■ COP30: climate diplomacy fails once again - Page 5
■ Governance fault lines widen - Page 6
■ Pakistan's investment drought - Page 7

WEEKLY
Cutting Edge
INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE • ANALYTICAL

RISING UNEMPLOYMENT: A TICKING TIME BOMB

weeklycuttingedge.com | CPL # 109 | 2-8 December 2025 | Vol# 21 Issue # 3 | Rs. 100


پاکی کا احساس، ہر بار
Treet®
Hygiene
Razor with Comb
پاکی پائیں
پاکیزہ رہیں
USE ONLY ON DRY SKIN
/Treet.grooming
بہترین نتائج کے لئے خشک جلد پر استعمال کریں

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

Rising unemployment: a ticking time bomb

Farhan Khan

According to the latest Labour Force Survey released last week by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate in Pakistan has reached a 21-year peak of 7.1 percent.

The survey reveals that during the last four years, the number of unemployed Pakistanis has jumped by 31 percent rising from 4.5 million to 5.9 million in 2024-25, denoting a jump of around 1.4 million people. Unemployment has affected all age groups, especially the youth aged 15-24 years in whose case joblessness went up from 11.1pc in 2020-21 to 12.6pc in 2024-25. Among the group aged 15-29, the rate rose to 11.5pc from 10.3pc, reflecting a shrinking job market.

Overall, the average unemployment rate increased to 6.9pc, compared to 6.3pc in the previous labour force survey. Regarding the gender factor, the male unemployment rate inched up from 5.5pc to 5.9pc, while for females it increased from 8.9pc to 9.7pc. In rural areas, unemployment rose from 5.8pc to 6.3pc, and in urban areas, it edged up from 7.3pc to 8pc. According to the survey, there was a rise in the Labour Force Participation Rate, indicating greater engagement of the working-age population in economic activities. While the rural participation rose from 48.6pc to 52.3pc, for the urban area, it went up from 38.8pc to 40.8pc, reflecting broader workforce inclusion across the country.

The total labour force in the country increased from 71.8m in 2020-21 to 85.6m in 2024-25 –- an addition of 3.5m people per year. The proportion of people aged 10 and above, who are either employed or seeking employment, increased from 44.9pc in 2020-21 to 47.7pc in 2024-25. As per the trend noted in recent years, the share of agricultural employment declined from 37.4pc in 2020-21 to 33.1pc in 2024-25, while the services sector grew from 37.2pc to 41.2pc. But unfortunately, industry's share declined to 24.9pc from 25.4pc.

Out of 179.6m working-age individuals in 2024-25, 117.4m are engaged in unpaid domestic and care activities. Out of 92m men, 50.7m (55pc) perform unpaid work, while among 87.6m women, 66.7m (76pc) are engaged in unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. Employees constitute the largest group (43.5pc), followed by own-account workers (36.1pc), contributing family workers (19.1pc), and employers (1.3pc). Between the two surveys, the share of employees rose from 42pc to 43.5pc, and own-account workers from 35.5pc to 36.1pc, while contributing family workers declined from 21.1pc to 19.1pc. In non-agricultural work, the informal sector continues to dominate, accounting for 72.1pc of jobs — 75.5pc in rural areas and 68.3pc in urban areas. Formal sector work is more common in cities, reaching 31.7pc. Female participation is higher in the formal sector at 33.7pc, while male participation in the informal sector reaches 73pc. Formal work has grown slightly over time.

The latest Labour Force Survey identifies some of the factors underlying the deteriorating job situation in the country. The first is the education and skills gap due to which many positions in the formal sector, especially in industries, remain unfilled for lack of suitable candidates. Secondly, the survey findings reflect an economy which is not in good health.

It is no secret that during the last four years the country's economic growth has suffered badly from a decline in foreign direct investment and exodus of multinational companies from Pakistan. The local investors have also shied away from new ventures due to high energy costs and bank interest charges. The government's policy lacks consistency and reliability which discourages both foreign and local investors. The economy is in a moribund state due to the acts of omission and commission by successive governments. The taxation system suffers from deep-rooted structural deficiencies which have rendered running of industries less and less profitable with the passage of time. Business circles say that complaints against over-taxation and corruption fall on deaf ears. Instead, the authorities concerned come up with new schemes which raise the cost of doing business. The rules regulating economic activities are too cumbersome and complex which hampers smooth working of businesses.

Rising unemployment is a ticking time bomb which must be defused before it explodes and causes social unrest and chaos. To this end effective strategies should be adopted to accelerate the pace of economic growth, with special focus on industries which are labour intensive. It is equally important to create a conducive economic, political and security environment for existing businesses to flourish as well as to attract foreign investors. Simultaneously, steps should be taken to expand the network of technical and vocational institutes in the country in order to train our youth and equip them with the skills needed by the industrial and corporate sectors. In this regard, the government should put special focus on the SME sector which has unlimited potential for job creation.

COP30: climate diplomacy fails once again

Nasim Ahmed

The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) failed to yield the results expected from it. More than 190 countries attended the summit which lasted two weeks but in the end the outcome was a big disappointment for all. At one point the conference came close to collapsing as several developed economies and petro-states sought to protect their fossil fuel interests in sharp contrast to the stand taken by a majority of countries facing climate disaster.

The absence of the US from COP30 was symbolic, underlining the disdain of the super power for the global concern over the ever-deepening climate crisis. The world is dangerously close to breaching the 1.5°C limit for global warming set at the 2015 Paris climate summit, but the developed countries responsible for toxic emissions seemed little pushed to initiate remedial measures.

At COP30 in Belem, Brazil, 80,000 people gathered but there was no concrete outcome except for countless pages of discussions, flowery speeches and rhetorical pledges. Remarkably, what was lacking was a credible plan to cut the present level of carbon emissions to maintain global warming near 1.5 C.

This year global temperatures hit 1.55 C above pre-industrial levels, but delegates from the developed countries were nonchalant in their attitude and preferred to leave hard decisions in this regard to the future. At the conclusion of COP30, 119 countries submitted new climate plans for 2035. Together they account for 74 percent of global emissions, but their proposals only reduce emissions by less than 15 percent of what is needed by 2035 to keep 1.5 C within reach.

The UN has repeatedly said that the world remains on track for 2.3-2.8 C of warming even if every new pledge is fulfilled. But this stark warning was cavalierly ignored by those responsible for the climate disaster. The global road map to move away from coal, oil, and gas earlier received support from more than 80 countries, including the EU as well as Australia and South Korea. But this found no mention in the final communique. The previous summits recognised the need to shift away from fossil fuels. But the COP30 marked a most unfortunate turning away from this goal.

The Brazil summit also shillyshallied on the critical issue of climate finance. Support from wealthy countries is urgently needed by vulnerable nations to combat the life threatening effects of the climate crisis. They need to strengthen their defences against flooding and extreme weather conditions. But all they got was vague promises and commitments couched in ambiguous phraseology. Pakistan is a prime example of the colossal economic and environmental damage it has repeatedly suffered over the last few years due to extreme weather conditions, including torrential rains and urban flooding. But it has yet to receive the aid it needs for reconstruction and rehabilitation from UN agencies and other sources.

In this regard, it is important to mention here that the USD 120 billion a year that has been committed by 2035 was initially proposed for 2030, while currently the actual need of the countries fighting climate change is estimated at USD 360 billion annually. Unfortunately, most developed countries want to designate climate funding as loans rather than grants, which will drive poor countries deeper into debt and poverty.

The "Baku to Belem road map" that was supposed to explain how the world will mobilize $1.3 trillion annually for climate action by 2035 was obliquely discussed at the summit and reduced to a footnote in the final decision. For vulnerable countries facing rising debt and shrinking aid budgets, the COP30 outcome signals that the growing financing gap cannot be expected to be narrowed in the near future.

The summit also failed to agree on concrete plans to halt deforestation. According to the 2025 Forest Declaration Assessment, deforestation is rising at an alarming rate, with 8.1 million hectares (20.9 million acres) lost in 2024 alone. Despite more than 90 countries at COP30 calling for a road map to combat deforestation and more than 80 calling for a fossil fuel phaseout, neither item appeared in the final text of the summit.

Climate experts say that of all the summits held during the last 30 years, COP30 was the most disappointing, divisive and acrimonious. The summit showed that the countries most responsible for global warming are least concerned and not ready to fulfil their responsibility in the matter. The countries vulnerable to climate change have been left to fend for themselves. We in Pakistan must prepare ourselves and mobilise indigenous resources to tackle the challenge of climate change in the years ahead.

Governance fault lines widen

Muhammad Ali

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) recent Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment (GCDA) has thrust Pakistan's institutional frailties into sharp relief, zeroing in on a dilapidated audit framework that imperils trillions in public coffers.

At a time when the nation's bureaucracy reels from political turbulence and fiscal austerity under the $7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF), the Fund's admonition about the dearth of internal audit mechanisms and the Auditor General's Office (AGP) curtailed autonomy transcends technocratic jargon. It lays bare a profound dysfunction in the exercise of public power—one where oversight bows to executive fiat, eroding accountability and fueling a culture of impunity that has long undermined economic stability.

This critique arrives amid mounting strains on Pakistan's governance edifice. With inflation hovering at 6.2 percent in October 2025 and public debt at Rs82.5 trillion, the stakes could scarcely be higher. The GCDA, requested by Islamabad and benchmarked for EFF compliance, dissects how fiduciary lapses expose nearly Rs40 trillion in federal expenditures—and exponentially more in provinces—to rampant risks. Absent robust internal controls, the report contends, corruption festers unchecked, distorting markets and siphoning resources that could fund essential services. The Fund's blunt assessment: without fortified audits, Pakistan's reform narrative remains a hollow echo, incapable of restoring investor trust or public faith in a system marred by elite capture.

The fissures run deep and systemic. The Public Finance Management (PFM) Act of 2019 mandated the appointment of Chief Internal Auditors (CIAs) in every ministry by 2020, vesting them with authority to preempt fiscal irregularities through real-time monitoring. Six years on, not a single post has been filled—a glaring non-compliance that leaves divisions bereft of even basic financial officers in dozens of cases. This vacuum manifests in predictable chaos: ministries operate without internal dashboards, allowing procurement scandals and budgetary overruns to balloon undetected until external probes unearth them. The Economic Affairs Division's recent admission to a Senate panel—that no transparent audit trail exists for IMF loan utilization—exemplifies this void, where billions in inflows vanish into opaque ledgers without traceability. Provinces fare worse, with devolved funds often funneled through patronage networks, amplifying leakages in health and education outlays.

The AGP's plight is equally emblematic of compromised independence. Constitutionally autonomous under Article 168, the office paradoxically clings to the Federal Secretariat's administrative tether, routing reports through the executive to Parliament rather than directly to legislators. Hiring freezes demand Finance Ministry nods for each auditor, crippling a force already 1,500 short; even "charged" budgetary allocations—meant for unfettered release—face withholding delays. This setup breeds dependency where autonomy is paramount, rendering the AGP a supplicant in the very battles it wages against malfeasance. Historical precedents abound: the 2019 PIA procurement scandal, where Rs21 billion in aircraft deals evaded scrutiny until PAC intervention, or the Rs2 trillion in supplementary grants over the past decade, now under IMF-mandated special audit after years of evasion. Such episodes not only erode fiscal buffers but also perpetuate a narrative of institutional capture, where oversight serves as theater rather than sentinel.

Compounding these structural woes is an audit apparatus drowning in volume but starved of velocity. The AGP churns out over 6,000 reports yearly—tomes swelling to thousands of pages—yet 75 percent of 34,000 PAC recommendations languish unimplemented, trapped in a procedural purgatory. Recidivist irregularities recur annually, from ghost employees in development projects to inflated contracts in SOEs like Pakistan Steel Mills, because executive agencies dodge accountability with impunity. The absence of compliance trackers or centralized monitoring—let alone enforceable timelines—transforms audits into archival exercises, not catalysts for correction. The IMF decries this as a "cycle of documentation without consequence," where output metrics eclipse outcomes, fostering a governance gap that invites corruption at every fiscal inflection.

These audit ailments are not isolated anomalies but threads in a broader tapestry of institutional erosion. Pakistan's public sector, from the Federal Board of Revenue's (FBR) politicized postings to the National Accountability Bureau's (NAB) selective prosecutions, exhibits a chronic chasm between de jure independence and de facto subservience. The GCDA extends this lens to "state capture," where policy bends to elite whims—tax exemptions costing 4.61 percent of GDP, or SIFC concessions shielding conglomerates from bids—distorting markets and stifling SMEs. Judicial encroachments, like the 2025 constitutional tweaks birthing a parallel Federal Constitutional Court, further entrench executive sway over appointments, per the Fund's critique. This pattern, echoed in UNDP's 2021 findings, underscores how vested interests perpetuate advantage, capping growth at 2-3 percent when 5-6.5 percent beckons with reforms.

The IMF's timing is propitious, aligning with EFF reviews that could unlock $1.2 billion in December 2025 disbursements. Historically, external anchors have spurred action: the 2013 PFM Act emerged from prior IMF prodding, though implementation faltered. Now, the Fund proposes a 15-point blueprint to fortify the ramparts—amending the AGP Act for direct parliamentary reporting and autonomous budgeting; mandating CIA postings with prosecutorial teeth; digitizing PAC tracking for real-time compliance dashboards; and empowering parliamentary oversight with enforcement powers. Pilot e-audits in high-risk entities like FBR and top SOEs could yield quick wins, recovering billions in misallocated funds while modeling transparency.

Yet, diagnosis demands more than deference; it craves political sinew. Successive regimes—from PTI's NAB overhauls to PML-N's patronage pacts—have deferred these fixes, prioritizing electoral optics over enduring architecture. Tying EFF tranches to verifiable milestones—CIA appointments by Q2 2026, PAC digitization by mid-year—could enforce momentum, much like the Fund's insistence on supplementary grant audits, pledged for delivery within a week of the November 2025 technical mission. Civil society, bolstered by platforms like Transparency International's local chapter, must amplify scrutiny, while international partners condition aid on progress. The imperative transcends audits; it's existential. Pakistan's Rs40 trillion federal kitty—and provincial equivalents—fuels a youth bulge of 64 percent under 30, demanding investments in skills and infrastructure unmarred by graft. Weak oversight not only invites fiscal hemorrhage but corrodes the social contract, breeding cynicism amid 42 percent poverty and 22 percent youth unemployment. As Stefan Dercon of Oxford notes, "Failure of implementation gives vested interests free rein," a peril Pakistan cannot afford.

The GCDA isn't mere admonition; it's an inflection. With the EFF's first review in May 2025 already spotlighting these gaps, December's board looms as a litmus test. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's administration, juggling coalition fragilities, must summon the resolve to sever executive tendrils—elevating AGP to a standalone entity, enforcing PFM mandates, and instituting consequence-laden audits. Failure risks not just tranche delays but a deeper erosion of sovereignty, where external diagnostics become perennial crutches.

Pakistan's institutions, battered yet resilient, harbor the blueprint for redemption: a rules-bound order where audits illuminate rather than languish. The IMF has illuminated the abyss; now, leaders must bridge it with deeds, not deferrals. In safeguarding these trillions, they safeguard the republic's promise—a future where public trust is earned through unyielding integrity, not eroded by unchecked excess. The hour demands not acknowledgment, but action; the cost of inaction, a legacy of squandered potential.

Pakistan's investment drought

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economic engine sputters under the weight of chronically low investment, a malaise that has persisted for years and now threatens to throttle any hope of sustainable recovery.

The investment-to-GDP ratio, a critical barometer of capital commitment, languished at a meager 13.1 percent in fiscal year 2024—a 50-year nadir that starkly contrasts with the regional average exceeding 30 percent. This figure, which inched up slightly to 13.8 percent in FY25 per the National Accounts Committee, falls woefully short of the government's 14.2 percent target, underscoring a private sector contribution of just 9.1 percent and public outlays at 2.9 percent. Amid stabilizing inflation at 4.9 percent and reserves hovering near $14.5 billion, the IMF's Extended Fund Facility has bought breathing room, but without bold structural overhauls, growth projections of 3.2 percent for 2025 risk fizzling into stagnation. The crisis isn't merely fiscal; it's a symptom of deeper rot—policy favoritism, institutional frailty, and a playing field tilted toward the elite—that demands far more than sporadic incentives.

Historical trends paint a portrait of squandered potential. Since the 1990s, Pakistan's investment ratio has trended downward, averaging 17 percent from 1960 to 2024, fueled by consumption booms rather than productive capital infusion. Public spending, often debt-financed and skewed toward subsidies for influential sectors, has crowded out private initiative, while bureaucratic hurdles and energy shortages deterred long-term bets. In contrast, South Asian peers have surged ahead: India's ratio hovers around 31 percent, propelled by infrastructure megaprojects and digital reforms; Bangladesh clocks 32 percent, buoyed by garment exports and remittances; even crisis-hit Sri Lanka sustains 23 percent through tourism rebounds and debt restructuring. These nations prioritized ease of doing business—India's single-window clearances, Bangladesh's special economic zones—yielding FDI inflows that Pakistan can only envy, at a paltry 0.5 percent of GDP in FY25.

The fallout is visceral and multifaceted. Low capital formation erodes productivity, leaving industries reliant on imported machinery and intermediates that strain the current account—deficits narrowed to 0.18 percent of GDP in 2024 via import compression, not export vigor. Balance-of-payments woes recur, as evidenced by the 2023 near-default averted only by IMF intervention. Job creation stalls: with 2 million youth entering the workforce annually, unemployment at 7 percent masks underemployment plaguing 40 percent in informal sectors. Innovation atrophies—R&D spending at 0.2 percent of GDP pales against India's 0.7 percent—while environmental vulnerabilities mount, with climate adaptation underfunded amid water scarcity and flood damages exceeding $30 billion since 2022.

Enter the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a civilian-military hybrid launched in June 2023 as a "single window" to slash red tape and lure $5 billion in annual FDI. Armed with powers to override regulations, the SIFC promised fast-tracked approvals in mining, agriculture, IT, and energy, drawing Gulf commitments for green initiatives and mineral exploration. By mid-2025, it notched wins: IT exports surged on simplified remittances; corporate farming pilots under the Green Pakistan Initiative boosted yields in Balochistan; privatization of PIA and DISCOs advanced with G2G pacts from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Inflation dipped to a six-year low, and logistics reforms enhanced port efficiency at Gwadar.

Yet, two years on, the SIFC's ledger reveals more ambition than achievement. FDI trickled to $1.3 billion in FY25, far below targets, hampered by its own opacity—broad immunities for officials and unchecked exemptions from environmental and labor norms drew IMF scrutiny in the 2025 Governance Diagnostic. At a Pakistan Business Council forum in Islamabad, SIFC's national coordinator conceded a "strategic shift," pledging to engage local "sectoral tycoons" before courting foreigners. This pivot rings hollow without tackling root impediments: inconsistent policies that flip with elections, a tax regime where exemptions cost 4.61 percent of GDP, and weak contract enforcement delaying resolutions up to 1,000 days. Handouts to favorites—energy rebates for textiles, mining concessions sans bids—perpetuate an uneven arena, where SMEs, comprising 90 percent of firms, face 20-30 percent higher compliance costs.

The exodus of multinationals lays bare this dysfunction. Since 2022, over 21 giants have scaled back or fled, not for lack of opportunity but for unviable operations amid volatility. Procter & Gamble shuttered manufacturing in October 2025, opting for third-party distribution after citing regulatory hurdles and forex constraints. Shell divested its 77 percent stake in 2023, followed by TotalEnergies' 50 percent exit from Total PARCO in 2024, both decrying supply chain snarls and high duties. Pharmaceuticals hemorrhaged: Eli Lilly, Pfizer, and Sanofi-Aventis ceased local production by 2025, burdened by price controls and import tariffs on active ingredients. Tech followed suit—Microsoft closed its Islamabad office in 2023, Uber and Careem suspended ride-hailing in 2025 amid low demand and insecurity, while Telenor sold to PTCL in late 2023 over energy costs and taxes. Yamaha halted motorcycle assembly in September 2025, axing 500 jobs, as rising input costs and weak sales eroded margins. Analysts attribute this to sovereign risk and regressive taxes, not isolated strategies—Shell's global retail pivot hit Mexico and Indonesia too, but Pakistan's cocktail of instability amplified the pain.

These departures aren't just corporate footnotes; they signal eroding confidence that ripples through supply chains. Local suppliers lose contracts, jobs evaporate—P&G's exit alone idled hundreds—and technology transfers halt, stunting innovation. FDI as GDP share dips to 0.7 percent, versus India's 2 percent, while remittances, a $35 billion lifeline, face headwinds from global slowdowns.

Revival hinges on transcending piecemeal palliatives for a holistic reinvention. First, level the field: enact the IMF-recommended 15-point agenda, mandating e-procurement, parliamentary vetting of incentives, and NAB autonomy to curb elite capture. Tax reforms could broaden the base—raising the 10.3 percent tax-to-GDP ratio to 15 percent—via equitable levies on real estate and agriculture, freeing Rs2 trillion for infrastructure. Judicial modernization, targeting 500-day dispute resolutions, would safeguard property rights.

Second, foster inclusivity: empower SMEs with digital single-windows, slashing registration to 24 hours, and subsidized credit at 8 percent for green tech. Public investment must pivot to human capital—Rs1 trillion for vocational hubs training 5 million youth in AI and renewables—mirroring Bangladesh's skills push that absorbed 4 million into exports.

Third, ensure predictability: a five-year investment charter, immune to electoral whims, guaranteeing repatriation and stable tariffs. SIFC could evolve into a transparent facilitator, publishing deal audits and capping exemptions at 1 percent of GDP.

The IMF envisions investment climbing to 16.44 percent by 2029 with reforms, potentially 20 percent via aggressive execution, creating 10 million jobs and halving poverty. Yet, as Atlantic Council warns, without closing the 10-point gap with India and Bangladesh, living standards stagnate. Policymakers, from Sharif's coalition to provincial satraps, must forsake patronage for equity. The SIFC's "shift" is a start, but true momentum demands dismantling barriers for all, not just tycoons.

Pakistan's bounty—241 million dynamic youth, vast minerals, strategic ports—beckons billions if unleashed. Clinging to uneven incentives invites more exits, more crises. The choice is clear: reform resolutely, or consign potential to the annals of what-ifs. With FY26 budgeting underway, the window narrows—act now, or watch the regional train depart without.

Pakistan's 'cautiously optimistic' recovery meets new pressures

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's Ministry of Finance has struck a note of tempered hope in its latest Monthly Economic Update and Outlook, describing the nation's economic trajectory as "cautiously optimistic." This assessment comes against a backdrop of stabilizing macroeconomic indicators but persistent headwinds from food price volatility and agricultural setbacks.

With inflation projected to linger between 5.0 and 6.0 percent this month—driven primarily by strains on agricultural output and supply chains—the report underscores the fragility of recent gains. While industrial momentum and fiscal discipline provide a foundation for recovery, the shift from a current account surplus to a deficit of $733 million in the first four months of fiscal year 2026 (FY26) signals vulnerabilities that demand vigilant policymaking. As the country navigates global uncertainties and domestic reforms, the path to sustained growth hinges on translating early wins into broader resilience.

The inflation forecast encapsulates the delicate balance policymakers are striving to maintain. October's Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation clocked in at 6.2 percent year-on-year (YoY), up from 5.6 percent in September and markedly lower than 7.2 percent in October 2024. On a month-on-month (MoM) basis, it rose 1.8 percent, easing slightly from 2.0 percent the prior month. Food prices, which constitute nearly 40 percent of the CPI basket, remain the chief culprit, exacerbated by flood-induced disruptions and border closures affecting supply chains for staples like tomatoes (up 126.96 percent YoY) and sugar (34.83 percent). Energy costs add fuel to the fire: electricity tariffs for low-income households climbed over 11 percent, while liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) prices edged up 5.16 percent weekly. The ministry anticipates stabilization as the Rabi cropping season advances, bolstered by adequate input availability and government interventions like targeted subsidies. However, private forecasts paint a grimmer picture, with brokerage houses like Topline Securities eyeing 6.5-7.0 percent for November, citing real interest rates surging to 400-450 basis points—well above the historical 200-300 bps average. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a gradual decline to 9.5 percent in 2025 overall, aligning with the State Bank of Pakistan's (SBP) 5-7 percent medium-term target, but warns of upside risks from commodity volatility.

Agricultural performance, the linchpin of food security and inflation, presents a mixed bag that tempers the optimism. Kharif season estimates for 2025-26 reveal declines across key crops, underscoring the toll of erratic weather and resource constraints. Sugarcane output is projected to rise modestly by 0.6 percent to 84.74 million tonnes from 84.24 million last year, defying flood impacts through expanded acreage in Punjab and Sindh, which account for 93 percent of production. Cotton, vital for textiles and exports, is forecast at 6.85 million bales—a 3.3 percent drop from 7.08 million—hampered by a 34 percent acreage reduction amid competition from water-intensive alternatives like sugarcane. Rice production slips 3.2 percent to 9.41 million tonnes from 9.72 million, with severe flood damage wiping out up to 60 percent in Punjab, the epicenter of 65 percent of national output. Maize fares worse, down 6.7 percent to 8.43 million tonnes, reflecting pest pressures and input shortages. Bright spots include mung (up 14.9 percent to 150.8 thousand tonnes) and chillies (0.5 percent to 114.4 thousand tonnes), signaling niche resilience.

Looking ahead to Rabi, the Federal Committee on Agriculture has set an ambitious wheat target of 29.68 million tonnes across 9.65 million hectares, banking on favorable inputs and monsoon recovery. Yet, broader challenges loom: water scarcity in the Indus Basin, soil degradation from over-irrigation, and climate shocks like the 2025 floods, which submerged 220,000 hectares of rice and maize, threaten yields. Agriculture's 22.9 percent GDP share and 37.4 percent employment footprint amplify these risks, with crop shortfalls inflating import bills—edible oils and pulses already strain forex reserves. Reforms like precision irrigation and pest-resistant seeds could reclaim 10-15 percent in yields, but implementation lags amid fiscal constraints.

Industrial revival offers a counterbalance, with large-scale manufacturing (LSM) registering 4.1 percent growth in July-September FY26, propelled by 15 sub-sectors including textiles, automobiles, and non-metallic minerals. September alone posted 2.7 percent YoY and 2.1 percent MoM gains, building on a Q1 average of 4.08-4.4 percent per updated Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) figures. Automobiles surged—cars up 74 percent, trucks 105 percent—fueled by eased import curbs and consumer rebound. Cement dispatches climbed 16.2 percent to 12.2 million tonnes, with exports up 20.8 percent, signaling construction momentum. Food processing grew 6.94 percent, while textiles edged 1.88 percent amid cotton woes. This uptick, from a -0.76 percent Q1 FY25 slump, reflects reform dividends: energy tariff rationalization and supply chain fixes under the IMF's Extended Fund Facility (EFF). Yet, pharmaceuticals and iron-steel lagged, highlighting uneven recovery. Sustained 5-6 percent LSM growth could add 1 percentage point to GDP, but scaling requires $2-3 billion in annual FDI for tech upgrades.

Fiscal metrics reinforce the stabilization narrative. Net federal revenues rose 2.4 percent to Rs4,117.5 billion in July-September FY26, with Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) collections hitting Rs3,834.9 billion in July-October—a robust 11.4 percent YoY surge. Expenditures climbed 11.9 percent to Rs2,779.3 billion, yielding a fiscal surplus of Rs1,338.2 billion (down from Rs1,536.3 billion last year) and a primary surplus of Rs3,497.3 billion (up from Rs3,202.4 billion). Public debt shrank by Rs1,371 billion—the first quarterly dip in five years—via surplus deployment to retire high-cost obligations, easing rollover risks and bolstering reserves at $14.5 billion. Agricultural credit disbursements jumped 18.6 percent to Rs845.3 billion in July-October, supporting Rabi inputs. Money supply (M2) contracted 1.0 percent, aiding disinflation, though net foreign assets grew modestly by Rs204.5 billion.

The external sector, however, injects

caution. The current account deficit ballooned to $733 million in July-October FY26—up 255 percent from $206 million last year—erasing prior surpluses. Exports grew a tepid 2.0 percent to $10.6 billion, lagging imports' 9.6 percent surge to $20.7 billion, widening the trade gap to $10.1 billion from $8.5 billion. Remittances provided ballast, rising 9.3 percent to $12.96 billion, but primary income outflows ($3.09 billion) and services deficits ($1.164 billion) persisted. October's $112 million deficit followed September's $83 million surplus, highlighting volatility. IT exports and higher remittances buoy the outlook, but import compression—tied to production needs—risks stifling growth.

Broader growth prospects align with this tempered view. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecasts 2.7 percent GDP expansion in 2025, accelerating to 3.0 percent in 2026, while the IMF eyes 2.7 percent. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb projects 3.5 percent, crediting reforms like digital transitions and governance upgrades under the EFF. Foreign direct investment (FDI) climbed 20 percent in H1 FY25 to a two-year high, with inflows from Aramco, BYD, and Samsung signaling renewed confidence. Rating upgrades by Moody's to "Positive" and others affirm this trajectory. Yet, challenges abound: geopolitical tensions, trade fragmentation, and law-and-order issues could derail buffers. Structural reforms—tax base broadening to 15 percent of GDP, SOE privatization, and green investments—must accelerate to hit 5-6 percent growth.

Pakistan's economy stands at an inflection point: early reform dividends like debt reduction and industrial stirrings offer hope, but inflation's creep and external strains test resolve. As the Rabi season unfolds and global commodities soften—World Bank predicts 4-6 percent drops in food and energy prices—the ministry's cautious optimism could firm up. Prioritizing equitable resource allocation, climate-resilient agriculture, and export diversification will be key. With youth unemployment at 22 percent and poverty at 42 percent, inclusive growth isn't optional—it's imperative. The coming months will reveal if this momentum endures or falters under pressure.

The missing links in Pakistan’s political journey

Raza Khan

Democracy has been a prominent concept for over a century, gaining particular significance after World War I. The world recognized that the lack of democracy and the denial of self-determination to people across the globe were underlying causes of the war and other conflicts.

Consequently, efforts were made by the international community to promote democracy in European and Western countries and to grant the right of self-determination to people in various regions. This recognition, influenced largely by the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, played a crucial role in the decolonization movements after World War II (1939–1945), leading to the independence of countries like Pakistan. Pakistan inherited its democratic framework from British colonial rule. However, as a society within pre-partition India, it lacked democratic foundations. Consequently, from the outset, Pakistan struggled to develop a true understanding of democracy — its value, and how it could be achieved.

Democracy is generally understood as a system of government in which the people of a country, province, or locality elect their rulers, who then govern according to the people's wishes. This process of choosing rulers is known as the electoral process. However, elections are just one aspect of democracy; democracy extends beyond voting — it is a whole culture. While the people's wishes are a key factor, these wishes are shaped by public opinion, which is expressed through elections. Understanding how public opinion is formed is crucial, as it is influenced by the kind of society, socialization, and worldview prevalent among the majority. All of these elements are deeply connected to the culture of a society.

To grasp the concept of democracy as a culture, it is essential to first understand what culture means. Culture refers to the collective way of life of the people in a particular country or region. The largest human grouping is a society, and the culture of democracy implies that every individual within a society has the right to think and act freely, within the boundaries of laws and moral codes. A democratic culture allows individuals to think and act as they see fit, so long as they adhere to legal and moral standards. This freedom fosters the growth of democratic values.

It is worth noting that some countries and societies are more democratic than others. For instance, Danish society is often considered more democratic than Indian society. In Denmark, people have the freedom to form and express opinions and act according to their beliefs. In contrast, India, despite being called "the largest democracy," often limits individual freedoms due to societal pressures and restrictions. The mere presence of elections and voting rights does not equate to true democracy. Genuine democracy depends on how freely individuals can form opinions and make choices, without coercion or societal duress. Therefore, the strength of democracy in any country relies on the degree of freedom people have to think and act independently.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that a state's laws and societal norms may not always benefit the majority. However, when people enjoy freedom of thought, expression, and action, they can debate these laws and moral standards, creating pressure on governments, community leaders, and social elites to bring about change. Reformed laws and updated moral standards foster an environment that supports mental growth and enables individuals to use their talents for the collective good of society.

Undoubtedly, elections play a vital role in any democracy. The process of electing rulers is directly tied to an individual's right to think and act freely. In a true democracy, people choose leaders they consider competent, honest, and capable. To make informed decisions, voters must have access to accurate information about their rights and responsibilities, the backgrounds of candidates, the key issues facing their country or locality, and methods to assess their leaders' performance. Public opinion — shaped by such knowledge — is essential for a strong democracy.

In the context of Pakistan, it is evident that many people lack sufficient information about their own issues and the democratic process. As a result, they often struggle to make informed decisions when electing political leaders. Strengthening democracy in Pakistan requires fostering a culture that encourages free thought, informed public opinion, and active civic engagement.

To understand and establish democracy, it is crucial to recognize why it is considered the best system of governance. There are several reasons why democracy stands out as the most effective form of government. Over centuries of experimentation with personal and dynastic rule, civilized nations have, over the last two and a half centuries, firmly concluded that democracy is the most just and practical system of governance. Frustrated by various authoritarian regimes, Western scholars began contemplating a system where the people's interests, welfare, and development were paramount, and rulers existed solely to achieve these objectives. Given that modern states often consist of millions of people, elections emerged as the most effective mechanism to determine the majority's interests and to identify the leaders best suited to serve them.

One of the key strengths of democracy is that a democratic government holds power for a fixed period or as long as the people desire. In most democratic states, governments serve four- or five-year terms. Once a government's tenure ends, new elections are held. If the people are satisfied with a government's performance, they re-elect it; if not, they vote it out. This institutionalized mechanism for accountability has rarely existed under other forms of rule.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, elected governments have often been unable to complete their terms, frequently being overthrown by military dictatorships. Ironically, such removals were sometimes celebrated by the public, largely due to the elected governments' failure to deliver on their promises. However, the solution to democratic failures is not dictatorship — it is more democracy. Since many people in Pakistan have been socialized in an ultraconservative environment under authoritarian rulers, they have struggled to grasp the essence of democratic culture. As a result, most political parties — with few exceptions — have evolved into family-run entities, reflecting the deeply entrenched nepotism and cronyism in Pakistani society.

Without fostering a culture of democracy within Pakistani society, achieving a successful democratic governance system will remain an uphill battle.

Interests and flattery in Gaza diplomacy

Faheem Amir

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

The recent spectacle at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit revealed how, from Washington to Islamabad, political actors have turned the tragedy of Gaza into a stage for self-promotion, applause, and power games.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's effusive praise of Donald Trump — calling him a "man of peace" and suggesting a Nobel nomination — was not merely a moment of enthusiasm but a calculated gesture rooted in Pakistan's political culture. In a country where survival depends less on merit and more on appeasing the real centres of power, such displays of flattery are not accidents; they are political rituals — a defining habit of national politics.

Before astonished world leaders and billions of bewildered viewers watching through the media, a prime minister from a financially indebted nation declaring, "I like to salute President Trump for saving millions of lives," revealed less about statesmanship and more about survival in a system where sycophancy replaces merit. In Pakistan's hybrid political order, those who salute the "real powers" — whether military, bureaucratic, or foreign — are elevated through Form-47s, while dissenters are crushed beneath the machinery of control. The system rewards obedience, not intellect; allegiance, not competence.

History offers ample proof of this truth. Those who dared defy the powerful — Liaquat Ali Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, and Nawab Akbar Bugti — paid with their lives. Others, like Imran Khan, now face prison for challenging the invisible hands that shape Pakistan's political destiny.

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

On the other hand, Donald Trump's so-called "golden age" of peace, as celebrated in Sharm el-Sheikh, reflects less of humanitarian compassion and more of calculated self-interest.

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

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

It is also a fact that Trump thrives on praise. He is less a statesman than a celebrity-CEO, governing more like a brand manager than a peacemaker. His so-called "20-point Gaza plan," though hailed as historic, lacked substance. It was policy as performance — a humanitarian gesture carefully scripted for applause.

As Marina Hyde observed, everything Trump does "is redolent not of a politician, but an ego-driven entertainment industry behemoth." His peace summit in Egypt resembled "The Official Release Party of a Peace Process" — a global photocall for applause. Obsessed with ratings, allergic to rivals, and addicted to spectacle, he governs less through ideology than performance.

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

Turning professional degrees into social trophies

Rasheed Ali

When Khadija Mastur Chaudhry scanned matrimonial 'rishtas' for her businessman son, she had a very clear — and very status-driven — wish. She wanted a 'doctor bahoo'. Among all prospective matches, she found a young woman: a fresh MBBS graduate from a public medical college, then doing her house job at a government hospital. Exactly the kind of 'rishta' to parade before relatives — a doctor in the family.

But once the match was made, and her son's bride had formally entered their home, Khadija's tune changed. She told her daughter-in-law: "There is no need to give such long hours for only seventy or eighty thousand rupees. Your husband is already earning over a million monthly through his garments business — so better you give maximum time to your husband and your house."

The woman, still new to married life and the hospital's wards, protested at first. She argued that her medical degree was the product of years of rigorous study. She had trained hard. She felt a professional — and moral — responsibility to use her skills to serve people in need.

Yet ultimately, under pressure from her husband and mother-in-law, she gave up. Her stethoscope gathers dust. Her white coat now lies folded. A once-promising young physician has quietly exited the profession.

Her story is far from unique. In Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad — across Pakistan — countless women have completed MBBS, engineering, law, or other professional degrees, only to abandon their fields after marrying.

"The phenomenon of 'doctor brides' is no longer anecdotal; it is structural," says Dr Khalid Masood Gondal, Vice Chancellor of King Edward Medical University (KEMU). Speaking at Sahiwal Medical College's first convocation, he warned that while around 80 per cent of medical graduates today are women, only about 20 per cent of them go on to serve as practicing doctors. "In most cases, their family members or in-laws forbid them from doing jobs."

This 'attrition' not only damages the healthcare system — but also represents a massive waste of public resources. Each doctor trained at a public medical college represents an investment of millions of rupees by the state, funds that yield no return when the graduate leaves practice.

A more recent study confirms the troubling trend: a nationwide survey by Gallup Pakistan and PRIDE, based on the 2020-21 Labour Force data, found that roughly 35 per cent of female medical graduates in Pakistan are unemployed, while another 20 per cent are out of the labour force entirely. That means more than a third of all qualified women doctors are not working.

Dr Bilal Gilani of Gallup Pakistan remarked, "Pakistan has a dearth of trained medical doctors," even though tens of thousands of female graduates remain idle. Why does this happen? The reasons are many — but often, deeply rooted in gender norms, family expectations, and structural barriers.

A recent letter published in a national daily pointed out that although over 70pc of medical students are now female (thanks to open-merit admissions), the majority do not enter the workforce. This is not because of lack of ambition or ability — rather, factors such as cultural norms, workplace harassment, lack of maternity leave or childcare, inflexible hours, and unsupportive in-laws push many to withdraw.

One academic study of female physicians — house officers and postgraduate residents — found that 88pc cited work-home imbalance as a major reason to quit. Long and erratic hours, on-call duties, physical exhaustion, inflexible scheduling, and difficulties obtaining leave were all cited as key factors.

As Dr Faryal Khan, a working doctor, once told a journalist: "It's not easy to keep a balance between family and kids and work." Even women who want to continue working often face subtle — or overt — pressures. Some husbands frown on night shifts; some in-laws see working women as unnecessary security risks or simply too busy to be good wives and mothers.

The young woman from Khadija Chaudhry's home is only one name among many, but her story captures the essence of a widespread paradox: a society that congratulates itself when young women "become doctors," yet politely — or not so politely — nudges them into the kitchen once the wedding bells ring.

What does this mean for Pakistan's health sector? At a time when the country faces a chronic shortage of qualified doctors, especially female ones who can serve in conservative and rural areas, this attrition is alarming.

By allowing — or even encouraging — medical graduates to drop out after marriage, we are squandering decades of public investment, eroding healthcare capacity, and denying patients care. As Dr Khalid Gondal argued, "This needs to be addressed." Yet reversing the trend will require more than statistics. It will demand a shift in social attitudes, and structural reforms. Policies such as maternity leave, flexible shifts, on-site childcare, safe transport, harassment-free workplaces, and support for female doctors returning from career breaks are urgently needed.

Digital violence targeting women

Dr. Fatima Khan

As the world observed the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25, a sobering reality pierces through the global solidarity: violence against women isn't confined to physical realms but has metastasized into the digital ether, where anonymity amplifies cruelty and borders dissolve into irrelevance.

This year's observance launches the United Nations' "UNiTE to End Digital Violence Against All Women and Girls" campaign, a 16-day activism drive culminating on Human Rights Day, December 10. Spearheaded by UN Women under Secretary-General António Guterres' UNiTE initiative, it spotlights tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)—a scourge that exploits algorithms and apps to stalk, shame, and silence. In Pakistan, where 38 percent of women have endured online abuse and 85 percent have witnessed it against peers, this campaign isn't rhetoric—it's a clarion call to dismantle the virtual cages trapping half the population.

At its core, TFGBV embodies a profound failure of empathy, predominantly from male perpetrators who weaponize technology to enforce dominance rather than nurture equality. Globally, the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2024 insights—building on its seminal 2021 study—reveal that 85 percent of women online have encountered harassment in forms like cyberstalking, deepfakes, and doxxing, with 38 percent as direct targets. In Pakistan, the Digital Rights Foundation's (DRF) Cyber Harassment Helpline, operational since 2016, tallied 3,171 complaints in 2024 alone—a 12.7 percent uptick from 2023—peaking at 386 in May amid election-season vitriol. Cyber harassment dominated with 2,741 cases, followed by non-consensual intimate image sharing (1,200 instances), a tactic disproportionately wielded against women for blackmail and reputational sabotage. Shockingly, 36 percent originated from districts with Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) cyber wings, underscoring institutional blind spots even in fortified zones. Gender breakdowns expose the asymmetry: 1,772 complaints from women versus 1,365 from men, with 90 percent of harassment filings by females, per DRF's 2023-2024 data.

These aren't abstract digits; they're detonations in women's lives. In a nation where 139 million wield mobile broadband and 143 million surf the web, digital spaces promise empowerment—e-commerce for rural artisans, virtual classrooms for veiled scholars—yet morph into minefields. The FIA's Cyber Crime Wing processed 171,600 complaints in its inaugural 2024 year under the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, a 12.7 percent surge, yet convictions languished below 4 percent—82,396 verified cases yielding a mere 92 resolutions. Women and girls, comprising 80 percent of filers alongside children, endure the brunt: over 1.8 million cyber victims since 2020, per government logs, with fraud alone siphoning Rs700 billion and shattering psyches. Non-consensual imagery, amplified by AI deepfakes, isn't fleeting— it lingers as "revenge porn," derailing careers and marriages. A 2024 case in Lahore saw a teacher hounded offline after morphed nudes circulated on WhatsApp groups, forcing her resignation and relocation.

This digital deluge intersects with offline inequities, amplifying a vicious cycle. The Sustainable Social Development Organisation's (SSDO) "Mapping Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan 2024" unmasks 32,617 GBV cases nationwide—5,339 rapes, 24,439 abductions/

kidnappings, 2,238 domestic assaults, and 547 honor killings—yet conviction rates hover at abysmal single digits, with Punjab's 94.5 percent rape monopoly (6,624 of 7,010 cases) yielding scant justice. Cultural silos—honor codes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, patriarchal policing in Balochistan—thwart reporting, while digital trails evade porous borders. Women in public spheres bear outsized scars: 73 percent of female journalists globally face work-tied attacks, a figure mirrored in Pakistan where 35 journalists sought DRF aid in 2023 alone amid gendered disinformation.

The toll extends beyond trauma: education falters as girls log off to evade groomers, employment shrinks with 29 percent lacking privacy savvy per the National Commission on the Status of Women, and democracy atrophies—female voter turnout dipped 5 percent in 2024 amid online intimidation. In sub-Saharan parallels, 28 percent of women face TFGBV; in Europe, 23 percent. Yet Pakistan's 152nd press freedom ranking and unchecked CCTV surveillance in women's shelters exacerbate isolation. As UN Women warns, without safeguards, "true equality remains out of grasp," with 117 countries scrambling for fragmented fixes like the UK's Online Safety Act or EU's Digital Services Act.

Pakistan's arsenal—PECA 2016, the Anti-Honor Killing Act—gathers dust amid enforcement voids. The FIA's 1991 helpline and DRF's 0800-39393 offer lifelines, but understaffed wings and cultural stigma yield 96 percent impunity for women's seekers. Community awareness, scarce beyond urban enclaves, starves rural survivors of recourse. The gulf yawns: laws proclaim consent sacrosanct, yet lived horrors mock them.

Bridging this chasm demands multifaceted resolve. First, legislate with laser focus: amend PECA for AI-specific penalties—deepfake creators facing 14-year bids—and mandate platform algorithms to flag gendered hate, aligning with the Global Digital Compact. Enforce via gender-sensitized law enforcement academies, training 10,000 officers annually in trauma-informed probes, and elevate conviction rates through fast-track GBV courts, targeting SSDO's dismal benchmarks.

Second, ignite digital literacy: scale DRF's school modules to 5 million girls, demystifying privacy toggles and doxxing perils, while closing the gender gap—women's internet penetration lags at 21 percent versus men's 43 percent. Partner with Meta and X for "safety by design," purging 90 percent of non-consensual content within 24 hours, as piloted in Australia.

Third, democratize prevention: fund grassroots initiatives via a Rs5 billion national TFGBV corpus, empowering imams in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to sermonize consent and NGOs in Sindh to map district hotspots. Tech firms must ante up: Google's Jigsaw, backing EIU studies, could localize tools like Perspective API for Urdu hate detection. Governments shun elite silos—extend FIA wings to Balochistan's fringes, where 11 rape cases hid 2024 horrors.

The UNiTE campaign's clarion—mobilizing governments for impunity's end, tech for safe platforms, donors for feminist fortitude—resonates urgently in Pakistan. Justice, digital or corporeal, enshrines consent as inviolable, not aspirational. As 2025's activism ignites, from Lahore's virtual vigils to global petitions, the imperative is collective: shatter screens of silence, forge fortresses of equity. Women's stories, altered by abuse's acid, deserve reclamation—not resignation. In this fight, every voice amplified, every law enforced, carves pathways to a borderless dignity where pixels empower, not ensnare.

How Europe's migration policy and arms empowered Sudan's warlords

Zeenat Adam

Sudan was teetering on the edge of crisis long before open war erupted in April 2023. Decades of authoritarian rule under Omar al-Bashir resulted in a fragile economy, fragmented security forces, and entrenched paramilitary structures.

Following the coup that overthrew al-Bashir in 2019, a fragile civilian-military transitional arrangement failed to unite competing factions. Political instability, localised rebellions, and a simmering rivalry between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – the successor to the Popular Defence Forces, government-backed militia known as the Janjaweed who committed war crimes in Darfur in the early 2000s – escalated into full-blown conflict.

By mid-2023, Sudan was effectively split into contested zones, with major urban centres, such as Khartoum and Omdurman, transformed into battlefields, and millions of civilians displaced internally or forced across borders as refugees.

Although geographically removed, the European Union played a consequential role in these developments. For nearly a decade, it pursued a strategy of "externalising" migration control, directing aid, training, and equipment to African states ostensibly to reduce irregular migration towards Europe.

In Sudan, this approach produced unintended and devastating consequences that the EU is yet to be held accountable for. Funding initially justified under "migration management" and "capacity building" intersected with opaque arms flows, Gulf intermediaries, and weak oversight. European money and materiel, intended to stabilise populations and impose border forces to buffer the migratory ambitions of Africans, may have indirectly reinforced the very actors now perpetrating war crimes in Sudan.

Between 2014 and 2018, the EU channelled more than 200 million euros ($232m at the current exchange rate) into Sudan via the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the Better Migration Management (BMM) initiative.

These programmes formally aimed to strengthen migration control, border security and anti-trafficking enforcement. In reality, they entrenched cooperation between the EU and Sudan's security structures, including units that effectively merged into the RSF.

As early as 2017, the Enough Project, an advocacy group focused on conflict, corruption and human rights, published a report titled Border Control from Hell, warning that "the gravest concern about the EU's new partnership with Sudan is that the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), one of the most abusive paramilitary groups in the country, stands to benefit from EU funding" and that "the equipment that enables identification and registration of migrants will also reinforce the surveillance capabilities of a Sudanese government that has violently suppressed Sudanese citizens for the past 28 years".

Two years later, the EU had to suspend several migration-control activities in Sudan because there was a risk that resources could be "diverted for repressive aims", according to an EU official document cited by German news outlet Deutsche Welle.

And yet, a factsheet titled What the EU really does in Sudan, published on the bloc's website in 2018, claimed: "The EU does not provide any financial support to the Government of Sudan ... The Rapid Support Forces of the Sudanese military do not benefit directly or indirectly from EU funding."

All this raises an important question: If the EU knew of the risk of diversion, why did it still invest hundreds of millions into a context where control over the end use of training, equipment and funds was manifestly weak?

What is worse is that the EU's role was not limited to supplying funds that could be misappropriated. It also provided weapons, albeit indirectly.

As the conflict deepened, investigators started uncovering foreign-manufactured weapons and ammunition circulating widely among the RSF and the SAF. Verified imagery, open-source analysis and serial number tracing have revealed European-manufactured systems on Sudan's battlefields. In November 2024, Amnesty International released an investigation disclosing that Nimr Ajbanarmoured personnel carriers (APCs) were equipped with French-made Galix defensive systems. Amnesty's analysts verified images and videos from multiple Sudanese locations and concluded that, if deployed in Darfur, their use would breach the longstanding United Nations arms embargo on the region.

In April, investigations by France24 and the Reuters news agency traced 81mm mortar shells found in an RSF convoy in North Darfur back to Bulgaria. The markings on this ammunition matched mortar bombs manufactured by a Bulgarian firm and exported legally to the United Arab Emirates in 2019. The Bulgarian government had not authorised the re-export of the shells from the UAE to Sudan.

In October, The Guardian reported that British military equipment, including small-arms target systems and engines for APCs, had been used by the RSF in Sudan, and they may have been supplied by the UAE.

Taken together, these findings illustrate a pattern: European-made arms and weapons systems, legally exported to third countries, have subsequently been diverted into Sudan's conflict, despite embargoes and supposed safeguards.

Although the UAE denies it plays any role in the conflict, its position as an intermediary hub for re-exported weaponry has been repeatedly documented. Still, European suppliers, bound by end-user agreements and export-control frameworks, share responsibility for ensuring compliance.

Under the United Kingdom and EU regulations, governments must deny or revoke licences when there is a clear risk of diversion to conflict zones or human rights abusers. The use of European-made arms and weapons systems in Sudan, therefore, demands a rigorous reassessment of post-shipment monitoring and enforcement.

Despite this, European and British governments have continued to issue new export licences to potential violators, including the UAE. Recent reporting by Middle East Eye shows that the UK approved roughly $227m in military exports to the UAE between April and June this year, even after being informed that Emirati-supplied equipment had reached the RSF.

Youths and the rising pull of western culture

Over the last few decades, the level of interest among Pakistani youth in Western culture and lifestyle has increased in terms of fashion, events and gatherings as well as formal and semi-formal occasions. Pakistan's population comprises more than 64 per cent of young people aged less than 30 years. These are the future leaders of our country. Therefore, it is critically important to channelise their energies in the right direction. People, especially youngsters, must revisit their entire approach to life and beyond.

Muhammad Gul Zaib
Okara

Balochistan turmoil

The last few weeks have seen people in most parts of Balochistan suffering owing to road blockades and one-way restrictions imposed on several major routes. The situation led to gridlocks, with commuters facing lengthy delays at key intersections. The ongoing unrest has seriously disrupted all academic activities. The business community is reeling, with both online and physical enterprises struggling to stay afloat amidst the standoff. Despite these challenges, residents have shown remarkable resilience, coping with prolonged power outages and gas shortages. As the situation continues to deteriorate, concerns grow about the long-term impact on Balochistan's economy and the wellbeing of its people.

Haroon Nasar
Quetta

Disillusioned youths

The youth of Pakistan seems disillusioned. This disillusionment not only erodes hope, but is also the biggest obstacle in the development of the country. The measures taken by the government are actually temporary, which add to the existing hopelessness. Due to lack of opportunities, young people consider their future abroad safe as they have invested a good amount of money on attaining their degrees. The government should take initiatives to revive hope among the nation's youth and give them opportunities to build their bright future while staying in Pakistan.

Malik Nouman Haider Hami
Islamabad

When protectors become predators

The rape of a woman inside a police station in Mirpurkhas is a gruesome reminder of how vulnerable women are even in places that are meant to ensure the safety of one and all. A case against the station house officer (SHO) is said to have been registered, but the accused has allegedly escaped. While government ministers and officials have taken notice of the incident, hollow statements and mere condemnation are not enough to gain public confidence. What we are facing is an institutional crisis of morality. When the agents of law themselves turn into lawbreakers, where should people go to seek assistance and justice?

Women belonging to Sindh's rural areas experience an infinite number of obstacles in seeking justice, including social stigma and institutional bias. Police stations are actually feared by them. Such cases not only harm the credibility of police, but also drive away victims in search of justice.

Accountability should be timely and uncompromising. The accused in the current case should be apprehended and prosecuted publicly to show that even police officers in uniform are not above the law. In addition, Sindh Police should embark on comprehensive reforms, such as gender-sensitivity training, internal surveillance, and the provision of safe reporting channels for women.

The safety of women is not a privilege, but a right guaranteed by specific clauses of the country's Constitution. The role of the state is clearly to ensure that law- enforcers are guardians, not predators.

Vinode Kumar
Karachi

Karachi's rail system needs action

For over two decades, the authorities have made repeated promises of improvement in Karachi's railway commuter service, but nothing meaningful has taken place. Millions have been wasted in meetings and paperwork, but the ground reality has remained unchanged.

Karachi, a massive city, is currently relying on a single, often delayed, local train, which is a completely inadequate solution for daily commuters. What the city truly needs is a modern, metro-style rail system with multiple trains running every few minutes. Importantly, there is no need for major new investment. The 50km track already exists. All that is required is to add more trains and make better use of the current infrastructure. It is high time the authorities moved beyond paying lip service, and delivered practical, fast and affordable transport solutions for the people of Karachi.

Zakir Hussain
Karachi

Creation of new provinces

A leading political party has recently reiterated its commitment to pursuing the creation of new provinces in Pakistan, emphasising that the process would be taken forward through legal and democra- tic channels. Party leaders argue that the Constitution provides clear provisions for the formation of newer provinces, particularly when population growth, administrative challenges and public needs demand such a move. Globally, similar practices are common, with countries like Canada and Brazil having regularly reorganised their administrative units to improve governance and service delivery.

The current situation in Pakistan reveals stark imbalances among the existing provinces. Some regions face excessive population pressure, while others have vast territories with sparse populations, making effective administration increasingly difficult. This lack of equilibrium has strained provincial resources and hindered the delivery of basic services to people. Many believe that the solution lies in creating smaller administrative units and granting them provincial status. Such a measure would allow for a more efficient distribution of authority and responsi- bility, improve governance, and ensure that public services reach all segments of society.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, political sensitivities and vested interests often hinder any move in that direction. Some political actors fear that administrative restructuring may dilute their influence, and they portray the creation of new provinces as a controversial move. However, there is no constitutional or legal obstacle to the formation of new provinces, provided constitutional procedures are followed.

The rationale for such a set of reforms is compelling: our governance system is under immense strain, and this has direct consequences for social development and the country's overall potential. Despite ample resources, inefficient planning and unequal distribution prevent their optimal utilisation. Human resources, particularly the country's youth, remain underdeve- loped in comparison to their peers in other developing countries, due to massive gaps in education, health, training and opportunities.

Smaller provinces and robust local governance structures are essential to address these issues effectively. Many large cities in Pakistan now have populations comparable to or exceeding some European countries, but their local governments remain weak or fragmented, leaving residents struggling with persistent urban problems. Smaller provinces, along with empowered local governments, would not only improve administration, but also promote social development, economic growth and equitable distribution of resources across the country.

Time is ripe for Pakistan to embrace comprehensive administrative reforms and recognise the necessity of new provinces. Just as nations like Canada and Brazil have evolved their administrative structures to meet modern demands, Pakistan, too, must adapt. Smaller provinces and effective local governance are no more political luxuries; they are urgent requirements of the 21st century to ensure efficient governance, people's welfare and long-term national development.

Syed Oun Abbas
Karachi

Bizarre, UFO-like halo of red light appears over small Italian town

Harry Baker

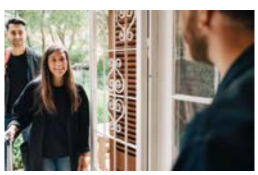
A striking new photo shows an eerie, UFO-like halo of red light seemingly hovering over a tiny town in the foothills of the Italian Alps.

The eye-catching image is remarkably reminiscent of another photo, taken in March 2023, which captured a near-identical red ring that briefly appeared over the same place. Nature photographer Valter Binotto captured both of the rings over Possagno, a small town of around 2,200 people in northern Italy. The latest luminous halo was snapped on Nov. 17 at around 10:45 p.m. local time, and it appears to be slightly fainter than the one from two and a half years ago. The red rings are actually examples of a rare lightning-related phenomenon dubbed "emission of light and very low-frequency perturbations due to electromagnetic pulse sources," or ELVEs, which occur during particularly intense thunderstorms, Spaceweather.com reported.

People rarely notice ELVEs because they are almost impossible to see with the naked eye. They flash in the sky for around one thousandth of a second, which is around 100 times quicker than it takes to blink. Therefore, photographers like Binotto either have to get really lucky or come equipped with special devices attached to their cameras to spot them. ELVEs form when powerful lightning bolts shoot electromagnetic pulses (EMPs) up toward space, where they collide with the ionosphere — the ionized part of the upper atmosphere that stretches between 50 and 400 miles (80 and 644 kilometers) above the ground. Once there, they excite nitrogen molecules, which briefly give off red light, similar to how auroras form. (Although red auroras are the result of oxygen, not nitrogen.)

Holiday guests bring joy — and germs! How to stay healthy

Julie Stewart



From Thanksgiving to New Year's, holiday togetherness comes with a catch: a spike in the viruses that thrive when we all gather inside.

The latest U.S. wastewater data suggests that COVID, flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and the norovirus stomach bug are on the rise. In some regions, measles is also making appearances. Here's how to protect yourself amid all the houseguests, hugs, and handshakes.

"During the holiday season, people tend to celebrate together indoors, which increases the opportunity of getting into contact with people," says Wan Yang, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. "Even though some of them may not have symptoms of infection, they could have an infection and unknowingly pass it to loved ones and friends."

Vaccines can reduce your risk of catching flu, COVID, RSV, and measles — or of developing severe symptoms if you do get sick, says Judd Hultquist, PhD, the Dr. Robert L. Murphy Professor of Emerging Infectious Diseases at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. It takes about 10 to 14 days after a shot to build protective antibodies. That means even if you get vaccinated just before Thanksgiving, your strongest protection will be in place for the full stretch of holiday gatherings that follow, Hultquist says.

Make your home comfortable for your family — not their germs. Use humidifiers. Indoor heating can dry the air, creating an environment where viruses linger longer. "Increased humidity helps lower the chance that the virus survives once it's emitted into the air," when infected people exhale, cough, or sneeze, says Yang. Aim for 40% to 60% humidity.

Decades-long droughts doomed one of the world's oldest civilizations

Owen Jarus

A series of severe, decades-long droughts ushered the end of the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the world's oldest civilizations, a new study finds.

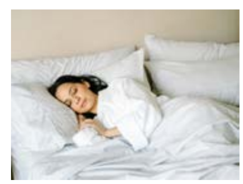
This Indus Valley Civilization (also known as the "Harappan" civilization) flourished between 5,000 and 3,500 years ago in a region that stretched across the modern-day India-Pakistan border. Its people created cities, such as Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, which had sophisticated water-management systems. They also created a written script, which remains undeciphered by modern scholars, and they traveled to Mesopotamia, where they conducted trade.

Why their civilization declined has long been a matter of debate. Now, in a new study, published in the journal Communications Earth & Environment, scientists say that lengthy droughts played a sizable role.

"Successive major droughts, each lasting longer than 85 years, were likely a key factor in the eventual fall of the Indus Valley Civilization," the scientific team wrote in a statement. As these droughts got worse, populations within the society shifted to areas where substantial water sources still existed, the researchers found.

Going to bed at the same time every night may help lower blood pressure

David Mills

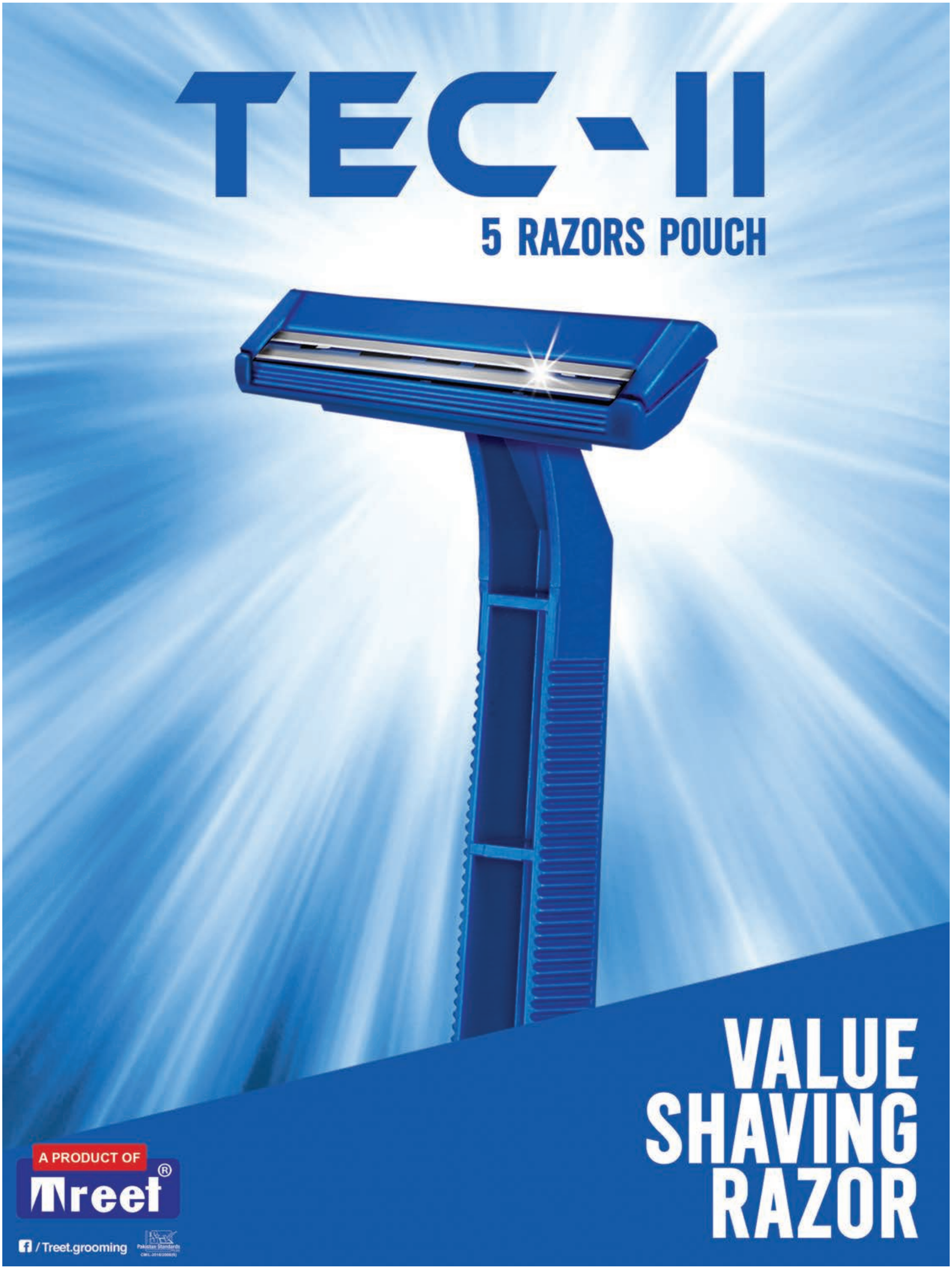


Going to bed at the same time every night can help lower your blood pressure, a new study suggests.

Researchers report that participants in a small study experienced significant decreases in their overall blood pressure, as well as their nighttime readings, after adjusting their schedules to go to bed at approximately the same time every evening. "This [regular bedtime] may be a simple, yet low-risk, adjunctive strategy to control [blood pressure] in many people with hypertension," the study authors wrote.

The researchers recently published their findings in the journal Sleep Advances. The researchers noted their study involved only 11 people and was done over a two-week period with no control group as a contrast. They acknowledged their hypothesis needs to be tested in larger randomized controlled trials. Experts not involved in the study say that despite the limited size of this study, the results were significant enough to warrant attention.

"This is a useful study in that such a simple intervention can have such a significant impact," said Cheng-Han Chen, MD, an interventional cardiologist and medical director of the Structural Heart Program at MemorialCare Saddleback Medical Center in Laguna Hills, CA. "While limited by its non-randomized design and small study cohort, the trial's results highlight potential for improving hypertension control through a low-cost, easily scalable intervention, and should encourage further investigation through randomized clinical trials," added Brian Brady, MD, a nephrologist and a clinical associate professor of medicine at Stanford University.


TEC-II
5 RAZORS POUCH
VALUE
SHAVING
RAZOR
A PRODUCT OF
Treet®
/ Treet.grooming