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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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Wealth for the few, debt for the rest

Farhan Khan

Poverty in Pakistan has surged to an eleven-year high of 29 percent, while income inequality has climbed to a twenty-seven-year peak of 32.7 percent. As a consequence, more than 70 million Pakistanis are now living below the monthly poverty line of Rs8,484, according to a Planning Ministry survey released last week.

Various estimates further reveal that real monthly household incomes have declined by 12 percent since 2019, falling from Rs35,454 to Rs31,127 in FY2024–25. This erosion of purchasing power has reversed the poverty reduction trend for the first time in thirteen years, marking a deeply troubling shift in the country's socio-economic trajectory.

It is also pertinent to note that the latest Labour Force Survey places unemployment at a twenty-one-year high of 7.1 percent. Meanwhile, the investment-to-GDP ratio has stagnated at 13.8 percent in FY2025, a clear indication of an economy struggling to generate momentum. These figures collectively portray an economy in regression, unable to create sufficient jobs or sustain inclusive growth. The alarming economic situation confronting the country is closely linked to the policies currently being pursued by the government.

Over the past several years, a number of multinational corporations have exited Pakistan, while many domestic enterprises have either scaled down or suspended their operations under mounting economic pressures. These pressures stem largely from a sharply contractionary policy framework shaped by IMF prescriptions, including subsidy withdrawals, elevated interest rates, rising energy tariffs, and an increasingly burdensome tax regime. As the economy's job-creating capacity has been severely constrained, unemployment has risen, reinforcing a vicious cycle in which joblessness depresses incomes and pushes more households below the poverty threshold.

A significant constraining factor remains Pakistan's persistent dependence on the IMF, whose policy framework is widely perceived as anti-growth and anti-poor, carrying heavy

social costs. However, it would be disingenuous to attribute the entire crisis to external pressures alone. IMF programme or not, the country's economic managers share substantial responsibility for the hardship faced by millions. Their failures include the inability—or unwillingness—to implement a genuinely progressive tax regime and broaden the tax base in a manner that enables income redistribution from the affluent to the underprivileged, thereby promoting social stability. The continued reliance on indirect taxation, which disproportionately burdens lower-income groups, coupled with the consistent exclusion of influential sectors from the tax net, reflects deliberate domestic policy choices. These shortcomings are compounded by insufficient efforts to rationalise and reduce unproductive current expenditures.

Another major factor behind the prevailing economic stagnation is Pakistan's inability

and imports exacerbates the current account deficit, which is routinely financed through borrowing from bilateral and multilateral lenders. Consequently, Pakistan's public debt has climbed to unsustainable levels, with debt servicing consuming a substantial share of annual government revenues and crowding out development spending.

Foreign investment inflows remain significantly below those of comparable regional economies. Despite numerous overseas visits by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif aimed at securing foreign capital, the results have been disappointing. Although the government has signed Memoranda of Understanding worth an estimated USD 25–30 billion, actual inflows tell a different story. According to State Bank of Pakistan data, total foreign investment declined by 51 percent during July–January 2025–26 compared to the same period the previous year, falling from USD 1,429 million



to attract meaningful levels of foreign direct investment (FDI). While the government has repeatedly declared foreign investment to be central to its growth strategy and established the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) to streamline decision-making at federal and sectoral levels—with representation from both military and civilian leadership—the tangible outcomes remain limited.

Exports, which constitute the lifeblood of any sustainable economy, have remained largely stagnant for years, with no clear signs of substantial improvement. Recent reports indicate that Pakistan's trade deficit with nine regional countries has widened by 41.32 percent. China remains the dominant trading partner, with exports to China recorded at USD 1.467 billion in 2025—slightly lower than the previous year's USD 1.482 billion—while imports surged to USD 11.097 billion, compared to USD 8.907 billion the year before. This widening imbalance between exports

to USD 694 million. The reasons are evident: investors seek predictable, stable, and low-risk environments, conditions that Pakistan has struggled to consistently provide. This assessment is reinforced by international credit rating agencies, which have yet to assign Pakistan an investment-grade rating.

To revive economic growth and effectively combat rising poverty, Pakistan must adopt a fundamentally new policy framework—one that departs from the prevailing elitist model marked by widening inequality and concentrated privilege. Fiscal discipline must begin at the top, with decisive curtailment of wasteful expenditures and a strategic reallocation of resources toward industrialisation, productivity enhancement, and export-led growth. Without such structural reforms and a genuine commitment to inclusive development, the country risks remaining trapped in a cycle of stagnation, dependency, and recurrent external borrowing.

Iran attack: a dangerous gamble by Donald Trump

Nasim Ahmed

The joint US-Israeli attack on Iran and brutal assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, has created an explosive situation in the Middle East which is on the verge of a wider war. The US has committed naked aggression against Iran in flagrant violation of the UN charter and international law. No wonder, there has been worldwide condemnation of the act – not only from Russia and China but also from European countries.

The war that has broken out threatening regional peace has been most brazenly and roguishly imposed by the US on Iran. Only days ago, negotiations were going on successfully, involving the International Atomic Energy Agency, Oman's foreign minister, Badr Al Busaidi, had publicly spoken of near agreement on Iran not producing nuclear weapons, drawing down of existing stockpiles, not stockpiling in future and IAEA inspection and verification mechanism. Iran had also signalled its willingness to reconsider its support for regional non-state actors and its missile programme.

According to intelligence reports, the Iranians had also agreed to allow American inspectors into the country for verification on their nuclear programme. The Omani foreign minister went on CBS News the night before the strikes to publicly state how well the negotiations were going, in what seems to be last-minute efforts to avert war. Most importantly, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Turkey were against this war and have been lobbying behind the scenes against the US attacking.

But then there was an invisible change in Washington's objectives -- from enrichment caps and verification mechanisms to regime change inside Iran. This was the trigger for the sudden launching of deadly strikes against Iran. It may be added here that during the 12-day war in June, the strikes were limited to destroying missile depots and eliminating military top brass. But this time the target was not only Iran's military command but also its political leadership. To this end, wave after

wave of US and Israeli bombers targeted the residential and office buildings under the use of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Masoud Pezeshkian and other dignitaries. The timing of the attack was also significant. Previous Israeli operations were conducted under the cover of darkness, whereas this time round attacks began in broad daylight in order to maximise and showcase the damage and expose the collapse of the system. Equally important is the fact that as compared to the June war, this time the US played a more aggressive role in attacking targets inside Iran alongside Israel.

Iran lost no time in responding to the vicious attack jointly by the US and Israel.



Iranian missiles struck not just Israel but also the US assets across the Gulf. This shows that Iran was ready to bear the initial brunt and counterattack the adversary with full force.

Going a step further, Iran moved swiftly to close the Strait of Hormuz, warning vessels against passage. This means that Iran is in no mood to give up and preparing for a long war.

The assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei is no doubt a big shock and turning point for the Islamic Republic of Iran but it does not presage a regime change as desired by the US. His assassination removes a figure who for more than three decades headed Iran's political, military and religious hierarchy. Ayatollah Khamenei was not merely a head of state. As Supreme Leader, he exercised final authority

over foreign policy, the armed forces and the state's ideological direction. As Marjai Taqleed, he embodied religious legitimacy that extended to the world's entire Shia population.

His passing is a big blow, but there is no danger of an immediate collapse of the Iranian system, given its state structure and history. According to some observers, the removal of Ayatollah Khamenei from the scene introduces an element of uncertainty and unpredictability in the Iranian situation with the possibility of hardliners taking the driving seat. Khamenei, though implacably opposed to Israel, was a known quantity. His moves were calculated and calibrated. A new leader under pressure to demonstrate strength may be less restrained

and more adventurous.

As it is, Iran has responded with incessant barrage of missile and drone strikes against Israel and US facilities in the Gulf. Its network of regional allies and proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, is also expected to scale up their aggressive posture in the Gulf region. Hezbollah has already mounted a severe attack on Israel from southern Lebanon.

President Donald Trump has played a big strategic gamble by attacking Iran but whether he succeeds in his aim remains an open question. It is possible that his move may boomerang and a more hardline regime emerges in Iran to challenge the US power diplomacy in the Middle East in aid of Israel's expansionist designs.

The structural reset

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's economy appears trapped in a cycle of repetition, where leadership changes but the underlying model remains largely untouched. The result is an increasingly fragile system marked by slow growth, widening inequality, and shrinking opportunity.

Rather than expanding the economic pie, stakeholders seem locked in a contest over diminishing resources. Social and economic mobility — the very foundation of a stable and prosperous society — has been sidelined. With poverty rising and fiscal pressures intensifying, the need for a structural reset has become urgent.

At the heart of the problem lies a growth model that has failed to evolve. Countries that have successfully transformed their economies within a generation have typically done so through export-led industrialisation. By integrating into global markets, investing in human capital, and fostering competitive industries, they created jobs, increased incomes, and expanded the middle class. Pakistan, too, acknowledges this path in policy speeches and official slogans. Yet the translation from rhetoric to action remains weak.

Export-led growth requires more than temporary incentives or isolated sectoral support. It demands a coordinated overhaul of governance, infrastructure, taxation, and public service delivery — particularly in education. A skilled workforce is the backbone of a competitive export sector. Without consistent investment in quality education and vocational training, productivity gains will remain limited, and industries will struggle to compete internationally.

One of the central challenges lies in fiscal fragmentation. While the federal government bears the brunt of macroeconomic responsibility, fiscal authority is largely devolved to the provinces. Larger provinces, benefiting from significant revenue shares, have expanded their spending — often without sufficient emphasis on productivity or long-term sustainability. Political considerations frequently overshadow economic discipline. Provincial administrations show little enthusiasm for empowering local governments, as this would dilute their fiscal control. Consequently, municipalities remain weak and under-resourced, unable to effectively collect taxes or improve urban infrastructure.

This imbalance has distorted the tax structure. The federal government relies heavily on taxing formal income and the documented sector, placing a disproportionate burden on manufacturing and salaried classes. Meanwhile, taxation of property and agricultural income

remains minimal. In Punjab, for example, property-related tax collection reportedly lags far behind comparable urban centres in neighbouring countries. Agriculture income tax and provincial sales taxes on services remain significantly below their potential. The result is a narrow tax base and an inequitable distribution of fiscal responsibility.

The consequences for competitiveness are severe. Manufacturing — which should be the engine of export growth — faces high taxation and some of the region's most expensive energy costs. Chronic inefficiencies in the power sector, including transmission losses and circular debt, further inflate production expenses. Exporters struggle to compete globally when their input costs remain elevated and policy support fluctuates unpredictably.

At the same time, the federal government's



fiscal position has grown precarious. With mounting debt obligations and limited revenue flexibility, it faces constraints that border on insolvency. A sustainable solution requires genuine burden-sharing between the centre and the provinces. Broadening the tax net to include all income categories — including landowners, service providers, and informal sectors — is essential. Empowering municipalities to raise local revenue and deliver services would not only ease federal pressures but also enhance accountability and urban livability.

Reforming the energy sector is another critical step. The federal government's heavy involvement has not translated into efficiency. Gradually reducing its footprint, restructuring debt, and distributing financial responsibility more equitably across provinces could help stabilise the sector. At the same time, state-owned enterprises must undergo meaningful restructuring or privatisation. Persistent losses from these entities drain public resources that could otherwise be invested in education, health, and infrastructure. Shrinking the overall size of government and curbing unchecked public sector hiring — particularly at the provincial level — would signal fiscal seriousness.

Yet even comprehensive fiscal and

structural reforms will falter without policy consistency. Investors, both domestic and foreign, prioritise predictability. Pakistan's policy landscape, however, has been marked by abrupt shifts with each political transition. Economic strategies are often reversed or reoriented, not on the basis of performance evaluation, but due to political rivalry. This volatility erodes credibility and discourages long-term investment planning. It is therefore unsurprising that foreign direct investment has dwindled to historically low levels, while local investors remain cautious about committing capital to export-oriented ventures.

Political stability, in this context, cannot be manufactured through suppression or exclusion. Sustainable economic growth depends on institutional strength, rule of law, and inclusiveness. Businesses need assurance that contracts will be honoured, regulations will remain stable, and economic decisions will not be subject to abrupt political recalibration. Restoring credibility requires bipartisan commitment to core economic principles that survive electoral cycles.

Another structural weakness lies in over-reliance on workers' remittances to finance the trade deficit. While remittance inflows provide critical foreign exchange support, they are largely channelled toward household consumption. Increased consumption, in turn, drives imports rather than expanding domestic productive capacity. This dynamic creates a temporary sense of external stability while masking deeper vulnerabilities. Without expanding export capacity and reducing import dependence, remittance-driven stability remains fragile.

The fundamental issue is that structural correction has been repeatedly postponed. Consumption-driven spurts replace productivity-driven expansion. Fiscal gaps are bridged through borrowing rather than reform. Policy rhetoric substitutes for institutional transformation. Unless these patterns change, the economy will remain caught in a loop of temporary relief followed by renewed crisis.

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at an economic crossroads. Continuing with incremental adjustments and politically expedient measures will only perpetuate instability and inequality. A genuine reset — centred on export-led growth, equitable taxation, energy reform, institutional credibility, and empowered local governance — is imperative. Social mobility and economic resilience cannot be achieved without confronting structural weaknesses head-on. The path forward requires discipline, inclusiveness, and long-term vision. Without addressing the fundamentals, the cycle of stagnation will simply continue, and the promise of sustainable prosperity will remain out of reach.

The productivity deficit

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's trade imbalance with nine key regional partners has widened sharply, underscoring deep-rooted structural weaknesses in the country's economic model.

The most striking disparity is with China, which continues to dominate Pakistan's regional trade profile. While exports to China stood at \$1.467 billion in 2025 — marginally lower than the previous year's \$1.482 billion — imports surged to \$11.097 billion, up from \$8.907 billion a year earlier. This dramatic 24.58 percent increase in imports, compared with virtually stagnant exports, has significantly expanded the bilateral trade gap and contributed to a broader 41.32 percent rise in Pakistan's trade deficit with regional economies.

The imbalance is not simply the result of fluctuating trade flows. It reflects deeper structural problems that have persisted for decades. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pakistan's recurring boom-and-bust cycles stem largely from a difficult business environment and weak governance. These factors have discouraged long-term investment, keeping capital formation well below levels seen in comparable emerging economies. Without sufficient investment in productive sectors, competitiveness remains limited and exports struggle to diversify or expand.

Pakistan's economic volatility has been closely linked to its macroeconomic policy approach. Repeated attempts to stimulate growth through fiscal expansion and monetary easing have often generated short-lived economic surges rather than sustainable development. Domestic demand typically rises beyond the economy's productive capacity, leading to inflationary pressures and depletion of foreign exchange reserves. This cycle is further complicated by a political preference for maintaining a stable exchange rate, which often delays necessary currency adjustments. The result is a pattern of temporary growth followed by abrupt corrections — each downturn weakening policy credibility and discouraging both domestic and foreign investors.

The persistence of these cycles suggests that neither the country's production structure nor its growth strategy has undergone meaningful transformation. Much of Pakistan's export base remains concentrated in low value-added goods, limiting its ability to compete globally. Expanding exports requires more than short-term incentives; it demands structural reform, technological upgrading, and an improved regulatory environment. Without these, expecting different economic outcomes from the same policy mix risks repeating past

mistakes.

Regional trade has also been affected by security and geopolitical considerations. Ongoing tensions with neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan and India, have constrained cross-border commerce. Security concerns have discouraged private sector engagement and disrupted established trade routes. Beyond the region, global instability has further dampened export prospects. The war in Ukraine and continuing conflicts in the Middle East have unsettled global supply chains and heightened uncertainty in commodity markets.

Trade prospects are also being shaped by shifts in international trade policy. Recent rulings in the United States regarding executive authority over tariffs have contributed to global uncertainty. More significantly for Pakistan, India's upcoming free trade agreement with



the European Union — set to take effect next year — poses a competitive challenge. Pakistan currently benefits from preferential market access to the EU under the GSP+ scheme, which grants reduced tariffs on a wide range of exports. However, if India secures broader or more advantageous access to European markets, Pakistani exporters may find themselves at a disadvantage, particularly in textiles and agricultural products.

Compounding these challenges are domestic economic constraints tied to Pakistan's ongoing engagement with the IMF. Two major policy conditions have weighed heavily on the economy. First is the requirement for full cost recovery in utilities, particularly in the power sector. Although electricity tariffs were recently reduced, this relief was achieved by retiring older, high-interest debt obligations. This measure may not be sustainable over the long term. The IMF has required authorities to commit to raising the Debt Service Surcharge if necessary to maintain financial viability in the energy sector. Without structural reform in power generation, transmission, and distribution, tariff adjustments alone are unlikely to resolve systemic inefficiencies.

The second condition involves limiting fiscal and monetary incentives that artificially stimulate demand without enhancing productive capacity. The IMF has emphasized the

need for disciplined macroeconomic management to avoid fueling another inflationary cycle. However, some policy flexibility has emerged. The government recently introduced targeted incentives for industry, including subsidies for rice exporters, after India lifted its ban on rice exports and intensified competition in global markets. While such measures may provide short-term relief to specific sectors, they do not address broader issues of productivity and competitiveness.

Pakistan's economic outlook will depend on whether policymakers can break free from reactive, short-term interventions and instead adopt a forward-looking industrial strategy. Increasing value addition within existing factories is insufficient if production remains oriented primarily toward the domestic market, with only surplus goods exported. A sustainable export-led model requires deliberate investment in industries designed specifically for global markets. This includes adopting advanced technologies, improving quality standards, reducing production costs, and integrating into global value chains.

Strengthening governance and regulatory transparency is equally important. Investors seek predictability and rule-based systems. Streamlining business procedures, ensuring contract enforcement, and maintaining policy continuity can significantly enhance investment sentiment. At the same time, improving infrastructure — particularly in energy and logistics — would reduce operational costs and enhance competitiveness.

Human capital development is another critical dimension. Modern manufacturing demands skilled labor capable of operating sophisticated technology and meeting international quality benchmarks. Expanding vocational training and aligning educational curricula with industry needs can help bridge this gap.

In conclusion, Pakistan's widening trade deficit with regional partners, especially China, is symptomatic of long-standing structural weaknesses rather than temporary market fluctuations. Persistent macroeconomic volatility, limited investment, governance challenges, and geopolitical tensions have constrained export growth and deepened external imbalances. Addressing these issues requires more than incremental policy adjustments. It calls for a comprehensive strategy focused on productive capacity, technological advancement, and export diversification. Only by shifting from consumption-driven growth to a sustainable, export-oriented model can Pakistan hope to stabilize its external accounts and secure durable economic progress.

Pakistan's quest for durable growth

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economic managers have struck a cautious but optimistic tone as the country moves deeper into the fiscal year 2025-26. While macroeconomic indicators point toward improving stability and gradual recovery, the Ministry of Finance has warned that external shocks — particularly geopolitical tensions and unpredictable global commodity prices — continue to pose significant risks to sustained growth. The government believes that careful economic management, continued fiscal discipline, and supportive monetary policies will be essential to safeguard the progress achieved so far.

In its latest monthly economic update, the ministry highlighted a moderate uptick in inflation expectations. Consumer prices, which rose by 5.8 per cent year-on-year in January, are projected to climb slightly higher, settling within a 6 to 7 per cent range. Although this represents a marginal increase from the previous month, officials maintain that inflation remains relatively contained compared to past volatility. On average, inflation during the first seven months of FY2026 has been recorded at 5.2 per cent, lower than the 6.5 per cent registered during the same period last year — a sign that price pressures, while present, are more manageable.

The ministry's outlook suggests that economic activity is expected to strengthen further in FY2026. This anticipated momentum is underpinned by macroeconomic stability, an improved fiscal position, and easing inflationary pressures. Policymakers argue that accommodative monetary measures have reduced borrowing costs, thereby encouraging private sector activity and investment. At the same time, fiscal consolidation efforts are aimed at reinforcing business confidence and maintaining financial discipline.

The country entered the third quarter of FY2026 with improved economic fundamentals. Exchange rate stability has provided much-needed predictability for businesses and importers, while sustained growth in workers' remittances and rising information technology exports have bolstered the external sector. High-frequency indicators — such as industrial production, energy consumption, and trade flows — suggest a gradual pickup in output. The combination of monetary easing and steady foreign inflows has contributed to a relatively balanced external account, reducing pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

One of the most encouraging developments has been the improvement in fiscal performance. During July-December FY2026, the overall fiscal balance recorded a surplus equivalent to 0.4 per cent of GDP, amounting to Rs541.9 billion. This marks a significant turnaround from the deficit of 1.3 per cent of GDP posted during the same period last year. The primary balance also showed strength, registering a surplus of Rs4,105.5 billion — equivalent to 3.2 per cent of GDP — compared to Rs3,603.7 billion in the previous year. These gains reflect stronger revenue mobilisation and disciplined expenditure management.

Tax collection has played a pivotal role in this improvement. During July-January FY2026, Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) collections rose by 10.5 per cent to Rs7,176.9 billion. Growth was broad-based, with direct taxes increasing by 11.1 per cent and indirect taxes by 9.8 per cent. Among indirect taxes, sales tax



revenue grew by 10.3 per cent, customs duties by 5.4 per cent, and federal excise duty by a notable 15.2 per cent. The consistent rise in tax receipts suggests enhanced enforcement measures and improved compliance, contributing to a healthier fiscal outlook.

Public debt management has also shown progress. The government reportedly retired a significant portion of its debt ahead of schedule, easing future repayment burdens and improving investor confidence. Additionally, a Rs38 billion Ramazan Relief Package has been introduced to provide targeted support to vulnerable segments of society, reflecting the government's effort to balance fiscal discipline with social protection.

Economic growth prospects are being supported by multiple sectors. Large-scale manufacturing (LSM), which experienced contractions in earlier periods, is expected to rebound as industrial activity regains pace. Lower financing costs and improved demand conditions are anticipated to stimulate production. Remittances from overseas Pakistanis continue

to provide a critical cushion to the external account, while the agricultural sector remains resilient despite weather-related uncertainties.

In agriculture, wheat sowing for the Rabi 2025-26 season has covered approximately 23.1 million acres against a target of 23.8 million acres. The production target stands at 29.7 million tonnes, reflecting efforts to maintain food security and support rural incomes. Encouragingly, imports of agricultural machinery and implements rose by 10.5 per cent to \$76.8 million during July-January FY2026, compared with \$69.5 million in the same period last year. This suggests greater investment in farm mechanisation, which could enhance productivity over the medium term.

Fertiliser usage data also indicates robust agricultural activity. During the Rabi 2025-26 period from October to January, urea offtake increased by 12 per cent year-on-year to 2,744 thousand tonnes, while DAP offtake reached 583 thousand tonnes. Higher fertiliser consumption typically signals farmers' confidence in crop prospects and improved input availability.

Another positive trend is the continued outflow of skilled and semi-skilled workers seeking employment abroad. In January 2026 alone, 75,663 workers were registered by the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, marking a 19 per cent increase compared to 63,559 in January 2025. While outward migration reflects domestic employment challenges, the associated remittances remain a vital pillar of foreign exchange earnings and household incomes.

Despite these encouraging indicators, the ministry has cautioned that downside risks remain. Escalating geopolitical tensions could disrupt global supply chains, while volatility in international oil and commodity prices may reignite inflationary pressures and strain the external account. Given Pakistan's dependence on energy imports, global price fluctuations have direct implications for domestic stability.

In conclusion, Pakistan's economic trajectory in FY2026 appears cautiously optimistic. Stronger fiscal balances, steady revenue growth, exchange rate stability, and resilient remittance inflows collectively signal improved macroeconomic health. However, the sustainability of this recovery will depend on continued policy discipline and the ability to navigate external uncertainties. If prudent macroeconomic management persists and structural reforms deepen, the economy may well consolidate its gains and build a more durable foundation for long-term growth.

Old guards, new crises

Raza Khan

In Pakistan, people are deeply disturbed by the economic crisis and inflation, which have severely impacted the common person, as well as by the ongoing political instability and social degeneration. Despite the widespread concern, the root causes of these issues remain unclear to many. While strategic and societal factors contribute to the current economic and political turmoil, there are significant problems at the operational level—specifically in governance.

Our society is currently facing a range of conflicts and crises, with the challenges multiplying daily. Several issues are contributing to these multifaceted conflicts and crises, including but not limited to widespread poverty, the prevalence of extremist social attitudes that fuel terrorism, economic collapse, increasing cases of child sexual abuse, honor killings, and violent disputes over minor property matters. The state, its apparatus, and its institutions are failing to address these issues effectively, despite the commitment and desire of many of its officials to rise to the challenge. For example, while the state has managed to defeat religious terrorist groups like the Taliban, it has been unable to control the spread of extremism, fundamentalism, and intolerance, whether among clerics, young people, or professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

One significant reason for the state's inability to address these conflicts and crises is the outdated approach of top decision-makers and civilian bureaucrats, who are often bound by conventional idiosyncrasies and practices. The conflicts and crises mentioned above are not unique to Pakistan; many societies and states have faced or are facing similar challenges. In today's world, most states have developed mass societies with non-traditional and complex problems. These societies, which are predominantly urban and peri-urban, require institutionalized rather than personalized mechanisms for conflict resolution and need fulfillment. This necessitates a new kind of governance that is fundamentally different from the conventional systems and structures in place.

Since the 1980s, "good governance" has been a key phrase in international organizations, encompassing aspects like transparency, accountability, rule of law, consensus-building, and access to justice. However, a new concept has emerged that goes beyond good governance, known as "new governance." The term "governance" itself gained prominence in

the 1970s and 1980s when many hierarchical states increasingly failed to address the needs and problems of their populations, leading to a decline in public trust in the state. As a result, the focus shifted from traditional government structures to the broader concept of governance.

In Pakistan, policymakers, political parties, politicians, and civil servants have a limited understanding of this novel concept of "new governance," let alone its implementation. Even if some are aware of it, they struggle to adopt it due to their retrospective approach. Our ruling politicians, including Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, are often stuck in the past, repeatedly highlighting dubious "achievements" and accusing each other of financial corruption, rather than embracing forward-looking governance practices.

collaboration among various ministries, including education, social welfare, youth affairs, and foreign affairs, as well as coordination between governments at local, regional, national, and international levels, along with civil society and the private sector. This networked approach is at the core of "new governance."

However, because this new governance approach is non-hierarchical, it clashes with the traditional mindset of our ruling politicians and civil servants, who are accustomed to chain-of-command authority. As a result, they have been unable to adopt the new governance model, and the issues and problems that require abandoning conventional governance methods remain unresolved. Consequently, we are witnessing an ever-increasing multiplication of social issues and problems.

There is also a personal interest for civil



The new governance approach emphasizes the importance of systems and structures in addressing the policy demands of the people and solving societal problems. Unfortunately, this aspect of governance has been largely overlooked by our government departments. While history is important, and addressing past wrongs is essential for progress, the state's focus on traditional governance methods has left it ill-equipped to tackle the deep-rooted issues within its institutions. This focus on outdated approaches has led to a lack of capacity and, at times, a lack of sincerity among state functionaries.

The challenges facing Pakistani society—or any society in the contemporary era—are complex and require a holistic, multijurisdictional, and networked approach. For example, the issue of youth unemployment cannot be effectively addressed by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs alone. It requires

servants in resisting new governance models because adopting these would require them to share their authority and power with other stakeholders, such as the private sector, non-profit organizations, and the market. This power-sharing is generally unacceptable to both ruling politicians and civilian bureaucrats. However, society desperately needs this collaboration between state functionaries, civil society, and the private sector to effectively address issues, solve problems, and meet the needs of the people.

The world is changing rapidly, and its challenges are growing at the same pace. The demands of contemporary life are significant and complex. To meet these demands and address the concerns of society, the state, along with its institutions, must embrace new governance models. If they fail to do so, they will struggle to manage the political, economic, and social instability that continues to grow.

Literacy lost in the ledger

Rasheed Ali

Every year in the hushed corridors of Islamabad and the bustling halls of provincial secretariats, politicians and technocrats unveil a familiar ritual: the annual budget speech. Television anchors dissect page after page, highlighting allocations for infrastructure, defence and healthcare. Inevitably, there's also a section devoted to education — promises of increased funding, new schools, teacher training and lofty targets for literacy. Yet outside these formal ceremonies, in dusty villages and crowded urban slums, a different story continues to unfold, one where classrooms remain empty, chalkboards untouched and millions of children hover on the margins of learning.

Pakistan's official numbers paint a picture of gradual progress. According to the latest estimates, the national literacy rate hovers around 60-63 per cent — a modest climb from previous years, but still a sobering figure when compared to regional peers. On the surface, this might sound like an achievement: that six out of every ten adults can read and write their name. But venture deeper into the data, and the gains look thin and uneven. Literacy among males stands significantly higher — often in the upper 60s — while female literacy remains stubbornly lower, barely climbing past the low 50s.

The divide isn't only about gender. Geography draws its own fault lines.

In urban centres such as Lahore and Islamabad, literacy rates edge closer to three quarters, but in vast stretches of rural Pakistan, barely half the population is literate. In provinces like Balochistan, where rugged terrain and scarce infrastructure compound educational neglect, fewer than half of adults can read or write, a stark reminder that national averages mask more than they reveal.

The numbers of children not in school are perhaps more jarring. UNICEF estimates that Pakistan has the world's second-highest population of out-of-school children, with more than 25 million children aged 5-16 missing out on formal education. That's roughly one in every three children of school age — children whose classrooms may be shuttered, inaccessible, or

non-existent. These are not just statistics; they represent girls who never set foot in Grade 1, boys who drift into labour instead of learning, and entire communities that see schooling as a luxury they cannot afford.

The reasons for this alarming trend are complex and often intertwined with poverty, socio-cultural norms, and policy paralysis. Government spending on education tells its own troubling narrative. Despite recurrent declarations of an "education emergency," public expenditure on schools has been squeezed to historically low levels, falling to around 0.8 per cent of GDP, far below the internationally recommended 4-6 per cent. Most of this paltry sum is consumed by teacher salaries and routine expenses, leaving

responsibilities often pushing education to the bottom of family priorities. A girl who could have been a scientist, a doctor, a leader, instead becomes another statistic in the national ledger.

Education advocates often point out what the budgets rarely translate into reality. In discussions with international partners and NGOs, the call is not just for more money, but for smarter investment — targeted programs that address barriers to girls' education, community-based schools in remote areas, and teacher training that goes beyond rote instruction. Innovative schemes like community literacy drives and adult education programmes have sprouted in pockets, demonstrating what can be achieved when citizens themselves are engaged in the mission to



little for infrastructure, textbooks, or innovative learning tools.

Take the experience of a small village on the outskirts of Quetta, where a young girl named Fatima dreams of becoming a teacher. Her local school, she says, has one room for all grades and one teacher struggling to teach them all. "Sometimes we don't even have books," she says, eyes bright with determination — and frustration. Fatima's story echoes those of millions across Pakistan, where schools exist on paper but seldom deliver quality education in practice.

And then there's the wider societal cost. Children denied education are more likely to be pulled into early marriage, child labour or cycles of poverty. Girls, in particular, face entrenched barriers, with cultural biases and household

educate.

Yet year after year, as budget speeches wax lyrical about allocations and aspirations, the next generation watches the same pages turn. The promise of education, once heralded as the cornerstone of national development, risks becoming a hollow refrain unless it is backed by sustained political will and tangible action on the ground.

In Islamabad, politicians may continue to announce increases in educational allocations with ceremonial applause. But for millions of Pakistani children like Fatima, the real question remains unchanged: will these numbers ever translate into classrooms where young minds can truly flourish? Until that happens, the promise of literacy will remain an unfinished chapter in Pakistan's story.

The geography of grief

Dr. Fatima Khan

A recent UN report lays bare the stark realities of maternal mortality, spotlighting Pakistan, Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as bearing nearly half of the world's 260,000 maternal deaths in 2023. While global declines in maternal mortality offer some hope, uneven progress across regions and the heavy toll of poverty, conflict, and underage marriages reveal deep-rooted challenges. With aid cuts threatening hard-won gains, the fight to save mothers and newborns demands urgent action and a broader vision for women's health and empowerment.

In 2023, Pakistan joined Nigeria, India, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as one of the four countries responsible for nearly half of the world's 260,000 maternal deaths, according to a sobering UN report. The findings, shared in time for World Health Day, have sparked urgent concerns about the devastating effects of reduced aid funding from nations like the US and UK. The report, a collaboration between UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), and UNFPA, defines maternal deaths as those caused by complications during pregnancy or childbirth. It paints a stark picture: Nigeria alone bore the brunt with 75,000 deaths, making up 28.7% of the global total. India and the DRC each saw 19,000 deaths (7.2% each), while Pakistan recorded 11,000 (4.1%). Together, these nations accounted for 47% of all maternal deaths worldwide last year.

Despite a 40% drop in maternal mortality since 2000—thanks to better access to healthcare—the report warns that recent aid cuts threaten to unravel this progress. With funding shortages forcing cuts to critical maternal and child health services, the UN agencies are calling for immediate action, particularly in crisis-hit regions where death rates are already alarmingly high.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasized that while solutions exist to prevent most maternal deaths, pregnancy remains perilous in many parts of the world. Beyond quality maternity care, he stressed the need to bolster women's health and reproductive rights to ensure safer pregnancies and healthier futures. The report also sheds light on the ripple effects of COVID-19, noting a spike in maternal deaths—40,000 in 2021, climbing to 282,000 in 2022, and reaching 322,000 in 2023. These losses stemmed not just from the virus itself but from widespread disruptions to maternity care, underscoring the need to safeguard these services during emergencies.

"A mother's death during pregnancy or childbirth often puts her baby's life in jeopardy, too," said UNICEF's Catherine Russell. "Far too many families lose both, even though we know

how to prevent these tragedies." She urged global leaders to prioritize funding for midwives, nurses, and community health workers, especially in vulnerable regions, to give every mother and newborn a fighting chance at survival.

The UN report reveals stark disparities in maternal mortality across regions and nations, with progress uneven at best. Between 2000 and 2023, global maternal deaths dropped by about 40%, with sub-Saharan Africa making notable strides. Alongside Australia/New Zealand and Central/Southern Asia, it was one of only three UN regions to see meaningful declines after 2015. Yet, sub-Saharan Africa still carried 70% of the world's maternal deaths in 2023, weighed down by poverty and ongoing conflicts.

Meanwhile, progress stalled in five regions post-2015: Northern Africa/Western Asia, Eastern/South-Eastern Asia, Oceania (minus Australia/

Keeping girls in school and equipping them with health knowledge is equally vital.

A key driver of high maternal and infant mortality is the persistent issue of underage marriage. In Sindh, the Child Marriages Restraint Act of 2013 aimed to curb this, but enforcement remains spotty. Young brides face heightened pregnancy complications, often repeatedly, and are less likely to be educated or informed about their health and childbearing choices. This is compounded by scarce quality healthcare, especially in rural areas, and limited access to family planning, leaving women vulnerable to frequent, risky pregnancies. Universal healthcare remains a low priority for many governments.

As a WHO official noted, investing in maternal and newborn health isn't a cost—it's a boost to human potential. The path forward goes beyond better medical care. It means prioritizing



New Zealand), Europe/North America, and Latin America/Caribbean. Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA's Executive Director, called access to quality maternal care a fundamental right, not a luxury. She urged stronger health systems—better supply chains, more midwives, and detailed data to identify those most at risk—to end the heartbreak of preventable maternal deaths and their ripple effects on families.

The report also spotlights the dire risks faced by pregnant women in humanitarian crises, where nearly two-thirds of global maternal deaths now occur amid fragility or conflict. Beyond ensuring care during pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum, it stresses improving women's overall health through family planning and tackling conditions like anemia, malaria, and chronic diseases.

girls' education, ensuring they finish school, and empowering them with knowledge to make informed choices. Educated girls grow into women who can navigate health services, plan families, and contribute to stronger societies.

The path to ending preventable maternal deaths hinges on more than just healthcare—it requires a commitment to equity and empowerment. Strengthening health systems, expanding family planning, and confronting crises like underage marriage are critical steps. Above all, keeping girls in school and equipping them with knowledge can transform lives, enabling healthier choices and stronger communities. As the UN report underscores, investing in mothers and newborns isn't just a moral imperative; it's a foundation for a thriving future.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's assassination will likely backfire. Here is why

Daoud Kuttab

A favourite tactic of war is to try to decapitate the enemy leadership. While such strategies might work in certain contexts, in the Middle East, they have proven to be a disastrous choice.

For sure, the assassination of an enemy leader might give a quick boost of popularity amid war. Certainly, United States President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are basking in the limelight of their perceived "success" in assassinating Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

But killing an 86-year-old man who had already been planning his succession due to his ill health is not that much of a feat considering the overwhelming firepower that the US and Israel together possess. More importantly, eliminating him does not necessarily mean that what follows would be a leadership or a regime that would accommodate Israeli and US interests.

That is because leadership assassinations do not lead to peaceful outcomes in the Middle East. They can open the door for much more radical successors or for chaos that leads to violence and upheaval.

A brief glance at recent history shows that whenever Israel and the US have tried the idea of leadership "decapitation" in various conflicts in the region, the results have been disastrous. In the case of Iraq, its leader Saddam Hussein was captured by US forces and handed over to allied Iraqi forces who executed him. This ended a regime that was openly antagonistic to Israel, but it also opened the doors for pro-Iranian forces to take power.

As a result, in the following two decades, Iraq served as a launching pad for Iran's regional proxy strategy, which saw it build a powerful network of nonstate actors that threatened US and Israeli interests.

The security vacuum created by the US invasion triggered various insurgencies, the most devastating of which was the rise of ISIL (ISIS), which swept through the Middle East, killing thousands of innocent people, including US citizens, and triggering a massive refugee wave towards US and Israeli allies in Europe.

Another case in point is Hamas. Since the early 2000s, Israel has repeatedly tried to assassinate its leaders. In 2004, it succeeded in killing its founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and then his successor Abdel Aziz Rantisi, who was considered a moderate. A few assassinations later, Yahya Sinwar was elected head of Hamas in Gaza and

went on to plan the October 7, 2023, attack.

Hezbollah has a similar history. Its late leader Hassan Nasrallah, who successfully led the expansion of the group to a formidable nonstate power, ascended to its leadership after Israel assassinated his predecessor Abbas al-Musawi. Two and half years of war and mass killing of leadership may now have devastated both armed groups, but Israel has failed to assassinate the idea behind them: resistance to occupation. The current lull in fighting may be the quiet before another storm.

In the Iranian case, it is highly unlikely that whoever replaces Khamenei would be as open to negotiations as he was. The statements by the Omani interlocutors during the talks in Muscat and Geneva pointed to major concessions on the nuclear issue that Iran under Khamenei was pre-

charges, the short-term gain in popularity and votes is worth it. Israeli leaders do little thinking and planning on the mid- to long term and do not have to bear the consequences of military adventurism abroad. After all, Israeli society is very much in favour of it.

But for Trump, the gains are not as apparent. He gets to brag about killing an 86-year-old ailing leader of a faraway country to a public that has no appetite for war. At a time of a continuing cost-of-living crisis in the US, he is spending billions of taxpayer dollars to fight a war against a country that posed no imminent threat, a war that many Americans are increasingly identifying as "Israel's war".

Instead of projecting power, Trump risks showing weakness and being seen as a US pres-



pared to make. It is unlikely that his replacement would have the political space to follow suit.

If Israel and the US continue their campaign and really push for state collapse in Iran, what comes out of that ensuing chaos could be anyone's guess. But if we are to go by recent experiences in Iraq and Libya, a security vacuum in Iran would have devastating consequences for US allies in the region and in Europe.

That raises the pertinent question of what Israel and the US stand to gain from their "decapitation" strategy in Iran.

For Netanyahu, the assassination of Khamenei is a major success. Facing crucial elections that could mean the possible end of his political life and maybe his imprisonment over four corruption

ident fooled into starting a costly war to ensure the political survival of the prime minister of a foreign country. It is clear for now that the US president has drawn a line at putting US boots on the ground. At some point, he will have to end the bombardment campaign and pull US troops. He will leave behind a disaster that US allies in the region will have to bear the brunt of. US regional alliances are sure to suffer. Domestic audiences are sure to ask questions.

This will be yet another US military adventure in the region that will cost US taxpayers' money, US soldiers' lives and foreign policy clout and offer no return. The hope is that Washington may finally learn its lesson that assassinations and decapitation strategies don't work.

In Modi's India, scandal still embarrasses but rape has become ordinary

Vidya Krishnan

As court documents tied to the late financier Jeffrey Epstein continue to surface, the scandal has become an international embarrassment, exposing how quickly powerful men can turn into reputational liabilities.

That discomfort reached New Delhi, where Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates was expected to deliver the keynote address at the AI Impact Summit but ultimately did not attend amid criticism and apparent unease within the Modi government over his past meetings with Epstein. The spectacle was revealing. Public moral outrage travels swiftly when scandal threatens reputations and diplomatic optics. Yet that sensitivity to association sits uneasily beside a domestic reality in which sexual violence against women unfolds with brutal regularity, drawing neither comparable embarrassment nor consequence. The contrast is grotesque. A political culture capable of signalling discomfort towards a global scandal remains strikingly untroubled by the everyday brutality faced by women at home.

Under the Modi administration, the news cycle churns with reports of gang rapes like factory output — steady, relentless, and numbing in repetition. The rapes have become so common that they are reported like the weather. Heatwave deaths. Flash flood. Five-year-old abducted, raped, murdered. And like the weather, only God is responsible. Not the rapist. Not the court. Not the police. Definitely not the prime minister.

Between the time this piece was commissioned and published, a five-year-old was gang-raped in Meerut, a 26-year-old was gang-raped in Faridabad, and a 17-year-old was gang-raped in Odisha. A 42-year-old was gang-raped in Delhi's suburbs. A 12-year-old girl was kidnapped and gang-raped in Bikaner. There were more gang rapes in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Kanpur. I could give you statistics, but numbers could never convey the larger, all-encompassing terror of living with predators. The threat of sexual violence is as constant as gravity. The cases are gruesome — intestines pulled out, rods inserted, tongues cut out, acid thrown, decapitation, strangulation, and burning. When I look at government data about rape — an average of 86 women are raped every day — it feels as grisly as stumbling upon a mass grave in Excel sheets.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his home minister, Amit Shah, ostensibly obsessed with restoring law and order at any cost, seem

entirely unconcerned that India is the gang rape capital of the world on their watch. The most alarming instance of this was when convicted rapist and Bharatiya Janata Party politician Kuldeep Singh Sengar, found guilty of raping a minor in 2017 and a native of Makhli village in Unnao district of Uttar Pradesh, was granted bail by a high court, raising the possibility of his reintegration into the very social and political landscape that had once enabled his impunity. A high court granted him bail in December. Thankfully, it was stayed by the Supreme Court, but only after infuriated women gathered in Delhi to protest. Sengar had raped a teenager, who was also gang-raped by his associates. Her father was murdered in police custody. A case was registered only after she threatened to burn herself in front of the chief minister's residence. Her tragic story showcases how Indian men, like



the Modi administration, remain remarkably unembarrassed about the state of affairs.

Sadly, this is not an aberration; it is the system speaking in its mother tongue. Public memory matters because each new case unfolds against the residue of the ones we were told would change everything. In 2012, I read about the “Nirbhaya” gang rape three days after the incident, on my way from the airport. I had been deliberately avoiding the news until she ended up at Safdarjung Hospital, and my editor needed a health update from me. After I learned all the details of what men had done to this young woman, I thought the world would stand still. A threshold had been crossed. Something told me the world would start anew. There were protests, and people everywhere would know her name, and something like this would never happen again.

All of my naivety was drowned in a chorus of “Not All Men”, as the gang rape was turned into something viral to hang a hashtag on. The refrain did not defend innocence so much as redirect attention away from accountability and

back towards male comfort.

It is impossible for me to hear of such cases and not think: What if it were me? My body. That rod. Those men. The suffering and mutilation of women's bodies is so reliable that there is now a market to help ease our fear. Security apps. Pepper sprays and wearable panic alarms. Every time I write about this subject, I sit with the absolute inadequacy of the written word in the face of men who film the rapes, brag about them, and get rehabilitated nevertheless.

It wouldn't be out of place to call this moment unprecedented, but it is beyond that. It is existential. Whether it is the United States or India, women are watching the same choreography of power protecting itself, as men of consequence close ranks and wait out the storm. The similarity lies not in scale or context, but in the recurring spectacle of institutions cushioning

powerful men while survivors fight alone. For a while now, both countries — allegedly the biggest and the oldest democracies — have been on a trajectory of self-destruction, with men leading the way. Under Modi as well as Trump, rape has become an extension of politics. Women are violated no longer by men alone, but by courts, hospitals, and newsrooms, too. It is the age of monsters. It did not begin with Epstein, Gates, or Sengar, of course, but they are the symbols of it.

While the middle class was busy buying into the dream of upward mobility, careerism, and two bed-

rooms in a gated suburb, we let thugs cultivate a wholesale misogynist empire that runs on hate for women. I do not know what to do with the rage I feel. What do you do when you are constantly told that your body, your people, your gender are disposable? I don't know.

What I do know is that the teenager who survived Sengar is still fighting for justice. I know that the survivors of Epstein's sex trafficking network are fighting for justice, too. These women are fighting with heart and soul and sweat and muscle. I know that I have no right to be despondent while they stand tall, looking every inch the hero they are. I also know that nobody puts up a fight like that unless you love your sisters.

At this dark hour, it feels important to place on record that as the Modi administration recoils theatrically from the shadow of the Epstein scandal at the summit stage, the satire writes itself. A government that cannot, or will not, protect its women should be far more ashamed of what is ordinary than of what is scandalous.

Brain drain or greatest export

Every now and then, we come across some heated debate in the media that blames the government for brain drain, and is dismissive of the idea that Pakistan's greatest asset lies in exporting its workforce. Such an argument says more about our national unease with facts. Pakistan today is really not short of talent. It is short of jobs. With a huge population and a modest, consumption-heavy economy, the country carries a significant surplus of employable people — both in the skilled and unskilled categories — for whom the domestic market offers limited absorption, if any at all.

A lot of doctors, engineers, pharmacists, information technology graduates, accountants, technicians and trained tradespeople emerge from universities and colleges every year, only to encounter a stagnant industry, frozen public hiring, weak private investment, and an informal sector that is incapable of using their skills productively.

This is not conjecture. Labour force data consistently shows that unemployment is higher among the educated than among the unskilled. In other words, education in Pakistan increasingly produces capability without opportunity. Remittances continue to be the economic backbone we rarely acknowledge.

Against such a backdrop, it is puzzling that overseas employment is still framed as a 'national embarrassment' rather than a strategic necessity. Remittances, now approaching \$40 billion annually, constitute Pakistan's single largest and most stable source of foreign exchange, surpassing exports, aid or foreign direct investment. They cushion the balance of payments, stabilise household incomes and indirectly support millions of dependents.

At a time when Pakistan faces chronic economic maladies, it is neither realistic nor responsible to dismiss labour export as a policy failure. With coherent planning, bilateral labour agreements and proper skills certification, Pakistan could raise annual remittances to \$60 billion, a shift that would materially improve macro-economic stability without any additional borrowing.

Few countries apologise for exporting labour. The Philippines, India and Bangladesh have institutionalised such an export. South Korea once did the same. Migration, when structured, is not brain drain. It is income diversification and skills circulation. Those who oppose labour export rarely address a simple question: what is the alternative for surplus workers today? Advising skilled youth to 'stay and struggle' without providing platforms for employment is neither patriotic nor humane. Sending workers abroad does not hollow out the state.

On the contrary, it allows citizens to earn foreign exchange, support families at

home, and acquire skills and exposure, and return, when they do, with capital, experience and broader social outlooks.

Criticism of governments is legitimate. But criticism that ignores labour market realities risks misleading the public rather than informing it. Pakistan effectively faces a binary choice: either it deploys its surplus human capital globally, or it leaves millions underemployed, frustrated and economically inactive at home. A country with over one million surplus employable individuals cannot afford to avoid integrating overseas employment into its national economic strategy. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a recognition of constraints and an attempt to convert them into advantage.

The real failure would be to pretend that dignity lies in unemployment, or that national pride is enhanced by idle talent. People are Pakistan's most valuable resource. Using that resource intelligently is not surrender; it is very much statecraft.

Dr Ashraf Chohan
London, UK

Sindh's deceased quota

Rule 11-A, which is commonly known as the Deceased Quota Policy, is a statutory provision meant to provide employment relief to the families of deceased employees. It is general in nature, applies to all eligible legal heirs, and does not make litigation a condition for entitlement. Unfortunately, the Sindh government has restricted its application only to cases decided by courts before Sept 26, 2024, a limitation that finds no support in the rules.

Such an approach effectively converts a statutory right into a litigation-based privilege. Executive authorities have no constitutional authority to narrow or amend Rule 11-A through administrative cut-off dates. Such selective compliance also runs contrary to the spirit of the Supreme Court's judgment, which is binding on all authorities under Articles 189 and 190 of the Constitution.

Moreover, such a policy violates Article 25 of the Constitution, as it creates an unreasonable distinction between similarly placed widows and orphans based solely on whether they approached the courts earlier. Many affected families waited in good faith for the government to implement the law, lacking resources or awareness to pursue litigation. Penalising them for this restraint is both unjust and inhumane.

Rule 11-A was introduced to reduce hardship and avoid unnecessary litigation, not to compel vulnerable families to seek judicial intervention.

In case of financial concerns, a phased implementation may be considered, but outright exclusion based on arbitrary dates is unconstitutional. The Sindh government should implement Rule 11-A uniformly for all

eligible families.

Jan Muhammad Siyal
Hyderabad

Unsafe water, unmet promises

In 2018, the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) of Sindh prepared a PC-I for a clean drinking water supply scheme for Naushahro Feroze in compliance with the directions of the Supreme Court of Pakistan's Judicial Water Commission. The official record of these directives and related proceedings is available with the Supreme Court.

However, despite the existence of this court-directed PC-I, the scheme was never implemented, and was not included in Sindh's Annual Development Programme (ADP) for release of funds and execution of work. As a result, a city that happens to be a district headquarters continues to rely on unsafe and contaminated water, exposing residents to serious health risks. This situation does not reflect mere administrative inefficiency; it reflects failure to comply with judicial directions in a matter directly linked with the fundamental right to life and human dignity.

When court-mandated public welfare projects remain confined to files, it raises serious questions about governance and accountability. The provincial government must explain why a project proposal prepared by PHED in 2018 under judicial oversight was not implemented, and why it was excluded from development priorities. Who is responsible for denying citizens their constitutional right to safe drinking water?

There is an urgent need for immediate implementation of the approved project proposal, its inclusion in the ADP 2026-27, and commencement of work without delay. Otherwise, the affected people will be seeking enforcement of judicial directions through due constitutional proceedings.

Dr Abdul Qadeer Memon
Naushahro Feroze

Annoying headlights

Installing high-beam headlights and extra flashlights on cars, rickshaws and motorbikes has become a risky trend. Modified headlights affect the vision of other drivers on the road, and that leads to accidents. A large number of road accidents involve high-beam headlights and multi-coloured flashlights which are illegally installed on many vehicles in Karachi. In fact, the basic purpose of headlights is to provide a required vision and alert other drivers so they may pass safely on two-way roads at night. The relevant authorities should take strict action and devise a strategy to halt the installation of flashlights and modification of headlights on vehicles.

M. Anees
Karachi

Why 'screen time' for kids is a parenting pitfall

Lisa O'Mary

You've set limits on screen time, taken your kid's iPad away, maybe even tried a digital "fast" – but these may not be the most effective ways to manage the impact of screens on your child's mental health.



Increasingly, research suggests it's not the amount of time kids spend on screens that matters – it's how they spend it. The latest such study linked suicidal thoughts and behavior to addictive screen use – but not length of screen use – in children ages 10 to 14. Findings like this are becoming a consistent trend in screen research, pointing toward habits of use and what happens in your child's online world as the most important intersection of health and screen time.

"This really is good news for parents because screens are everywhere in teens' lives and they use screens in so many different ways," including for schoolwork and leisure, said Jessica L. Hamilton, PhD, a Rutgers University professor and expert in how social media is linked to suicidal thoughts and behaviors among teens. You can take comfort in knowing that most young people use screens daily without experiencing mental health problems – and that a lot can go right with screen time. "Not all screen time is created equal," said Brooke Ammerman, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "I encourage young people and their parents to think about: How are screens being used by yourself and members of your family? When are you using them? Why are you using them? Rather than thinking screens are bad, look for how they could potentially be a signal for other things that could be going on." Plenty of studies link screen use to health harms in kids, a focus that stems from concerns over the persistent rise of mental health problems among adolescents.

Saturn's largest moon may actually be 2 moons in 1

Harry Baker

Saturn's largest moon, Titan, may be made of two different moons that smashed together hundreds of millions of years ago, a new study suggests. If confirmed, this epic collision could also help to solve several long-standing mysteries surrounding the gas giant, including how its iconic rings formed. Titan is the solar system's second-largest moon, behind Jupiter's Ganymede. It is around 3,200 miles (5,150 kilometers) across, which is roughly 1.5 times wider than Earth's moon and around 5% wider than Mercury. Aside from its immense size, Titan is notable for its dense atmosphere, which consists mainly of nitrogen and is around 1.5 times thicker than Earth's atmosphere. It is also the only solar system body, other than Earth, that has confirmed liquid on its surface, in the form of methane — making it a potential candidate for hosting extraterrestrial life. The European Space Agency's Huygens probe touched down on Titan in 2005, making it the only moon, other than our own, that a spacecraft has landed on. Until now, researchers thought that, like most other moons, Titan formed billions of years ago via the gradual accumulation of tiny chunks of rock and dust. But in the new study, uploaded Feb. 9 to the preprint server arXiv and accepted for future publication in *The Planetary Science Journal*, researchers from the SETI Institute showed that this may not be the case. Based on data collected by NASA's Cassini probe, which flew past Titan and deployed Huygens to its surface, the SETI team proposes that Titan may have formed around 400 million years ago when two similarly massive moons slammed into each other.



Your own voice could be your biggest privacy threat

Drew Turney

If you know what to listen for, a person's voice can tell you about their education level, emotional state and even profession and finances — more so than you could imagine. Now, scientists posit that technology in the form of voice-to-text recordings can be used in price gouging, unfair profiling, harassment or stalking.



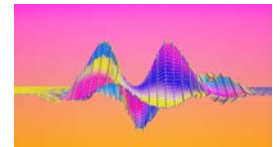
While humans might be attuned to more obvious cues such as fatigue, nervousness, happiness and so on, computers can do the same — but with far more information, and much faster. A new study claims intonation patterns or your choice of words can reveal everything from your personal politics to the presence of health or medical conditions.

The research, published in the journal *Proceedings of the IEEE*, highlights a grave concern for the technology's capability in privacy and unfair profiling. While voice processing and recognition technology present opportunities, Aalto University's speech and language technology associate professor Tom Bäckström, lead author of the study, sees the potential for serious risks and harms. If a corporation understands your economic situation or needs from your voice, for instance, it opens the door to price gouging, like discriminatory insurance premiums. And when voices can reveal details like emotional vulnerability, gender and other personal details, cybercriminals or stalkers can identify and track victims across platforms and expose them to extortion or harassment. These are all details we transmit subconsciously when we speak and which we unconsciously respond to before anything else.

A 'return to possibility': How to restore hope to your life

Eric Spitznagel

If you feel like everything is on fire, well, you're not alone. The world is living through what feels like a rolling existential crisis. Climate change is speeding up, global conflicts are building, and political divides have ripped apart families and friends.



The U.S. fell to its lowest ranking ever (24th) on the 2025 World Happiness Report. According to a national poll by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School, more than half of Americans under 30 report no sense of belonging and feeling "depressed, down, or hopeless." We're all doomscrolling – and taking the doom to heart. And when someone tells you to "just stay positive," it can feel like being handed a juice box after a house fire. How are we supposed to stay hopeful? Is that even a reasonable goal anymore? A new study from the University of Missouri offers a timely reminder: Hope isn't just a luxury – it supports our sense of meaning and direction. Researchers found that people who report higher levels of hope are significantly more likely to find their lives meaningful.

Psychologists, researchers, and philosophers believe hope is still possible, but not in the ways we might expect. It isn't about ignoring reality or forcing ourselves to stay positive. It's about something deeper and more durable. It's about showing up for your own life, even when it's messy. It's about making space for grief and humor and gratitude and allowing it all to live side by side. Robin Stern, PhD, co-founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, says hope starts not with forced optimism but with giving yourself permission to feel terrible.

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