or the simple audacity of a woman choosing her own marriage. Imagine a 16-year-old girl in Jacobabad, dreaming of a life beyond her father's control, only to be dragged into a field and silenced forever by his hand. This isn't ancient history; it's Pakistan today, a national shame that stains the soul of a nation and exposes the gaping chasm between progressive laws and the patriarchal iron fist that crushes women's lives.

The numbers chill the blood: 142 souls in nine months, with women and girls making up three-quarters of the toll. Civil society and human rights groups, from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan to local activists in Hyderabad, are sounding alarms that echo across drawing rooms and protest squares. "This is genocide by custom," one survivor-turned-advocate told me, her voice trembling over a crackling phone line from Sukkur. Karo-kari isn't just murder; it's a cultural cancer, festering in rural and tribal pockets where jirgas—unelected councils of elders—dispense death sentences like village wisdom. A woman steps out for work, laughs with a neighbor, or says "no" to an arranged match, and suddenly she's "kari," the black mark that justifies her burial alive. In Upper Sindh alone, 47 cases this year; in Larkana, 32. These aren't statistics on a report—they're daughters, sisters, futures stolen in the dead of night.

Pakistan took a stand in 2016 with the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, a beacon of hope that plugged the loopholes in Qisas and Diyat laws. No more pardons from grieving families coerced into forgiveness; honour killings were reclassified as straight-up murder, non-compoundable, punishable by life or death. Parliamentarians from across aisles thumped tables in applause, and women's rights groups celebrated a victory for justice. Yet, nine years on, that law gathers dust like an unread book. Police in remote thanas file FIRs with one hand while taking bribes with the other, investigations fizzle under pressure from waderas and tribal chiefs. Courts, overwhelmed and under-resourced, see conviction rates hovering below 5 percent—emboldening killers who know the system winks. In one heartbreaking case from Dadu last month, a 22-year-old widow was shot by her brother-in-law for "dishonoring" the family by seeking divorce; the jirga nodded approval, the police looked away, and the court? Still pending, two months later.

This impunity isn't accidental; it's engineered by a society that views women as property, their bodies battlegrounds for male ego. In Sindh's feudal heartlands, where landlords hold sway like medieval kings, a girl's autonomy is a threat to inheritance, alliances, and ancient codes. Jirgas, those self-appointed courts, thrive in this vacuum, ordering stonings or acid attacks with the authority of mullahs and mustaches. Across provinces, the names change—watta satta in Punjab, swara in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—but the poison is the same: toxic masculinity dressed as tradition, sanctioned by silence.

The state's failure runs deeper than lazy cops or clogged courts. It's a refusal to confront the rot at education's core, where textbooks glorify obedience over rights, and mullahs in village mosques preach submission as piety. Religious leaders, with their vast reach, could flip the script—sermons on Friday that thunder against karo-kari as un-Islamic murder, not divine duty. Yet too many stay mute, fearing backlash from bearded brigades. Media, that fourth pillar, flashes headlines but fades fast, chasing political scandals over sustained campaigns. Educators in government schools, starved of funds, teach rote history but skip gender equity, leaving generations blind to dignity's true meaning. And politicians? They pass laws for photo-ops, then retreat to air-conditioned villas, leaving rural women to fend against feudal fury.

But change isn't a pipe dream; it's a fire waiting to be lit. Start with zero tolerance for jirgas: ban them outright under a new Anti-Honour Killing Enforcement Act, with mandatory 10-year sentences for participants. Deploy all-women police units—expand the 5,000-strong force tenfold—to rural posts, trained in trauma-sensitive investigations. Courts need fast-track benches: 100 new ones nationwide, deciding cases in 90 days, with video links for terrified witnesses. Convene a national fatwa council to declare karo-kari haram, broadcast from every minaret. Media must commit: a year-long "Break the Silence" series, partnering with NGOs for survivor stories that humanize the horror.

Political will is the spark. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, with his PML-N machinery, must lead: tie MPAs' performance to conviction rates in their districts, slash budgets for non-compliant thanas. Provinces like Sindh, with its 2013 Child Marriage Act, can pioneer—extend it to honour killings with provincial task forces. Civil society, from SPO to Save the Children, isn't waiting: street theater in Larkana villages, helplines buzzing 24/7, safe houses springing up like lifelines. International pressure helps—UN Women funding trials, Amnesty amplifying voices—but real power lies in Pakistani hands.

Pakistan, land of the pure, can't claim purity while blood soaks its soil. Ending karo-kari isn't women's work; it's everyone's duty—to dismantle patriarchy brick by brick, law by law, heart by heart. The 105 women of 2025 demand it; the daughters of tomorrow deserve it. With unwavering resolve, we can bury this shame forever, rising as a nation where honour means humanity, not homicide. The time for whispers is over—roar for justice, or the screams will never stop.

Are we Muslims or Mujrims? How hate became India's daily entertainment

Ismail Salahuddin

Every morning in today's India begins with two parallel news cycles. One, broadcast on television screens, is carefully curated: Panel debates on Pakistan, Hindu pride, and endless theatre about a "new India". The other, untelevised but deeply real, is the daily routine of Muslims being lynched, harassed, jailed, and demonised. Between the two, the message is chilling: Muslim suffering is either erased or turned into a spectacle, consumed like evening entertainment for the majority, while Muslims themselves are forced to live as if they are perpetual criminals, always accused, and never heard.

Take the killing of a seven-year-old Muslim boy in Azamgarh this September. His body, stuffed into a bag, was discovered with chilling indifference by neighbours who were later arrested. For a fleeting moment, local reports carried the story, but it quickly disappeared from prime-time television, replaced by fiery debates on "love jihad", border tensions, or the India-Pakistan cricket match. A Muslim child's death did not fit the script of national outrage. Instead, it became part of the silent archive of normalised violence. Sociologist Stanley Cohen once wrote about "states of denial": Societies in which atrocities are not hidden but absorbed so routinely that they no longer shock. That is India today: Muslim killings happen in daylight, but the majority sees them as background noise.

At the same time, hate is not just silence; it is a performance. When Muslims in Kanpur raised placards saying "I love Muhammad (PBUH)", the police responded not with protection but with FIRs against 1,300 Muslims and mass arrests. The act of love itself was criminalised. Yet when Hindutva mobs gather in Maharashtra or Madhya Pradesh, chanting open calls for genocide, television crews either glorify them or quietly look away. Violence against Muslims has become a kind of theatre, a script where Muslims are always on trial, and Hindutva forces play the role of guardians of civilisation.

This selective visibility is deliberate. The rise of "jihadi-mukt bazaars" in Indore, where Muslim traders were expelled overnight, is an economic lynching. Entire families lost their livelihoods, children were pulled out of school, and women were left to beg neighbours for food. Yet national media framed it as a "law and order adjustment", barely noting the human cost. Hindutva groups celebrated on social media, turning the dispossession of Muslims into viral entertainment. What should have been a national scandal was packaged as routine "local tension".

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath embodies this culture of spectacle. From his official stage, he spews venom against Muslims, calling them "infiltrators" and "terror sympathisers". These are not fringe voices; they are the ruling elite. And yet, the so-called opposition parties respond not with outrage but with their own diluted versions of Hindutva, competing to prove who can appear more "pro-Hindu" while Muslim fears are silenced. This bipartisan consensus has made it clear: Muslims are not political subjects in India any more; they are political props.

The toll of this is more than physical; it is psychological and existential. To live as a Muslim today is to live as a permanent suspect – watched in the mosque, judged in the market, doubted in the classroom. Every Friday prayer feels like a risk. Every loudspeaker call of the azaan feels like a provocation to some, even though it is the heartbeat of a community. The Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi once wrote, "jinhe naaz hai Hind par, woh kahan hain?" ("Where are those proud of India now?"). The question echoes today: If this is India's greatness, why does it demand Muslim humiliation every day as proof?

The Ugandan-born Muslim scholar Mahmood Mamdani offers a framework that helps us name this reality. In his famous work Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, he explains how states and societies divide Muslims into two categories: The "acceptable" one who submits quietly, and the "dangerous" one who resists or even asserts dignity. In India, this division is weaponised daily. The Muslim who hides his faith, who stays invisible, is tolerated. But the Muslim who affirms his identity – who says "I love Muhammad (PBUH)" in public, who asks for equal rights, who resists erasure – is instantly cast as mujrim, the criminal. Mamdani reminds us that this is not about theology, it is about power: Who has the right to define legitimacy, and who must live under suspicion.

This is why lynching videos circulate on WhatsApp like memes, why anchors smirk when peddling conspiracy theories about "Muslim population explosion", and why mobs laugh after torching shops. Hatred is not just politics any more; it has become collective leisure. When cruelty becomes comedy, when humiliation becomes a prime-time script, the line between democracy and fascism has already collapsed.

History warns us: Societies that turn minority suffering into entertainment do not remain immune from the rot. The silence of German liberals during Nazi rallies, the casual indifference of Americans during the lynching of Black people, and the cheering of Israeli crowds during bombings in Gaza all stand as reminders that entertainment built on hate eventually devours the society itself. India is not exempt.

So I return to the question: Are we Muslims or mujrim? Why must we live on trial every day while killers walk free? Why must our children's deaths be erased while the state celebrates "Amrit Kaal"? The answer is not just for Muslims to give; it is for India's majority to decide whether they will continue to watch hate as their favourite serial or finally switch off the screen.

Pakistan's resolve against terrorism

Following setbacks on the battlefield, India has resorted to overt acts of terrorism through its operatives and facilitators in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), with clear evidence of these actions having been presented globally. Pakistani forces have also been up to the mark, guarding the frontiers both geographical and ideological. Across 2024 in KP, 799 terrorists were eliminated — an average of 2.1 per day — while 577 Pakistanis achieved martyrdom; 272 army personnel, 140 policemen and 165 innocent civilians. By mid-September 2025, Pakistan Army had carried out 10,115 intelligence-based operations, with nearly 40 per cent of them having taken place in KP.

These operations have resulted in 917 terrorists being eliminated — averaging 3.5 per day — while 516 Pakistanis lost their lives; 311 soldiers, 173 policemen and 32 civilians. Each martyr represents courage, sacrifice and the unyielding spirit of a nation determined to overcome terrorism. Terrorism in our homeland is a pressing issue that stems from identifiable causes and policies needing immediate attention. The primary driver of its rise is the failure to implement the National Action Plan (NAP). When measures are left un-executed, harmful elements get the space they need to thrive.

There is evidence that India is using Afghanistan as a base for terrorism against Pakistan, and we have urged Afghanistan not to allow its territory to be used this way. However, in recent days we have seen Pakistan is showing that its patience has limits as well. Afghanistan must ensure its territory does not become a safe haven for non-state actors whose presence poses a global threat. These groups have no ties to religion, ethnicity or tradition; their sole purpose is spreading violence and chaos.

The flow of weapons into Afghanistan, including some of American origin, poses a threat not only to Pakistan, but to the entire region. These arms can be used anywhere, creating widespread danger. The security of the Pakistani people cannot be compromised for the sake of any other country, especially Afghanistan. The Pakistani nation stands united and resolute against terrorists and their facilitators. The sacrifices of our martyrs will never be in vain. The entire nation deeply respects and honours the martyrs, and salutes their bravery. If terrorism is to be eradicated in the country, the nexus of crime must be eradicated. Terrorists and their facilitators, whoever they are or whatever position they occupy, must be confronted.

Dialogue is certainly the best approach to resolving issues, but when the enemy and its allies reject peace, it becomes necessary to respond the way they understand. Terrorists violate the most sacred tribal traditions by using children and women as shields, turning the innocent into instruments of savagery. Such methods reveal their moral bankruptcy and their complete incompatibility with any notion of honour or humanity.

Muhammad Mohsin Iqbal
Islamabad

T-Cash Card delivery confusion

The launch of the T-Cash Card by eTransit Punjab and Punjab Mass Transit Authority (PMA) was welcomed by the people as a step towards modern transport payments. Thousands of people applied online, selecting their nearest metro stations from the list provided on the relevant website. However, the delivery process has created confusion.

Although the online list contains many stations across Rawalpindi and Islamabad's Red Line metro, cards are now being delivered only at four stations: Saddar, 6th Road, Kashmir Highway and Pakistan Secretariat. The applicants are receiving text messages, directing them to the stations they originally selected, but those locations are not part of the delivery process. As a result, many commuters do not know where to collect their cards from.

Another problem is the restricted pickup timing. Many students and office workers are unable to visit the stations within the limited hours notified. Extending collection timings to at least 8pm would allow more people to receive their cards without disrupting their work or studies. The T-Cash Card is a useful service, but smoother planning and better communi-cation are needed to ensure convenience for the public. The authorities concerned should increase the delivery points and expand collection hours to avoid further frustration among the daily commuters.

Muhammad Anfal
Islamabad

Karachi's MUCT debate

The debate over municipal utility charges and taxes (MUCT) has gained momentum once again. While people understand that the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) needs funds to operate, the real concern is how effectively this money is being used. The mayor may have a proactive approach, but people just do not want tall claims anymore; they expect results in return for the taxes they pay.

Broken roads, missing or non-functional streetlights, and chronic water shortages in several neighbourhoods remain unaddressed. In addition, long-standing projects, like the construction of the Karimabad underpass and the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) across the University Road, have no completion date in sight. The consequent traffic congestion is a serious and frustrating hazard the people remain exposed to at least twice every day. If the KMC wants to continue collecting MUCT, it should also be willing to be held accountable to the people who want transparency in its operations. People deserve to see their contributions getting directly invested in improving municipal services. Only through practical steps, better infrastructure, reliable utilities, and a clear demonstration of where the money goes can public trust be restored. Karachi and its people do not resist taxation; they resist neglect. The people are willing to contribute, but they demand that their hard-earned money gets trans-lated into visible change in their daily lives.

Syed Oun Abbas
Karachi

Unsanitary conditions at Karachi University canteens

Most canteens at the University of Karachi function amid poor sanitary conditions. Uncovered food, greasy counters, unwashed utensils, and stagnant water around their premises are some of the hallmarks of these on-campus canteens. I have suffered health consequences after consuming food from one of the canteens. Many students have since shared similar experiences, but our complaints rarely reach the administration, and, even when they do, they are covered up by bureaucratic silence. The situation has only worsened with time. Food items are left exposed to flies, waste is discarded close to eating areas, and water dispensers are seldom cleaned. It is ironic that the university shows such disregard for basic health and hygiene.

Azlina Razzak Baloch
Karachi

Traffic jams on RCD Road

Traffic on the main RCD Road, which connects Karachi, Quetta and Chaman, mostly remains affected owing to severe traffic jams. The traffic police seem completely unable to manage the situation, especially during peak hours. Ambulances carrying patients remain stuck for long periods. During VIP movements, the road is often closed for hours, worsening the traffic flow even further. Loading pickups and heavy vehicles are the main and leading cause of the problem. It is surprising that even after a bypass road was made available to them, these commercial vehicles continue, or are allowed to continue, to use the main RCD Road. The government must take urgent steps to improve the traffic system across the provincial capital.

Kifa Jan Baloch
Awaran

Negligence in public hospitals

In public-sector hospitals, doctors arrive late, stay for a few hours and then leave. As a result, patients are left unattended, and many lives are lost due to negligence. Also, most doctors, if not all, run their own clinics to make additional earnings. Strict monitoring, fair salary reforms, and strong disciplinary measures are needed to ensure that doctors perform their duties with professional sincerity.

Fozia Asghar Ali
Turbat

An Iranian volcano appears to have woken up — 700,000 years after its last eruption

Stephanie Pappas

A volcano in southern Iran thought to have been extinct for some 710,000 years has stirred. New research published in the journal Geophysical Research Letters finds that an area of ground near the Taftan volcano's summit rose 3.5 inches (9 centimeters) over 10 months between July 2023 and May 2024. The uplift has not yet receded, suggesting a buildup of gas pressure below the volcano's surface.

The findings reveal the need for closer monitoring of the volcano, which hasn't been considered a risk to people before, said study senior author Pablo González, a volcanologist at the Institute of Natural Products and Agrobiology, a research center of the Spanish National Research Council (IPNA-CSIC). Volcanoes are considered extinct if they haven't erupted in the Holocene era, which started 11,700 years ago. Given its recent activity, González said, Taftan might be more accurately described as dormant. "It has to release somehow in the future, either violently or more quietly," González told Live Science. There is no reason to fear an imminent eruption, he said, but the volcano should be more closely monitored. Taftan volcano is a 12,927-foot (3,940 meters) stratovolcano in southeastern Iran, situated among a rumple of mountains and volcanoes that was formed by the subduction of the Arabian ocean crust under the Eurasian continent. Today, the volcano hosts an active hydrothermal system and smelly, sulfur-emitting vents called fumaroles, but it isn't known to have erupted in human history.

Astronomers spot the most powerful and distant 'odd radio circle' ever seen

Joanna Thompson

With help from citizen scientists, astronomers have spotted the most powerful "odd radio circle" (ORC) yet. The discovery could give astronomers a better understanding of how these unusual objects — and the galaxies they encircle — form.

"ORCs are among the most bizarre and beautiful cosmic structures we've ever seen — and they may hold vital clues about how galaxies and black holes co-evolve, hand in hand," Ananda Hota, founder of the RAD@home Astronomy Collaboratory and co-author of a new paper describing the findings, said in a statement.

ORCs were first described in 2019 by a team using the Australian Square Kilometer Array Pathfinder. They are essentially gigantic, faint rings of plasma that appear to surround certain galaxies and emit radio waves. To date, only around a dozen of these enormous objects — most of which are 10 to 20 times the size of the Milky Way — have been found. But researchers think the newly discovered ORC may offer some clues about how these cosmic behemoths form. This ORC is unique for a couple of reasons. First, it is made of not just one, but two rings interlocked like a Venn diagram. This is only the second time astronomers have observed such a configuration. Second, it is the most distant and powerful ORC found to date. Researchers detailed their findings in a paper published Oct. 2 in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.

The new rings were first flagged by citizen scientists taking part in the RAD@home Astronomy Collaboratory, an international citizen science research platform originally founded in India.

This 5-minute stress buster can boost your mood for days

Damian McNamara

When you're stressed, it's common to scroll through videos for a quick laugh or distraction. But new research suggests that switching to short inspirational videos – the kind where underdogs overcome challenges – may be a more effective, longer-lasting way to reduce stress. These types of videos offer hope, said lead study author Robin Nabi, PhD, a professor of communication at the University of California Santa Barbara. Although the drawbacks of digital media often get the spotlight, this study highlights its potential for good. The findings also build on previous research from Nabi and colleagues supporting hope's significant influence on mental health. "It's encouraging, especially in a time when things are challenging on a lot of different fronts, to feel like there's something we can do to support ourselves," Nabi said, "something that's easy, that's hopefully enjoyable, and offers these benefits." Don Grant, PhD, a media psychologist in Los Angeles and a fellow of the American Psychological Association, called the study "extremely significant" and said he was not surprised by the findings. "In my own work, I find that generating and supporting hope is a key factor in helping my clients reduce their stress," said Grant, who was not affiliated with the new study. Stress is often generated by catastrophic or negative self-talk, so to remember, believe in, or even discover hope "is a tremendous tool when successful."

Exercise and pain: How to move no matter how much you hurt

Jen Ator

When you're living with chronic pain, the idea of exercise can feel like punishment. Chronic pain patients are being constantly told that simply moving more will help them in the long run. True on paper, especially when you talk about building muscle to support joints. But for best results, research and patient experiences show that movement, done strategically, can reshape the way your body experiences pain.

"Movement is one of our top strategies to ease the sensitivity of the nerves," says Uschold. Think of it like resetting that faulty alarm. "When we introduce blood flow and movement into the nervous system, the sensitivity of the nerves calms down. And when nerves are less sensitive, the alarm is less likely to go off."

Exercise doesn't just retrain the nervous system — it strengthens the whole body. "Through gradual stretching and strengthening, the brain learns that movement is safe again, which dials down the pain response," says Helfrich. Over time, exercise also releases endorphins, improves mood, and boosts energy, helping break the depression-pain cycle. The science backs it up. Dozens of studies show that regular activity reduces pain severity and improves function. A 2022 meta-analysis found that patients with fibromyalgia who followed aerobic, strength, or flexibility programs reported less pain, fewer depressive symptoms, and improved quality of life months later. And a 2017 systematic review even found that people who tolerated mild discomfort during exercise did just as well long-term as those who stayed pain-free, suggesting a little soreness isn't harmful and may even signal progress.

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