

■ Rising unemployment:
a massive - Page 5

■ Pakistan's youth bulge and
the jobs imperative - Page 6

■ Export push or policy
experiment? - Page 7

WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX AND PAKISTAN

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Index

CUTTING EDGE

4

Opinion
Global hunger index and Pakistan

10

Education
Balochistan's stolen school years

5

Economics
Rising unemployment: a massive

11

Nutrition
Pakistan's food system at a crossroads

6

Economics
Pakistan's youth bulge and the jobs imperative

12

War
Europe's Israel policy faces a democratic test

7

Economics
Export push or policy experiment?

8

Economics
A complex mix of progress and strain

9

Opinion
Rethinking Pakistan's role in a connected world

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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Global hunger index and Pakistan

Farhan Khan

According to the 2026 Global Hunger Hotspots report, released by Action Against Hunger, two out of every three people suffering from acute food insecurity worldwide live in just 10 countries, with over 196 million people facing crisis, emergency, or catastrophic hunger conditions. The report was compiled by integrating data from the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI 2025) and the Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC 2025), in order to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based view of the world's most significant hunger hotspots to monitor in 2026.

Alarming, SOFI reported that approximately 673 million people were suffering from chronic hunger, while the GRFC documented 295 million people experiencing acute food insecurity across 59 countries and territories — the highest figure recorded since the GRFC was first published in 2016. This document goes beyond statistical analysis by incorporating first-hand testimonies, insights drawn from Action Against Hunger's field programs in the countries reviewed, and practical recommendations aimed at improving hunger conditions and strengthening resilience in vulnerable regions.

The Global Hunger Hotspots report focuses on the ten countries with the highest number of people facing acute food insecurity, including Nigeria, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Syria. Other areas of major concern include Haiti, the Gaza Strip, and South Sudan, which have smaller populations but extremely high levels of hunger, affecting between 50% and 100% of their populations. These regions combine a high incidence of hunger with a real and growing risk of famine.

The report highlights several key themes that underline the worsening nature of food crises around the world. First, acute food insecurity is increasingly concentrated in a limited number of countries. Secondly, the number of people facing famine-like conditions is rising steadily. In areas such as Gaza, Haiti, and South Sudan, hunger has become a tragic reality that threatens entire populations. Armed conflict, extreme weather events, economic shocks, and structural inequalities are present in hunger-afflicted countries with varying degrees of intensity. These factors interact with one another, reinforce existing vulnerabilities,

and repeat similar patterns across different national contexts, creating prolonged and complex emergencies.

It has also been observed that the most severe hunger crises emerge in areas where political and social institutions are weak, compromised, or deeply strained. When infrastructure and essential services lack resilience, any shock — whether war, drought, or economic collapse — can quickly escalate into catastrophe. What is particularly concerning is that violence, bureaucratic restrictions, attacks on humanitarian workers, and political obstacles severely hamper access to aid. These impediments not only slow down timely humanitarian interventions but also aggravate the needs of populations already affected by food crises, thereby deepening the emergency and prolonging recovery.



One of the most alarming findings is that in the 13 countries surveyed, nearly 30 million children suffer from acute malnutrition. Of these, about 8.5 million are severely malnourished and at high risk of mortality if they do not receive timely treatment. Malnutrition is also widespread among mothers: at least 13 million pregnant or breastfeeding women are malnourished, with consequences likely to be passed on to their children, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of hunger and poor health. In many countries, however, affected populations demonstrate extraordinary resilience in combating hunger. Their determination during emergency situations and their ability to adapt through autonomy-building programs are key elements that help sustain hope for a more stable and secure future.

However, what continues to hamper the work of humanitarian organisations like

Action Against Hunger is the lack of adequate funding. In 2024, the “Hunger Funding Gap” report showed a 65% shortfall in funding for hunger- and food-related humanitarian programs in countries facing food crises. Since then, international funding cuts have worsened the situation. For example, the United States announced an 83 percent cut to its support for humanitarian programs worldwide. This was followed by significant reductions in assistance from Germany, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands. A study published in July 2025 showed that programs funded by USAID over the last 20 years are estimated to have saved more than 90 million lives, reducing overall mortality by 15% and child mortality by 32% in beneficiary countries. According to the authors of the study, maintaining these cuts until 2030 could result in 14 million preventable deaths, including 4.5 million children under the age of five.

In the 2025 Global Hunger Index, Pakistan ranks 106th out of 123 countries. With a score of 26.0, the country's level of hunger remains concerning. Despite some progress, the nutrition and food security situation continues to be serious. Pakistan is ranked among the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change and has already experienced unprecedented flooding in recent years. It also struggles with high multidimensional poverty, with nearly half of an average household's monthly expenditure going toward food, while approximately 82 percent of the population cannot afford a healthy diet.

A total of 18 percent of children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition, and around 40 percent are stunted, reflecting long-term nutritional deprivation. Record-high food and fuel prices, exacerbated by climate change impacts on agriculture and infrastructure, have placed immense pressure on Pakistan's most vulnerable communities. The World Food Programme works with the government and local partners to improve food security and nutrition among poorer households and vulnerable populations across the country. To complement life-saving humanitarian assistance in emergency contexts and gradually reduce dependence on external aid, the WFP is investing in long-term resilience-building initiatives, including stunting prevention, disaster risk reduction, strengthening food systems, and supporting sustainable livelihood activities.

Rising unemployment: a massive

Nasim Ahmed

During his recent visit to Pakistan, World Bank President Ajay Banga spoke candidly about the massive unemployment challenge facing the country. He emphasized that with one of the world's largest youth populations entering the labour market, Pakistan must create between 2.5 and 3 million jobs annually — or nearly 30 million over the next decade. Failing to do so, he warned, could push the economy toward collapse, fuel social unrest and instability, and drive increasing numbers of young Pakistanis to seek livelihoods abroad.

According to Banga, high unemployment is not merely an important development goal but a serious “generational challenge” that will test the government's ability to absorb, skill, and productively deploy a youth cohort entering the workforce at an unprecedented pace. This represents a structural test for policymakers, one that will shape economic outcomes, social cohesion, and the credibility of the country's governing institutions in the decades ahead. The World Bank president also noted that employment creation will remain a “binding constraint on growth” over the long term, as a lack of jobs will ultimately limit how quickly the economy can expand.

The stark reality is that current growth patterns reflect an economy struggling to move forward. Pakistan's unemployment crisis is worsening steadily, severely restricting growth potential and eroding economic optimism. There are unmistakable signs that what should be a demographic dividend risks turning into a long-term liability. With nearly 80 percent of the population below the age of 40 and almost two-thirds under 30, demographic pressure is translating into a steadily rising unemployment rate, which has reportedly reached a 21-year high of 7.1 percent.

The average annual GDP growth of just 1.7 percent between 2022 and 2025, combined with high inflation, has eroded real incomes and weakened labour demand across the economy. Key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and wholesale and retail trade — which traditionally absorb the bulk of the workforce and employ more than three-quarters of workers — have experienced decline. Manufacturing, construction,

and trade have all contracted, shrinking the economy's ability to generate jobs for millions of young people entering the labour market each year.

According to the latest Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate has risen to 7.1 percent in FY25. The Population and Housing Census 2023 places the broader unemployment figure at around 22 percent, reflecting the reality that many young people remain jobless for extended periods and increasingly seek opportunities abroad. With the labour force growing by roughly 3 percent annually, sustained GDP growth of at least 5 percent or higher is necessary to prevent further deterioration in labour market conditions. The widening gap between a growing labour supply and shrinking labour demand has become perhaps the most pressing policy challenge facing the country. It is therefore no surprise that recent years have witnessed a surge in outward



migration, with skilled professionals leaving in record numbers. This trend demonstrates that the employment problem is not limited to low-skilled workers but is increasingly affecting highly trained individuals as well.

Pakistan is thus experiencing a toxic combination of weak employment growth and declining real incomes. Persistent inflation in recent years has disrupted household budgets and pushed increasing numbers of people below the poverty line. Worse still, whatever limited growth has occurred has been unevenly distributed, benefiting only select segments of society. When growth is both slow and unequal, the inevitable result is rising unemployment, widening inequality, and spreading economic distress.

What, then, is the way forward? As the

World Bank president indicated, Pakistan must develop a new job-creation strategy based on sustained investment in human capital, modern physical infrastructure, and regulatory reforms that make it easier to start, operate, and expand businesses. At the same time, the government should facilitate broader access to financing and insurance, particularly for small and medium enterprises and the agricultural sector, both of which generate a large share of employment through labour-intensive activity. At present, however, these sectors remain largely deprived of the capital required to operate at their full potential, limiting productivity and growth.

Building human capital is perhaps the most urgent need of the hour. Any serious employment generation strategy must focus on equipping young people with skills aligned with market demands. To promote vocational and technical education, the country must

expand its network of polytechnic institutes and skills development centres in order to prepare a workforce capable of meeting the evolving needs of a modern economy. This approach would not only enable young people to access meaningful employment but also enhance productivity and competitiveness across labour-intensive sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.

Needless to say, well-funded vocational and technical education programmes could help close the critical skills gap and open new economic opportunities for millions of young people, while also

boosting productivity across Pakistan's industrial landscape. Equally important is the need to provide SMEs and agricultural enterprises with easier and more reliable access to financing and insurance so they can grow and hire more workers. Finally, the government must address the bureaucratic obstacles that continue to hinder business activity. Cumbersome legal requirements, complex labour and social security regulations, and a complicated taxation system — including multiple withholding rates at various stages of business transactions — discourage investment and entrepreneurship. Without meaningful improvements in the ease of doing business, Pakistan will struggle to maximize productivity or generate the large-scale employment opportunities required for its rising generations of youth.

Pakistan's youth bulge and the jobs imperative

Muhammad Hassan

During his recent visit to Pakistan, World Bank President Ajay Banga delivered a stark but necessary message: Pakistan must generate between 2.5 and 3 million jobs every year — roughly 30 million over the next decade — if it hopes to maintain economic stability and social cohesion.

His warning highlighted a reality that policymakers can no longer ignore. With one of the youngest populations in the world entering the labour market at an unprecedented pace, the country stands at a defining crossroads.

The challenge is not merely economic; it is generational. Pakistan's demographic profile, often described as a potential dividend, could just as easily become a long-term liability if the economy fails to absorb the rapidly growing workforce. The question confronting decision-makers is whether the country can transform youth energy into productive growth or allow unemployment and underemployment to fuel instability and migration pressures.

Pakistan's population structure amplifies the urgency of the situation. Nearly 80 per cent of citizens are under the age of 40, while close to two-thirds are younger than 30. This youth-heavy demographic should, in theory, create a foundation for innovation, productivity, and growth. Yet the labour market tells a more worrying story.

According to recent labour statistics, unemployment has climbed to a 21-year high, reaching 7.1 percent. While the figure alone is concerning, it likely understates the broader problem of underemployment and informal work, where many young people struggle to secure stable, well-paid jobs. The mismatch between a rapidly expanding workforce and limited employment opportunities has placed immense pressure on both economic planners and social systems.

In this context, the assessment that Pakistan faces a "generational challenge" resonates strongly. The country is no longer debating incremental development goals — it is confronting a structural test that will shape its long-term trajectory.

The solution outlined by the World Bank chief rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars. The first is sustained investment in human capital and physical infrastructure. Without better education, healthcare, and transport networks, economic expansion remains constrained and uneven.

The second pillar involves regulatory reform. Businesses in Pakistan often face com-

plex procedures and legal hurdles that increase costs and discourage expansion. Simplifying the process of starting and operating a business would not only stimulate entrepreneurship but also attract investment capable of generating jobs at scale.

The third pillar focuses on improving access to finance and insurance, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and agriculture. These sectors account for a significant share of employment but frequently operate outside formal financial systems, limiting their ability to grow and hire more workers.

Together, these pillars suggest that job creation cannot be achieved through isolated policies. Instead, it requires coordinated structural reforms that address both supply and demand in the labour market.

Among the proposed remedies, investment in human capital stands out as perhaps the most critical. Pakistan's education and training systems often fail to align with evolving market demands, leaving young people with qualifications that do not translate into employment opportunities.

Vocational and technical education has historically received insufficient attention, despite its direct link to workforce readiness. Expanding and modernizing polytechnic institutes and skills centres could bridge this gap by equipping youth with practical skills needed in industries such as manufacturing, construction, and agriculture.

These institutions can serve as hubs for workforce development, connecting training with real labour market needs. Properly funded and strategically designed programmes would not only improve employability but also enhance productivity across key sectors of the economy. In a competitive global environment, skills development is no longer optional — it is essential.

SMEs and the agricultural sector remain central to employment generation in Pakistan, yet both struggle with limited access to formal credit and insurance. A major reason for this gap is the large informal economy, where businesses avoid formal registration due to regulatory complexity and tax burdens.

Cumbersome legal requirements, ranging from labour regulations to social security compliance, often discourage entrepreneurs from formalizing their operations. Additionally, taxation policies such as minimum turnover taxes and multiple withholding mechanisms create uncertainty and reduce profitability for businesses attempting to operate within formal

frameworks.

Without addressing these structural barriers, efforts to expand financing will have limited impact. Businesses hesitant to formalize cannot easily access the credit needed for expansion, and those already formalized may find growth constrained by compliance costs. Reforming this environment is crucial if Pakistan hopes to unlock the employment potential of SMEs and agriculture.

A key takeaway from Banga's remarks is the inadequacy of short-term fixes. Temporary subsidies or isolated schemes may provide relief but do not address underlying weaknesses in productivity, education, and governance. Sustainable job growth requires a long-term strategy that encourages investment, innovation, and enterprise development.

Policymakers must also recognize that economic growth alone does not automatically translate into employment. Job-rich growth demands targeted interventions that connect young workers with emerging opportunities, particularly in sectors capable of absorbing large numbers of entrants.

Failing to address the employment challenge carries serious consequences. A large youth population without opportunities can increase social unrest, strain public resources, and accelerate outward migration as young Pakistanis seek livelihoods abroad. This would mean losing valuable human capital at a time when the country needs it most.

Moreover, underemployment can erode trust in institutions and weaken social cohesion, making economic reforms more difficult to implement. The stakes, therefore, extend beyond economics to the stability and credibility of governance itself.

Pakistan stands at a pivotal moment. Its youthful population offers immense potential, but only if the economy can generate sufficient opportunities to absorb millions entering the labour force each year. The message delivered by Ajay Banga is clear: the country must act decisively to transform demographic pressure into economic strength.

Investing in skills, easing business regulations, and expanding access to finance are not optional policy choices — they are essential components of a sustainable future. If implemented effectively, these measures could turn Pakistan's youth bulge into a driving force for productivity and growth. If neglected, however, the same demographic trend could become a prolonged economic burden. The next decade will determine which path the country chooses.

Export push or policy experiment?

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's policymakers appear to be experimenting with a new strategy to revive exports at a time when the country faces significant economic pressures. For decades, export promotion — particularly for the textile sector — relied on generous subsidies, cheap energy, and concessional financing. Those incentives helped large exporters maintain competitiveness despite structural inefficiencies in the domestic economy.

However, the economic situation has changed dramatically over the past few years. Subsidies have largely been withdrawn, taxation has increased, energy prices have surged, and interest rates have climbed steeply. As a result, exporters have struggled to maintain momentum, and export growth has remained largely stagnant. In response, authorities are now trying a different approach: finding ways to lower costs without directly violating fiscal constraints or international commitments.

The latest measures suggest a more creative, albeit controversial, attempt to support export-led growth without explicit subsidies. Whether this strategy marks a turning point or simply a temporary workaround remains an open question. Historically, Pakistan's export sector — especially large textile manufacturers — benefited from substantial government support. Exporters enjoyed discounted energy tariffs, concessional financing for both short-term and long-term investment, and relatively light taxation. These policies were designed to boost competitiveness and expand foreign exchange earnings.

Over time, however, these supports became increasingly difficult to sustain. Economic reforms, combined with agreements with the International Monetary Fund, pushed the government toward reducing fiscal distortions and improving transparency. Subsidies were gradually phased out, and exporters were brought into the standard tax net.

Unfortunately, these changes coincided with global and domestic shocks. International energy prices surged, while Pakistan's own power sector inefficiencies drove costs even higher. At the same time, higher tax rates — including the super tax — increased business expenses, and rising interest rates made borrowing more costly. Compounding these challenges was weaker global demand for textiles, particularly in key importing markets.

The combined effect has been clear: exports have struggled to grow despite repeated declarations that export-led expansion remains a central policy goal.

Although the government has repeatedly emphasized export-led growth as a cornerstone of economic recovery, practical support measures were limited until recently. Large exporters continued lobbying for the return of earlier incentives, but policymakers faced tight fiscal space and strict conditions tied to stabilization programs.

Previously, subsidised export financing was provided by the State Bank of Pakistan, effectively involving money creation and risk transfer to the central bank's balance sheet. Amendments to the SBP Act curtailed this approach, restricting direct quasi-fiscal interventions.

In response, the government introduced a modest 3 percent relief on working capital financing for exporters through a fiscal subsidy. Yet exporters argued that the support remained insufficient to offset rising operational costs. This pressure set the stage for a new and unconventional solution.

The latest move by the State Bank of Pakistan reflects what many observers describe as innovative financial engineering. The central bank reduced the cash reserve requirement (CRR) by 100 basis points, a step that releases additional liquidity into the banking system. Since the elevated CRR had originally been introduced to absorb excess liquidity, its reduction now appears consistent with current monetary conditions.

This decision is estimated to free approximately Rs300 billion, potentially generating an additional Rs30–35 billion in profits for commercial banks. Shortly afterward, the government announced a deeper concession under the Export Finance Scheme (EFS), reducing financing rates from policy rate minus 3 percent to minus 6 percent — effectively lowering borrowing costs for exporters.

Crucially, the additional cost is to be absorbed by banks rather than the fiscal budget. Interestingly, the estimated cost to banks — around Rs30 billion on existing financing — closely matches the gains they stand to receive from the CRR reduction. This has fueled speculation about a tacit alignment among policymakers, banks, and exporters to design support without explicit subsidies.

Alongside financing reforms, the government announced plans to end cross-subsidies embedded in industrial electricity tariffs and wheeling charges. Officials estimate this could reduce energy costs by around Rs4 per unit for industrial consumers. While the move is presented as fiscally neutral, the government has yet to clearly explain how the revenue gap will be managed.

For exporters dealing with high energy costs, this step could provide meaningful relief. Yet uncertainty remains about imple-

mentation and whether such measures can be sustained without placing pressure on public finances.

Despite being described as fiscally neutral, the new financing arrangement has sparked debate over the independence of the State Bank of Pakistan. Critics argue that such targeted interventions can distort credit allocation and influence lending behaviour in ways that compromise market efficiency.

Past experiences have also raised concerns. Several concessional schemes aimed at promoting exports were reportedly misused, forcing authorities to roll them back. A recent export facilitation program overseen by the Federal Board of Revenue faced similar challenges, highlighting the risks of weak monitoring and enforcement.

The central question now is whether regulators can ensure that concessional financing reaches genuine exporters rather than being diverted for other purposes. Without robust safeguards, the initiative could undermine both credibility and outcomes.

Another key critique centers on the nature of the support itself. The current scheme primarily lowers the cost of working capital, which may improve exporters' profit margins rather than driving long-term growth. Some economists argue that concessional long-term financing would have been more effective, encouraging investment in technology, productivity improvements, and capacity expansion.

Still, supporters contend that immediate liquidity relief is necessary to keep exporters competitive amid global headwinds. With margins under pressure due to weak international demand and rising domestic costs, short-term financing relief could prevent further decline.

Pakistan's latest export support measures represent a blend of creativity and compromise. Facing fiscal limitations and external oversight, policymakers have attempted to provide relief through monetary and regulatory adjustments rather than direct subsidies. The strategy may help exporters in the short term, but it also raises valid concerns about central bank autonomy, market distortion, and implementation risks.

Ultimately, the success of this approach will depend on whether it leads to genuine export expansion rather than merely boosting profits for existing players. Pakistan's export sector needs not only cheaper financing but also structural improvements, long-term investment, and greater competitiveness in global markets. The coming months will reveal whether this "out-of-the-box" thinking becomes a sustainable policy model or another temporary experiment in a long history of export incentives.

A complex mix of progress and strain

Shahid Hussain

The latest consolidated fiscal operations data released by the Finance Division for July to December 2025-26 paints a mixed picture of Pakistan's economic management. On the surface, tax revenues and primary balances show some improvement, suggesting tighter fiscal discipline. Yet beneath these figures lies a more complicated reality marked by rising current expenditure, increasing debt servicing costs, and widening concerns about sustainability.

The first half of the fiscal year reveals both progress and pressure points. While revenue authorities have strengthened collection efforts, the government's spending — particularly on debt servicing and defense — has grown rapidly. Development spending also tells a contrasting story, with authorized funds not fully translating into actual disbursements. Together, these trends highlight the delicate balance policymakers face between stabilizing the economy and sustaining growth amid inflationary pressures and structural weaknesses.

One of the most striking developments in the data is the sharp increase in current expenditure between the first and second quarters of the fiscal year. Government spending rose from roughly Rs4 trillion during July–September to Rs5.5 trillion by the end of December. This significant jump reflects mounting financial obligations, particularly those linked to borrowing costs.

The primary driver behind this surge has been the rise in mark-up payments on debt. Interest payments climbed from Rs1.38 trillion in the first three months to Rs3.56 trillion over the six-month period. This increase came despite a decline in domestic bank borrowing, which shifted from negative Rs2.192 trillion to negative Rs325.4 billion. Non-bank borrowing, which initially showed modest gains, also turned negative by mid-year.

These figures suggest that debt servicing remains a heavy burden even as borrowing patterns change. The growing cost of servicing existing obligations limits fiscal flexibility and reduces the space available for social programs and development investment.

The decline in non-bank borrowing, particularly through savings centres, may indicate broader stress within the economy. Analysts interpret this trend as a reflection of reduced household savings, driven by the high cost of living and stagnating wages in the private sector over recent years. Inflationary pressures have eroded purchasing power, leaving many families with less disposable income to invest in government savings schemes. At the same time, businesses struggling with rising operating costs have found it difficult to increase wages,

further squeezing consumers. The result is a weakening savings base that could limit the government's ability to rely on domestic non-bank financing in the future.

Defense expenditures also increased notably during the first half of the fiscal year. Spending rose from approximately Rs447 billion in the first quarter to nearly Rs1 trillion by December. The rise is largely attributed to growing operational costs linked to an uptick in security challenges and terrorist incidents across the country.

While higher defense spending may be understandable in light of evolving security conditions, it adds further pressure to already stretched fiscal resources. Balancing national security needs with economic stability remains a persistent challenge for policymakers.

Excluding borrowing costs, the government's primary balance showed improvement, rising from Rs3.497 trillion to Rs4.106 trillion during the first six months. This indicates stronger fiscal management in areas other than debt servicing.

However, the overall budget balance tells a less encouraging story. The surplus narrowed significantly from Rs2.119 trillion in July–September to just Rs541.882 billion by December. In percentage terms, the deficit ratio improved from 1.6 percent to 0.4 percent, based on a budgeted GDP of Rs129,567 billion, but this change may partly reflect assumptions rather than structural improvements.

GDP estimates themselves are under scrutiny, as the International Monetary Fund has highlighted gaps in source data affecting sectors accounting for nearly one-third of the economy. This review raises questions about how accurately fiscal performance is being measured.

Development expenditure and net lending rose sharply from Rs295 billion in the first quarter to nearly Rs964 billion by mid-year. Yet closer analysis suggests this rise reflects accounting changes and net lending rather than actual project spending. According to figures from the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, although Rs356 billion were authorized for development during July–December, only around Rs210 billion were actually spent. This roughly 40 percent shortfall indicates delays in project execution and underscores ongoing inefficiencies in public sector development planning.

Low development spending can hinder long-term growth by slowing infrastructure projects and limiting employment generation, especially at a time when economic momentum is already fragile.

On the revenue side, the Federal Board of Revenue recorded a notable rise in tax collections, increasing from Rs2.9 trillion in the first quarter to Rs6.1 trillion by December. This

growth reflects aggressive fiscal tightening and stronger enforcement measures.

However, higher taxation can also have a contractionary effect on economic activity if businesses and consumers face reduced spending capacity. Critics argue that while increasing revenue is important, controlling expenditure — especially non-productive current expenditure — should be prioritized in the short term.

A major contributor to non-tax revenue growth was the petroleum levy, which rose from Rs371.6 billion to over Rs822 billion. While this helped strengthen government income, it may also explain declining public savings, as higher fuel costs increase living expenses.

Provincial governments also improved their tax collections, which rose from Rs268.9 billion to Rs568.5 billion during the first half of the fiscal year. Much of this increase came from sales tax on services rather than reforms in agricultural or real estate taxation — areas that had been identified as potential revenue sources under international reform discussions.

At the same time, federal transfers to provinces doubled, reaching Rs3.6 trillion by December. This influx contributed to higher provincial spending but also highlights continued reliance on federal resources rather than self-sustained provincial revenue generation.

Another issue emerging from the fiscal data is the growing statistical discrepancy, which widened from negative 261 billion rupees to negative Rs413 billion. While provincial discrepancies narrowed slightly, broader inconsistencies remain a concern.

The International Monetary Fund has also pointed to substantial discrepancies in trade statistics, including billions of dollars in import data requiring review. Reducing these inconsistencies is essential for improving policy credibility and ensuring accurate economic planning.

Pakistan's fiscal performance during the first half of 2025-26 reflects a complex mix of progress and strain. Revenue collection has improved and primary balances show signs of discipline, yet soaring debt servicing costs, rising current expenditure, and underutilized development funds reveal structural weaknesses that cannot be ignored.

The data suggests that simply raising taxes will not be enough to secure long-term fiscal stability. A stronger emphasis on reducing non-essential spending, improving development execution, and expanding productive economic activity may be necessary to create a more balanced path forward. As GDP figures undergo review and economic uncertainties persist, the coming quarters will be crucial in determining whether fiscal reforms translate into sustainable growth or deeper structural pressures.

Rethinking Pakistan's role in a connected world

Raza Khan

A key aspect of social discourse in Pakistan generally focuses on Western, particularly American, policy dictates to Islamabad, which are often perceived as the key determinants of the country's political, economic, and even socio-cultural dynamics. Much of this social discourse, however, tends to be uninformed and lacks substantial analytical grounding. The fact of the matter is that we are living in an advanced stage of a globalized world and therefore cannot escape the influence and impact of international dynamics.

In the age of globalization, local issues have increasingly become international issues, and this is accurate in a broader context. Globalization is impacting each and every one of us in multiple ways. Pakistan, like other nations, cannot avoid the effects of globalization, and these impacts are both positive and negative. Among the positive outcomes,

Pakistan has become part of the global economic mainstream. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani young men and women are earning livelihoods through participation in the global economy, including freelancing, information technology services, and overseas employment. These young people contribute significantly

to Pakistan at times when the country's economy has faced severe challenges, and when foreign direct and portfolio investment has declined sharply. Moreover, another positive impact of globalization is that many favorable aspects of Pakistani society, which otherwise remained concealed from the rest of the world, such as the country's splendid scenic landscapes and tourism potential, have become internationally recognized.

On the other hand, globalization has also brought negative repercussions for Pakistan. For instance, the persistent portrayal

of Pakistan as associated with terrorism and radicalism has shaped international perceptions of the state and society. As a result, many Pakistanis, despite possessing skills, education, and integrity, often face suspicion abroad. The international media coverage of violent incidents, such as the massive terrorist attack in an Islamabad mosque that killed more than 30 people, further reinforces this image and demonstrates how quickly local tragedies become global narratives in the interconnected media environment.

Globalization in the realm of state-to-state relations has manifested itself in the form of complex interdependence, a concept that needs to be explained in detail. Since time immemorial, human societies have interacted continuously. In every historical epoch, the nature, direction, and frequency of this interaction have differed, largely depending on the political organization of the international system. With the establishment of the modern

post-Cold War era, inter-state relations began to assume a new shape, described by some scholars as "Complex Interdependence." The concept was coined by scholars Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye as a neoliberal critique of the realist explanation of world politics. In Pakistan, both common citizens and policy-makers must understand this evolving reality, and this is the key aim of this discussion.

Without a deeper comprehension of contemporary international relations, Pakistan cannot fully benefit from global opportunities. Traditionally, people and even policymakers in Pakistan have had limited understanding of global dynamics, resulting in a constrained worldview.

Coming to the concept of Complex Interdependence, it represents the idea that states and their fortunes are inextricably tied together. In the age of globalization, this interconnectedness is unavoidable, and no country can isolate itself from it. The theorists who

introduced this concept observed that various and complex transnational connections and interdependencies between states and societies were growing, while the use of military force and traditional power balancing was declining in relative importance, though still relevant. Ironically, due to ongoing conflicts such as the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war, many in Pakistan perceive

the entire world as being engulfed in conflict. Yet, despite decades of involvement in the war on terror and significant losses, Pakistan itself has largely experienced relative peace at the state-to-state level, having avoided full-scale war with India or Afghanistan in recent years.

Keohane and Nye also differentiated between interdependence and dependence in analyzing power relations among international actors. They argued that the decline of military force as the primary policy tool, combined with the rise of economic and other forms of interdependence, increases the



nation-state system, international interaction and the resulting interdependence became more structured, legally defined, and institutionally organized.

As the nation-state system evolved and became more rigid, international interdependence increasingly assumed a somewhat unidirectional character. State-to-state interaction between the establishment of the modern system and the beginning of World War II remained largely restricted to limited economic exchanges and military conflicts. Post-World War II, and especially in the

probability of cooperation among states. Their research, which emerged in the 1970s, posed a significant challenge to political realism and later became foundational to theories categorized as liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal institutionalism. These theorists contended that post-World War II countries have become increasingly intertwined, to the extent that they cannot function effectively without interdependence. The monumental growth of transnational corporations has blurred state boundaries and challenged traditional realist assumptions regarding the absolute centrality of the state. In other words, while realists argue that the state is the sole dominant actor in international relations, the concept of complex interdependence emphasizes the influential role of non-state actors, including multinational corporations, international institutions, and global civil society networks.

Complex Interdependence can be understood most clearly when contrasted with the realist worldview. Realists contend that the state is the dominant actor in world politics and that violence and military force are the fundamental means through which states pur-

sue their interests. In contrast, Complex Interdependence emphasizes cooperation rather than conflict, reflecting the evolving realities of global interaction since the end of World War II. While violence and conflict have not disappeared entirely, non-security issues such as international monetary relations, climate change, trade, and global environmental concerns have gained significant importance. The theorists argue that the day-to-day affairs of states increasingly involve promoting cooperative economic interaction rather than focusing solely on military and security matters.

Keohane and Nye further argued that realist assumptions provide only an incomplete basis for analyzing modern politics of interdependence. Realism may represent an ideal type or an extreme set of conditions, but Complex Interdependence offers an alternative ideal type that reflects contemporary realities more accurately. The term “complex” indicates the multiple channels of interaction among actors, while “interdependence” refers to situations in which states or peoples are affected by the decisions of others. Interdependence may be symmetric, where actors are affected equally,

or asymmetric, where the impact varies between parties. It can take strategic, economic, political, or social forms. At first glance, Complex Interdependence appears rational and realistic, particularly when contrasted with the limitations and inconsistencies inherent in traditional realism. Realists like Hans J. Morgenthau argued that international politics is fundamentally a struggle for power dominated by organized violence, yet contemporary global realities demonstrate that cooperation and mutual dependence increasingly shape international behavior.

Thus, Pakistani foreign policymakers must recognize the significance of Complex Interdependence within the international system and design strategies that enable the country to maximize benefits for its citizens through meaningful and productive engagement with other states, international institutions, and global economic networks. Understanding this interconnected world is not merely an academic exercise; it is an essential prerequisite for shaping informed policies and ensuring Pakistan’s effective participation in an increasingly interdependent global order.

Balochistan’s stolen school years

Rasheed Ali

For hundreds and thousands of children across Balochistan province, the classroom should be a place of possibility — a sanctuary where knowledge promises a brighter tomorrow. But for over a decade, that promise has been battered by the relentless drum of India-backed insurgency and Taliban militant violence.

In the province, the echoes of gunfire have long overshadowed the school bell, and the lessons learned in textbooks increasingly feel like distant dreams. At least 3,694 schools in the province remain non-functional, with hundreds more closed just in the latest security episodes, leaving tens of thousands of teaching posts vacant and a generation of students without consistent access to education.

The crisis is stark: UNICEF estimates that nearly 75 per cent of children in Balochistan are out of school, a figure far below the national average, and girls in particular are disproportionately affected. In some districts, the landscape of learning has been fundamentally altered — classrooms lie empty, teachers have fled out of fear, and parents, terrified for their

children’s safety, have stopped sending them to school. In places once filled with the laughter of students, desolation now lingers.

“Education should be a right, not a risk,” says Dr Faiza Khan, an educationist based in Quetta, voicing concern shared by many in the province. “But in Balochistan, going to school has too often meant facing threats from violence that doesn’t spare children or teachers. This disruption has stolen years of learning from our youth, especially girls, who already face cultural hurdles to education.”

The shadow of India-sponsored militancy has taken many forms. On May 21, 2025, a suicide bombing targeting a school bus in Khuzdar killed at least 10 civilians, including eight children, and injured dozens more, injuring 39 children alone in that single blast — a grim reminder that militants will stop at nothing. These attacks reinforce a climate of fear that goes far beyond schools as physical targets. Violence has rippled into every corner of public life: coordinated insurgent assaults in early 2026 killed dozens of civilians and security personnel, underscoring how normal life — including education — has been disrupted by conflict.

Security fears have deeply scarred the education system. In some areas, schools have been physically repurposed or forcibly occupied, becoming training grounds or outposts for armed groups and, at times, even used as military or paramilitary bases. Reports indicate that many educational institutions sit unused or inaccessible because of occupation by armed actors or displacement of local communities fleeing violence. In districts such as Awaran and Mashkay, colleges and schools have not operated for years, depriving an entire cohort of students of any formal education.

The human cost of this crisis is heavy and layered. Teachers, once the backbone of learning, have become targets themselves. Kidnappings, threats, and even killings have prompted many educators to abandon their posts, seeking safety in urban centres or other provinces. With such chronic shortages of qualified teachers, classrooms that are technically open often lack the capacity to deliver quality education.

Government figures, while sometimes contested by local activists, acknowledge the scale of disruption. “The security situation has

undeniably impacted school attendance and functioning,” admits Ahsan Ahmed, a senior official in the Balochistan Education Department. “We have to address both safety and educational infrastructure simultaneously if we are to restore learning in Balochistan.”

Yet, the toll is not measured only in closed classrooms. Enrolment rates in the province are among the lowest in Pakistan, with literacy levels that lag behind other regions. Girls face compounded challenges, not only from insecurity but from entrenched societal norms that limit their mobility and access to education. The result is a widening gender gap and a bleak future for young women who see fewer opportunities for advancement.

“We are fighting two wars — one against militancy, the other against ignorance,” says Dr Meher Gul, a Quetta-based academic. “But the first has set back the second in the most devastating way. When education falters, communities lose hope.”

This pervasive sense of loss is not unfounded. With enormous gaps in schooling, many children are effectively forced into early labour or pushed into informal means of survival. The absence of educational continuity breeds frustration and alienation, conditions that militant groups are all too ready to exploit. The cycle of violence undermines any attempt to cultivate stability and prosperity through education, leaving communities trapped in a vicious circle.

Official responses have been fragmented. The provincial government occasionally announces new schools or educational initiatives, but these efforts are frequently eclipsed by larger security concerns. Meanwhile, national and international agencies urge sustained attention to the needs of out-of-school children and the restoration of safe learning environments. Yet, without substantive progress on the security front, promises of educational reform often ring hollow.

Community dynamics further compli-



cate recovery efforts. In remote villages, tribal and local leadership holds sway, and parents often make decisions about their children’s schooling based on perceived threats. The fear of sending a child to school — particularly over long distances where the threat of ambush or bombing feels more imminent — remains a powerful deterrent. In these regions, many children spend their days idling at home, their potential unrealised, while parents wrestle with impossible choices.

The human dimension of this crisis becomes even more poignant when viewed through the eyes of the students themselves. “I used to dream of becoming a teacher,” confides Zahra, a 14-year-old who lost three years of schooling due to closures in her village. “Now I worry only about staying safe.” Her words echo the sentiments of countless young Baloch children whose dreams have been obscured by the grim realities of conflict.

Despite these challenges, some organisations are battling to keep education alive through community programmes and informal learning centres. Local activists and NGOs

work tirelessly to offer basic literacy and vocational training, attempting to fill the gaps left by a faltering system. But these efforts, often underfunded and under threat themselves, struggle to reach the scale required to meet the needs of the province’s youth.

The situation in Balochistan raises fundamental questions about the future not just of education but of society itself. An entire generation stands at risk of being left behind, unable to access the tools and knowledge that could offer a path out of hardship. Unless the root causes of insurgency are addressed alongside robust security and educational reforms, the gulf between aspiration and reality will only widen.

As the province looks to the years ahead, the intertwined threads of peace, safety, and education must be woven into a comprehensive strategy — one that sees every child in a classroom and every teacher safe in their role. Until then, the schools of Balochistan remain silent battlegrounds in a conflict that punishes the innocent and imperils the future of an entire generation.

Pakistan’s food system at a crossroads

Dr. Fatima Khan

A recent assessment by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has highlighted a troubling reality at the heart of Pakistan’s food landscape: the country produces enough calories to feed its

population, yet fails to ensure diets that are diverse, nutritious, and healthy. The analysis, presented at a food systems workshop in February, points to deep structural imbalances that are undermining public health and weakening long-term human development outcomes.

The findings reveal a paradox that has long gone under-recognised. Pakistan’s food system succeeds in generating energy-rich foods but struggles to provide adequate nutrition. As a result, millions face malnutrition, stunting, and diet-related diseases, while the health system confronts rising burdens from

both undernutrition and obesity. The issue is no longer simply about food availability — it is about the quality, diversity, and accessibility of what people consume.

The FAO assessment describes a clear asymmetry in Pakistan's food production and consumption patterns. Cereals, sugar, and edible oils dominate the national diet, exceeding levels recommended for healthy eating. In contrast, nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, pulses, and legumes remain in short supply and are consumed far below dietary recommendations.

This imbalance has entrenched a cereal-heavy diet across the country, especially in rural communities where affordability and availability strongly shape food choices. While milk and dairy products are widely consumed and serve as an important source of nutrition, intake of fruits and vegetables remains limited. Protein sources beyond dairy — including meat, poultry, and eggs — are often consumed only occasionally, leaving many households with insufficient intake of essential nutrients.

Pulses do play a role in supplementing protein needs, yet domestic production has not kept pace with demand, forcing reliance on imports and limiting accessibility for lower-income families.

Perhaps the most alarming trend highlighted in the analysis is the rapid rise in consumption of sweets, snacks, and highly processed foods. As these products become more affordable and widely available, especially in rural areas, diets are shifting toward energy-dense but nutrient-poor choices.

The growth in processed food sales reflects changing consumption habits driven by urbanisation, lifestyle shifts, and price considerations. When nutrient-rich foods are expensive or difficult to access, households naturally gravitate toward cheaper options that offer immediate satiety but limited health benefits. Over time, this dietary transformation contributes to a cycle of poor nutrition and chronic illness.

The increased intake of free sugars and unhealthy fats is particularly concerning because it coexists with longstanding deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals. This dual reality has created what experts call the “double burden” of malnutrition.

Pakistan now faces two overlapping nutrition crises. On one hand, chronic undernutrition remains widespread, especially among women and children. On the other, obesity and non-communicable diseases are rising rapidly, placing unprecedented stress on healthcare services.

Recent data indicate that around 41 percent of women in Pakistan suffer from anaemia, contributing to poor maternal health and a maternal mortality rate of approximately 186 deaths per 100,000 live births. Child malnutrition is similarly severe, with stunting affecting



roughly 40 percent of children under five, reflecting long-term nutritional deprivation.

At the same time, obesity rates among adults have surged, increasing risks of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes. The country ranks among those with the highest diabetes prevalence globally, underscoring how dietary patterns are reshaping public health. This convergence of undernutrition and overnutrition not only harms individuals but also strains national health budgets, forcing increased spending on treatment rather than prevention.

The assessment highlights that rural communities may be particularly vulnerable to unhealthy dietary shifts. Limited access to diverse foods, lower incomes, and inadequate market infrastructure push families toward inexpensive, calorie-heavy staples. As a result, rural diets often contain fewer fruits, vegetables, and high-quality proteins compared to urban areas.

This trend has implications beyond health. Poor nutrition reduces productivity, impairs cognitive development, and limits educational outcomes — all factors that weaken economic growth and human capital development over time.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and coordinated policy action. The FAO recommends realigning agricultural incentives and subsidies to encourage the production and affordability of nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, and pulses rather than focusing predominantly on staple crops.

Equally important is reducing excessive sugar consumption through fiscal and regulatory measures. Higher taxes on sugary drinks, confectionery, and ultra-processed foods could discourage unhealthy consumption patterns while generating revenue for nutrition and

health programmes. Policymakers could also incentivise producers to reduce sugar content and improve nutritional profiles of processed foods.

Such measures would not only influence consumer choices but also send market signals encouraging healthier food production practices.

Policy reforms alone will not be enough. Public awareness campaigns are crucial to shifting dietary habits and promoting informed food choices. Nutrition education in schools, community outreach programmes, and clearer food labelling can help households understand the long-term consequences of dietary patterns.

Strengthening local food markets and supply chains — particularly for perishable produce — can also improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables, reducing dependence on processed alternatives.

Pakistan's food system stands at a critical juncture. While the country has made progress in ensuring calorie availability, the deeper challenge now lies in delivering nutrition that supports healthy lives and sustainable development. The findings presented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations serve as a wake-up call: producing more food is not enough if diets remain unbalanced and nutrient-deficient.

Transforming the food system will require bold policy choices, smarter incentives, and a renewed focus on human health rather than calorie counts alone. If these reforms are implemented effectively, Pakistan can shift from a cycle of nutritional insecurity toward a future where food supports both public wellbeing and long-term economic resilience. If not, the country risks allowing preventable health crises to undermine its development potential for generations to come.

Europe's Israel policy faces a democratic test

Majed al-Zeer

More than 457,000 European citizens have signed a petition calling for the full suspension of the European Union's partnership agreement with Israel within the initiative's first month.

Launched on January 13 as a formally registered European citizens' initiative, the petition must reach 1 million signatures from at least seven EU member states by January 13 next year to trigger formal consideration by the European Commission. It is not a symbolic appeal. It is a mechanism embedded within the EU's democratic framework, designed to translate public will into institutional review.

The speed and geographic spread of this mobilisation matter. The demand to suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement is no longer confined to street demonstrations or activist circles. It has entered the EU's formal democratic architecture. The petition calls for suspension on the grounds that Israel is in breach of Article 2 of the association agreement, which conditions the partnership on respect for human rights and international law. As the initiative states, "EU citizens cannot tolerate that the EU maintains an agreement that contributes to legitimize and finance a State that commits crimes against humanity and war crimes." The text further cites large-scale civilian killings, displacement, destruction of hospitals and medical infrastructure in Gaza, the blockade of humanitarian aid and the failure to comply with orders of the International Court of Justice.

The initiative has gathered 457,950 signatures, more than 45 percent of the required total in just one month. Signatories come from all 27 EU member states without exception. This is not a regional surge. It is continental. The distribution of signatures reveals more than raw numbers. France alone accounts for 203,182 signatories, nearly 45 percent of the total. That figure reflects the country's longstanding tradition of solidarity mobilisation, sustained mass demonstrations throughout the genocidal war on Gaza and the clear positioning of major political actors, such as La France Insoumise. France has emerged as the principal engine of this institutional push.

Spain follows with 60,087 signatures while Italy stands at 54,821, a particularly striking figure given the presence of a right-wing government that openly supports Israel.

Belgium has registered 20,330 signatures from a population of roughly 12 million, reflecting high relative engagement. In the Nordic region, Finland with 12,649 signatures, Sweden with 15,267 and Denmark with 8,295 show sustained participation. Ireland has reached 11,281 signatures from a population of just over five million.

Several of these countries have already exceeded their required national thresholds under EU rules. France, Spain, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Italy and Sweden have all surpassed the minimum number needed for their signatures to count towards the seven-member-state requirement. This is a critical development. It means the initiative is not merely accumulating volume but is also already satisfying the geographic legitimacy criteria built into the European

does not signal absence of dissent. Rather, it illustrates the structural constraints within which dissent operates. That more than 11,000 citizens have nevertheless formally registered their support indicates that institutional engagement is occurring even under conditions of political pressure.

Taken together, these patterns reveal something deeper than a petition's momentum. Over more than two years of genocidal war, ethnic cleansing and the systematic destruction of civilian life in Gaza, solidarity across Europe has not dissipated. It has moved from protest slogans and street mobilisation into a formal democratic instrument that demands institutional response.

Petitions do not automatically change policy. The European Commission is not legally bound to suspend the association agreement even if the initiative ultimately reaches 1 million signatures. But the political implications are significant. A successful initiative would formally compel the commission to respond to a demand grounded in the EU's own human rights clause. It would demonstrate that the call for suspension is rooted in broad and measurable public support across multiple member states.

The European Union has long presented itself as a

normative power committed to international law and human rights. Article 2 of its partnership agreements is foundational. If hundreds of thousands, and potentially more than a million, European citizens insist that this principle be applied consistently, EU institutions will face a credibility test.

This petition is not merely a count of signatures. It is an index of political will. It shows that across France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Ireland, the Nordic states and beyond, citizens are invoking the EU's own democratic mechanisms to demand accountability.

Whether the initiative ultimately reaches 1 million, one reality is already established. The demand to suspend the EU-Israel partnership has entered Europe's institutional bloodstream. It can no longer be dismissed as marginal rhetoric. It is embedded within the union's formal democratic process, and that marks a significant development in Europe's response to the genocide in Gaza.



citizens' initiative mechanism.

The Netherlands, with 20,304 signatures, is approaching its national threshold. Poland, at 22,308 signatures, reflects engagement that extends beyond Western Europe. Even in smaller states such as Slovenia with 1,703 signatures, Luxembourg with 900 and Portugal with 4,945, participation is visible and measurable. Germany presents a revealing contrast. Despite being the EU's most populous member state and the site of some of the largest demonstrations against Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, the petition has gathered 11,461 German signatures, only 17 percent of Germany's national threshold of 69,120. This gap between visible street mobilisation and formal institutional participation highlights the particular political and legal environment in Germany, where pro-Palestinian expression has faced restrictions and where successive governments have maintained near-unconditional support for Israel as a matter of state policy. The relatively low percentage

The price of safety

While going to my teaching hospital in Rawalpindi recently, I came across signage on the Murree Road informing citizens of various fines for traffic rule violations. My friend and I were not wearing helmets as the hospital was just a couple of kilometres away. We were stopped by traffic wardens and handed a fine of Rs2,000. Fair enough. Whatever the situation was, it was clear that we had violated a traffic rule meant for our safety, and we were punished. However, many people react differently.

When we were being handed the fine, another motorcyclist, who had been stopped for the same offence, was shouting obscenities when the wardens were merely fulfilling their duty.

Another of my colleagues boasted of how he tactically avoided traffic wardens when he was not wearing a helmet. I have seen many motorcyclists riding with their helmets resting over the fuel tank. They choose not to wear it.

All those who speak against the fines should visit the emergency departments of any hospital to see for themselves how lethal over-speeding, not wearing a helmet, and performing 'stunts' on the roads can be. In any case, we should behave like responsible citizens to ensure laws are abided by. As long as we follow the traffic rules, fines would never impact us.

Muhammad Majid Shafi
Islamabad

Broken promises, barren fields

A little while ago, the Sindh Wheat Grower Support Programme (SGWSP) was launched to support small- and medium-scale farmers, boost wheat production, and strengthen national food security. While the initiative's intent is commendable, inconsistent policy decisions and weak implementation have undermined its effectiveness, leaving farmers uncertain and financially strained.

The Sindh government had announced last year that wheat growers would receive agricultural inputs in the shape of one bag of diammonium phosphate (DAP) and two bags of urea per acre of land. For small farmers, such support is not marginal. Many prepared their land for wheat cultivation under this assurance, even if they had not initially planned to grow the crop. Soon after, the Sindh government reversed the policy, replacing in-kind fertiliser distribution with direct cash transfers, citing transparency and efficiency.

This abrupt change put farmers under financial strain as they were forced to buy fertilisers from the market while waiting for cash disbursements that were often delayed, affecting yields and household incomes. Some farmers report they have yet to receive any

support. Delays are particularly concerning as farmers have not received funds for DAP while the time for urea application has arrived, further eroding trust in government assurances.

The SGWSP still holds potential to benefit Sindh's agricultural economy and national food security. To succeed, the government must ensure policy consistency, timely execution and transparent monitoring. Agricultural support works best when farmers can rely on predictability, trust and accountability.

Saman Shafique
Karachi

Cooling period

The two-hour cooling period for digital transactions is aimed at safeguarding the customers, but the practical effectiveness of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) decision remains unclear. I recently transferred Rs30,000 to a wallet account after receiving a fraudulent WhatsApp message from a compromised account of a family member. Upon discovering the fraud, I immediately reported the transaction to my bank within 20-25 minutes. Despite this prompt action, the amount was not recovered and the complaint was later closed by the bank. This raises a fundamental policy concern. If a transaction reported well within the cooling period does not qualify for reversal, how is the policy being implemented in practice?

Fahad Tahir
Karachi

Chirah Dam

The proposed construction of the Chirah Dam on the Soan River poses a severe threat to the already water-stressed downstream localities. These communities receive no municipal water supply and depend entirely on groundwater extracted via tube wells. The Soan River is the primary natural recharge source for the regional aquifer. Intercepting its flow will disrupt the only aquifer replenishment mechanism, further depleting the water table. The situation may worsen as the residents face shortages during seasonal extremes.

Fakhar ul Hasan
Rawalpindi

State claims and ground truths

In George Orwell's 1984, the character of Big Brother frequently changes his enemies as well as his alliances. The citizens are constantly policed, and when they are told that one country is no longer the enemy, and that the nation is now at war with another, they have no choice but to accept the propaganda. A similar situation has arisen in Balochistan where the provincial government is indulging in all sorts of propaganda, and the people

have no choice but to keep listening to hollow claims of peace and prosperity.

For instance, the government repeatedly asserts that the writ of the state has been established, and that Balochistan is now safe for road travel. However, the truth is obvious: not a single day passes without blockades by insurgents or attacks on security forces.

Furthermore, the government keeps talking about how development programmes have changed the fate of the province and its people. The contrast is brought forward by the District Vulnerability Index, which uses 21 indicators grouped into six key domains of education, communication, health services, livelihoods, transportation and demography. Balochistan ranks at the bottom across nearly all domains, and 17 of the 20 most vulnerable districts in Pakistan happen to be located in Balochistan. This underlines a rather comprehensive failure of governance.

Instead of strengthening peace, prosperity, development and social equality, ministers and government representatives continue to use woolly words on talk shows to hide the truth. Unlike the Orwellian society depicted in 1984, however, ground realities cannot be erased by fabricated narratives in today's world.

For the sake of Balochistan's people, the provincial government must walk the talk.

Majid Ali
Quetta

Dark reality of Sindh's 'enlightened governance'

For years, a 'progressive' narrative has been carefully curated to suggest that Sindh is governed by an enlightened leadership. However, for those living in the province, this is nothing but hollow fiction. Sindh is just not run by institutions. It is run by an entrenched ecosystem of feudal elites, political patrons and a complicit law-enforcement machinery.

While intellectuals and 'influencers' organise seminars on human rights, they rarely name the actors who violate these rights. This selective silence is complicity. From the cold-blooded murder of farm labourer Kailash Kolhi in Badin to the horrifying killing of Altaf Mahar and his brother, a minor, in Shikarpur, the message is clear: justice in Sindh is a privilege of the powerful.

The ruling elite class survives on the myth that 'there is no alternative'. It is time the educated class stopped shielding this failing system with vague condemnations, and began demanding accountability for specific actors.

True change will not come from civil society reports or donor conferences; it will come when the people of Sindh refuse to accept political monopoly as their destiny.

Aziz Mahar
Shikarpur

Ancient rock art depicting hunters and geometric shapes discovered in Egypt's Sinai Desert

Owen Jarus

A rock shelter discovered in the southern Sinai Desert contains designs and inscriptions spanning a period of 10,000 years, the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities has announced in two statements.



Located on the Umm Arak Plateau, the rock shelter was discovered during an archaeological survey carried out by a team of Egyptologists. They were assisted by a local resident named Sheikh Rabie Barakat, who helped guide them to the site, the statements said.

The rock art is older than the pharaonic kingship in Egypt, which began in about 3100 B.C., but it appears that artists continued drawing there until medieval times. The shelter is about 330 feet (100 meters) long and 10 feet (3 m) deep, with a ceiling up to 5 feet (1.5 m) high. The oldest rock art, which was dated based on its style, was found near the entrance and dates to between roughly 10000 and 5500 B.C., the statements said. It depicts a variety of scenes, including a hunter who's holding a bow and is accompanied by at least two hunting dogs.

Scenes from later time periods include people riding horses and carrying weapons, and there are inscriptions that date to ancient and medieval times. The rock art also includes geometric images made of X's, squares, ovals, crescents and more complex shapes. The archaeological team is in the midst of analyzing the designs.

The shelter is near ancient copper and turquoise mines and was likely "used across the ages as a lookout point and a place for gathering and rest," one of the statements said.

The best time to eat breakfast for longevity

Fran Kritz

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



Archaeopteryx, one of the world's first proto birds, has a set of weird, never-before-seen features

Aristos Georgiou

Researchers have uncovered an intriguing set of never-before-seen features in the skull of Archaeopteryx, an iconic dinosaur that is considered a key transitional fossil in the evolution of birds, a new study reports. The features — which are absent in nonflying dinosaurs but are widespread in living birds — may have enabled Archaeopteryx to acquire, manipulate and process food more efficiently, the research team proposed in the study, which was published in the journal *The Innovation*. The newly discovered features include a tiny bone that indicates Archaeopteryx had a highly mobile tongue. The researchers also identified "weird" soft tissue traces interpreted as oral papillae — small, tooth-like projections on the roof of the mouth. Jingmai O'Connor, an associate curator of fossil reptiles at the Field Museum in Chicago and lead author of the study, told *Live Science* in an email. Finally, the team found "unusual" openings near the tip of Archaeopteryx's jaw that suggest a nerve-rich structure and may represent an early analogue of what is known as a bill-tip organ in modern birds. The identification of these features in Archaeopteryx marks their earliest known appearance in the fossil record, according to the study, suggesting these characteristics evolved during or close to the emergence of avian dinosaurs — known as birds — which is thought to have occurred during the Late Jurassic period (roughly 161.5 million to 143 million years ago).



What happens to your heart health when you eat nuts regularly

Simon Spichak

People who eat more nuts may be less likely to die of heart disease, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Nutrition*.



"Although nuts are nutrient-dense foods rich in unsaturated fats, plant protein, fiber, and several vitamins and minerals, their high fat and calorie content has historically made people hesitant to include them regularly in their diets," lead study author Montry Suprono, DDS, associate professor and director of the Center for Dental Research at Loma Linda University, told *Health*. But these findings "strengthen the existing evidence" suggesting that nuts can reduce the risk of heart disease death, he said. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is responsible for one in three deaths in the U.S., making it the leading cause of mortality. The most common form is coronary artery disease, also known as ischemic heart disease (IHD), which develops when the arteries become narrow and the heart struggles to pump blood throughout the body.

For this study, Suprono and the other researchers tracked over 80,500 participants, all of whom were Seventh-Day Adventists. Via a questionnaire, the team documented participants' normal nut consumption. They included tree nut intake—which included almonds, cashews, walnuts, and mixed nuts—as well as total nut intake, which counted tree nuts, peanuts, and peanut butter. Over an average of 11 years, 4,258 people died from CVD—1,529 of those were attributed to IHD specifically.

پاکیزگی کا یقین

