

WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

A silver SUV is shown on a yellow assembly line in a factory. The car's hood is open, and it is being lifted by a yellow crane. The background shows the industrial setting of the factory with various equipment and structures.

**PAKISTAN'S ECONOMY
CANNOT BE REVIVED
WITHOUT OVERDUE
STRUCTURAL REFORMS**

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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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Pakistan's economy cannot be revived without overdue structural reforms

Farhan Khan

The latest update on Pakistan's economy presents a mixed picture. The government has met many of its IMF obligations but is struggling with the consequences of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. The Update concedes that higher global oil prices remain the principal risk to the outlook through their impact on purchasing power, input costs and the import bill. For ordinary Pakistanis, that risk is already a daily reality.

On the achievement side is a narrower current account deficit. In July-August of the current fiscal year, it stood at \$543 million, down from \$853 million in the same two months a year earlier. Under the Extended Fund Facility, that counts as progress. The composition of the improvement matters more than the number, however. The trade deficit did not shrink. It widened from \$5.16 billion to \$6.16 billion, driven largely by the higher cost of petroleum and related imports. Exports to the Middle East rose by only \$0.2 billion, nowhere near enough to offset the higher oil bill.

Two factors did the work instead. The first is remittances, which grew by 14.7 percent. Surveys suggest the conflict has actually helped here, as Pakistani workers in the Gulf have largely stayed put rather than returning home, as nationals of some other countries have done. The second is the slower pace of debt growth, 7.7 percent this year against 13 percent last year. Remittances are welcome but cannot be part of a long-term strategy. They depend on the fortunes of host economies and the continued stability of the region, and no country has built lasting prosperity on money sent home by its workers.

The Debt Management Office credits fiscal consolidation, a primary surplus and lower interest payments for the slowdown in debt growth. Independent economists point to something less flattering: tax collection has risen despite weaker sales and withholding tax revenue, mainly through tighter enforcement at the factory gate in sugar, cement and fertilizer.

These are indirect taxes, and their burden falls hardest on those least able to bear it. They have contributed to food inflation at a time when the World Bank puts poverty at 44 percent. The primary surplus is real, but it excludes interest payments, which absorb 46 percent of current expenditure and 43 percent of

the total budget. That calculation also assumes the policy rate will not rise, an assumption now under pressure as inflation has climbed from 3.1 percent in August 2025 to 11.1 percent in August 2026. The government's recent \$3 billion dual-tranche Eurobond adds to the strain. It raised \$1.75 billion for 5.5 years at 7.5 percent and \$1.25 billion for ten years at 7.9 percent, making it dearer than money from multilateral and bilateral lenders. It almost certainly postdates the budget estimates, so its cost is not reflected in the figures.

Perhaps the most worrying signal is the slump in industry. Large-scale manufacturing growth, which stood at 8.93 percent in July 2025, fell to 3.03 percent in July 2026. Higher utility costs, partly the result of IMF-linked energy reforms, are one cause. Weak private-sector credit is another. The Update records the flow of credit to the private sector sliding further into negative



territory between the two years. Needless to say, an economy cannot create jobs, widen its tax base or earn export revenue if its factories are starved of affordable energy and finance.

What should be done? First, narrow the trade gap. Pakistan cannot control global oil prices, but it can reduce its exposure to them. That means faster conversion of power generation to domestic and renewable sources, incentives for solar adoption, and better public transport and fuel efficiency to curb petroleum consumption. On the export side, policy must move beyond textiles towards higher-value goods and services, with predictable energy tariffs for exporters and swift refunds of their taxes. The gains in remittances should be channelled into formal banking and, where possible, into productive investment rather than consumption alone.

Energy tariffs must target inefficiency rather than pass it on. Line losses, theft and capacity payments to power producers are the real drivers of expensive electricity, and cutting them would lower costs without abandoning reform commitments. At the same time, the government's appetite for domestic borrowing crowds out private credit. Reducing the fiscal deficit through better revenue collection rather than heavier borrowing would free bank lending for small and medium enterprises, the backbone of employment.

An inflation rate of 11.1 percent is eroding household budgets faster than any wage increase can compensate. Monetary policy must remain vigilant, but price pressures from the supply side, such as transport costs and food distribution, require attention too. Improving storage, reducing the number of intermediaries and curbing hoarding in staple commodities

would help. Relief measures, as the Update itself says, should be temporary and targeted, but they must actually reach the vulnerable, ideally through existing income-support channels.

Emphasis must shift from indirect to direct taxation. This is the most important reform. Pakistan's dependence on sales taxes, withholding taxes and levies on fuel means that a poor household pays a far greater share of its income than a wealthy one. The Update recommends accelerating revenue mobilisation and sustaining tax reform, but it stops short of saying where the additional revenue should come from. It should come from those with the ability to pay: large

landowners, real estate speculators, retailers and wholesalers outside the tax net, and high-income professionals who pay a fraction of what their salaried counterparts do. Digitising transactions, enforcing documentation and broadening the income tax base is harder than raising a tax at the factory gate, but it is the only route to durable revenue without deepening poverty.

Reserves are now more stable, the currency is steadier and the IMF programme remains on track. But stability that rests on remittances, expensive borrowing and regressive taxes is fragile, and it will not survive another oil shock. The government's priority should be to turn macroeconomic discipline into broad-based growth. That means cheaper energy for producers, credit for businesses, lower inflation for households and a tax system that asks more of those who can afford it.

The war for oil resources

Nasim Ahmed

The global economy is currently suffering badly under the weight of the largest energy supply disruption in history. Following a severe military escalation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has ground to a near-halt, hovering below 15% of its pre-war levels.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), global oil supply has plummeted by 5.7 million barrels per day, a staggering 6% contraction that has driven crude prices past \$110 per barrel. Dubbed the "Three Seas Crisis," this catastrophic bottleneck stretches across the Gulf/Red Sea, the Black Sea, and the Suez Canal. Standard tanker rerouting has been effectively blocked, transit premiums have soared, and global maritime insurance rates have reached prohibitive levels.

While the current headlines paint this as an immediate military crisis, historians and economists recognize it as the boiling point of a 50-year geopolitical and geo-economic struggle for the control of oil. For half a century, the grab for fossil fuels has dictated global alliances, triggered devastating wars, and shaped the rise and fall of superpowers. Today's crisis is not an anomaly; it is the logical culmination of a world built entirely on the strategic weaponization of energy.

The modern era of energy geopolitics was born in the shadow of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, a moment that permanently altered the balance of global power. For the first time, resource-rich developing nations realized they could bring Western economies to their knees without firing a shot. Oil was no longer just a commercial commodity; it became the ultimate instrument of foreign policy.

In response to this vulnerability, the United States established a rigid security doctrine. For decades, Washington's conduct on the global stage was governed by the need to secure the unhindered flow of Middle Eastern oil. This imperative drove the creation of the "Petrodollar" system—an arrangement ensuring that global oil transactions were denominated exclusively in U.S. dollars, anchoring American financial hegemony.

To safeguard this arrangement, the U.S. extended a military umbrella over the Persian Gulf. When that umbrella failed to guarantee stability, military interventions followed—most notably the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. For decades, the "grab for oil" meant a direct, physical scramble by great powers to control fields, dictate drilling rights,

and secure vulnerable maritime routes.

In the 2010s, the nature of this struggle fundamentally changed. The American shale revolution transformed the United States from a vulnerable, energy-dependent importer into the top global oil and gas producer. This domestic abundance fundamentally rewired Washington's conduct. No longer entirely reliant on Persian Gulf stability for its survival, the U.S. weaponized its newfound energy independence alongside its control over global financial networks. In the current 2026 landscape, Washington is actively deploying secondary tariffs and financial sanctions to block Russian and Iranian crude from Western markets, while aggressively draining over 170 million barrels from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) to stabilize domestic prices. Simultaneously, American crude and liquefied natural gas (LNG) are being heavily exported across the Atlantic to secure a deeply vulnerable, energy-dependent Europe.

However, this aggressive deployment of



economic leverage—the hallmark of modern geo-economics—has triggered a fierce counter-offensive from its primary global rival: China. As the world's largest oil importer, Beijing views Western financial and maritime control as an existential threat. To break the American chokehold, China has spent the last decade deepening bilateral ties with Russia and Middle Eastern producers, intentionally pioneering Yuan-denominated petro-trade to bypass the U.S. dollar entirely.

For years, policymakers argued that the transition to green energy would eventually neutralize the geopolitics of fossil fuels. The 2026 crisis has definitively exposed that narrative as a mirage. Instead of eradicating the war over oil, the green transition has hybridized it. The world is now locked in a volatile, du-

al-track conflict over both old and new natural resources.

First, the crisis is exposing the extreme fragility of the traditional order. While high oil prices are currently yielding massive, short-term windfall profits for non-disrupted Gulf actors like the UAE and Oman, they threaten long-term global stability. The IEA warns that unless international mechanisms assist non-diversified oil economies—such as Nigeria and Algeria—in transitioning away from hydrocarbon dependence, a sudden structural fracturing of the oil market will trigger domestic collapse, civil conflict, and mass regional migration.

Second, the current price shock has severely fractured the green transition itself. High oil prices were theoretically supposed to make renewables more competitive. Instead, according to the World Economic Forum's Energy Transition Index, global transition momentum has declined for the first time in a decade. Faced with soaring diesel prices, sky-

rocketing shipping costs, and immediate supply shortfalls, pragmatism has trumped idealism. Governments worldwide have been forced to prioritize immediate energy security over long-term decarbonization, prompting temporary returns to coal power and emergency investments in domestic nuclear energy.

As Western nations desperately attempt to reduce their reliance on Middle Eastern oil, they have run directly into a new, heavily fortified geo-economic bottleneck. China currently controls roughly 80% to 90% of the global manufacturing capacity for solar panels, wind turbines, and critical battery infrastructure.

The lesson of the last 50 years is clear: the global hunger for power will always adapt to the resources available. The "war over oil" has evolved from a 20th-century territorial pursuit of fields and wells into a multi-layered, 21st-century geo-economic conflict.

As the Strait of Hormuz remains choked and energy markets fracture, the conflict is no longer just fought with boots on the ground. It is waged via maritime interdictions at global chokepoints, secondary financial sanctions, automated refining warfare, and a cutthroat industrial race to dictate the infrastructure of both the current hydrocarbon economy and the future clean energy grid. For the global economy, escaping the black gold trap is proving to be a slow, bloody, and profoundly dangerous endeavour.

The FDI paradox

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's improving external position and a somewhat stronger sovereign credit profile have yet to produce the investment response the country needs most for sustained economic growth: a meaningful increase in foreign direct investment.

The latest figures underline the disconnect. According to available estimates, net foreign direct investment declined by around 32 percent to \$1.7 billion in FY26, despite an improvement in several macroeconomic indicators. The divergence raises an important question: if Pakistan's macroeconomic position is becoming more stable, why are foreign investors still reluctant to commit greater amounts of capital to the country?

The question has become even more relevant following a recent meeting between a visiting International Monetary Fund delegation and office-bearers of the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OICCI), which represents multinational companies operating in Pakistan. The interaction highlighted an issue that policymakers have acknowledged repeatedly but have struggled to resolve: macroeconomic stabilisation is necessary to attract investment, but it is only the starting point.

For foreign investors, the actual business environment is shaped by what happens after capital enters the country. Regulatory and compliance requirements, taxation, energy availability, policy coordination and the predictability of government decisions all influence whether an investor expands operations, maintains existing investment or looks elsewhere for opportunities.

One of the clearest indications of the difficulties confronting foreign businesses came from another disclosure by the OICCI. Its member companies had around Rs102.8 billion in tax refunds pending as of August, comprising approximately Rs68 billion in income tax and Rs34.8 billion in sales tax.

For businesses, such amounts are not merely accounting entries. They represent working capital that could otherwise be used to maintain operations, purchase equipment, increase production, hire workers or finance expansion. When legitimate refunds remain unpaid for extended periods, companies are effectively deprived of funds that belong to them.

The issue becomes more serious because OICCI members include some of the country's largest and most established multinational companies. These are not small businesses operating informally or companies without a significant history in Pakistan. If large foreign investors face prolonged delays in receiving legitimate tax refunds, the implications for the broader investment climate are difficult to ignore.

The government may continue to assure prospective investors that Pakistan is removing bottlenecks and improving the ease of doing business. But investors are likely to judge the environment by their actual experience rather than official assurances.

The refund issue is only one part of a much larger problem. Foreign companies operating in Pakistan have to assess the cumulative cost of doing business, including foreign exchange constraints that can complicate the repatriation of profits and dividends, frequent changes in tax and regulatory requirements, uncertainty over government policies, weak-

investors compare countries not only on the size of their markets but also on the predictability of regulations, availability of infrastructure, energy reliability, taxation and the ease with which profits can be transferred.

Energy remains another major concern. Pakistan's recurring dependence on imported fuel has repeatedly exposed the economy to external shocks. The disruption surrounding the Iran-US conflict has once again highlighted the vulnerability created by dependence on imported energy.

The issue is not simply the availability of fuel during a crisis. Higher international prices immediately increase the import bill and raise transportation and production costs, while uncertainty over supplies can disrupt industrial activity. Pakistan has made repeated commitments to improving energy efficiency, conservation and the development of alternative sources, but the structural vulnerability remains.

The OICCI's call for broadening the tax base during its meeting with the IMF delegation is equally significant. Foreign investors operating in the documented formal economy are already visible to the tax authorities. They file returns, maintain records and comply with regulatory requirements, yet many continue to wait for billions of rupees in refunds.

At the same time, substantial segments of the domestic economy remain either lightly taxed or outside the effective tax net. This creates a contradiction at the heart of Pakistan's revenue strategy. A government seeking higher tax revenues cannot indefinitely depend on the same documented businesses for additional collections while failing to bring undertaxed sectors into the formal tax system.

Repeatedly increasing the burden on compliant companies can eventually weaken the very investment base that the country needs to expand.

The size of the OICCI refund backlog also raises a broader question: if a relatively limited group of major foreign-invested companies has more than Rs100 billion tied up in tax refunds, what is the total stock of refunds awaiting taxpayers across the country?

That figure would provide an important measure of the administrative efficiency of the Federal Board of Revenue. A tax system cannot be judged only by how much money it collects. Its credibility also depends on how efficiently



nesses in dispute resolution and concerns regarding the protection of intellectual property.

The quality of coordination among government institutions also matters. A process that requires approvals from several federal and provincial departments can become unnecessarily lengthy when agencies do not coordinate effectively. What may appear to be a routine administrative requirement to a government department can translate into substantial delays and additional costs for a business.

Such problems are particularly damaging in an environment where international investors have alternatives. Capital is mobile, and

it processes legitimate claims and honours its obligations to taxpayers.

This is particularly important as the government seeks to attract investment from Pakistani-American businesspeople and other overseas investors. Encouraging overseas Pakistanis and foreign companies to invest is understandably a policy priority, but investment decisions are ultimately determined by commercial considerations and confidence in institutions.

Pakistan cannot assume that foreign capital will come simply because the government asks investors to participate in the country's economic development. Investors have choices, and those choices are increasingly global.

The country therefore needs to compete

on the basis of a credible investment environment rather than investment conferences, assurances or incentive packages alone. Predictable policies, efficient regulatory institutions, reliable energy, a broader and fairer tax base, timely refunds, effective dispute resolution and protection of investment are all essential components of that environment.

Macroeconomic stability remains important because high inflation, external imbalances and exchange-rate instability can discourage investment. But stability is only the foundation. Investors ultimately need confidence that the rules will remain predictable, contracts and obligations will be respected, legitimate payments will not be unnecessarily

delayed and government institutions will work with rather than against productive businesses.

The decline in FDI despite improvements in some macroeconomic indicators should therefore be treated as a warning rather than simply another statistic. Pakistan has spent considerable effort restoring external stability and rebuilding international confidence. The next challenge is to convert that stability into an environment in which investors actually want to commit capital for the long term.

The difference is crucial. It is relatively easy to invite investors to Pakistan. The harder task is to build an economic and institutional system that gives them sufficient confidence to stay, reinvest and expand.

Surface progress, persistent pressures

Husnain Shahid

The Finance Division's September Update and Outlook presents a mixed picture of Pakistan's economy, with some indicators showing improvement while others point to persistent structural weaknesses. The document attributes much of the progress to the implementation of commitments under the ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) Extended Fund Facility, while identifying the continuing Middle East conflict and elevated global oil prices as major risks to the economic outlook.

The Finance Division has specifically warned that higher international oil prices could affect purchasing power, production costs and the country's import bill. This concern is particularly significant for Pakistan, where petroleum remains one of the largest components of the import basket and changes in global oil prices quickly feed into domestic prices and the cost of doing business.

One of the more encouraging developments highlighted in the update is the narrowing of the current account deficit. The deficit declined from \$853 million during July-August 2025 to \$543 million in the corresponding period of the current fiscal year. On the surface, this represents an improvement in the external account, but a closer examination suggests that the underlying picture is considerably more complicated.

The improvement did not result from a reduction in the trade deficit. Instead, the trade deficit increased from \$5.16 billion in the first two months of the previous fiscal year to \$6.16

billion during the corresponding period of the current year. The deterioration is understandable in the context of higher international petroleum prices following the escalation of the Middle East conflict, while exports to the Middle East increased by around \$200 million.

Two developments appear to have played the principal role in containing the current account deficit. The first was a substantial increase in remittance inflows, which rose by 14.7 percent. Remittances are a particularly valuable source of foreign exchange because they do not create a repayment obligation. Recent surveys have suggested that the regional conflict may have contributed to the increase, as Pakistani workers in the Gulf have generally remained in their host countries rather than returning home, unlike nationals of some other countries affected by the conflict.

The second factor was a slower pace of growth in debt. According to the update, the rate of debt accumulation declined to 7.7 percent this year from 13 percent last fiscal year. The Debt Management Office, operating under the Ministry of Finance, attributes this improvement to fiscal consolidation, the achievement of a primary surplus and lower interest payments.

However, these claims need to be examined in the broader context of government finances. Independent economists have questioned the extent to which higher tax collections can be described as evidence of genuine fiscal improvement. They point out that revenue from sales and withholding taxes has been affected by the Gulf crisis, while

increased collections have partly resulted from intensified enforcement and scrutiny of sales tax at the factory level, particularly in sectors such as sugar, cement and fertiliser.

The composition of taxation matters because an increased reliance on indirect taxes can place a disproportionately greater burden on lower-income households. At a time when poverty remains a serious concern, higher taxation that is ultimately reflected in the prices of essential goods can worsen the financial pressure on vulnerable families.

This makes the World Bank's estimate of poverty at around 44 percent particularly relevant. The government therefore needs to complement its revenue mobilisation efforts with measures that protect low-income households from the inflationary impact of taxation and higher input costs.

There is little doubt that the government has made progress in controlling the primary balance. However, a primary surplus is calculated after subtracting government expenditure from revenue but before accounting for interest payments on public debt. This distinction is important because debt servicing continues to consume a very large share of government resources.

Interest payments account for around 46 percent of total current expenditure and approximately 43 percent of the overall federal budget. Any sustained increase in borrowing costs would therefore put additional pressure on fiscal management. The assumption that the policy rate will remain unchanged may also become increasingly difficult to sustain if

inflationary pressures continue to build.

Inflation has already risen sharply, increasing from 3.1 percent in August 2025 to 11.1 percent in August 2026. Much of the recent pressure has been linked to the impact of the regional conflict, particularly through energy and commodity prices. If inflation remains elevated, monetary policy could face renewed pressure, with potentially negative consequences for private investment and economic activity.

The government's recent \$3 billion dual-tranche sovereign Eurobond issue also highlights the continuing cost of accessing international capital markets. The issue comprises \$1.75 billion for 5.5 years at an interest rate of 7.5 percent and \$1.25 billion for 10 years at 7.9 percent. These rates are considerably higher than the financing generally available through multilateral and bilateral sources. Moreover, because the borrowing took place after the budget was presented, its full implications may not have been reflected in the original budget estimates.

Perhaps more worrying is the slowdown in large-scale manufacturing. The large-scale manufacturing growth rate in July 2025 stood at 8.93 percent, significantly higher than the annual estimate of 4.98 percent. By July 2026, however, growth had fallen sharply to 3.03 percent.

The decline cannot simply be viewed as a temporary fluctuation. Higher utility costs resulting from the implementation of IMF-linked energy reforms have increased the cost of production for industry. At the same time, private-sector credit flows have deteriorated, moving from negative Rs170 million during July-August 2025 to negative Rs364.5 million during the corresponding period of 2026.

This combination of higher production costs and weaker access to credit creates a difficult environment for private businesses. It also raises questions about how quickly the economy can transition from stabilisation to



sustainable private-sector-led growth.

The Finance Division's recommendation is to accelerate revenue mobilisation, ensure that relief measures remain temporary and targeted, and continue progress on energy and tax reforms. These are reasonable objectives if they are implemented in a manner that does not further weaken domestic demand or discourage investment.

However, the next phase of reform requires greater attention to the quality and composition of taxation. Pakistan needs a tax structure that raises more revenue through direct and ability-to-pay taxation rather than relying excessively on indirect taxes that ultimately pass the burden to consumers.

Similarly, energy tariffs should address inefficiencies, losses and governance failures within the energy sector instead of simply transferring rising costs to already burdened consumers.

Macroeconomic stability is important, but stability achieved through higher taxation, expensive borrowing and weaker private-sector activity cannot by itself provide a durable foundation for growth. The real test of the government's economic strategy will be whether it can convert the current period of IMF-supported stabilisation into an economy capable of generating investment, employment, exports and sustained growth without repeatedly returning to the same cycle of crisis and external financing.

The September update therefore offers reasons for cautious recognition of progress, but it should also serve as a reminder that improving headline indicators is not the same as resolving structural problems. Pakistan's challenge now is to ensure that the gains from stabilisation are not achieved at the expense of consumers, businesses and future economic growth.

Modest recovery, rising risks

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economic growth outlook remains clouded by uncertainty, with major multilateral institutions offering different projections for the current fiscal year.

The Asian Development Bank has forecast growth at 3.7 per cent, 0.3 percentage points below the government's target of 4 per cent but broadly in line with the provisional growth rate recorded for 2025-26. The World Bank has placed its projection lower at 3.2 per cent, while the International Monetary Fund expects growth of 3.5 per cent. The difference

may appear relatively small, but they are significant for an economy struggling to generate growth substantially above population expansion. They also underline the uncertainty surrounding Pakistan's economic outlook at a time when policymakers are attempting to preserve macroeconomic stability while creating conditions for stronger economic activity.

According to data available on the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics website, the provisional growth rate for 2025-26 was 3.7 per cent, with the size of the economy estimated at \$4,523.1 billion and per capita income at \$1,901. The government's target of 4 per cent growth

for the current fiscal year therefore represents only a modest improvement over the previous year.

The variations in the forecasts of the three multilaterals can partly be explained by the different dates on which their assessments were prepared. Each institution would have incorporated its own assumptions regarding global economic conditions, commodity prices and the likely duration and impact of the conflicts in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine. Developments in these regions are particularly important for Pakistan because of their potential impact on oil prices, shipping

costs, trade flows and external financing conditions.

The projections also depend on assumptions about domestic policy. In particular, the IMF's assessment is based on the expectation that Pakistan will continue implementing the structural benchmarks and time-bound commitments agreed under its current programme. Many of these measures are intended to strengthen fiscal and external sustainability, but their immediate impact can be contractionary.

This creates a difficult policy challenge. Measures designed to stabilise the economy can simultaneously restrict domestic demand, increase business costs and discourage investment. The government must therefore manage the delicate balance between maintaining the credibility of the stabilisation programme and creating sufficient space for economic expansion. The IMF team is currently in Pakistan for discussions on the fourth quarterly review under the ongoing programme as well as the third review of the Resilience and Sustainability Facility. A staff-level agreement will be required before the IMF staff can submit the review to the Fund's Executive Board for approval of the next tranche.

One issue that could feature prominently in the discussions is the recently introduced concession on petroleum products for motorcycles and cars with engines below 800cc. The relief is estimated to involve around Rs75 billion, equivalent to approximately 4.4 per cent of the total petroleum levy collection targeted in the budget. The amount may not appear large in the context of the overall budget, but any shortfall in petroleum levy revenues would have to be addressed through some combination of additional taxation, higher prices or expenditure reductions. Cutting development spending could provide an immediate fiscal adjustment, but it would also carry consequences for economic growth because the Public Sector Development Programme supports infrastructure and other productive investments.

The challenge becomes more complicated when the performance of the industrial sector is examined. The increase in overall GDP growth during 2025-26 was supported significantly by industry, whose growth rate reportedly rose from 1.96 per cent in 2024-25 to 6.61 per cent in 2025-26. On the face of it, this represents a substantial improvement and appears to provide an important basis for the higher overall growth rate. However, the large-scale manufacturing sector has challenged the strength of this recovery. Industrialists, particularly in textiles, have argued that rising input costs have placed considerable pressure on manufacturers. They have attributed part of the increase to administrative measures linked to IMF programme requirements, including tariff adjustments intended to move towards full cost recovery in the energy sector.

The availability of credit is another concern. Data reported by the Finance Division show that credit flows to the private sector were negative Rs232.1 million during the comparable period in 2025 and deteriorated further to negative Rs393.4 million during the corresponding period this year. Weak private-sector credit can constrain investment and expansion at precisely the time when Pakistan needs businesses to increase productive capacity.

The textile sector has also reported the closure of more than 100 units, citing high input costs and difficult operating conditions. Such claims need to be assessed against comprehensive industrial data, but they raise legitimate questions about the sustainability of the manufacturing recovery. If some

These competing indicators demonstrate why economic forecasts should be treated as estimates rather than certainties. Growth projections can change rapidly when oil prices rise, geopolitical tensions intensify, external financing conditions deteriorate or domestic policy changes. Similarly, inflation forecasts can be overtaken by supply shocks, exchange-rate movements and changes in energy prices.

The government should therefore avoid treating any single forecast as a guaranteed outcome. The more important task is to ensure that economic statistics accurately reflect conditions on the ground. Reliable data are essential not merely for international credibility but for domestic policymaking. If official indicators



segments of industry are expanding while major export-oriented sectors are contracting or shutting down production units, headline industrial growth may not fully capture the pressures being experienced across the manufacturing base.

The inflation outlook presents a somewhat different picture. The three multilateral institutions are relatively close in their forecasts, with the ADB projecting inflation at 8.3 per cent, the World Bank at 8.2 per cent and the IMF at 8.4 per cent for the current fiscal year. Their greater convergence on inflation compared with growth suggests that there is somewhat more agreement about the direction of price pressures.

Domestic data, however, underline the risks surrounding those projections. Inflation increased to 9.2 per cent in July and further to 11.2 per cent in August. If elevated inflation persists, the annual rate could exceed the projections made by the multilaterals. The State Bank of Pakistan, meanwhile, has retained its medium-term inflation projection of 5 to 7 per cent and has kept the policy rate at 11.5 per cent. The central bank's assessment provides room to avoid further monetary tightening, but a sustained acceleration in inflation could make that position increasingly difficult to maintain.

understate emerging weaknesses, policymakers may respond too late to problems that could have been addressed at an earlier stage.

Pakistan needs timely and transparent information on industrial production, private investment, employment, inflation, exports, imports and external financing. Differences between official estimates and conditions reported by businesses should be investigated rather than dismissed.

Ultimately, the objective should not be to produce statistics that support an optimistic narrative, nor to assume that every forecast will be achieved. Economic projections are useful precisely because they provide policymakers with an early indication of potential risks. The government should use them as warning signals and adjust policies when the underlying evidence changes.

The current forecasts suggest that Pakistan can expect modest growth, but none points to a rapid economic expansion. With inflation again rising and industrial businesses facing higher costs, the challenge is to protect the gains of stabilisation without suppressing the investment and productivity needed for stronger growth. Accurate statistics, realistic forecasts and timely policy responses will be essential if Pakistan is to turn modest recovery into sustainable economic expansion.

Pakistan needs a shift from the culture of coercion to positive peace

Raza Khan

The growing visibility of violence in Pakistan's social and political life is becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss as a series of isolated incidents. From domestic disputes and community conflicts to political confrontations, the use of force frequently appears to have become an accepted method of settling disagreements. The reasons for this are complex and deeply rooted, but one important explanation lies in the social structures through which authority and power have traditionally been exercised.

Large sections of Pakistani society continue to function within authoritarian, patriarchal and, in some areas, tribal traditions. In such environments, power is often associated with dominance, obedience and the ability to compel others rather than with dialogue, equality and consensus. When these values become embedded in social behaviour, coercion can gradually acquire legitimacy as a means of resolving conflict.

A society that has not developed strong democratic norms is unlikely to regard peaceful disagreement as a natural or desirable part of public life. Where authority is placed above equality and obedience above discussion, compromise can be interpreted as weakness while the ability to force an opponent into submission is treated as strength. The result is a culture in which intimidation, pressure and, at its most extreme, violence become familiar instruments for dealing with disputes.

Yet the absence of visible violence does not necessarily mean that genuine peace exists. In many parts of Pakistan where open conflict appears limited, the prevailing condition may be better described as "negative peace". The concept refers to the absence of direct violence rather than the presence of justice, harmony or social reconciliation.

Under such circumstances, people may avoid confrontation not because their differences have been resolved but because they fear the consequences of escalation. Rival individuals, families or groups maintain an uneasy equilibrium because each knows that an attack could provoke retaliation. Peace therefore becomes dependent on fear rather than trust.

There is a parallel with the concept of the "balance of terror" associated with the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct military confrontation largely because each understood that a major conflict could result in catastrophic consequences. Nuclear deterrence created a form of stability

based not on reconciliation between the rivals but on the devastating cost of war.

A similar principle has influenced the relationship between Pakistan and India, where nuclear deterrence has been an important factor in preventing a full-scale conventional war despite repeated periods of severe tension. But deterrence of this kind cannot easily be transferred to the domestic sphere.

Within a society, fear-based stability remains fragile. It may prevent an immediate confrontation, but it does not eliminate resentment, inequality, mistrust or grievances. When the balance is eventually disturbed, the conflict that emerges can be more intense precisely because its underlying causes have been allowed to accumulate.

This is why Pakistan needs to move beyond the mere suppression of violence towards what is commonly described as "positive peace". Positive peace is not simply the absence of conflict. It involves creating the political, economic and social conditions that reduce the incentives and grievances that generate violence in the first place.

Such peace requires institutions based on justice, political systems that allow meaningful participation, economic opportunities that are accessible to wider sections of society and social structures that recognise equality and human dignity. Citizens are more likely to resolve disagreements peacefully when they believe that institutions can provide justice and that their voices have a legitimate place in the political and social system.

The transition, however, cannot be achieved through a few temporary policy measures. It requires a long-term transformation in political culture and civic attitudes. A society must become more politically aware, socially conscious and willing to participate in democratic processes. Citizens need access to education and information, but they also need institutions that allow them to translate awareness into constructive participation.

Leadership is central to this transformation. The direction in which a society develops is influenced considerably by the priorities established by those who exercise authority. Leaders who understand the causes of violence can help create institutions and policies that address grievances rather than merely suppress their consequences.

Leadership, in this sense, is much more than occupying public office. It requires the intellectual capacity to understand complicated social problems and the moral courage to confront them. A leader capable of contributing

to positive peace must be prepared to examine the roots of conflict, recognise institutional failures and pursue long-term solutions even when short-term political or social pressures favour easier alternatives.

Historically, transformative leadership can emerge in different ways. One possibility arises when society itself reaches the conclusion that existing arrangements have become unsustainable. When people collectively recognise that established institutions and leadership structures can no longer address their problems, they may begin searching for new ideas and alternative forms of leadership.

Another possibility is that individuals emerge who recognise a crisis before society as a whole fully understands its implications. Such people may identify structural problems early and attempt to initiate reform before circumstances become even more difficult. Their effectiveness, however, ultimately depends on their ability to build public trust and develop institutions capable of sustaining change.

Pakistan appears to face elements of both situations. Many citizens recognise the spread of violence and are aware of weaknesses in existing systems of conflict resolution. Yet awareness of the problem has not consistently developed into a broad, organised demand for structural transformation. Concern often remains fragmented, expressed by individuals or small groups without developing into a sustained national conversation about the causes of violence and the kind of society Pakistan wants to become.

Meanwhile, traditional structures of authority continue to influence political and social life in many parts of the country. In various regions, political influence has historically been concentrated among powerful families, feudal landlords, tribal chiefs and other local elites. Their authority has often been based on inherited status, patronage and personal influence rather than institutional accountability or open competition.

Such systems can sometimes contain disputes temporarily through negotiation, patronage or the exercise of personal authority. But containing a conflict is not the same as resolving it. When the underlying causes remain untouched, grievances can survive beneath the surface and reappear in another form.

Pakistan, however, is no longer the society it was when many of these traditional power structures became established. Rapid population growth, expanding education, urbanisation, mass communication and digital technology have transformed the way citizens

interact with one another and with the state. Young people in particular are exposed to ideas, cultures and political debates far beyond their immediate communities.

These changes require a different approach to leadership. Problems such as inequality, unemployment, youth frustration, political polarisation and social exclusion cannot be effectively addressed through rigid hierarchies and inherited authority alone. They require evidence-based policymaking, institutional capacity, public participation and a willingness to understand perspectives different from one's own.

The challenge for Pakistan is therefore not simply to reduce the number of violent incidents. It is to change the conditions and attitudes that make violence an acceptable

response to disagreement. That requires strengthening democratic institutions, improving access to justice, broadening economic opportunity and encouraging a political culture in which disagreement does not automatically become confrontation.

The country needs a new generation of leadership with intellectual depth, practical vision and a commitment to institutional accountability. Such leaders need to understand Pakistan's history without becoming prisoners of it, learn from international experience without blindly copying foreign models, and recognise that durable stability cannot be built solely through authority or coercion.

Ultimately, positive peace is a process rather than an event. It cannot be imposed overnight by legislation or administrative

action. It emerges gradually when citizens develop confidence in institutions, when differences can be expressed without fear, and when justice becomes more credible than retaliation. Pakistan's long-term stability will depend not merely on controlling violence but on creating a society in which violence becomes less necessary, less legitimate and less acceptable as a means of resolving conflict.

The real transformation, therefore, lies in replacing the culture of coercion with a culture of dialogue. Until that happens, the country may continue to experience periods of relative calm, but such calm will remain fragile. Genuine peace will begin only when Pakistan develops the social, political and institutional foundations that allow its citizens to disagree without becoming enemies

Pakistan must treat women's heart health as a national priority

Dr Fatima Khan

The finding that Pakistani women have the highest death rate from ischaemic heart disease among women in five South Asian countries should serve as a serious warning for both health policymakers and the public. It challenges the long-standing perception that cardiovascular disease is primarily a man's disease and highlights an urgent but often overlooked threat to women's health.

The issue came into sharper focus on the eve of World Heart Day on September 29, when cardiologists, gynaecologists and representatives of the local healthcare industry gathered at the Karachi Press Club to launch the nationwide "Her Heart Matters" campaign. The initiative highlighted evidence from Global Burden of Disease estimates published in JACC: Asia, drawing attention to the growing cardiovascular risks faced by Pakistani women.

According to the study, Pakistan was the only one of the five South Asian countries examined where the ratio of deaths to estimated cases was higher among women than men. The ratio stood at 4.4 percent for women compared with 3.1 percent for men. Whatever the limitations of such estimates, the finding is significant because it points to a serious gap between the prevalence of cardiovascular risk and the ability of the healthcare system to identify and manage it in time.

Heart disease is still widely perceived in Pakistan as an illness that primarily affects men, particularly older men. That perception

can have serious consequences. When women, their families and even healthcare providers do not immediately associate certain symptoms or risk factors with cardiovascular disease, diagnosis can be delayed until the condition has become much more difficult to treat.

The major risk factors are hardly unknown. Hypertension, diabetes, obesity, physical inactivity and unhealthy diets are all well-established contributors to cardiovascular disease. The problem is that awareness of these risks does not necessarily translate into regular screening, preventive treatment or sustained follow-up.

As a result, many women reach hospitals only after significant complications have developed. By then, the opportunity to prevent or delay serious cardiovascular disease may already have been lost.

There is also a need to rethink how women's healthcare is approached throughout their lives. Cardiovascular health should not become a concern only after middle age or when symptoms become severe. Certain stages of a woman's life can provide important opportunities for identifying cardiovascular risks much earlier.

Pregnancy and childbirth, for example, can reveal underlying health problems that may have implications well beyond the pregnancy itself. High blood pressure during pregnancy should not simply be treated as a temporary condition that ends with delivery. Women who experience pregnancy-related hypertension require appropriate follow-up because it can indicate a higher future risk of

cardiovascular disease.

Women already living with diabetes, obesity or hypertension require even greater attention. These conditions frequently overlap and can significantly increase cardiovascular risk. The experience of major public hospitals, where many women seeking treatment for diabetes also present with one or more cardiovascular risk factors, demonstrates how closely these conditions are connected.

This makes routine screening particularly important. A woman should not have to wait for chest pain, breathlessness or another severe symptom before her cardiovascular health is assessed. Prevention depends on identifying risk before disease becomes an emergency.

But changing public perceptions is only one part of the solution. Pakistan's healthcare system also needs to strengthen its primary and secondary levels of cardiovascular care. Tertiary cardiac hospitals perform an essential function, but they cannot be expected to carry the entire burden of cardiovascular disease.

A patient who develops hypertension should ideally be diagnosed and managed at the primary-care level. A woman with diabetes or obesity should have her cardiovascular risk assessed during routine treatment. Patients requiring specialist intervention should then be referred appropriately. Such a system would reduce pressure on major hospitals while allowing serious conditions to be identified earlier.

The alternative is an increasingly expensive cycle in which patients receive care

only after their condition has deteriorated. Emergency treatment is inevitably more costly, more difficult and often less successful than prevention and early intervention.

Families also have an important role to play. Women frequently carry substantial responsibilities for children, elderly relatives and household management, leaving their own health needs at the bottom of the priority list. This attitude must change.

Women need the time and support to attend medical appointments, undergo screening, remain physically active and follow prescribed treatment. A woman who postpones medical care because of household responsibilities is not merely making an individual choice; she is often responding to expectations about whose health should take priority within the family.

The “Her Heart Matters” campaign is therefore timely and potentially valuable. But its real success should not be measured by

the number of seminars, awareness sessions or media messages generated around World Heart Day. The more meaningful measure will be whether awareness translates into behaviour and healthcare outcomes.

Are more women being screened for hypertension and diabetes? Are high-risk women being identified earlier? Are women receiving proper follow-up after pregnancy-related hypertension? Are patients able to access affordable medicines and specialist care when required? These are the questions that will determine whether awareness efforts produce lasting change.

Pakistan cannot afford to treat cardiovascular disease among women as a secondary health issue. The evidence suggests that the risks are substantial, while gaps in prevention and early diagnosis remain considerable.

The country therefore needs a broader approach that combines public awareness with accessible primary healthcare, routine

screening, better referral systems and sustained follow-up. Doctors, families, schools, workplaces, communities and policymakers all have a role in creating an environment in which women can take their cardiovascular health seriously.

Most importantly, prevention must begin before the emergency ward. By the time a woman arrives at a cardiac hospital with a serious complication, the healthcare system has already missed several opportunities to intervene. The real goal should be to identify risk years earlier, manage it consistently and prevent disease from reaching that point.

Women’s heart health is not simply a medical issue. It is a question of family well-being, economic productivity and the quality of life of millions of Pakistani women. The message behind “Her Heart Matters” is therefore worth extending beyond a campaign: her heart matters every day, and prevention must start long before a crisis begins.

WMA members must call for release of detained Palestinian medics

Javid Abdelmoneim

More than 1,700 healthcare workers have been killed during the genocide in Gaza. Israel has detained hundreds more without charges. Doctors, nurses and paramedics who stayed to treat the wounded have themselves become casualties of this war.

When medical staff are killed, imprisoned or disappeared, it is not only they who pay the price. Patients lose the people they rely on to keep them alive. This is something delegates who gather in Rotterdam this week for the General Assembly of the World Medical Association (WMA) must remember. The fate of their Palestinian colleagues should be put on the table, not as a debating point, but as a test of whether the world’s governing body of medical ethics still means what it says.

The WMA already recognised the seriousness of these issues last year by adopting a resolution on the protection of healthcare in conflict. That was an important step and a welcome reaffirmation of the principles of medical neutrality. The challenge now is to ensure this is followed by the commitment of every medical association to explicitly support it and to use its influence to pressure governments to act. If the WMA Assembly needs a single face for this file, it could be the one of Dr Hussam Abu Safia, the paediatrician who was the head of Kamal Adwan Hospital, the last functioning hospital in northern Gaza until Israeli forces stormed it in December 2024.

He’s been held now for more than 22 months without charge under Israel’s Incarceration of Unlawful Combatants Law, which permits indefinite detentions. He reportedly continues to endure prolonged solitary confinement, beatings, severe weight loss and untreated pre-existing conditions. An international petition for his release has drawn the signatures of more than 970 medical professionals from 41 countries.

Alongside him stands Dr Mazen al-Rantisi, the 71-year-old family physician from Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, known as the “doctor of the poor”. He was arrested in June in a predawn raid on his home. In addition, our longtime Doctors Without Borders (MSF) colleague, Dr Mohammed Hassan Ali Obeid, a respected 43-year-old Palestinian orthopaedic surgeon and father of three children, has been detained under the Unlawful Combatants Law in Israel for more than 600 days without charge.

Although detained health workers have been released, more than 80 remain in Israeli custody alongside at least a dozen arrested from the West Bank. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recorded 1,000 attacks on healthcare, which have resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and 1,700 injuries in Gaza since October 7, 2023. Roughly 90 percent of Gaza’s health infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged. In August 2025, United Nations experts stated that the systematic destruction of the health system amounts to “medicide”.

In the West Bank, where no wartime

emergency provides cover, the WHO also documented more than 1,000 attacks on healthcare since October 7, 2023, with 42 deaths and at least 218 injuries.

Ambulances are stopped at checkpoints and their crews taken. Medics trying to reach people injured in settler attacks have themselves been obstructed. Dialysis and oncologic patients stay home because the checkpoints make the journey to treatment impossible. Healthcare workers have been shot, detained and killed during Israeli military raids. All of this represents Israel’s deliberate and systematic endeavour to dismantle Palestinians’ capacity to provide care. This is consistent with its clear and blatant disregard for Palestinian life.

The WMA Assembly should speak plainly about what is happening. It should call publicly for the release of detained Palestinian doctors, including Abu Safia, al-Rantisi and Obeid. It should press for independent access to those still being held. And it should back independent investigations into attacks on healthcare in Gaza and the West Bank with the findings made public regardless of where they lead. This is an opportunity to collectively pressure fellow medical associations, political authorities and any relevant bodies to take action.

What lies before the Rotterdam assembly is a duty. One that reaffirms loudly, structurally, universally the founding proposition of the WMA: that membership carries an ethical responsibility, which does not flex with geography or alliances.

The Republican consensus on Israel is starting to fracture

Said Arikat

The Republican Party's powerful alliance with Israel — repeatedly reaffirmed during President Donald Trump's second term — is rooted in conservative Christianity's rise as a political force more than half a century ago.

The Reverend Billy Graham's relationship with President Richard Nixon helped bring evangelical politics into the White House. Graham later regretted his political entanglement, particularly after Watergate, but the opening remained. In the late 1970s, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority mobilised conservative evangelicals into a potent Republican constituency that Ronald Reagan incorporated into his conservative coalition. Israel became increasingly central to that identity, with many evangelicals viewing support for the Jewish state through a biblical rather than purely strategic lens. Leaders such as televangelist John Hagee and Christians United for Israel later built an institutional network that translated religious conviction into political pressure. What began as evangelical access to Republican presidents became a durable political infrastructure.

For Christian Zionists, this alliance is about more than religious affinity. Many view Israel as central to biblical prophecy, including end-times interpretations and the anticipated return of Jesus Christ. These beliefs elevated support for Israel from a foreign-policy preference to a religious commitment. As evangelical voters became a core Republican constituency, politicians had strong electoral incentives to embrace that commitment, bringing theology, party loyalty and strategic interests into closer alignment.

Today's Republican leaders inherited that system. Mike Johnson of Louisiana, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, embodies its contemporary influence. He has invoked biblical passages to portray the relationship between the US and Israel as more than a conventional strategic partnership. His speakership gives him considerable influence over legislation, congressional spending and debates over US military assistance to Israel.

Senator Ted Cruz of Texas has repeatedly framed his support for Israel in explicitly Christian terms. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas represents a more nationalist, hawkish version of the alliance. His effort to replace "West Bank" with "Judea and Samaria" in federal terminology illustrates how biblical language can enter government policy. Former

Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, now Trump's ambassador to Israel, represents the same intersection of evangelical Christianity and Republican politics. His defence of Israeli settlements and rejection of conventional territorial terminology reflect a worldview in which biblical claims carry substantial political weight.

These figures did not create the alliance; they are its current custodians. Their influence extends beyond rhetoric. Congressional votes on military assistance, diplomatic protection and sanctions translate political commitments into policy. Christian Zionist organisations sustain that influence through church networks, lobbying, grassroots mobilisation and direct engagement with elected officials, keeping their priorities prominent even when other Republicans question overseas commitments.

President Donald Trump strengthened the evangelical alliance with Israel while introducing a competing force into Republican foreign policy: America First. His administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocation of the US embassy fulfilled a longstanding Christian Zionist priority. Yet Trump's coalition also includes voters sceptical of foreign entanglements, overseas military interventions and extensive foreign assistance. This creates a tension within the Republican consensus.

For Christian Zionists, support for Israel can constitute a biblical obligation. For some America First Republicans, the question is whether that commitment advances a clearly defined American interest. The positions overlap but are not identical. The tension sharpens when support for Israel risks a wider war, additional deployments or prolonged US involvement in the Middle East. The Iran war has exposed precisely this contradiction, forcing Republicans to confront the point at which support for Israel collides with America First opposition to prolonged military involvement abroad. Religious conservatives may regard biblical commitments as decisive while more isolationist Republicans question the financial costs, potential American casualties and responsibilities Washington assumes on behalf of other countries.

Trump has sought to accommodate both constituencies, but their competing priorities have become increasingly difficult to reconcile. A more consequential challenge may be emerging among younger Republicans. A Pew Research Center March survey found

that Republicans overall viewed Israel more favourably than unfavourably, by 58 percent to 41 percent. Among Republicans aged 18 to 49, however, 57 percent held unfavourable views. Older Republicans remained substantially more favourable. A separate Pew survey in May found that 42 percent of Republican-leaning Americans aged 18 to 29 viewed Israelis favourably, compared with 83 percent of those aged 65 and older. Although the surveys measured different populations and questions, both revealed a pronounced generational divide.

These findings do not mean younger Republicans have abandoned Israel or oppose the US-Israel relationship. They do suggest that the constituency underpinning the alliance is becoming less uniform. The reasons extend beyond ideology. Younger Americans encounter the conflict through social media, reporting on Gaza and images of civilian suffering. Some question whether religiously grounded foreign-policy commitments serve American interests. Others support Israel while opposing particular Israeli government policies. Unfavourable views of Israel should not automatically be equated with hostility towards Israelis or rejection of the bilateral relationship.

Nevertheless, a generation increasingly divided over Israel may prove less receptive to appeals treating support for the country as an unquestionable test of conservative identity. Israel has developed into more than a foreign-policy priority. For millions of conservatives, support for Israel has been part of the Republican Party's religious and moral identity.

That legacy remains powerful, but its foundations are shifting. Younger Republicans came of age during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Trump's nationalism, scepticism towards foreign intervention and Israel's war on Gaza. Their questions increasingly concern not only theology but also national interests: What does US support for Israel accomplish, what does it cost and when should religious conviction yield to strategic considerations?

Such questions may reshape the coalition without immediately dismantling it. Evangelical organisations retain substantial resources, access to political leaders and the capacity to mobilise voters. Their congressional allies hold positions of considerable influence, and changing public opinion does not automatically translate into new party platforms or congressional votes.

Sindh traditional products

Many districts in Sindh possess unique products and traditional skills that could generate substantial income for the locals if developed into modern industries and linked with international markets. For example, Hyderabad's glass bangles, Shikarpur's traditional pickles, Hala's pottery and handicraft, Khairpur's dates and Tharparkar's embroidery and handicraft have significant potential for national and international markets. Instead of confining these activities to small cottage industries, the government and the private sector should join hands to establish modern production units, quality standards, packaging facilities, branding, export support and market linkages. With proper investment, these local products may become international brands, generate valuable export earnings, and create thousands of jobs.

Muhammad Ibrahim Maznani
Dadu

Ghost teachers

Ghost teachers continue to undermine the education system in remote and rural areas of Balochistan. These teachers are officially appointed and they receive regular salaries, but remain absent from their schools and do not perform their duties. Their prolonged absence deprives children of their basic right to education. The problem is particularly damaging in areas where educational facilities are already limited. The government must address teacher absenteeism through effective monitoring. Teachers who remain absent without valid reasons should face disciplinary action. Regular inspections, attendance and monitoring can also help ensure that schools function properly.

Naseer Samad
Hub

Privatisation

If a state enterprise goes into crisis, the only solution that appears feasible in the eyes of our decision-makers is privatisation. This is what the International Monetary Fund (IMF) advises all struggling economies. The fact is that we do not need further privatisation. What we need is a complete overhaul of the economic structure.

Asad Ullah
Lower Dir

Chashma Right Bank Canal breach

The recent breach in the Chashma Right Bank Canal (CRBC) in Paharpur tehsil of Dera Ismail Khan has once again exposed the serious threat faced by communities living along the canal. Paharpur has witnessed canal breaches in the past that inundated nearby settlements, forcing families to leave their homes and causing considerable damage to houses, agricultur-

al land and infrastructure.

Yet, despite repeated concerns raised by local residents through social media and official channels, several vulnerable sections of the canal remain in a precarious condition. The latest breach once again inundated populated areas, creating panic and forcing families to evacuate, some having to leave their cattle behind. Many residents are now uncertain about when they will be able to return to their homes. The immediate priority should be to protect the affected population and all the settlements at risk. The authorities must also look beyond the present emergency. Several other weak points along the CRBC could cause similar devastation if they are left unattended.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government and all the relevant authorities should conduct an urgent technical inspection of the canal banks, identify the vulnerable points and reinforce them. An early warning and emergency response mechanism should also be established for communities living close to the canal. Preventive action is far less costly than repeatedly responding to disasters after they occur. The residents of Paharpur should not have to wait for another breach and potentially a greater tragedy before all such warnings are taken seriously.

Muhammad Maroof Hassan
Dera Ismail Khan

Plastic dissolution

Articles are published often in the media, but no one presents a workable solution to combat the menace of plastic shopping bags. I wish to present one. There are various kinds of plastics, and all are soluble in their specific solvents. Those manufacturing shopping bags should mention the type of plastic used in them and its specific solvent so that the plastic bags collected from garbage can be separated from organic waste and then sent to their respective dissolution chambers.

Plastics are basically polymers. The dissolution process converts the polymer back into individual chemicals, making it liquid that can easily flow through the drain like water.

It is the responsibility of those managing solid waste to guide waste-collectors and provide them separate bins for plastic bags.

Dr M. Quadrat-e-Khuda
Karachi

Sialkot-Kharian Motorway

The federal government recently approved Rs27.62 billion in sovereign guarantees along with a rollover of Rs6.94 billion in viability gap funding for the Sialkot-Kharian Motorway. This deserves more public scrutiny than is currently the case. Sovereign guarantees are not free money. They are contingent liabilities that sit on the government's books and become real costs to taxpayers if the underlying project

underperforms or a private partner defaults. Viability gap funding exists precisely because a project cannot stand on its own financially, so a rollover of this scale is worth explaining in plain terms rather than announcing it as a routine approval.

All infrastructure projects, including the Sialkot-Kharian Motorway, do have genuine economic value, connecting industrial centres and easing freight movement across Punjab. That value is exactly why the terms attached to public guarantees should be published clearly, including the conditions under which the guarantee could be called and what recourse exists if the project's traffic or revenue projections fall short.

The federal government should publish a summary in plain language of major guarantee approvals like this one alongside the technical notification, so that citizens may better understand what liability the state has actually taken on in their name.

Mishaal Waseem
Islamabad

Quota system

There are a number of causes behind chronic bad governance that has plagued Pakistan. A fundamental cause is the quota system.

The system was introduced for a limited period of 15 years to provide a level playing field to people living in remote and underdeveloped areas. Over time, however, the original purpose of the quota system was largely abandoned, and it came to be used as a shortcut to secure lucrative government employment.

Candidates from the so-called 'backward areas', having gained entry through a system that prioritised quotas over merit, were then placed in charge of government offices and institutions. Politicisation and mediocrity gradually gave way to inefficiency, corruption and, ultimately, chronic bad governance.

The proposal in the said article to end the direct induction of military officers into the public service, bypassing the CSS examination, however, carries considerable weight. Such direct inductions have done little to improve governance and, in many instances, have only compounded the problem. The Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) needs to adopt a genuinely open, merit-based system of recruitment.

The benefits of merit-based recruitment in public services are evident across much of the developed world where competence and professional ability form the basis of selection and advancement. Should Pakistan not follow the same path? Why not? If merit-based recruitment has enabled other countries to build competent and effective public institutions, why should Pakistan not adopt the same principle to improve our governance and to enable Pakistan to grow and prosper?

Abid Mahmud Ansari
Islamabad

Antarctica will keep losing ice throughout this century, even if emissions are cut

Sanjana Gajbhiye

Antarctica may feel very far away from everyday life. But when ice sitting on land moves into the ocean, it raises sea levels around the world.



That matters for coastal towns and cities.

Higher seas can affect homes, roads, buildings, and other infrastructure that may stay in place for decades. A new analysis suggests that Antarctica is very likely to keep losing ice this century, even if greenhouse gas emissions fall sharply. But how much ice it loses is still not fixed.

Much of Antarctica is covered by a huge ice sheet that rests on land. Around the edges, floating ice shelves help slow the glaciers behind them. These shelves act like barriers. They do not stop the glaciers completely, but they make it harder for land ice to flow quickly into the ocean. Warmer ocean water can melt the shelves from below. As they get thinner or break apart, they hold back less ice.

That is where the problem can grow. More land ice can then flow into the ocean, raising sea levels. Robert Kopp, a Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University and a co-author of the paper, said coastal communities need better information about how much sea-level rise they may face. "Coastal communities need to prepare for rising seas, and the amount of rise they will have to manage still depends on the choices we make today. Cutting emissions now can limit the risks facing future generations," Kopp said.

Meet the newest living cat species, the first described in 100 years

Meghan Rosen

Attention cat lovers: There's an adorable new addition to the feline family tree.



Meet *Leopardus tilcayo*, a pint-size tiger cat discovered in Bolivia in the Yungas forests of the central Andes Mountains. *L. tilcayo*, reported in *Current Biology*, is the first new living cat species described and named by scientists in more than 100 years. The last one was the Uruguayan pampas cat (*L. fuscatus*), described in 1923.

L. tilcayo has a slender body, spotted fur and a ringed tail. It weighs roughly two kilograms, about as much as a two-month-old domestic kitten. For such a tiny cat, *L. tilcayo* has made a terrific splash, pouncing into headlines around the world. "I did not at all expect attention at this scale," says Jonas Lescroart, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Antwerp in Belgium. Lescroart and his colleagues hadn't set out to discover a new species. They were looking to untangle one branch of the cat family tree. Until now, scientists didn't have a good sense of how many tiger cat species existed. These small cats live in the tropical regions of the Americas and tend to look alike, Lescroart says. The researchers analyzed the genetics of 38 species of the *Leopardus* genus, which includes tiger cats as well as more widely known animals like the ocelot. They expected to find two, three or even four distinct species of tiger cat. Instead, Lescroart and his colleagues' analyses pointed to five separate species, including one that scientists had never before described: *L. tilcayo*.

The new species is based on two specimens: a female that was treated briefly for injuries at a sanctuary in Bolivia and released to the wild and a male that still lives at the sanctuary. His name is Tigrino.

Eating sugar while taking antibiotics might harm gut bacteria

Brenda Goodman

Sugary foods combined with antibiotic treatment can damage the gut microbiome in ways that could leave people vulnerable to dangerous infections, a new study shows.



The new research, published in the journal *Nature*, took advantage of a natural experiment: It looked at what happened to gut bacteria in cancer patients who were hospitalized and treated with sustained antibiotics before receiving stem cell transplants. Because the patients only ate food prepared by the hospital, researchers knew exactly what and how much food they ate – a rarity in nutrition studies, which typically rely on participants to recall what they ate hours or days earlier, something people are notoriously bad at.

The gut microbiome consists of trillions of bacteria, viruses and other microbes that populate human intestines. These tiny organisms perform a host of functions including helping with digestion, making essential vitamins, and playing a role in immune function. Science has shown the microbiome also communicates with the brain to produce neurotransmitters like serotonin, which are important for sleep, mood and stress levels.

Studies have shown that the numbers and variety of bacteria that live in the gut depend largely on diet.

Experts have found an unexpected side-effect of weight-loss drugs

Steph Santos Paulo

Weight loss medications may make your nails more likely to fall off, new research has suggested. In a study of almost 2,000 people, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, researchers found those taking



GLP-1 drugs were more than four times more likely to experience nail detachment than those who did not. Even when the researchers factored in the effect of individual age, sex, country and medical background, nail detachment was still at least twice as common among GLP-1 users. Overall, 66 per cent of people taking GLP-1 drugs reported at least one problem with their nails, compared with 53 per cent of non-users. Nail discolouration was particularly common, affecting 46 per cent of GLP-1 users compared with just 17 per cent of non-users. "Until now, nail changes associated with GLP-1 therapies had essentially been anecdotal," said Dr Charles Tateb, who co-authored the study and presented it at the 2026 European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology Congress. "Our findings show a clear association, but they also underline an important point: not everything that happens during GLP-1 treatment is necessarily caused by the treatment itself." The researchers caution that GLP-1 drugs may not directly cause these nail changes. Instead, they could be an indirect effect of the rapid weight loss and reduced food intake that can come with taking the drugs. Losing weight quickly, eating less, and being deficient in nutrients such as protein, iron and zinc can all disrupt nail growth, Dr Christos Tziotziou – a consultant dermatologist at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in London, who was not involved in the research – told BBC Science Focus.

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