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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL



WHY FOREIGN INVESTMENT CONTINUES TO ELUDE PAKISTAN

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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, 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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Why foreign investment continues to elude Pakistan

Farhan Khan

Despite persistent efforts, foreign investment has not been flowing into Pakistan in the required quantity, underscoring deep-rooted structural and policy challenges.

According to the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), during the July–November period, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows totalled USD 1,474.2 million, a sharp decline from USD 2,151.9 million recorded in the corresponding period of the previous year. More recently, the government has signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) worth over USD 25 billion; however, these commitments have yet to be translated into binding contracts or tangible inflows, raising questions about their practical impact on the economy.

SBP data further reveal an alarming trend in the first five months of fiscal year 2025–26. Total Foreign Investment plunged by 77 percent to just USD 314 million, compared to USD 1.391 billion in the same period of FY25. During this time, Foreign Direct Investment also declined by 25 percent to USD 927.4 million, down from USD 1.24 billion a year earlier. Foreign Portfolio Investment, meanwhile, experienced net outflows over several months, contributing significantly to the overall contraction in total foreign investment. These figures collectively point to a deteriorating investment climate that continues to erode investor confidence.

The reasons for this decline are not far to seek. Both local and foreign investors consistently highlight a range of persistent problems, including inconsistencies in tax regulations, legal loopholes, procedural hurdles and an excessively complex tax system. Based on current trends, experts estimate that the investment-to-GDP ratio may fall below 13 percent during FY26, as both domestic investment and FDI sink to levels not witnessed in recent decades. It may be recalled that this ratio had already fallen to 13.1 percent in FY24, marking the weakest performance in 50 years. Available figures clearly indicate that domestic investors remain hesitant, foreign investors are pulling back, and established foreign business entities are increasingly exiting the country. This situation carries serious implications for economic growth, employment generation and long-term macroeconomic stability.

Evidently, the authorities concerned have failed to create the enabling environment required to attract and retain capital. Capital, by its very nature, is risk-averse and gravitates

toward environments that offer political stability, policy certainty, rule of law and physical security. In Pakistan's prevailing policy and security landscape, these essential fundamentals are largely absent. As a result, investor sentiment remains subdued despite official assurances and promotional efforts.

Worryingly, recent months have witnessed the exit of several multinational corporations, alongside the relocation of well-known Pakistani textile groups to other countries in order to escape unaffordable energy costs and persistently high interest rates. Manufacturing units and business groups are particularly discouraged by a regime of graded taxation on turnover regardless of profitability, multiple withholding tax rates applied at various stages of business transactions, and effective tax rates that in some cases approach as high as



60 percent. Taken together, these factors have pushed the tax burden to levels that discourage reinvestment within the country while simultaneously driving away foreign direct investment.

Compounding these economic challenges is the deteriorating security situation, marked by rising terrorism, volatile borders and incompetent governance across multiple spheres. It is therefore not difficult to understand why investors remain reluctant to commit long-term capital. Political instability further darkens the economic outlook. While the primary responsibility in this regard lies with the government, the opposition also cannot be absolved of its share of responsibility in perpetuating uncertainty and discord.

The establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) under the 2023 Investment Policy was initially welcomed with optimism. It was hoped that this powerful, centralized body would remove investment-related hurdles by acting as a one-stop facilitator, cutting bureaucratic red tape, improving the ease of doing business, and coordinating federal and provincial efforts to

foster a more favourable investment climate. However, these expectations have largely remained unfulfilled, primarily because attracting investment involves far more than simply expediting files or issuing executive orders.

Pakistan faces intricate and deeply entrenched structural issues that demand comprehensive and far-reaching reforms to break the cycle of stagnation that continues to bedevil the investment climate. These challenges include the stranglehold of elite classes over key sectors of the economy, distortions in the taxation system, and a wide range of systemic inefficiencies. Frequent changes in government lead to abrupt shifts in taxation, incentives and regulations, making long-term planning virtually impossible for investors. High public debt, repeated currency devaluations and ongoing IMF programmes contribute to economic volatility, further discouraging potential investors.

Additionally, complex, slow and opaque approval processes for land acquisition, permits and licenses create significant friction and costly delays. Insufficient and expensive energy supplies, particularly high electricity tariffs, along with underdeveloped infrastructure, further undermine competitiveness. Perceived security risks, especially in major economic hubs such as Karachi, act as a strong deterrent. Inconsistent tax policies, sudden tax hikes and complicated regulatory frameworks make it increasingly difficult for businesses to operate profitably. Moreover, declining integration with global supply chains and an overreliance on low-technology products reduce Pakistan's appeal compared to regional competitors. In essence, investors seek predictability and stability—conditions that Pakistan is currently failing to provide.

It is therefore time to shed the inertia of the past and undertake long-overdue reforms. These should include broadening the tax base, making the tax regime fairer, more transparent and equitable, overhauling the power sector to reduce prohibitively high energy costs, and addressing wider governance failures. Such reforms are beyond the capacity of organizations like the SIFC, which operate through a top-down approach and lack the ability to address the intricate governance challenges spread across various economic sectors. What is required instead is a holistic, sustained and coordinated strategy, ideally overseen by a full-time inter-ministerial body headed by the prime minister himself, to restore investor confidence and place the economy on a durable growth path.

National dialogue is the only way out of present impasse

Nasim Ahmed

In a declaration issued after a two-day national conference held in Islamabad, the opposition alliance Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Ayeen Pakistan (TTAP), among other demands, expressed its willingness to engage in dialogue with the government to resolve the multifaceted challenges facing the nation.

The conference strongly demanded fresh, free, and transparent elections across the country and called for a thorough investigation into alleged rigging in the February 8, 2024 general elections. It also unequivocally condemned what it termed attacks on the judiciary, opposed the 26th and 27th constitutional amendments, and demanded the appointment of a new Chief Election Commissioner to oversee the conduct of new elections.

Declaring the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) a “black law,” the opposition alliance demanded its immediate abolition, alleging that the legislation is being used to silence the media and suppress dissenting voices. The declaration also called for urgent measures to curb rising inflation and reduce the burden of excessive taxation on the public. It strongly condemned enforced disappearances and demanded the release of Mahrang Baloch and other political detainees. Additionally, it was announced that February 8 would be observed internationally as a “Black Day,” while a central committee would be formed to mobilize the public. Provincial-level consultative conferences were also announced as part of the alliance’s future political strategy.

Significantly, a day earlier, Federal Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar had stressed the urgent need for a national dialogue, stating that Pakistan required both political and economic stability at a time when the country remained mired in prolonged political confrontation between the government and the opposition. Addressing a seminar in Lahore, he remarked that no nation could progress amid persistent political turmoil and economic uncertainty. The law minister noted that Pakistan’s history had witnessed alternating periods of tolerance and confrontation, emphasising that it was the collective duty of politicians to strike a balance between these tendencies and pave the way forward through meaningful dialogue. He further stressed that all political actors must play their role in preventing violence and extremism in politics. Calling for restraint and respect for

dissent, he urged leaders to listen to opponents, embrace constructive criticism, and work towards forging a national political charter to ensure long-term stability, saying, “We feel the need for a national dialogue, only for the sake of our beloved country.”

Meanwhile, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq has also expressed his willingness to facilitate dialogue between the government and opposition parties, signalling institutional support for reconciliation efforts. On the other hand, the Prime Minister’s Adviser on Political Affairs, Rana Sanaullah, has stated that political stability can only be achieved through restraint, mutual respect, and sustained dialogue. He warned that confrontation and violence had repeatedly derailed Pakistan’s democratic process in the past. Sanaullah added that polit-



ical instability takes root when parties refuse dialogue, stressing that the government had offered talks on multiple occasions. He recalled that prior to the passage of this year’s budget, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had publicly invited the opposition for talks and had also proposed a ‘Charter of Pakistan’ as a framework for consensus-building.

Echoing similar sentiments, another senior PML-N leader, Saad Rafique, has called for a new Charter of Democracy and a Charter of Economy. He urged engagement with all constitutional forces and dialogue with state institutions to ease political pressure and restore stability in the country. Rafique maintained that confrontation and chaos could only weaken the state, warning that repeated assaults on the sanctity of the vote had severely eroded public trust in the political system.

From the spate of conciliatory statements recently emanating from both sides of the political divide, it appears that, at long last, good sense may be prevailing. Politicians of all hues seem to be realising that democratic space is being increasingly squeezed and that extra-con-

stitutional forces tend to consolidate their hold on power whenever political parties remain locked in unending squabbles.

It may be added that relations between the government and the opposition have come under increased strain in recent weeks, particularly after the military’s spokesperson, Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, described PTI founder Imran Khan as a “national security threat,” triggering strong reactions from various political quarters. Imran Khan, who is already incarcerated, was once again sentenced to 17 years of imprisonment in the Toshakhana-II case last week, further intensifying political tensions across the country.

Despite these developments, parties participating in the TTAP and its All Parties Conference (APC) believe that, given the prevailing circumstances, there is an urgent need for dialogue and a new democratic charter among all political forces to place democracy on a stronger and more sustainable footing. It may be recalled that the opposition had made a similar offer for dialogue in August last year, but no concrete steps were taken by either side to formally initiate talks. This time, however, the opportunity for a political breakthrough should not be wasted.

While extending an offer for dialogue, Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Ayeen Pakistan (TTAP) has also announced a nationwide wheel-jam and shutter-down strike on February 8, 2026. The alliance has further declared that it will organise conferences at all provincial headquarters and engage bar councils, civil society organisations, and the general public in efforts aimed at the restoration of the Constitution, the rule of law, and democracy in Pakistan. Simultaneously, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Sohail Afridi has announced preparations for a countrywide movement demanding the release of Imran Khan.

In this backdrop, it would be advisable for the government to seriously consider the olive branch extended by TTAP and initiate a national dialogue before the PTI and other opposition groups resort to street agitation to press their demands, potentially worsening the law and order situation. The country has already suffered immensely due to prolonged political confrontation, while the economy remains in a fragile and precarious state. The time has come for sane and sensible voices on both sides to take the initiative and begin a structured negotiation process in the larger national interest.

When austerity hurts

Muhammad Zain

Every year, it feels like the same story in Pakistan's budget battles. When money gets tight, the government reaches for the easiest lever: slowing down spending on roads, schools, hospitals, and other projects that are supposed to improve people's lives.

The numbers for the first five months of this fiscal year tell a familiar tale—only 9.2% of the trillion-rupee federal development budget has been spent by the end of November. That's not just a slow start; it's a deliberate choice to hold back funds in order to look fiscally responsible, especially in the eyes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

For ordinary Pakistanis, this means promises of better infrastructure, more jobs, and stronger public services keep getting pushed further down the road. The government talks about economic stability, but the reality on the ground is that growth and development are being put on hold to plug holes in the budget caused by missed tax targets and uncontrolled day-to-day spending. It raises a difficult question: can we really achieve long-term prosperity if we keep treating development as something we can afford to delay?

The federal government set aside Rs1 trillion for development this year—money meant for everything from highways and power plants to irrigation schemes

and social programs. Yet, five months in, barely a tenth of it has been used. That's even lower than the same period last year, which is worrying because it shows the squeeze is getting tighter, not easier.

Officials have tried to explain this away by blaming lower spending in the provinces, special areas, and even the railways. But that doesn't hold much water. The real throttle is coming from the centre itself. With a massive Rs430 billion shortfall in tax collection and little progress in cutting wasteful current spending—like generous allowances, overlapping ministries, and inefficient state enterprises—the federal government is pulling back on both its own projects and those it funds in the provinces.

The main goal here is to deliver the primary surplus the IMF is asking for—a measure of how much revenue exceeds spending before

interest payments. In the first quarter, that surplus hit 1.6% of GDP, but it didn't come from smart cost-cutting alone. A big chunk came from one-off profits transferred from the State Bank and a sharp increase in the petroleum levy, which quietly raises fuel prices for everyone.

What's even more concerning is what the government has quietly promised the IMF: if tax revenues keep falling short, major development spending will be postponed until the very last quarter of the fiscal year—potentially even into FY26. In simple terms, development becomes whatever is left over after everything else is paid for. It stops being a priority and turns into a leftover.

Delaying development projects isn't just an accounting trick—it has real consequences. When funds for a new hospital or school are frozen, patients and students feel it immediately. When a road or bridge isn't built on time, farmers struggle to get their produce to market, businesses face higher costs, and entire communities stay cut off. In a country

cabinet is large and expensive. There are dozens of overlapping institutions and generous perks that could be trimmed. Subsidies that mostly benefit the well-off could be better targeted. Simply putting a stop to wasteful procurement and ghost projects would free up billions.

But these reforms require political courage. They mean taking on powerful interests—bureaucrats, politicians, and connected businesses—who benefit from the status quo. Successive governments, including the current one, have talked a good game about austerity and reform but have done remarkably little when it comes to their own privileges. Instead, the burden keeps falling on ordinary citizens through higher taxes on fuel and utilities and on the future through delayed development.

What Pakistan really needs is a clear, long-term growth strategy that treats fiscal discipline as a means to an end—not the end itself. Countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam have shown it's possible to maintain IMF-sup-

ported programs while still investing heavily in infrastructure and human development. They broadened their tax bases gradually, improved governance, and kept their focus on exports and jobs. Pakistan could do the same if leaders were willing to think beyond the next review meeting with the Fund.

Right now, Pakistan is walking a fiscal tight-rope, and development spending is the safety net being pulled away to keep

the performer balanced. The low utilization rates, reliance on one-off revenues, and the willingness to postpone projects all point to the same underlying issues: a narrow tax net, uncontrolled current spending, and a lack of political will for deeper reforms.

Meeting IMF targets is important—but it shouldn't come at the cost of sacrificing the very investments that will make those targets easier to meet in the future. Citizens deserve leaders who can deliver stability without constantly putting growth on hold. Until the government shows the resolve to cut waste, widen the tax base fairly, and protect development spending, we'll keep seeing the same cycle repeat: promises made in the budget speech, quietly deferred when the bills come due. It's time to choose a different path—one where fiscal responsibility and development go hand in hand, not one at the expense of the other.



where unemployment is high and regional inequalities are stark, these delays slow down job creation and deepen poverty, especially in less-developed areas like parts of Balochistan, rural Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It also sends a discouraging signal. Investors—both local and foreign—look for reliable infrastructure and public services before committing money. When projects keep getting deferred, confidence erodes, and the economy grows more slowly than it could. Pakistan already has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the region, and instead of fixing that structural problem, we keep leaning on the same short-term fixes: squeeze development, raise indirect taxes, hope for a bailout.

The good news is that this doesn't have to be the only path. Pakistan has plenty of room to cut non-essential current spending without touching development. The federal

Brighter forecasts, blurred data

Muhammad Hassan

In recent weeks, international lenders have painted a slightly brighter picture of Pakistan's economy, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) leading the way by revising its growth estimate for the last fiscal year upward to 3% from an earlier 2.7%.

This small but notable upgrade has been echoed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, aligning with a trend of multilateral institutions harmonizing their outlooks. The revision came around the time of the IMF's approval of a second tranche under its Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program in early December 2025.

At first glance, this seems like good news amid ongoing economic challenges. But dig a little deeper, and questions arise about the reliability of the underlying data. The 0.3% bump is largely attributed to stronger performance in the final quarter of FY2025, supposedly driven by a rebound in agriculture despite severe floods in June. Looking ahead, projections for the current fiscal year hover around 3.2%, but is this realistic? With acknowledged gaps in key economic statistics and weak performances in major sectors, it is worth examining whether these upgraded figures truly reflect ground realities or rely too heavily on official Pakistani data that is still under scrutiny.

The ADB's Asian Development Outlook update in December 2025 highlighted the revision, noting a stronger-than-expected fourth quarter that pushed overall FY2025 growth to 3%. Reports suggest this was based on updated estimates from Pakistan's government, particularly an uptick in farm output. The IMF, through a statement by Deputy Managing Director Nigel Clarke following the EFF tranche approval, appeared to align with this view, praising macroeconomic stability while the World Bank and ADB followed in a coordinated manner.

This harmonization among multilaterals isn't unusual—they often cross-reference data to present a unified front. However, the IMF itself has long flagged significant shortcomings in Pakistan's economic statistics. Back in its October 2024 EFF documents, the Fund committed technical assistance to fix weaknesses in Government Finance Statistics (GFS)

and the Producer Price Index (PPI), noting "important shortcomings remain in the source data available for sectors accounting for around a third of GDP." Ongoing assistance is slated to continue until at least June 2026, raising eyebrows about why growth figures are being upgraded now, based partly on the very data under improvement.

Growth estimates require vast, granular data collection—something independent think tanks or even multilaterals struggle with in Pakistan. As a result, these institutions often lean on official figures from authorities like the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) and the Finance Division.

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Pakistan's economy, but FY2025 was tough. The Finance Division's updates in July and later months warned of risks from heavy rains and floods, which indeed hit hard. Official data eventually pegged agriculture growth at just 0.56%—below historical averages but positive amid challenges.

The bulk of this came from livestock



(4.72% growth), fisheries (1.42%), and forestry (3.03%). While livestock is a major contributor, data on these sub-sectors—especially fisheries and forestry—is notoriously hard to verify independently. Unlike major crops, which have more traceable outputs, these rely on estimates that can be opaque. Major crops suffered declines, but the non-crop elements propped up the sector enough to contribute to the overall growth upgrade, particularly in the flood-affected final quarter.

The narrative ties the Q4 boost to farm recovery post-floods, but with climatic disruptions acknowledged in government reports, it is fair to wonder if the rebound was as robust as claimed.

Large-scale manufacturing (LSM), a key industrial driver, tells a similar story of weakness. For July-May FY2025, LSM growth

was negative 1.21%, and the full-year figure came in at -0.73%. To make the overall growth revision credible, June 2025 LSM was reported at a positive 4.14%—a sharp turnaround that helped lift the annual average.

Yet, contemporaneous reports from June highlighted factory closures, rising input costs (even as the policy rate dropped to 11%), and exits by long-standing multinationals. High energy prices, competition from regional peers with lower rates, and other pressures suggest the sector was under duress. Neither agriculture nor manufacturing showed dramatic improvements, leaving the services sector to carry much of the load.

Services, now the largest GDP component, includes wholesale and retail trade—which often mirrors price movements in imperfect markets, influenced by middlemen (aartis) and smuggling across porous borders. This can inflate contributions without reflecting real productivity gains.

The current year's forecast around 3.2% assumes continued stability and reform

progress. But with key productive sectors showing muted growth and ongoing data issues, realism is in question. The IMF's technical help underscores that source data for significant GDP portions remains unreliable, and full fixes are years away.

Multilaterals' alignment on the upgrade supports Pakistan's reform narrative, especially post-EFF tranche, but it also highlights dependence on official inputs. Independent verification is limited, making these figures vulnerable

to optimism.

Pakistan's economy has stabilized in some macros—lower inflation, better reserves—but the recent growth upgrade for FY2025 feels premature given sector weaknesses and admitted data gaps. The 3% figure, while modest, relies on hard-to-verify components and a late-quarter surge that contrasts with on-ground reports of floods, closures, and costs.

As technical assistance continues into 2026, a revisit of these numbers makes sense. True sustainable growth needs not just harmonized headlines but robust, transparent data and structural fixes in agriculture, industry, and beyond. Until then, caution is warranted: upgraded projections are welcome, but they must stand up to scrutiny for policymakers, investors, and citizens alike.

Pakistan's FDI aspirations: Big promises, limited payoff

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's leaders often highlight diplomatic breakthroughs and initiatives like the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) as signs that foreign investors are finally taking notice. With high-profile visits and billions in signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs), the narrative is one of turnaround. Yet, the latest data from the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) tells a more cautious story.

For the first five months of FY2026 (July–November 2025), net foreign direct investment (FDI) stood at around \$927 million—down significantly from previous periods and far from the transformative inflows the country needs.

This gap between ambition and reality is stark. While privatization efforts, like the recent sale of First Women Bank, and IMF projections offer some optimism, underlying issues persist. The current account flipped to a small surplus in November, buoyed by remittances, but wider deficits in trade and muted industrial activity raise questions about sustainable recovery. As the government pushes for more FDI, it is worth asking: are these efforts translating into real investment, or are structural hurdles still holding Pakistan back?

The SBP's provisional figures for July–November FY2026 show gross FDI inflows at \$1,474.2 million, compared to \$2,151.9 million in the same period the prior year—a notable drop. Outflows were lower at \$546.8 million versus \$909.5 million previously, resulting in net FDI of approximately \$927 million. China remained the top contributor, with around \$308 million, but even that was concentrated in traditional sectors like power and finance.

This decline comes despite the SIFC's mandate to streamline approvals and attract investment. Established to cut red tape and act as a one-window facilitator, the council has indeed helped sign MoUs worth over \$25 billion in potential deals. High-level engagements, including visits by the Prime Minister and military leadership, have boosted Pakistan's geopolitical profile. However, converting these agreements into actual binding contracts and

on-ground projects remains elusive.

The IMF, in its recent second review of the Extended Fund Facility, which completed in December, projected FDI at just 0.5% of GDP for the current year—down from 0.6% last fiscal. While praising the SIFC for its authority to fast-track investments, the Fund raised concerns about its "untested transparency and accountability provisions." Staff emphasized the need for clear reporting on SIFC-linked inflows and any associated incentives, aligning with commitments to avoid new tax breaks or subsidies that could distort the playing field.

One bright spot—or point of contention—is privatization. The SBP reported zero proceeds from privatization in the period under review, which seems odd given the high-profile sale of First Women Bank Limited (FWBL). In October 2025, the government divested its

lion surplus last year. The goods trade deficit widened to \$12.769 billion from \$9.799 billion, and services trade remained in the red at \$1.316 billion.

The saving grace? Workers' remittances surged to \$16.145 billion, up from \$14.767 million. The Prime Minister has framed this as evidence of "brain gain" over "brain drain," reflecting confidence in the economy. Yet, the IMF expects moderation ahead, as global slowdowns and shifting migration patterns take hold.

Pakistan's investment climate still faces headwinds: high energy costs, policy inconsistency, security perceptions, and a cumbersome regulatory environment. Multinational exits and factory closures continue, signaling waning confidence. Unemployment is rising, private sector wage growth is stagnant, and public salaries—covering just 7% of the workforce—keep climbing at taxpayer expense.

Elite capture persists, exemplified by the recent rollback of rules limiting double benefits for reemployed pensioners. Without deeper reforms—broadening the tax base, cutting wasteful spending, and ensuring transparent incentives—FDI will likely stay subdued.

The SIFC's short-term target is \$5 billion annually, with grander long-term visions. But until MoUs turn into factories, jobs, and exports, these remain aspirations.

Pakistan's macroeconomic indicators show pockets of stability—lower inflation, rebuilt reserves, and remittance strength—but they don't yet support claims of escaping fragility. FDI inflows are down, privatization proceeds minimal, and trade imbalances growing. The SIFC and diplomatic push are steps forward, but real progress demands structural change: fair incentives, transparency, and an attractive business environment.

Until reforms bear fruit, alternatives like debt write-offs or rescheduling might offer breathing room. For now, the economy's recovery feels fragile, reliant on remittances and stopgaps rather than robust investment. Leaders must bridge the gap between promises and delivery to turn potential into prosperity—one concrete project at a time.



82.64% stake to Abu Dhabi-based International Holding Company (IHC) for about \$14.6 million (Rs4.1 billion). Hailed by the Prime Minister as a boost to UAE–Pakistan ties, the deal marked a rare successful privatization.

Why the zero in official data? It could be timing—the transaction might not have been fully reflected in the July–November figures—or classification issues. Nonetheless, this modest inflow underscores a broader challenge: Pakistan's privatization drive has yielded limited results, often hampered by political sensitivities and valuation disputes.

On the external front, November brought a small current account surplus of \$100 million, a relief after deficits in prior months. However, the July–November cumulative balance was a \$812 million deficit—worse than the \$503 mil-

Civil society and the imperative of good governance in Pakistan

Raza Khan

In contemporary Pakistan, public issues have multiplied manifold, and problems ranging from extremism and terrorism to financial corruption and administrative laggardness, as well as routine yet obtrusive concerns such as traffic chaos, are fundamentally rooted in poor governance across almost every sphere of public life.

These challenges, despite their varying nature and intensity, share a common denominator: weak and ineffective governance structures. Therefore, the commonly prescribed panacea for these persistent ailments is good governance. However, the more radical and pressing question remains: how can good governance actually be achieved? While the attainment of good governance undoubtedly requires the collective role of multiple institutions and contributing factors, the role of civil society in ensuring and sustaining good governance is particularly critical and cannot be overlooked.

It is important to note here that there exists a widespread belief that good governance is primarily the outcome of sound policies and efficient enforcement mechanisms put in place by incumbent ruling parties and political leadership. According to this view, viable and vibrant policymaking, coupled with proactive governance, can significantly improve administrative performance and ensure the overall well-being and development of the people and their respective social, economic and political domains. There is considerable substance in this perception, both among the general public and the ruling elites. However, this perspective represents only a partial reality. Good governance is equally, if not more so, the result of active participation by civil society institutions and civic-minded individuals in public life. Without an informed, active and vibrant civil society, meeting the essential criteria of good governance becomes well-nigh impossible.

History teaches us that in developed, politically stable and increasingly democratizing countries, the role of civil society has been central to the observance and continuity of good governance practices. In general terms, good governance refers to those actions, arrangements and institutional behaviors on the part of political leadership, government bodies and state functionaries that, guided by certain well-recognized indicators, lead to improvements in the overall social environment, the betterment of people's lives in all respects, and the guarantee of sustainable development and collective welfare. From this standpoint, the role of civil society—an agglomeration of informed, concerned and proactive citizens, along

with their associations and institutions—in promoting good governance becomes self-explanatory. Without a proactive civil society, neither the improvement of living standards nor the realization of sustainable development can realistically be envisioned.

Sociological experts describe civil society as a social and public sphere that exists above the domain of the family and below the authority of the state. It encompasses private-owned media, political parties operating outside government, and a wide range of non-profit social, political and economic associations, institutions and organizations. A viable and vibrant civil society contributes directly to good governance, which itself is characterized by a composite of essential features such as transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation and predictability. One of the most important roles of civil society in this regard is to apprise citizens of their fundamental rights and responsibilities. While constitutional frameworks in most states clearly define fundamental rights, the general masses are often unaware of these rights and, more importantly, of the mechanisms through which they can be realized. An active civil society educates and sensitizes people about their constitutional and political rights, thereby building their capacity to participate meaningfully in political, judicial and policymaking processes. This informed participation serves as a powerful check on rulers and helps ensure good governance.

Civil society is also instrumental in making people aware of the role of government, state institutions and the responsibilities of public functionaries. In most cases, people view the government merely as a provider of basic services, utilities, security and development. They remain largely uninformed about how these services are delivered, how institutions function, and what responsibilities officials are legally bound to fulfill. A vibrant civil society bridges this knowledge gap by informing citizens about the structure, functions and obligations of various state institutions and officeholders. Without such awareness, most people remain disconnected from governance processes, public issues and administrative mechanisms, particularly regarding how these systems are supposed to respond to the needs and concerns of the population.

Furthermore, civil society provides forums and platforms where people can debate, deliberate and articulate their issues, and subsequently communicate them to rulers and administrators. In this sense, the role of civil society becomes three-dimensional: educating citizens, facilitating dialogue, and channeling

public opinion into governance structures. Additionally, civil society creates opportunities for people to participate maximally in governance processes. Public participation in public affairs is a cornerstone of good governance and an essential condition for democratic legitimacy.

Another crucial characteristic of good governance is transparency. When people are aware of their rights—largely due to the efforts of a proactive civil society—they also become conscious of the necessity for transparency in governance processes. Moreover, an informed citizenry is a sine qua non for accountability within governance systems. Without informed citizens, the requisite public pressure on state institutions and functionaries cannot be exerted, and accountability remains largely symbolic. Civil society thus plays a critical role in fostering awareness about the importance of the rule of law among citizens, while simultaneously reminding government institutions and officials of their obligation to uphold it. Too often, state functionaries act or behave as if they are above the law, rather than subject to it.

It is a proactive civil society, and the informed citizenry it cultivates, that consistently reminds state institutions and government servants that they are subject to the law of the land and that all their actions are constrained by official rules, procedures and codes of conduct. In other words, civil society continually reinforces the principle that no government institution or official has the authority to violate the law or infringe upon the fundamental rights of the people.

An active civil society, through an informed citizenry, also plays a decisive role in the formulation of sound, sustainable and effective public policies. Civil society forums, organizations and institutions enhance public understanding of the various stages of public policymaking, including policy formulation, implementation, evaluation, analysis and reformulation. They also inform citizens about how and where they can participate in these processes at different levels, thereby strengthening democratic governance.

In contemporary Pakistan, the country faces a profound crisis of governance. This crisis persists largely because political leadership has failed to fully grasp the root causes of weak governance. There must be a clear realization on the part of the government that unless civil society is motivated and enabled to participate maximally in public life, good governance will remain an elusive goal. After all, the ultimate source of support for any democratic or elected government is the people themselves, and without their informed and active engagement, sustainable governance reform is simply not possible.

Human cost of terrorism on education in Balochistan & KP

Rasheed Ali

In the unforgiving mountains and vast deserts of Pakistan's Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provinces, the promise of education, a beacon of hope for a brighter future, has been cruelly eclipsed by the relentless shadow of terrorism and insurgency. Explosions shatter the morning calm, gunfire echoes through valleys, and fear grips the hearts of children who once dreamed of classrooms filled with laughter and learning.

As of late 2025, the devastation is heartbreaking: thousands of schools lie in ruins, teachers live in constant dread, and millions of young minds are denied their fundamental right to education. The May 2025 suicide bombing of a school bus in Khuzdar, Balochistan, which claimed the lives of at least four innocent children and injured dozens more, stands as a grim reminder of this ongoing tragedy. In December 2025, militants reduced yet another girls' primary school in North Waziristan's Mir Ali to rubble, the second such attack in a week, plunging hundreds of girls into uncertainty.

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest yet most impoverished province, endures an insurgency fuelled by groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Rooted in deep-seated grievances over marginalisation, the conflict has turned schools into battlegrounds. Over 3,600 schools remain non-functional, plagued by inadequate facilities and a severe teacher shortage; nearly 16,000 posts vacant, as educators flee for their lives. Parents, haunted by horror stories, often keep daughters at home, fearing abductions or blasts. Enrolment lingers at a dismal 50pc, with girls bearing the brunt.

The May 2025 Khuzdar attack was particularly soul-crushing. A suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a bus carrying children to an army-run school, killing four young students and wounding 39 others in a fireball of twisted metal and screams. Families were torn apart: one grieving father buried all three of his children, their small uniforms stained with blood. Survivors, scarred physically and emotionally, recount

nightmares of the blast, limbs lost, dreams shattered. "My daughter was excited for school that morning," one mother whispered in the aftermath, her voice breaking. "Now she wakes up screaming, afraid of any loud noise." The BLA's tactics, including this assault, aim to erode state authority, but they inflict indelible trauma on the innocent.

In KP, the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has revived nightmares from the 2014 Peshawar massacre, where over 140 lives, mostly children, were stolen. Violence surged in 2025, with attacks concentrated in border areas. In December, militants dynamited a girls' primary school

teacher shared, "I teach 50 children in a crumbling room with a leaking roof, always watching the door, wondering if today is the day militants come." Parents echo the terror: after school bombings, many pull children out, saying, "Better alive and illiterate than dead chasing dreams."

In Balochistan, teachers, especially non-locals, live under perpetual threat. Many have transferred out, leaving classrooms empty. A former educator recounted fleeing after colleagues were targeted: "We were symbols of the state, so they hunted us. I left everything behind to save my family." Children bear invisible wounds; studies link exposure



in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, leaving rubble where laughter once rang. Locals decried it as "engineered warfare", forcing over 600 students, many girls, into makeshift arrangements or out of school entirely. Approximately five million children in KP remain unenrolled, trapped by poverty, fear, and destruction.

Personal accounts paint a vivid picture of resilience amid despair. In KP's tribal districts, education officer Warda from Dera Ismail Khan describes the barriers: "Early marriages, household chores, lack of secondary schools, safety fears, these smother girls' ambitions." Female teachers, scarce and reluctant to serve in remote areas, face cultural taboos and threats. One anonymous

to violence with trauma, poorer health, and stunted futures.

Yet, glimmers of hope persist. In makeshift tents or transitional structures, determined students gather under harsh suns.

Initiatives like scholarships for victims' children and security forces' community events help heal PTSD. But without tackling root causes, poverty, marginalisation, and militancy, the cycle endures. As 2025 ends, the children of Balochistan and KP plead for peace. Their stolen childhoods and silenced school bells are a national tragedy. Education is not just a right; in these scarred lands, it is survival. Until the guns fall silent, an entire generation's potential will remain buried under the rubble of fear.

When water turns deadly

By Dr. Fatima Khan

On a winter morning in December, as Lahore's fog hung low over clogged drains and stagnant pools of grey water, a young mother filled a plastic bottle from a hand pump on the edge of her neighbourhood. She paused, lifted it to her nose, and frowned at the faint, sulphuric smell. There was no alternative. Boiling the water might make it safer, she told herself, even as she knew it would not remove what could not be seen.

Scenes like this, repeated daily across South Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America, formed the unspoken backdrop to a stark and unsettling message delivered by Prof. Dr. Aurangzeb Hafi on December 19, 2025 — a day marking his 53rd birthday, but one he chose to dedicate not to mere celebrations, but to warning the world.

In a keynote message titled “The Unsafe Future of Safe Water & Air”, Prof. Hafi, Principal Investigator of the Asia & Oceania Post-Doctoral Academia (AOPDA), presented what he described as an evidence-based situation report on the “Sewage-Hydrotoxicity-Health Nexus”. The document traced a continuous, often ignored chain linking prevailing sewage-drainage systems to toxicated underground water reserves, toxic air emissions and, ultimately, the mounting toll on human health. Prof. Hafi, who was listed among the “Top of the Top-10” global achievers in the Bi-Decadal Merit Gazette by Impact Hallmarks in 2021, framed the issue as a global crisis of governance, equity and survival rather than a purely technical environmental concern.

According to United Nations statistics cited in the report, around 869,000 children under the age of five die every year due to toxically germ-infested water — equivalent to the loss of three to four young lives every minute. An additional 2.1 million children die annually from exposure to other environmental toxins and air-pollutants, while millions more endure chronic illnesses, impaired cognitive development and life-long disabilities. Prof. Hafi identifies the core driver behind this grim arithmetic as the “Lethal Tetragonal Pollution System”, with the prevailing sewage-drainage infrastructure acting as its central engine.

He explains that in much of the developing world, sewage systems are not ‘ecologically compatible’ and are structurally incapable of confining the pollutants they generate. Instead, they release a toxic mix of odorous and hazardous gases such as hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, methane and nitrous oxide; volatile organic compounds including

sulfur-based compounds and phenolics; bioaerosols carrying bacteria, fungi, viruses and parasites; and particulate matter (PM) that lingers in the air and settles into the environment in its totality. Over time, these emissions infiltrate underground water reserves, converting vital aquifers into long-term repositories of toxic contaminations.

The scale of this contamination is no longer theoretical. In Lahore, recent findings cited in the report reveal that due to sewage water intrusion, clear indications of Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (STEC) have been detected in well over 97 per cent of groundwater samples drawn from depths of 100 to 120 feet. The presence of STEC — particularly the highly virulent O157:H7 strain — is especially alarming. This pathogen is known to cause severe gastrointestinal illness and can progress to Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), a life-threatening condition that leads to kidney



failure, most often affecting young children and the elderly. For Prof. Hafi, these findings underscore how deeply sewage-derived pathogens have penetrated what were once considered protected underground water reserves.

UN-released figures for 2024-2025 indicate that approximately 2.1 billion people, nearly one in four globally, lack access to safe drinking water. At the same time, some 2.5 billion people do not have access to appropriate sanitation facilities. These deficits, Prof. Hafi argues, generate a feedback loop in which inadequate sanitation accelerates water contamination, which in turn amplifies disease transmission and environmental degradation.

The health consequences are particularly severe in the context of vector-borne diseases. More than 57 per cent of the world's population is currently at high risk of such illnesses. WHO and UNICEF statistics cited in the report indicate that in roughly 72 to 83 per cent of adult cases, and 80 to 87 per cent of cases among children, unsafe drinking water constitutes a major attributable root source. In densely populated urban fringes and rural settlements alike, sewage outlets

are tunnelled and pooled onto lands inhabited by poorer communities, imposing a disproportionate toxic burden. Overwhelmed soil-patches and subsoil water systems lose their natural capacity to shield against or neutralise pollutants, leaving drinking water sources increasingly compromised — a trend documented in research initiative, SAIRI's decade-long report on water resources.

The report further notes that the crisis is geographically concentrated yet globally consequential. The UN children's rights organisation, in collaboration with WHO, estimates that just ten countries account for nearly two-thirds of the global population without access to safe drinking water. These include China with 108 million people affected, India with 99 million, Nigeria with 63 million, Ethiopia with 43 million, Indonesia with 39 million, Congo with 37 million, Bangladesh with 26 million, Tanzania with 22 million,

and both Kenya and Pakistan with 16 million each. Prof. Hafi warns that if current trends persist, the number of people deprived of safe drinking water could more than double in the coming decades.

Against this backdrop, the report highlights severe policy gaps and calls for an urgent shift away from fragmented, sector-by-sector approaches. Governments, Prof. Hafi argues, must recognise water and air safety as inseparable priorities and adopt integrated regulatory frameworks that reflect this reality. He urges continuous engagement

with decision-makers, stakeholders and the public to illuminate the trade-offs and synergies inherent in sewage management, sanitation and eco-sustainability.

In one of its most forceful conclusions, the report issues an ‘inevitable call’ for what it terms a ‘Global Hydro-Detoxification Initiative’, warning that the remnants of inaction are already assuming ‘devastating proportions of epic scale’. The damage, Prof. Hafi stresses, is no longer confined to water or soil alone. Entire ecosystems are being toxicated, leaving future generations a planet far more hostile than the one inherited from centuries of human stewardship. As night falls over cities and villages where safe water remains a daily uncertainty, his warning resonates with uncomfortable clarity: the ‘unsafe future’ of ‘safe water and air’ is no longer a distant threat — it is already here.

(The writer is a physician by profession. She has worked as an intern at the Capital Health (New Jersey) & St. Luke's Hospital (New York). Rights and gender issues are the areas of special interest to her. She can be reached at: fatima23393@hotmail.com)

Is the US making a great gamble to reshape Iraq?

Firas Dabbagh

United States President Donald Trump's second administration has introduced a bold and unconventional strategy for the Middle East. The administration intends to recalibrate US influence in a region historically scarred by conflict, prioritising regional stability through economic strength and military consolidation by asserting a stronger, business-minded US presence.

At the centre of Trump's ambitious goal is what the new US envoy to Iraq, Mark Savaya, described as his goal to "make Iraq great again". This approach moves away from traditional endless war tactics towards a transactional, results-oriented diplomacy that aims to restore Iraqi sovereignty and economic vitality. It could be the "great gamble" for Trump, who seeks an Iraq that serves as a stable, sovereign regional hub rather than a battleground for foreign interests. Trump's primary plans and wishes for Iraq involve a twofold mission: consolidating all armed forces under the command of the legitimate state and drastically reducing the influence of malign foreign players, most notably Iran. The administration seeks to open Iraqi markets to international investment, upgrade the country's infrastructure, and secure the independence of its energy sector. Hence, the plan is to ground a genuine partnership that respects Iraq's unity while ensuring that it is no longer a central node for militia activity or external interference.

This assertive US strategy lands directly in a highly contested and fractured political environment in Iraq, which is less a single state than a patchwork of competing powers. The heart of the problem lies not just in parliament, but also in the persistent shadow influence of armed factions and militias that often operate outside the formal chain of state command. Those groups were among the biggest winners in the November 2025 elections.

Now the ongoing government negotiations have thrown a stark light on these non-state actors. Their power raises crucial concerns for the future: How can Iraq enforce the law and, crucially, attract the foreign investment needed for revival if armed groups challenge state authority? The consolidation of the country's armed forces under complete state control is an urgent necessity, underscored by rising regional tensions and security threats.

Moreover, the path to achieving genuine

stability is severely obstructed by entrenched political interests. For Iraq to achieve stability, it must urgently strengthen its institutional frameworks and clearly establish a separation of powers. Yet, many political parties seem more focused on maintaining control over lucrative state resources than on implementing the meaningful reforms the country desperately needs. The result is a governance model struggling to stand firm amid the crosscurrents of competing loyalties and power grabs.

To achieve these high-stakes goals, Trump has bypassed traditional diplomatic channels by appointing Mark Savaya as the US special envoy to Iraq on October 19. Such an appointment signals a shift towards



"deal-making" diplomacy. Savaya's mission is to navigate the complex political turmoil following Iraq's parliamentary elections to steer the country towards a stable transition. His job is to bridge the gap between institutional support and massive financial investment, acting as a direct representative of Trump's business-centric foreign policy.

Savaya is an Iraqi-born, Detroit-based businessman lacking the traditional diplomatic background; his experience is rooted in the private sector in the cannabis industry, but he gained political prominence as an active supporter of Trump's campaign in Michigan. He played a key role in the delicate negotiations that secured the release of Elizabeth Tsurkov, the Israeli-Russian academic and Princeton University student who had been kidnapped by an Iraqi militia for more than two years.

Savaya's communal and ethnic ties have given him significant access to Iraqi power centres that traditional diplomats often lack. Iraq's position in a geopolitical tug-of-war is compounding the internal struggles, forced to balance its critical relationships with two giants: the US and Iran. On the one hand,

Washington's objective is clear: it wants to bolster Iraq's sovereignty while simultaneously pushing back against the dominance of powerful, often Iran-backed, militias. The US believes that allowing these armed groups too much sway could leave the nation isolated and wreck its fragile economic stability.

But Iranian influence remains a formidable and enduring force. Tehran views Iraq not just as a neighbour but also as a crucial strategic ally for projecting its power across the entire region. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been actively working to maintain unity among key Shia factions in Baghdad. This move clearly signals Iran's deep and enduring interest in shaping Iraq's political alignment and its future path. Iraq must therefore navigate this high-stakes balancing act to survive.

Savaya's mission unfolds at a time when Iran's regional "axis of resistance" is under unprecedented pressure. Having already lost their primary foothold in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024, and seeing Hezbollah's political and military standing in Lebanon severely decimated by the 2025 conflict with Israel, Iranian proxies now face the very real prospect of losing their grip on Iraq too.

In Lebanon, a new government is committed to regaining the state's monopoly on the use of force, leaving Hezbollah increasingly isolated. This regional retreat means that for Tehran, maintaining influence in Baghdad is a final, desperate stand to remain a relevant regional power. The success of Trump's gamble also depends on the roles of other regional players. Turkiye has recently recalibrated its strategy to integrate Iraq into ad hoc regional trade and security frameworks, effectively diluting Iran's centrality. Simultaneously, Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are emerging as key economic and security partners for Baghdad, offering an alternative to reliance on Iran.

However, these regional actors also bring their own agendas — such as Turkiye's focus on containing Kurdish movements — which may conflict with US objectives. If Savaya can successfully align these diverse regional interests with Trump's plan, he may fundamentally rewrite Iraq's turbulent future. The "Make Iraq Great Again" strategy reflects a pragmatic reassertion of US interests within the anarchic international system, prioritising Washington's security and economic power over idealistic goals.

Why the Arab Spring was never a failure

Larbi Sadiki

For more than a decade, the Arab Spring has been widely dismissed as a failure, often portrayed as a brief eruption of idealism that collapsed into repression, war and authoritarian restoration. Tunisia's uprising, which started on December 17, 2010, with the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, is often remembered in this register: as a tragic prelude to dashed hopes rather than a transformative political moment.

This reading is incomplete and, in important ways, misleading. Bouazizi's act was not merely a reaction to police brutality, corruption or economic exclusion, although all three were real. It was a moral rupture that shattered the quiet normalisation of humiliation and laid bare the ethical foundations of authoritarian rule. What followed in Tunisia, and soon across much of the Arab world, was not simply protest, but an awakening: a collective realisation about dignity, belonging and the limits of obedience.

The Arab Spring should therefore be understood less as a failed transition than as a lasting transformation of political consciousness. Its most consequential effects were not institutional but experiential, reshaping how people understood citizenship, legitimacy and their own capacity to act. Even where regimes survived or reasserted control, that shift did not disappear. It altered the terrain on which power is contested to this day.

For this reason, the uprisings cannot be understood as isolated national revolts. From Tunis to Cairo, Sanaa to Benghazi, different societies moved in parallel, shaped by distinct histories but animated by a shared emotional and political grammar. Protesters were not only demanding material change; they were asserting themselves as political subjects, rejecting the idea that power could indefinitely deny them visibility, voice and equal citizenship.

The uprisings were enactments of this shift. They redefined what legitimacy meant and who could claim it. In occupying public space, people were not merely opposing regimes but rehearsing alternative ways of living together. The Arab Spring was less a programme than a practice, shaped through action rather than design: a lived reimagining of political possibility.

One of its most consequential dimensions was the transformation of streets and squares into sites of collective learning. Places long monopolised by the state's coercive and symbolic power were reclaimed as arenas of participation and mutual recognition. In Cairo's Tahrir Square, Tunis's Bourguiba Avenue and Sanaa's Change Square, common citizens organised security, cleaned streets, debated demands and negotiated differences. Public space became a school of politics.

These moments mattered for a simple reason: they showed that democracy is not only a constitutional arrangement but a social practice learned through action. Protesters did not sim-



ply demand rights; they enacted responsibility. Even when these spaces were later cleared or violently reclaimed, the experience of inhabiting them left a lasting imprint. Once people have lived democracy, however briefly, they carry its memory forward.

The Arab uprisings also revealed why cities matter. Revolts are often ignited in peripheral and marginal spaces, with Sidi Bouzid being the most powerful example, but they are sustained or defeated in urban centres. This is not a claim about virtue but about structure. Cities concentrate institutions, social networks and historical memory. They bring people into direct confrontation with the machinery of power, including ministries, courts and security services, and make authority tangible rather than abstract.

Urban life fosters dense repertoires of sociability: trust, cooperation, debate and solidarity forged in markets, neighbourhoods, mosques and universities. These networks enable collective action to persist beyond the initial moment of rupture. Without them,

uprisings risk remaining episodic. With them, they acquire durability, even under repression.

Repression, of course, came swiftly and brutally. The exhilaration of those early months was followed by counter-revolution, militarisation and war. In many Arab cities, regimes responded by reasserting control over bodies, spaces and memory. It would be dishonest to romanticise what followed.

Yet repression did not erase the symbolic struggle unleashed in 2011. Across the region, protesters targeted not only rulers but the imagery and rituals that sustained authoritarian power. Portraits were torn down, slogans scrawled over symbols of dominance, and statues defaced. These acts were not theatrical excesses. They were attempts to dismantle the emotional architecture of fear and submission.

Such moments leave traces even when they are followed by defeat. The experience of collective transgression, of crossing lines once deemed inviolable, alters how authority is seen and felt. People learn that power can be confronted, mocked and undone, even if temporarily. That knowledge does not disappear with repression.

This is why the Arab Spring is not dead, despite sustained efforts to portray it as a historical error or a cautionary tale. What survived was not a set of institutions but a pedagogy of liberty. Learned through action and reflection in public space, this pedagogy reshaped how people understood agency, responsibility and resistance.

Its effects are visible today in quieter, more fragmented struggles. Across the region, younger generations mobilise around social justice, environmental degradation and public accountability. They may not invoke 2011, but they operate with an inherited refusal of fatalism. A graffiti in Hay Ettadhamen, a marginalised suburb of Tunis, captures this enduring scepticism: "Is Tunisia a republic, a monarchy, an animal farm, or a prison?"

The Arab Spring's most enduring contribution lies here. It demonstrated that even acts originating in marginal spaces can reshape collective imagination and expand the horizon of the possible. Bouazizi's defiance did not produce instant democracy. But it ignited a critical consciousness that continues to animate struggles against injustice and exclusion. The uprisings did not fail. They changed form, but not meaning.

Influx of imported cars

There has been an influx of imported cars and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) in the country lately. A majority of these new completely built unit (CBU) models are electric vehicles (EVs) or hybrid vehicles (HVs) and are being brought in under the recently announced New Energy Vehicle (NEV) policy.

Besides, the commercial import of used cars has also been allowed under International Monetary Fund (IMF) pressure on the pretext of promoting healthy market competition. However, the overall auto-mobile demand has not shown a significant growth to justify the huge import of new and used vehicles. The existing local automobile industry possesses the capability to meet the current demand through local production.

The liberalisation of automobile imports would adversely affect the balance of trade in a difficult economic time for the country. The automobiles being imported mostly cater to the affluent segments of society and are out of reach of the common man.

In addition, these imports jeopardise the existing local automobile and vendor industries that have made sizable investments in the country. They also contribute to the national exchequer significantly, both in terms of paying taxes and creating job opportunities.

The automobile policy should promote progressive manufacturing of conventional vehicles and NEVs locally. There should be specific deletion targets for the industry which should be strictly enforced by the government. The present high duty and tax rates for the local industry also need to be rationalised. Local manufacturers should be provided incentives to upgrade their plants and to introduce latest models. Concurrently, the government should consider pricing regulation so that automobile manufacturers do not increase their prices without justification.

The mushroom growth of automobile imports needs to be regularly checked by the government and appropriate measures need to be taken to protect both the local industry and the consumers' interests.

Aamir Malik
Karachi

State of computer education

While the state prioritises information and communication technology (ICT), it is deeply troubling to witness the state of computer education at the Government Madressa and Campus High School, Naushahro Feroze, an institution with a long academic history and over 1,800 enrolled students.

In an age where digital literacy defines a child's future, the school's computer lab, as can be seen in the accompanying image,

is like a silent monument to administrative neglect.

The lab is practically non-functional. Almost all computers are outdated, dead, or missing from the original inventory. The monitors do not switch on, keyboards and CPUs are unusable, and even the printers belong to a generation now obsolete. The school is forced to rely on a single working laptop and one projector, leaving hundreds of students without any meaningful exposure at all to ICT.

The school, however, is not an isolated case. The government continues to high-light its commitment to digital education, signing agreements and launching ICT initiatives with international partners. Yet, the reality on the ground exposes a stark contradiction.

Without maintenance, monitoring and technical support, equipment delivered to schools simply deteriorates into scrap, and entire generations lose access to skills that are essential for survival in a modern economy. The students of Sindh deserve far better. A functional ICT lab is not a luxury in this age; it is a fundamental requirement, and its absence represents a systemic failure that must be rectified without any delay.

Dr Abdul Qadeer Memon
Naushahro Feroze

Free international trade

Free international trade is clearly the driving force behind the unprecedented global economic growth we have witnessed in the last five decades. But United States President Donald Trump's policy of enhancing tariffs on imports from countries with trade surpluses is damaging and against the very principles that have fuelled this growth.

It is true that the US faces a huge trade deficit with several countries, including China, India, Japan, Vietnam, Canada and member states of the European Union.

That Trump wants to rebalance the trade with these countries is the reason behind his decision to impose higher tariffs, which he announced earlier this year. However, imposing higher tariffs on imports leads to higher inflation, which, in turn, harms the US economy, and politically undermines the administration and the Republican Party. The Trump administration has now realised that tariffs are causing higher inflation. Persistent inflation has delayed interest rate downward cuts by the US Federal Reserve Board, causing additional economic strain.

In order to offset the impact of rising prices, Trump has now come up with an idea of giving \$2,000 as 'tariff dividend' to all American citizens having an annual income less than \$100,000. The estimated cost to the US of the proposed tariffs dividend will be around \$300 billion. The financial and eco-

nomical impact of enhancing tariffs on imports and then compensating the American people with tariff dividend to counter inflation is just about nothing. In other words, the idea of tariff dividend is practically tantamount to a U-turn on Trump's tariff policy.

Ejaz Ahmad Magoon
Doha, Qatar

Concessions for senior citizens

I visited the Pakistan Railways Reservation Office at the City Station in Karachi to reserve a seat in air-conditioned business class to Lahore. Aged 72, I was surprised to know that only one train, the Taizgam, gives discounts to senior citizens. It is a shame as the elite class in Pakistan has all the privileges. On the other hand, in our neighbouring country, males aged over 60 years and females over 58 years get a number of concessions. They even have a seat quota on all passenger trains. Pakistan Railways should immediately offer discounts on all its trains for every person aged 60 years or above.

Zafar Ul Huda Abbasi
Lahore

Police checkpoint

The police checkpoint on the Islamabad Expressway right after crossing the Faizabad Inter-change towards Islamabad is causing serious inconvenience to thousands of daily commuters. During rush hours, long lines of vehicles stretch all the way to Khanna Pul. A journey that used to take 20 minutes now takes an hour or even longer. Emergency vehicles, like ambulances, are often seen stuck in traffic. The entire mess is caused by the police checkpoint as the road becomes clear right after the barrier. The authorities should find a better solution that ensures public safety without making common people suffer every day.

Muhammad Anfal
Islamabad

Obsolete curriculum

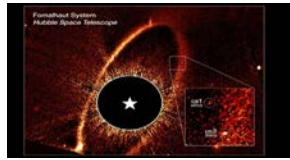
Outdated curriculum has become a serious barrier for students in Balochistan. Text-books, syllabi and teaching styles used in government schools are based on old ideas that do not match the needs of today's world. Students miss important skills. They fall behind their peers from private schools. The absence of topics, like climate change, digital skills, financial literacy, mental health and entrepreneurship, makes the situation even worse. Rote learning is common, while real skill development is ignored. It is time for the government to update the curriculum so that students may be prepared for the future.

Mehrdil Haider
Absor

Scientists spot 'unprecedented celestial event' just 25 light-years from Earth

Ivan Farkas

Astronomers hoping to observe a planet around a nearby star have witnessed a much rarer "unprecedented celestial event," the team said: The violent aftermath of not one, but two collisions between the rocky building blocks of planets. Over the past two decades, astronomers witnessed two separate catastrophic collisions around the star Fomalhaut, located just 25 light-years away in the constellation Piscis Austrinus. The detections occurred after planetesimals (rocky pieces of unformed planets) measuring much larger than the dinosaur-killing asteroid smashed each other into massive clouds of glittering debris. The Fomalhaut system is no stranger to such crashes. It's famously known as the "Eye of Sauron" due to its resemblance to the fiery, all-seeing eye from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* franchise. The likeness comes from the spectacular dust belt that surrounds Fomalhaut at a distance of 133 astronomical units (AU), with one AU being equal to 93 million miles (150 million km) — the average distance between the sun and Earth. Formed from countless rocky, icy collisions, this belt of dust and debris provides a dustier analog of our early solar system as it appeared more than 4 billion years ago, the team said — offering a glimpse of our neighborhood's chaotic infancy, when planets were being created, destroyed, and reassembled. A new study, conducted by an international team of researchers and led by Paul Kalas, an astronomer at the University of California, Berkeley, described these two collision events in destructive detail to help solve a planetary mystery.



Japan trials 100-kilowatt laser weapon — it can cut through metal and drones mid-flight

Fiona Jackson

Japan has deployed a system that fires laser beams with 100 kilowatts of energy — powerful enough to disable small drones. It was installed on board a 6,200-ton (6.3 million kg) warship.



The weapon combines 10 lasers (each 10 kW in power) into a single 100 kW beam, giving it enough focused power to burn through metal surfaces. It is a fiber laser, meaning the beam is generated by light being amplified and focused as it travels through a solid-state optical fiber doped with rare earth elements. Engineers designed this system specifically to shoot down drones, mortar rounds and other lightweight airborne threats.

Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA) confirmed in a statement that the laser system was installed on the JS Asuka test ship after arriving at one of Japan Marine United's shipyards. It was seen packed into two 40-foot (12-meter) domed modules. The system will soon be sent to sea for its first trials under real maritime conditions. These are due to start after February 27, 2026, according to @AGChatch, a YouTube account that monitors Japanese naval technology.

The laser weapon has been in development since 2018, and a prototype was confirmed to have been delivered to ATLA by the manufacturer, Kawasaki Heavy Industries, in February 2023. Officials delivered a briefing upon its docking, saying that "provided sufficient power, the system can continue to engage targets without running out of ammunition," according to The Asia Live.

Obesity's cancer link is worse than you think

Donavyn Coffey

Cancer deaths are dropping overall, but not the ones linked to obesity.

That's what mounting evidence now shows. A sweeping new report on U.S. cancer trends revealed that cancers linked to obesity are becoming more common. Another study, presented in July at the Endocrine Society Annual Meeting in San Francisco, found that deaths from obesity-related cancers have more than tripled over the past two decades.

These include esophageal, colon and rectal, breast (postmenopausal), uterine, gallbladder, upper stomach, kidney, liver, ovarian, pancreatic, thyroid, meningioma (brain), and multiple myeloma — 13 types in all, now accounting for 40% of new cancer diagnoses in the U.S. Women, older adults, Native Americans, and Black Americans are especially vulnerable. Second only to smoking, obesity ranks as one of the leading preventable causes of cancer. Yet even as the public's awareness of smoking's risks has dramatically increased, experts warn we've underestimated just how much excess weight — and the complex biology behind it — can fuel the disease. What exactly drives this link is not fully understood, but experts are homing in on some strong possibilities. It could be estrogen, fat cells, the microbiome, insulin resistance, or all of the above. One thing is sure: The public health threat of obesity is only increasing.

So what does this mean for cancer prevention, and how can you protect yourself? Behind the drop in overall cancer rates are significant declines in the number of smokers — and smoking-related cancers. Between 1965 and 2015, the smoking rate fell from 42% of the population to 15%, putting a major dent in rates of lung cancer, which is still the deadliest form.



Hair dye and your health: What's new?

Julie Stewart

If you search for hair dye on social media, you'll mostly see inspo photos of women with brightly colored locks. But you'll also find clips warning you that dying your hair isn't so fun — it could cause cancer or reproductive health problems.



If you're one of the up to 80% of women in the U.S. who color your hair, you might see these headlines and wonder: What's really in my hair dye, and is it safe to use? "There's still a lot that we have to learn, but the data that exists so far, I think, is enough for us to be worried about what we're being exposed to," says Samantha Schildroth, PhD, MPH, a postdoctoral associate in environmental epidemiology at Boston University.

The concern with hair dyes isn't what they do to your hair — it's what happens when they enter the skin around it. "The scalp has a very rich blood supply," says Melanye Maclin, MD, a research and development dermatologist. "Those chemicals absorb into the scalp and enter the main bloodstream." In fact, hair dye users have significantly different levels of at least 11 metabolites circulating in their blood compared to those who don't use it, according to research published in *Scientific Reports*.

What does that mean for your health? It's hard to say for sure because there are no clinical trials that prove that one product or another increases risk.

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