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MACROECONOMIC STABILITY HAS NOT TRANSLATED INTO RELIEF FOR THE MASSES

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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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Macroeconomic stability has not translated into relief for the masses

Farhan Khan

The government continues to present macroeconomic stabilisation as evidence of recovery, yet households continue to struggle with food, electricity, transport, and housing costs. The point is that stabilisation is not improving ordinary Pakistanis' lives. Needless to say, for households, recovery means being able to buy food, pay rent, educate children and meet unexpected expenses. But this is not happening.

The weakness of Pakistan's economic recovery is also evident in its modest growth rate. The National Accounts Committee revised GDP growth for FY2025-26 to 3.65 per cent, while the IMF projected growth of 3.5 per cent for FY2026-27. These rates are insufficient to generate the volume of productive employment required by a rapidly growing population.

According to the World Bank, approximately 3.5 million people enter the workforce annually, yet job creation remains inadequate. Unemployment reached 7 per cent in 2024, while labour productivity grew by only 0.4 per cent annually between 2014 and 2024. Pakistan's national poverty rate fell from 64.3 percent in 2001–02 to 21.9 percent in 2018–19. However, the World Bank estimates that it rose to approximately 29 percent in 2024–25, leaving around 70 million people below the national poverty line. Real wages declined by an average of 3.4 percent annually between 2018–19 and 2024–25.

The challenge is to build an economy in which households can sustain their livelihoods despite economic shocks. Lower inflation does not mean prices return to previous levels; it means they rise more slowly. After successive years of price increases, households can continue to struggle even when inflation moderates. Pakistan's consumer price inflation reached 10.26 percent year-on-year in September 2026, while the IMF's October projections put average inflation at 9.9 percent for FY2026–27.

The pressure is especially visible in household food budgets. The cost of essential foods, including wheat, flour, vegetables and meat, force families to make difficult choices. When meat becomes less affordable, families may buy it less frequently. Rising food costs can also force households to reduce quantities, compromise dietary diversity or postpone other expenses.

Inadequate nutrition, compounded by extreme heat, cold and other harsh weather conditions, can increase health risks, particularly for children, older people and those already vulnerable. The consequences extend beyond household budgets to health, education, and human development. Daily-wage earners, pensioners and workers in the informal economy are particularly exposed when incomes fail to keep pace with prices. The relevant measure is not simply how much people earn in rupees, but what those rupees can buy—and what families must sacrifice to make ends meet.

The rupee's long-term depreciation against the US dollar has added to economic pressures. A weaker currency raises the domestic cost of imports, including fuel, machinery and industrial inputs. Exchange-rate stability is good, but it cannot reverse the accumulated effects of earlier depreciation or guarantee stronger household purchasing power. For households, the immediate concern is whether incomes keep pace with essential costs.

International oil prices, exchange rates, taxes and fiscal constraints shape domestic fuel prices. Pricing and energy taxation should therefore be assessed not only against revenue targets but also for their distributional effects. Without efficient energy use, reliable transport and a productive domestic economy, repeated cost increases can undermine the benefits of stabilisation. Pakistan produces a wide range of food commodities, yet many households struggle to afford food while farmers face high input costs and uncertain returns. International prices, energy, storage, transport and intermediaries all influence the relationship between farm-gate and retail prices. Economic growth must generate productive employment and rising real incomes. Without stronger agricultural and industrial productivity, investment and export capacity, expansion may not translate into meaningful relief.

Macroeconomic discipline is necessary. Fiscal imbalances, external vulnerabilities and persistent inflation cannot be ignored. But stabilisation is a means to an end, not the final measure of economic success. The next phase must connect economic discipline with productive investment, employment, stronger real incomes and sustained poverty reduction. Tax and energy adjustments should be assessed for their effects on different income groups, while agriculture, education, healthcare and essential public services need sustained attention.

Pakistan's challenge is to turn macroeconomic stability into a recovery that reaches households. Stabilisation without relief is an incomplete recovery. The central challenge before the government is to transform macroeconomic stability into inclusive and sustainable economic growth. This requires a fundamental shift in economic priorities, from managing financial indicators to improving productive capacity, employment and household incomes.

First, the government must adopt a more equitable taxation policy. The existing dependence on indirect taxation places a disproportionate burden on ordinary consumers and the salaried middle class. The tax base should be broadened by bringing undertaxed sectors and high-income groups into the net, eliminating unjustified exemptions and improving tax administration.

Second, the energy sector requires comprehensive reform. Expensive electricity is damaging household budgets as well as industrial competitiveness. The government must address transmission and distribution losses, improve recovery, reduce generation inefficiencies and restructure unsustainable contractual obligations. Affordable and reliable energy is essential for both household welfare and industrial expansion.

Third, investment must be directed towards employment-generating sectors, particularly agriculture, manufacturing, information technology and small and medium enterprises. Export-oriented industries should receive support to improve productivity, diversify markets and generate foreign exchange without relying perpetually on external borrowing.

Fourth, human development must become a central pillar of economic policy. Public spending on education, healthcare, nutrition and vocational training should be increased and its effectiveness improved. Finally, social protection programmes should be strengthened to shield vulnerable households from economic shocks. Targeted cash assistance, food support and carefully designed subsidies can provide immediate relief.

Ultimately, the purpose of economic management is not simply to make national accounts look healthier; it is to make people's lives better. A family that cannot afford nutritious food, educate its children, pay electricity bills or obtain medical treatment has little reason to celebrate macroeconomic stability. The country needs an economic strategy that puts employment, affordability, social protection and shared prosperity at its centre. Only then will macroeconomic recovery become a reality for the masses rather than remain a statistical accomplishment.

Pakistan's education deficit: the way forward

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan's constitution promises free, compulsory education to every child between five and 16. But nearly eight decades after independence, that promise remains largely unkept. The Economic Survey 2025-26 puts the national literacy rate for people aged 10 and above at 63 percent, up from 61 percent, and says 28 percent of school-age children are out of school.

That is an improvement on the previous figure, but it still means roughly one child in three or four is outside the system. Estimates of the total vary: a government study cites 25.37 million out-of-school children, while another official body released a figure of 26.2 million. Either way, Pakistan has the second-largest out-of-school population in the world.

According to the Economic Survey 2025-26, pre-primary enrolment dropped by 9.9 percent. But being in school does not guarantee learning. A government study found that 77 percent of ten-year-olds cannot read and understand a simple text. Dropout compounds the problem. The primary completion rate is just 57 percent, so many children who enrol leave before they have mastered the basics. Poverty, child labour, early marriage and long distances to school push them out, and girls are hit hardest. One survey found 34 percent of girls out of school, compared with 22 percent of boys.

The root of the problem is money. Reports on the latest Economic Survey say education spending has fallen to 0.8 percent of GDP, with expenditure down 23 percent to Rs962 billion and Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa recording sharp cuts. In 2024 the government said it aimed to raise education spending to 4 percent of GDP by 2029. The trend is moving in the opposite direction. Pakistan spends far less on classrooms than on debt servicing and defence, and what it does spend is mostly absorbed by salaries, leaving little for buildings, books, laboratories or teacher training.

Even the money that is allocated often fails to reach children. Pakistan's education departments have long been associated with "ghost schools", which exist on paper and draw budgets and salaries but have no pupils, no teachers, or no building. Ghost teachers collect pay without teaching. Postings and transfers are widely seen as being decided by political connections and bribes rather than merit. When a recruitment drive is announced, jobs are too often sold or handed out as favours. A corrupt administration cannot be expected to deliver quality education, and each leaking rupee is a child left behind.

The teachers who do reach the classroom are frequently under-prepared. Many enter the profession with little pedagogical training, receive little support afterwards, and are routinely pulled away from teaching for election, census, polio and dengue duties. Rote learning remains the norm, and children pass through grade after grade without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy.

Pakistan has produced education policies in abundance but sustained none. Each government announces a new plan, a new curriculum or a new slogan, and the next one abandons it. Since the 18th Amendment made education a provincial subject, the federal government sets targets while provinces control the budgets and the schools. The result is a patchwork with no consistent national direction and little accountability.



The country runs several parallel education systems. Elite private schools offer English-medium instruction, trained staff and decent facilities, while low-fee private schools and overstretched public schools serve the majority, often with crumbling buildings, missing toilets and overcrowded classes. A child's school largely determines their future opportunities, which entrenches inequality across generations.

Provincial gaps are equally stark. Punjab records the highest literacy rate at 68 percent, followed by Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 58 percent each, while Balochistan is lowest at 49 percent. In Balochistan, 45 percent of school-age children are not enrolled, despite a sharp improvement from 69 percent two years earlier. A child's life chances still depend heavily on the province and district of birth.

Punjab has responded with the country's most ambitious experiment: handing the management of government schools to private operators. The department has completed outsourcing of 13,600 schools in three phases and has now approved a fourth phase of 6,460 schools, including 600 high schools for the first time, while also deciding to close schools with enrolment of up to 100 students.

The government says the system is working. Officials told the chief minister that outsourcing increased enrolment by 1.3 million in 16 months. Earlier research on contracting out schools in Punjab supports part of that case: one study estimated that enrolment in converted schools rose by over 60 percent.

But critics are unconvinced. Teachers' unions argue that nearly 700,000 children left school after outsourcing and that the number of institutions fell from 52,000 to 38,000. They also fear regular teachers will be declared surplus and replaced by cheaper contract staff. Independent scrutiny is thin. One commentary notes that the programme has expanded to thirteen thousand institutions before results were independently established on learning

rather than attendance. Until the evidence covers what children actually learn, and what happens to children in closed schools, the verdict on privatisation must remain open.

What is the way forward? First, Pakistan must treat the budget promise as binding. Reaching 4 percent of GDP is the minimum, with spending protected from cuts and tied to measurable results. Second, the system needs a clean-up. Biometric attendance for teachers, a verified school census, public disclosure of school-level data and independent audits would expose ghost schools and ghost salaries. Recruitment and transfers must be merit-based and transparent.

Third, the teaching profession must be rebuilt, with proper pre-service training, continuous mentoring and an end to non-teaching duties. Fourth, provinces need a shared national floor for curriculum, learning assessment and minimum facilities, with extra funding for Balochistan, rural districts and girls' education, including stipends, safe transport and local schools for girls.

Fifth, reforms such as outsourcing should be judged by independent learning data, not enrollment claims. Whatever the management model, the state must keep its responsibility to guarantee free, quality schooling. Finally, all of this requires continuity. Education reform takes a decade to bear fruit, and it will not survive if every government abandons its predecessor's work. A cross-party national consensus, backed by the provinces, is the only way to turn a promise on paper into a classroom for every child.

Export ambitions vs. ground realities: The crisis facing Pakistan's textile sector

Muhammad Ali

The textile exporters in Pakistan are facing difficulties because of the increasing cost of production, erratic government policies, and the worsening doing business environment. The urgent appeal by the exporters for financial assistance in conjunction with overdue changes in energy prices, taxes, export finance and logistics demonstrates the basic contradiction in the economic policy of Pakistan. Despite the emphasis by the government to promote exports to improve foreign exchange reserves and avoid borrowings from abroad, government policies are making it increasingly difficult for the exporters to compete in international market.

The Pakistan Textile Exporters Association has made valid points on the conditions in which the industry has been operating. Another point that needs to be considered is that how the government expects exporters to earn more foreign exchange when important decisions regarding the production and commercial activities are being taken without proper consultations from the business community. The promotion of exports has emerged as a recurring theme in the country's economic policies. It is absolutely necessary to boost the exports for bringing about improvement in the balance of payments position by reducing the strain on foreign exchange resources and reducing the dependency on international financial institutions. But this can only be done if the exporters are assured that the conditions under which they function will remain stable.

But this is far from being the case in Pakistan. There have been repeated changes in electricity and gas rates, tax structures, financing schemes and other regulatory arrangements without much consideration being given to the implications of such actions for any prior commitments. The international buyers set their prices and terms of agreement several months in advance. The exporters in Pakistan are supposed to keep to these agreements despite any rise in the cost of production.



The most recent meeting organized by the Ministry of Commerce has again drawn attention to all these issues. There were complaints of cross-subsidies incorporated into the industrial electricity rates and objections related to gas prices as well as complaints about the delays in receiving tax rebates. The textile exporters also pointed out the shortcomings in the application of concessional export finance programs and poor railway freight services for the connections of Punjab's industrial regions with the ports along with increasing shipping costs internationally.

It might seem that individually, these issues are easily solved, but together, they might greatly affect the competitiveness of the export-driven industry. Textile production is a rather competitive sector of international business characterized by narrow profit margins. Small changes in electricity, gas, transport, or financial costs might determine whether the order will be received or not.

Energy pricing is still an important issue since energy supply plays a vital role in manufacturing textiles. The constant change of tariffs and the involvement of cross subsidies makes forecasting expenses difficult for manufacturers. Pakistan's exporters should also be able to compete with those from other countries which have more stable industrial energy policy. Unless this is taken into account in energy policy, the industry faces a structural problem.

Taxation and financing issues are among those as well. The delay in reimbursement of sales taxes and other money related to exports blocks capital that manufacturers need to buy raw material and to pay wages and to carry out orders. The same applies to concessional loans – if terms announced are not followed, or exporters face unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles when using this opportunity, then no help can be expected from them.

Temporary aid might be required when high domestic costs pose a risk to the existing export linkages and competitiveness of the

firms. But such aid needs to be given on the basis of clear eligibility criteria and goals along with its fiscal impact. The government also needs to make sure that the aid is given so that there are tangible benefits in terms of exports rather than being just another recurrent subsidy. This aid should be able to motivate the firms to increase their investments and efficiency levels.

In fact, the textile sector itself realises that short-term help will not provide a sustainable solution. The most important thing that exporters require is an effective and competitive policy environment that would enable them to achieve greater efficiency, use the latest technology, produce diversified products, and place bigger orders from foreign markets.

In addition, consultations between policymakers and exporters should also become a standard procedure in economic decision-making. The producers have better knowledge about the cost of production, foreign consumers, deadlines for deliveries, and competition compared to the government bureaucrats working in administrative agencies.

The government should introduce a system whereby any changes in policies should be negotiated with business organizations before the implementation. Any increases in the costs of energy for industries or changes in the financial and tax systems should include the assessment of their influence on production costs, jobs, and exports. Transitional periods would also facilitate business adjustment to new conditions without violating existing agreements.

It is necessary to make the government departments responsible for inefficiency in their administration leading to extra costs for the exporters. Delays in tax refunds, non-uniform application of the financial schemes and complex bureaucracy procedures are not just inefficient but affect adversely the efficiency and competitiveness of manufacturers. Public services should not be judged only by the policies they have introduced but also by how they implement them.

Logistics infrastructure calls for the same treatment as well. Poor railway cargo connections of industrial regions in Punjab make Pakistan's exports dependent upon costly transport. Costlier transport will further undermine the competitiveness of Pakistani goods in international markets. Improvement of the efficiency of railway transport, ports and coordination among transport authorities will help to cut down these costs.

It is impossible for Pakistan to sustain economic growth in future without expanding its exports. In this respect, textile exporters have been significant source of employment and economic activity and also earn valuable foreign exchange for Pakistan. Therefore, their concerns must be taken seriously by the government when formulating national economic policies.

In reality, the government has to understand the fact that export competitiveness will not come by making announcements or offering temporary financial inducements. Export competitiveness is dependent on availability of cheap energy, sound tax structure, easy access to financing, efficient logistics and consistent rules. It will not be possible to ask exporters to bear the brunt of policy inconsistency while demanding better export performance from them. Pakistan will have to first develop an atmosphere where business can prosper and compete.

Broadening the net: The path to fair taxation

Husnain Shahid

The focus of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on developing a more equitable, inclusive and predictable tax structure in Pakistan brings to fore one of the most entrenched economic issues plaguing the country. Even after multiple attempts at reform, the tax load continues to remain unfairly skewed towards salaried workers, documented enterprises and others within the formal economy whereas some major economic players are undertaxed when compared to their economic capability. Until this issue is sorted out, it will be difficult for Pakistan to leverage the stabilization of its macroeconomic environment into economic growth and prosperity.

It has been pointed out by the IMF that there is a need to tax the un-taxed segments of the economy, rationalize exemptions and reduce the burden on the taxed population. These suggestions have been raised many times in the past by the IMF and continue to surface because of the lack of structural changes in the tax system. A tax system which continuously manages to squeeze more out of compliant taxpayers and leaves large segments of the economy un-taxed is certainly not equitable or sustainable.

There are three interlinked issues that exist in Pakistan's taxation system; the small tax base, pressure from influential economic groups and tax evasion. Further, these issues become even worse due to the inefficiencies in the administration, corruption and bribery opportunities in the tax process. This has resulted in the creation of a situation where the law-abiding citizens are facing more burden while influential persons find ways to escape from their responsibilities.

Citizens, who earn on salaries and companies and corporations that are functioning officially, are always subjected to the wrath of the government every time there is a need for additional taxes to be collected in order to fulfill the fiscal objectives. The higher income tax deductions, added tax burden and various other measures of taxation have made the lives of these citizens tough and troublesome.

It is not simply that there is a lack of tax revenue being collected from the population. The real problem is that the FBR has been unsuccessful in creating a means of tracking economic activities outside the recorded economy in order to make sure that those earning money do pay their fair share of taxes. Rather than improving its ability to identify income earners who are making money without declaring, the tax system has depended on raising rates of those people and companies who are easier to track. Thus, the vicious circle continues. The idea to assign a higher role to Pakistan Revenue Automation Limited (PRAL) should be taken into account. It acts as an IT Infrastructure and tax automation for the FBR. Some of its functions include support of the IRIS system, which is an electronic tax registration, filing and administration. Despite the fact that the PRAL is functioning as an independent public sector organization with a separate board of directors, its relationship with the FBR hinders it from independently taking up a technological approach.

Enhancing PRAL's operational independence, its professionalism, and its availability to up-to-date analysis techniques can play an essential role in changing the approach that Pakistan uses for taxpayer identification and monitoring of the economy. Rather than using the discretionary power of individual tax

officers, the government can use objective data, automation, and risk assessment to detect tax evasions.

Pakistan has many elements necessary for the creation of such a system. First of all, computerized national ID cards provide a way to identify people, which can be employed through the proper legal protection. A well-governed data exchange including NADRA, banks, property registers, utilities, companies, and other entities can greatly enhance the understanding of the situation in the country's economy.

The analysis of data could possibly detect inconsistencies between reported income levels and possession of valuable real estate, cars, financial assets, or business stakes. Data on transactions with real estate, consumption of utilities and banking operations could also be used to discover those whose financial capability is out of sync with their reported taxable income. It is not going to be a proof of a tax claim, but rather a ground for a check.

The introduction of the technology-based system will also help limit unnecessary contacts between taxpayers and the tax authorities. Too many personal contacts always provide an opportunity for rent-seeking, harassment and bribery. The automated system will allow the government to limit the use of discretion and increase the transparency of tax collection. While it is possible to make economic transactions visible through technology, it is incapable of overcoming the political obstacles in the process of taxing the powerful groups. Also, it won't eliminate the corruption unless the government itself will be held responsible. Any tax system that uses the data has to guarantee citizens from arbitrary taxation, the misuse of their private information and unauthorized access to the financial records.



At the same time, the government has to show its willpower in order to incorporate the traditionally undertaxed industries in the tax system. Among those industries are retailers, wholesalers, the real estate market and agriculture. Those industries comprise a big part of economic activity, but the contribution of their income to the state budget is still far below their possibilities.

Taxation of agriculture, for example, needs proper coordination between the federal and provincial governments after the devolution of the powers in the constitution. In the same manner, there should be an efficient mechanism in place for retail and wholesale trade that will facilitate the process of registration and documentation without putting undue burden on small businesses.

The intention here should not be to punish the businesses or individuals that have stayed out of the tax net. Instead, the government needs to design a system where tax compliance is easy, implementation is regular, and taxes are paid by those who have capability to pay. In this way, the tax net can be widened, and higher rates can be reduced for those already paying taxes.

Prosperity will not come to Pakistan by taxing the same few individuals and firms time after time. The nation should not rely on indirect taxes and increases in levies to meet their budget targets when there are significant economic activities going unrecorded. The goal should be to bring about visibility in economic activities and have everybody pay as per their capability.

Empowerment of the PRAL and using the appropriate technology can serve as a good way to start. But eventually, success will depend on the political will and the determination to question vested economic interests. An equitable tax structure is not just a condition demanded by international creditors; it is important for Pakistan's economic sovereignty and development.

SBP rate hike: A necessary precaution

Shahid Hussain

The decision of the State Bank of Pakistan to hike its policy rate by 50 basis points to 12pc is quite expected considering the increasing dangers to the stability of prices and uncertainty regarding the global economic outlook.

The decision may not please the business community as a result of increased interest rates, but the central bank has no choice because of the need to maintain the results of the stabilization efforts. Against the background of persisting international inflation, high interest rates and vulnerability of energy prices to political factors, the rise in inflationary pressure may be harmful for the country.

Pakistan has achieved some success in improving its external situation. Stable currency exchange rates, the growth in the amount of foreign exchange reserves and remittances have positively affected the balance of payments of the country. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to consider all these positive trends as the solution of the problems associated with external vulnerabilities of Pakistan. There are still a number of threats from the international environment.

The international economic environment has been growing more difficult. Major central banks are finding it hard to control inflation and manage the delicate balance of maintaining growth. According to the IMF projections, high prices continue to be an issue in most countries. Higher interest rates in international markets are also creating competition for resources, which means it will become harder for developing countries like Pakistan to find investments at reasonable costs.

In this situation, the SBP should be prepared for the scenario in which inflationary expectations may become a reality. Any pressure on the value of the national currency will raise the prices of imports like fuel, machinery and other materials. Exchange rate stability due to low demand for imports does not mean that the problems in the external sector have been resolved. If imports suddenly spike, oil becomes expensive internationally, or interna-

tional monetary policy tightens, these issues can be exposed easily.

This recent rate increase is therefore a precautionary step towards maintaining macroeconomic stability and not a measure taken to stop economic activity forever. If the inflation rate is allowed to increase further, then more tightening of monetary policies will be needed, which would cost more for business and people alike. By taking steps before inflation becomes too much of a problem, the government intends to ensure that it does not undo its earlier efforts of controlling the rate of inflation and keeping the currency stable.

While the policy decision has been welcomed by many, some parts of the economy have been against it. Foreign investors in particular have welcomed this move since they believe it is needed to control inflation and stabilize the currency. Higher interest rates may lead to better financial products in the domestic market and hence attract foreign investors. This is particularly helpful at a time when international conditions are uncertain.

Moreover, according to industrial associations, expensive credits will negatively influence manufacturers' plans to enlarge their capacities, modernize equipment and initiate new investment projects. Small and medium-sized companies are especially exposed to such risks since they usually have limited opportunities for acquiring alternative financial resources. If the cost of borrowing increases, companies will be compelled to refrain from expansion, decrease working capital and limit production.

These issues need to be taken seriously into consideration. The industrial sector of Pakistan has still not fully recovered, and the continuous high interest rates can prove to be detrimental to the formation of a stronger productive base because businesses need inexpensive credit so that they can adopt modern technology and compete in the international market. Should the cost of credit remain too expensive for a considerable time span, domestic manufacturers would become uncompetitive compared to the manufacturers in countries where credit and energy are relatively cheap.

Still, the monetary policy cannot be determined only through the needs of businesses in relation to credit facilities. The central bank has to think about the consequences of the inflation, currency instability and changed global financial situation. The problem with high inflation is that it erodes the purchasing power of the people and discourages investment due to uncertainty of prices.

However, it would not be realistic to assume that monetary tightening will be able to solve the problem of inflation in Pakistan on its own. Interest rates can control excessive spending and borrowing and have an impact on inflation expectations and exchange rate stability. But they cannot affect the ability of producing more electricity, reducing fuel imports, increasing productivity of agriculture, or eliminating inefficiencies in supply chain management. In the case when inflation is caused by high production costs, monetary tightening is clearly ineffective.

And this is where the role of the government becomes extremely crucial. Sustainable recovery for the industry cannot be achieved without reforming the cost of doing business, and not just by resorting to monetary tightening. There should be a fundamental transformation of the energy sector, which will make sure that industries receive stable electricity and gas supply at low prices.

Tax reform is just as crucial. With a small tax base and successive increase in the tax burden of existing taxpayers, the investment process suffers and the incentive for businesses to operate outside the taxation system is increased. The inclusion of undertaxed areas within the tax system along with simplified processes and stable taxation system would certainly help businesses in creating a level playing field. Reforms in the regulatory framework are also essential in order to remove any excess administration and policy uncertainty for the investors.

In this case, both the government and the central bank need to pursue complementary policies. As far as the SBP is concerned with the task of maintaining low levels of inflation and external stability, the government should work on supply-side constraints and public spending management reforms. This would eventually help in creating some room for a lower interest rate policy.

In light of all the factors, Pakistan cannot afford another situation wherein there is an improvement in the inflation rate and reserve levels temporarily only to have the country slide into yet another economic crisis. The reality of the situation is that the recent increase in the policy rate might be necessary because of the risks to the economy, but it must not act as an excuse for postponing crucial changes. Monetary tightening can help create a shield for the economy temporarily in order to prevent inflationary threats, but ultimately any help for the economy will come from reduced energy prices, wider tax base and increased productivity and consistency of policies.

Pakistan's internal security challenges

Raza Khan

People generally associate security with physical protection from danger and understand insecurity as exposure to physical harm. This is understandable because the safety of oneself, one's family and one's property is a fundamental concern for every individual. However, a deeper examination reveals that an individual's perception of security is also closely linked to several non-physical and non-military factors. Therefore, ensuring an acceptable level of physical security requires serious attention to these broader dimensions of security, not only by policymakers but also by society at large.

Pakistan is located in one of the world's most volatile regions, where external security threats have historically remained serious. However, the country is currently confronted with multiple internal security challenges that require urgent attention. Failure to address these dangers could put the very survival of the state at risk. Among the various internal security threats, the most serious is the administrative collapse across the country. This situation has recently been acknowledged by none other than Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, who has called for a deeper institutional reset.

The most visible indication of this administrative collapse is the lack, and sometimes complete absence, of the state's writ in almost every sphere of public life. In present-day Pakistan, the state appears increasingly incapable of enforcing its laws, whether through persuasion or the use of its lawful authority. Consider, for example, the inability of the authorities to remove encroachments created by traders and land

grabbers along almost every major road and thoroughfare in the country, including those in the federal capital, Islamabad. A large majority of people also disregard safety regulations and precautionary measures designed primarily for their own protection.

This widespread disregard for government instructions and laws reflects a serious erosion of public confidence in state institutions. There are several reasons for this lack of trust, but the most important is the state's failure to convince citizens that its primary purpose is to serve and protect them. The state has been unable to establish this relationship because those who have controlled its affairs at the highest levels, including civilian and military leaderships, have often used public institutions to advance personal interests rather than the welfare of the people.

There is a natural reaction to every action. When the state consistently neglects public welfare, development and security, the consequences are bound to affect society. Large sections of the population remain deprived of quality education and basic opportunities for development. As a result, many citizens have become increasingly indifferent to government advice, regulations and even ordinary laws. This attitude has further weakened the administrative system and created a vicious cycle in which the absence of state authority encourages public lawlessness, while public disregard for the law makes governance even more difficult.

The extent of administrative deterioration can be judged from the fact that it is difficult to identify even a single district in Pakistan whose administrative structure could serve as a model for the rest of the country. None of the provinces has an effective local government system in place, leaving districts largely dependent on civilian administrative officers, particularly deputy commissioners.

These officers are generally capable of managing routine administrative affairs, but the overall manner in which public services and local issues are handled leaves much to be desired. For instance, a district administration may intervene when a road is completely blocked. However, when pushcart operators and street vendors occupy most of the same road, leaving only a narrow passage for traffic and pedestrians, the administration often remains indifferent despite the problem being visible to everyone. Such selective enforcement of the law reflects the weakness of administrative institutions and their inability to maintain order consistently.

Another major internal security challenge is the growing influence of powerful interest groups, commonly known in Western countries as pressure or special-interest groups. In Pakistan, however, many of these groups can more accurately be described as mafias because of the way they dominate different sectors and protect their vested interests. Whether it is education, healthcare, construction, real estate or capital markets, powerful groups have established considerable control over their respective fields, often at the expense of the general public.

Private educational institutions provide a particularly clear example of this phenomenon. Over the years, they have developed into such an influential interest group that they can effectively pressure the state to frame rules and regulations according to their preferences, often without adequate consideration of the financial burden on ordinary families. The private education sector has become so powerful that the government frequently appears helpless in dealing with its excessive commercialisation and exploitative practices.

This situation has emerged largely because the state has failed to fulfil one of its most fundamental responsibilities: providing quality education to all citizens. The mushrooming growth of private educational institutions is therefore not simply the result of market demand but also reflects the absence of sound policymaking and effective governance in the public education sector.

Over time, officials in education departments and other relevant government institutions have, in some cases, found it more advantageous to develop questionable relationships with private school owners rather than strengthen public educational institutions. Consequently, the education system has deteriorated to an alarming level. A large proportion of the population has been denied the quality education necessary to become responsible citizens and contribute meaningfully to national development. Much of the confusion, disorder and social instability visible in contemporary Pakistan can be traced to inadequate education and the failure to develop an informed and responsible society.

The exceptionally low success rate in the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination is another indication of the problems confronting the country's education system. This year, once again, only 2.74 per cent of candidates who appeared in the examination qualified, raising serious questions about the standard of education and the quality of human resources being produced by the country. The performance and professional standards of even those candidates who pass the examination and enter the civil service also deserve closer scrutiny. Weak educational foundations and inadequate professional preparation have inevitably contributed to the administrative shortcomings that are now affecting the entire country.

A state is fundamentally an institution established to protect and promote the public interest, whereas interest groups generally work to advance private or individual interests. In present-day Pakistan, however, private interests have increasingly overshadowed public welfare because the state has largely failed to protect the latter. This is an extremely dangerous situation that the country's power centres must recognise and address before it becomes irreversible.

Unfortunately, the political component of the country's power structure is entangled in so many controversies and competing interests that it appears to have lost the ability to make bold, rational and far-reaching decisions. Political considerations, personal interests and institutional rivalries frequently take precedence over the broader national interest, making meaningful reforms increasingly difficult.

Under these circumstances, those occupying the most influential positions in the country's power structure must rise to the occasion and demonstrate the political will to take difficult but necessary decisions. Pakistan cannot be rescued from the negative influence of powerful interest groups unless the state re-establishes its authority and ensures that public institutions serve ordinary citizens rather than privileged individuals and organisations. Once the most influential decision-makers demonstrate a genuine commitment to reform, other state institutions are likely to follow. More importantly, the public will also support the government if people become convinced that its actions are genuinely aimed at protecting their interests and improving their lives.

Pakistan's internal security challenges are therefore far more serious than they may appear. They are gradually hollowing out the foundations of the state and creating conditions that make it easier for external adversaries to exploit internal weaknesses and advance their own objectives. Whether the problem is the collapse of the administrative structure, the growing dominance of mafias in different sectors or other forms of institutional dysfunction, almost every major internal security threat is directly connected to the country's political and administrative arrangements.

The country's leading policymakers, influential decision-makers and institutional leadership must recognise the gravity of the situation. The question before them is no longer simply how to maintain the existing political and administrative arrangements. It is whether Pakistan can continue to function effectively as a state if these fundamental weaknesses remain unaddressed. The priority must be the survival, stability and strengthening of the state, not the continuation of a dysfunctional system that has increasingly failed to serve its people.

Pakistan's nutritional divide

Dr Zaheer Ahmad Babar

The Food and Agriculture Organisation's latest assessment highlights a widening gap between the nutritional needs of Pakistan's population and the food supplied by the country's agricultural system. Its recently released policy brief exposes a fundamental weakness in the country's food and agricultural policies: the failure to ensure that people have access to the variety of nutritious foods recommended under national dietary guidelines.

Vegetables, fruits, roots and tubers, and pulses remain in short supply, while cereals and sugar are available in quantities exceeding dietary requirements. With more than 60 per cent of Pakistanis unable to afford a healthy diet, misplaced agricultural priorities, inefficient distribution networks and high food prices are aggravating the nutritional crisis. The result is a troubling combination of undernutrition, rising obesity and diet-related diseases, all of which are undermining the country's human development and economic potential.

The scale of the problem is reflected in the figures presented in the FAO assessment. Between 2010 and 2023, the estimated shortfall in vegetable supply increased from 10.9–17.8 million tonnes to 13–21.6 million tonnes. Similarly, the gap in fruit supply widened from 1.9–10.3 million tonnes to 3.9–14.3 million tonnes. These figures indicate that the country has failed to keep food production in line with the changing nutritional requirements of its growing population.

Rapid population growth is placing additional pressure on an already inadequate food supply. At the same time, climate change and increasingly frequent extreme weather events are threatening agricultural production, damaging crops and disrupting supply chains. Floods, droughts, heatwaves and irregular rainfall can reduce yields and affect the availability of essential food items. Unless these challenges are addressed through long-term planning and investment, the gap between nutritional needs and the supply of affordable, healthy food is likely to widen further.

The consequences are already visible in the country's public health indicators. Around 40 per cent of children under the age of five suffer from stunting, which restricts their physical growth and affects brain development, learning abilities and future productivity. The damage caused by childhood malnutrition can continue throughout a person's life, limiting educational achievement and employment opportunities. This is not merely a health problem; it is also a serious obstacle to the development of a skilled and productive workforce. The situation is equally alarming among women. Anaemia affects approximately 42 per cent of women of reproductive age, increasing health risks during pregnancy and childbirth. This is particularly concerning in a country that continues to face a substantial maternal health burden. Poor nutrition among women also affects the health and development of their children, creating a cycle of malnutrition that can pass from one generation to another.

At the other end of the nutritional spectrum, Pakistan is experiencing a rapid increase in obesity and diabetes. According to the figures cited in the assessment, an estimated 31.4 per cent of adults aged between 20 and 79 were living with diabetes in 2024, placing Pakistan among the countries with the highest prevalence rates. Diets containing excessive amounts of sugar, salt and unhealthy fats contribute to obesity and increase the risk of diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and other non-communicable illnesses.

The coexistence of widespread undernutrition and rising obesity reveals a serious failure of the food system. A significant proportion of the population cannot afford nutritious food, while unhealthy, calorie-rich alternatives are often cheaper and more readily available. This imbalance places an additional burden on an already stretched healthcare system and reduces productivity through illness, disability and premature deaths. The economic cost extends beyond individual households, affecting national development and the country's ability to build a healthy workforce. These outcomes are rooted in structural weaknesses in agricultural planning and food distribution. For decades, Pakistan's agricultural policies have focused heavily on major crops such as wheat and rice, with comparatively less attention given to ensuring an adequate and affordable supply of fruits, vegetables, pulses and other nutrient-rich foods. While these staple crops are important for food security, their production alone cannot guarantee a balanced diet for the population. The problem is further aggravated by inadequate storage facilities, weak cold-chain infrastructure, poor transportation networks and significant post-harvest losses. Perishable food items are particularly vulnerable to these weaknesses. A considerable quantity of fruits and vegetables is wasted before reaching consumers, reducing market supplies and pushing up prices. Farmers also face difficulties in accessing reliable markets, finance and modern agricultural facilities, discouraging investment in diversified crop production.

For low-income households, the affordability of nutritious food remains a major concern. When fruits, vegetables, pulses and other healthy food items become expensive, families are often compelled to rely on cheaper foods that provide calories but lack essential nutrients. Under such circumstances, public awareness campaigns urging people to adopt healthier eating habits cannot produce meaningful results unless nutritious food is physically available and financially accessible. People cannot be expected to follow dietary advice when the recommended food is beyond their purchasing power.

The FAO's recommendation to align agricultural investment and trade priorities with nutritional requirements therefore offers an important starting point for reform. The country's agricultural performance should not be judged solely by the volume of wheat, rice or sugar produced. It must also be assessed in terms of the availability, diversity, quality and affordability of food needed for a healthy population.

The organisation has also emphasised improvements in food distribution, investment in storage and market infrastructure, and measures to reduce food waste. These interventions can help increase the supply of perishable produce, reduce unnecessary costs and make nutritious food more accessible to consumers. Nutrition education, front-of-package food labelling and taxes on sugary drinks and products containing excessive amounts of sugar, salt and unhealthy fats are also among the measures recommended to encourage healthier consumption patterns.

However, implementing these proposals will require coordinated action by federal and provincial governments. Agricultural subsidies, research priorities and market policies need to be reviewed so that they support the production of a wider range of nutritious crops. Farmers should be encouraged to diversify their production through access to affordable credit, improved seeds, modern technology, reliable markets and better storage facilities. Investment in cold storage, transportation and processing infrastructure is equally important to reduce post-harvest losses and stabilise prices.

The government can also use public procurement programmes for schools, hospitals and other public institutions to create a stable market for nutritious food. Targeted assistance and social protection programmes can help low-income families afford healthier diets. At the same time, food labelling and public awareness initiatives should enable consumers to make informed choices about what they eat. Pakistan's food security challenge cannot be addressed simply by producing more calories. The real test is whether the agricultural system can provide a diverse range of safe, nutritious and affordable foods to the entire population. The country's agricultural policies must move beyond their traditional emphasis on a few major crops and place human nutrition at the centre of planning and investment. Ultimately, agricultural success should be measured not only by yields and production figures but also by the ability of every citizen to afford a balanced and healthy diet.

How long do we keep mourning for the loss of our little ones?

Muhammad Zaman Butt

The growing number of deaths, abuse cases and preventable accidents involving children exposes serious weaknesses in the country's healthcare system, public safety standards and institutional accountability.

People across Pakistan are becoming increasingly concerned about the safety and security of their children as heartbreaking incidents involving infants and young people continue to emerge from different parts of the country. Almost every few weeks, reports surface about children losing their lives because of negligence, inadequate safety arrangements, poor infrastructure, abuse or the failure of the authorities concerned to perform their duties. These incidents have created a disturbing sense of insecurity among parents, who are increasingly worried about whether their children are safe even in places where they should be protected.

What makes these tragedies even more painful is the familiar response that follows almost every incident. Government officials express condolences, announce inquiries, promise action and sometimes order the suspension of the officials concerned. However, once public attention begins to fade, the matter often disappears from the headlines, while the underlying problems remain unresolved. There is little evidence of lasting institutional reforms or effective measures to ensure that similar incidents do not happen again.



The reported deaths of 14 infants in a fire incident at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in Islamabad last month have once again exposed serious questions about safety arrangements in government hospitals. Instead of immediately accepting responsibility and providing a transparent explanation of what happened, the hospital administration and the federal government have reportedly been blaming one another. Some reports suggest that a fault in the hospital's air-conditioning system may have caused the fire. Whatever the actual cause, the incident raises an extremely disturbing question: how could such a tragedy occur in a major government hospital where the lives of newborn babies should receive the highest level of protection?

Hospitals are supposed to be places of safety, treatment and recovery, particularly for newborns and critically ill patients who cannot protect themselves. They must have functioning fire alarms, emergency exits, fire-fighting equipment, trained staff and properly maintained electrical and air-conditioning systems. These arrangements are not optional facilities but essential safety requirements. If a hospital fails to maintain them, the consequences can be devastating. The PIMS tragedy should therefore lead to a comprehensive examination of safety standards in public and private hospitals throughout the country.

Unfortunately, the danger to children is not confined to healthcare facilities. They remain vulnerable to sexual violence, physical abuse, unsafe buildings and other forms of negligence. On August 5, 2026, an 18-month-old girl, Aizal, was reportedly raped and killed in Pakistan. Such incidents are particularly disturbing because they involve children who are entirely dependent on adults for their protection and security.

According to Sahil, 3,660 cases of child abuse, including sexual abuse, rape and murder following sexual abuse, were reported in 2025. Punjab, in particular, continues to record a considerably higher number of such cases than other provinces. These figures are deeply alarming, although the reported cases may represent only part of the actual problem, as many incidents of child abuse remain unreported because of social pressure, fear, stigma or a lack of confidence in law enforcement agencies.

Another heartbreaking incident occurred on June 30, 2026, when 14 children reportedly lost their lives after the roof of a private tuition centre collapsed. These children had gone there to study and improve their educational prospects. Their parents had entrusted them to an institution where they believed they would be safe. Instead, the children never returned home. This tragedy raises serious questions about building inspections, the enforcement of construction standards and the responsibility of authorities to ensure that educational institutions provide safe environments.

These incidents are not isolated examples of misfortune. They point towards broader institutional weaknesses, including inadequate inspections, poor maintenance, weak enforcement of safety regulations and a lack of accountability. Whether a child dies in a hospital fire, a building collapse, an electrical accident or an incident of abuse, the authorities must establish whether the tragedy could have been prevented and who was responsible for the failure.

The most troubling aspect of the government's response is that accountability frequently ends with announcements. An inquiry committee is formed, an official is suspended or transferred, and compensation may be announced for the affected families. But is this enough to address the loss of an innocent life? A suspension or transfer cannot substitute for a proper investigation, nor can financial compensation bring back a child.

Where evidence establishes that an individual or institution failed to fulfil its legal responsibilities and that negligence contributed to a child's death, the matter should proceed through the appropriate legal channels. Those found responsible must face consequences in accordance with the law, regardless of their position or influence. Investigations should be independent, transparent and completed within a reasonable timeframe. Their findings should also be made public so that families and citizens can understand what went wrong and what action has been taken.

The scale of infant mortality in Pakistan makes the situation even more distressing. According to figures attributed to the World Health Organization, approximately 246,300 babies die every year in the country. This enormous number highlights the continuing challenges surrounding maternal healthcare, newborn care, access to medical facilities and the quality of health services. Many infant deaths are associated with preventable complications and shortcomings in healthcare delivery. Improving antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, emergency obstetric services, neonatal facilities and access to trained medical professionals must therefore become a national priority.

At the same time, protecting children

requires much more than improving healthcare facilities. The government must strengthen child protection mechanisms, ensure effective policing, enforce building regulations and conduct regular safety inspections of schools, tuition centres, hospitals and other public places. Every institution dealing with children should have clearly defined safety responsibilities, emergency procedures and trained personnel. Complaints of abuse must be investigated promptly, while children and their families should have access to effective reporting and support mechanisms.

The innocent children who should be growing up, playing with their parents, attending school and dreaming about their futures are instead becoming statistics in official reports and headlines. Behind every reported death is a family whose life has been permanently changed. No amount of compensation can replace a child, and no official statement can ease the suffering of parents who have lost their sons or daughters because of circumstances that might have been prevented.

The purpose of accountability should not merely be to punish someone after a tragedy. It must also be to prevent the next tragedy. Pakistan needs a child safety policy that brings together healthcare institutions, educational authorities, law enforcement agencies and child protection departments under a clearly defined system of responsibility. Regular inspections, enforceable safety standards, reliable data collection and effective monitoring should be essential parts of this approach.

Pakistan cannot afford to treat the death of a child as just another incident that attracts temporary public attention. Every innocent life lost because of negligence, abuse or institutional failure represents a serious question about the country's priorities and its commitment to protecting its most vulnerable citizens. The government must move beyond condolences and routine inquiries and demonstrate through concrete action that children's lives matter. Protecting children is not simply a government responsibility; it is a national obligation that must be fulfilled before more innocent lives are lost.

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RFK Jr is wrong about the Arab world

Mahmoud Al-Hamza

At a recent campaign rally in Michigan, United States Secretary of Health Robert F Kennedy Jr made remarks that have caused much controversy. He alleged that Muslim Arabs do not produce science and literature and do not win major awards because of the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This was not merely a hasty and inaccurate assessment of the knowledge production of a specific demographic. It was a statement that reflects racist attitudes and misconceptions about an entire region and an entire religion. It is also easily refutable.

There are plenty of Muslim Arab scientists, thinkers and writers who have made major contributions over the past century. Some of them are Nobel laureates, such as novelist Naguib Mahfouz, diplomat Mohamed ElBaradei, journalist Tawakkol Karman, and scientists Ahmed Zewail, Moungi Bawendi and Omar Yaghi. Many others have not received a Western award but have nevertheless contributed significantly to their own countries and the world.

The Arab world does face challenges in knowledge production, but this does not prove an inherent deficit in its people or the overwhelming influence of a certain political group. Rather, it reflects historical and institutional conditions that impact this process.

Human civilisations have not been equal in knowledge production across history. Some have witnessed scientific and intellectual flourishing while others have faced decline and turmoil. Downturns have not occurred because populations had suddenly lost their mental capacities but because the political, economic, cultural and institutional conditions that allow knowledge to thrive change over time.

In the case of the Islamic civilisation, its centres – from Baghdad and Damascus to Cairo and Cordoba – experienced a vast scientific and intellectual movement involving scholars, translators, philosophers, physicians and mathematicians from diverse religious and linguistic backgrounds for centuries. This prosperity was not isolated from the world; it was built on the translation, critique, development and interaction with Greek, Syriac, Indian and other bodies of knowledge.

Meanwhile, parts of Europe experienced significant backwardness in scientific education and development. However, Europe was not a monolith, nor were those centuries a homogeneous dark period. It also witnessed varying intellectual, institutional and scientific developments across different regions and timeframes.

European conditions then gradually changed: Educational institutions and universities evolved, networks for book and knowledge circulation expanded, and European scientific traditions interacted with scientific knowledge transferred from the Islamic world and elsewhere.

No one can claim, based on these historical disparities, that Europeans are inherently incapable of producing science or that their religion or ethnic origins preclude them from innovation. Serious historical interpretation focuses on institutions, economics, education, political patronage and knowledge networks rather than claims that certain populations lack innate abilities.

The exact same principle must apply to Arabs and Muslims today. Since Europe was able to change the conditions of knowledge production, it is illogical to assume that the contemporary reality of Arab and Islamic societies reflects fixed limits in their scientific or literary capacities. Science is universal and not the racial or religious property of anyone. Decline is not a genetic destiny for any people, and prosperity is not an eternal privilege.

Rejecting RFK Jr's generalisations does not mean denying the challenges facing scientific research in many Arab countries. There are serious questions concerning research and development funding, university independence, education quality, freedom of research and expression, institutional stability, the ability to attract and retain scientists, and links between knowledge and the economy and production. However, these questions are the beginning of scientific analysis, not the end.

A society that does not provide a researcher with a suitable laboratory, does not grant universities sufficient independence, does not allocate the necessary resources for research and does not ensure the continuity of scientific institutions cannot expect results comparable to those of a society that invests sustainably in these areas.

Furthermore, wars, conflicts, displacement, brain drain and weak scientific cooperation can disrupt the accumulation of knowledge, even when a society possesses qualified human capital. The capacity for thought and innovation is one thing, and the ability to translate them into sustainable scientific production is another. Between the two lies an entire system of socioeconomic conditions, institutions and policies.

Blaming the challenges contemporary Arab societies face on a single political group – in RFK Jr's case, the Muslim Brotherhood – and presenting this as a comprehensive explanation for the state of science and literature among hundreds of millions of people falls short of serious historical or social analysis.

Pakistan's defence partnerships

While Pakistan is wrestling with political confrontation at home, its diplomacy is opening doors abroad. From the Badr memorandum of understanding (MoU) to the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, and from Saudi Arabia's security consultations to mediation with Iran and the United States, Pakistan is acquiring a place at tables where regional security is being negotiated. The opportunity is considerable. The challenge is to turn international recognition into domestic stability, industrial strength and prosperity.

The Badr MoU, signed by Qatar, Türkiye, Pakistan and Indonesia, marks the latest advance. The opportunity extends beyond buying and selling weapons. Shared design, component manufacturing, software development, testing, maintenance and training could create enduring industrial relationships. A country that helps manufacture a system develops skills and supplier networks that an ordinary purchase may never deliver. But signatures cannot run factories. The Badr MoU needs an efficient institution to translate ambition into projects, with agreed financing, clear responsibilities and deadlines. Good faith must be matched by management capable of delivering on time.

Military might, however, achieves its greatest value when it supports diplomacy. Pakistan is continuing with its efforts to help bring the US and Iran towards some sort of an accommodation. Pakistan is attempting a difficult balancing act: sustaining communication with the US, preserving access to Iran's leadership, and maintaining Saudi confidence.

Its usefulness rests on maintaining a credible channel across these relationships. This is where Pakistan's defence partnerships and diplomatic role must reinforce each other. Pakistan can gain lasting influence by helping countries find an exit from confrontation that preserves security and dignity. However, such an achievement would be more persuasive if accompanied by reconciliation at home.

Continuing confrontation with political rivals consumes political energy that the country urgently needs for reconstruction. Pakistan should ensure fair and transparent judicial proceedings, and put an end to politically motivated moves. The way forward also requires credible institutions, and all political actors to remain within constitutional limits. A country seeking to mediate between bitter international adversaries should apply the same patience and confidence to resolving its own political disputes.

Peace along the country's borders is equally necessary. Terrorism must be confronted firmly, but lasting security also requires sustained diplomacy with Afghanistan. Islamabad and Kabul need practical arrangements to prevent armed groups from exploiting territory, manage border disputes and preserve legitimate trade. With Iran, cooperation should protect a peaceful frontier. With India, Pakistan should continue seeking dialogue and measures that reduce the risk of another military escalation.

Economic recovery must give these efforts a material foundation. Pakistan's mineral resources can contribute far more if extraction is supported by value addition. Mineral wealth would become national wealth only when it creates productive skills, competitive businesses and lasting employment. Exporting raw materials alone would leave much of the value elsewhere. Pakistan has earned itself an opening. Its task now is to make external confidence durable through internal consent, peaceful borders and productive industry. The country's finest strategic achievement would be a Pakistan in which the people get to experience the gains its government announces: greater security, meaningful work and a future worth investing in.

Qamar Bashir
Islamabad

Children's social media use

The country seems to be moving towards a stricter control of children's social media usage. In September, the Punjab Assembly passed a resolution seeking legal restriction on the use of social media for those aged less than 16 years. Besides, a petition is also being heard by the Islamabad High Court, seeking to control children's access to social media. However, simply limiting access may not actually lead to anything except possibly pushing the children towards other less noticeable methods of accessing social media.

The response to whatever the crisis is, should not be about restricting the access itself; it should be about improving digital literacy. Schools need to raise awareness regarding how to navigate social media and avoid identity manipulation, misinformation or online exploitation. Platforms should be held responsible for protecting the youth, and any complaints should be addressed immediately.

It's important for the government to avoid the temptation of taking the easy route and in the process raise generations of children who fear the internet. The focus should be on having our future generations digitally literate and aware of how to steer through the harmful effects of excessive and unsafe use of social media.

Harram Ali Saikhou
Lahore

Appointment of VCs

It was heartening to read about the Punjab government's long-awaited appointment of vice-chancellors (VCs) for five medical universities. Though the process was delayed by what seems like excessive scrutiny, the outcome appears to have been worth the wait. The government has selected highly competent and eligible individuals for these coveted posts, and deserves to be given due credit for it.

The most significant aspect of these appointments is the condition that all the VCs have been barred from undertaking any direct or indirect clinical or para-clinical practice. This prerequisite, which was made a condition for the final notification, may seem unnecessary to some, but it is of immense importance.

It is not humanly possible to do justice to more than one demanding role with the required commitment. By eliminating the distraction of private practice, the VCs can now fully concentrate on their duties, fostering a better academic environment and working for the welfare of their students. With this progressive precedent in place now, the same restriction now needs to be applied to all teaching staff in medical colleges and universities across Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) for both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Private practice among teaching faculty is a dangerous trend and greatly affects the education of medical students. It leaves teachers with no time to teach, supervise and guide their students properly. At the very least, all public medical colleges should be advised to impose strict restrictions on private practice by their teaching faculty. The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) should take the first step in this crucial situation.

If such a policy is implemented, we can hope for a brighter future for the medical profession and a significant spike in the standard of our medical graduates.

Dr Ahmed Bakhsh
Rawalpindi

Emergency facilities

A devastating fire broke out in Shah Jamal, a small and underdeveloped town in Muzaffargarh district, destroying a shop within minutes. Thankfully, no lives were lost as the incident occurred late in the evening. However, the response exposed a serious lack of emergency facilities in the area. The fire brigade reportedly arrived nearly two hours after the incident because of the long distance from the nearest facility. By then, the fire had already caused significant damage. This incident highlights the urgent need for basic emer- gency services in small towns. A timely response can prevent major disasters and can save both lives and livelihoods.

Mahar Muhammad Hanzla
Muzaffargarh

Social media use ranks among the top predictors of depression

Eric W. Dolan



An analysis of more than 183,000 American adults surveyed over an 11-year span indicates that higher daily social media use is consistently linked to an elevated likelihood of reporting depression.

Using machine learning models to evaluate demographic and media habits from 2014 through 2024, researchers found that social media use ranked among the strongest predictors of self-reported depression, with its contribution to predicted risk rising once use exceeded about two and a half hours per day. The findings, published in Mental Health Research, suggest that the connection between heavy social media use and self-reported depression is not limited to teenagers and has remained stable across a decade of shifting digital trends.

Social media encompasses online platforms built for interpersonal communication, content sharing, and public commentary on community life, services, or products. Over the past decade, the rapid adoption of platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has reshaped how people socialize, express themselves, and compare their lives to the lives of others. Alongside this expansion, public health experts have raised questions about whether heavy engagement with these apps contributes to depression, a mood condition characterized by persistent sadness, low energy, and a reduced interest in everyday activities.

Do houseplants really improve indoor air quality?

Sanjana Gajbhiye



Houseplants have a reputation for cleaning indoor air, but how much pollution can they actually remove?

A review of 60 studies suggests the benefits are often much smaller than lab tests make them seem. In homes and offices, researchers also had a harder time showing how much the plants contributed.

Plants can help, the authors say, but the evidence cannot yet predict how much a particular setup will improve a particular room. Prashant Kumar, founding director of the Global Centre for Clean Air Research at the University of Surrey in England, led the team of 35 researchers from seven countries. They ran no new experiments and could not combine the earlier results into one overall figure because the studies differed too much. "There is growing evidence that indoor greening can improve the spaces where we live and work, but much of the research has looked at individual benefits in isolation," Kumar said.

People spend roughly 80% to 90% of their time indoors, the authors noted. Yet 60% of the studies in real buildings focused on offices, while only 10% looked at homes. Paint, furniture and cleaning products can release gases called volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, including toluene and formaldehyde. In short lab tests, plants often removed 60% to 80% or more of these two gases.

In real rooms, studies of potted plants reported drops of 5% to 30% in VOCs and tiny airborne particles. Results depended on plant numbers, room size and ventilation. One occupied office with plants growing in water instead of soil had 28.1% lower total VOC levels over 12 months than an identical room without plants.

How much water are we really taking from nature?

Sanjana Gajbhiye



Rain falls on a crop field, and the plants use it to grow. But grass, shrubs or trees would need much of that rain too if the land had never been farmed.

Researchers in Chile developed a new way to calculate how much additional water farms and tree plantations use compared with natural vegetation.

The usual water footprint estimate was about 2.7 times as large as their revised total, and the entire gap came from how they counted rain. Doctoral student Steven Hidalgo-Toapanta and Patricio Neumann-Langdon of the Universidad del Bío-Bío in Chillán, Chile, worked with Pasiano Rivas-García of Mexico's Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León. They based their estimates on weather records, crop data and a national farm census covering 2021 and 2022, rather than measurements in the field. "Rainfall would still be used by vegetation without agriculture or forestry," said Neumann-Langdon. "Our approach asks how much human land use actually changes natural water flows, rather than counting all water passing through crops."

Water footprints tally the water crops use. Blue water comes from rivers or groundwater for irrigation, while green water is rain that soaks into the soil and plants then use. The standard method, described in the Water Footprint Network's 2011 manual, includes all that green water in the crop's total.

Simple exercise done just once a week could help lower blood pressure

Khloe Quill



Holding a wall squat for a few minutes might not feel like an intense workout, but a growing body of evidence suggests it could be one of the most effective ways to lower your blood pressure.

A trial published in BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine found that isometric exercise training, where muscles contract without moving the joints, leads to meaningful drops in resting blood pressure within just four weeks. Researchers also found that daily exercise may not be necessary to maintain these benefits, as exercising just once a week was enough to preserve some heart-health improvements.

The study followed 100 inactive adults with normal to high-normal blood pressure, defined as a systolic reading between 120 and 140 millimeters of mercury. For the first four weeks, the participants performed lower-body isometric wall squats three times a week at home. The routine consisted of four two-minute sessions separated by two minutes of seated rest, monitored using heart-rate straps to ensure consistent effort.

After four weeks, participants' top blood pressure number (systolic pressure) fell by about 9.5 points on average, while their bottom number (diastolic pressure) also dropped compared with the control group. Researchers then examined the effects of reduced exercise frequency. During the following four weeks, participants were randomly assigned to train three, two, one or zero times per week. Those who stopped exercising completely saw their blood pressure bounce back to baseline within four weeks, essentially wiping out their progress.


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