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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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Upcoming budget: the path to sustainable economic growth

Farhan Khan

As the annual budget approaches, business organisations are once again presenting proposals for structural reforms aimed at accelerating economic growth. Past experience suggests that such recommendations are often overlooked by governments constrained by short-term political pressures, coalition considerations, populist demands, and immediate revenue requirements.

This year, however, the situation is more demanding and calls for collective wisdom from both the public and private sectors. Pakistan's economic challenges require cooperation rather than isolated policymaking. Recent taxation proposals submitted by major business stakeholders, including the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OICCI), have once again introduced fresh ideas to revive economic momentum and place the country on a path of sustainable growth.

The OICCI proposals focus not only on mobilising foreign direct investment but also on strengthening revenue generation for the national exchequer. The chamber represents more than 196 member companies from over 30 countries, with investments exceeding \$20.9 billion in Pakistan. As one of the country's oldest business chambers, its member companies contribute a substantial share of government revenues.

The OICCI has submitted its taxation proposals for fiscal year 2026–27 with the expectation that the government will move away from managing the economy through ad hoc taxation and instead build a stable, investment-oriented fiscal regime capable of restoring growth, credibility, and competitiveness.

There is little doubt that the government needs additional revenue. Yet the methods used to raise taxes continue to discourage investment and undermine long-term economic productivity. In this context, the taxation proposals submitted by the OICCI for fiscal year 2026–27 deserve serious consideration.

The proposals go beyond immediate economic concerns and call for long-term structural fiscal reform. Their central argument is that Pakistan can no longer rely on repeatedly increasing tax rates on already documented sectors of the economy. Sustainable revenue growth, they argue, can only come through ex-

pansion of the tax base, digitisation, simplification of compliance procedures, and restoration of investor confidence.

Pakistan today faces a difficult combination of fiscal stress, low productivity, weak industrial competitiveness, capital flight concerns, and declining investor confidence. International Monetary Fund-backed macroeconomic stabilisation measures may have reduced immediate external default risks, but the underlying structure of the economy remains fragile.

The country continues to operate with an extremely narrow tax base, while the formal sector carries a disproportionately heavy burden. A large part of the informal economy remains outside the tax net, while documented businesses face rising compliance costs and growing regulatory complexity. This imbalance has created a distorted environment in which



tax compliance often becomes a competitive disadvantage rather than a lawful obligation.

For this reason, the OICCI proposals place documentation and digitisation at the centre of reform. Modern tax systems increasingly depend on digital integration, transaction traceability, data analytics, and automation to reduce leakages and improve collection efficiency.

Pakistan has made some progress through digital invoicing, online filing systems, and banking documentation requirements. However, implementation remains fragmented and inconsistent. The larger challenge lies in integrating taxation with the broader digital economy. Electronic payments, retail digitisation, electronic invoicing, and data-linked compliance systems can significantly reduce undocumented economic activity without imposing excessive burdens on already compliant

businesses.

International experience shows that countries which successfully expanded revenue collection did so not by raising tax rates but by widening economic formalisation.

Policy consistency is another critical concern. One of the most damaging features of Pakistan's tax system has been abrupt policy shifts, retrospective taxation measures, complicated withholding arrangements, and constantly changing compliance requirements.

Foreign investors cannot make long-term commitments in an environment where tax obligations change unpredictably. This uncertainty has caused significant damage to investor confidence. It is one of the reasons why foreign direct investment remains far below potential despite Pakistan's strategic location, demographic strength, and large domestic market.

Local investors also tend to favour real estate speculation or offshore diversification instead of industrial expansion.

The role of regulatory institutions also requires improvement. For Pakistan to reposition itself as a credible investment destination, tax policy must shift from short-term revenue extraction to becoming an instrument of long-term economic growth.

The tax net must expand horizontally rather than vertically. Compliance should become simpler, more transparent, and less adversarial. Tax policy should support

industrial competitiveness, strengthen export-oriented sectors, and encourage value-added production.

Equally important are manufacturing modernisation, expansion of logistics infrastructure, and investment in productive sectors.

Pakistan stands at an important economic crossroads. It faces demographic pressures, technological transition, regional connectivity opportunities, and major changes in global supply chains. Yet these opportunities cannot be fully utilised without undertaking basic structural reforms.

The coming budget therefore offers more than a routine fiscal exercise. It presents an opportunity to rethink the country's economic direction. Whether the government chooses short-term revenue fixes or meaningful structural reform will shape Pakistan's growth prospects for years to come.

US-Iran standoff: no war, no peace – will the ceasefire hold?

Nasim Ahmed

The guns may have fallen silent between the United States and Iran, but peace remains elusive. After weeks of intense military confrontation that shook the Middle East and unsettled global energy markets, Washington and Tehran now find themselves in a familiar but dangerous position: neither full-scale war nor genuine reconciliation. The current ceasefire, brokered largely through Pakistani mediation, has created a temporary pause in hostilities, yet the underlying disputes that pushed the two adversaries to the brink of catastrophe remain unresolved.

The central question confronting the region today is whether this fragile ceasefire can survive mounting mistrust, competing strategic objectives and repeated provocations. Equally important is whether the United States and Iran can eventually reach a broader political agreement capable of transforming a temporary truce into durable peace.

At present, the prospects remain uncertain. The recent conflict demonstrated how rapidly tensions can spiral out of control in the Gulf. American and Israeli strikes on Iranian military and nuclear-linked facilities triggered retaliatory Iranian missile and drone attacks on United States assets and allied states in the region. Tehran's partial disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical energy corridors, sent shockwaves through global oil markets and heightened fears of a wider regional war.

Although the ceasefire has reduced the intensity of fighting, violations and accusations continue. Reports of drone incidents in the Gulf, naval confrontations and hostile rhetoric from both sides indicate that the truce remains highly fragile.

Several factors, however, favour the continuation of the ceasefire. First, neither Washington nor Tehran appears eager for another round of large-scale military escalation. The conflict imposed heavy economic and political costs on both sides. Iran suffered extensive damage to infrastructure and military facilities, while the United States faced rising energy prices, growing regional instability and increasing international pressure to avoid another prolonged Middle Eastern conflict.

Second, regional powers including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and China have intensified diplomatic efforts to prevent renewed warfare. Pakistan, in particular,

has emerged as an important intermediary, facilitating indirect communication between the two sides and helping shape ceasefire proposals.

Third, economic realities favour restraint. Iran urgently needs sanctions relief and access to frozen assets to stabilise its struggling economy, while the United States seeks stability in global oil markets and freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. A collapse of negotiations could once again threaten global energy supplies and trigger economic turbulence worldwide.

Despite these incentives for peace, the obstacles to a comprehensive agreement remain formidable. The most difficult issue is Iran's nuclear programme. Washington insists that Tehran must sharply limit, or entirely halt, uranium enrichment activities. American officials argue that Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium presents an unacceptable proliferation risk and fear that Tehran could eventually move towards nuclear weapons capability. Iran, however, maintains that it has a sovereign right under international law to pursue civilian nuclear enrichment for peaceful purposes.

This dispute derailed previous negotiations and continues to complicate current talks. Reports suggest that the United States is seeking a long-term moratorium on enrichment, possibly extending from fifteen to twenty years, while Iran appears willing to accept only temporary restrictions.

Another contentious issue is Iran's ballistic missile programme. The United States and its regional allies view Iran's expanding missile arsenal as a direct threat to Gulf security and Israel. Tehran, however, regards its missile capabilities as essential to national defence, especially after years of sanctions, isolation and military pressure. Any Iranian concession on missiles would therefore carry significant domestic political risks for the leadership in Tehran.

The question of regional influence further complicates diplomacy. Washington continues to oppose Iran's support for armed non-state actors and allied militias across the Middle East, including groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Iran argues that these alliances form part of its legitimate regional security architecture and provide deterrence against hostile powers.

The Strait of Hormuz remains another highly sensitive issue. Iran seeks greater control and security oversight in the strategic waterway, while the United States insists on

unrestricted international navigation. Given that nearly one-fifth of global oil trade passes through the strait, even limited tensions can have worldwide consequences.

Sanctions relief is equally divisive. Iran wants the lifting of American and international sanctions as part of any agreement, including access to frozen financial assets. The United States, however, prefers a phased approach linked to Iranian compliance with nuclear and security commitments. This sequencing dispute — who acts first and how quickly — has historically undermined trust between the two sides.

Domestic politics in both countries also constrain diplomacy. Hardliners in Tehran remain deeply suspicious of American intentions and fear that compromise would project weakness after months of confrontation. Meanwhile, many American policymakers argue that Iran responds only to pressure and warn against granting concessions without strict verification mechanisms. Political divisions on both sides make compromise difficult even when strategic logic favours negotiation.

Yet diplomacy has not completely failed. Recent reports indicate that negotiators are discussing a limited framework agreement or memorandum of understanding aimed at formalising the ceasefire and opening the door to broader negotiations. The proposed framework reportedly includes phased sanctions relief, the reopening of commercial shipping lanes and temporary restrictions on aspects of Iran's nuclear activities.

Even if such an interim arrangement emerges, however, it would likely represent conflict management rather than genuine reconciliation. The ideological hostility, strategic rivalry and mutual mistrust between the United States and Iran run too deep to disappear quickly.

The Middle East therefore appears headed towards a prolonged period of "no war, no peace" — a tense equilibrium marked by ceasefires, indirect negotiations, proxy confrontations and periodic escalations.

Whether the ceasefire holds will depend less on goodwill than on cold strategic calculation. As long as both sides believe the costs of renewed war outweigh the benefits, diplomacy may survive. But one miscalculation, one attack by a proxy group or one breakdown in negotiations could once again push the region towards open conflict.

For now, the ceasefire remains alive, but precariously so.

Divergent inflation forecasts

Muhammad Hassan

Pakistan's economic managers have sent conflicting signals on the inflation outlook at a time when policy clarity is especially important. Within hours of each other, the State Bank of Pakistan and the Economic Coordination Committee presented sharply different assessments of price pressures. While the central bank warned that inflation could move into double digits and remain above its 5–7 percent target for much of FY27, the ECC projected that inflationary pressures were easing and that economic stability was gradually taking hold.

The contrast is more than a technical difference in interpretation. It goes directly to the credibility of economic management at a time when businesses, investors, and households depend on clear and consistent signals to make decisions. When key institutions appear to describe different trajectories for the same economy, uncertainty naturally increases.

The monetary side of the policy debate has been relatively consistent. The State Bank has repeatedly pointed to rising global energy prices, driven largely by geopolitical tensions in the **Middle East**, as the principal source of current inflationary pressure. Pakistan's exposure to imported fuel makes the domestic economy particularly sensitive to such external shocks.

Recent inflation data reflects these concerns. Headline inflation has risen to 7.3 percent, while core inflation has reached 7.8 percent. For the central bank, the concern extends beyond the immediate rise in prices. The larger risk lies in second-round effects, where temporary increases in fuel and energy costs gradually spread into transport charges, production costs, and broader pricing structures across the economy.

This is precisely the kind of dynamic that monetary authorities seek to prevent. Once inflation expectations become embedded, they can become much more difficult to reverse. Businesses begin adjusting prices in anticipation of higher future costs, while households alter consumption and wage expectations accordingly. In such circumstances, inflation can become more persistent even if the original external shock begins to fade.

It is for this reason that tighter monetary policy has increasingly been expected by market participants. In recent weeks, some market projections had already begun factoring in the possibility of a significant increase in the policy rate, with estimates ranging up to 200 basis points.

From that perspective, the State Bank's warning does not appear unusual or controversial. It represents a conventional monetary policy response to external price shocks. The central objective is to anchor expectations early and preserve macroeconomic stability before inflationary pressures spread more deeply into the broader economy.

The difficulty emerges when fiscal and administrative messaging appears to move in a different direction. The ECC's recent assessment has emphasized moderation in prices. It pointed to improved supply chain management, tighter administrative oversight, and gradual stabilization in key commodity markets. Weekly price data and selective declines in certain essential items were cited as evidence that inflationary pressures were beginning to ease.

At one level, this assessment is not without basis. Short-term price movements in food items and selected commodities can indeed reflect temporary improvements in supply conditions or administrative interventions. Such developments may provide some immediate relief to consumers.

However, the two narratives operate on different time horizons and address different dimensions of inflation. The State Bank's assessment is forward-looking. It focuses on medium-term risks and the transmission of external energy shocks into broader domestic price structures. The ECC's assessment, by contrast, places greater emphasis on immediate price trends and recent administrative outcomes.

Both perspectives can contain elements of truth. Temporary easing in specific commodities does not necessarily invalidate the central bank's concern about broader inflationary momentum. Similarly, a warning about future inflation risks does not preclude short-term moderation in particular segments of the market.

The problem lies not in the existence of different perspectives, but in the absence of a clearly articulated framework that connects them. When these assessments are presented without sufficient explanation, they risk appearing contradictory rather than complementary. This has practical consequences. Economic agents do not respond merely to individual data points; they respond to expectations shaped by official communication.

If the central bank signals monetary tightening because inflation risks are rising, while the government simultaneously emphasizes stabilization, uncertainty about the policy direction increases. Businesses may delay investment decisions, investors may become more cautious,

and households may struggle to interpret the broader economic outlook.

Such mixed signals can weaken policy effectiveness. Monetary policy works in part through expectations. If those expectations become confused or fragmented, the impact of policy measures can be diluted. The divergence also raises broader questions about coordination at the highest level of economic management. Monetary policy, fiscal policy, and administrative price management are expected to complement one another.

When they appear to be operating on different assumptions about the inflation trajectory, it can suggest either limited information sharing or a deeper difference in policy interpretation. Neither is particularly reassuring at a time of external economic volatility. A more coherent explanation is possible. It may be that the ECC is focusing primarily on short-term price developments, while the State Bank is highlighting medium-term risks. That distinction is valid. But it needs to be explicitly communicated.

Without that clarity, differences in tone are more likely to be interpreted as inconsistency rather than nuance. The broader external context makes this issue especially important. Pakistan's inflation dynamics remain heavily influenced by global commodity prices, particularly oil. The ongoing instability in the Middle East has already increased energy costs, with clear implications for fuel prices, transport charges, industrial inputs, and household budgets.

In such an environment, policy coherence becomes more valuable—not less. The credibility of economic management depends not only on the accuracy of individual assessments but also on the consistency of the broader policy narrative. Divergent messaging at the highest levels creates room for doubt precisely when confidence needs reinforcement.

What the current situation requires is not identical language from every institution, but alignment within a shared analytical framework. Policymakers must clearly distinguish between short-term price movements and medium-term inflation risks, while ensuring that monetary and fiscal communication remain mutually reinforcing.

In conclusion, inflation will not be contained through messaging alone. It will require coordinated policy, credible implementation, and above all, a common understanding of the risks facing the economy. Without that coherence, even well-designed measures may lose effectiveness in an environment clouded by mixed signals and uncertain expectations.

Power subsidy reform: Economic necessity and political risk

Muhammad Zain

Pakistan's commitment to the International Monetary Fund to phase out untargeted residential electricity subsidies from next year and replace them with targeted support through the Benazir Income Support Programme marks one of the most politically sensitive economic decisions currently confronting the government. While the reform is likely to provoke public resistance, it has become increasingly difficult to postpone in the face of mounting fiscal pressures and deepening structural distortions in the power sector.

For years, electricity subsidies for low-consumption households were intended to provide relief to lower-middle-income families. Consumers using up to 200 units of electricity benefited from lower tariffs under a broad subsidy framework. The policy was originally introduced as a social protection measure, designed to shield vulnerable households from rising energy costs.

Over time, however, the system has produced unintended consequences. High tariffs outside the subsidized slab have created strong incentives for what is often described as "legal power theft." Households with the financial means to do so have increasingly installed multiple electricity meters, dividing their consumption across separate connections in order to remain below the subsidized threshold.

This practice does not involve illegal tapping of electricity, yet it distorts the intended purpose of the subsidy. Instead of directing support primarily to households genuinely in need, the current structure rewards those who are better positioned to manipulate the tariff system. What began as targeted relief has gradually evolved into a pricing distortion that undermines both fairness and efficiency.

The government's agreement with the IMF to move toward income-based targeting through the National Socio-Economic Registry therefore reflects more than an externally imposed programme condition. It also acknowledges a hard fiscal reality: Pakistan's budgetary space has narrowed to the point where continuing broad-based untargeted subsidies is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

The power sector itself remains burdened by persistent structural weaknesses. circular debt, transmission losses, under-recovery, theft, and operational inefficiencies continue to place heavy pressure on public finances. In such an environment, carrying hundreds of billions of rupees in untargeted subsidies imposes an increasingly difficult

burden on the national budget.

The present subsidy structure also creates hidden economic costs beyond the immediate fiscal burden. Residential subsidies for low-consumption households are partly financed through cross-subsidization, which shifts costs onto other consumer categories—particularly industry and commercial users.

This has important economic implications. Higher electricity tariffs for industrial consumers increase production costs, weaken competitiveness, and reduce export potential. In a country already struggling with investment constraints, weak industrial growth, and limited job creation, expensive energy further undermines economic performance.

From a policy perspective, targeted subsidies offer a more rational approach. Directing public support to households identified through income-based criteria can reduce



misuse of public resources and improve the efficiency of social spending. In principle, it allows scarce fiscal resources to be concentrated on those most in need.

Yet the transition will not be painless. Between households that qualify for full social assistance and affluent consumers who can absorb higher tariffs lies a large and economically fragile lower-middle-income population. These households often live under considerable financial pressure. Many do not fall within officially defined poverty thresholds, but they continue to face stagnant wages, rising inflation, and growing utility costs. Their incomes may place them above formal eligibility criteria, yet their economic vulnerability remains substantial.

For this segment of the population, the removal of subsidized electricity could have immediate and visible consequences. Reduced disposable income may force families to cut back not only on electricity consumption but also on other essential household spending. During periods of extreme summer heat, even

maintaining basic comfort through lighting and fans can become a financial challenge.

This is where the political sensitivity of the reform becomes especially acute. While targeted support may improve fiscal efficiency, it also risks increasing the hardship of those who are economically vulnerable but officially categorized as "non-poor."

Public perceptions of fairness will therefore matter greatly. Citizens are likely to scrutinize the state's broader spending priorities when asked to absorb higher electricity costs. The political legitimacy of the reform could come under pressure if households perceive that ordinary consumers are being asked to bear austerity while entrenched privileges remain untouched. That perception is strengthened by the continued existence of subsidized or free electricity benefits enjoyed by influential segments of the public sector, including certain privileged power-sector employees and institutional beneficiaries.

Whether fully justified or not, such asymmetries carry political consequences. When economic adjustment appears unevenly distributed, public frustration tends to intensify. The sense that reform burdens fall disproportionately on ordinary citizens can weaken trust in both government policy and broader economic restructuring.

This makes the political management of the transition as important as the economic design itself. If the reform is to succeed, policymakers will need to communicate clearly, ensure transparency in targeting, and demonstrate visible efforts to address privileges and inefficiencies elsewhere in the system.

A well-designed transition may also require supplementary measures. Expanding the reach of targeted social protection, introducing transitional support for vulnerable lower-middle-income households, and improving billing transparency could help soften the social impact.

In conclusion, the move to replace untargeted electricity subsidies with income-based support reflects an unavoidable economic reality. Pakistan's fiscal position and power-sector weaknesses no longer allow the continuation of broad-based subsidies that distort pricing and strain public finances. Yet economic necessity does not erase political risk. The challenge now lies in ensuring that reform is not only fiscally sound but also socially credible. Without fairness, transparency, and careful implementation, a necessary adjustment could easily become a source of deeper public discontent.

IMF review and Pakistan's structural challenges

Shahid Hussain

The International Monetary Fund's approval of the latest review of Pakistan's ongoing programme comes at a moment of heightened global economic uncertainty. With tensions in the Middle East disrupting energy markets and adding volatility to international prices, the timing is particularly important for a country whose external position remains highly vulnerable to imported energy shocks.

For Pakistan, the latest tranche offers a measure of short-term relief. The country's balance-of-payments position continues to depend heavily on external financing, remittance inflows, and access to international support. In that context, the approval of the review helps ease immediate financing pressures and provides a degree of reassurance to markets.

The outcome itself was not entirely unexpected. Pakistan has broadly remained on track under the ongoing Extended Fund Facility, and the approval was widely viewed as a matter of timing rather than fundamental uncertainty. Yet it did not come without cost. Reports indicate that the government accepted around a dozen additional conditions, reaffirming its commitment to pre-conflict programme targets in order to keep the stabilization effort intact.

One of the most consequential elements of this commitment has been the decision to maintain a tight monetary stance despite growing domestic pressure for interest rate cuts. The IMF's emphasis on caution reflects concern that rising global energy prices could feed into domestic inflation, particularly through fuel, transport, and imported input costs.

In practical terms, this means that economic policymakers are being asked to prioritise macroeconomic stability over short-term growth impulses. While lower interest rates could provide relief to businesses and stimulate domestic demand, the current global environment has made inflation control and external stability the more immediate priority. Another politically difficult commitment relates to the gradual withdrawal of untargeted energy subsidies. For years, broad-based subsidies have been used to shield consumers from higher utility costs. However, these measures have also imposed a heavy fiscal burden and often failed to target the most vulnerable households effectively.

The continuation of subsidy reform therefore signals a difficult but significant policy choice. It reflects an effort to strengthen fiscal sustainability, even though such decisions inevitably carry social and political costs, particularly

for lower-middle-income households already under economic pressure.

Equally important is the government's commitment to achieving a primary budget surplus equivalent to 2 percent of gross domestic product. This target is central to the broader stabilization framework because it seeks to ensure that government revenues exceed non-interest expenditures. In effect, it is intended to contain borrowing pressures and improve debt sustainability.

Yet while the IMF has expressed satisfaction with programme implementation, that should not be mistaken for a broader economic victory. The current phase of stability remains largely supported by external financing rather than by durable structural improvement. Pakistan's external position has improved in the short term, but the foundations remain fragile. Export competitiveness remains weak, produc-



tivity growth remains limited, and investment levels remain insufficient to generate sustained expansion. In other words, recent gains have helped stabilize the economy, but they have not yet transformed its underlying structure.

That is why continued policy discipline remains critical. The present stability is not yet self-sustaining. It remains vulnerable to both domestic policy slippages and external shocks. Pakistan's past engagements with the IMF have often followed a familiar pattern. Initial compliance under immediate financing pressure has typically produced short-term stabilization. But once external pressures eased, reforms often lost momentum, and policy reversals gradually undermined earlier gains.

The current global environment leaves far less room for such reversals. Geopolitical instability, particularly in energy-producing regions, has increased the risks facing oil-importing economies. A sustained rise in oil prices would directly widen Pakistan's import bill, put renewed pressure on foreign exchange reserves, and intensify inflationary pressures. Under such conditions, premature fiscal loosening or rapid monetary easing could quickly reverse recent

gains. What appears stable today could become vulnerable again if policy discipline weakens before stronger structural foundations are built.

However, the more fundamental challenge extends beyond programme reviews and tranche approvals. Pakistan cannot indefinitely rely on external lenders to finance structural weaknesses that remain politically difficult to address.

A durable path to stability requires deeper reforms that have long been acknowledged but repeatedly postponed. Broadening the tax base remains one of the most important of these. Pakistan's tax structure continues to rely heavily on a narrow base, indirect taxation, and a limited number of formal-sector contributors. Reforming state-owned enterprises is equally critical. Persistent losses in public-sector entities continue to place pressure on public finances, diverting resources away from productive investment and social priorities.

The energy sector also remains central to the reform agenda. Improving efficiency, reducing losses, and addressing structural weaknesses in pricing and distribution are essential not only for fiscal management but also for broader economic competitiveness.

Export performance represents another long-standing challenge. Without stronger export competitiveness, Pakistan's external account will remain structurally vulnerable. Sustainable stability ultimately depends on the country's ability to generate foreign exchange through productive economic activity rather than repeated external borrowing.

The broader international context makes these reforms even more urgent. The global economy is entering a period of heightened uncertainty, where external financing conditions may tighten and geopolitical disruptions may become more frequent. In such an environment, resilience will depend less on emergency inflows and more on domestic economic strength. Countries with stronger institutional frameworks, competitive export sectors, and credible fiscal structures will be better positioned to withstand external shocks.

In conclusion, the IMF's latest review provides Pakistan with valuable breathing space at a difficult moment. It reduces immediate financing pressures and supports short-term macroeconomic stability. But it does not resolve the deeper structural weaknesses that continue to constrain long-term growth. The real test now lies not in securing another tranche, but in using this window of stability to undertake reforms that reduce dependence on external support and build a more resilient economic foundation.

Pakistan's Afghan repatriation challenge remains far from over

Raza Khan

Pakistan's long-standing challenge of hosting millions of Afghan nationals remains far from fully resolved, despite the return of a significant number of people to Afghanistan. The presence of more than 4.4 million Afghan nationals in Pakistan, whether as refugees or undocumented residents, has been a major issue for decades. The matter carries important implications for security, governance, public services and social cohesion.

According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, more than 2.1 million Afghans had returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan by mid-April 2026. Although this is a substantial figure, it remains limited when viewed against the broader scale of Afghan migration into Pakistan over the past four decades. Officially, Pakistan has maintained that around 4.4 million Afghan nationals have been living in the country. These include holders of Proof of Registration cards and Afghan Citizen Cards, as well as undocumented residents. Independent estimates, however, have often placed the total number of Afghan nationals who have lived in Pakistan since 1980 at between six and eight million.

One of the central difficulties has been the absence of precise and comprehensive data. Weaknesses in registration systems, incomplete surveys and the inability to maintain updated records have made accurate counting difficult. Births within Afghan families in Pakistan have further complicated the documentation process. In addition, administrative weaknesses and corruption in registration procedures have at times created uncertainty regarding the exact number of Afghan nationals residing in the country. These factors have prevented policymakers from obtaining a clear picture of the scale of the issue.

Political considerations have also contributed to the complexity of the matter. Over the years, different policy approaches toward Afghanistan, including broader strategic calculations, often delayed the development of a consistent long-term framework on refugee management, documentation and repatriation. As a result, Pakistan struggled

for decades to formulate a comprehensive and effective policy.

In recent years, however, the state has pursued a more structured repatriation policy. The return of around 2.1 million Afghan nationals within a relatively short period reflects a notable shift in implementation. Compared with previous decades, when returns remained limited, this represents a significant administrative development.

At the same time, the issue remains far from fully addressed. A substantial number of undocumented Afghan nationals are still living in Pakistan. Policymakers therefore face the challenge of balancing national security

groups were able to exploit. These factors, combined with broader regional instability, contributed to the rise of violent extremism that has caused heavy human and economic losses for Pakistan.

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 added another dimension to the issue. Pakistani officials have argued that the changed political situation in Afghanistan strengthens the case for repatriation, particularly in view of Islamabad's security concerns. Afghan authorities have also publicly called on Afghan nationals abroad to return home.

From a legal perspective, Pakistan is



considerations, economic pressures, administrative capacity and humanitarian responsibilities. Provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which have hosted large Afghan populations for many years, have faced particular pressure on infrastructure, employment opportunities, education, health services and local resources.

Security concerns have become especially prominent in recent years. Pakistan has repeatedly linked the presence of cross-border militant networks, including the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, to instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The difficult geography of former tribal areas, weak institutional presence and long-standing economic deprivation created conditions that militant

not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, international refugee law generally holds that refugee protection may end when the circumstances that caused displacement have fundamentally changed. This principle remains part of the broader debate surrounding Afghan repatriation.

The challenge for Pakistan now is to develop a clear, lawful and sustainable policy that addresses national security, economic pressures and administrative realities while ensuring that any repatriation process is orderly, transparent and consistent with humanitarian principles. The issue has shaped Pakistan's domestic and regional policy for more than four decades and will continue to require careful management in the years ahead.

Childhood lead exposure demands urgent action

Dr. Fatima Khan

The latest findings on childhood lead exposure in Pakistan should serve as a serious warning to policymakers. A joint study by the Ministry of National Health Services and UNICEF has revealed that four in ten children between the ages of 12 and 36 months in high-risk urban areas carry dangerous levels of lead in their blood.

This is no longer a narrow technical issue confined to public health specialists. It is a growing national emergency unfolding quietly in homes, streets, industrial neighbourhoods, and informal settlements. Lead poisoning is particularly dangerous because its effects are often invisible in the early stages. A child may appear healthy while exposure is already causing irreversible damage. Unlike many other health threats, the consequences are not temporary. Lead affects neurological development in ways that can permanently reduce cognitive ability, weaken memory, slow learning capacity, and contribute to behavioural problems.

The long-term implications extend beyond individual health. Childhood lead exposure directly undermines human capital. A child affected in the early years may struggle later in school, face reduced educational attainment, and experience weaker employment prospects in adulthood. In that sense, lead poisoning is not only a medical issue—it is an economic and developmental challenge that can affect national productivity for decades.

One of the most troubling aspects of the study is the sharp inequality in exposure levels across different regions. In Hattar, nearly nine out of ten children were found to be affected. In Islamabad, by contrast, exposure levels were significantly lower.

This contrast points to more than environmental variation. It highlights deep disparities in governance, regulation, and enforcement. Industrial zones and informal economic clusters often operate under weak oversight, creating conditions where environmental health risks can accumulate with little monitoring or intervention.

The sources of lead identified by the study are neither unknown nor newly discovered. They include industrial emissions, unsafe battery recycling, contaminated consumer goods, and everyday household products such as spices, cosmetics, and paints.

These risks have been recognized for years. That exposure remains widespread therefore reflects not a lack of scientific understanding, but a failure of effective regulation. Pakistan already has legal frameworks governing industrial pollution, emissions standards, and product safety. The problem lies in implementation. Regulatory enforcement remains inconsistent, under-resourced, and in some cases compromised by weak institutional capacity. In many high-risk areas, monitoring is limited and compliance mechanisms remain inadequate.

The persistence of informal battery recycling is especially concerning. In many communities, used batteries are dismantled and processed under unsafe conditions, often close to residential areas. Without proper con-



tainment and disposal systems, lead contamination can spread through air, soil, dust, and water—creating prolonged exposure risks for children living nearby.

Public awareness remains another critical weakness. Many families are simply unaware that their daily environments may be exposing their children to toxic substances. Parents may not recognize that products used in the home, local industrial activity, or poorly regulated informal markets can create serious health hazards.

This makes prevention at the household level particularly important. Even the strongest regulations will have limited impact if communities are not equipped with clear, practical, and accessible information. Awareness campaigns must therefore become a central part of any effective response.

The measures proposed at the launch of the report are important and necessary. These include the development of a national action plan, stronger surveillance systems, and greater

coordination across sectors such as health, environment, industry, and local government.

But policy frameworks alone will not be enough. Their effectiveness will depend on political commitment, sustained financing, and measurable implementation. Task forces and advisory committees can help define priorities, but they cannot substitute for enforceable action. A credible national response requires concrete steps. Informal recycling activities must be regulated or formalized. Lead-based paints and hazardous consumer products must be phased out. Industrial emissions standards must be enforced consistently, without selective exemptions or administrative delays.

Surveillance capacity also needs to be strengthened. Routine monitoring of high-risk communities, targeted blood testing in vulnerable populations, and stronger environmental inspection systems are essential to understanding both the scale and geography of the problem.

International partnerships can support this effort. Initiatives such as Lead-Free Future, which aims to eliminate childhood lead poisoning by 2040, can provide technical expertise, global experience, and policy momentum.

Ultimately, however, responsibility rests with domestic institutions. External partnerships can assist, but durable progress will depend on whether Pakistan's own regulatory, public health, and environmental systems are willing and able to respond decisively. The urgency of the issue cannot be overstated. The early years of childhood are a critical period of neurological development. Damage sustained during this stage can shape educational outcomes, social development, and economic potential throughout life.

In that sense, the cost of inaction will not simply be measured in health statistics. It will be reflected in weaker human development, reduced productivity, and lost national potential.

In conclusion, childhood lead exposure must now move to the centre of Pakistan's public health agenda. The scientific evidence is clear, the sources of contamination are well understood, and the policy tools required to reduce exposure already exist. What remains uncertain is whether the seriousness of the crisis will finally generate sustained political action. Without decisive intervention, millions of children will continue to bear the hidden cost of a preventable environmental failure.

Producing doctors, losing standards: A system under strain

Rasheed Ali

On a warm afternoon in Lahore, a final-year medical student sits outside her college's skills lab, waiting for her turn to practise a clinical procedure that may or may not be supervised that day. Inside, the lab contains a few basic diagnostic tools, and limited simulation equipment. "We study a lot of theory," she says cautiously, asking not to be named. "But when we enter hospitals, we realise we are not confident with real patients. Everything feels different from what we were taught."

Her experience is not an exception. It reflects a broader unease within Pakistan's rapidly expanding medical education sector, where the growth of private medical colleges has far outpaced the infrastructure, faculty strength, and clinical training required to sustain quality education.

Over the past two decades, Pakistan's medical education system has undergone significant expansion under the regulatory oversight of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), the statutory body responsible for approving institutions, accrediting programmes, and setting minimum standards for medical training. Today, the country is estimated to have around 180 to 190 medical and dental colleges, with more than 120 operating in the private sector alone. This rapid proliferation has created opportunities for aspiring doctors, but it has also raised persistent questions about standards, supervision, and outcomes.

A senior official associated with PMDC, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue, describes the situation as structurally imbalanced. "We have expanded institutions faster than we have expanded faculty and clinical training capacity," the official says. "In some cases, colleges are approved based on initial compliance, but sustaining those standards over time becomes a challenge. The regulatory framework exists, but enforcement has historically been uneven."

Behind the official numbers lies a deeper crisis of capacity. The PMDC assessments have indicated that Pakistan requires more than 26,000 qualified medical faculty members to properly staff its institutions, yet the available number remains significantly lower. The gap forces many colleges to rely on visiting lecturers, overstretched professors, or in some cases, minimally experienced staff to fill essential teaching roles.

This shortage is particularly damaging in

clinical education, where hands-on supervision is critical. A former dean of a public sector medical university, Prof Dr A. Rahman, explains the implications bluntly. "Medicine is not a subject that can be learned through lectures alone. It requires repeated supervised exposure to patients. When faculty is missing or overstretched, that chain of learning breaks down." He adds, "In some private institutions, students are paying substantial fees but receiving fragmented clinical training. That is a serious concern for patient safety in the long term."

The issue is compounded by the uneven quality of infrastructure across institutions. While regulations require private medical colleges to be attached to teaching hospitals and maintain functional laboratories, implementation varies widely. In some cases, students report limited access to real hospital wards or



over-reliance on affiliated hospitals where they compete for clinical exposure with multiple institutions.

A senior physician at a major public hospital in Islamabad describes the consequences of this gap when graduates enter the workforce. "We are increasingly seeing young doctors who are academically strong but clinically underprepared," he says. "They know the theory but struggle with basic bedside skills. The system ends up retraining them during house jobs, which delays their development."

Despite these concerns, the private medical education sector continues to attract thousands of students each year, driven by high demand for medical careers and the limited capacity of public sector institutions. Estimates suggest that medical and dental colleges across Pakistan collectively enrol and produce tens of thousands of graduates annually, contributing significantly to the healthcare workforce. However, experts caution that quantity is not translating into consistent quality.

Tuition fees in private medical colleges are another point of contention. In many

institutions, the total cost of education runs into several million rupees over the course of a degree, placing a heavy financial burden on families. Critics argue that such high fees are not always matched by commensurate investment in teaching infrastructure or faculty development.

A PMDC-linked education analyst summarises the dilemma: "There is a mismatch between commercial expansion and educational responsibility. Medical education has, in some cases, become a business model rather than a public service." He adds, "When profit becomes the dominant driver, investment in labs, faculty, and training often becomes secondary."

In response to these concerns, the PMDC has recently introduced measures aimed at stabilising the sector. These include restrictions on the establishment of new medical colleges and tighter controls on student intake in existing institutions. The regulator has also stressed stricter inspections, improved faculty requirements, and better enforcement of hospital affiliation standards.

A senior PMDC representative explains the rationale: "The pause on expansion is necessary to allow the system to catch up. We need to consolidate quality before we expand further. Otherwise, we risk producing graduates who are not fully prepared for clinical practice."

Yet students remain caught in the middle of reform and reality. Many express frustration at the gap between expectations and training outcomes. "We are told we are future doctors, but often we don't get enough exposure to real cases," says a student in Karachi. "We worry about what kind of doctors we will become if things don't improve."

Despite these challenges, there is consensus among experts that Pakistan's medical education system is not beyond repair. Rather, it requires sustained reform, better enforcement of existing regulations, investment in faculty development, and a shift away from unchecked expansion.

As Prof. Dr. Rahman puts it, "Pakistan is producing a large number of doctors, but the question is whether they are fully trained to meet the needs of patients. Medical education is a long-term national responsibility. If we compromise on it, the effects will be felt across the entire healthcare system for decades."

For now, the system continues to expand, but so too do the concerns about what that expansion truly delivers.

The BJP's Bengal victory exposes the erosion of Indian democracy

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

Recent state elections in India have produced one of the most consequential political verdicts in the country's contemporary history, especially in West Bengal (WB), a border state of more than 100 million people that has long resisted the advance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

For the first time in history, the BJP has captured power in Bengal, winning 207 of the 293 seats declared so far and reducing the TMC to 80. One seat is due for repolling.

The scale of the BJP's victory has transformed India's political map. But the verdict has also triggered profound questions over the integrity of the electoral process itself.

The election took place after an extraordinarily sweeping and deeply controversial "Special Intensive Revision" (SIR) of electoral rolls conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI), ostensibly to remove duplicate, deceased or "ineligible" voters. Across West Bengal, more than nine million names — nearly 12 percent of the electorate — were initially flagged, removed or subjected to scrutiny during the exercise.

The exercise disproportionately targeted Muslims, migrant workers and poorer voters in districts where the BJP has historically struggled electorally. In many constituencies won by the BJP, the number of deleted or disputed voters exceeded the margin of victory.

The implications are grave. India may have crossed from electoral distortion into mass disenfranchisement. Bengal is not merely another Indian state. Partitioned in 1947 on religious lines during the violent birth of India and Pakistan, it shares a border of more than 2,200 kilometres with Bangladesh and has long occupied a central place in India's political imagination. Muslims constitute roughly 27 percent of the state's population and have historically voted strategically to block the BJP's rise.

That is precisely why Bengal mattered so much to Modi.

The BJP had expanded rapidly in the state over the past decade but failed to dislodge Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in 2021. The 2026 election was therefore viewed both as a referendum on Banerjee's weakening government and as a test of whether Indian elections still retained the institutional credibility they once enjoyed.

The controversy centred on the SIR process, which was first rolled out in Bihar in June 2025 before being expanded to nine states and

three Union Territories, including West Bengal. Under the exercise, Booth Level Officers — local election officials tasked with maintaining voter rolls — conducted house-to-house verification of voters. Citizens were required to re-establish their eligibility through documentary proof within extremely tight deadlines. Failure to do so could result in deletion from the electoral rolls.

For the first time since India adopted universal adult suffrage in its first general election of 1951-52, the burden of proving voting eligibility was effectively shifted to citizens themselves. This represented a dangerous rupture in the democratic compact.

The process hit migrant workers particularly hard. Bihar and Bengal are among India's largest sources of migrant labour, with millions working in distant states. Many were unable to return home within the narrow verification



windows. Others struggled with inconsistencies in spelling, missing legacy documents, changes of surname after marriage or discrepancies between official records.

These problems were especially acute among Muslims and poorer women. The ECI insisted the exercise was administrative and necessary to remove duplicate or fraudulent entries. The BJP framed it as an attempt to eliminate "illegal infiltrators", especially alleged undocumented Muslim migrants from Bangladesh.

But in Bengal, the exercise quickly acquired the character of a political operation. Districts with large Muslim populations witnessed some of the highest voter deletions. The process lacked transparency, while AI-assisted "logical discrepancy" software disproportionately flagged Muslim names because of transliteration inconsistencies between Urdu, Bengali and English spellings. The TMC repeatedly alleged that the ECI was functioning less as an independent constitutional body and more as an extension of the ruling party's political machinery.

The Supreme Court of India intervened

several times but ultimately allowed the process to continue. Millions filed appeals after discovering their names had disappeared from the rolls. Yet more than 3.4 million appeals remained pending before polling, with fewer than 2,000 cleared in time. The court ruled that voters whose appeals had not been decided would still be barred from voting in the election, although their names could theoretically be restored later. That judgement effectively legitimised disenfranchisement on a massive scale.

On a personal level, I experienced the process myself. My family had to re-establish its eligibility to remain on the voter rolls in Uttar Pradesh, where elections are due next year. Compared with Bengal, deadlines there were longer and the scrutiny somewhat less severe. Yet even navigating the process revealed its harrowing and exclusionary character. Elderly people, migrants, women with inconsistent documents and poorer citizens faced a bureaucratic labyrinth that many simply could not overcome.

Several officials privately admitted that Hindu voters had less reason to fear deletion than Muslims. Eventually, roughly 2.7 million voters in Bengal were officially struck off the rolls. Millions more remained trapped in unresolved appeals and verification disputes before polling day. The BJP polled 29,224,804 votes, 3,211,427 more than the TMC's 26,013,377. Analysts examining constituency-level data argue that in many seats won by the BJP, the number of deleted or disputed voters exceeded the margin of victory.

It is thereby appropriate to contend that there are grounds to suspect the verdict was "stolen" with the assistance of the state machinery, including the ECI, although it is constitutionally mandated to function as an impartial body.

The BJP's victory was also aided by a Hindu majoritarian campaign that grossly exaggerated the TMC's supposedly "pro-Muslim" stance and heightened Hindu insecurity. After the BJP's setback in the 2024 parliamentary election, when Modi lost his outright majority and became dependent on coalition partners, the party began recalibrating its electoral strategy.

One strand of this effort was the proposed delimitation exercise, under which parliamentary and assembly constituencies would be redrawn in ways likely to favour northern and Hindu-majority regions. In Assam, where the BJP also returned to power comfortably this year, earlier delimitation exercises had already weakened Muslim electoral influence in several constituencies.

The war on Iran will likely end in American retreat

Jeffrey Sachs and Sybil Fares

The war against Iran that the United States and Israel launched on February 28, 2026, will likely end in an American retreat. The United States cannot continue the war without producing disastrous consequences. A renewed escalation would likely lead to the destruction of the region's oil, gas, and desalination infrastructure, causing a prolonged global catastrophe. Iran can credibly impose costs that the United States cannot bear and that the world should not suffer.

The US – Israel war plan was a decapitation strike, sold to President Donald Trump by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and David Barnea, the director of the Mossad. The premise was that an aggressive joint US–Israeli bombing campaign would so degrade the Iranian regime's command structure, nuclear programme, and IRGC senior leadership that the regime would fracture. The United States and Israel would then impose a pliable government in Tehran.

Trump seems to have been convinced that Iran would follow the same course as had occurred in Venezuela. The US operation in Venezuela in January 2026 removed

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in what appears to have been a coordinated operation between the CIA and elements inside the Venezuelan state. The US won a more pliant regime, while most of the Venezuelan power structure remained in place. Trump seems to have believed naively that the same outcome would occur in Iran.

The Iran operation, however, failed to produce a pliant regime in Tehran. Iran is not Venezuela, historically, technologically, culturally, geographically, militarily, demographically, or geopolitically. Whatever happened in Caracas had little relation to what would take place in Tehran.

The Iranian government did not fracture. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), far from being decapitated, emerged with a tightened internal command and an expanded role in the national-security architecture. The supreme leader's office held; the religious establishment closed ranks behind it; and the population rallied against external attack.

Two months on, Trump and Netanyahu have no Iranian successor government under their control, no Iranian surrender to close the war, and no military pathway whatsoever to victory. The only path, and the one the US seems to be taking, is a retreat, with Iran in charge of the Strait of Hormuz and with none of the other issues between the US and Iran settled.

Several reasons explain America's disastrous miscalculations and Iran's successes. First, American leaders fundamentally misjudged Iran. Iran is a great civilisation with 5,000 years of history, deep culture, national resilience, and pride. The Iranian government was not going to succumb to US bullying and



bombing, especially reflecting on the fact that Iranians remember how the US destroyed Iranian democracy in 1953 by overthrowing a democratically elected government and installing a police state that lasted 27 years.

Second, American leaders dramatically underestimated Iran's technological sophistication. Iran has world-class engineering and mathematics. It has built an indigenous defence industrial base, with advanced ballistic missiles, a homegrown drone industry, and indigenous orbital launch capability. Iran's record of technological development, built up despite 40 years of escalating sanctions, is a stunning national achievement.

Third, military technology has shifted in a way that favours Iran. Iran's ballistic missiles cost a small fraction of the US interceptors deployed against them. Iranian drones cost \$20,000; US air-defence interceptor missiles cost \$4m. Iran's antiship missiles, with costs in the low six figures, threaten US destroyers that cost \$2–3bn. Iran's anti-access and area-denial

network around the Gulf, layered air defence, drone and missile saturation capacity, and sea-denial capability in the strait have made the operational cost of imposing American will on Iran far higher than the United States can sustain, especially taking into account the retaliatory destruction that Iran can impose on the neighbouring countries.

Fourth, the US policy process has become irrational. The Iran war was decided by a small circle of presidential loyalists at Mar-a-Lago, with no formal interagency process and a National Security Council that had been hollowed out across the preceding year. Trump's director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Joe

Kent, resigned on March 17 with a public letter describing "an echo chamber" used to deceive the president. The war was the output of a decision-making system in which the deliberative apparatus had been turned off.

This was neither a war of necessity, nor a war of choice. It was a war of whim. The underlying premise was hegemony. The United States was attempting to preserve a global dominance that it no longer possesses, and Israel was trying to establish a regional dominance that it will never have.

The likely endgame, given all this, is that the war will likely end with a return to

something close to the status quo ante, except for three new facts on the ground. First, Iran will have operational control over the Strait of Hormuz. Second, Iran's deterrent posture will be significantly raised. Third, the US long-term military presence in the Gulf will be significantly reduced. The other issues that supposedly prompted the US to attack Iran — Iran's nuclear programme, regional proxies, the missile arsenal — will most likely be left where they were at the start of the war.

Even as the US retreats, Iran will not press its advantage against its neighbours. Three reasons explain why. First, Iran has a long-term strategic interest in cooperation with its Gulf neighbours, not an ongoing war. Second, Iran will have no interest in restarting a war it has just successfully ended. Third, Iran will be restrained, if any restraint is needed, by its great-power patrons, Russia and China, who both desire a stable and prosperous region. The Iranian leadership understands this clearly, and will stop the fighting.

Agriculture research and production

The government has recently decided to re-structure the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council (PARC), which is an appreciable decision aimed at boosting research and agriculture production. It is a well-known fact that without research, no sector can develop, but for agricultural crops, livestock and fisheries production as well as forestry and forage development, research is critically important for both removing the obstacles and increasing overall production.

PARC is an apex organisation, equipped with highly qualified and trained research personnel, responsible for conducting due research for the development of all agriculture components. It is doing its best to cover all aspects of research, but owing to older practices, managerial problems, lack of coordination and lack of proper dissemination of research findings, the required impact is not seen in public.

Farmers do not get due benefits, resulting in low per-unit production with respect to crops, livestock and fisheries. Further, forestry and forage output is very low compared to production volumes in neighbouring countries. Due to these reasons, almost every day, there is an unwarranted increase in the price of food items, which creates problems for both producers and consumers. The main reasons for low production are decreasing land fertility, water scarcity and unavailability of high-quality seeds. Poor farming culture and practices, climatic stress, pests and diseases add to the woes.

In livestock and fisheries, the main problem is the cost of production, mainly the feeding component, which is more than 75 per cent of the total cost. Quality seeds resistant to drought, salinity and salt are not widely used, and the same is the case with multi-cutting fodder and fodder trees. Australia has developed quality fodder seeds for rangelands. During drought, two seeds are grown; the lush green one is rich in protein, while the other provides roughage to fill the belly. During heavy rains, drought seeds are replaced by the other one for providing enough protein and roughage. Rangelands are developed and maintained in such a way that they fulfil the nutritional requirements of dairy as well as meat animals by about 60-70pc.

In the fisheries and marine sector, there is a lot of potential, but no development work has been carried out. Research is required to be conducted on available potential in Sindh and Balochistan, and developing culturing practices of shrimp lobster, crab and other marine fisheries. Further, the research and development component needs to be strengthened in the forest and forage sub-sector to increase forest area.

Undeveloped areas should be developed for increasing per-animal production of milk, meat, wool, hair and quality hide. Per-pond production of inland as well as marine fisheries can be developed through due restructuring and strengthening of research activities of PARC in coastal areas of the country.

Increasing the overall production of the agriculture sector is in the interest of producers and consumers, and, indeed, in the larger interest of the national economy.

Dr Baz Mohammad Junejo
Hyderabad

So-called health experts

Laws prohibit the practice of medicine by un-qualified or non-registered doctors. However, it is increasingly observed that health-related information, advice and tips are widely disseminated, especially through morning shows on almost every television channel and across social media platforms, by individuals presenting themselves as 'health experts' — doctors, herbalists and self-proclaimed beauty specialists.

In most cases, the credentials of these individuals are unknown to the public. There is often no verification as to whether they are qualified health practitioners registered with their relevant authorities, such as the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) or the National Tibb Council. These self-proclaimed health experts are frequently seen confidently offering advice on a wide range of health and beauty issues, including skin whitening, weight reduction, diabetes, hypertension, digestion and viral diseases. Such practices pose a significant risk to public health, as viewers may attempt to follow unverified or inappropriate advice.

The regulatory authorities overseeing electronic media, social media and the medical profession must ensure the establishment of an effective oversight mechanism. This should include the strict implementation of guidelines, ensuring compliance in letter and in spirit so that only qualified health practitioners and relevant specialists are permitted to disseminate health-related information.

Waheed ur Rehman
Rawalpindi

Remote and hybrid work

The sharp rise in petrol prices in Pakistan has intensified the financial burden on ordinary citizens, particularly salaried employees in the private sector. In such a situation, the importance of work-from-home policies is beyond doubt. Although the federal government initially hinted at encouraging remote work during the ongoing strain, the subsequent retraction of this decision reflects a missed opportunity.

Work from home offers immediate

financial relief to employees by eliminating daily commuting costs. A significant portion of salaries is now consumed by petrol alone, leaving little for other necessities amid rising inflation. By working remotely, employees can save a significant portion of their salaries. Companies, too, can significantly cut operational costs. Office spaces require electricity for lighting, air-conditioning and running equipment. Reducing on-site staff lowers such expenses.

Globally, many Western countries have already institutionalised remote and hybrid work models, even in normal, non-crisis situations. For example, in the United Kingdom, around 28 per cent of workers are engaged in hybrid work arrangements. In the United States, approximately 22pc of the workforce works remotely. In the Netherlands, the adoption is even higher, with about 52pc of employees working from home at least part of the time. Ireland has also seen a major shift, with roughly 35pc of its workforce working remotely or in hybrid arrangements. Across the European Union more broadly, about 22pc of workers now work from home at least occasionally, nearly double the pre-Covid level. These figures demonstrate that remote work is no longer an emergency response, it is a permanent feature of modern economies.

For Pakistan, adopting such practices could help mitigate the economic pressure caused by inflation and fuel price volatility. International studies have shown that employees value remote work highly, and are often more satisfied and engaged when given due flexibility. The government and private sector should actively promote remote work wherever feasible.

Riaz Ahmad
Karachi

Pakistan's democratic experience

Democracy rarely collapses overnight, it erodes gradually when institutions lose their authority and public trust begins to fade. Pakistan's democratic experience reflects this slow and complex struggle. Despite the presence of elections and constitutional frameworks, the deeper principles of democratic governance often remain fragile. Political instability, weak parliamentary oversight and continuous power struggles have limited the ability of elected institutions to function effectively. As a result, public confidence in democratic institutions continues to decline. Pakistan's democratic future depends on strengthening institutions, respecting constitutional boundaries, and encouraging responsible political participation. Without institutional stability, democracy turns into a risk, merely becoming a formal structure rather than a living political system.

Ayesha Fiaz
Jhang

Eating eggs regularly reduces Alzheimer's disease risk

Dr. Priyom Bose

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder marked by amyloid- β plaque accumulation, neurofibrillary tangles, and neuronal loss, resulting in cognitive decline and death. It is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States, with projected national management costs exceeding \$600 billion annually by 2050.



Alzheimer's disease etiology involves genetic, vascular, and environmental factors, notably diet. Due to the lack of curative treatments and limited pharmacological efficacy, prevention targeting modifiable risk factors is critical. Previous research indicated higher dementia mortality among vegetarians compared to non-vegetarians, despite reduced all-cause and other cause-specific mortalities with vegetarian diets.

Recent studies indicate egg consumption may be associated with Alzheimer's disease risk, with moderate intake linked to a 10% reduction in neurodegenerative mortality. However, most studies are limited by design flaws, inconsistent dietary assessment, lack of biomarker validation, and inadequate adjustment for confounders, underscoring the need for rigorous investigation.

The current study exploited the Adventist Health Study-2 (AHS-2) cohort to examine the relationship between egg consumption and Alzheimer's disease risk, drawing on extensive dietary and health data from over 96,000 participants. AHS-2 data were merged with Medicare claims and deidentified. For this analysis, only US participants aged 65 and older were included, with eligibility based on Medicare records.

Drones may help astronauts find water on Mars

Jean Carmela Lim

Drones equipped with ground-penetrating radar could one day help to locate water beneath the surface of Mars, according to new research from the University of Arizona.



A team from the university's Lunar and Planetary Laboratory tested the technology by flying radar-equipped drones over debris-covered glaciers in Alaska and Wyoming. The flights demonstrated that drones can map the thickness of rocky material sitting on top of buried ice, a capability that could guide future drilling missions on the Red Planet. The study was published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research: Planets*. Ground-penetrating radar has been used on glaciers before, but typically on clean ice where the surface is visible. Imaging through layers of rock and debris is more difficult, and orbital spacecraft lack the resolution to measure exactly how deep the covering material runs.

Drones can solve this problem by flying much closer to the surface, capturing data at far higher resolution than satellites are capable of. "If you want to make decisions about where to drill on Mars, you need to know if the ice you're trying to find is under one meter of debris or 10," said Roberto Aguilar, a doctoral researcher at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory and lead author of the study. "That's the kind of information a drone-based system could provide."

NASA has already proven that aerial vehicles can operate on Mars. The Ingenuity helicopter, which landed aboard the Perseverance rover, completed more than 70 flights between 2021 and 2024. Future drone missions could build on that success by carrying instruments designed to scout for resources. The Arizona team spent weeks in the field refining how drones should operate when carrying ground-penetrating radar.

Science reveals new ways to relieve knee arthritis pain

Lou Schuler

If knee arthritis were a growth stock, you'd want to own a few shares. Fifty percent of adults in the U.S. will develop knee osteoarthritis, which happens when the cartilage in the joint wears away and the bones rub more closely against one another. Once you have it, you can expect to live with it for 26 years, on average. While the damage can't be reversed, new research offers promising ways to mitigate the pain and perhaps even slow the disease's progress by targeting what drives it — things like body weight and mechanical load. Three recent studies exemplify the trend. Consider weight loss drugs: Excess body weight has long been linked with increased knee arthritis risk. People with obesity have higher rates of knee arthritis, get diagnosed younger, and experience more pain and physical limitations. "Just telling people 'go lose weight' is not going to work," said Elena Losina, PhD, a biostatistician and professor of orthopedic surgery at Harvard Medical School. Exercise is the most commonly recommended treatment for knee arthritis, and walking is the most commonly recommended type of exercise. But the repetitive stress of walking — never mind running, basketball, or tennis — can sometimes worsen knee pain. Arthritis typically begins in the medial compartment of the knee — the part closest to the other knee. Medial arthritis is three times more common than lateral arthritis, on the outer part of the knee. That's because, when you walk, 70% of the compressive force lands on the medial compartment. Physical therapist Kim Bennell, PhD, has been studying musculoskeletal injuries for three decades. In recent years, she and her research team at the University of Melbourne in Australia have increasingly focused on exercise, as it's the most effective non-pharmaceutical, nonsurgical arthritis treatment.



Why your best night's sleep starts in the morning

Debbie Koenig

If you're trying to sleep better right now, experts say the most important changes don't happen at night — they happen first thing in the morning. Read on for two simple steps to set yourself up for better sleep after sun-



down. Set your alarm seven days a week. Why it works: You need to set your body clock. As luxurious as it feels to sleep in, it may make it harder for you to fall asleep at night. "The most important thing is waking up at the same time each day," says Jeffrey Durmer, MD, PhD, a sleep medicine doctor. "That's because of the chemical process and the brain's activation of its circadian rhythm." Science says: If you wake up at roughly the same time every day, your circadian cycle cues your body when it's ready for sleep. That said, your natural bedtime can vary based on how strenuous your day was. But that cycle will help you get the sleep you need. "This is a recommendation based on the science of circadian neurobiology," Durmer says. Plenty of research — both with people and mathematical modeling — makes it clear, he says: "Wake times predict sleep onset times, not the reverse." Hype vs. reality: You've heard it from sleep apps, major medical groups, and influencers: Go to bed at the same time every night. (Search #bedtimeroutine on TikTok for some eye-openers.) But that advice "is a big fallacy, because sleep is a very dynamic process," Durmer says. "Your body and your brain react to the day's events, and sleep is something that reflects that."

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