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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

PRIORITISING STABILIZATION OVER GROWTH: A FAILED STRATEGY

weeklycuttingedge.com

CPL # 109

21-27 October 2026

Vol# 21 Issue # 49

Rs. 100



نفاست کی پہچان

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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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Prioritising stabilization over growth: a failed strategy

Farhan Khan

Pakistan's current economic strategy, which has prioritised stabilisation over growth, is exacting a heavy toll on ordinary citizens. Businesses and consumers across the board are feeling the brunt of constrained activity, high living costs and limited opportunities. Government spokesmen continue to talk about the advantages of economic stabilisation. However, maintaining stabilisation by strangulating the economy for five straight years has proved counterproductive. The core issue is that fiscal reforms are missing—both in broadening the tax base and in curtailing the government's running expenditure.

There is no doubt that the government has achieved primary fiscal surplus, while the consolidated fiscal deficit stands at its lowest level in over two decades. These are notable achievements but they do not help alleviate poverty. According to World Bank data, extreme poverty—people living below \$3 per day—was at 23 percent in Pakistan in 2024. That rate is more than four times higher than in Bangladesh (5.9 percent) and India (5.3 percent). Almost half of Pakistan's population struggles to afford adequate food, housing, education, healthcare and other essentials, as 48 percent of the population lives below \$4.2 per day. This proportion is more than double that recorded in the other two countries.

Pakistan remains far behind its regional peers in human development outcomes, a gap that continues to widen under the current policy mix. The debt burden is also rising, further constraining the room for manoeuvre and placing additional pressure on future budgets.

The current stabilisation policies are making the situation even worse. Vulnerable people need employment opportunities, and these can only be generated through higher growth. Stabilisation is only giving comfort to the elite while making life miserable for most. Growth requires fiscal spending on development and rationalising taxation in the formal sector. Both are missing.

There is no decline in the government's running expenditure. Foreign trips and private

jet travel are increasing. The number of ministers and advisers continues to grow, and there is no end to the rewards for the ruling elite. To meet the fiscal targets, the axe only falls on development spending. The federal Public Sector Development Programme averaged 0.6 percent of GDP over the last five years, compared with 1.3 percent in the preceding five years. This is inexcusable in a country where 25 million children—35 percent of the total aged 5 to 16—are out of school and 40 percent of children under five are stunted. There should be a health and education emergency in the country. On the contrary, the government is cutting this expenditure to meet the International Monetary Fund's targets while doing nothing meaningful to reduce its own slack.

Experts instead recommend a thor-



ough overhaul of the present failed economic strategy. The focus must shift from stabilisation to growth. A central pillar of that shift is reforming a taxation system that remains heavily dependent on indirect taxes, which punish the poor. Indirect taxes raise the cost of essential goods and services and fall disproportionately on lower-income households that have little ability to absorb additional burdens. Growth-oriented policy requires generating additional revenues by broadening the tax base and bringing retailers, traders and other currently undertaxed groups into the net. There should be no discrimination. The culture of untouchability for powerful segments must end before it is too late. The government needs to confront this problem head-on.

At the same time, the government is required to curtail its wasteful expenditure. Space for development and social-sector spending can only be created by lowering all other types of outlays. Without doing so, the country may keep falling into the abyss, and the disconnect between the masses and the ruling elite may continue to widen. There is a limit to how long things can be allowed to slip like this. Eventually, this could explode and wash away everything.

Stabilisation has delivered short-term fiscal metrics—primary surpluses and a lower deficit—but at the cost of suppressed growth, rising poverty and deteriorating human development indicators. Debt continues to accumulate under the weight of high financing needs and limited economic expansion. Businesses

face constrained demand and an uncertain outlook. Consumers confront higher prices for essentials while employment opportunities remain scarce. Political parties that once expected economic stabilisation to translate into public goodwill are discovering that the human cost is becoming politically visible.

A decisive change of course is required. The government must create genuine fiscal space by restraining non-essential current spending, ending the pattern of elite privileges, and reforming taxation so that the burden is shared more equitably.

Only then can resources be directed toward development projects, education and health—areas that have been starved for years.

Higher growth is the only sustainable path out of the current trap of low growth, high poverty and rising indebtedness. Without that shift, the stabilisation that has been pursued so single-mindedly risks becoming a long-term liability rather than a foundation for recovery. The warning signs are already clear: stagnant human development, a large share of the population unable to meet basic needs and children out of school and stunted. The time for cosmetic adjustments has passed. An overhaul that places growth, fair taxation and disciplined public spending at the centre of policy is the only realistic way forward.

Saudi-Houthi war: a new test for middle east security

Nasim Ahmed

The war between Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Houthi movement has added a dangerous dimension to an already volatile regional environment, raising questions about the reliability of American security guarantees, the strategic calculations of China and Russia, and the future of collective security in the Gulf. The implications extend far beyond the battlefield, threatening energy supplies, international trade and an already fragile world economy.

What makes the latest confrontation particularly intriguing is the ability of the Houthis, long regarded as a relatively minor military force, to challenge one of the region's wealthiest and most heavily armed countries. Their capacity to employ drones, missiles and asymmetric warfare has demonstrated that military superiority measured in expenditure and sophisticated weaponry does not necessarily translate into strategic success. A comparatively inexpensive attack can impose enormous defensive costs, disrupt commercial activity and undermine investor confidence.

The Houthis are closely aligned with Iran, which has provided them with varying degrees of political and military support. Tehran consequently possesses an important source of regional leverage without necessarily having to engage directly in every confrontation. However, the Houthis also have their own political objectives and domestic interests; reducing them to a mere instrument of Iranian policy would overlook the complexities of Yemen's conflict.

For Saudi Arabia, the challenge is formidable. It must protect its population, energy installations and maritime interests while avoiding another prolonged and expensive military campaign in Yemen. A conflict that began as a regional security problem could once again become a drain on resources and a threat to the economic transformation Riyadh has pursued under Vision 2030.

Perhaps the most consequential question is why Washington has not provided the level of support Riyadh might have expected. Saudi Arabia has long been a major American partner, and the United States has maintained a substantial strategic interest in Gulf security, including the protection of maritime commerce and energy supplies. Yet an alliance does not automatically mean that every attack on a partner will trigger direct military intervention. Washington must weigh the risks of escalation, its competing global priorities

and the possibility that another open-ended Middle Eastern war could undermine its wider strategic objectives.

Nevertheless, perceived American reluctance carries consequences. If Gulf governments conclude that Washington's security guarantees are conditional or unreliable during a serious crisis, they may increasingly diversify their defence relationships and seek alternative regional arrangements. This would not necessarily mean an immediate American withdrawal, but it could gradually weaken the foundations of the existing security order.

The confrontation also presents an important geopolitical question concerning China and Russia. Both countries have strategic interests in the Middle East and have sought to expand their influence in a region traditionally dominated by the United States. A prolonged crisis could oblige Washington to divert military assets, diplomatic attention and financial



resources from other theatres. If repeated regional emergencies weaken confidence in American leadership, Beijing and Moscow could gain relative influence without assuming equivalent responsibility for Gulf security.

China can draw on its economic relationships, energy interests and diplomatic engagement, while Russia can use its regional connections to maintain influence and pursue strategic opportunities. China depends heavily on stable energy supplies and international commerce, while Russia also has economic and strategic interests that could be damaged by prolonged instability. Both have reasons to encourage restraint and could contribute to diplomatic efforts. The central issue is whether they will use their influence to help contain the conflict or remain largely on the sidelines while seeking geopolitical advantage.

The crisis also raises questions about the Makkah Accord and the commitments its signatories are understood to have undertaken regarding collective security. If the arrangement

envisages mutual assistance against threats to member states, the absence of a coordinated response to the Saudi predicament would expose a serious gap between diplomatic declarations and practical obligations. Any assessment must distinguish between the accord's actual provisions and political expectations surrounding it. Nevertheless, the broader principle is unmistakable: regional security agreements cannot command confidence if their members fail to establish clear procedures for consultation, assistance and collective action when a serious threat emerges.

The consequences of the Saudi-Houthi confrontation could extend throughout the global economy. The Strait of Hormuz carries roughly one-fifth of global petroleum consumption, while the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb constitute a crucial maritime corridor connecting Gulf producers with European and international markets. Saudi Arabia's East-

West pipeline offers an alternative route for transporting oil to Yanbu on the Red Sea. However, the strategic value of this alternative diminishes if shipping through the Red Sea is also endangered. Simultaneous threats to these routes would expose the vulnerability of the global energy system.

For developing countries with limited foreign exchange reserves and little fiscal room for subsidies, the consequences can be particularly severe. Pakistan, for example, is vulnerable to international oil-price fluctuations because of its dependence on imported energy. A sustained increase in petroleum prices would intensify inflationary pressures, increase the import bill and place additional strain on the country's external accounts.

The economic damage would not be confined to energy importers. Gulf economies themselves depend on secure infrastructure, predictable trade and investor confidence. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the United Arab Emirates' commercial ambitions and Qatar's energy expansion all require a stable regional environment. Renewed conflict threatens these objectives by raising investment risks and diverting resources towards defence.

The fundamental weakness of the current regional order is the absence of a credible security framework capable of reconciling competing interests. Military deterrence can impose costs on adversaries, but it cannot resolve the political grievances and rivalries that sustain conflict. Saudi Arabia cannot secure lasting peace simply by striking Houthi positions. Nor can Iran expect to achieve enduring

strategic advantages by supporting regional partners whose military activities risk wider escalation. Similarly, American military power cannot guarantee stability indefinitely without a credible political strategy.

The unresolved conflict in Yemen must therefore return to the centre of diplomatic efforts. This requires engagement with the Houthis, the internationally recognised Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, Iran and other relevant parties. Protection of civilians, respect for territorial sovereignty, restrictions on attacks

against civilian infrastructure and guarantees of safe maritime passage must form essential elements of any settlement. Regional governments should also establish permanent mechanisms for crisis communication, maritime security cooperation and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Such arrangements would reduce the danger that a local confrontation could rapidly become a regional war.

The present crisis offers the Middle East an uncomfortable but necessary lesson: external powers will ultimately prioritise their

own interests. Saudi Arabia and its neighbours cannot base their long-term security entirely on the assumption that Washington, Beijing or Moscow will intervene whenever their interests are threatened. Gulf states must strengthen collective security while avoiding arrangements that turn their rivalries into instruments of competition among external powers. Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular, need sustained dialogue to prevent their strategic competition from repeatedly destabilising neighbouring countries.

Beyond production: Why Pakistan's food insecurity is an affordability crisis

Muhammad Ali

The status of Pakistan as the most food-insecure country in South Asia reflects the entrenched weakness of the economy, agriculture and social protection systems of the country.

The results of GHI for the year 2026 point to the problems facing millions of people trying to provide themselves with adequate and nutritious food despite rising inflation, poor economic performance, poverty, unemployment and climate-related disasters.

Food insecurity in Pakistan is no longer an issue of agricultural production. Rather, it has become an issue of affordability, lack of access to food items and vulnerability of households in the face of economic and natural disasters. A nation may produce enough food or food may be available in its markets, but millions of its citizens can still go hungry if they do not earn enough money to buy a healthy diet. That is the irony of the food system in Pakistan. Prices of flour, vegetables, pulses, meat, milk and other food items have made nutritious food inaccessible for poor families in the country.

In light of electricity charges, transport costs, rent and other necessary expenses dominating household budgeting, food quality and food availability are the first victims. The recent hunger analysis shows worsening of key nutritional indicators. As per the findings of the 2026 GHI report, both undernourishment and child wasting have gotten worse since 2018, with the latter nearing the index high severity threshold. This poses particular concern since lack of proper nutrition in early life causes serious implications for future development of individuals – physical development, education performance and intellectual development. Lack of nutrients

in early life will have implications on the health and performance of children that might affect their future lives through low productivity and earning capacities.

Food security of Pakistan is intricately connected to problems of the country's agriculture industry. At the same time, inefficiencies in markets and the involvement of many middlemen may increase the difference between what growers receive and consumers pay.

It is not enough to increase the food supply to solve the problem of hunger. The country should implement its food policy so that farmers will be able to grow crops effectively,

dictable rainfall, and high temperatures create additional risks for farmers relying on weather conditions. Disasters can ruin an entire season's crop, resulting in a farmer's inability to pay debts or buy seeds for the next year.

The resulting decrease in production and supply chain disruption can lead to increased prices for food items, while the people who become victims of natural calamities face loss of income required to buy basic necessities. Thus, the need of the hour is for Pakistan to consider climate resiliency as an integral part of food security. Efficient irrigation, drainage, flood prevention, conservation, and development of climate resistant crops can lower down the vulnerabilities of farmers. Agricultural research and provision of weather information can facilitate farmers in deciding the time of cultivation and harvest. Insurance coverage and financial assistance can act as safeguards from major losses in case of natural calamities.

Water is another area which requires special consideration. Agriculture consumes a substantial proportion of Pakistan's total available fresh water, but there is waste due to inefficient irrigation techniques and poor infrastructure facilities. Improving the maintenance of canals, promoting water-efficient irrigation technologies and encouraging crops suited to local climatic conditions could help increase productivity without placing additional pressure on scarce resources. Better coordination between federal and provincial authorities is equally necessary to ensure that water is distributed and used efficiently.

The government must also recognise that food insecurity is closely connected to employ-



preserve them after the harvest, and supply basic necessities to consumers at low prices. Better warehouses, cold storage, rural roads, and transport systems can minimize losses and ensure stable supplies. Providing better market information, increased competition, and preventing exploitative schemes can ensure that farmers and consumers receive fair prices.

Climate change makes it much more challenging. Frequent floods have destroyed growing crops, killed animals, destroyed irrigation systems, and led to the displacement of rural families. In addition, droughts, unpre-

ment and income generation. Families with unstable earnings are often unable to maintain adequate diets when prices rise or employment disappears. Rural workers, informal-sector employees and daily wage earners are especially exposed because they frequently lack savings, insurance or reliable social protection. Expanding productive employment, supporting small businesses and improving opportunities for women and young people would strengthen household purchasing power and reduce dependence on emergency assistance.

Social protection programmes remain essential for families that cannot afford adequate nutrition. Financial assistance and targeted food support should reach vulnerable households promptly, particularly during floods, droughts and periods of sharp food inflation. However, temporary relief cannot replace a comprehensive strategy for reducing poverty.

These support programmes need to be integrated into maternal healthcare, child nutrition care, school feeding programs, nutrition education, and provision of clean drinking water. The primary health care centers should also be able to detect and treat malnutrition cases before any damage occurs.

The success of all these measures would depend on the accountability and proper implementation of the programmes. For the federal and provincial governments to know which communities face the maximum nutritional threats, they need to have accurate statistics. The government expenditures should be measured in terms of food accessibility and improved nutrition of children rather than the number of programmes initiated or the amount of money spent. Cooperation between agriculture, health, education and social security departments is required since hunger cannot

be handled by any one department alone.

Finally, the hunger problem in Pakistan is an outcome of poverty, poor performance of the agricultural sector, environmental challenges, and lack of social protection. Increasing food output is vital but not sufficient as it needs to make nutritious food accessible and affordable for vulnerable families.

The government needs to adopt modern and climate-resilient farming techniques, enhance water management practices, minimize food waste, foster rural employment, and provide nutrition assistance. Without this becoming a priority, hunger will cause poor health, undermine efficiency, and perpetuate poverty for generations to come. Guaranteeing that every family can purchase an affordable and healthy meal should be the benchmark by which economic success in Pakistan is measured.

Why economic stabilization isn't reaching Pakistan's poor

Husnain Shahid

The government repeatedly claims economic revival, but the actual situation tells a different story as millions of Pakistanis are dealing with substandard health facilities, education, drinking water and living conditions.

As much as the emphasis of the government is on economic stabilisation, foreign exchange reserve and fiscal targets, it becomes important to consider the latest findings by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). As per the latest estimates, 38.3 percent of the Pakistani population faces multidimensional poverty, whereas 12.9 percent are vulnerable to being in multidimensional poverty. The numbers themselves present an indication about the extent of deprivation the country is facing.

Multidimensional poverty is a more comprehensive indicator of deprivation when compared with income poverty. In fact, multidimensional poverty measures the degree to which a person has access to necessities such as nutrition, health care, education, sanitation, electricity, water supply and adequate housing facilities. A person or a household could earn enough to not fall in the category of income poverty but face severe lack of other necessities.

This situation is further worsened with regards to other neighboring nations. The reported incidence of multidimensional poverty in the two adjacent nations of India

and Bangladesh is 16.4% and 14.9% respectively. It should be noted that while the surveys used for these figures are not conducted in the same year and thus do not constitute a perfect snapshot, there still exists a noticeable discrepancy which highlights the difficulties that Pakistan faces with regards to providing even basic facilities, better human development and making sure economic growth trickles down to the underprivileged groups.

The depth of deprivation experienced by those who fall within the category of multidimensionally poor in Pakistan is 51.7%. This implies that people labeled poor experience more than half of the weightages of the deprivations identified by the index. The other 12.9% of people labeled as being vulnerable to poverty are at a risk of falling into poverty in case of any illness, job loss, rising cost of food, natural calamity or any other economic shock.

These results highlight the weaknesses inherent in assessing the economic performance of a country in terms of financial metrics alone. Higher foreign exchange reserves, reduction in fiscal deficits, lower levels of inflation, or even moving closer to external finance objectives will all result in stabilisation. But these have very little significance for people who do not have enough money to feed themselves adequately, to send their children to school, or to get themselves treated at hospitals. Stabilization is a necessary prerequisite for development, but it cannot be an alternative to improving standards of life and providing

economic opportunities.

The experience of Pakistan shows that the gains of macroeconomic adjustment do not always address the requirements of the common people. Higher prices for utilities, taxes, and consumer goods have put great strain on household income. Businesses that have higher costs for energy and capital find it difficult to increase output and generate employment. With weak economic activity, poor households do not get many opportunities to better their situations, while those that are vulnerable may be pushed deeper into poverty.

There is far more to be expected than just an immediate financial crisis. Multidimensional poverty can trap generations in its vicious circle and ruin the country's economic future. Malnourished children can have delayed physical and cognitive development that will affect their ability to work and learn later in life. The same applies to people who drop out of school before they graduate; they tend to work poorly paid jobs.

Moreover, inadequate medical care lowers productivity of workers and increases the likelihood of having to pay for preventable illnesses. Inadequate sanitation, lack of clean water and poor-quality homes add up to health risks and affect mostly children and the most vulnerable population members. All these problems reinforce each other making it almost impossible to break free from the cycle of poverty even if the income situation temporarily improves.

In light of this, it is necessary for the government to think again about its expenditure strategy. It will always be necessary to have some fiscal discipline, especially in times when debt-servicing and other mandatory payments eat away a significant portion of the budget. However, care needs to be taken in making budget cuts and other revenue decisions, as these decisions should not undermine the need to invest in human development. Investment in education, primary health care, nutrition, clean drinking water and sanitation must be viewed as a development effort rather than an expense.

Efficiency in public expenditure will also be crucial. The federal and provincial governments will have to deal with the inefficiency in service delivery, lack of accountability, poor coordination, and misallocation of scarce resources. Projects should be evaluated for their developmental impact rather than their political visibility.

Policies aimed at poverty alleviation should be incorporated as an important and measurable goal of economic policy-making. Policymakers ought to set concrete targets for the alleviation of poverty, conduct evaluations of progress made, and identify areas with critical needs of vital social services. With proper local statistics, policymakers will have the ability to allocate scarce resources in regions that are disadvantaged compared to others in the country based on averages.

Social security policies should be designed in a way that complements the provision of better social services and opportunities for productive employment. Assistance in the form of cash transfers can enable poor families to cope with inflation and shocks to income; however, alleviating poverty in the long run calls for providing the population with quality education, healthcare, skills and job opportunities. The provincial governments, which are responsible for many aspects of social services



delivery, must be held responsible for concrete achievements rather than the funding of various programs.

The conclusions drawn by the UNDP put Pakistan's problem in a much broader perspective that takes into consideration the whole world community. Over 1.2 billion people suffer from multidimensional poverty, which illustrates that poverty is one of the key problems in development. Still, the relatively high rate of multidimensional poverty in Pakistan calls for an effective response at the national level, based on the country's particularities and challenges. To wait until the benefits of stabilization trickle down to the deprived would mean to extend their suffering.

In other words, what Pakistan needs is a combination of macroeconomic stabilizations

and investments in the human capital. It is not enough just to have good macroeconomic indicators – one should assess the situation on a broader scale and see if millions of people who lack access to basic necessities can benefit from the economic recovery.

Beyond the stabilization policy being an end in itself, it is imperative for the government to show how the benefits of its policies can impact the lives of the people positively. Absence of constant investment in human development and strong institutions means that the economic achievements would be weak and unsustainable. It is impossible for Pakistan to achieve sustainable economic prosperity without improving the conditions of a significant proportion of its population who are exposed to multiple forms of deprivations.

Short-term fixes, long-term pain

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy still looks shaky after efforts to fix big financial problems. Slow growth, high inflation, poverty and outside pressures keep making it hard for the country to recover in a real way.

The International Monetary Fund's latest World Economic Outlook says Pakistan's economy will grow by 3.5 per cent this year. At the time inflation is projected to hit 9.9 per cent on average. The current account is also expected to run a deficit to one per cent of gross domestic product. Together these numbers show that Pakistan is still at risk from econom-

ic shocks and that stability hasn't yet brought widespread improvement for most people.

There's another issue. These numbers were made months ago. They might not account for how fast the world is changing. They may have assumed things would calm down in politics but that hasn't happened. Conflicts in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine are still going on. They are causing uncertainty, cutting energy supplies and making global trade harder. For Pakistan, which relies heavily on imports and has huge money to spend, these problems could make recovery even tougher.

In fact, the projected growth of 3.5

per cent is worrying on its own. Last year, Pakistan's economy grew by 3.6 per cent. This year's forecast is even low, which means fewer jobs, slower income growth and less progress in fighting poverty. With the population growing and millions of people needing work, this kind of growth won't be enough to make a big difference in people's lives.

The situation is worse when compared to the rest of the region. South Asia is expected to grow by 6.4 per cent in 2026, way faster than Pakistan. This gap shows that Pakistan still can't build a lasting growth model based on investment, exports, better productivity and stronger industries. Even though global growth

is expected to stay moderate, Pakistan's struggles are not just because of outside problems. They also come from issues inside the country that past governments have failed to fix.

Inflation is another problem. The IMF had predicted that inflation would average 9.9 per cent. The real number has already gone beyond it. It reached 11.1 per cent in August and 10.3 per cent in September. For people, the effects are quick to notice. Higher electricity, gas and oil prices, taxes and the cost of essentials have already made the lives of the common people unbearable. Economic stability does not mean much if the cost of changes keeps falling on people who are already struggling to get by.

Export performance is another problem. Shipping problems that are affecting trade with Middle Eastern countries have made this situation more uncertain for exporters. Sending products by air can cost much for many companies, especially those that don't have much money to work with. If these problems don't get better, export growth might not reach what the government expects which could limit the country's ability to make money and pay for important imports.

The current account forecast is therefore something that needs watching. Higher oil

prices and shipping costs can make the cost of imports go up even if the economy is not doing well. If exports don't grow enough the gap in money could create more pressure on the foreign exchange reserves and the exchange rate. Remittances have given some help. More money coming in from Pakistanis working abroad has helped keep money available and has supported people's spending. This improvement might not last. Some of the money

careful checking. The IMF says that unemployment will go down from 6.9 per cent in the fiscal year to 6.5 percent in FY2027. But other estimates say that unemployment is already 22 per cent, based on the Labour Force Survey data.

Poverty makes everything more urgent. The World Bank says that 47.9 per cent of people in Pakistan are poor, according to the middle-income poverty line for FY2025, but different numbers come from different ways of looking at the problem. The current government spending does not leave much room for projects that help development, education, health care and training for better jobs. The government needs to take a look at how it spends money. Now most of the budget is used for daily expenses, about 93 per cent of the whole budget. This leaves little money for investments that can make the economy stronger in the long run.

The biggest problem is to save the poorest people from rising inflation and use the country's resources in areas that make money and jobs. Without these changes, slow growth, high prices and other problems will keep making each other worse. Pakistan can't keep borrowing for an indefinite time. It has to build an economy that can promote exports, attract foreign investment and create good jobs for its people.



coming in might be from temporary situations linked to the crisis in the Middle East, like jobs and travel choices made by Pakistani workers. If the situation changes, remittance growth could slow, which would make the economy face outside problems again.

Pakistan's job numbers also need

Pak strikes in Afghanistan and Kabul threats

Raza Khan

Relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban regime continue to deteriorate as Kabul-supported Pakistani terrorist outfits, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group (HGBG), keep carrying out large-scale terrorist attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces. Meanwhile, an interim Afghan Taliban minister has vowed to capture Peshawar within two days if his regime desires.

Following the recent Kohat terrorist attack that claimed nearly 40 lives—claimed by the Afghanistan-based, Taliban-protected HGBG—and other assaults by the TTP, Pakistan carried out precision airstrikes in Afghanistan's Kunar and Helmand provinces

on October 1. Pakistan's Ministry of Information maintained that the operation was a meticulously planned, intelligence-based counterterrorism action targeting TTP hideouts, which eliminated 22 militants and destroyed weapons caches. Conversely, the Afghan government claimed the strikes hit civilian residences, killing nine people—mostly women and children—and injuring 11 others.

Pakistan's official stance regarding these strikes is that the Afghan Taliban government actively harbors the TTP and HGBG, allowing militant groups to launch cross-border attacks into Pakistani territory. For their part, the Afghan Taliban deny these allegations, maintaining that security issues within Pakistan remain an internal matter while condemning the airstrikes as a blatant violation of Afghan

sovereignty. While civilian casualties in such aerial operations cannot be entirely ruled out due to terrorists using civilians as human shields, Afghan Taliban claims that Pakistan's airstrikes exclusively targeted civilians make no sense at all. Why would Pakistan deliberately strike innocent civilians who are not only from a neighboring state but are fellow Muslims? However, striking the hideouts of Pakistani terrorists based in Afghanistan is fully justified, both legally and morally, because they represent a persistent fitna that ought to be eliminated.

Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban regime's argument that Pakistan's security troubles are purely an internal issue for Islamabad lacks justification given the regional reality. As if this friction were not enough, Taliban Min-

ister for Borders and Tribal Affairs, Noorullah Noori, stated that the Afghan flag could be raised in Peshawar—the capital of Pakistan's KP province—within two days if the Islamic Emirate (the term the regime uses for itself) chose to act. Addressing a gathering in Kabul, Noori cautioned Pakistan against testing Afghanistan's patience. While the minister's statement regarding the capture of Peshawar is largely a shallow threat meant to appease domestic Afghan nationalist sentiments, it also reveals the deep-seated internal wish of many Afghans. Kabul has long harbored irredentist claims on Pakistan's Pashtun-inhabited territories in KP and upper Balochistan without any legal or moral foundation.

In this context, there is little expectation of improving relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban regime. In fact, no such hope is realistic when the Afghan Taliban consistently maintain the stance that Kabul cannot stop attacks by Afghanistan-based Pakistani terrorist groups inside Pakistan. In recent years, the Taliban regime's support for Pakistan's largest terrorist network, the TTP, has become the primary bone of contention between the two sides. While the Afghan Taliban deny offering direct support to the Pakistani Taliban despite acknowledging their presence in Afghanistan, they have failed to take any concrete measures to prevent the TTP from executing strikes inside Pakistan. Against this backdrop, the prospects of mending these sour relations appear exceedingly difficult.

On the other hand, Islamabad has unequivocally stated that Kabul must choose between maintaining friendly ties with Pakistan or continuing to host and protect the Pakistani Taliban at the expense of its relationship with Islamabad. In short, Pakistan is asking Kabul to choose between the Pakistani state or the militant TTP. The Pakistani Taliban have been waging war against the Pakistani state since their formation in 2007. However, after the launching of a grand military operation against the group following the loathsome school attack in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, most of the TTP's leadership and network relocated across the border. There, the TTP provided crucial support to the Afghan Taliban fighting against the now-defunct Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and US-led international forces. Thus, TTP fighters became strategic assets for the Afghan Taliban, making it nearly impossible for Kabul to abandon them. This explains why, even after five years, the Afghan Taliban regime remains hesitant to take action against the TTP, claiming instead that it can-

not stop the group from carrying out attacks on Pakistani soil.

Recent months have witnessed another sharp spike in terrorist attacks by the TTP and HGBG across KP province, claiming hundreds of Pakistani lives. Most of these incidents have been claimed by or blamed upon the TTP. Pakistan blames the Taliban regime in Kabul for this recent surge in terrorism and urges them to stop cross-border attacks and prohibit the use of Afghan soil against Pakistan.

It appears that with Pakistan's firm and fully justified stance, relations with the Afghan Taliban regime have hit a historic low. Pakistan has now clarified in no uncertain terms that Afghan authorities are well aware of the TTP's hideouts and sanctuaries on Afghan soil;

in August 2021, Pakistan has been unable to realize its long-cherished hope that a Taliban return to power would eliminate the animosity emanating from Afghanistan toward Islamabad. This outcome has been deeply unfortunate for Pakistan.

This situation offers a crucial lesson: Pakistan's policy regarding Afghanistan—specifically relying on the Taliban to fulfill its strategic objectives—has failed. Consequently, a thorough reassessment is required to formulate a viable policy moving forward. Pakistan's hope that the Afghan Taliban would help address security threats along its western border has come to naught. The underlying reason is that pinning hopes on a militant non-state actor is fundamentally flawed; a militantly-ori-



failing to act against them is a deliberate policy choice. Realizing this, Pakistan has recognized that enough is enough, and a line must be drawn where state interest takes precedence over appeasement. The TTP has been the primary enemy of the state for the last 19 years, and any country that supports it cannot be considered a friend—if not explicitly labeled an enemy of Pakistan.

For their part, the Afghan Taliban have hosted and nurtured the TTP on Afghan soil out of self-interest. As mentioned earlier, the TTP assisted the Afghan Taliban in fighting Afghan state forces, rival militant groups, and international forces inside Afghanistan. Therefore, the Pakistani Taliban hold immense strategic value for Kabul, which is why the regime remains unwilling to compromise on them. Ironically, the Pakistani state was historically supportive of the Afghan Taliban and played a key role during their overrunning of Afghan state forces to recapture power. Pakistan had banked on the Afghan Taliban to secure a friendly regime in Kabul. Yet, since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan

entled group, no matter how friendly it may initially appear, retains the potential to turn against its benefactor.

Furthermore, since the Afghan Taliban's second coming to power, the militia has adopted a stronger blend of nationalist and religious fervor. Their regime's support for the TTP is also driven by historical Afghan irredentist claims over Pakistani Pashtun-dominated territories. Lacking political legitimacy inside Afghanistan as a military faction that seized power by force rather than through a democratic process, the Taliban critically need to rally public support. Because anti-Pakistan sentiments have historically run deep in Afghanistan, the Taliban—much like previous Afghan rulers, whether elected or unelected—have tried to stoke anti-Pakistan feelings to unite the population behind them and legitimize their rule. The Afghan Taliban's adoption of this posture has ultimately forced Pakistan to revisit its Afghanistan policy. This is indeed the right step to take. In fact, it should have been taken much earlier; nevertheless, it is better late than never.

Resilience starts at home, but who was never counted?

Dr Zaheer Ahmad Babar

A flood does not ask who is at home. It reaches the pregnant woman in her ninth month, the man who cannot hear a warning siren, and the child drinking from a well that was clean last week. That is the uncomfortable truth behind this year's International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction, observed on October 13 under the theme "Resilience Starts at Home".

UNDRR's concept note says the 2026 observance aims to raise awareness of the home's central place in risk reduction, push for stronger governance and investment in resilient housing, and empower households facing heightened vulnerability to act on risk information. Among its key messages is a plain one: a warning that does not reach a household, is not understood, or is not acted on has failed. In Geneva, a youth festival invited students to explore how housing choices, communication and everyday habits shape resilience, and to help bridge the "last mile" where early warnings must become household decisions.

The day has a long pedigree. It began in 1989, after a UN General Assembly call for a day to promote a global culture of risk awareness and disaster reduction. Its 2026 message sharpens a question that practitioners have debated for years. If safety begins at home, what happens to people whose homes, bodies or circumstances were never in the plan?

For Prof. Dr. Aurangzeb Hafi, a Pakistani academic, a cross-disciplinary researcher and a polymath, that question has defined an era-defining career. His central complaint is that relief systems too often treat disaster-hit populations as a single mass, counting "people affected" without asking who they are.

His answer is the landmark appraisal he developed; 'Disaster's Epidemiological Susceptibilities and Pandemic Outbreak (DESPO) Appraisal'. It breaks crisis data down by sex, age and disability, to show how many pregnant women, nursing mothers and people with sensory or mobility impairments are in a disaster zone, and where. A companion model, Post-DESPO, looks at the longer aftermath, including chemical contamination of drinking water and what environmental toxins may mean for fetal development. Prof. Hafi calls this field "Terato-Kinetics."

The method was tested in the monsoon floods of 2022, one of Pakistan's worst

disasters. UNFPA's executive director said at the time that heavy rains had flooded a third of the country, affecting more than 33 million people, an estimated 650,000 of them pregnant women. UNFPA also reported more than 1,000 damaged health facilities in Sindh province alone.

Days later, in Lahore, a DESPO report warned that about 650,000 pregnant women and some 3.1 million children faced severe hardship, and it said malnutrition among children in camps was running at three times the emergency threshold. Prof. A. Z. Hafi lamented that similar indicators had appeared in the DESPO assessment of the 2014 floods, yet lessons went unlearned. The pregnancy figure matches the UN estimate, so the report's distinctive contribution was its framing of the numbers as a call for targeted, longer-term protection rather than generic aid.

UN-KAKHTAH traces his disability-inclusive thinking to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. As the principal investigator of projects named 'Child Retardation Risk Assessment and Management' (CRRAM)



after that disaster. His findings from Sri Lankan relief camps, as presented by the analysts, showed that persons with disabilities were systematically shut out of life-saving distribution.

The wider record heavily supports the sense that the 2004's Tsunami was a turning point. A 2015 statement noted that the Hyogo Framework was adopted in Kobe in 2005, just after the 2004's Tsunami, which confronted many with the special situation of persons with disabilities in major disasters. The Sendai Framework later carried that concern further. It calls for risk-informed decisions based on the open exchange of disaggregated data, including by disability. Disability advocates have described it as the most disability-inclusive international mainstream framework. It was agreed in March 2015, and more than 200 persons with disabilities took part in the conference as delegates, speakers and panellists.

UN-KAKHTAH argues that this policy language echoes the data architecture of DESPO and that his early advocacy for addressing "vulnerable situations" as a whole rather than only "vulnerable groups" shaped the debate. Independent confirmations establish direct lines from his work to the final text strengthen that claim, and future historians of the frameworks may or may not weigh in. But what can be said is that the principle he champions is now written into the global agenda.

Written principles are not the same as practice. Sendai is a voluntary, non-binding agreement. That is why its monitoring matters. Disability groups have warned that very few countries and other actors report data disaggregated by sex, age and disability to the Sendai monitor. The vulnerable can only be protected if they are counted first, and much of the world still counts them poorly.

That is the gap Prof. Hafi's work aims at. Mobile units under the UN KAKHTAH DRR Repositories network are aimed to carry prenatal care, mobility support and immunological protection into crisis zones. According to the network's representatives, its name recognises two organisations and two figures of humanitarian solidarity: Kofi Annan, Helen Keller Intl., Aurangzeb Hafi, and the Tzu Chi Foundation.

The danger underground, Prof. Hafi also draws attention to a slower but persistent hazard. Neglected sewage systems and unchecked chemical discharge, he argues, can contaminate subsoil water, and water does not stay where it is put. It moves through soil, crops and bodies, and it can reach people at the earliest stage of development. In this framing, protecting life before birth becomes inseparable from protecting the water systems that sustain life.

UNDRR's message is that homes should withstand the hazards around them. Its concept note stresses that nobody should have to choose between an affordable home and a safe one, and that building resilience into homes costs a fraction of rebuilding after a disaster.

Prof. Hafi's contribution to the conversation is a reminder that a safe house is only part of the answer. A home is safe only if everyone in it is counted, warned and reached, from the woman in her last trimester to the neighbour who cannot hear the siren. The theme asks the world to build better from the household up. The researcher's question is who else is standing in the doorway.

India's mass voter purge is hollowing out democracy

Tanweer Fazal

Over the weekend, thousands of protesters demanding the resignation of India's chief election commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, faced mass detentions and a heavy police crackdown in New Delhi. The demonstrations, which have brought together youth activists and opposition parties, centre on the removal of more than 130 million names from India's electoral rolls, raising profound questions about the state of Indian democracy.

The deletions are the result of the controversial Special Intensive Revision (SIR) undertaken by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The ECI periodically revises electoral rolls to add new voters and remove the names of those who have died or permanently moved away. The last intensive revision was completed in 2003-2004. What makes the current SIR unprecedented, however, is its scale, the arbitrariness and overreach of its procedures, and the mass disenfranchisement that has followed. The exercise has disproportionately affected Muslims, women, migrants and other marginalised communities while also raising questions about the legitimacy of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) electoral victories in Bihar and West Bengal.

Both the ECI and the ruling party have defended the exercise by using the language of "purification". In a caste society, that rhetoric is deeply troubling but also revealing. The bureaucratic procedures and technological infrastructure underpinning the exercise barely mask its intention to create two classes of citizenship in India, one endowed with political voice through the right to vote and the other reduced to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life".

The SIR's intent, procedures and outcomes reveal a sinister design: to maximise voter exclusions rather than enhance voter participation. This subverts the promise of universal adult suffrage, a cornerstone of India's constitutional democracy. The ECI initially excluded the government-issued Aadhaar card from the list of documents accepted for voter verification during the SIR, supposedly because it was considered "overinclusive". If that did not expose the exercise's exclusionary intent, the ECI's invention of the category "logical discrepancy" during the West Bengal SIR certainly did. This pseudo-legal innovation accounted for 2.7 million of the nearly 9 million names removed from electoral rolls in Bengal.

The demand for educational certificates, land records, legacy documents and family trees as evidence also places a heavy burden on poor and marginalised voters, especially in regions still reeling under mass poverty, landlessness and rampant illiteracy. With the "burden of proof" shifted to ordinary voters, the SIR aims to achieve precisely what it set out to do: mass deletions and consequent disenfranchisement.

Customised apps and online forms, digitised electoral rolls and the requirement to upload scanned documents in prescribed formats are all presented as evidence of the

minorities, Muslims across the country bear a particularly heavy burden of deletions. In Bengal, Muslims reportedly accounted for about 65 percent of the 2.7 million people removed from electoral rolls on grounds of "logical discrepancy". With only 19 specially constituted tribunals to handle more than 3.8 million appeals, the corrective process in effect has remained inaccessible to many excluded voters. In Hyderabad, 1.94 million names were marked for deletion under the "absent, shifted, dead and duplicate" (ASDD) category. An estimated 40.7 percent of those entries appeared to belong to



SIR's efficiency and objectivity. But this approach ignores the digital divide in a deeply unequal society. Technology does not operate outside relations of power. In fact, it often serves as a mechanism of control. The category of "logical discrepancy" relies on an AI-enabled application, ERONET (Electoral Roll Officers' Network), which compares voters' details with older electoral rolls and flags discrepancies in names and family relationships. The use of such centralised systems has also raised questions about who controls electoral data and how these discrepancies are assessed. Women are particularly vulnerable to these procedures. Many change their names or addresses after marriage and may lack the documents needed to establish links with older electoral records. The excessive exclusion of women demonstrates how ostensibly neutral technological procedures can reinforce existing inequalities and weaken people's political voice.

The SIR's purported neutrality is at odds with its effects, which fall heavily on the weak and the marginalised. Among religious

Muslim voters, compared with Muslims' 30 percent share of the city's population. In some constituencies in Hyderabad's Old City, Muslims accounted for as much as 80 percent of the names marked for deletion. The pattern is repeated in the National Capital Region, Delhi, where nearly one-third of the existing electorate was missing from the draft SIR roll. Studies flag especially high rates of exclusion in areas with large minority and migrant populations and among residents of informal and unauthorised settlements. The disproportionate exclusion of Muslims suggests an ideological alignment between the SIR's ostensibly impersonal bureaucracy and the social and political programme of the Hindu right.

As a political and ideological instrument, the exercise has proved to be doubly potent. Through mass deletion of voters from targeted social categories, such as Muslims, it has contributed to shrinking the electoral base of the BJP's principal rivals. The elections in Bihar and Bengal after the SIR suggest a discernible pattern.

Why Iran-US negotiations keep failing

Mahjoob Zweiri

Since the start of the war, there have been several negotiation initiatives between the United States and Iran. Only one – the memorandum of understanding signed in Islamabad on June 18 – was concluded, but it collapsed within days. While prevailing analyses tend to explain this failure through the details of the provisions, this article proceeds from a different premise: that the diplomatic stalemate between the two sides is shaped by a syndrome that has governed US-Iranian relations for years.

In international relations, psychological syndromes can arise as a result of deep crises that leave their mark on political consciousness and memory, potentially obstructing efforts at rapprochement and negotiation between countries.

In the case of Iran and the US, the syndrome is comprised of two complexes: the complex Washington developed as a result of the 1979 siege of the US embassy in Tehran and the complex Tehran developed as a result of historical US hostility and its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018.

The roots of the rupture between the two countries go as far back as August 1953 when US and British intelligence agencies helped overthrow the nationalist government of Mohammad Mosaddegh after it nationalised the oil industry in 1951. Since then, a perception has become entrenched in Iranian consciousness: that Washington does not accept an independent government in Tehran and it is prepared to sabotage it if it goes against its interests.

From this perspective, Washington's decision to host Shah Reza Pahlavi, who had just been overthrown by his people, for medical treatment in October 1979 was read in revolutionary Tehran as a prelude to a second coup. Iranian students stormed the US embassy on November 4 that year and held 52 Americans for 444 days. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed and have not been restored to this day.

While the incident is portrayed in the Iranian narrative as a defence of the revolution, in American consciousness, it established the image of Iran as a state that does not respect international norms, whose word cannot be relied upon and whose behaviour should not be rewarded. That is the embassy siege complex. It is not about the incident itself so

much as the informal rule it produced in US decision-making: that Iran must concede first and its concession must be verified before it receives anything in return.

The Iranian complex was shaped by this history as well, but it reached its peak in May 2018 when US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA's) confirmation that Tehran was complying with it.

Just two weeks later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced 12 demands for a new deal, only four of which were related to the nuclear file. Seven of them were related to Iran's regional behaviour in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan and the Gulf. In other words, Washington did not merely revoke an existing agreement; it also raised the ceiling of its conditions for any future agreement.

The knot then deepened in June 2025 when the US took part in the Twelve-Day War and struck the nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan at a time when a new round of indirect negotiations was scheduled in Muscat. It then reached its furthest point with Washington's participation alongside Israel in the current war.

Accordingly, a conviction became entrenched in the Iranian consciousness that an American signature guarantees nothing, that any agreement can be overturned with a change of administration and indeed that negotiation itself may be a cover for war rather than an alternative to it. The informal rule this has produced in Iranian decision-making is that there will be no step taken before binding guarantees and no concession before pressure is lifted.

Thus, the two complexes stand at opposite ends: The first requires Iranian action before an American quid pro quo while the second requires an American guarantee before Iranian action. A reading of the recent negotiation initiatives shows that every US initiative bears the imprint of the embassy siege complex. The 15-point plan put forward in March demanded the dismantling of the Natanz, Isfahan and Fordow facilities; an end to uranium enrichment; the suspension of Iran's missile programme; and the abandonment of its allies in exchange for promises to lift sanctions later.

The May draft by White House envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner linked the release of Iran's frozen funds to the suspension

of enrichment first. The American response in September also stipulated the freezing of enrichment and the entry of inspectors throughout the negotiation period. What remains constant in the American initiatives is that Iranian action precedes the quid pro quo and verification precedes trust.

The imprint of the JCPOA withdrawal complex in the Iranian initiatives is also a constant. The five-point response in late March demanded guarantees that war would not be repeated. The 10 points put forward in April demanded a binding UN Security Council resolution shielding any agreement from being overturned. And the 14 points in May demanded a nonaggression pledge that includes Israel.

Meanwhile, the seven-day plan proposed by Tehran last month stipulated the lifting of sanctions and the US naval blockade on Iran before the opening of the Strait of Hormuz on the sixth day and the start of nuclear negotiations on the seventh. What remains constant in the Iranian initiatives is that guarantees precede action and the lifting of pressure precedes Iranian concessions. All these initiatives were dialogue between two complexes with each side drafting its text to protect itself from a repetition of its historical experience with the other, rather than to meet the other halfway. This may explain why the gap in substance has narrowed, but the gap in trust has not.

The Islamabad memorandum represents the exception that proves the rule as it was the closest moment to a settlement because it was formulated to reassure both sides over their core concerns. To reassure Washington, it stipulated the dilution of Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium and made the lifting of sanctions and unfreezing of funds conditional on Iranian implementation.

To reassure Tehran, it provided for an end to hostilities, respect for mutual sovereignty, a mechanism to monitor implementation and UN Security Council approval of the final agreement. Ballistic missiles were also entirely absent from the text. But this agreement did not hold. Tehran suspended its participation in the Geneva round of talks because of the absence of a ceasefire in Lebanon, which had been a consistent demand in every Iranian initiative since March. In the Iranian reading, Washington's inability to rein in Israel confirmed that an American signature was not enough. The JCPOA withdrawal complex immediately kicked in, and the two sides returned to square one.

Growing trust deficit

The trust deficit between the public and state in Pakistan seems to be growing. While people continue to place faith in their neighbours, communities and fellow citizens, their confidence in public institutions often remains uncertain. This contrast makes one wonder why trust happens to be stronger among individuals than in the institutions that are responsible for serving them.

Public trust is built on transparency, accountability and consistent communication. When government institutions fail to explain their decisions, respond to public concerns or provide timely information, uncertainty takes root. In the absence of credible information, rumours, misinformation and speculation find room to spread, further widening the gap between the state and its citizens. The problem becomes more serious when people are confronted with rising electricity bills, increasing fuel prices, inflation and economic uncertainty. For an ordinary household struggling to meet its basic needs, statements about economic progress carry little reassurance unless they are accompanied by practical explanations, visible improvements and clear accountability. Citizens deserve to know how public funds are spent, why certain policies are introduced, and how these decisions will affect their daily lives.

Transparency should not be limited to official websites, press releases or public statements. It requires institutions to proactively share accessible information, acknowledge shortcomings, respond to criticism and make decision-makers answerable for their actions. Although Pakistan has laws and mechanisms intended to ensure access to information and financial accountability, their effectiveness ultimately depends on proper implementation and public accessibility.

Equally important is crisis communication. During floods, shortages, security incidents or internet disruptions, timely and credible information is essential. When the relevant authorities remain silent or provide delayed and contradictory statements, people increasingly rely on unverified information circulating on social media. This not only creates confusion, but also undermines confidence in official institutions. Clear, consistent and timely communication can help prevent misinformation and it can strengthen public confidence during difficult circumstances.

Rebuilding public trust requires more than promises or temporary communication campaigns. It demands a culture of openness in which public institutions treat citizens as stakeholders rather than passive recipients of government decisions. Officials must be willing to answer difficult questions, address legitimate grievances and demonstrate accountability through their actions.

Pakistan's big challenge is not simply to

improve public perception of its institutions, but to make those institutions worthy of public confidence. Trust cannot be demanded; it must be earned through transparency, responsible governance and meaningful engagement with citizens. Only when people see honesty reflected in institutional conduct can the gap between the state and society begin to narrow.

Wasif Khaliq Dad
Rawalpindi

Sindh wheat scandal

A major corruption scandal surfaced within the Sindh Food Department after the relevant minister dismissed eight officers and employees involved in wheat embezzlement, and ordered the recovery of more than Rs5.128 billion embezzled through the unlawful sale of government wheat stocks. The minister also referred the cases to Sindh's anti-corruption establishment for further investigation, and directed senior departmental officers to initiate legal proceedings against the dismissed officials in court. The procurement centres involved are said to be the ones at Thari Mirwah, Setharja, Sikandarabad, Choondiko and Shikarpur.

The official government-controlled price of wheat in Sindh is set at Rs3,850 per 40kg, but artificial inflation, hoarding and speculation have pushed open-market wholesale prices up to Rs4,352 per 40kg. The government should take urgent steps to control wheat prices to end the misery of people who are already crushed under financial burdens and inflation.

Rasool Bakhsh Shah
Sanghar

Gas supply interruptions

The scale of disruption in routine life that is currently visible across Karachi is frustrating. The Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) has been carrying out seemingly endless excavation work for laying supply lines. What might have been necessary infrastructure work has added more chaos to an urban landscape already struggling under the plethora of so-called 'development projects'.

Nowhere is the situation more painful than in Gulshan-i-Iqbal along the University Road, which can hardly be described as a functioning road anymore, given the prolonged disruption caused by the Red Line construction. The SSGC's excavation has aggravated an already unbearable situation. This raises a basic question: from whom did SSGC obtain the permission to dig up roads, streets and lanes around the road? If the permission came from the Sindh government, then it must explain why it allowed another major intervention to take place in an area already crippled by its own project. Was there a coordinated plan between the relevant agen-

cies? Who assessed the cumulative impact on Karachi's roads and residents? And, most importantly, who was made responsible for restoring the roads after the gas company's work was completed?

There is another puzzling aspect. The Karachi mayor has told the media that SSGC has provided Rs14 billion to Jamaat-i-Islami-led town municipal corporations (TMCs) for the reconstruction of roads damaged by its excavation. If the money has been transferred, why are the roads still lying in ruins? Where is the mechanism ensuring that the funds are actually being used for the intended purpose?

Ultimately, this is not merely a question of potholes, broken roads or even traffic congestion. It is a question of governance. If the SSGC damages a road, who repairs it? If the union councils (UCs) receive money for reconstruction, who monitors its use? If the Sindh government grants permission for excavation, who ensures that the city is restored afterwards? Karachi's citizens should not have to pay the price for institutional chaos. They deserve better.

Dr Asif Ahmad
Karachi

Regional link

Pakistan has the capacity to become a regional link to Central Asia, but security issues along with tensions with Afghanistan make regional and local trade routes sensitive and unprotected. Border clearance and customs processes are prolonged, and poor container scanning also creates problems in supervising cargo and preventing illegal traffic. The lack of railway connectivity is also a major barrier, as Pakistan and Central Asian countries have different railway gauge systems. Moreover, the lack of political involvement by Pakistani leaders has created tensions regarding the accomplishment of all connectivity projects. What is needed is a mechanism based on better security coordination, updated border installations, strong railway links and persistent political cooperation.

Ayesha Naveed
Chakwal

Borrowing spree

One does not know if securing loans should be considered an achievement by the government. Most borrowed finances are used for non-development purposes. It seems that the only responsibility of the Ministry of Finance is to seek debts from every available source. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is already dictating policies, and more lenders can only mean more dictations. Downsizing of the ministry must, therefore, be considered. The government should do away with borrowings, and focus on self-reliance.

Shaista Anwar Kirmani
Karachi

Ultra-processed food intake linked to silent strokes

Sonia Anand

Healthy adults who eat high amounts of ultra-processed food, like packaged snack foods, sugary breakfast cereals, soft drinks, instant noodles and ready-to-eat frozen meals, are more likely to have signs of damage to the brain that may increase the chances of clinical stroke and future memory problems.



Researchers used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to scan the brains of nearly 9,000 people and detected tiny areas of damage more frequently in participants who ate the most ultra-processed food compared with those who ate the least. Participants with the highest intake were 40% more likely to show these changes, which produce no obvious symptoms but are considered early warning signs that can appear years before a stroke or memory problems begin.

"I would not have expected this finding, frankly. We studied middle-aged Canadians who had no heart problems and reported no other health concerns," said Russell J. de Souza, first author of the study and an associate scientist at the Population Health Research Institute (PHRI) of McMaster University and Hamilton Health Sciences, and an associate professor in Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact and the Heersink School of Global Health and Social Medicine at McMaster University.

"Usually, this kind of damage is associated with conditions we hear about and treat at a much older age." Published in JAMA Network Open, the PHRI-led study enrolled Canadians between the ages of 35 and 69 with no history of heart disease from communities across Canada.

3 napping habits may be linked to dementia years before diagnosis

Amy Glover

Sleep and dementia seem to have a complicated relationship. They do seem to be linked, but it can be very hard to work out whether the condition causes the symptom or vice versa. It may be a mix of both.



Some research suggests that while sleeping for a minimum of seven or eight hours a night may be associated with a lower likelihood of developing dementia, over-65s who kip for longer – eight and a half hours or more – might face a higher risk. The other extreme (insomnia) is linked to 40% greater odds of ending up with mild cognitive impairment, sometimes seen as a precursor to conditions like Alzheimer's.

A brain primed for dementia might also struggle to clear waste effectively during sleep, one paper found. And now, research published in The Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences has suggested that our napping habits could be associated with a 48% higher dementia risk, too.

This study looked at 995 adults who were over 65 and were part of the US Medicare programme. The study began in 2010, and participants' health was tracked across a decade. The researchers also looked at their napping habits. And they grouped people's sleep patterns by: Frequency (how often participants nodded off during the day); Intention (whether people who napped meant to do so, or if it happened accidentally), and; Duration (how long the naps lasted).

After comparing these results, researchers found that frequent nappers, who caught some midday Zzzs most days of every day, had a 48% higher chance of developing dementia compared to non-nappers. Unintentional nappers, who napped without really meaning to, saw a 39% greater risk, and napping for 30 minutes or less was associated with 40% increased odds.

'White' dwarf stars can be purple, pink and even green

Elizabeth Howell

Stellar cores called white dwarfs come in an astonishing array of colors, including what scientists say is the first known green star and the reddest star ever found, new research reveals.



A white dwarf star is the dense, cooling core that remains after a low- to medium-mass star runs out of fuel. The new study, published in the journal RAS Techniques and Instruments, shows that white dwarfs come in far more colors than their name suggests. White dwarf stars got their moniker because the first known examples glowed in either white or pale blue. The new study, however, suggests that "white" dwarfs also emit visible-light colors like pink, green, cyan, purple and yellow. "Most stars, including most white dwarfs, behave like 'perfect radiators,' so their colour is set almost entirely by temperature. But nobody had really looked into what else might be possible for white dwarfs," Mark Hollands, an astronomer at the University of Warwick in the U.K. and first author of the study, said in a statement. "It turns out these incredibly dense stars can produce colours nobody expected, and some of them genuinely surprised me." The variety of colors is possible due to white dwarfs' densities compared with main-sequence stars, the study suggests. Cooler white dwarfs have a density of about 1 gram per cubic centimeter, much like flowing water on Earth.

2 giant Ramesses II statues, one wearing a double crown, discovered in Egypt

Owen Jarus

While working on his land in a village in northern Egypt, a man made an astonishing discovery: the remains of two massive statues of Ramesses II.



The man, Khaled el-Shahat, immediately notified the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, which sent a team to the village of Behbeit El Hagar to excavate and study the statues, the ministry said in a translated statement. Ramesses II had one of the longest reigns in Egypt's history, ruling from around 1279 to 1213 B.C. During his 66 years in power, Egypt controlled an empire that stretched as far northeast as modern-day Syria. He initiated many building projects throughout the empire, and numerous Ramesses II statues have been found throughout Egypt. Archaeologists had previously found architectural fragments bearing the name of Ramesses II at Behbeit El Hagar, which is known for its temple dedicated to Isis, a goddess associated with healing and magic, said Mahmoud Emam, an Egyptologist at Cairo University who has worked on remains from the site but was not involved with the recent excavation. He noted that the newly found statues were unearthed on the western side of the temple complex.

Both of the newfound statues were once larger than life, with the bigger one likely standing nearly 28 feet (8.5 meters) tall when it was originally built. However, most of what remains is its head, which is 5.2 feet (1.6 m) tall and depicts the pharaoh wearing the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Part of this large statue's back pillar has a hieroglyphic inscription that gives the pharaoh's "Horus" name: Hor-Ka-Nakht-Mery-Maat.

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