Crimes against journalists: a disturbing trend - Page 5

Nil returns, nil reform - Page 6

Pakistan's economy finds its footing? - Page 7

WEEKLY
Cutting Edge
INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE • ANALYTICAL

SMOG: A CRISIS OF OUR OWN MAKING

weeklycuttingedge.com CPL # 109 4-10 November 2025 Vol# 20 Issue # 51 Rs. 100

پاکی کا احساس، ہر بار
Treet®
Hygiene
Razor with Comb
پاکی پائیں
پاکیزہ رہیں
USE ONLY ON DRY SKIN
/ Treet.grooming
Pakistan Standards
CM/L-2019/2008(R)

Index | CUTTING EDGE

About Us

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

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

Smog: A crisis of our own making

Farhan Khan

Punjab, especially its provincial capital Lahore, is gasping under the grip of severe smog. Over the past two weeks, a thick blanket of haze has descended upon the city, turning it into one of the most polluted urban centres in the world.

According to monitoring data, Lahore's Air Quality Index (AQI) has consistently remained above 400 in recent days — a level deemed hazardous for human health. As per IQAir data, the Gulberg-III monitoring station last week recorded a staggering AQI of 613 between 7am and 8am, while other stations across the city reported readings of 515 and 465. Other cities in Punjab are also battling dangerously high pollution levels. Gujranwala recorded an AQI of 431, while Faisalabad reached 337 — both dozens of times higher than the safe limit.

Experts identify PM2.5 — microscopic particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream — as the main pollutant. In Lahore, PM2.5 concentrations reached 241 micrograms per cubic metre, nearly 48 times higher than the World Health Organisation's prescribed limit. Public health specialists warn of the long-term impact of such exposure. According to WHO, prolonged inhalation of polluted air can heighten the risk of heart disease, lung cancer, asthma, and stroke. Children, the elderly, and people with respiratory conditions are particularly vulnerable.

To mitigate the crisis, the Lahore Waste Management Company has launched an anti-smog operation, deploying 16 mechanical washers, 50 regular washers, and 400 workers for road cleaning and water sprinkling. Lahore police have also intensified their crackdown on individuals and entities contributing to environmental pollution. So far this year, 197 FIRs have been registered and 203 suspects arrested by various police stations across the city. Meanwhile, the Ravi Urban Development Authority has reportedly stepped up operations within its jurisdiction, banning the burning of crop residue and all types of solid waste.

For several consecutive winters, Pakistan has ranked as the third most polluted country in the world. Industrial emissions, vehicular smoke, and crop residue burning are the main culprits behind the worsening smog. Winds carrying pollutants from across the Indian border further aggravate the situation. Transportation remains a major contributor to air pollution, with more than 4.2 million motorcycles traversing Lahore's congested streets daily. Pakistan's continued reliance on outdated Euro-II diesel fuel has further deteriorated air quality. The country's freight and passenger fleets are still dominated by pre-Euro and Euro-II trucks and buses, many of which emit dangerously high levels of pollutants. Weak regulatory enforcement and ineffective vehicle inspection systems allow these aging, smoke-belching vehicles to remain operational, making Pakistan's transport sector one of its most damaging pollution sources.

The World Bank estimates that outdoor air pollution in Pakistan causes 22,000 premature adult deaths and results in the loss of 163,432 disability-adjusted life years annually. Indoor air pollution, meanwhile, leads to 28,000 deaths each year and causes 40 million acute respiratory infections. Furthermore, the 2024 Air Quality Index report revealed that poor air quality shortens average life expectancy by 3.9 years — and by as much as seven years in heavily polluted cities such as Lahore, Peshawar, Gujranwala, and Rawalpindi.

According to the World Bank, environmental degradation costs the country nearly 7 per cent of its GDP — around Rs365 billion annually — with the greatest burden falling on the poor. Pakistan's agriculture sector, on which 2.6 billion people depend for their livelihoods, also suffers heavily from the deteriorating environment.

Given the worsening air quality crisis that engulfs the country each year, Pakistan urgently needs to adopt a proactive approach to setting and enforcing air quality standards. Yet, no meaningful progress has been made in this regard. Last week, the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Climate Change was informed that Pakistan's vehicular emission standards remain stuck at Euro-II levels — a benchmark the rest of the world surpassed nearly two decades ago. Most developed nations now use Euro-VI or equivalent standards, introduced by the European Union in the 1990s, which set increasingly strict limits on pollutants such as nitrogen oxide and hydrocarbons.

According to media reports, the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency (Pak-EPA) — responsible for formulating and enforcing the National Environmental Quality Standards (NEQS) — is plagued by severe financial and technical constraints. The agency, which operates under the Ministry of Climate Change, must urgently update vehicular and industrial emission standards in line with global benchmarks and Pakistan's worsening environmental realities. Equally crucial is the establishment of robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, along with clear and sustainable funding channels for environmental agencies at both the federal and provincial levels.

The legal framework to hold polluters accountable already exists, but the will and capacity to enforce it remain absent. This gap must be urgently addressed. Targeted interventions are needed to curb industrial emissions and crop burning — two of Pakistan's most toxic pollution sources. Moreover, emerging climate challenges must now shape all levels of policymaking, from energy and agriculture to water management and urban planning. Without adopting a comprehensive and innovative strategy, Pakistan's air quality crisis will continue to worsen, pushing the country further toward environmental and public health catastrophe.

Crimes against journalists: a disturbing trend

Nasim Ahmed

The 2025 International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists (IDEI) was observed throughout the world last week under the theme of Chat GBV: Raising Awareness on AI-facilitated Gender-Based Violence against Women Journalists. This year's theme highlights the threats women journalists face in the digital space and the negative effect this can have on freedom of expression generally.

According to UNESCO, between 2006 and 2025 over 1,800 journalists have been killed around the world, with 9 out of 10 cases remaining judicially unresolved. Thus, impunity emboldens the fascist forces and leads to more killings. UNESCO is of the view that impunity damages whole societies by covering up serious human rights abuses, corruption, and crime.

In recognition of the far-reaching consequences of impunity, especially of crimes against journalists, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/68/163 at its 68th session in 2013 which proclaimed November 2 as the 'International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists' (IDEI). This resolution condemns all attacks and violence against journalists and media workers. It also urges Member States to do their utmost to prevent violence against journalists and media workers, to ensure accountability, bring to justice perpetrators of crimes against journalists and media workers, and ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies. It further calls upon States to promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently.

The special day encourages governments, civil society, the media, and everyone concerned to uphold the rule of law and join in the global efforts to end impunity. The latest UNESCO data on killings of journalists show that the global impunity rate for journalist killings remains shockingly high at 85%. In his message on the day António Guterres, UN Secretary-General said: "Media professionals around the globe face mounting perils in their pursuit of truth – including verbal abuse, legal threats, physical attacks, imprisonment, and torture. Some are even killed. On this International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, we demand justice. Gaza has been the deadliest place for journalists in any conflict. I call once again for independent and impartial investigations. Impunity anywhere is not only an injustice to the victims and their families – it is an assault on press freedom, an invitation to further violence, and a threat to democracy itself. All governments must investigate every case. Prosecute every perpetrator. And ensure that journalists can do their jobs freely everywhere."

In his message on the day, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said the government would take steps to ensure effective investigation, justice, and prosecution in cases of crimes against journalists. To quote the PM, "Today reminds us that a free, informed, and responsible press is the foundation of any democratic society. Journalists enable public access to facts and are torchbearers of truth. Violence, threats, or reprisals against them while performing their duties are attacks on freedom of expression. The government of Pakistan is committed to protecting press freedom. A free press guarantees a strong, transparent, and democratic Pakistan."

The digital revolution has created new opportunities as well as challenges. Women are particularly at risk, especially those in public-facing roles such as journalists, politicians, and scientists. They face AI-driven threats, surveillance, deepfakes and other forms of harassment. This issue, known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), has become alarmingly prevalent in ghe digital space. "Chat GBV" is a call to action for all stakeholders to tackle Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through various initiatives, including talking about it and proposing solutions.

Murder is the most extreme form of media censorship, but journalists are also face countless threats - ranging from kidnapping, torture and other physical attacks to harassment. Threats of violence and attacks against journalists create a climate of fear for media professionals, impeding the free flow of information for all citizens. In many cases, threats of violence and attacks against journalists are not properly investigated. If justice systems vigorously investigate all threats of violence against journalists, this will send a powerful message that society will not tolerate attacks against journalists and against the right to freedom of expression for all.

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity is the first coordinated effort to address the issue. Since the plan was adopted, the issue of safety of journalists has gained a higher visibility in the UN, as evidenced by the increasing number of declarations, resolutions and other normative texts, and the UN Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights. Protecting journalists is also part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The day comes as a reminder that Pakistan is consistently ranked as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists due to frequent threats, physical attacks, and a pervasive culture of impunity for perpetrators. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Pakistan was ranked 158th out of 180 countries. Recently, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) condemned the worsening situation for media professionals in Pakistan. The IFJ has expressed deep concern over targeted killings of journalists, misuse of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (Peca) to file cases against media workers, undeclared censorship, harassment by state and non-state actors, forced layoffs, and non-payment of salaries.

Nil returns, nil reform

Muhammad Ali

In the quiet corners of Islamabad's tax offices, a quiet rebellion unfolds—not with protests or petitions, but with blank forms. Out of 5.5 million income tax returns filed so far in FY2025-26, a staggering 1.7 million declare zero taxable income, nearly one in three filers opting for the "nil" box. This isn't a glitch in the system; it's a symptom of a deeper malaise, where procedural checkboxes trump real revenue, and the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) chases shadows instead of substance.

For a nation grappling with a 10 percent tax-to-GDP ratio—the lowest in South Asia—this flood of empty declarations exposes a regime that coerces compliance from the compliant while letting evaders roam free. As the filing deadline looms, extended to snag three million more returns, the real question isn't why so many report nothing—it's why the powerful contribute so little. In a country where 44.7 percent live below $4.20 a day, this isn't inefficiency; it's inequity, eroding trust in a state that demands more from its workers than its wheeler-dealers.

The surge in nil returns shouldn't shock policymakers—it's the predictable fruit of a tax architecture built on inclusion over extraction. To join the Active Taxpayers' List (ATL), a golden ticket for economic participation, filing is mandatory, even if your income hovers below the Rs600,000 annual threshold. Non-filers face a gauntlet: 20 percent withholding on bank transactions, doubled property transfer taxes, sky-high duties on car buys, and blacklisting from formal loans. Banks, risk-averse, shun them like bad debts; businesses, wary of audits, ghost them in deals. So, enter the nil filers: pensioners drawing tax-exempt annuities, homemakers with no earnings, overseas Pakistanis remitting without local income—all compelled to submit blanks just to keep doors open.

In mature economies like Canada or Australia, with 25 percent tax-to-GDP ratios, such folks skip filing altogether, their compliance assumed. But in Pakistan, where evasion gnaws 60 percent of the informal economy, universal mandates are the blunt tool to drag everyone into the net—even those with empty hands.

This procedural obsession yields a hollow victory. The FBR, under IMF pressure from the $7 billion Extended Fund Facility, celebrates 5.5 million filings as a win, but 31 percent nil dilutes the pot. Worse, 977,000 filers report less income than last year, including exporters claiming losses on $15 billion shipments. The agency's response? A post-deadline audit blitz, hiring 2,000 auditors to probe nil and low-income cases. Scrutinize drops in declared earnings? Fair game for under-reporting hunts. But mass audits on zeros? A resource sinkhole. With FBR's 30,000 staff stretched thin, chasing pensioners or expat remitters yields pennies—perhaps Rs1,000–2,000 per case—while evaders in real estate or exports hide billions. Whistleblower rewards, eyed at Rs150 million from Rs5 million, sound bold, but without data access or digitization, they're theater. The real heist happens elsewhere, in sectors where under-reporting is art form.

Q1 FY2025-26 revenue data lays it bare: the salaried class—600,000 souls, teachers to techies—forked over Rs130 billion, up 18 percent year-on-year, more than double the Rs71.1 billion from exporters (Rs45 billion), wholesalers (Rs11.5 billion), and retailers (Rs14.6 billion) combined. Property flips, elite playground, added Rs60 billion—still half salaried's haul. Exporters, shipping $30–31 billion abroad, pay 1 percent on turnover—effective rates under 1 percent after subsidies—while a Rs300,000 monthly earner coughs 13 percent (Rs38,833 annually, down from Rs45,833). Retailers, in cash bazaars, declare fractions via presumptive schemes; wholesalers ghost audits. This isn't coincidence—it's design. Final tax regimes cap liability; benami holdings shield assets. The IMF demands Rs15 trillion total revenue, but regressive withholdings (75 percent of "direct" taxes) squeeze the poor, salaried max at 35 percent slabs. Result? A system where compliance costs honesty: a Rawalpindi clerk's Rs60,000 salary loses Rs8,000 to tax, leaving scraps for floods; a DHA developer flips Rs50 million plots, pays Rs2.25 million, pockets the rest untaxed.

The human erosion is profound. Salaried workers, 20–30 million strong, fund 56 percent of income tax—Rs391 billion in FY25's first nine months—yet watch traders evade via informal deals. Youth, 1.6 million entering yearly, face 10 percent unemployment; women, 21 percent participation, sidelined by barriers that could add 20–30 percent GDP if lifted. Poverty surges—21.5 percent drop glacial amid floods erasing gains—while resentment brews. Social media erupts: #TaxTheRich trends with payslips versus tycoon yachts; Pakistan Taxpayers' Alliance decries "discrimination," pushing exporter relief. In Khuzdar, 71.5 percent poor, a nil-filing widow accesses loans but starves on Rs20,000 pension—tax-free, yet system-shackled.

Reform beckons, but politics stalls. Confront lobbies: audit exporters' losses, cap presumptive rates at 5 percent audited profits, wealth tax feudal 2 percent on Rs10 crore+ holdings. Digitize: AI risk-scans, POS integration netting Rs1 trillion extra. Exempt true nils—pensioners, low-earners—via auto-waivers; redirect audits to high-yield shadows. Slash current spending 25 percent—elite perks trimmed, assets auctioned—freeing Rs3 trillion for Benazir expansions (Rs50 monthly to 50 million). Tie MPAs to compliance: districts with 20 percent base growth get bonus funds.

Pakistan's tax tale is cautionary: coerce filings, harvest illusions; chase equity, reap revenue. The 1.7 million nils aren't villains—they're victims of a net too wide, too weak. The FBR must pivot: tax power, not paperwork. For the clerk, the widow, the youth—the system owes fairness. Until then, compliance crumbles, evasion endures, and a nation pays the price in lost trust and stunted dreams. The deadline ticks. Will leaders audit the empty, or fill the void?

Pakistan's economy finds its footing?

Husnain Shahid

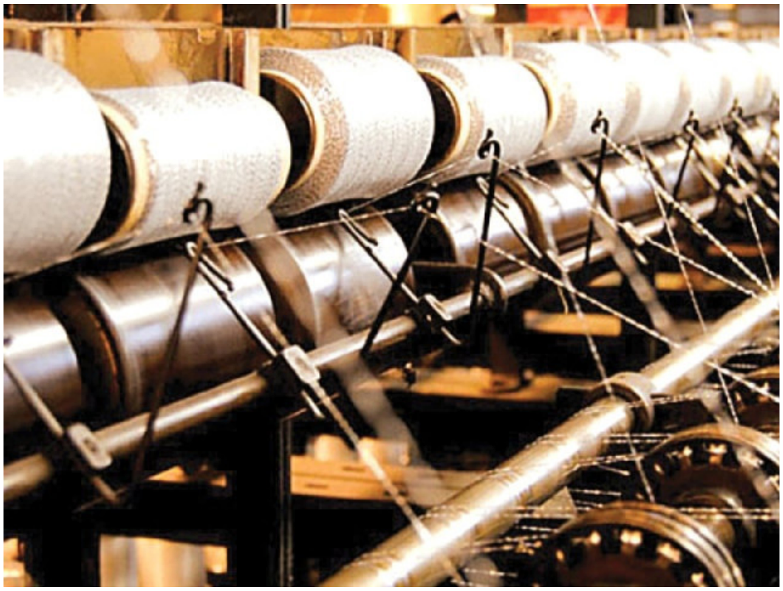
In the shadow of recent floods that submerged dreams and fields alike, Pakistan's economy emerges with a quiet resolve, as outlined in the Ministry of Finance's Monthly Economic Update and Outlook Report.

The document charts a course of gradual revival, crediting the first quarter of FY2025–26's positive momentum to a blend of decisive policy interventions, ironclad fiscal restraint, and forward-looking reforms. For a country long synonymous with volatility—from 2023's near-default brink to 2025's deluges claiming Rs430 billion in agricultural losses—this report isn't mere bureaucracy. It's a testament to endurance, where every stabilized indicator whispers of potential, reminding us that recovery isn't a sprint, but a deliberate march toward sustainability.

The first-quarter performance, spanning July to September, radiates encouragement. Economic activities hummed with vitality: industrial output rebounded 19.9 percent in Q4 FY25, spilling into early gains this year, while services expanded 3.72 percent. Fiscal discipline shines brightest—a deficit trimmed to 5.4 percent of GDP, down from double digits—freeing resources for growth drivers like infrastructure and social nets. Reforms underpin it all: the National Tariff Policy slashing duties to boost exports, digital tax platforms capturing Rs1 trillion extra, and energy tweaks curbing Rs2 trillion in circular debt. Picture the Faisalabad mill owner, powering machines without blackouts, or the Lahore entrepreneur scaling via eased credit at 8 percent rates. These aren't hypotheticals; they're the ripple effects of a government that's learned from pain, turning IMF conditionality into owned progress.

Central to this narrative is the fresh staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund, a handshake that transcends paperwork. Under the $7 billion Extended Fund Facility, it validates Pakistan's reform zeal: revenue mobilization from 10 percent to 12 percent of GDP, subsidy rationalization saving Rs300 billion, and transparent debt management. The ministry frames it as a reaffirmation of sound fundamentals—reserves at $19.8 billion covering three months of imports, rupee volatility tamed. This isn't blind faith; it's earned. Bilateral lifelines from Saudi Arabia and China, plus multilateral nods from the World Bank, weave a safety net, allowing focus on long-term sustainability. Governance, once a byword for graft, now emphasizes accountability: PSDP funds tied to outcomes, anti-corruption drives netting high-profile scalps.

Investor confidence, that elusive butterfly, has alighted. The report spotlights a dramatic CDS plunge—2,200 basis points in 15 months—easing default fears from 2023's abyss. This isn't abstract finance; it's a lifeline for borrowing costs, now below 10 percent for sovereign bonds. Fitch's "Excellent" rating for green, social, and sustainable instruments catapults Pakistan into the $1 trillion global



eco-finance arena. Imagine solar arrays in Thar deserts or mangrove barriers shielding Karachi—projects that not only green the ledger but employ thousands, aligning with SDGs. The sustainable financing framework, with rollovers secured and fresh issuances eyed, bolsters market trust, drawing FDI whispers from $1.9 billion toward $5 billion targets.

Inflation, the household villain, tempers the good news. Floods have exerted upward pull—supply chains snarled, wheat spiking 50 percent monthly—but the ministry forecasts 5–6 percent this month, hugging the SBP's 5–7 percent band. From 38 percent infernos, this is progress, courtesy of global commodity dips and demand softness. Yet, vigilance is key: 2025 deluges could reignite food prices, eroding the 4.5 percent FY25 low. The commitment rings true—monetary tools sharpened, strategic reserves stocked—ensuring stability amid external jolts like US tariffs nipping exports 1.5 percent.

Social protection, the report's humane core, shields the fragile. Amid 44.7 percent poverty below $4.20 daily, expansions to Benazir Income Support—Rs10 billion yearly, Rs50 monthly to 50 million—cushion inflation's bite, lifting nutrition 15 percent and schooling. Inclusive growth targets the 1.6 million youth workforce entrants: SME loans creating 2 million jobs, women's programs from 21 percent participation via creches and safe transit. Multilateral partnerships amplify: World Bank's $2 billion portfolio funds skills hubs, IMF ties weave SDGs into budgets.

Agriculture, the flood-scarred giant, tallies Rs430 billion losses—rice, cotton, sugarcane battered, threatening textile's $16 billion exports and food for 240 million. Yet, revival stirs: loans up 20 percent, machinery imports 30 percent for tractors and drips. Early yields tick upward in Punjab cooperatives; the Risk Coverage Scheme de-risks credit for 97 percent smallholders under 12.5 acres. The Electronic Warehouse Receipt system, if commercialized, could inject Rs500 billion, empowering farmers over middleman debt traps.

Pakistan's horizon gleams, but pitfalls lurk—geopolitical flares, trade barriers, climate reprisals shaving 2–3 percent GDP yearly. The ministry's blueprint—fiscal prudence, reform acceleration, private sector embrace—is the antidote. From CDS triumphs to Fitch accolades, these are building blocks for 5 percent growth by 2030. For the Orangi job-seeker, the rural mother rationing rice, the urban teacher taxed thin—this recovery must touch ground. With elite sacrifices for progressive taxes (45 percent slabs), green investments, and resilient fields, Pakistan can forge prosperity. The path is steady, the will tested. In this November dawn, the economy stirs—not flawless, but forward. The floods fade; the future beckons. Will leaders seize it, turning recovery into renaissance for all?

Pakistan's economy is growing—but its people are being left behind

Shahid Hussain

In the teeming lanes of Karachi's Orangi Town, where the air hums with the clamor of motorbikes and street vendors, 22-year-old Sana clutches a crumpled resume, standing in a snaking queue outside a garment factory. The job posting promised 50 openings; over 300 have shown up, many like her—fresh graduates with dreams deferred by an economy that grows too sluggishly to absorb them.

Pakistan adds 1.6 million youths to its workforce annually, a tidal wave of ambition crashing against a shoreline of opportunity that expands by mere ripples. The government celebrates a GDP growth of 3 percent as a sign of recovery, but for Sana and millions more, it's a cruel jest. The World Bank's Pakistan Development Update Report 2025 delivers a stark verdict: this trajectory is "insufficient" to meaningfully reduce poverty or unemployment. Having climbed from 2.6 percent in the last fiscal year to 3 percent now, with projections of 3.4 percent in FY27, the economy inches forward like a weary traveler. Yet for a nation of 240 million souls, where 44.7 percent—over 100 million people—subsist below the $4.20-a-day poverty line, and rural destitution towers at double the urban rate, this isn't revival; it's stagnation masquerading as progress.

Devastating floods continue to submerge croplands and cripple factories, turning fragile gains into losses. The report serves as an urgent siren: absent sweeping, inclusive reforms, Pakistan's so-called recovery will inflate GDP charts while abandoning the masses in the dust.

The statistics paint a grim tableau, one that underscores the chasm between macroeconomic headlines and lived realities. At 3 percent growth, the economy scarcely outruns the population boom of 2.1 percent per year, rendering per capita income virtually frozen at $1,812—a figure that buys less amid lingering inflation. Employment generation lags catastrophically: only 600,000 to 800,000 jobs materialize annually, far short of the 1.6 million new entrants, driving official youth unemployment to 10 percent and underemployment into the shadows, where part-time gigs or informal hustles mask deeper despair.

Poverty metrics reveal glacial shifts; at the $3.20-a-day threshold, the rate stands at 22.2 percent today, projected to ease to 21.5 percent by FY27—a meager 0.7 percentage point decline that leaves roughly 2 million people ensnared in hardship. Zoom out to the $4.20 line, and the picture darkens: 44.7 percent of Pakistanis remain poor, with the floods having wiped out a decade of anti-poverty strides in a single deluge. Regional disparities amplify the crisis—in Khuzdar, Balochistan, a staggering 71.5 percent wallow in extreme poverty; in Sindh's flood-ravaged districts, a farmer watches his Rs50,000 rice harvest dissolve into muddy waters, compelling his 14-year-old daughter to abandon school for domestic labor.

The World Bank cautions that this yawning jobs deficit breeds not just inequality but social volatility—crime spikes, protests erupt, as seen in the 2022 wheat shortage riots that paralyzed cities. Without intervention, these pressures could ignite broader unrest, fracturing the social fabric.

Inflation, though retreating from its tyrannical highs, continues to gnaw at the vulnerable. Peaking at 38 percent in 2023, it averages 7.2 percent this fiscal year, forecasted to dip to 6.8 percent in FY27. Yet food inflation remains a volatile beast, fueled by supply chains shattered by floods; wheat prices surged 50 percent in a single month this September. In Karachi's low-income enclaves, a mother rations meals as flour bags become luxuries; in rural heartlands, where agriculture employs 40 percent of the workforce, fertilizer costs have ballooned 40 percent, and diesel prices have doubled, squeezing smallholders into debt traps. Climate vulnerabilities exacerbate this: the 2025 monsoon floods threaten to slash agricultural output by 10 percent, reigniting inflationary spirals and widening fiscal deficits. The Bank advocates an investment-driven paradigm to tame prices, generate employment, and bolster real wages. But Pakistan's investment-to-GDP ratio hovers at a paltry 14 percent—half of India's robust 28 percent—strangled by elevated policy rates (currently 11 percent), exorbitant energy tariffs, and bureaucratic mazes that deter both domestic and foreign capital.

Deeper structural ailments fester beneath the surface, demanding surgical reform. The tax-to-GDP ratio, mired at 10 percent, ranks as South Asia's nadir; the Federal Board of Revenue collects Rs9.5 trillion annually but requires Rs15 trillion to fund essential public goods like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The system is profoundly regressive—75 percent of collections stem from indirect taxes like sales VAT withholdings, which disproportionately burden salaried workers and consumers while affluent elites, including feudal landowners, exploit loopholes. Exports stagnate at $31 billion, overly dependent on low-value textiles; protective tariffs averaging 13 percent, coupled with logistical bottlenecks—containers dwell twice as long at ports as in Vietnam—erode global competitiveness. The ease of doing business? Pakistan languishes at 108th worldwide, plagued by chronic power outages, policy somersaults that erode investor confidence, and foreign direct investment trickling in at just $1.9 billion. Governance deficits compound the woes: post-18th Amendment devolution has left provinces cash-strapped for local services, while corruption diverts funds from the Public Sector Development Programme. Climate change acts as a multiplier of misery—the 2022 floods inflicted $30 billion in damages, with recurrent events poised to shave 2–3 percent off GDP annually if unaddressed.

Amid the gloom, the report identifies tentative bright spots that could, if nurtured, spark transformation. Fiscal prudence under the IMF's $7 billion Extended Fund Facility has narrowed the deficit to 5.4 percent of GDP, bolstering foreign reserves to $19.8 billion—a buffer against external shocks. Inflation's descent from 23.4 percent last year, a Q4 industrial rebound of 19.9 percent, and record remittances of $38 billion provide breathing room. Policy tweaks like the National Tariff Policy are trimming duties, while digital tax initiatives have captured an additional Rs1 trillion. Sustained, these could propel Pakistan toward 5 percent growth by 2030, unlocking the demographic dividend of a youth bulge where 60 percent are under 30.

The roadmap ahead requires bold, immediate action across multiple fronts. Tax justice must be prioritized: elevate the ratio to 15 percent through progressive income slabs (45 percent on earnings above Rs10 million), introduce wealth taxes on vast feudal holdings, and align capital gains at 30 percent. Phase out regressive withholdings; incentivize formalization of the 60 percent informal economy via digital filing rebates of 10 percent. Export acceleration demands slashing average tariffs to 5 percent, overhauling Karachi and Qasim ports to halve container dwell times, and granting 50 percent utility subsidies to export-oriented firms. To ignite a job creation engine, allocate Rs500 billion for small and medium enterprises—offering 8 percent concessional loans, establishing tech incubation parks in 10 major cities, and targeting 2 million new positions. Women's economic empowerment is non-negotiable: mandate safe public transport, workplace creches, and stringent anti-harassment enforcement to boost female labor participation from 21 percent, potentially adding 20–30 percent to GDP.

Climate resilience calls for a Rs1 trillion dedicated fund: construct efficient irrigation canals, distribute drought-resistant seeds, and roll out micro-insurance covering 80 percent of farmers against shocks. Finally, governance overhaul should link lawmakers' constituency funds to measurable outcomes, expedite commercial courts for swift contract enforcement, and mandate annual publication of regional equity audits. Scale up the Benazir Income Support Programme to Rs10 billion, delivering Rs50 monthly stipends to 50 million via biometric digital IDs for transparent, leak-proof aid.

For Sana queuing in Orangi, 3 percent growth is an abstraction without a paycheck. For the Sindh farmer surveying flooded fields, it's irrelevant to daily survival. The World Bank's admonition rings true: tinkering at the edges won't suffice. Pakistan craves a growth revolution—one that is inclusive, sustainable, and audacious. With a youthful population brimming with potential, the window for a demographic windfall is open but narrowing. Leaders must tax entrenched power, empower the marginalized, and fortify against nature's fury. Plant these seeds of reform now, or consign 1.6 million young dreams to annual oblivion. The soil is fertile; the question is whether those in power will cultivate a thriving future or allow it to wither in neglect.

The first honest American president

Eric Reinhart

Every era of the American government has had its scandal. Trump's innovation is to make scandal itself a governing philosophy. Although it is tempting to see the Trump regime's corruption – its open profiteering, its use of the state as an instrument of vengeance and self-enrichment – as a perversion of American democracy, the truth is more unsettling: it's a mirror. The difference between Trump's era and those before it is not the presence of corruption, but its visibility and the nation's collective incapacity to feel scandalised by it.

For decades, corruption in the United States was moralised as a deviation from an otherwise legitimate system. From the rail barons and company towns of the 19th century to the revolving door of Wall Street and Washington in the 20th and 21st, American capitalism has always depended on the conversion of public office into private profit. When politicians became lobbyists and habitual inside traders, when corporations wrote legislation, when government bailouts were given to bank executives and political donors, when hospital executives grew rich on public subsidies while their workers and patients sank into precarity, the mechanisms of corruption were disguised as professionalism, efficiency, or expertise. The neoliberal order taught us to equate virtue with success and to see moral worth in market value.

By the time Trump arrived, corruption had been normalised as realism. Trump merely stripped it of its polite fictions – not only in domestic politics but in foreign policy, where the US has long cloaked its violence in the language of democracy and human rights. Trump's extrajudicial killings of unidentified individuals via unilateral military strikes in Latin American waters, for example, are not a break with American precedent but its most naked expression, the open performance of practices that past administrations enacted beneath the cloak of deniability and euphemism. Likewise, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) brutality and cruelty under Trump are not new. It is instead largely a dramatised, made-for-TV version of what Barack Obama – who earned the title of "deporter in chief" – pioneered over the years in which he built the career of Tom Homan, now Trump's so-called border czar. Like Trump, Obama was a great admirer of Homan, awarding him a 2015 Presidential Rank Award for Distinguished Service to honour his passion for rounding up immigrants, separating children from their parents and caging people in detention camps.

The brazenness of Trump's corruption and cruelty – the nepotism, the grift, the self-dealing, the open auctioning of government contracts and justice – does not shock us because it feels like an honest expression of what we already knew: that American government and institutions serve the wealthy individuals who own them, whether directly or indirectly through their donations and lobbyists or via networks of influence, bribery and extortion. The outrage that might once have followed is replaced by a weary recognition that things have always worked this way.

Trump, in this sense, is not an aberration but a revelation. If earlier administrations moralised capitalism as a meritocracy that shored up the egos of billionaires and the politicians they allowed into office, Trump performs it as pure id: unrestrained appetite, unashamed greed. His corruption is not a sickness in the system but the system's disavowed truth made flesh.

What's been destroyed is not legality but the psychic architecture that once made illegality feel objectionable. What was once experienced as transgression is now enjoyed as truth-telling. The superego no longer forbids but commands us to enjoy naked displays of power and our own complicity in them.

In a society where every sphere of life has been subordinated to the logic of accumulation – where medicine, education and even care itself are governed by profit – the exposure of corruption does not generate collective moral renewal. It confirms what everyone suspects: that there is no ethical order left to defend. The result is a form of political paralysis. We can name corruption but cannot act against it, because doing so would require dismantling the very system we've been trained to believe is inevitable and upon which our nation, as we know it, is built.

Liberal responses to corruption falter for the same reason. They appeal to morality – to decency, fairness, honesty – without confronting the fact that these values have been emptied of institutional substance and stable cultural ground. The right, meanwhile, has learned to weaponise this emptiness. Trump's genius lies in his capacity to turn corruption into spectacle, to make its shamelessness feel for many like authenticity and its violence like freedom. His followers recognise, rightly, that corruption pervades elite life; what they mistake is the source of it. They see decadence in bureaucrats, not billionaires; in migrants, not monopolies.

If corruption no longer provokes meaningful response, let alone popular revolt, it's because – under Democratic Party branding – "the resistance" has been commercialised. Indignation has become a lifestyle, cynicism a badge of sophistication. Political criticism and condemnation have been thoroughly commodified, folded into the culture industry – a machine that turns moral disgust into product and aphorisms about tyranny into New York Times bestsellers alongside corrupt politicians' memoirs. When politics becomes entertainment and outrage becomes a corporate aesthetic, fascism no longer needs to disguise itself as virtue; it simply needs to put on a better show than its supposed opponents.

Trump's corruption rages on unchecked, not because people don't see it, but because they no longer believe anything better is possible. To be scandalised, after all, is still to believe in a moral world that can be violated. What we face now is something darker: a society that no longer believes in its own possibility for redemption.

Rebuilding an ethical imagination will require more than exposing corruption. It will require building genuine public and civic institutions designed to serve working-class people rather than the interests of the wealthy and investing in forms of collective, reciprocal caregiving that give democratic ethics concrete life and value.

Corruption thrives in the ruins of solidarity. To meaningfully oppose it, we must build a society in which truth and honesty are not matters of individual performance but of shared public purpose, confrontation with our sordid national past, and a genuine departure from it

After decades of delay, final phase of Afghan repatriation begins

Raza Khan

Eventually, the federal government has made a sane and strategic decision: to immediately repatriate all Afghans living in Pakistan and not grant any further extensions in their stay. This long-overdue move should have been implemented decades ago. Yet, as the saying goes, "better late than never." The decision to send back millions of Afghans to their homeland is expected to have salutary effects on Pakistan's law and order situation and overall stability.

The decision was taken in a recent meeting chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. It comes at a particularly critical juncture in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations — following a week-long border conflict between the two countries in which several security personnel, terrorists, and civilians lost their lives. The timing suggests that the government's move is a direct response to these violent confrontations. One can only hope that the federal government will stand firm on this policy and implement it in letter and spirit. For decades, the presence of millions of Afghan refugees has posed a grave security risk to Pakistan, particularly in the relatively underdeveloped provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan, where law and order has long remained fragile. Therefore, the repatriation process must proceed on a war footing.

When Pakistan first decided, in November 2023, to begin sending back more than four million Afghans — both legal and illegal residents, starting with the latter category — it was based on credible evidence of Afghan involvement in numerous terrorist and criminal activities across the country. Being foreigners, Afghans have been difficult for Pakistani authorities to monitor and control effectively. This challenge led law enforcement and security agencies to recommend their repatriation, arguing that it was impossible to restore order in KP and Balochistan without removing this destabilising element. Nevertheless, the November 2023 decision was already decades late.

According to the briefing presented in the recent meeting chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, as of October 16, 2025, a total of 1,477,592 Afghan nationals had been repatriated. However, no precise figure was provided for the number of illegal Afghans who have left. It is believed that around half a million have returned so far, but the actual number of undocumented Afghans still residing in Pakistan may exceed two million.

One of the most crucial outcomes of the federal meeting was the reaffirmation of Islamabad's resolve not to extend the stay of any Afghans living in Pakistan. The decision to deny further extensions had been made earlier in August 2025. Over the past 40 years, successive governments in Pakistan have repeatedly granted open-ended extensions to Afghan refugees, both registered and unregistered. This recurring leniency had created a sense of permanence, with many Afghans and even Pakistanis believing that Afghan refugees had acquired a lasting abode in Pakistan — despite repeated government announcements, including in October 2023, of their eventual repatriation.

In August 2025, Pakistan took a decisive step by refusing to grant another extension and ordering the expulsion of 1.3 million Afghans holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards issued by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). These PoR cardholders represented the last group of Afghan refugees legally residing in Pakistan without visas. The formal repatriation drive for PoR holders commenced on September 1, 2025.

In preparation, the interior ministry had earlier instructed provincial governments to begin mapping PoR cardholders and developing repatriation action plans. On August 4, the ministry issued a detailed letter to the chief secretaries and police chiefs of all provinces, as well as to Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, outlining the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP). The letter directed that voluntary returns begin immediately, followed by formal deportations from September 1. The NADRA was tasked with deregistering returning Afghans at transit points, while the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) was instructed to facilitate repatriation at designated border crossings. The ministry also called for the establishment of transit centres, transportation arrangements, and financial support mechanisms for deportees.

During the recent meeting on Afghan repatriation, Prime Minister Sharif once again urged all provinces to extend full cooperation in implementing the plan. The forum decided that all recommendations presented would be strictly enforced. Encouragingly, after months of hesitation, the PTI-led provincial government in KP — which hosts the largest Afghan population — has now pledged full cooperation. Addressing the KP Assembly on October 20, Chief Minister Sohail Afridi announced that the provincial government would support the federal plan for the return of Afghan refugees and coordinate closely with federal authorities to ensure smooth execution.

With KP's unequivocal support, there should now be no significant impediment to completing the repatriation process. The province's population has overwhelmingly welcomed the move, viewing it as a necessary step to restore peace and economic balance. For years, KP's residents have suffered the consequences of terrorism and criminal activity linked to elements within the Afghan refugee population. Economically too, the province has borne an immense burden from hosting millions of Afghans.

Following the recent border clashes, in which the Afghan Taliban government displayed hostility and intransigence toward Pakistan, public sentiment across the country has hardened. Pakistanis are no longer willing to tolerate the continued presence of millions of Afghans on their soil. This shift in policy and perception marks a decisive moment in Pakistan's long and troubled relationship with Afghan refugees — one that could redefine national security and regional stability for years to come.

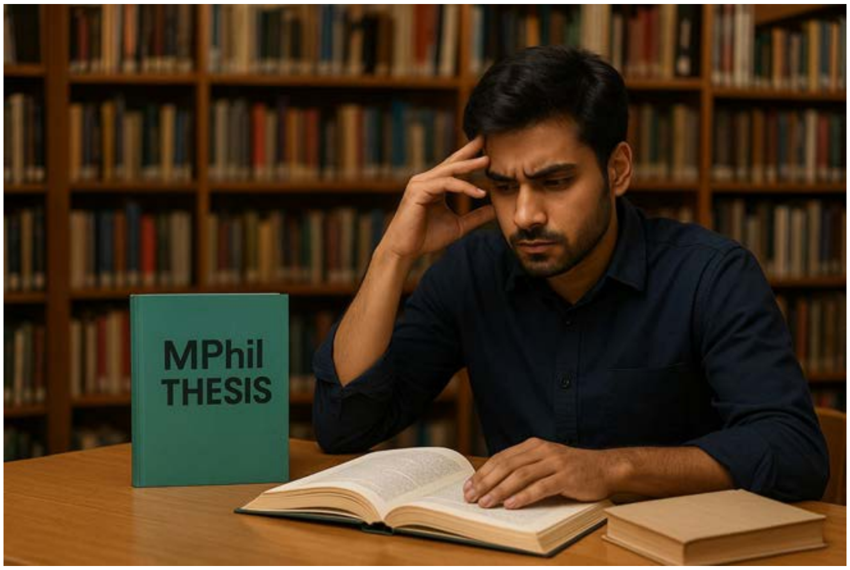
Invisible research, invisible impact

Rasheed Ali

When Fahimullah, a young MPhil student at the Faculty of Arts, University of the Punjab, began searching for a research topic, he expected to find guidance toward something meaningful — an issue that reflected the real challenges Pakistan's society faces today. But instead, he found himself stuck in a cycle familiar to many postgraduate students: a list of topics so overused and disconnected from reality that even the titles seemed relics of the past.

"I regret that whatever research is carried out in social sciences at our universities has no link with society's issues," he says, frustration evident in his voice. "Only old and repeated topics are allocated to MPhil and PhD students. Research on such topics doesn't help identify social problems or provide any solutions for the development of society."

Fahimullah's complaint is neither rare nor exaggerated. Across Pakistan's universities, many students in the social sciences share a deep sense of disillusionment. Their research — intended to analyse, explain, and solve human and social problems — often ends up gathering dust in library shelves, read only by examiners, forgotten soon after the degree is awarded.



In conversations with students and faculty, the same picture emerges: research topics are repeated, methodologies outdated, and the findings rarely find their way into public debate, policymaking, or community practice. "It's as if we are producing research just to fulfil degree requirements," says another MPhil student from the sociology department. "We are not trained to ask new questions, only to find data to support old ones."

Social scientists argue that this disconnect between academia and society has widened over the years. Dr Rubina Saigol, a prominent Lahore-based educationist and researcher, has long criticised the stagnant nature of social science research in Pakistan. "Students do not even know the theoretical framework in which to situate their arguments," she observed in an earlier interview. "They are unaware of research methodologies beyond basic surveys, which do not provide the depth needed to study social realities."

The problem, according to academics, stems from the system itself. Supervisors, often burdened with administrative and teaching loads, encourage "safe" topics that can be completed quickly, avoiding controversial or field-intensive work. Funding for social research is minimal, and university libraries are often devoid of up-to-date journals or access to global databases. As a result, the same studies — on teacher motivation, gender roles, or media influence — are repeated year after year with only minor variations.

"In many universities, a master's or MPhil thesis is treated as a formality," says Dr Nadeem Ahmad, a Lahore-based sociologist. "There's no institutional incentive to innovate. The research may have references to society, but not roots in it."

The consequences of this academic inertia go far beyond the classroom. When social sciences fail to produce knowledge that connects to real issues — poverty, governance, migration, urbanisation, or social justice — the policymaking process loses one of its most vital supports. "Without socially grounded research, governments and institutions operate in the dark," notes Dr Ahmad. "Decisions are made without evidence. That's why we see policies that sound ambitious on paper but fail in practice."

This crisis is not entirely new. For decades, Pakistan's social sciences have struggled to define their identity. Following the country's independence, most disciplines borrowed heavily from Western theories and frameworks without adapting them to local realities. Even today, much of the research remains derivative — applying imported models to contexts they were never designed for.

"There's a lack of intellectual courage," says Dr Saigol. "We rarely produce new theories rooted in our experience. Our research often reads like summaries of Western authors, with a few Pakistani examples inserted."

The funding disparity between natural sciences and social sciences deepens the divide. While research grants and laboratories in engineering, medicine, or technology attract both government and private support, the humanities and social sciences remain underfunded. According to Dr Saigol, "Fewer financial resources for research are provided to departments of social sciences and humanities at public-sector universities. Fewer resources inevitably lead to fewer facilities — and that affects quality."

Yet, despite the bleak picture, a new generation of students like Fahimullah hopes for change. Some have begun to question why their research is not making an impact, why their findings never reach policymakers, and why the university remains so detached from the communities it is supposed to serve. "If our work doesn't help people understand and solve real problems, then what's the point?" Fahimullah asks quietly.

Social scientists propose several steps to reverse the decline. They call for overhauling outdated curricula, introducing stronger training in research methodology, and building institutional bridges between universities and government departments. "We need research that's actionable, that identifies solutions to social challenges," says Dr Ahmad. "Students should be encouraged to investigate local problems, even if they're complex or politically sensitive. That's how social sciences contribute to progress."

Some universities have already begun modest reforms — revising thesis guidelines, encouraging field-based projects, and inviting practitioners from civil society and government to collaborate. But without consistent policy support and funding, such efforts remain scattered.

For Fahimullah, the dream is simple but profound: to see social science research that matters — research that informs, influences, and inspires. "I want my thesis to be something more than a file on a shelf," he says. "It should reflect the society I live in, its struggles, and its hopes."

His words resonate with a quiet truth: a nation that neglects its social sciences also neglects its ability to understand itself. Until that changes, the gap between university and society will remain — wide, silent, and deeply consequential.

Cruelty in silence

Dr. Fatima Khan

Pakistan's diverse ecosystems are home to a vast array of wildlife, yet animal welfare remains a neglected issue. Despite laws designed to prevent cruelty, mistreatment of both domesticated and wild animals persists due to weak enforcement and societal indifference.

While legal frameworks such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) exist, gaps in implementation and outdated regulations hinder effective protection.

A small group of individuals gathered near Tibba Badar Sher Chowk in Bahawalpur, drawn to an unusual and troubling sight—a donkey-cart, with its unfortunate animal left dangling in the air. The overloaded cart, burdened beyond capacity by its owner's attempt to maximize profits, had lifted the donkey off the ground. Despite the owner's desperate efforts to bring the animal down without offloading some of the cargo, bystanders viewed the scene with indifference, treating it as an everyday occurrence.

For Sania Waheed, an A-Levels student visiting her maternal grandparents in Bahawalpur from Islamabad, the sight was deeply unsettling. She was disheartened by the apparent lack of empathy shown by those around her toward mistreated animals, whether domesticated or stray. Sania questioned the moral fabric of society, wondering how people could claim to uphold religious and ethical values while neglecting the welfare of innocent creatures.

Islamic scholar Allama Abbas Shirazi emphasized that Islam places great importance on the compassionate treatment of animals. Citing the Holy Qur'an, he reminded believers that every living being, from creatures on land to birds in the sky, forms a community just as humans do. He highlighted that the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strongly advocate for kindness toward animals, with numerous Hadiths illustrating the gravity of cruelty and the virtue of mercy. The Prophet (PBUH) personally intervened in cases of animal mistreatment, setting a powerful example of compassion.

Even small acts, such as removing eggs from a bird's nest, were addressed in Islamic teachings, underscoring the need for justifiable reasons when taking the life of any creature. True adherence to Islamic principles means rejecting all forms of cruelty—whether overburdening animals, neglecting them, hunting for sport, or subjecting them to unnecessary suffering.

Beyond religious teachings, Pakistan's legal framework also provides protection for animals. Senior Supreme Court lawyer Agha Intizar Ali Imran pointed out that laws such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) and the Punjab Animals Slaughter Control Act (1963) criminalize acts of abuse, with offenders facing fines, imprisonment, or even the forfeiture of their animals.

Agha Imran recalled a landmark case that captured national and global attention—the plight of an elephant in Islamabad Zoo. The Islamabad High Court ruled that animals have inherent rights under the Pakistani Constitution, condemning the mistreatment of the elephant, the exploitation of a bear forced to perform tricks, and the inhumane culling of stray dogs. The judgment reaffirmed the legal recognition of animal rights, challenging anthropocentric views and emphasizing the moral and legal duty to safeguard all living beings.

Agha Intizar Ali Imran highlights that individuals can report incidents of animal cruelty by dialing 1819. The law calls for the formation of an animal ethics committee, ensuring stricter enforcement against abusers. Pakistani legislation explicitly bans the shooting and poisoning of animals, reinforcing legal protections for their welfare.

Despite its rich biodiversity, with 177 species of mammals and 660 species of birds, Pakistan struggles with conservation and animal welfare. The country received a low ranking on the World Animal Protection Index, earning an overall grade of 'E,' with an alarming 'F' in government accountability and a 'G' in animal protection. This places Pakistan below India and only slightly above nations with severe human rights violations.

Imran points out that animals kept in zoos and those privately owned as exotic pets both live under captivity. While the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) provides legal protection, the responsibility for wildlife management rests with provincial governments, as Pakistan lacks a unified national zoo policy.

The lawyer expresses concern that most provincial wildlife laws fail to address adequate animal welfare regulations. When it comes to privately owned wild animals, the Northern Areas Wildlife Preservation Act (1975) mandates permission from the Chief Wildlife Warden for scientific study or placement in a recognized zoo.

Regarding domesticated pets and companion animals, Articles 3 and 5 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCTAA) may apply, but no specific laws directly govern their treatment. Although Article 429 of the Pakistan Penal Code criminalizes harming animals valued above Rs50, cruel practices such as the mass culling of strays continue unchecked.

Imran acknowledges that the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) serves as a foundational framework recognizing that animals experience pain and suffering. However, he notes that this fundamental principle has yet to be effectively integrated into broader legislation to ensure stronger protections for animal welfare.

Although Pakistan has laws aimed at protecting animals, the lack of enforcement and inadequate policies leave many vulnerable to cruelty and neglect. The country's low ranking on the World Animal Protection Index underscores the urgent need for reform. Strengthening legal provisions, ensuring provincial governments take responsibility, and fostering public awareness are essential steps toward improving animal welfare. Recognizing animals as sentient beings and integrating this principle into legislation can pave the way for a more compassionate and ethical society.

How labour unions in Europe can help end Israel's genocide in Gaza

Samer Jaber

A ceasefire has been in effect in Gaza since October 10, but Israel has not stopped its brutal violence. In the span of three weeks, it has killed more than 220 Palestinians. On Tuesday, it massacred more than 100 people in 24 hours. Israel continues to refuse to let in the amount of aid agreed in the ceasefire. It is blocking materials and equipment for reconstruction and large-scale medical evacuations.

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli soldiers and settlers continue to attack the Palestinian people and their property with impunity. They have killed more than 1,000 Palestinians, including 213 children, since October 7, 2023. Just on October 16, Israeli soldiers shot dead a nine-year-old child while he was playing football with friends.

A ceasefire clearly will not stop the killing as long as Israel receives political, military and logistical support from the West to continue its occupation and colonisation of Palestine. Two years of street protests throughout the world have sought to pressure governments to reverse their position on Israel, but they have failed to achieve significant change.

Large-scale labourmobilisation may be the answer. Labour unions, particularly in Europe, are uniquely positioned to play a central role in undermining their governments' support for Israel. Given the active trade between Israel and European countries and the logistical significance of European ports, workers in many sectors could make a difference by organising for Palestine.

Over the past two years, millions of people have marched across Europe, yet governments have largely ignored calls to end all support for Israel. Even the Irish government, despite its vocal support for Palestinian rights, engages in large-scale trade with Israel. Ireland was Israel's third largest importer in 2024.

Public marches often serve as a pressure valve, channelling dissent and lowering pressure on governments to change policy. Industrial action, however, is different. Workers drive the economy. When they refuse to carry out their duties, the consequences can be politically and economically costly.

Unlike protest marches, strikes and industrial actions can paralyse supply chains, raise production costs and force concessions. Unions have the organisational experience to escalate actions strategically – from localised slowdowns to national-scale strikes – turning economic disruptions into political pressure.

In liberal democracies, unions remain the most effective instrument through which people can force governments to act. And there is plenty of evidence of that in recent history.

For example, labour unions in Western countries played an active role in challenging the apartheid regime in South Africa. The Irish anti-apartheid strike at Dunnes Stores in July 1984 when workers refused to handle South African goods in protest against apartheid became a landmark in the history of workers' struggles. Similarly, in November 1984, San Francisco dockworkers took a stand by refusing to unload cargo from South Africa.

These and other instances of solidarity action by workers expanded the momentum of the anti-apartheid movement in the West, which ultimately led to governments officially imposing sanctions on the apartheid regime.

The European Union is Israel's largest trading partner, accounting for 32 percent of Israel's total trade in goods in 2024. The EU supplies 34.2 percent of Israel's imports and receives 28.8 percent of its exports. Much of Israel's military supplies and logistics come from EU countries. Disrupting this supply chain could directly undermine Israel's war machine.

Ports are critical chokepoints in this chain because they control the flow of goods. Selective industrial action at ports halting shipments to or from Israel would have a significant impact. Israeli goods represent just 0.8 percent of the EU's total trade, so such actions would hit Israel hard while minimally affecting EU economies.

Moreover, disrupting EU ports would ripple beyond Europe. Much of Israel's trade with the United States, its top trading partner with $55bn in trade in goods and services in 2024, passes through major European ports. Blocking transshipments or increasing cargo costs by forcing ships to avoid EU hubs could increase steeply the cost of Israeli logistics.

Trade unions can also take action by refusing to handle goods produced in Israeli settlements within occupied Palestinian territory. Or they can go further and refuse to deal with any products destined for or coming from Israel. This would make engaging in trade with Israel quite costly for small- and medium-sized European businesses and corporations. In doing so, trade unions would be upholding international law and acting in accordance with established human rights principles.

Given the wide scope industrial protest action can have, solidarity movements should seek to ally with labour unions across Europe. Solidarity groups can focus on mobilising public support, promoting consumer boycotts and educating communities about Palestine's history and Israel's actions. These activities sustain legitimacy, widen the support base and keep the Palestinian struggle in public consciousness.

Meanwhile, unions can take direct action at production sites and ports, halting the flow of goods to Israel. The alliance of solidarity movements and unions would shift the struggle from symbolic protest to material confrontation with the systems sustaining Israel's war. In September, Italian activists and workers demonstrated just how effective such combined action can be when they launched a national strike for Gaza.

Israel's war and colonisation of Palestine rely on close relations with corporations, particularly in Europe and North America. Many of these corporations are also major employers in these places, exploiting workers, driving down wages and lobbying for labour deregulation while profiting from occupation and war. They lobby governments to support Israel and buy weapons and technologies tested on Palestinians to use for surveillance and repression on their own people.

Namal Valley deprived of affordable healthcare

Over 50,000 residents of the Namal Valley remain deprived of a government hospital and affordable medical services. The situation has become alarming, as healthcare, once considered a noble profession, has now turned into a business enterprise. Majority of the residents cannot afford the rather high consultation fee of doctors running their private clinics. The government must take immediate steps to regulate the consultation fee charged by private practitioners, and ensure the supply of quality medicines. It should also establish a government hospital in Namal on the land already owned by the provincial government, providing the people the healthcare facilities they truly deserve.

Muhammad Iqbal Awan
Mianwali

Islamabad's decline: From visionary city to mediocre reality

As a nation, we have grown dangerously comfortable with mediocrity. Setting the bar low has become our collective habit, and perhaps our greatest curse. We accept poor governance as normal, weak institutions as inevitable, and broken infrastructure as a given. Over time, this quiet acceptance has seeped into our cities, our public spaces, and even our sense of self. Instead of demanding better, we learn to settle for anything.

There are cities that grow out of accident and necessity, and then there is Islamabad that was born out of a vision. Nature had already done half the work: a dramatic amphitheatre of the Margalla Hills, open skies and a rich diversity of flora and fauna that gave the city its natural charm. The planners of the 1960s recognised this gift, and for once in South Asia, they resisted the temptation to spoil it.

They set a bar. Islamabad was laid out not just as streets and markets, but as an idea. Wide, tree-lined boulevards. Green belts threading through neighbourhoods. A rhythm of order, cleanliness and breathing space. For decades, it stood as a refreshing anomaly in South Asia, and as a proof that urban life here could aspire to something better. For many of us, it was a quiet source of pride. But somewhere along the way, we let the bar fall. Maybe as a consequence of a national contagion of accepting absurd mediocrity in everything.

For a city with such stunning natural beauty, its commercial centres are shockingly repugnant. The Markaz in F-10 and F-11 areas are prime examples: poorly imagined from the start, even more poorly regulated, and now reduced to being ugly eyesores. Allowed to decay into filthy, unkempt spaces, they symbolise everything Islamabad was supposed to rise above, and everything we allowed to slip through our fingers. No standards for facades, no regulation of passages, and no coherent aesthetics. Today, Islamabad is just another South Asian city — cluttered and chaotic.

The Blue Area extension is probably our last chance. Already, some worrying signs are visible in the shape of under-sized plots, stingy parking allocations, and design compromises. But it is not too late; not yet. The new Blue Area can either sink into the same dilapidated, unimaginative fate as the old Blue Area, or it can rise as a true downtown, one that reflects ambition and modernity instead of resignation. The planners should not turn the Blue Area extension into another monument of neglect.

Omair Hasan
Islamabad

National unity over mass protests

In these testing times when Pakistan seems to be standing at a critical cross-roads, there is little justification for any party to indulge in mass protests. There is no point in adding to the woes of a nation that is already grappling with internal and external challenges.

While the right to protest is a democratic principle, it must be exercised with responsibility and foresight. Unnecessary marches and disruptions only deepen divisions and divert attention from the more urgent issues facing the country.

Tensions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have heightened, leading to clashes that have put national security and regional stability at risk. The country's armed forces have been on a high alert for some time, safeguarding the sovereignty of the homeland under difficult and dangerous circumstances. Instead of adding to the chaos, we must show solidarity with our defenders, recognising the burden they carry while we enjoy our freedoms.

Furthermore, the nation is still recovering from the devastating floods that displaced millions, and destroyed infra-structure across the country. The road to recovery demands unity, cooperation and a shared sense of responsibility.

At such a sensitive moment, we must rise above political and ideological divides to support national rehabilitation efforts. This is a time to stand together — not to create further instability. Let us channel our energies into rebuilding the country, honouring our heroes, and fostering complete peace and prosperity.

Khateeb Khan
Kotli, AJK

Making CPR a national priority

Recently, I witnessed a person collapse from cardiac arrest on a busy Karachi road. Bystanders gathered around, unsure how to help, waiting anxiously for paramedics to arrive. Due to heavy traffic and poor road conditions, the rescue team could arrive only after a delay. When it finally reached the scene, the first thing the paramedics did was to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), which is a life-saving technique that keeps blood flowing until further medical help is available.

This experience made me realise how crucial it is for everyone to learn basic first aid skills like CPR. Karachi is currently facing a disturbing rise in emergencies on city roads. In most such cases, emergency help is unavailable straightaway. Knowing CPR can mean the difference between life and death in such scenarios.

Internationally, many countries have made CPR training a part of their school curricula. It is high time Pakistan recognised the life-saving potential of CPR.

The relevant authorities should take immediate action in terms of designing and implementing crucial CPR training programmes, including workshops in educational institutions, corporate offices and public places to educate the masses.

Maham Saeed
Karachi

Karachi's relentless struggle for basic decency

For Karachi's residents, particularly the youth, life has become a relentless struggle against a cascade of institutional failures. The city's graduates, armed with ambitions and degrees, confront a barren landscape of unemployment. They suffer from health problems triggered by a filthy environment where garbage dumps are aplenty and clean water is a luxury. There are no libraries or sports complexes. A chaotic and inadequate transport system cripples mobility, while crumbling roads make every journey a perilous ordeal. Most alarmingly, the fundamental safety of every citizen is compromised. The people of Karachi are not asking for miracles; just basic functions of a civilised society.

Sajjad Ali
Karachi

Exploitation in education

It is deplorable when an institution, under the guise of extracurricular activities, engages children in strenuous labour without proper oversight. Recently, a student at a well-known private school in Mianwali sustained serious injuries while shifting bricks from one place to another. This raises serious questions on the school's conduct towards its students. If deceit and negligence prevail within educational institutions, what lessons are being imparted to the younger generation? Are schools, despite charging exorbitant fee, unable to arrange proper services instead of assigning such tasks to their students? Can such practices be justified?

Muhammad Iqbal Awan
Mianwali

Greenland is twisting, tensing and shrinking due to the 'ghosts' of melted ice sheets

Sascha Pare

Tectonic processes and the "ghosts" of past ice sheets are contorting, lifting and pulling Greenland in different directions, new research reveals.

Greenland sits on the North American tectonic plate, which has dragged the island northwest by 0.9 inches (23 millimeters) per year over the past two decades. Researchers have been monitoring this drift for some time, but a new study analyzing satellite data has found that there is far more to the movement and to other deformations than just plate tectonics.

"We get this complicated pattern with twisting, pressure, and tension," said study lead author Danjal Longfors Berg, a postdoctoral researcher specializing in geodesy and Earth observation at the Technical University of Denmark. "The Greenlandic map will slowly lose its accuracy if not updated," he told Live Science in an email.

Berg and his colleagues analyzed data from 58 Global Network Satellite System (GNSS) stations in Greenland that record the island's horizontal and vertical movements, and nearly 2,900 GNSS stations around the North American plate. The researchers entered these data into a model, and when they removed the effect on Greenland of the North American plate, the researchers were left with bedrock deformations — areas where Earth's crust has been stretched or crumpled — that didn't match previous modeling. In most regions, the movement of landmasses is overwhelmingly controlled by tectonic processes.

What happens to your heart health when you eat nuts regularly

Simon Spichak

People who eat more nuts may be less likely to die of heart disease, according to a new study published in the Journal of Nutrition. "Although nuts are nutrient-dense foods rich in unsaturated fats, plant protein, fiber, and several vitamins and minerals, their high fat and calorie content has historically made people hesitant to include them regularly in their diets," lead study author Montry Suprono, DDS, associate professor and director of the Center for Dental Research at Loma Linda University, told Health. But these findings "strengthen the existing evidence" suggesting that nuts can reduce the risk of heart disease death, he said. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is responsible for one in three deaths in the U.S., making it the leading cause of mortality. The most common form is coronary artery disease, also known as ischemic heart disease (IHD), which develops when the arteries become narrow and the heart struggles to pump blood throughout the body. For this study, Suprono and the other researchers tracked over 80,500 participants, all of whom were Seventh-Day Adventists. Via a questionnaire, the team documented participants' normal nut consumption. They included tree nut intake—which included almonds, cashews, walnuts, and mixed nuts—as well as total nut intake, which counted tree nuts, peanuts, and peanut butter. Over an average of 11 years, 4,258 people died from CVD—1,529 of those were attributed to IHD specifically. The data showed that people with the highest total nut intake had a 14% lower risk of dying from CVD and a 19% lower risk of dying from IHD as compared to those who had the lowest. The greatest reduction was seen in those who ate the most tree nuts—they had a 27% lower risk of IHD mortality.

Humanoid robots could lift 4,000 times their own weight

Bobby Hellard

Researchers in South Korea have built an artificial muscle that can lift approximately 4,000 times its own weight. They say it can be used in future humanoid robots. A key breakthrough with the muscle's design is its ability to be flexible or taut when needed, which is a first for this field of research. The scientists outlined their findings in a study published in the journal Advanced Functional Materials.

"This research overcomes the fundamental limitation where traditional artificial muscles are either highly stretchable but weak or strong but stiff," lead study author Hoon Eui Jeong, a professor of mechanical engineering at the Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology (UNIST), said in a statement. "Our composite material can do both, opening the door to more versatile soft robots, wearable devices, and intuitive human-machine interfaces."

Artificial muscles are often limited by an inability to be flexible or taut; they need to be stretchable while still offering enough energy output, or else their work densities are limited. But soft artificial muscles are believed to be transformative because they're lightweight, mechanically compliant, and capable of multidirectional actuation (movement).

When the researchers say "work density," they refer to how much energy per unit volume the muscle can deliver.

The best time to eat breakfast for longevity

Fran Kritz

When you eat breakfast could play a surprising role in your long-term health—and might even influence how long you live.

New research suggests that as people age, the timing of their meals—especially breakfast—may reveal important clues about their overall health and longevity. Eating breakfast later in the day was linked to higher rates of health problems such as depression, fatigue, and oral health issues, as well as a greater risk of early death. "Our research suggests that changes in when older adults eat, especially the timing of breakfast, could serve as an easy-to-monitor marker of their overall health status," lead author Hassan Dashti, PhD, RD, a nutrition scientist and circadian biologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, said in a news release. "Encouraging older adults in having consistent meal schedules could become part of broader strategies to promoting healthy aging and longevity." The study, published in Communications Medicine, followed nearly 3,000 adults in the U.K. aged 42 to 94, for more than 20 years. Participants reported when they typically ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner, along with information on sleep habits, occupations, and perceived health. As participants aged, their breakfast and dinner times gradually shifted later. On average, each additional decade of life was linked to an eight-minute delay in breakfast and a four-minute delay in dinner. Their overall eating window—the number of hours between first and last meal—also narrowed. Notably, delaying breakfast was associated with more chronic health conditions and a higher risk of death during the 20-year follow-up. Each additional hour's delay in breakfast time corresponded to an 8–11% increased risk of death. These findings show that "later meal timing, especially delayed breakfast, is tied to both health challenges and increased mortality risk in older adults," said Dashti.


Trim II XL
SHAVE WITH
COMFORT &
STYLE
A PRODUCT BY
Treet®
/ Treet.grooming