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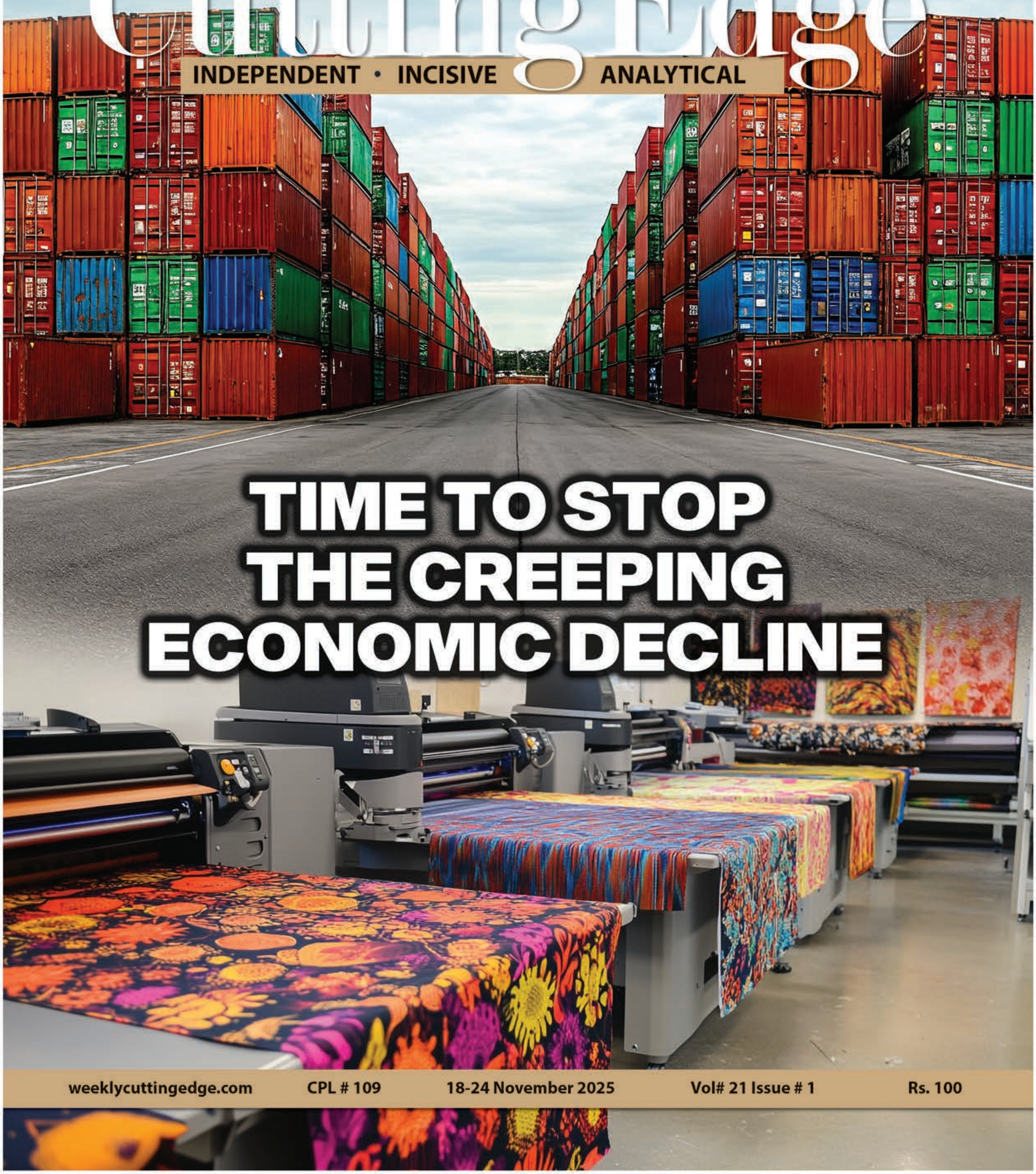

TIME TO STOP THE CREEPING ECONOMIC DECLINE

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

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Time to stop the creeping economic decline

Farhan Khan

According to the latest figures, private investment in manufacturing has fallen to its lowest level in over a decade — from Rs706 billion in FY19 to Rs377 billion in FY25. Another figure that should attract our attention is that large-scale manufacturing contracted 1.5 percent in FY25. The combined share of manufacturing and mining in GDP is a paltry 13.2 percent. The result is a rise in unemployment and fewer goods available for exports.

There are clear signs that the economy is stagnating, with the industrial base shrinking from year to year. Fresh investment is not coming to replace worn-out machinery in industry. This has led to a fall in production and loss of the growth momentum. The Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently said that investment is now below replacement level which means that the capital stock is aging fast adversely affecting the quality and cost of production. In this context, it may be added here that the major exporters of this country — textiles, surgical/sports goods, carpets, leather — have time and again lamented the rise in their input costs (including high utility charges and a discount rate double that of our regional competitors) with shutdown of local units as well as the exit of many international companies in recent months.

Due to high interest rates, borrowing costs have been high, while import restrictions have resulted in a shortage of essential inputs. A volatile currency makes matters worse. It is relevant to point out here that on the economic front our neighbouring countries are doing much better. India reported industrial growth of 4 percent in FY25., while Bangladesh recorded 3.98 percent. They achieved this feat through export diversification and keeping the cost of production low.

In recent years, the government has been mainly concerned with monetary stabilisation and paid little attention to developing an industrial strategy that reduces the cost of producing and exporting goods. Import restrictions force the factories to work below capacity and produce less. Due to this policy little is left for export after domestic consumption. In the latest Human Development Index (HDI) released sometime back, Pakistan registered a score of 0.544, placing it 168th out of 193 countries in the 'low' human development category, marking a deterioration from the previous year's position of 164. Pakistan's HDI fell even further by 33.1 percent to 0.364, showing that economic gains mean little when they fail to uplift living standards of the people. Pakistan's failure in the health and education sectors exposes the government's claim of having achieved economic stability. There is a 40 percent stunting rate among children under five. 25 million children are out of school. The situation regarding sanitation, clean water, housing and food security leaves much to be desired. Pakistan is in the grip of a lethal mix of environmental and socio-economic pressures resulting from insufficient resources and lack of long-term planning.

There is no way out of the logjam without drastic reforms in all sectors. The first step in this direction is policy consistency and coherent long-term planning to attract and increase investment in industry and agriculture. A credible path back to expansion needs transparency on input availability, firm timelines for tariff rationalisation in energy, and assurances of policy continuity. The most urgent need of the hour is a generous package of incentives both for industrialists and exporters so that the country can earn more foreign exchange. To pay back its foreign debt. Singapore, a small city state, boasts exports of about 250 billion dollars annually. The same is the case with Vietnam which has risen from the ashes of a prolonged war to become a high export income country. But our exports are a measly 30 billion dollars a year. Even Bangladesh with a limited resource base earns more from exports as compared to Pakistan.

The fact that in the Ease of Doing Business Index Pakistan is ranked in the lowest category speaks volumes about the kind of business environment prevailing in the country. Exorbitant cost of energy is one of the biggest hurdles to industrial growth. Another roadblock is the complex web of rules, regulations, taxes and levies which make the smooth running of industry a difficult task. Corruption is the last straw on the camel's back.

A well-considered economic revival plan is needed to address such issues as reliability of energy costs and supply, timely access to inputs, and a simple and lean tax administration which is friendly to the business class, not hostile. The proposed revival plan must also include incentives to encourage foreign direct investment which is at a very low level at present. Needless to emphasise, without restoring the economy to full health, we cannot meet the challenge of mass unemployment and rising poverty staring us in the face.

Will the 27th amendment strengthen or weaken the judiciary?

Nasim Ahmed

Following a heated debate and strong protest by the opposition parties, the 27th Constitutional Amendment Bill was passed by Parliament last week. The move has proved highly controversial. Critics say that the amendment has changed the basic structure and violated the principle of separation of powers established by the 1973 Constitution which envisioned an independent judiciary. In their view, the amendment has made the judiciary subservient to the executive.

In protest against the new amendment, two senior judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, both former chief justices of their respective provincial high courts, have resigned. A judge of the Lahore High Court has also subsequently resigned. A strong point of criticism is that the new amendment was rushed through parliament with extraordinary haste. Constitutional amendments are no ordinary pieces of legislation. They call for deep deliberation and open public debate by jurists and representatives of the people so that all aspects of the proposed amendment, both positive and negative, are discussed and a national consensus is evolved. But this process was not followed in the case of the 27th Amendment.

From the government side it has been argued that Parliament has the right to amend the constitution. But this right is not absolute and subject to some unwritten limitations and conventions. For example, the Parliament cannot alter the basic structure of the constitution, especially the provisions relating to its Islamic character, fundamental rights, the principle of separation of powers and independence of judiciary. No doubt, the Parliament has the right to establish a Federal Constitutional Court but before proceeding ahead, it should have consulted with the superior judiciary and held open debate on the merits and demerits of the issue. A constitutional amendment calls for due diligence and detailed deliberation. But this procedure was not followed. Also, no action was taken to respond to the written concerns raised by some sitting judges.

Diving into the details of the 27th Amendment, it appears that the amendment has introduced drastic changes to the existing judicial system and the military's chain of command, giving sweeping immunities to government officials. With the establishment of a Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) as the apex court in Pakistan, all matters of a constitutional nature, including those relating to public interest and the enforcement of fundamental rights of the people, will be heard by the FCC, while the Supreme Court will merely function as an appellate court for civil and criminal matters. Of particular concern is the new provision that the chief justice and all judges of the first FCC will be handpicked by the Prime Minister and the President.

What is more, the Supreme Court and all other courts will be bound by the decisions of the FCC. The new amendment allows the Special Parliamentary Committee to select the chief justices of the Supreme Court and the FCC from amongst the judges of the respective courts. But there is no prescribed criterion for a judge being selected to either position. Previously, the senior-most judge of the Supreme Court was automatically selected as the chief justice of Pakistan without any interference from the

government.

Well known jurists have also expressed concern over the fact that the Judicial Commission of Pakistan, which selects judges for elevation to the Supreme Court, the FCC and the high courts by voting, cannot function independently as it is dominated by political and executive-branch members. Only five out of 13 members of the JCP will be judicial appointments. Earlier, the judges of the superior courts were selected by the JCP which had a majority of judicial members. The executive-dominated JCP will also have the power to recommend the transfer of judges from one high court to another, and if a judge does not accept the transfer, they will face disciplinary proceedings and may be removed for misconduct. This provision has been interpreted as a standing threat to judges who pass a judgment against the executive.

According to the government spokesmen, these amendments have been made to exercise greater control over the superior judiciary which had become too powerful and was overstepping its constitutional mandate. In this context, it has been cited that in the past some judges committed judicial overreach which jolted the system and created an imbalance. Under the new amendment, this will not be possible anymore.

But there is another side to the picture. A glance at the judicial history of Pakistan shows that whenever courts interfered in political matters, it was because some hands were at work behind the scenes. Examples of this are endorsement of martial laws and removal of prime ministers from office by court orders. In this context, it is pertinent to recall here that recently some judges of the Islamabad High Court known for their uprightness and independent stance wrote a letter to the then-CJP Qazi Faez Isa, complaining against harassment by invisible forces. Justice Athar Minallah also wrote a letter to Chief Justice Afridi, saying that judges were under pressure while giving a verdict in favour of the PTI in the reserved seats case. But no remedial action was taken.

According to media reports, some lawyer bodies and civil society organisations have announced their plans to hold nation-wide rallies to register their protest against the 27th amendment. It remains to be seen how much public pressure they can generate to force the government to withdraw or amend the new amendment.

Beyond the tax-to-GDP illusion

Muhammad Ali

In the hallowed halls of policy discourse, where optimism often clashes with harsh realities, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Resident Representative to Pakistan, Mahir Binici, delivered a sobering reminder during a panel at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute's (SDPI) conference. The discussion underscored Pakistan's precarious fiscal tightrope. Binici urged the nation to elevate its tax-to-GDP ratio to 15 percent—a benchmark deemed essential for tackling intertwined economic woes and escalating climate threats.

Yet, as recent Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) data paints a picture of modest progress, the adage "lies, damned lies, and statistics" rings truer than ever. Headline figures may tout improvement, but a deeper dive reveals a troubling narrative of regressive burdens, stifled growth, and widening inequality that undermines the very foundations of sustainable recovery.

The FBR's latest report heralds a breakthrough: the tax-to-GDP ratio climbed to 10.3 percent in fiscal year 2024-25 (FY25), a notable uptick from the five-year average of 8.7 percent. This marks the first double-digit achievement in over a decade, propelled by a 26.3 percent surge in overall collections to Rs13.254 trillion. At the forefront is a "quantum leap" in direct taxes, ballooning from Rs3.721 trillion in revised estimates for FY24 to Rs5.826 trillion last year—a 56 percent jump that ostensibly broadens the revenue base and eases reliance on indirect levies. Enforcement crackdowns played a starring role, netting Rs874 billion through audits and compliance drives, an eightfold increase from the prior year's Rs105 billion. Sectors like sugar and cement bore the brunt, with Rs25 billion and Rs12.8 billion recovered respectively in the first half of FY25 alone, thanks to real-time monitoring tools.

But these numbers demand scrutiny, not applause. Discrepancies abound across official sources, eroding trust in the data. The IMF's first review of Pakistan's $7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF), completed in May 2025, charts a steadier ascent: from 10 percent in FY20 to 12.6 percent in FY25, with interim figures at 10.3 percent (FY21), 10.4 percent (FY22), 10.5 percent (FY23), and 10.6 percent (FY24). The Finance Division's July 2025 Outlook corroborates the collection spike but pegs FY24 at Rs10.472 trillion, highlighting how nominal GDP revisions can inflate ratios without genuine structural shifts. Such inconsistencies aren't mere footnotes; they obscure the true drivers of "progress," often masking pain inflicted on the vulnerable.

Consider the composition of these gains. Up to 75-80 percent of direct taxes stem from withholding on consumer purchases—a mechanism the Auditor General of Pakistan flagged years ago for abandonment, yet it persists like an unwelcome guest. Enforcement windfalls, exceeding Rs300 billion in FY25, targeted sugar and cement mills, with fertilizer units now in the crosshairs. The fallout? Costs passed downstream to consumers, inflating prices for essentials like sugar and building materials. In a nation where food and shelter devour household budgets, this regressive ripple exacerbates poverty. The World Bank's latest assessment paints a grim canvas: 42.4 percent of Pakistanis—over 100 million souls—languish below the $3.65 daily poverty line in FY25, unchanged from the prior year despite stabilizing inflation. Under revised thresholds, the figure swells to 44.7 percent at $4.20 per day, with extreme poverty tripling to 16.5 percent. Economic growth, clocking a tepid 2.6 percent, fails to dent these depths, as agricultural woes—40 percent rainfall deficits and pest invasions—hammer rural livelihoods.

The pandemic's shadow lingers as a contextual culprit. Five COVID-19 waves from FY20 onward ravaged output and collections, with FY22's 6 percent GDP "boom" propped by inventory drawdowns rather than robust production. Inventory-led growth, while statistically flattering, generates few jobs and evaporates quickly, leaving poverty entrenched. Contrast this with export powerhouses like textiles, surgical goods, carpets, and leather—pillars of Pakistan's economy—that howl over input cost surges. Utility tariffs and a policy rate double regional rivals' have triggered shutdowns and an exodus of foreign firms, challenging FBR's rosy enforcement narrative. Without addressing these chokeholds, higher tax ratios risk strangling the golden goose of genuine expansion.

Enter the IMF's EFF and the freshly inked $1.4 billion Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF), lauded by Binici as lifelines for climate-proofing finances. The program mandates a 3 percentage point tax-to-GDP hike, targeting untaxed realms like agriculture, real estate, and digital commerce, while pruning exemptions. Pakistan's Q1 FY26 performance offers a glimmer: a 1.6 percent GDP fiscal surplus of Rs2.12 trillion, up 10 percent year-on-year, fueled by State Bank profits, a 30 percent petroleum levy boom, and provincial surpluses. Yet, this "success" is a double-edged sword. Non-tax revenues, dominated by the petroleum levy—now at Rs70 per liter on key fuels—disproportionately burden the poor, who spend a larger share on transport and heating. Development spending? Slashed to Rs40 billion from a budgeted Rs150 billion in the first quarter, starving infrastructure and human capital investments. Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) outlays crawled to Rs76 billion in four months, a mere 7.6 percent of allocation, as IMF-aligned austerity prioritizes debt servicing over growth catalysts.

This contractionary zeal, while meeting IMF covenants, stifles the output surge needed for inclusive prosperity. Higher growth could naturally buoy the tax ratio, but only if it spawns jobs and curbs poverty—not if it's inventory-fueled or smuggling-sustained. The elite, shielded by undertaxed sectors, must shoulder sacrifices: a trillion-rupee slash in current expenditures through subsidy rationalization and luxury curbs. Out-of-the-box reforms beckon—carbon taxes on polluters over blanket levies, incentives for green exports, and provincial tax devolution to hit agriculture's blind spots.

As FY26 unfolds with a Rs17.6 trillion budget eyeing 4.2 percent growth, the litmus test is delivery. Will the tax net ensnare evaders without ensnaring the poor? Can surpluses seed schools and solar grids, not just sovereign bonds? Pakistan teeters on this precipice: embrace holistic reforms, and 15 percent becomes a launchpad for equity; cling to stopgaps, and statistics will continue their damning deceit. The proverb warns of manipulated metrics; now, it's time for metrics that heal a fractured economy.

Stability or stagnation?

Husnain Shahid

As Pakistan's government celebrates the fruits of its stringent economic reforms—measures that averted a full-blown financial collapse— a pressing question lingers in the corridors of power: does this so-called stability translate into tangible improvements for ordinary citizens?

The narrative of macroeconomic steadiness, often amplified by ministers in public forums, masks a harsher reality. Despite curbing inflation and securing international bailouts, the nation remains mired in a limbo of mere survival, with no visible bridge to inclusive, enduring growth. More alarmingly, the purported gains have yet to permeate everyday lives, leaving millions to contend with soaring expenses, crumbling infrastructure, an intensifying environmental catastrophe, and a gnawing fear of tomorrow's uncertainties.

This disconnect was laid bare at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute's (SDPI) annual conference earlier this year, where United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative Dr. Samuel Rizk painted a stark portrait of national duality. He evoked a "tale of two Pakistans": an elite stratum basking in fiscal equilibrium, contrasted against the vast underbelly where social metrics are plummeting and human potential is withering. Rizk's words echoed the frustrations of experts who argue that without channeling resources into people-centric priorities, stability risks becoming a hollow echo chamber for policymakers.

The UNDP's 2025 Human Development Report, unveiled in May, crystallizes this malaise. Pakistan's Human Development Index (HDI) score stands at a dismal 0.544, consigning the country to the 168th spot among 193 nations in the low human development bracket—a slide from 164th the prior year. This regression isn't abstract; it underscores a failure to advance core pillars like health, education, and decent living standards. When inequality is factored in, the adjusted HDI craters by 33.1 percent to 0.364, revealing how disparities devour potential prosperity. In a nation where economic headlines tout recovery, such figures expose the chasm between aggregate indicators and lived experiences. Life expectancy hovers at 67.6 years, mean schooling years scrape by at 4.3, and per capita income limps at $5,501—metrics that lag even behind South Asian neighbors like India and Bangladesh.

On the ground, the human toll is visceral and unrelenting. Child malnutrition afflicts nearly 38 percent of under-fives with stunting, a chronic marker of deprivation that impairs cognitive growth and perpetuates cycles of poverty. This isn't a relic of the past; it's a persistent epidemic, fueled by food insecurity and inadequate maternal nutrition. Compounding this, an estimated 25 million children aged 5-16 remain out of school, a figure that swells by 20,000 annually, according to the Pakistan Institute of Education's latest assessment. Girls bear the brunt, with dropout rates exacerbated by cultural barriers and economic pressures. Basic amenities fare no better: access to clean water, sanitation, and stable housing remains elusive for millions, breeding diseases and stalling mobility. These aren't isolated woes; they form a web that traps families in vulnerability, rendering economic upticks irrelevant when survival demands daily improvisation.

The climate crisis acts as a merciless accelerator, obliterating fragile gains with ruthless frequency. This year's monsoon fury, from July onward, has ravaged Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan, displacing over 6 million and claiming more than 100 lives. Flash floods and glacial outbursts have submerged farmlands, factories, and homes, with economists pegging the economic wreckage at upwards of $7 billion in added current account deficits alone. Echoing the 2022 deluge that exacted $30 billion in damages, these events have gutted agriculture—Pakistan's lifeline for 40 percent of the workforce—triggering crop shortfalls and spiking food prices. Vulnerable households, already teetering on malnutrition's edge, face deepened hunger, while health systems buckle under disease outbreaks in flooded camps. Education suffers too, with schools shuttered just as the academic year kicks off, pushing more children toward labor or early marriage. Pakistan's geography, perched at the mercy of Himalayan melt and Arabian Sea swells, demands resilience-building, yet institutional silos and short-sighted planning leave communities exposed to these recurrent tempests.

At the heart of this inertia lies a yawning chasm in resources. Dr. Rizk flagged the stark mismatch: Pakistan draws about $14 billion yearly from multilaterals like the IMF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and IFC. Yet, fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires 15-17 percent of GDP—around $50-60 billion annually—a gap that mocks current inflows. Tax revenues, pivotal for self-reliance, stagnate at a tax-to-GDP ratio of 10.3 percent for FY25, far shy of the IMF's 15 percent threshold and unlikely to breach 13 percent by 2027. Wealthy sectors like real estate and retail escape fair scrutiny, shielding elites while squeezing the poor through regressive levies. Meanwhile, untapped avenues like climate finance—critical for green infrastructure—languish, despite global pledges.

The finance minister's remarks at the SDPI event underscored a path forward: harnessing climate funds and luring ethical private capital to fortify buffers against shocks. Public-private partnerships, as advocated in UN forums, could infuse innovation into renewables and adaptive farming. Yet, realization must evolve into resolve. Economic stewards cannot afford complacency; stability sans equity is a facade that erodes trust and fuels unrest. Prioritizing budgets for clinics, classrooms, and climate defenses isn't charity—it's the sinew of a thriving society.

Pakistan stands at a crossroads. The 2025 floods, HDI slump, and ballooning out-of-school numbers scream for a paradigm shift: from firefighting crises to architecting futures. Bold reforms—tax equity, green bonds, skill hubs—must supplant rhetoric. As Dr. Rizk implored, bridging the "two Pakistans" demands deliberate resource rerouting toward health, learning, and eco-resilience. Fail here, and stability devolves into stagnation; succeed, and it blossoms into shared ascent. The hourglass runs low—with only five years to SDG deadlines, the choice is stark: invest in humanity, or inherit hollow laurels.

Pakistan's industry in retreat

Shahid Hussain

In a stark revelation that underscores the deepening crisis in Pakistan's economy, private investment in the manufacturing sector has plummeted to its lowest point in more than ten years.

From a robust Rs706 billion in fiscal year 2019, it has nosedived to a mere Rs377 billion in FY25—a staggering drop of nearly 47 percent. This isn't just a numerical setback; it's a catastrophic failure where new capital inflows can't even offset the natural wear and tear of existing machinery and infrastructure. The implications are profound: without replacement, factories age prematurely, efficiency erodes, and the nation's productive capacity shrinks inexorably.

This decline transcends temporary economic hiccups. It represents a fundamental structural decay, a slow-motion unraveling of Pakistan's industrial foundation. When businesses halt expansions or upgrades, the ripple effects cascade through the economy. Production lines idle, global competitiveness wanes, and what was once a pathway to prosperity devolves into stagnation. These statistics aren't anomalies from a single tough year; they trace a persistent downward trajectory over half a decade, painting a picture of an industrial sector in retreat.

The rot extends beyond investment figures. Large-scale manufacturing actually shrank by 1.5 percent in FY25, following a meager 0.92 percent uptick in FY24. For six consecutive years, the combined contribution of manufacturing and mining to Pakistan's GDP has stagnated at a paltry 13.2 percent. These metrics are alarm bells, foretelling a cascade of woes: diminished employment opportunities, sluggish export growth, and a shrinking tax revenue stream that starves public services and infrastructure. In essence, the industrial engine that once powered economic vitality is sputtering, pulling the entire nation toward inertia.

Business leaders and economic analysts have been sounding the alarm for years, pinpointing a familiar roster of villains. Skyrocketing borrowing rates have made loans prohibitive for expansion. Stringent import curbs have strangled the supply of essential raw materials and components. Domestic demand remains anemic, battered by inflation and uncertainty. Input costs have surged unpredictably, the rupee's value has swung wildly, and government policies have flipped like weather vanes in a storm. These issues aren't fresh revelations; they've become entrenched, reshaping corporate strategies in ways that prioritize survival over growth.

The real tragedy lies in this normalization of dysfunction. Companies that once eyed bold investments now adopt a wait-and-see posture, channeling excess funds into safe havens like government bonds rather than risky factory upgrades. From an individual firm's perspective, this caution is prudent—why commit capital to an environment riddled with volatility? Yet, aggregated across the economy, it spells disaster, starving the nation of the innovation and capacity needed for revival. Behavioral shifts like these don't reverse overnight; they calcify into a culture of caution that perpetuates the cycle.

A comparative lens with neighboring countries sharpens the contrast and exposes Pakistan's vulnerabilities. India boasted a solid 4 percent industrial growth in FY25, while Bangladesh notched 3.98 percent in FY24. Both nations have excelled by diversifying exports and fostering policy environments that breed certainty. Pakistan lags because its

core attractors for capital—stable governance, predictable regulations, and competitive costs—are conspicuously absent. Investors flock to markets where rules are transparent and profits foreseeable. This pattern has played out regionally for years, yet policymakers in Islamabad seem content with inertia, allowing competitors to widen the gap.

Voices from the ground, such as those from the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry, have been unequivocal. Their assertion that investment now falls short of mere asset replacement isn't hyperbole; it's a verifiable accounting reality with far-reaching strategic fallout. An aging capital stock demands more than superficial fixes like interest rate tweaks or fleeting demand surges. Rebuilding requires a profound rebuild of trust, convincing entrepreneurs that today's commitments won't be undermined by tomorrow's policy whims.

The roadmap to recovery begins with policy coherence, a rarity in Pakistan's governance landscape. While monetary tightening has been essential for curbing inflation, it alone can't ignite industrial rebirth. A comprehensive strategy must slash production and export costs through targeted reforms. Temporary import controls might patch balance-of-payments holes briefly, but weaponizing them routinely disrupts supply chains, pushing plants into underutilization and inefficiency. True expansion demands ironclad commitments: guaranteed input availability, phased energy tariff reductions, and ironclad pledges against abrupt rule changes without stakeholder input.

Consistency in policy doesn't equate to stagnation; it means crafting transparent frameworks that allow long-term planning, then rigorously tracking outcomes. Incentives, when deployed, should reward tangible results—new investments, job creation, export volumes—rather than succumbing to influence peddling. The government must curb its habit of unveiling grand initiatives lacking execution muscle. Credibility stems from delivery, not declarations.

While affordable credit is crucial, data reveals that uncertainty and squeezed margins pose greater barriers. Any robust revival blueprint must tackle energy reliability—both in supply and pricing—ensure seamless input access, and streamline tax systems for predictability. These aren't concessions to the private sector; they're the bedrock enabling calculated risks that drive progress. Nations vying for global investment recognize this imperative and prioritize it relentlessly.

The counterfactual is already unfolding in the numbers. Factory slowdowns evaporate jobs, halt export momentum, and erode fiscal buffers. This, in turn, amplifies budgetary pressures, tightening the noose on growth and repeating the vicious loop. Escaping this trap demands a pivotal shift: elevating sustainable production above patchwork solutions. The clock is ticking. As regional rivals advance their industrial prowess, Pakistan's procrastination inflates the cost of inaction exponentially.

The verdict is indisputable. Private manufacturing investment has been halved, output hovers between flat and contracting, and the sector's GDP slice remains frozen. The prescription is equally clear: rebuild investor faith via steadfast rules, sensible energy costs, dependable supplies, and a seamless transition from stabilization to sustained expansion. Lay out detailed timelines, enforce accountability across the board. Until the state demonstrates that strategies outlast news cycles, capital will stay sidelined, and Pakistan will continue devouring its future potential rather than sowing seeds for prosperity. The choice is binary—act decisively or consign the industrial base to irreversible decline.

Who's experimenting with education and why?

Rasheed Ali

When the 18th Amendment to Pakistan's Constitution was passed in 2010, one of its boldest moves was to transfer the subject of education — curriculum, syllabus, standards, and planning — from the federation to the provinces. The aim was to bring governance closer to communities and improve responsiveness. It also introduced Article 25-A, making free and compulsory education for children aged 5-16 a constitutional right.

Fifteen years later, the pendulum may be swinging back. Reports indicate that the proposed 28th Amendment seeks to reassign education to the federal government — reviving debate over whether the devolution experiment ever worked.

By abolishing the concurrent legislative list, the 18th Amendment promised genuine provincial autonomy. Provinces were to design their own curricula, teacher training systems, and education policies. The federal role was retained only in higher-education standards and research institutions.

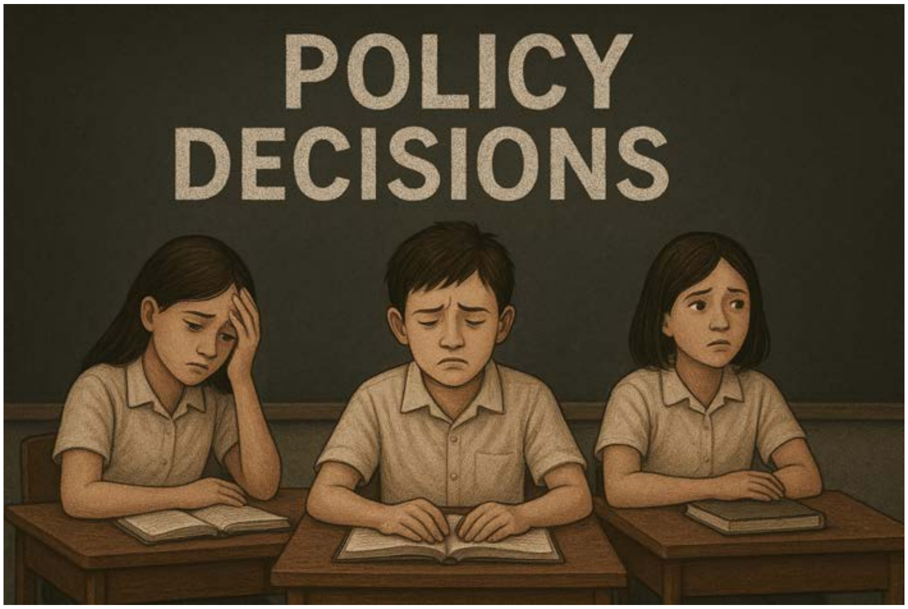
However, performance since 2010 has been uneven. Data compiled by the Munich Personal RePEc Archive shows that post-devolution progress on literacy and enrolment remained sluggish — particularly in Sindh and Balochistan. Experts argue that while autonomy expanded, institutional capacity did not. Provinces struggled with planning, financing, and coordination. A federal review in 2018 described them as "centralised bureaucratic apparatuses with little or no local accountability".

The result: out-of-school children still hover around one-third of the school-age population, and provincial disparities in quality have widened. Promised innovation at the local level largely failed to materialise, fuelling criticism that the 18th Amendment decentralised authority but not responsibility.

Education is not an arena for short-term policy experiments. Each reform — whether devolution or re-centralisation — requires years of adjustment, investment, and institutional learning. Frequent structural shifts can disrupt continuity, confuse accountability, and undermine outcomes.

The new debate under the 28th Amendment reflects this dilemma. According to media reports, the proposed change would bring population welfare and education back under federal control. Proponents say it will restore uniform standards and reduce fragmentation. Critics counter that it reverses more than a decade of provincial development and undermines the spirit of federalism.

An editorial in a local publication warned that "returning education, health and social policy to federal control risks undoing more than a decade of institutional development." Experts also note that provinces, despite their struggles, have built frameworks for teacher management and curriculum reforms that should now be strengthened, not dismantled.



Here arises a valid question: if the 18th Amendment was flawed, who is accountable? The 18th Amendment was championed by the same parties — PML-N and PPP — that now lead the coalition contemplating its partial reversal. If devolution was poorly conceived or implemented, responsibility lies with multiple actors:

- Parliament and policymakers, who underestimated the administrative transition required.
- Provincial governments, which gained powers but often failed to invest in planning, teacher training, and monitoring.
- Federal agencies, which retained coordinating functions but did little to support provincial capacity.
- The political class at large, which promoted devolution as rhetoric without the follow-through of resources and timelines.

If education now returns to Islamabad's control, these same actors must explain why their earlier conviction in devolution has evaporated — and whether the reversal is based on lessons learned or political expediency.

And what next? The draft amendment is still under review. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif recently stated that no step would be taken "that weakens the federation or the provinces". Yet civil-society voices remain sceptical, fearing that a shift back to federal authority could centralise decision-making and stifle provincial innovation.

Analysts suggest that if change is inevitable, it must be targeted — perhaps limiting federal oversight to curriculum and standards while leaving teacher recruitment, training, and school management to provinces. A national daily noted in a recent editorial, "It makes no sense for the federation to be involved in teacher recruitment or transfers; decisions should happen at the level where information exists."

The crucial question is whether any new structure will enhance learning outcomes or simply re-ignite another cycle of bureaucratic reshuffling.

Pakistan's education sector has already lost years to structural uncertainty. Whether under provincial or federal control, governance reforms must focus less on jurisdictional turf wars and more on what reaches classrooms.

If devolution failed, identify why — capacity, funding, or commitment — and fix it. If re-centralisation proceeds, ensure it is evidence-based, transparent, and inclusive. Above all, policymakers must remember that in every round of political experimentation, it is not governments but students who bear the cost.

The merging militant threat

Raza Khan

Recently, Pakistani strategists have asserted that the largest terrorist network targeting Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), based in Afghanistan, and the Afghan Taliban are essentially one entity, with no real distinction between the two militant groups. At first glance, this may seem surprising since they operate in two separate countries, yet there is significant rationale behind this conclusion drawn by Pakistani decision-makers.

The premise of Pakistani strategists for arguing that the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which the state refers to as Fitna-ul-Khawaij, constitute a single entity rests on the rising involvement of Afghans within the TTP and the subsequent blurring of boundaries between the two groups. According to these strategists, in the recent anti-terrorist operations, nearly 60 percent of terrorists killed during infiltration attempts over the past three to four months were Afghan nationals.

The head of Pakistan's military public relations wing, Lt. General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, has stated, "The TTP is not a separate entity; it is a branch of the Afghan Taliban." He elaborated that the group has pledged allegiance to the Taliban emir, adding that "we have clear evidence that the Taliban are settling TTP fighters in densely populated areas to provide them a protective shield."

It must be recalled that the TTP has historically viewed the Afghan Taliban model as its ideological ideal. The Afghan Taliban insurgency, which began in 1994 and resulted in their takeover of Afghanistan in 1996 and again in 2021 through insurgency tactics, suicide attacks, and seizure of state authority, has long served as a blueprint for the TTP. It should also be remembered that the formation of the TTP in 2007 was fashioned after the Afghan Taliban by its founder, Baitullah Mehsud.

Thus, when the TTP was established, its founder Baitullah Mehsud took bayat (pledge of allegiance) to Afghan Taliban founder Maulvi Omar Mujahid. Consequently, despite being composed of Pakistani militants, the TTP has often shown greater loyalty to the Afghan Taliban than to Pakistan. In effect, the TTP has remained an extension of the Afghan Taliban throughout its existence. Seeing that the group no longer has space within Pakistan—particularly in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa—the TTP has further solidified its ties with the Afghan Taliban, much to the frustration of Pakistani authorities.

From the TTP's perspective, replicating the Afghan Taliban's insurgency-plus-terrorism model holds more promise for success than negotiating with the Pakistani state or acquiring a marginal territory along the border to operate as local warlords. Moreover, the TTP has broader ideological objectives attainable only through violence and terrorism. While the TTP may have its own reasons for fighting Pakistan, the more important question is why the Afghan Taliban have remained completely uncompromising on their support for the TTP despite Islamabad's pressure and diplomatic engagement.

There are several critical reasons in Afghan Taliban calculations that explain why continued—and even increased—support for the TTP serves their interests more than strengthening ties with Pakistan, their longtime benefactor.

The Afghan Taliban view the TTP as a valuable strategic asset. During the Afghan Taliban insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan state, the TTP not only reinforced their ranks but also fought against Afghan forces and international troops, including NATO, helping secure Taliban victories on the battlefield, especially when U.S.-aligned forces adopted a more neutral posture. For these reasons, the Afghan Taliban consider themselves indebted to the TTP.

More importantly, in the Afghan Taliban's calculations, the TTP could play an instrumental role in countering future resistance from anti-Taliban Afghan groups, mostly comprising non-Pashtun minorities such as Tajiks, Hazaras, and Turkmen—communities that had formed the Northern Alliance in 2001 to aid the U.S.-NATO offensive that ousted the Taliban regime after 9/11.

Thus, the shared Pashtun ethnicity of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban is a major factor behind the Afghan Taliban's unwavering support and reliance on the TTP. Beyond the strategic and ideological considerations previously mentioned, this shared ethnic identity has become the most significant factor compelling Pakistan to rethink its longstanding pro-Taliban policy in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has increasingly realized that its extensive support for the Afghan Taliban has backfired and now constitutes a serious threat to national security. Since regaining power, the Afghan Taliban regime has adopted an overtly hostile posture toward Pakistan, manifested not only in rhetoric but also in concrete actions.

Recent border skirmishes between Islamabad and Kabul highlight this shift. Notably, the Afghan Taliban regime attacked Pakistani border forces after Islamabad targeted TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan. Such strong reactions reinforce Pakistan's assertion that the TTP and the Afghan Taliban are one and the same.

The Afghan Taliban's adoption of a nationalistic, anti-Pakistan posture appears to be a deliberate strategy aimed at winning public support within Afghanistan. Coming to power by force, and lacking deep roots in Afghan society and history, the Taliban regime seeks to bolster its legitimacy by cultivating anti-Pakistan sentiments—an approach likely to resonate with segments of the Afghan population.

This narrative serves to attract both sentimental and educated Pashtuns, for whom anti-Pakistan rhetoric has long held emotional appeal. Therefore, by promoting anti-Pakistan sentiments, the Afghan Taliban aim to strengthen their hold on power and increase acceptance among Afghan citizens.

This strategy, however, is ultimately shortsighted. Pakistani strategists maintain—with substantial evidence—that the Afghan Taliban are hosting the TTP, despite repeatedly claiming they would not allow Afghan soil to be used against Pakistan. These assurances, however, remain little more than lip service. As long as the Afghan Taliban regime remains in power in Afghanistan, it is likely to continue supporting and cultivating the TTP.

Pakistan's invisible cities

Fatima Khan

A groundbreaking World Bank working paper has shattered decades of complacency about Pakistan's demographic landscape. The study leverages cutting-edge satellite imagery and the globally recognized Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) methodology to reveal a staggering truth: 88 percent of Pakistan's 241 million people reside in areas exhibiting urban characteristics.

This figure dwarfs the government's longstanding official estimate of just 39 percent urban population, exposing a profound statistical mirage that has warped policy, starved infrastructure, and fueled a silent crisis of unmanaged sprawl.

The implications are seismic. Traditional census definitions, anchored in obsolete administrative boundaries from the British colonial era, have relegated bustling peri-urban clusters, secondary towns, and dense settlements to "rural" status on paper. In reality, the data paints a vivid portrait of transformation: 46 percent of Pakistanis now inhabit high-density urban cores—think Karachi's teeming megacity or Lahore's pulsating heart—while another 42 percent dwell in moderately dense urban centers, including what were once sleepy villages now swollen with factories, markets, and makeshift housing. These "functional cities" masquerade as countryside, depriving them of urban governance tools, fiscal transfers, and development funding tailored to their needs.

This misclassification isn't a mere bureaucratic quirk; it's a policy catastrophe with cascading fallout. Property tax systems, designed for sparse rural plots, fail to capture the value of booming real estate in peri-urban belts, leaving local governments cash-strapped. Infrastructure planning—roads, water supply, sanitation—remains skewed toward official urban hubs, ignoring the invisible metropolises where millions struggle daily. Municipalities in these hybrid zones lack the authority to enforce zoning, manage waste, or upgrade utilities, resulting in a vicious cycle of decay. Slums proliferate unchecked, home to an estimated 40 percent of the urban populace, where open sewers, erratic electricity, and contaminated water breed disease and despair. Congestion chokes mobility, air pollution claims thousands of lives annually, and inequality festers as informal economies dominate, offering precarious livelihoods without social safety nets.

At the heart of this urban explosion lies a rural implosion. Agriculture, once the backbone employing 37 percent of the workforce and underpinning exports like textiles and rice, is in freefall. Erratic monsoons, water scarcity from Indus overuse, soil degradation, and outdated farming techniques have slashed yields—wheat production stagnated at 28 million tons in 2024 despite population growth, while cotton output fell 30 percent over five years. Smallholders, burdened by high input costs and debt, abandon fields en masse. Climate shocks exacerbate the exodus: the 2022 floods displaced 33 million and destroyed 8 million acres of cropland, with recovery still incomplete. As rural incomes plummet—average farmer earnings hover below $2,000 annually—families flock to cities seeking opportunity, only to swell informal settlements and strain already overburdened systems.

This migration isn't inevitable; it's a symptom of neglect. Urban policymakers, ensconced in air-conditioned offices, have long dismissed rural distress as peripheral, decrying subsidies for fertilizers or electricity as fiscal drains. Yet, this shortsightedness boomerangs. Overloaded cities breed social unrest—crime rates in Karachi rose 15 percent in 2024 amid youth unemployment at 11 percent—while food insecurity looms as domestic production lags imports. The World Bank warns that without intervention, urban poverty could entrench at 25 percent by 2030, intersecting with environmental hazards like heatwaves that killed over 1,000 in Sindh this summer.

History offers blueprints for balance. In 19th-century New York, visionary merchants didn't confine investments to Manhattan's core; they funded railroads and subways extending to outer boroughs and beyond, recognizing that decongesting the center required viable alternatives. This holistic approach eased rural-to-urban pressures, stabilized labor pools, and propelled economic dominance. Similarly, modern powerhouses like China reversed urban overload through rural revitalization—pouring trillions into village infrastructure, e-commerce, and agro-industries to retain 40 percent of its population outside megacities.

Pakistan must heed these lessons with urgency. First, reform the statistical foundation. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics should integrate satellite-derived DEGURBA metrics into the 2027 census, redrawing boundaries to reflect ground realities. This would unlock urban-tier funding for peri-urban areas—property taxes could surge 50 percent in reclassified zones, per World Bank projections—enabling local bodies to deliver piped water (currently reaching only 60 percent of urbanites) and modern sanitation.

Second, forge a national urban-rural compact. Channel urban revenues—via a dedicated fund from property and sales taxes—back to countryside revitalization. Subsidize drip irrigation and climate-resilient seeds to boost yields 20-30 percent, create off-farm jobs in food processing, and expand rural broadband for digital markets. Social protection like Benazir Income Support must prioritize farm families to stem migration. In cities, prioritize affordable housing, mass transit, and slum upgrades; Karachi's Bus Rapid Transit, if scaled, could cut commute times 40 percent.

The interdependence is undeniable: vibrant villages supply food, labor, and stability to cities; thriving urban centers drive innovation and markets for rural goods. Ignoring this symbiosis courts disaster—environmental collapse, social fractures, economic stagnation. As the World Bank study illuminates, Pakistan is already an urban nation in all but name. Embracing this truth isn't optional; it's the pathway to resilient prosperity. Policymakers, from Islamabad to provincial capitals, must act swiftly: enumerate accurately, invest equitably, and bind city and village in shared destiny. The alternative is a fractured future where sprawl devours potential, and millions remain trapped in the shadows of progress.

Ice cream and MAGA drama in the American swamp

Belén Fernández

In the latest episode of the soap opera that passes for politics in the United States, President Donald Trump has dramatically split with Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, a former ally and a notorious wearer of the MAGA hat.

Writing on his Truth Social platform, Trump denounced his fellow Republican as "wacky" and "Far Left", claiming that he did not have time to deal with her alleged barrage of phone calls: "I can't take a ranting Lunatic's call every day."

As The New York Times noted, Trump had previously "stood by" Greene when she was criticised "for voicing conspiracy theories about the Sept. 11 attacks, school shootings and wildfires started by space lasers".

Anyway, nothing "Lunatic" about any of that. Greene denies having called the president, saying instead that she had texted him to suggest that he cease endeavouring to thwart the full release of the so-called Epstein files pertaining to the late paedophile and disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, which may implicate Trump.

The US House of Representatives is set to vote this week on the matter – and Greene is not the only Republican to have broken ranks. Several other House Republicans have also defied Trump on the Epstein front, including Thomas Massie of Kentucky and Lauren Boebert of Colorado.

In a typical about-face, Trump has now spontaneously reversed his position on the Epstein files, posting on Truth Social late on Sunday: "House Republicans should vote to release the Epstein files, because we have nothing to hide." And yet the Epstein files are hardly the only issue that raises the question of whether MAGA might not be headed for some sort of self-combustion.

As Trump recently reminded Americans, "Don't forget, MAGA was my idea. MAGA was nobody else's idea."

And so it's only logical that folks would associate the distinct failure to "make America great again" with the idea man himself.

Outright propaganda can only go so far – and people tend to notice when they don't have enough money to put food on the table in spite of upbeat presidential pronouncements regarding the state of the economy.

Even Trump has apparently realised, to some extent, that he stands to further alienate his base by insisting on nonsensical tariffs and other punitive financial measures. As a nonsolution, the government will now lower tariffs on coffee and bananas while the president muses over potential $2,000 tariff rebate cheques and 50-year mortgages.

A November 14 White House news release blamed the Democrats for the country's "economic mess" but assured citizens that "grocery prices and housing prices are trending in the right direction" with prices "for everyday staples" such as ice cream seeing "declines".

The news release ended on the inspiring note: "We're making progress – and the best is yet to come."

In addition to the cost-of-living crisis, another source of rising discontent among Republicans is US support for Israel. In July, Greene became the first Republican lawmaker to call the genocide in the Gaza Strip by name, condemning the "starvation" of Palestinians.

To be sure, US aid to Israel is not just a Republican thing; Trump's Democratic predecessor Joe Biden was more than happy to fling tens of billions of dollars at the genocidal state as it went about starving and otherwise annihilating civilians in Gaza. The Trump administration, however, has added a slight twist to business as usual by not only backing Israel to the hilt but also simultaneously threatening to starve poor Americans at home by withholding essential food assistance. But, hey, at least the price of ice cream is "declining".

Last week, two days before his official breakup with Greene, Trump took to Truth Social to warn that "only a very bad, or stupid Republican would fall into" the Democratic "trap" of the "Jeffrey Epstein Hoax", allegedly concocted purely to detract attention from the Democrats' wide-ranging transgressions.

But it seems that an ever-greater number of MAGA adherents may be at risk of descending into badness and stupidity as Trump reveals himself to be maybe not the most qualified person to "drain the swamp in Washington, DC" – one of the president's perennial promises to do away with corruption and other traditional political vices.

Indeed, Trump's apoplectic fits over the possible release of details regarding Epstein – ie, someone who was very much entrenched in said "swamp" – do not bode well in terms of drainage prospects.

Then again, the fact that Americans re-elected a nepotistic billionaire and convicted criminal to head the country suggests that the swamp probably isn't going anywhere anytime soon. On a micro level, the intra-MAGA soap opera may provide some fleeting gratification for spectators. But it's not like the drama sets the stage for any substantive improvement to the political panorama.

And while opposing Trump is, objectively speaking, a noble aim, we don't really need any more people who think space lasers cause wildfires and compare pandemic safety measures to the Holocaust. Nor, for that matter, do we need any more genocide-enabling Democrats, who at the end of the day are just as committed as Republicans to maintaining a corrupt plutocracy.

Blind and unquestioning support for the president may be eroding among his MAGA base. But rest assured that the swamp is here to stay.

Why Russia's liberal opposition is so anti-Palestinian

Selbi Durdiyeva

In July, Uzbekistan-born, Russian-speaking Israeli writer Dina Rubina gave an interview to the Russian opposition channel Rain TV, which caused a stir in the Russophone world. During the hour-and-a-half programme, she declared that there are no "peaceful residents" in Gaza, Israel has the right to "cleanse Gaza and turn it into a parking lot", and that Palestinians need to be "dissolved in hydrochloric acid".

Self-exiled journalist and producer Mikhail Kozyrev, who interviewed Rubina, decided to take out these bits, calling them "the most complex part" of the interview. Although he appeared to question Rubina on the claim that there are no "peaceful residents in Gaza" by comparing it to the collective blame Russians face over the war in Ukraine, he did not reject her claims and himself took a clear pro-Israel stance throughout his conversation with her.

And while many Russian speakers condemned Rubina – especially in Central Asia where her book talks were cancelled – there were many among Russia's political emigres who supported her, did not condemn her openly, or maintained her words were taken out of context.

This incident is not an aberration. Many in the Russian liberal opposition, which now operates mostly in exile, unquestioningly support Israel. This is not only due to their tendency to disregard institutionalised racism in Russia but also due to their embrace of a civilisational hierarchy narrative that places the white West at the top. Anti-Palestinian bias is a natural outcome of this worldview.

Examples of the Russian opposition's virulent anti-Palestinianism abound. Yuliya Latynina, a star columnist living in exile, has made parallels between "barbarians" destroying "blossoming civilisations" and the Palestinians and called students protesting against the genocide in Gaza "lazy and stupid".

Another self-exiled liberal commentator, Leonid Gozman, has claimed that European countries that voted at the United Nations in favour of a "pro-Hamas" resolution calling for a truce in Gaza did so because they were "afraid of their immigrant communities".

Andrei Pivovarov, former director of Open Russia, a now-defunct pro-democracy organisation, has said he finds Israel's actions in Gaza "justified". He was imprisoned in Russia until he was released last year in a prisoner exchange with the West.

Russian opposition politician, Dmitri Gudkov, currently residing in Bulgaria, has declared: "For me, Israel is the embodiment of civilisation. Anything against it is barbarism."

Kseniya Larina, a renowned Russian journalist and radio host, also currently in exile, has hosted on her show Israeli Russian-speaking intellectuals multiple times. In one instance, a talk with an Israeli educator was titled, "Recognition of Palestine is not antisemitism, it's idiocy".

These are just a few examples of the many Russian liberal emigres who openly supported Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. In addition, Russian pop icons, comedians, musicians, and TV personalities who are based in Israel or visit also constantly broadcast the Israeli narrative.

Popular Russian oppositional media outlets – the Nobel Prize recipient newsletter Novaya Gazeta, Meduza publication outlet, and TV Rain – disproportionately feature pro-Israeli news with little counter-narrative offered. As a result, racist, anti-Palestinian rhetoric thrives in Russian-language social and traditional media.

The roots of this pro-Israeli stance among Russia's liberals – who make up the majority of the Russian opposition – go back to the 20th century.

The Jewish people were persecuted by the Tsarist regime during the Russian Empire, which the Bolsheviks initially denounced. But the communist regime itself eventually embraced anti-Semitic views under Joseph Stalin. Discrimination against Jews continued, and it peaked during 1951-53, when Stalin accused a group of Jewish doctors of conspiracy against the state and launched a campaign of persecution. Even after the Communist Party dropped the accusations, Jews continued to be subject to forced assimilation and structural discrimination.

Within this context, the emerging liberal opposition of the 1980s came to perceive Israel as a protector of the victimised Jewish community and a democratic, liberal state, part of the West.

In parallel, there was an immigration wave towards Israel, which was seen as a place of safety for Soviet opposition figures. This also fed into an unconditional allegiance to Israel and Zionism among dissidents, which was inherited by subsequent generations of the liberal opposition.

The pro-Israel bias of the Russian opposition intensified even more after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which sent hundreds of thousands of opposition-minded Russians fleeing abroad. Israel has been one of the main destinations; by some estimates, in 2022 alone, some 70,000 Russians moved there, compared with 27,000 in 2021, contributing to a total of about 1.3 million Russian-speakers in Israel.

The paradox here is that the Russian liberal opposition maintains that it is the democratic, moral alternative to President Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism while openly expressing racist views against the Palestinians. It largely condemns Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Russian war crimes, but denies the Israeli ones.

In the West, the self-declared democratic values of the Russian opposition are rarely scrutinised. But they should be, because it is not just in relation to Palestine that its racist views are apparent.

Choking on progress: How real estate tycoons killed Lahore's air

It has been years since the people of Lahore have been forced to breathe toxic air during winters. Smog has become a seasonal issue because the outskirts of Lahore have been deprived of hundreds of thousands of trees and green pastures that have been replaced by concrete jungles.

Several brick kilns have emerged in the vicinity of these new housing societies, emitting poisonous fumes into the atmosphere. Those involved in real estate profiteering ventures have become too strong for those in government to resist. For centuries, farmers burned their crop residue to prepare for the next harvest. Trees, serving as nature's oxygen generators, would counter this pollution. But when the trees were chopped down and sprawling lush pastures were replaced with concrete, the natural balance simply vanished. According to health experts, the smog is destroying lungs, and the average lifespan of children has been reduced by about six years. This does not seem to bother the government which continues to be hand in glove with the merchants of death and destruction.

In the good old days, the moment one crossed the Fortress Stadium, one would enjoy the soothing sight of thousands of trees as far as the eye could see. All one can see now are billboards and neon signs. Tractors, which are meant for agricultural use, are seen moving around loaded with construction material, emitting toxic black smoke. Land meant for parks and hospitals has been converted into commercial entities. Now even the Walton Airport, which was built in 1918, has been demolished to make way for a business district. This malaise has infected every city in Punjab. Even the river bed, where once Ravi used to flow majestically, has fallen prey to powerful real estate tycoons. Despite the massive damage inflicted by recent floods, the provincial government continues to call the controversial housing project a 'game-changer'. Indeed, the game has changed, but for the worse.

Malik Tariq Ali
Lahore

The regulatory change and its impact

Customer protection guidelines of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) for all commercial banks are generally found to be commendable. However, item 2.5.1 of Business Conduct & Fair Treatment Framework, recently released under BPRD Circular No. 04 of 2025, has shocked small depositors across the country. Now, under the cited regulatory framework, depositors with average monthly balance of less than Rs50,000 will be charged a certain fee by the banks for providing the 12-month bank statement ending June 30 that is required by most individuals for finalising their income tax returns.

This development is nothing but SBP's approval of banks' plan to jack up their income by levying a charge on their small depositors. This guideline is an act of unfair treatment. Small depositors will have to pay charges for obtaining their account statements, while big depositors will continue to have the same free of charge. Does the SBP officialdom assume that small depositors are not required to file tax returns when the income above Rs600,000 per annum (or Rs50,000 per month) is taxable? Individuals earning Rs50,000, or, for that matter, even Rs200,000 per month cannot afford to maintain a balance of Rs50,000 in their bank accounts. However, they have to submit their tax returns. Similarly, senior citizens having their lifetime savings invested in different government schemes draw every penny of their monthly profit to keep their lives moving. They, too, cannot maintain the required balance, but still have to submit tax returns. The SBP should review the framework, and advise all commercial banks to provide Tax Year (July-June) statements free of charge to their account holders irrespective of their monthly average bank balance.

M. Shams Izhar
Karachi

Fix the roads before you fix the drivers

Karachi faces multiple challenges, such as pathetic roads, poor drainage, broken traffic signals and faded lane markings. Drivers often commit unintentional violations because of the poor road infrastructure. Before penalising citizens through exorbitant e-challans, the government should first provide safe and properly maintained roads. Instead of discrimination in fines, there should be equal standards and better road development policies across all major cities. A fair system is one that enforces law and ensures the basic rights of the people. The authorities concerned should review the e-challan policy, bring uniformity across provinces, and take immediate action for the repair and maintenance of Karachi's roads.

Nafisa Younus
Karachi

Factors behind China's progress

The progress China has been able to make in a matter of just 35 years is undoubtedly miraculous. I recently visited China for two weeks on a learning tour with a large group. The last time I had been to Beijing was in the 1990s for a few days. The differences I witnessed this time are mind boggling. The country has grown exponentially on the simple principle of the rule of the law regardless of any bias, including lawmakers, bureaucrats and the men and women in uniform. Merit is considered supreme and it is followed everywhere religiously. Reward and punishment are part of every walk of life. It seems as if no one is poor in China anymore because I did not find any beggars on the roads of the four cities that I visited. Millions of tourists visit China every year and boost the local economy. They feel safe as the crime rate is negligible. There is zero tolerance for corruption. Honesty and trustworthiness are the motto of the whole nation. One can only hope that Pakistan would someday learn these lessons from its best friend.

Serajuddaula Syed
Karachi

The tale of Two Karachis

Recently, around 6pm, I left the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) area in Karachi to go to a distant locality. Anyone who drives in Karachi knows this is just about the worst possible time — Sharea Faisal jammed end to end, Korangi Road crawling, and Jam Sadiq Bridge suffocating in gridlock. But the Malir Expressway was different: smooth, wide and strangely empty. For a moment, it felt like another Karachi. And that, perhaps, is the problem. The tale of Karachi is, indeed, a tale of two cities existing within a single city. The salaried class and daily wage-earners slog home using clogged arteries — exhausted, crammed into buses, or stuck in traffic jams on motorbikes. Their commute devours hours of life every day. Meanwhile, the elite class glides along a glittering shortcut carved through Malir, built almost exclusively for their convenience. The contrast is stark. The expressway does not solve Karachi's traffic problem; it merely shifts comfort from the many to the few. Worse, it is environmentally reckless. Cutting through the Malir River's course, the expressway narrows the bed, and replaces farmland with concrete. Experts have been warning of intensified flooding in future monsoons, but nature continues to be treated as an element disposable. Which, by the way, it is not.

Driving under the bright LED lights that line the expressway, another irony struck me: across the walls in Shah Faisal Colony, entire neighbourhoods sat in darkness amid power outages. The road had light; the people had none. Could there be a sharper metaphor for misplaced priorities?

Instead of uniting, the Malir Expressway deepens the divide. Karachi deserves better: buses, circular railway, safer roads, water and power for the majority, etc. Building for the few while ignoring the many is not at all progress; it is fracture.

Haseeb Dal
Mirpurkhas

New antivenom works against 17 dangerous African snake species

Sayan Tribedi

More than 300,000 snakebite cases occur in Africa annually, resulting in at least 7,000 deaths, as well as numerous amputations and injuries. Now, scientists have invented a new nanobody-based antivenom that shows promise against 17 dangerous African snake species. Until now, the mainstays of treatment have been antivenoms created by exposing horses to particular venoms and then isolating protective antibodies from the animals' blood. These traditional antivenoms can occasionally cause allergic reactions in patients, and they are effective against only one or a few of related snake species. Now, in a study published in the journal Nature, scientists report creating an antivenom that targets most of Africa's deadliest elapids, meaning cobras, mambas, and the rinkhals, also called ring-necked spitting cobras. Instead of horse serum, the antivenom uses eight engineered nanobodies that are essentially tiny antibody fragments designed to block key toxins in the snakes' venoms.

Juan Calvete, director of the Evolutionary and Translational Venomics Laboratory at the Biomedicine Institute of Valencia, who was not involved in the study, said the new nanobody-based antivenom is "a remarkable advance in the development of synthetic antivenoms." However, he noted that in its current form, the antivenom may be expensive to make, and thus challenging to use in poorer regions. To create the new antivenom, researchers exposed an alpaca and a llama to venoms from 18 African snakes, including cobras, mambas, and the rinkhals.

Parts of Arizona are being sucked dry, with areas of land sinking 6 inches per year

Skyler Ware

Satellite data reveals that some areas in Arizona's Willcox Basin are sinking more than 6 inches (15 centimeters) per year — the fastest rate of subsidence in the state.

This sinking is the result of intensive groundwater extraction to support agriculture in the region, which lowers the water table in the basin, taking the land surface down with it. Past research has shown that since the mid-20th century, parts of the basin have sunk by up to 12 feet (3.6 meters). The extraction and subsidence have caused wells to run dry and cracks to open up in the ground. The findings were presented at The Geological Society of America Connects 2025 in San Antonio. Groundwater in the basin fills the spaces between dust and dirt particles below the surface. When this groundwater is removed, the spaces it once filled collapse because the sediment can't support its own weight. Once the spaces that used to hold water collapse, the change is permanent, and the basin loses its ability to replenish its groundwater.

"Over time, those pore spaces that were once being held open by water pressure start to collapse," Brian Conway, a geophysicist at the Arizona Department of Water Resources who was not involved in the research, said in a statement. "That causes the overlying surface to sink because of the compaction that's happening in the subsurface."

In the new research, Danielle Smilovsky, a researcher at the Conrad Blucher Institute at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, used a satellite-based technique known as interferometric synthetic aperture radar (InSAR) to measure changes to Willcox Basin's surface height between 2017 and 2021.

Flavanols in cocoa, berries may improve blood flow in sedentary people

Katharine Lang

Sitting for long periods is linked to declines in vascular function, particularly in the legs, even in people who are physically fit. Recent research suggests that adults in the United States sit for at least 6 hours every day, and adolescents even more. Decline in vascular function can increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases, such as strokes and heart attacks. However, many of us have sedentary jobs, spend a lot of time travelling by car, train, or plane, or enjoy watching TV or playing computer games, so we may spend much of the day sitting down. Now, researchers from the University of Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, have found that flavanols may help counteract the effects of prolonged sitting. In their small-scale study, published in The Journal of Physiology, researchers found that young men who drank a high-flavanol cocoa drink before sitting for 2 hours maintained better blood flow in the femoral (leg) and brachial (arm) arteries than those who drank a low-flavanol version of the drink. Researchers recruited 40 healthy men, ages between 18 and 34, into the study. Half were high in fitness, and half were low, as measured by a cardiorespiratory fitness test conducted by the researchers. Before the experimental visits, participants fasted for 12 hours, and avoided caffeine, alcohol, polyphenol-containing foods and drinks, and any vigorous exercise for 24 hours.

Exercise may help counter depressive, anxiety-like symptoms

Deep Shukla

Exercise can help moderate some of the adverse effects of an unhealthy diet on depression-like symptoms in rats, according to a recent study published inBrain Medicine.

The study, conducted in a rat model, showed that exercise helped reduce depressive and anxiety-like symptoms induced by a high-fat, high-sugar diet. The study's findings suggest that exercise could mitigate the effects of an unhealthy diet on mood by normalizing levels of metabolic hormones, such as insulin and leptin, and attenuating the decline in certain metabolites produced by the gut microbiome.

The study's lead author, Yvonne Nolan, professor in anatomy and neuroscience at University College Cork, said, "Our findings provide important proof-of-concept that exercise can mitigate some unhealthy diet-related mental health effects and point to specific biological pathways involved. More research is needed to confirm these effects in humans and understand the full mechanistic picture."

The ease of access to ultra-processed foods that are high in sugar and saturated fats has led to an upsurge in obesity and other metabolic conditions. This increase in the prevalence of obesity has been compounded by the lack of physical activity and sedentary lifestyles. Notably, the metabolic changes associated with the consumption of such a high-sugar, high-fat Western-style diet are also associated with an increased risk of mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety. A high-fat, high-sugar Western-style diet can alter pathways involving metabolic hormones, including leptin and insulin, as well as the composition and metabolism of the gut microbiome.