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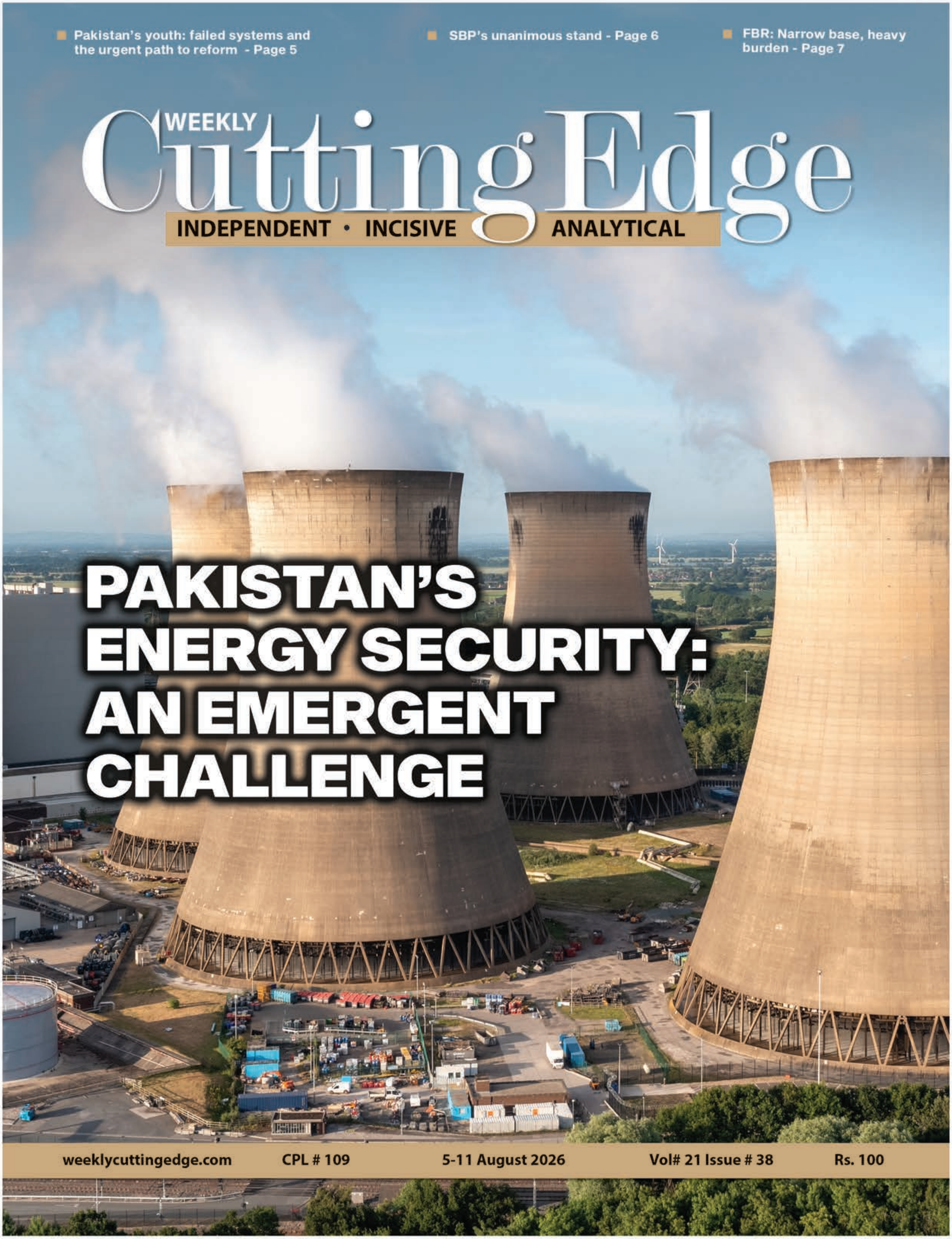

PAKISTAN'S ENERGY SECURITY: AN EMERGENT CHALLENGE

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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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Pakistan's energy security: an emergent challenge

Farhan Khan

Pakistan's energy security has once again emerged as one of the country's most pressing national concerns as renewed conflict in the Middle East threatens global oil supplies and maritime trade. The latest tensions between the United States and Iran, coupled with repeated disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, have exposed the vulnerability of Pakistan's energy-dependent economy. The recurring crises serve as a stark reminder that the country can no longer rely on temporary diplomatic calm or hope that geopolitical tensions will not affect its economic stability. Instead, Pakistan must treat the current situation as an opportunity to undertake long-overdue structural reforms that can safeguard its energy future.

The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most important energy corridors, carrying nearly one-fifth of global oil supplies. For Pakistan, which imports the overwhelming majority of its crude oil, petroleum products and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Gulf countries, the waterway is nothing less than an economic lifeline. Any disruption in this strategic passage immediately translates into higher fuel prices, increased freight and insurance costs, supply shortages and inflationary pressures throughout the economy.

Recognising these growing risks, the government has initiated one of the most significant reforms in its energy security framework by deciding to establish the country's first-ever Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR). At present, Pakistan largely operates on a fragile "just-in-time" inventory system that leaves little room to absorb prolonged supply disruptions. Under the proposed strategy, the government plans to create emergency oil reserves sufficient for 45 days during the first phase, eventually expanding storage capacity to cover 90 days of national consumption. During national emergencies, these reserves would be placed under government control to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies.

This initiative marks an important shift in Pakistan's strategic thinking. Most major energy-importing countries maintain strategic reserves precisely to protect their economies against geopolitical shocks, natural disasters and market volatility. Pakistan's decision therefore represents not merely an emergency response but the beginning of a more comprehensive national energy security policy.

Complementing this initiative is the government's plan to develop a Pakistan Maritime Energy City at Gwadar Port. The project envisions inviting Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to establish strategic crude oil storage facilities at Gwadar. Such an arrangement would provide Gulf producers with secure storage outside the immediate conflict zone while simultaneously granting Pakistan preferential access to these reserves during emergencies. If implemented successfully, Gwadar could evolve into a major regional energy hub serving both commercial and strategic purposes.

The government is also seeking immediate financial relief to cushion the economic impact of rising energy costs. Pakistan has reportedly requested Saudi Arabia to provide a $6.7 billion deferred-payment oil facility on exceptionally concessional terms, including an interest rate of just one percent, a repayment period of fifteen years and a five-year grace period. The proposal represents a substantial improvement over the previous $1.2 billion arrangement agreed in early 2025 at significantly higher financing costs. Such support would help preserve Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves while reducing pressure on the balance of payments.

The growing strategic partnership between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has become important in this context. Since the signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement in September 2025, Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of Pakistan's most dependable financial partners, extending deposits, investment commitments and other forms of economic assistance. This growing relationship has acquired even greater significance as regional instability continues to threaten energy markets.

However, financial assistance alone cannot solve Pakistan's deeper structural vulnerabilities. The repeated closure and reopening of the Strait of Hormuz has demonstrated how dependent Pakistan remains on a single maritime corridor for its energy supplies. Every disruption immediately pushes up import costs, fuels inflation and complicates macroeconomic management. The government faces an unenviable fiscal dilemma: either pass on higher fuel prices to consumers, risking inflation and public dissatisfaction, or absorb part of the burden through subsidies, thereby undermining fiscal consolidation commitments under the IMF programme.

The economic consequences extend well beyond energy prices. Higher oil and gas import costs widen Pakistan's already substantial trade deficit and place additional strain on scarce foreign exchange reserves. The country's narrow export base further compounds these vulnerabilities. During the last fiscal year, imports of approximately $69.76 billion far exceeded export earnings of about $30.14 billion, with workers' remittances of around $41.6 billion playing a crucial role in bridging the external financing gap. Yet reliance on remittances also carries risks. A prolonged economic downturn in Gulf countries, disruptions to overseas employment or the large-scale return of Pakistani workers could significantly reduce remittance inflows, thereby weakening one of Pakistan's most important sources of foreign exchange.

Pakistan has begun exploring options to diversify its energy imports. Saudi Arabia has examined alternative export routes through Yanbu on the Red Sea, while Islamabad is considering sourcing crude oil and petroleum products from additional suppliers. Nevertheless, these alternatives cannot immediately replace the cost advantages, logistical efficiency and scale of supplies traditionally routed through the Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz. Diversification is therefore a gradual process rather than an immediate solution.

The current crisis also underlines the urgent need to expand Pakistan's domestic energy production. Greater investment in indigenous natural gas exploration, hydroelectric power, solar energy, wind projects and other renewable resources can gradually reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels. Accelerating the transition towards cleaner energy would not only strengthen energy security but also improve environmental sustainability and reduce long-term import costs. Lasting energy security will require a broader transformation based on domestic energy development, diversified supply routes, stronger exports, larger strategic reserves and sound macroeconomic management.

Pakistan's youth: failed systems and the urgent path to reform

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan's young generation stands at a crossroads. Nearly 70 million people belonging to Gen Z — those born between 1997 and 2012 — form a demographic wave large enough to reshape the country's future for better or for worse. Yet instead of becoming a dividend, this vast cohort risks turning into a catastrophe. Rising unemployment, restricted freedoms, elite capture and a collapsed governance model have left millions of young Pakistanis deeply frustrated, angry and increasingly restless. Federal Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's recent warning at the country's first Economic Summit captured the gravity of the moment with unusual candour: the system has fallen, temporary firefighting will not save it, and without structural reform the consequences could be severe.

Naqvi's assessment was blunt. Decades of political continuity have failed to deliver basic governance or public services. Centralized power has left citizens distant from justice and state institutions. Reliance on foreign loans to paper over budget deficits continues without fixing the institutional flaws that create those deficits in the first place. Efforts under the current government amount to emergency measures rather than permanent solutions. Most critically, the minister identified the youth as a potentially unstoppable force if their aspirations continue to be ignored. Young people, he stressed, do not want token stipends or distributed tablets. They demand meritocracy, transparent job markets and genuine economic opportunity. Given the right environment, Pakistani youth could earn significant foreign exchange on their own. Without that environment, the pressure will only build.

The warning gains a sharper edge when viewed against recent upheavals across South Asia. In Bangladesh, unfair job quotas for the children of ruling-party members ignited a youth-led uprising that toppled an authoritarian government. In Nepal, a ban on critical social media platforms triggered mass protests over corruption, elite capture and unemployment; the prime minister resigned within days. Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya movement, fuelled by years of economic mismanagement, high inflation and joblessness under a family dynasty, forced a government from power. India's Gen Z protests, sparked by leaked exam papers and reports of student suicides, grew into a broader challenge to repression, unemployment and democratic backsliding, forcing a federal education minister to resign and giving rise to a new youth-driven political platform. In each case, a single grievance quickly expanded into a wider demand for justice, opportunity and accountable governance.

Pakistan shares many of the same underlying conditions. Basic rights remain precarious. Media freedom and free expression face restrictions. Unemployment is climbing. The economy stays dependent on external assistance, limiting genuine autonomy. Public discontent over inflation, joblessness and political repression has created a volatile atmosphere. In Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Kashmir, protest against an elite-dominated power structure continues. Hundreds of political and human-rights activists are reported to be behind bars. Although mainstream media may under-report these tensions, social media ensures that reality cannot be fully suppressed. Attempts to curb digital access only deepen alienation in a generation that lives online.

Naqvi correctly identified decentralization as a core remedy. Dividing oversized administrative units into smaller provinces or structures would bring government closer to the people, improve service delivery and restore a sense of ownership. Centralized control has long deprived citizens of timely justice and responsive institutions. Equally important is a decisive shift away from political patronage toward genuine economic opportunity. Token gestures will not satisfy a generation that watches peers in neighbouring countries force change through collective action. Young Pakistanis need open, competitive job markets based on merit rather than connections. They need an education system that equips them for a modern economy instead of trapping them in outdated examinations prone to leaks and corruption. They need the freedom to express dissent without fear of arbitrary detention.

Political parties must also move beyond short-term manoeuvring. Naqvi called for sustained, comprehensive dialogue across the political spectrum to restructure the state. The business community, long content to fund campaigns, should take a more direct role in shaping policy rather than remaining spectators. Constitutional and administrative overhauls are not optional luxuries; without them, economic summits and speeches will continue to produce little lasting progress. The legitimacy of the current order is already under strain in several regions. Further unrest, especially along sensitive borders, could carry consequences that extend beyond Pakistan's frontiers in a volatile regional landscape.

The demographic arithmetic is unforgiving. A youth population of this size cannot be managed indefinitely through repression or temporary relief. History in the immediate neighbourhood shows how quickly frustration can coalesce into movements that topple governments. Pakistan still has time to choose a different path — one that channels the energy of its young people into productive economic and civic participation rather than confrontation. That path requires genuine decentralization, transparent economic opportunity, restoration of democratic rights and an end to the culture of elite capture. Token measures and emergency loans will not suffice. Only structural reform that places merit, opportunity and accountability at the centre can prevent a demographic dividend from becoming a demographic crisis. The warning has been issued clearly. The question is whether those in power will act before the force Naqvi described becomes impossible to contain.

SBP's unanimous stand

Muhammad Hassan

The State Bank of Pakistan's decision to leave its policy rate unchanged at 11.5 percent was hardly surprising. With inflation still significantly above the central bank's medium-term target, but without sufficiently strong evidence of renewed demand-side overheating, there was little compelling reason either to cut or raise borrowing costs. The more significant development was not the decision itself but the unanimity behind it.

Headline inflation eased to 11.1 percent in June from 11.7 percent in May, but remained well above the State Bank's 5-7 percent medium-term target range. Core inflation also moderated, though at 8.4 percent it remained elevated. Against that backdrop, holding the policy rate steady was arguably the most logical option.

What makes the latest decision more interesting is that every member of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) voted for the status quo. At the previous meeting, one member had favoured a 50-basis-point increase. The shift from a hawkish dissent to complete unanimity therefore provides an important clue about how the Committee's assessment of the economic outlook may have evolved. This matters because the State Bank has now begun disclosing the voting pattern alongside its monetary policy decisions as part of its effort to improve transparency. Once votes become public, they are no longer merely an internal procedural detail. They become part of the central bank's communication with financial markets, businesses and households.

The policy rate tells observers where the MPC ultimately landed. The voting pattern can provide additional information about how members viewed the risks surrounding that decision. A change from one dissenting vote for a rate increase to unanimous support for maintaining the rate should consequently raise a straightforward question: what changed in the Committee's assessment between the two meetings? There are several developments that could justify a more comfortable view of the economy. Broad money growth slowed to 13.2 percent year-on-year by July 10, compared with 15.2 percent at the time of the previous MPC meeting. Pakistan's current account ended FY26 with a deficit of only $139 million. Foreign exchange reserves had exceeded the end-June target of $18 billion before recent debt repayments brought them down to around $17.3 billion by July 17.

Inflation expectations have also eased among both consumers and businesses, while the Federal Board of Revenue met its revised FY26 tax collection target of Rs13 trillion. Fiscal developments provide another source of comfort. The primary balance is estimated to have remained in surplus for the third consecutive year, while the government is targeting a primary surplus equivalent to 2 percent of GDP and an overall fiscal deficit of 3.6 percent of GDP in FY27.

If these targets are achieved, monetary policy will continue to operate alongside a fiscal position that broadly supports the fight against inflation. Taken together, slower monetary expansion, a manageable external account, improved reserves, fiscal consolidation and moderating inflation expectations provide a reasonable basis for concluding that the existing monetary stance remains appropriate.

But the picture is not entirely reassuring. Private-sector credit growth has accelerated to 14.9 percent year-on-year, with expansion spread across working capital, fixed investment and consumer financing. The State Bank itself expects budgetary incentives, tariff rationalisation and stronger private-sector credit to support economic activity. It projects real GDP growth between 3.5 and 4.5 percent in FY27.

A stronger recovery is welcome, but it could also increase pressure on imports and the external account. The current account, which recorded only a marginal $139 million deficit in FY26, is expected to widen to as much as 1 percent of GDP during the current fiscal year. That remains manageable, but it illustrates the delicate balance the central bank will have to maintain as economic activity strengthens. The inflation outlook also contains reasons for caution. The decline in headline inflation in June was partly helped by lower global energy prices and favourable electricity tariff adjustments. At the same time, food inflation increased because of higher wheat, allied products and perishable food prices. The State Bank expects global commodity prices, rising input costs and domestic food pressures to keep inflation above the target range for several months before it gradually settles near the upper end of the 5-7 percent range by June 2027.

None of this automatically justifies higher interest rates. Supply-side shocks should not necessarily be answered with tighter monetary policy, especially when inflation expectations remain contained and there is limited evidence of second-round effects. Yet inflation at 11.1 percent, core inflation at 8.4 percent, private-sector credit growth at 14.9 percent and projected GDP growth of up to 4.5 percent make the move from a previously hawkish dissent to complete unanimity worthy of closer examination.

The latest monetary policy statement suggests that the overall macroeconomic outlook has improved, while simultaneously acknowledging geopolitical uncertainty, volatile commodity prices, domestic food pressures and the possibility of a wider current account deficit. The assessment may prove correct. But if the risks have changed sufficiently to eliminate the previous dissent, observers need greater clarity about which assumptions or indicators drove that change.

This is precisely where transparency becomes more valuable. A shift in voting patterns could reflect a changed assessment of inflation persistence, improving expectations, stronger foreign exchange reserves, greater confidence in fiscal consolidation or a belief that the external position has become more resilient. It could also simply reflect new data that reduced concerns about demand-side inflation. The vote alone, however, cannot tell us which factor mattered most. That distinction is important because monetary policy operates through expectations as much as through interest rates. Banks deciding how to price loans, businesses considering investment and consumers planning major purchases all need some understanding of the central bank's likely future direction.

The most useful signal is therefore not simply that the policy rate is 11.5 percent today. It is an indication of what combination of inflation, credit growth, fiscal developments and external pressures could cause the MPC to change course tomorrow.

Pakistan is now entering a more complicated phase of economic recovery. Inflation remains above target but is expected to decline. Credit is expanding even as broad money growth moderates. Economic growth is projected to strengthen, while the current account is expected to widen but remain within a manageable range. Foreign exchange reserves are targeted to reach $20.2 billion by end-December, although the external position remains vulnerable to commodity prices and geopolitical shocks. These trends are not necessarily contradictory, but managing them simultaneously will require careful policy judgement.

The unanimous decision to maintain the 11.5 percent rate may therefore be entirely justified. What deserves greater attention is the disappearance of the previous hawkish dissent. As voting patterns become a regular part of monetary policy communication, changes in those patterns will inevitably become signals about the central bank's evolving assessment.

The rate decision itself needed little explanation. The unanimous vote deserves considerably more. If greater transparency is to make monetary policy more predictable, the State Bank should increasingly help markets understand not only what the MPC decided, but why its assessment of the risks changed. Ultimately, transparency is not about publishing more numbers for their own sake. Its real value lies in making the central bank's reaction function easier to understand—especially when inflation, growth, credit and external conditions begin moving in different directions.

FBR: Narrow base, heavy burden

Muhammad Zain

The government's reliance on electricity bills as a convenient vehicle for tax collection has exposed one of the most persistent weaknesses of Pakistan's taxation system. The state finds it easier to collect more from people and businesses already within its reach than to bring those who remain outside the formal tax net into the system.

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has collected nearly Rs1.9 trillion in sales and income taxes through electricity bills over the past four years. The figure may initially appear impressive, particularly at a time when the government is under constant pressure to increase revenues. But it should instead prompt a more uncomfortable question: why has electricity consumption become such an important source of tax collection in a country where millions of potential taxpayers remain outside the formal tax system?

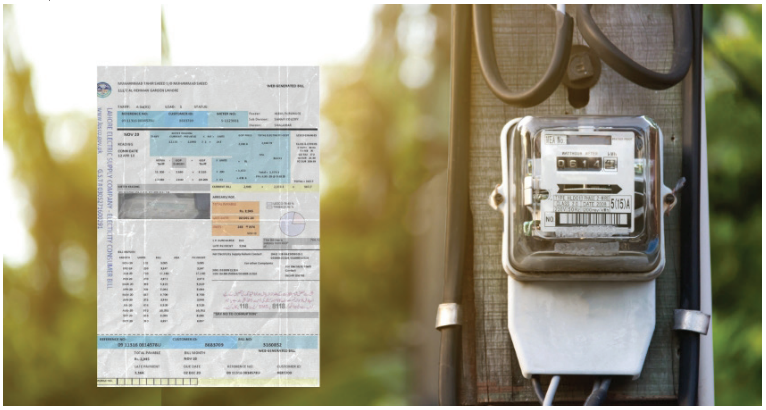
The answer points to a fundamental imbalance in the way taxation is administered. Rather than broadening the tax base, improving documentation and identifying people and businesses that should be paying taxes, the state has increasingly relied on mechanisms that allow it to collect revenue from those it can easily identify.

Electricity consumers are an obvious target. Their consumption is recorded, their bills are generated regularly and payment can be enforced through the threat of disconnection. This makes the electricity bill an extremely efficient collection mechanism from the government's perspective. But administrative convenience does not necessarily make a tax fair.

The problem becomes even clearer when considered alongside the revelation that between Rs400 billion and Rs500 billion in adjustable income tax withholding goes unclaimed every year. The money is collected but is not subsequently claimed by eligible taxpayers, indicating just how complicated and uneven the existing system has become. The situation creates an unusual arrangement in which people outside the formal tax net can effectively avoid becoming documented taxpayers while still contributing through indirect taxation. At the same time, consumers who may not have a direct income-tax liability can find themselves paying amounts collected through their electricity bills simply because they happen to consume electricity.

The cumulative burden falls particularly heavily on ordinary households. Electricity itself has become increasingly expensive because of tariffs, capacity payments, circular debt-related costs, surcharges, fuel price adjustments and other charges. Adding multiple forms of taxation to an already inflated electricity bill makes the monthly payment increasingly difficult for families and small businesses to absorb.

The FBR chairman recently told a parliamentary panel that the sales tax component of electricity bills includes normal sales tax, extra tax, further tax and tax imposed on electricity supplied to retailers. Income tax is also withheld from industrial and commercial consumers and, in certain cases, domestic consumers. The FBR has also argued that electricity enjoys significant concessions and suggested that there may be room for further taxation. But this raises an important question: how much additional pressure can consumers realistically absorb?



Electricity is not a luxury for most households. It is an essential service. Families need it for lighting, cooling, refrigeration, education and communication, while businesses require it to operate. When taxes are embedded into electricity bills, the state is effectively using access to an essential service as a mechanism for collecting revenue. One member of the parliamentary panel reportedly described the practice as "tantamount to coercion". The description may sound harsh, but it captures the central concern. A tax system should first establish who is liable to pay, determine the amount due and then collect it through a transparent process. Using an electricity connection as the point of collection reverses that logic: the state collects first and leaves the consumer to establish whether the amount was actually payable.

This is particularly problematic when the tax is adjustable or refundable. A taxpayer may eventually be entitled to claim an amount back, but the process can be complicated, time-consuming and difficult for ordinary consumers to navigate. For households and small businesses facing cash-flow pressures, even temporarily losing access to money can be a significant burden.

More importantly, this approach does little to solve Pakistan's underlying tax problem. The country does not primarily suffer from an inability to collect taxes from people who are already documented. Its deeper challenge is the narrowness of the tax base and the large informal economy that remains difficult to document and assess. The state must therefore distinguish between increasing tax collection and improving taxation. The two are not necessarily the same thing.

A government can raise revenue quickly by increasing withholding rates, adding levies to utility bills or imposing additional charges on existing taxpayers. But such measures can create resentment, distort economic incentives and place a heavier burden on those who are already compliant. They may also discourage businesses and households from remaining within the formal economy if compliance simply results in higher costs.

A sustainable tax system requires a broader base, stronger enforcement and greater trust. Individuals and businesses that have taxable incomes should be identified through modern data systems, cross-checking of financial information and effective documentation. At the same time, those who are not legally liable to pay income tax should not be treated as convenient sources of revenue merely because they receive an electricity bill.

The state must also address the issue of unclaimed adjustable withholding taxes. If hundreds of billions of rupees remain unclaimed every year, the government should determine why taxpayers are unable or unwilling to recover money that is legally due to them. Simplifying the refund and adjustment process could improve confidence in the tax system while reducing the perception that withholding taxes are simply another form of permanent taxation.

Pakistan cannot build a stronger fiscal system by repeatedly squeezing the same group of compliant consumers. The objective should be to bring more people into the tax net, not to make those already inside it pay more.

The collection of nearly Rs1.9 trillion through electricity bills should therefore not be celebrated merely as a revenue achievement. It should be viewed as a warning about the direction of fiscal policy. When an electricity bill becomes one of the easiest ways for the state to collect taxes, the real question is not how much more can be extracted from consumers. It is why the government has not yet built a tax system capable of reaching those who remain outside the net. Until that question is answered, revenue collection will remain easier than tax reform—and ordinary consumers will continue paying the price.

Papering over the cracks: Endless return of Pakistan's circular debt

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's power sector has once again found itself trapped in the same vicious cycle: rising costs, inadequate subsidies, higher tariffs, fresh borrowing and, ultimately, more debt. The circular debt stock increased by around Rs61 billion during the last fiscal year, reaching approximately Rs1.67 trillion from Rs1.61 trillion a year earlier.

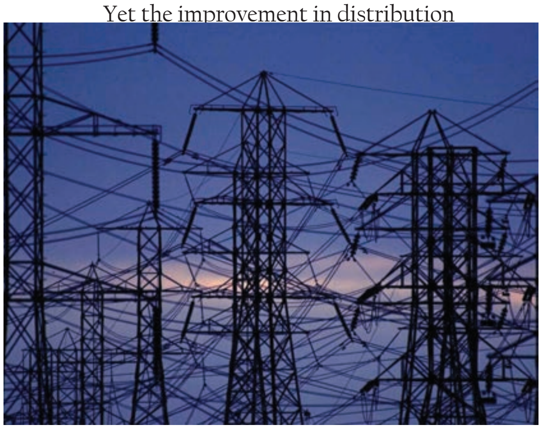
The increase may appear modest against the size of the energy sector, but it carries a much larger significance because it represents a failure to meet a key commitment under Pakistan's International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme to contain the stock at Rs1.61 trillion. The Power Division has attributed the increase largely to a reduction in the federal subsidy. Of the Rs893 billion originally allocated for the power sector, around Rs98 billion was cut. Government officials argue that had the full subsidy been provided, circular debt would have declined to approximately Rs1.58 trillion rather than rising to Rs1.67 trillion.

There may be merit in that argument. But it also exposes the deeper weakness of Pakistan's electricity system. If the sector requires substantial fiscal support merely to prevent its unpaid obligations from increasing, then the underlying problem is not simply a shortage of subsidy. It is a business model that has repeatedly failed to become financially sustainable. For decades, successive governments have attempted to fix the problem through a variety of measures. Power purchase agreements with independent power producers have been renegotiated. Inefficient generation plants have been retired or closed. Electricity tariffs have been repeatedly increased. Banks have provided fresh financing to clear accumulated obligations. Yet circular debt continues to return, much like a problem that has been temporarily concealed rather than permanently solved.

Last year, the government arranged financing of around Rs1.23 trillion from 18 banks to manage the sector's accumulated liabilities. The transaction, serviced through a Rs3.23-per-unit surcharge imposed on electricity consumers, was described as the largest financing arrangement of its kind in the country. Such measures may provide immediate relief to the balance sheets of power-sector entities, but they do not eliminate the structural weaknesses responsible for generating new liabilities.

In effect, the debt is often shifted from one account to another. It may move from the government's books to a bank loan, from a power company's balance sheet to consumer surcharges, or from one public-sector entity to another. But unless the reasons behind the accumulation of unpaid bills are addressed, the liability inevitably resurfaces. There are, however, some encouraging signs. Distribution company losses, commonly referred to as Disco losses, have reportedly fallen significantly, from Rs591 billion to Rs326 billion over the past two years. This is a substantial improvement and deserves recognition. Better loss management, improved recovery and greater administrative discipline can help reduce the financial burden on the sector.

Yet the improvement in distribution



losses is being undermined by the broader financial structure of the electricity market. Consumers continue to face rising tariffs, additional surcharges and recurring adjustments, while the government continues to inject money into the sector and arrange new borrowing. A system cannot be considered financially healthy when consumers are repeatedly asked to pay more while the state remains responsible for plugging persistent financial gaps.

The rapid expansion of rooftop solar has introduced another major challenge. As grid electricity becomes increasingly expensive, solar technology is becoming more affordable and accessible. Households and businesses with sufficient financial resources are therefore increasingly choosing to generate their own electricity. The growth of net-metered and off-grid solar capacity is a rational response by consumers to high electricity prices, but it creates a difficult dilemma for the national grid.

The electricity system has substantial fixed costs that do not disappear simply because some consumers reduce their dependence on the grid. When higher-income consumers and businesses shift towards solar, those costs increasingly have to be recovered from a smaller pool of grid-dependent consumers. This can push tariffs even higher for those who remain connected.

That creates a dangerous feedback loop. Higher electricity prices encourage more consumers who can afford the initial investment to install solar panels. Their departure leaves fewer consumers to finance the fixed costs of the grid. Tariffs then rise further, providing another incentive for consumers to seek alternatives. The result is an increasingly fragmented electricity market in which those least able to invest in alternative energy sources may end up carrying a disproportionate share of the system's financial burden.

This is why Pakistan's circular debt problem cannot be solved simply by arranging another bank loan, increasing tariffs or providing a larger subsidy. These measures may address the symptoms, but they do not close the leaks.

Those leaks are already well known: distribution losses, transmission constraints, weak bill recovery, electricity theft, dependence on expensive imported fuels and power purchase agreements based on assumptions that may no longer reflect the country's economic realities. Unless these structural problems are addressed simultaneously, any reduction in the existing debt stock will only be temporary. The government must therefore stop viewing the electricity crisis in isolation. Power, gas and oil are deeply interconnected parts of the same energy economy. A subsidy shortfall in one area, an ill-designed tariff policy in another, or a sudden increase in the import bill can ultimately create financial pressures elsewhere in the energy chain.

Pakistan needs a comprehensive energy strategy rather than another short-term accounting exercise. Circular debt should not merely be transferred, refinanced or temporarily reduced. The objective must be to prevent new debt from accumulating in the first place.

The latest increase in circular debt should therefore be treated as a warning rather than simply another breach of an IMF target. Pakistan has spent years managing the consequences of an inefficient power system. What it now needs is the political will to address its causes. Until the system can recover its costs efficiently, reduce losses, improve governance and remain attractive to consumers without making electricity unaffordable, circular debt will continue to return—regardless of how many times it is cleared from the books.

Need for structural reform

Raza Khan

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's recent proposal for dialogue among all political parties to bring about reforms to the current governance system, while suggesting the creation of new provinces along with other reforms, is important but should have been made and implemented long before. More importantly, the interior minister said the current 'system' of governance had 'collapsed' and was fundamentally incapable of resolving the country's problems. This is indeed a major acknowledgement by a key figure in the present dispensation and, therefore, is going to be very consequential.

Dilating upon the issue, Mohsin Naqvi was quoted as saying: "The system we are living under has collapsed. Problems cannot be solved through it," he said. "If this system continues, we will still be sitting here 10 years from now discussing the same issues," the minister said, adding that only structural change could break the cycle and that a reset was necessary.

There cannot be two opinions about the assertions of Mr Naqvi and, yes, the system is not at all the panacea for the issues facing the country. We have been identifying the shortcomings of the parliamentary political system as well as the so-called federal-provincial dichotomous administrative structure and emphasizing that the state and, particularly, society and its members, face problems and issues of such profound and complex nature that the existing system cannot address them, let alone provide their solutions.

Insofar as Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's suggestion that all political parties would have to sit together to settle every issue facing the country, including the creation of new administrative units, is concerned, one has problems with this suggestion. All big and small political parties have been beneficiaries of the extant system; therefore, asking them to sit together to address every issue is akin to crying for the moon. More importantly, all the key political parties, like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), would not at all be ready to agree to the formation of new administrative units and provinces.

To all intents and purposes, all of them are provincial parties instead of national parties. The PPP has its bastion in Sindh, the PML-N has its forte in Punjab, and the JUI-F has some following in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The main opposition party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), is not at all in a position to take any meaningful position on the matter. So, generally speaking, political parties would not agree to the proposal for the formation of new provinces.

Nevertheless, structural political and administrative reforms ought to be undertaken whether these political parties agree to them or not. The issue is one of the survival of the state and addressing the immediate needs of the people. The country is facing dire political, economic, security and social challenges. For instance, the political system has collapsed and political polarization in the country is once again approaching a breaking point. Obviously, political parties alone are not responsible for this political polarization, and the powers-that-be have equally to be held responsible for the collapse of the system.

The most important point that comes to the fore in Mohsin Naqvi's candid admission that the system has failed and that one solution is the formation of new provinces is that this is only one aspect of the polycrisis faced by the country. Transforming the parliamentary political system into a presidential system and forming viable and vibrant local government structures are other key aspects of the much-needed structural changes.

Insofar as the need for new provinces and administrative units in Pakistan is concerned, there cannot be two opinions about it. However, these provinces and administrative units should not be created on the basis of ethnicity. Already, whatever provinces we have in Pakistan were created during colonial times or after independence largely on the basis of ethnicity. Although every province has had a majority of one ethnic group, minority groups have always considered themselves at a disadvantage, as they could not obtain the political, economic and cultural rights they deserved.

Consequently, there have always been ethnic tensions and conflicts within our provinces, which have greatly marred their development and the overall uplift of the country. Had provinces created on the basis of ethnicity been a recipe for addressing multiple conflicts and crises across the country, Pakistan would have been a well-governed and politically stable state. Unfortunately, no one can claim Pakistan to be a developed and politically stable country.

Today, bad governance, as is evident from unprecedented inflation and societal conflicts across the length and breadth of the country, has made it nearly dysfunctional. What we need is to come up with new governance structures based on a new administrative philosophy. Thus, keeping in view the administrative issues and prevalent bad governance, Pakistan needs to rationalize its administrative structure.

In addition to structural reforms, there is also a need for massive administrative reforms, which also have various aspects, including, but not limited to, revamping the whole administrative edifice, which currently is based generally on the federal-provincial-district trichotomy; introducing extensive and across-the-board civil service reforms; revisiting existing policies; and plugging policy gaps.

Insofar as revamping the whole administrative structure of the country is concerned, policymakers have to come up with novel solutions. The administrative structure we have, whatever name one may give it, is fundamentally colonial in form and essence. This does not mean that the colonial administrative structures were worthless. In fact, they had their own virtues and substance. For a long time, they kept the state and its system quite functional.

However, with large-scale social, political, economic, technological and other changes, particularly the manifold increase in population and the concomitant rise in new issues and problems, the colonial structures have been found wanting. Therefore, there has been a need to come up with new administrative structures that have the capacity to address the issues of contemporary, postmodern times and the needs of the people.

Coming to the issue of the formation of new provinces, what the country really needs at the moment are lean and vibrant provinces, which is the cry of the hour. When Pakistan came into existence, there were three provinces in what is now Pakistan, while Balochistan was given the status of a full-fledged province in 1970. Over the years, we have observed that the provinces have failed to provide viable, sustainable and good governance structures and models.

The reason is that provincial governments have so many areas, issues and problems to negotiate, but they find themselves incapacitated to respond effectively. This has particularly been the situation since the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in April 2010, when provinces were given more subjects to legislate upon and govern. The provinces have had huge capacity issues in coming up with sound legislation and policies regarding the large number of departments handed over to them.

Here it must be mentioned that there would never be consensus among political parties and associations of different professionals, particularly lawyers, teachers, journalists and others, to bring about structural reforms. But the country needs them, whether Mr Naqvi says so or not.

The challenge, therefore, is not merely to debate the creation of new provinces or administrative units but to rethink the entire governance architecture of the country. The present debate provides an opportunity to move beyond political expediency and consider what kind of state and administrative structures are required to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society.

The creation of smaller, leaner and more responsive provinces could potentially bring government closer to the people, but this can only work if accompanied by meaningful local governments, administrative decentralization, civil service reform and clearly defined responsibilities among the federal, provincial and local tiers of government.

Likewise, any attempt to restructure the provinces should not become another exercise in ethnic or partisan politics. The objective should be to create administrative units that are economically viable, administratively manageable and capable of delivering public services effectively. The debate should consequently be based on governance, service delivery, economic viability and institutional capacity rather than merely political representation or ethnic considerations.

Ultimately, the most consequential aspect of Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's remarks is not his proposal for new provinces alone but his acknowledgement that the existing system has failed to deliver. Once such an admission is made by a senior member of the government, it cannot simply be brushed aside as another political statement. It demands a serious national debate on the nature of the political and administrative system, the distribution of authority, the capacity of institutions and the mechanisms through which the state responds to the problems of its citizens.

The political leadership may disagree on the precise form of reform, and political parties may have understandable interests in preserving their existing provincial bases. Yet the magnitude of the challenges confronting Pakistan makes the status quo increasingly difficult to defend. The country requires structural political and administrative reforms that are designed not for the benefit of any individual party or institution but for the survival, stability and prosperity of the state and its people.

That is why Mr Naqvi's admission should be treated as the beginning of a serious conversation rather than the conclusion of one. Pakistan needs a new governance philosophy capable of responding to the political, economic, social, security, demographic and technological realities of the twenty-first century. The longer structural reforms are delayed, the greater will be the cost of continuing with a system that its own senior functionaries now acknowledge is no longer capable of resolving the country's fundamental problems.

Why Pakistan is losing the social sciences race!

Rasheed Ali

On a humid afternoon outside a university admissions office in Lahore, a young student clutched two admission forms — one for sociology, the other for business administration. Before he could make up his mind, the debate had already begun.

"Choose business," his uncle advised. "At least you'll find a job."

His mother nodded in agreement. "What will you do with sociology?"

The young man fell silent.

The brief exchange, repeated in countless homes across Pakistan every admission season, reveals more than a family's career advice. It reflects a national mindset that has quietly pushed social sciences to the margins of higher education. In a country grappling with poverty, governance failures, climate vulnerability, urbanisation, political instability and educational inequality, the disciplines designed to understand society itself are often dismissed as degrees with little economic value.

For decades, medicine, engineering, information technology and business have been regarded as the safest routes to employment. Social sciences—including sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, economics, international relations, public policy and development studies—have increasingly become fallback options rather than first choices. Students avoid them, parents discourage them, universities invest less in them and employers seldom seek them out. The consequences extend far beyond university campuses.

Ironically, almost every major national challenge confronting Pakistan today demands exactly the kind of research social scientists are trained to produce. Questions about why millions of children remain out of school, why public policies often fail to deliver, why poverty persists despite repeated interventions, why communities distrust institutions or how climate change is reshaping migration patterns cannot be answered through engineering or medicine alone. They require an understanding of people, institutions and behaviour.

Yet Pakistan continues to lag well behind many countries in social sciences research.

Education experts argue that the problem begins with perception but is reinforced by policy. As fewer students enrol in social science programmes, universities allocate fewer resources to these departments. Limited funding leads to fewer research projects, weaker academic output and declining international visibility. Employers then view these degrees as less relevant, further discouraging students from entering the field. The cycle repeats itself every year.

Former Higher Education Commission (HEC) Chairman Dr Mukhtar Ahmed has described social sciences as "a very important area" but also "the missing link in our education system," warning that strengthening these disciplines is essential for preserving the fabric of society. His remarks underline a growing concern among academics that Pakistan cannot hope to formulate effective public policy without investing in the research needed to understand its own social realities.

For researchers working in the field, the challenges begin with funding. Unlike laboratory sciences, social science research depends heavily on extensive field surveys, interviews, community engagement and long-term data collection. These activities require sustained financial support, but researchers say available funding remains limited and highly competitive.

The Higher Education Commission has attempted to address the gap through its Thematic Research Grant Programme, which supports studies on governance, education, the economy and other national priorities. While the initiative represents an important step, academics argue that the number of projects receiving grants remains too small to meet the country's research needs. The HEC itself has acknowledged that Pakistan must further strengthen research infrastructure, institutional capacity and academic development to build a more vibrant social sciences ecosystem.

Money, however, is only part of the story.

Inside many classrooms, students continue to prepare for examinations by memorising textbook definitions rather than questioning assumptions or analysing real-world problems. Original research, critical thinking, policy evaluation and data analysis often receive far less attention than rote learning. By the time students graduate, many possess theoretical knowledge but little practical experience in designing surveys, analysing datasets or evaluating public programmes.

Education specialists say this mismatch leaves graduates struggling in an increasingly competitive job market where governments, international organisations and development agencies seek professionals capable of evidence-based policy analysis rather than simple academic credentials.

Former Federal Education Minister Balighur Rehman repeatedly stressed the importance of adopting modern research methods and strengthening links between universities and industry, arguing that applied research is essential for both economic development and national progress.

Around the world, social sciences have undergone a remarkable transformation. Economists increasingly work alongside climate scientists to study environmental policy. Psychologists collaborate with public health experts to improve vaccination campaigns. Sociologists partner with artificial intelligence researchers to understand how new technologies affect society. Data science, behavioural economics and public policy analysis have opened entirely new career paths that barely existed two decades ago.

These interdisciplinary approaches have become central to policymaking in many developed countries, where governments increasingly rely on evidence gathered by social scientists before designing reforms. Whether the issue is tax compliance, education reform, public health, urban planning or social protection, policymakers now recognise that understanding human behaviour is as important as understanding technology.

Pakistan has yet to fully embrace this shift.

Experts argue that universities should move beyond traditional classroom teaching by equipping students with practical skills in statistical analysis, artificial intelligence applications, geographic information systems, behavioural research and policy evaluation. Equally important, they say, universities must establish stronger partnerships with government departments, think tanks, private companies and development organisations so that research addresses real policy challenges instead of remaining confined to academic journals.

The need for stronger social sciences was recognised years ago by UNESCO's former Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences, Pierre Sané, who described efforts to strengthen the discipline in Pakistan as a "turning point" after what he called a long period during which the field had remained in a "dismal state of affairs."

Today, as Pakistan confronts economic uncertainty, demographic pressures, climate change, governance challenges and rapid technological transformation, many education experts believe the country can no longer afford to neglect the disciplines that explain how societies function.

The young student standing outside the admissions office eventually folded his sociology admission letter and quietly slipped it into his backpack.

His decision may have seemed insignificant to those around him. Yet in many ways, it symbolised a much larger question confronting Pakistan.

A country that invests heavily in understanding machines but so little in understanding its own people risks solving technical problems while leaving its deepest social challenges unanswered.

For Pakistan, reviving the social sciences is no longer simply an academic aspiration. It is becoming a national necessity.

The toll of hepatitis in Pakistan

Dr. Fatima Khan

The grim statistics released by the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) on World Hepatitis Day should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers. Pakistan's position among the countries carrying the heaviest burden of viral hepatitis is not merely a matter for the health ministry. It is a national development challenge that affects families, productivity, healthcare spending and, ultimately, the country's human capital.

Pakistan is ranked among the world's highest-burden countries for viral hepatitis and has emerged as the largest reservoir of Hepatitis C infections globally. Nearly 13.8 million Pakistanis are estimated to be living with chronic Hepatitis B or C, while more than 37,000 people die every year from complications including liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Behind these figures are thousands of families dealing with prolonged illness, expensive treatment and the loss of breadwinners. The scale of the crisis also raises an uncomfortable question: how has Pakistan allowed a largely preventable and, in the case of Hepatitis C, curable disease to reach such alarming proportions?

The answer lies partly in the weaknesses of the country's healthcare system. Hepatitis is not an unavoidable consequence of poverty or geography. Hepatitis C can be cured with effective antiviral treatment, while Hepatitis B can be prevented through vaccination and managed with appropriate medical care. Yet the country continues to record around 110,000 new Hepatitis C infections every year.

The overwhelming contribution of unsafe medical practices makes this situation particularly disturbing. Reuse of syringes, inadequate sterilisation of medical equipment, unsafe injections and unscreened blood transfusions continue to expose people to infection. What should be basic infection-control practice is too often treated as an optional precaution.

This is not simply a problem of individual negligence. It reflects systemic failures in regulation, monitoring, training and enforcement. Healthcare facilities, whether public or private, cannot be allowed to compromise basic safety standards without consequences. A patient seeking treatment should not have to worry that the very procedure intended to make them healthier could expose them to a potentially life-threatening infection.

The risks also extend well beyond hospitals and major medical centres. Dental clinics, barber shops and beauty salons can become sources of transmission when instruments are not properly sterilised. The continued presence of unlicensed practitioners and quacks adds another dangerous dimension to the problem.

Pakistan has announced crackdowns on quackery repeatedly, but the persistence of unqualified medical practice suggests that enforcement remains inconsistent. Laws have little value if violations are not detected, prosecuted and punished. Periodic campaigns may generate headlines, but they cannot substitute for permanent regulatory systems capable of identifying unsafe practitioners and preventing them from operating.

The official messages issued around World Hepatitis Day have rightly focused on prevention, early diagnosis and equitable access to treatment. But Pakistan has heard similar messages for years. What is missing is not awareness at the policy level but sustained implementation.

The country needs a national hepatitis elimination programme based on measurable objectives rather than broad declarations. Authorities should establish clear targets for screening, vaccination, treatment and reductions in new infections, with regular public reporting on progress. Funding must be adequate and sustained, while responsibilities should be clearly assigned to federal, provincial and local institutions.

Infection control should be treated as a non-negotiable requirement throughout the healthcare system. Medical facilities need regular inspections and audits, while blood banks should be subjected to strict and transparent quality controls. Safety violations should result in meaningful penalties rather than warnings that are easily ignored.

Universal Hepatitis B birth-dose vaccination should also receive much greater attention. Expanding vaccination coverage is among the most effective ways of preventing future infections and reducing the long-term burden on the healthcare system. At the same time, Pakistan needs to expand affordable screening so that infected people can be diagnosed before the disease progresses to severe liver damage.

Treatment must be accessible as well. Diagnosis without affordable treatment does little to address the problem. Patients who discover that they have Hepatitis C should be able to obtain effective treatment without being pushed into financial distress. Similarly, those living with Hepatitis B need long-term monitoring and medical support.

Public awareness is another critical part of the response. Many Pakistanis remain unaware that everyday medical and personal-care practices can carry risks if basic hygiene standards are ignored. Unsafe injections, improperly screened blood and inadequately sterilised instruments can transmit infection. People need to know how hepatitis spreads, where they can get tested and what treatment options are available.

Awareness campaigns, however, should not be limited to a single day every year. Health education needs to be continuous, evidence-based and designed for different communities and literacy levels. Television, radio, social media, schools, workplaces and local healthcare networks can all play a role.

Reducing stigma is equally important. People diagnosed with hepatitis may avoid testing because of fear, misinformation or social embarrassment. Such reluctance allows infections to remain hidden and increases the likelihood of transmission. Early diagnosis should be presented as an act of responsibility rather than a source of shame.

Pakistan cannot afford to treat hepatitis as another health problem that can be managed through occasional campaigns and official statements. The economic consequences of the epidemic are considerable. Patients who become seriously ill may lose their ability to work, families may face high treatment costs and the healthcare system must eventually bear the expense of treating complications that could have been prevented or detected earlier.

The country already possesses many of the tools required to change this trajectory. The challenge is to deploy them systematically and consistently.

World Hepatitis Day should therefore be more than an annual reminder of alarming statistics. It should become an opportunity to measure what has actually been achieved since the previous year—and what remains undone.

Pakistan does not need another declaration of concern. It needs political commitment, effective regulation, reliable financing, vaccination, widespread screening, accessible treatment and strict enforcement of basic healthcare standards.

Thousands of deaths from hepatitis every year are not an inevitable reality. They are, to a significant extent, preventable. The real test of public policy is whether Pakistan finally acts with the urgency that this preventable health emergency demands.

How Israel and the European far right tried to exploit Ceuta

Ahmed Najar

The scenes from Ceuta were tragic. Thousands of desperate people attempted to cross from Morocco into the Spanish enclave, which left dozens dead and reignited one of Europe's most contentious political debates. Yet almost as quickly as the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis emerged, they were eclipsed by something else.

Within hours, social media was filled with warnings of an "Islamic invasion". The hashtag #StopIslam spread rapidly among far-right networks. Politicians who had long campaigned against immigration seized on the events as proof that Europe faced not simply a border challenge, but a civilisational one. Calls for tougher border controls quickly followed, while Italy announced it was reintroducing border checks with Spain. The speed of that transformation is perhaps the most revealing aspect of the crisis.

Before investigators had established the full circumstances of the crossings, before many of those who died had even been identified, prominent politicians, commentators and online campaigners already appeared certain of what Ceuta meant. That certainty deserves as much scrutiny as the tragedy itself.

The question to pose right now, therefore, is who benefited from the way the events in Ceuta were immediately interpreted. The beneficiaries were quickly apparent. Europe's nationalist right found fresh material to reinforce long-standing warnings about migration and Islam. Anti-Muslim campaigners gained another opportunity to portray Muslims as an internal security threat. At the same time, the events fed into a broader narrative advanced by the Israeli government and echoed by its political allies in Europe: that Muslim immigration, rising criticism of Israel and concerns about anti-Semitism are increasingly intertwined.

That narrative has become more pronounced since the war in Gaza. As public outrage over Israel's genocide has grown across Europe, Israeli officials have repeatedly argued that changing European attitudes are driven less by the scale of destruction in Gaza than by demographic change and the growing political influence of Muslim communities.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been one of them. In speeches and public remarks, he has portrayed Israel and Europe as partners in a shared struggle against radical Islam, mass migration and what he describes as a broader challenge to Western civilisation. In this telling, Israel is no longer simply defending itself; it is defending Europe itself.

This framing has profound political consequences. It shifts the debate away from Israel's genocidal conduct in Gaza and towards the identity of those criticising it. Opposition to Israeli policy is no longer presented primarily as a response to humanitarian catastrophe, occupation or violations of international law. Instead, it is increasingly framed as a consequence of demographic change and the political influence of Muslim communities.

Never mind that across European nations, majorities of up to 78 percent hold unfavourable views of Israel – nations where Muslims make up less than 10 percent. Still, political leaders including Viktor Orban, Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen stick to this narrative, expressing strong support for Israel while pursuing hard-line anti-immigration agendas. In Britain, figures such as Tommy Robinson have similarly presented Israel as the front line in a broader civilisational struggle with Islam. Increasingly, support for Israel has become intertwined with a wider political project defined by opposition to immigration, multiculturalism and Islam.

The convergence is striking. For parts of Europe's nationalist right, support for Israel provides an opportunity to present themselves as defenders of Jewish communities while pursuing policies directed against Muslim minorities and migrants. For Israel's current government, these movements offer reliable diplomatic support while reinforcing a narrative that links criticism of Israel to broader anxieties about migration and security. The political interests are distinct, but they increasingly reinforce one another.

The consequences extend well beyond electoral politics. Across Europe, debates about Palestine are increasingly discussed through the language of security. Demonstrations against the war in Gaza are sometimes portrayed less as expressions of political dissent than as potential public order concerns. Muslim organisations are viewed through the lens of counter-extremism. Campaigns for Palestinian rights are, in some quarters, presented not as movements grounded in human rights or international law, but as vehicles for imported anti-Semitism.

None of this diminishes the reality of anti-Semitism. It remains a serious and persistent form of racism that must be confronted wherever it appears. But there is an important distinction between combating anti-Semitism and broadening its meaning to encompass criticism of Israeli government policy. When that distinction becomes blurred, legitimate debate is narrowed, and a vital tool for confronting genuine anti-Semitism risks being weakened through overuse and politicisation.

Seen in this context, Ceuta becomes more than a migration story. The remarkable speed with which politicians, commentators and activists converged around familiar themes suggests that the political infrastructure for interpreting such events already existed. Whether coordinated or entirely independent, the political effect is the same. One narrative reinforces the next. Fear of migration fuels hostility towards Muslims. Hostility towards Muslims makes solidarity with Palestinians appear increasingly suspect. Once support for Palestinian rights is reframed as a security concern rather than a political or humanitarian one, scrutiny of Israel's actions becomes easier to dismiss.

This matters because the debate is no longer only about borders. It is about legitimacy. It is about whose voices are considered credible, whose suffering deserves recognition and which political causes are regarded as legitimate. If solidarity with Palestinians can be portrayed as the product of demographic change rather than a moral response to the devastation of Gaza, then attention shifts away from the conduct of states and towards the identities of those raising concerns.

Ceuta should have been remembered first and foremost as a humanitarian tragedy. Instead, it became another chapter in Europe's culture wars. When humanitarian disasters are understood less through the lives they destroy than through the political narratives they can sustain, truth risks becoming secondary to political utility. Fear ceases to be merely a reaction to events and instead becomes a governing ideology.

And once fear becomes ideology, impunity is never far behind.

Shortage of ambulances in Turbat

There is a serious shortage of ambulance services in Turbat. In emergency situations, every second is precious and any delay can worsen a patient's condition or even cost a life. The shortage of ambulance affects not only the residents of Turbat, but also people from nearby areas who depend on the city's hospitals for emergency treatment. The government should increase the number of ambulances and ensure that they are fully equipped, properly maintained and available round the clock. Trained emergency staff should also be appointed to provide timely assistance. Access to emergency medical transport is a basic public service, and no one should be deprived of it.

Ayesha Munir Ahmed
Turbat

New postal rates

The revised postal rates for international mail available on the website of Pakistan Post as well as at the Islamabad General Post Office (GPO) have not been communicated to many post offices. The rates came into effect on March 12, while many post offices continue to insist on charging the old rates. According to the relevant notification, postal rate for a 50gm letter had been reduced from Rs400 to Rs250. However, post offices in F-6, F-7, F-8 and DHA phase 2 insist on charging the old rates. This is a serious lapse on the part of Pakistan Post.

Jawwad Zaki
Islamabad

Microplastics in human body

Recent studies have identified microplastics in human blood, lungs, placenta and digestive tissues, raising questions about their long-term effects on human health. Consequently, the search for affordable and sustainable methods to remove microplastics from water has become a global priority. One promising solution comes from nature itself in the shape of moringa oleifera plant.

The seeds of moringa oleifera contain water-soluble proteins with a positive electrical charge. Most suspended particles in water carry a negative charge. When powdered moringa seeds are added to contaminated water, the positively charged proteins attract and neutralise these particles. This process, known as coagulation and flocculation, causes the contaminants to clump together into larger aggregates called flocs. As these flocs become heavier, they settle at the bottom of the container and can be removed through filtration. The result is cleaner and clearer water. Unlike conventional chemical coagulants, such as aluminium sulphate, moringa seed powder is bio-degradable, environmentally friendly and is derived from a renewable natural resource.

The water purification process begins with the harvesting of mature moringa pods. The seeds are removed from the pods, dehulled and dried before being ground into a fine powder. This powder is then mixed with contaminated water and stirred thoroughly. After a period of settling, the flocs containing impurities and microplastic particles sink to the bottom, allowing the clarified water to be filtered and collected. Additional dis- infectants may be applied if the water is intended for drinking purposes.

Moringa-based water treatment is in-expensive, sustainable and easily applicable in rural and resource-limited communities. Since moringa plants grow well in many regions of Pakistan, the raw material is readily available. Despite these benefits, moringa seed treatment is not a complete replacement for modern water treatment technologies. While it effectively removes suspended particles and facilitates the aggregation of many microplastics, it may not eliminate dissolved chemical pollutants, heavy metals or extremely small nano-plastics. Therefore, it should be viewed as a complementary method rather than a standalone full-scale solution on its own.

Dr Abdul Quddoos
Lahore

The cost of law enforcement

A date palm tree in Dera Ghazi Khan was recently cut down to apprehend a suspect who had climbed it. While there can be no disagreement about the importance of maintaining law and order, the destruction of a mature tree during the operation raises concerns about whether less damaging alternatives could have been employed. A date palm is a long-term natural asset that takes years to mature and contributes to local livelihoods, biodiversity and environmental sustainability. In regions such as southern Punjab, where date palms hold both economic and ecological value, the loss of a mature tree signifies the loss of a resource that cannot be replaced easily or quickly. The central issue is not the apprehension of the suspect, but the means by which the operation was carried out. Practical options, such as protracted negotiation, the use of ladders and safety equipment, assistance from local rescue personnel, or securing the area until the individual descended could have been explored before taking the irreversible step of cutting down the tree. At a time when Pakistan is striving to increase forest cover and promote environmental conservation, every mature tree deserves thoughtful consideration. Development, security and environmental protection should not be viewed as competing priorities. Rather, they must work together in shaping responsible decision-making. This incident offers an opportunity for reflection. The challenge before us is not simply to enforce the law effectively, but to do so in a manner that respects and preserves the natural resources upon which future generations depend. A society committed to sustainability must ensure that solutions to immediate problems do not create lasting environmental losses.

Shafaq Altaf Kazmi
Karachi

Social media ban

Following Australia's example, the United Kingdom has announced a ban on social media for children aged less than 16 years. This is a great step to protect children from misleading and vulgar content available on social media platforms. Several reports indicate that social media does not make children happy; it makes them anxious and depressed. In fact, it is depriving children of what they should be doing to be happy, like playing with their friends, reading good books and spending time with their families. All parents worldwide tell their children not to speak with strangers, but on social media, children can communicate with strangers without parents knowing about it. This is proving to be very harmful.

So far, two developed countries — Australia and the UK — have banned social media platforms for children under 16 years of age. As we all know, today's children are the future of our country. Therefore, better-guided and raised children will give a better future to their respective countries. All developing countries, including Pakistan, should do the same because they are in need of better future leaders. The government should consider taking the lead on this matter.

Ejaz Ahmad Magoon
Dubai

Hashtag justice: The erosion of sustained public pressure

There is a disturbing change in how we respond to violent crimes against women and children in society. Till a few years ago, horrific incidents were met with lasting public anger, peaceful street protests, and calls for justice. Today, our grief seems to last no more than a couple of days on social media. The pattern has become entirely predictable. When a terrible case comes to light, it fills our feeds for about 48 hours. This brief window is full of shock, celebrity condemnation and victim-blaming.

As soon as the next headline appears, the reaction to the 'previous' tragedy vanishes. Real-world activism and sustained pressure on institutions have been replaced by temporary social media hashtags. This short span of attention carries dangerous consequences. When public memory lasts merely for days, if not hours, potential criminals take heart from the fact that public anger would burn out quickly.

By reducing justice to a short-lived digital trend, we tend to lose the strong public pressure needed to force real reform.

Seher Raza
Lahore

A newly found world blurs the boundary between planet and moon

Lisa Grossman

A newly discovered cosmic object is not a planet, not a moon — but a third thing we don't have a name for yet. The object is about as massive as Jupiter and orbits a brown dwarf — a body that fuses deuterium in its core but is too small to burn hydrogen and shine as a true star. The brown dwarf, in turn, loops around a small star. That hierarchy of orbits makes the system, called CD-35 2722, the first with a known "exosatellite", astronomer Kevin Hoy and his colleagues report in Nature. They coined that term because nothing else is quite right. It's not exactly an "exomoon." And "exoplanet" doesn't feel right either, says Hoy, of the University Diego Portales in Santiago, Chile. "The structure of CD-35 is so different from the structure of the solar system that all the words we invented to describe the solar system just aren't really working anymore." The find reignites a longstanding debate about what makes a planet a planet: an object's intrinsic properties or its relationship to other bodies. Hoy and his colleagues used the Very Large Telescope in Chile to observe the brown dwarf multiple times from October 2023 to February 2026. Periodic shifts in the wavelengths of the brown dwarf's light revealed a massive companion tugging it to and fro — the same technique used to find the first exoplanets in the 1990s and hundreds since. But this is the first time the technique has identified what Hoy calls a "moonish thingy": something orbiting a bigger something orbiting a bigger something.

Beyond 'healthy' obesity: New framework weighs organ damage and daily limitations

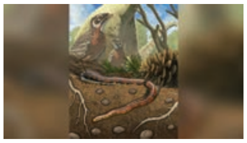
Robert Egan

A new approach to defining obesity could help physicians better determine which patients need more intensive treatment by focusing on the effects of excess adiposity on organs and tissues rather than relying primarily on whether a person meets a set of metabolic risk thresholds. In a new review published in The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, researchers from LSU's Pennington Biomedical Research Center examine the concept of "metabolically healthy obesity" and argue that a newer framework distinguishing preclinical obesity from clinical obesity provides a more biologically grounded and clinically actionable approach.

The review, "Does Metabolically Healthy Obesity Really Exist: Going Toward New Definitions," was authored by Dr. Christian Rodriguez, a postdoctoral researcher, and LSU Boyd Professor Dr. Eric Ravussin. The paper examines how the traditional classification of metabolically healthy obesity (MHO) and metabolically unhealthy obesity (MUO) has influenced treatment decisions and why the newer framework developed by The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology Commission on the Definition and Diagnosis of Clinical Obesity may offer a better path forward. The traditional MHO/MUO framework generally classifies people with obesity based on the presence or absence of metabolic abnormalities. Under that approach, individuals with metabolically unhealthy obesity may be candidates for more intensive lifestyle interventions and pharmacotherapy, while those classified as having metabolically healthy obesity may initially receive structured lifestyle support, with more intensive treatment considered if their metabolic health worsens or other risk factors emerge.

A rare 3-D snake fossil is spilling secrets of its unusual lifestyle

Libby Riddle



Most snake fossils are two-dimensional. Sandwiched within rocks, the pressure of millions of years flattens them like a pancake. But in 2020, scientists uncovered a uniquely well-preserved snake fossil in southeastern Brazil. The snake's tiny skull — only 20 millimeters in length — was 3-D, with its braincase still intact. The fossil's well-preserved skull has now provided the earliest concrete evidence of a fossorial snake — a serpent that burrowed underground. And that suggests early snakes explored more habitats and lifestyles than previously thought, researchers report in Nature.

The fossil belongs to a previously unknown snake species that lived 85 million to 75 million years ago. Researchers named it Tametara mirim, after the words for "adorned" and "small-sized" in the Tupí-Guaraní language of Brazil. It is one of only four snake fossils from the Age of Dinosaurs preserved this well. "This quality of preservation allows us to answer questions you simply cannot answer if you don't have the right body parts preserved," says paleobiologist Tiago Simões of Princeton University. Unlike human brains, which float in fluid within our skulls, the shape of snake brains closely matches the inside of their braincase. Using CT scans, the researchers reconstructed T. mirim's brain anatomy. Well-developed brain regions correspond to the senses the snake relied on most.

Eat your ice cream for a long, healthy life? This doctor says so

Allison Aubrey

If you're hankering for a cool treat on a hot day, nothing screams summer like ice cream. And a physician renowned for shaping U.S. healthcare policy has a message: Go ahead and enjoy it. Zeke Emanuel is an oncologist and bioethicist who served as an adviser to the Obama administration, helping shape the Affordable Care Act. He believes in a system that invests in prevention, one that aims to keep people healthy. So when he released his book, literally titled Eat Your Ice Cream: Six Simple Rules for a Long and Healthy Life, I asked him what motivated him. "Mostly anger at the wellness industrial complex," Emanuel says. He says the wellness industry is selling people all kinds of things that are expensive and clinically unproven, pointing to the latest peptide trend, whole body scans and "all sorts of supplements" marketed as anti-aging elixirs. In his book, Emanuel takes a back-to-basics approach, based on evidence, to maintaining good health. And though the title is a bit tongue-in-cheek, he points to evidence that people who are in the habit of eating ice cream have a lower risk of metabolic disease, despite the fact that it has lots of sugar and fat. Researchers have dubbed this the "ice cream paradox." There's data from 2015 that suggests "that ice cream is actually pretty good at preventing development of Type 2 diabetes, and dairy in general is good at preventing Type 2 diabetes," Emanuel says. Dairy contains whey protein that may benefit glucose regulation, which may partially explain the association, though the research doesn't nail down cause and effect. Emanuel is also big on consuming more fiber and fermented foods, pointing to the need to feed the bacteria in our guts. "Evolution would have gotten rid of them if they weren't there for a reason," Emanuel says. "And so treating them well, through eating more fermented foods, whether it's yogurt or cottage cheese or hard cheeses like gruyere or kimchi or sauerkraut, good things for us."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