

Fortnightly

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Caretakers and General Elections

Anwarul Haq Kakar's remarks raised eyebrows
across political circles

Dollar and the Pakistani Economy

Rupee value gain to bring inflation down

Global Politics

US planners to link IMEC with Middle East,
Europe, and Israel



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The “level playing field” issue

By Dr Syed Riffat Hussain



Speaking to the media in Lahore on September 20, 2023, Chairman Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Bilawal Zardari Bhutto, alleged that his party was being asked to contest general elections in the absence of a level playing field. He said, “Our demand for a level playing field is from the PML-N.” He further said that his party had authorised Mr. Asif Zardari to sort this matter out with PML (N). Leaders of other political parties like MQM and Jamaat-i-Islami have also complained about the playing field being uneven for them.

These allegations, apart from being part of an electoral campaign, also raise doubts about the credibility of upcoming general elections as being “transparent, free and fair”.

In the past, nearly all elections have been tainted by allegations of “manipulation” by the Establishment. The 2018 elections were rigged in favour of PTI to implement the so-called “Imran project.”

Given this chequered history, it would make sense for political parties like PPP to voice their apprehensions about the fairness of the upcoming electoral exercise.

Ever since its ouster from power in July 1977, PPP has found it difficult to remain relevant as a mainstream political party. It has lost its stronghold in Punjab to PML (N) and its influence has suffered erosion in Baluchistan and KPK.

Founded in 1967 by Zulifqar Ali Bhutto as an alternative to Ayub Khan’s decade-long dictatorial rule, PPP emerged as the largest political party when it won overwhelming majority seats in the 1970 national elections. After the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, PPP, under the charismatic leadership of Zulifqar Ali Bhutto assumed the reins of power and continued to rule the country until General Zia ul Haq’s military coup in July 1977 which led to the overthrow of the PPP government, arrest of its top leadership, and execution of

Zulifqar Ali Bhutto on cooked up charges of ordering the murder of one of his political opponents.

PPP returned to power in 1988 but President Ghulam Ishaq Khan soon dismissed its government on charges of corruption in 1990. PPP came to power again in 1993 under Bhutto’s daughter, Benazir Bhutto but was dismissed again before completing its term in 1996.

Its defeat at the hands of its archrival Pakistan Muslim League (N) in 1997 marked the total eclipse of its power. Its popularity suffered a heavy fatality when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi in December 2007 while returning from her national campaign rally. Riding the popular sympathy wave, PPP managed to win 2008 national elections but it was evident that her electoral losses in the largest Province of Punjab to its main political rival, the Pakistan Muslim League (N), exposed its terminal decline.

The rise of Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) led by charismatic former cricketer Imran Khan heralded a change in the political landscape of Pakistan by introducing the entry of third force. Composed largely of urban youth that was clamouring for political change, PTI entered the electoral arena on the promise of change, the so-called Naya Pakistan.

In the 2013 national elections PPP lost badly to PML (N) and was able to win majority seats only in Sindh.

During the last 16 months, PPP as a coalition ally of the PDM government was able to project itself as a serious contender for the position of future Prime Minister-ship. This claim has been directly challenged by PML (N), which hopes to win a majority of votes from Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan. PML (N) is counting on the return of its party leader Mian Mohammed Nawaz Sharif who has been living in exile

in London for the last four years.

Mr. Nawaz has announced that he would return to Pakistan on October 21, 2023. However, the most significant hurdle that Nawaz would face would be revival of NAB cases against him after the reversal of NAB amendments introduced by the PDM parliament that had quashed bulk of the cases involving corrupt practices by the PDM ruling coalition.

The two-one decision of the Supreme Court special bench annulling the decision of the PDM Parliament also has far reaching political consequences for the upcoming general elections.

NAB courts have been activated and media reports suggest top leadership of the PDM will be affected by the revival of these cases. It would be interesting to see how many of the top leaders of the political parties will be “politically” barred from contesting upcoming elections which are scheduled to be

held by the end of January 2024.

It will be critical to see how election commission of Pakistan would react to all the cases which are at their terminal stages of inquiry and whether it would initiate action against those political leaders which have been punished by NAB for engaging in corrupt practices. Media reports suggest that NAB has been working overtime and it has co-opted members from different intelligence agencies to complete the process of its investigation. Critics of NAB have long argued that it has been used as a political tool to harass opposition and its verdicts have suffered from lack of transparency and evidence.

Maverick political leaders like Faisal Vowda have urged the interim government to be unsparing toward the accountability process. How many political leaders would fall victim to this new phase of witch-hunt launched by NAB is a million dollar question for election speculators at home and abroad.



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Who was the most famous Bandial: Umar Ata or Farooq?

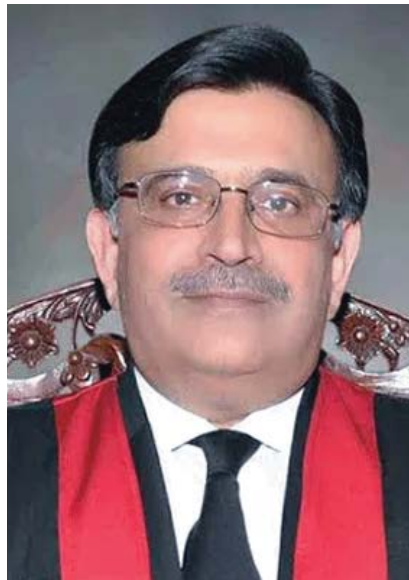
By M.A. Niazi

It is debatable whether Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial was more famous than his cousin Farooq Bandial. I will admit to a certain cowardice in discussing this only after Mr Justice Bandial had retired. But it was only when Mr Justice Bandial had become Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court did it become possible that he would exceed the fame of Farooq Bandial, who was at that time definitely the most famous member of the Bandial clan, even more so than his maternal uncle, and Umar Ata's father, Fateh Khan Bandial, who had become Interior Secretary, a post he held at the time that Farooq shot to fame.

That was in 1978, when he and six others were convicted by a military court of armed robbery at the house of film star Shabnam, and though it did not form part of the accusation, they were suspected of also criminally assaulting her, not just in front of her husband, the music composer Robin Ghosh, but her young son Ronnie too. Shabnam was not just a Bengali but a Hind unamed Jharna Basak, and while she had appeared in 170 films, there was an undercurrent of opinion, mostly among the more loutish of Lahori lads, that though that Farooq and his friends had done something... well, not good, but something to boast of.

Now that we have no film industry to speak of, it's perhaps hard to describe the place Shabnam enjoyed in it. Suffice to say that Farooq Bandial had achieved something no one could have dreamed of.

There were consequences (like Shabnam leaving the film industry, and indeed the country). The Chief Justice's father, F.K. Bandial, tried to save his nephew, who had been sentenced to death by a military court for robbery, and finally got Shabnam to sign off on a forgiveness which saved the lives of the accused. When Farooq was released, he became a transporter in his native Khushab.



He became a member of the PML(N), but joined the PTI in 2018. There were loud objections, and Imran let him go. It shows his generosity of spirit, his lack of jealousy, that he let him into the party in the first place. Farooq Bandial was made memorable both by his dark glasses (which Imran must have envied) and his mustachios.

I don't think Umar Ata could compete with his cousin in the moustache department, but he certainly tried in the fame department. Just as Farooq became the hero of all those prurient teenaged boys who had no idea of political correctness, or the evils of sexual harassment,

Umar Ata became the hero of all the PTI supporters. He also became involved in the struggle to keep Imran Khan out of jail. He couldn't, perhaps because it would have violated too many precedents.

A lot of people would argue that Farooq Bandial was irrelevant to Umar Ata Bandial's tenure, but I still can't help noting the coincidences. Where the brother named his son Umar Ata, the sister named hers Farooq. So while one was the 'gift of Umar', which is, when you think about it, an appropriate name for a

judge, the other was given the title by which the Caliph Umar is most commonly known: Farooq. Also, considering that Farooq had been a civilian tried by a military court under Martial Law, I wonder whether he could bring the requisite judicial neutrality to the case involving the trial of civilians by military courts for their involvement in the May 9 violence.

Well, it seems that Western countries will now have to tear themselves away from the May 9 violation of human rights, to that of India assassinating a Canadian citizen.

Now any cop would tell you that Sikh nationalists are fair game for RAW hitmen wherever they find them. Of course, this citizenship complication is only to be overcome by brute force. Not only must other South Asian countries accept Indian special-ness, but so must other countries. I see a hard time for Kashmiri freedom fighters in Pakistan, for example. And any Pakistani businessman who has taken a position against trade with India had better watch out. As should any Pakistani cricketer who has ever hit an Indian bowler for a six.

Navigating Pakistan's Political Landscape: Elections, Accountability, and the Quest for Certainty

By Noor Aftab

In the intricate web of Pakistan's political scene, a pervasive sense of uncertainty blankets the eagerly awaited general elections. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), while acknowledging the complexities involved, has refrained from pinning down an exact election date, citing technical intricacies that need addressing. However, an unwavering commitment exists to ensure that Pakistan's democratic machinery rolls into action come January, following a meticulously planned and executed process.

The Inner Workings of Electoral Preparedness

Behind the scenes, an ECP official, speaking on condition of anonymity, has provided insights into the labyrinthine steps that must precede the announcement of the all-important polling day. These steps, intricately intertwined with the functioning of a democratic society, are governed by Section 57 of the Elections Act. This legal framework stipulates a precise sequence of events that must unfold.

First and foremost is the submission of nomination papers by aspiring candidates. Each name put forward is subject to intense scrutiny and evaluation, a process designed to uphold the integrity of the elections. The criteria and standards are rigorous, reflecting the gravity of the occasion. Only those who meet these stringent criteria have the privilege of advancing to the next stage.

The scrutiny of nomination papers represents a pivotal phase in the electoral process. Teams of legal experts and election officials meticulously examine every detail, ensuring that each candidate meets the qualifications specified by the law. The mission is twofold: to protect the sanctity of the electoral process and to maintain the highest standards of transparency and fairness.

Following this critical phase, decisions are rendered on the acceptance or rejection of nomination papers. The outcomes have far-reaching implications, as they determine which candidates proceed to the campaigning phase and which must return to the drawing board. These decisions represent a cornerstone of electoral integrity, reflective of the nation's commitment to fair and just elections.

Yet, the electoral journey does not conclude here. Invariably, the decisions made during the scrutiny of nomination papers trigger a cascade of appeals. This is an essential safeguard, a mechanism by which candidates can challenge perceived injustices and discrepancies in the process. It underscores the democratic principles of accountability and due process.

Each step in this meticulously orchestrated process adheres



to a set timeline, ensuring that the electoral calendar remains on track. The legal framework governing elections recognizes the vital importance of adherence to these timelines, safeguarding the integrity and impartiality of the process.

An Unconventional Remark: Caretaker Prime Minister's Musings

On the periphery of this intricate dance of democracy, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister, Anwarul Haq Kakar, made waves with a remark that raised eyebrows across political circles. During an appearance in New York for the annual U.N. General Assembly, he broached the subject of constituency delimitation—a topic intertwined with the election timeline.

Kakar's remarks introduced an element of unpredictability into the equation. He suggested that the process of delimiting constituencies by the ECP, coupled with public consultations, might demand an additional three to three and a half months. This projection, made on the global stage, left many speculating about its potential implications for the general elections.

Intriguingly, Kakar also ventured into the realm of political conjecture. He hinted that the general elections could potentially proceed without the presence of Imran Khan, the charismatic leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Kakar cited Khan's alleged involvement in the unlawful activities of May 9 as the grounds for this speculation. This revelation threw a fresh curveball into the already complex political landscape.

Notably, Kakar unambiguously dismissed claims of military intervention in the upcoming elections, categorically stating that such allegations had no basis in reality. Instead, he underscored that the responsibility for conducting elections lay squarely with the ECP, which operates as an independent entity.



Furthermore, Kakar drew attention to an intriguing facet of Pakistan's political landscape. He highlighted the appointment of the current head of the Election Commission, a move that saw PTI Chairman Imran Khan involved in the selection process. This prompted him to question why the PTI leadership would object to a process in which they had a direct hand.

Civil Society's Lament: PATTAN and Coalition38 Speak Out

Amid this backdrop of uncertainty, Pakistan's civil society organisations have raised their voices. Prominent among them are PATTAN and Coalition38, a coalition comprising over 150 civil society organisations and labour unions. Together, they issued a joint statement that expressed their collective regret over the ECP's vague pronouncements regarding the upcoming general elections.

For these organisations, the ECP's statements appear to deepen the prevailing uncertainty, raising troubling questions about the trajectory of Pakistan's democratic journey. They argue that these statements run counter to the spirit of Article 48(5a) of the Constitution, which explicitly binds the president to announce an election date within 90 days of the dissolution of an assembly. In their view, the ECP's pronouncements erode the principles of transparency and accountability that underpin a healthy democracy.

Moreover, PATTAN and Coalition38 expressed profound dismay over what they termed as the ECP's erosion of credibility and the trust of the public. They noted with concern the perceived inconsistencies in the ECP's statements and actions, as well as instances of the commission allegedly flouting the orders of superior courts. These organisations, pillars of Pakistan's civil society, appear resolute in their quest for transparent and accountable governance.

HRCP's Call to Action: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Weighs In

Adding to the chorus of concern surrounding the uncertainty of the general elections, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) entered the fray with a clarion call to action. HRCP articulated its concerns and aspirations for a transparent and timely electoral process.

At the heart of HRCP's message lies a plea for the swift announcement of an election schedule. This, they believe, aligns with the stipulated 90-day period mandated by Article 48(5a) of the Constitution. The organisation's rationale is clear: timely elections uphold the principles of democracy and ensure that the will of the people prevails.

But HRCP's concerns go beyond the election schedule. The organisation urges the ECP to expedite the delimitation of constituencies. Delimitation, while a crucial aspect of the electoral process, should not serve as a pretext for further delays. HRCP insists that the delimitation process must be carried out swiftly and efficiently to keep the election timeline on track.

Furthermore, HRCP has raised concerns about potential manipulation of the electoral process by institutions such as the

National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra). To guard against this possibility, HRCP calls upon the ECP to remain vigilant and ensure that the integrity of the electoral process remains unassailable.

A Legal Turning Point: Supreme Court's Verdict on NAB Amendments

In a significant legal development, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rendered a verdict that reverberated throughout the political landscape. The case at hand pertained to the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chairman's petition against amendments to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) law.

The apex court's decision struck down nine out of ten amendments to the NAB law, instantly setting in motion a series of legal ramifications. This landmark ruling sent shockwaves through the political establishment, as it effectively revived numerous cases involving leaders of major political parties. These cases, ranging from allegations of corruption to misuse of public office, had been in legal limbo pending the court's decision.

The significance of the Supreme Court's verdict cannot be overstated. It reaffirmed the judiciary's commitment to upholding the rule of law and ensuring accountability for public officials. In essence, the court's decision meant that cases against individuals occupying public positions were reinstated.



This sweeping judgement impacted a multitude of cases, and its implications transcended party lines. Leaders from various political factions found themselves back in the legal spotlight, as the court's decision paved the way for renewed legal scrutiny. Among the cases that sprung back to life were the Toshakhana cases involving prominent figures such as Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif, Asif Zardari, and Yusuf Raza Gilani.

The political terrain also witnessed the revival of cases such as the Pink Residency reference against Asif Zardari. Former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's LNG case and the reference against former Finance Minister Shaukat Tareen were similarly reinstated. These developments indicated that the legal landscape was rapidly evolving, setting the stage for potential courtroom battles.

Other notable cases included the Kidney Hill reference against Saleem Mandviwala and the assets beyond means reference against Ishaq Dar, which were set to be transferred back to the accountability



ty court. Furthermore, the NAB reference against Sindh's Chief Minister, Murad Ali Shah, was also on track for relocation to the accountability court.

The resurgence of cases extended to the provincial level, with Lahore's accountability courts witnessing a flurry of renewed activity. Cases such as the Ramzan Sugar Mills reference against Shehbaz Sharif and Hamza Shabbaz, as well as the Paragon Housing reference involving Khawaja Saad Rafiq and Khawaja Salman Rafiq, were among those resurrected.

The legal pendulum swung widely, encompassing cases against a diverse array of individuals, including former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, Zafar Gondal, Nawab Aslam Raisani, Lashkari Raisani, Arbab Alamgir, Asma Arbab Alamgir, and Sher Azam Wazir. These cases represented a broad spectrum of political affiliations and raised questions about the potential consequences for those involved.

Official records revealed the extensive nature of the legal resurgence. Former parliamentarians and serving or retired officers found themselves linked to approximately 1,809 references, investigations, inquiries, and complaints since 2019. These inquiries covered a wide range of allegations and transgressions, from financial improprieties to misuse of public office.

The sheer volume of these cases underscored the magnitude of the accountability process. Collectively, they represented an estimated loss of around 700 billion rupees to the national exchequer. This financial toll was a stark reminder of the fiscal consequences of corruption and mismanagement.

The cases spanned various stages of investigation and legal proceedings. Around 460 references, 270 investigations, 456 inquiries, and 623 complaints were set to be revisited. This comprehensive review was an acknowledgment of the need to hold public officials accountable for their actions and decisions.

The nature of these cases encompassed a wide spectrum of alleged misconduct. Approximately 755 cases were returned at the inquiry stage, while 292 were at the investigation stage. These cases ranged from financial irregularities involving sums less than Rs 500 million to instances of assets beyond known sources of income. Additionally, 213 cases were affected by Section 9A, and 89 were related to fraud allegations.

NAB, the key player in these accountability efforts, diligently submitted the records of 44 references to the Islamabad accountability courts. These records encompassed a wide array of cases, including those associated with the Toshakhana (gift repository) and suspicious transactions involving figures like Nawaz Sharif, Asif Zardari, and Yusuf Raza Gilani.

Among the records handed over were those pertaining to Turkey's Karkey rental power plant reference involving National Assembly Speaker and former Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf. Additionally, NAB submitted records related to a reference against Asif Zardari, which involved transactions worth Rs 8 billion.

The accountability process had gathered momentum, signalling that individuals occupying public office would be subject to thorough scrutiny. These developments had far-reaching implications for the political landscape, setting the stage for a potential reshuffling of the political deck.

The Uncertain Road Ahead: Implications for General Elections

Amid these legal and political developments, a prevailing sense of uncertainty loomed over the prospect of imminent general elections. Within political circles, there was a palpable unease about the intersection of accountability efforts and the electoral timeline.

Many political analysts and observers expressed apprehension that the appointment of serving officers from the military and premier intelligence service within NAB could expedite the accountability process. However, this acceleration might inadvertently result in delays in the scheduling of general elections. The rationale behind this concern was rooted in the potential legal battles and political maneuvering that could accompany accountability proceedings.



Beyond the mechanics of elections, the caretaker government faced a critical test—ensuring not only that elections were free, fair, and transparent but also that it protected and respected citizens' rights to peaceful protest. This dual mandate highlighted the delicate balance that the caretaker government needed to strike as it navigated a complex and evolving political landscape.

Moreover, the government faced the formidable challenge of addressing issues that directly affected the lives of ordinary citizens. The electorate looked to its leaders for solutions to pressing problems, and the caretaker government's response would undoubtedly shape public perceptions and influence the course of future political discourse.

As the nation watched and waited for clarity on the electoral timeline, Pakistan's political landscape remained marked by uncertainty and expectation. The confluence of legal decisions, accountability processes, and political dynamics promised a future replete with challenges and opportunities. In this fluid environment, Pakistan's journey towards the next general elections unfolded, driven by the imperatives of accountability, democracy, and the quest for a better future.



‘Over to Mian Sahib’: Nawaz faces popularity test as nation awaits his return

By Tahir Niaz

Ex-interior minister Rana Sanaullah had said, “Either Imran Khan exists or we do”. The statement by the PML-N stalwart is a reflection of the scale of political threat the Nawaz-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) is feeling from the former prime minister and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan.

This is exactly where PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif is planning to land in Pakistan, ending his nearly five-year-long self-exile in London. The possible return of Nawaz Sharif would confirm at least two things; first, the elections are imminent, and second is that he is quite sure of winning the elections.

Keeping in view the party symbol, ‘tiger’, Sharif patriarch was supposed to take Khan head-on but he is hoping to find his arch-rival languishing in jail facing uncountable charges instead. So many times, Nawaz announced his return and then backed off, seeking ‘guarantees’.

The party said he will return on October 21 and address a mammoth party rally at Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore to kick start the election campaign. PML-N senior vice-president and Nawaz Sharif’s daughter Maryam Nawaz said at a party gathering in Lahore that her father’s return would be “historic.” She believes that Nawaz Sharif’s ‘comebacks’ would be stronger than his ‘setbacks’.

The political scenes spanning over the past two years suggest that his younger brother and ex-prime minister Shehbaz Sharif remained unable to counter Khan’s narrative and popularity. He used brute force, threw the judicial book at Khan, his lieutenants and party workers to turn the situation in his favour but the strategy seemingly didn’t work as Khan’s popularity remains intact and if the political observers are not wrong, has increased with every anti-Imran move. No matter the PTI continues to suffer under the caretakers as well.



Imran Khan may soon find himself being accused of supporting terrorists as he is already facing charges such as blasphemy, corruption, and sedition. Sedition comes as the latest charge against Imran Khan and his supporters facing trial in connection with the May 9 incidents. He has also been banned from holding office, with insiders saying that a ‘minus-Imran Khan’ deal is already on the table. The question is if Khan will choose jail or freedom. The answer so far is jail.

Under Shahbaz Sharif’s government, Khan was convicted of wrong deeds and is now serving his three-year prison sentence. However, he is still the leading political figure in Pakistan and enjoys a huge following. This very aspect of the story would not let Imran Khan accept a deal on some other’s terms.

Nawaz has already started blaming Gen Bajwa for his removal in 2017. From London, Pakistan’s three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif blamed the ex-army chief for his ouster. He claimed that the country’s former powerful military and spy chiefs orchestrated his ouster when he was forced to step down after being convicted of corruption. He didn’t stop here. He also sought accountability of General Bajwa,

General Faiz, and some of the former judges for conspiring to remove him and ‘derailing’ Pakistan into disaster. He offered no evidence for his claim, however.

Despite being convicted on corruption charges, which he has always denied — Nawaz Sharif was permitted to leave Pakistan for medical treatment abroad by the Imran Khan government. Sharif later opted to stay in London apparently to escape court cases and was declared a fugitive from justice.

Now the party wants Nawaz Sharif to head its election campaign. The vote was expected to be held in November but is likely to be delayed as the elections oversight body says it needs more time to redraw constituencies to reflect the census.

As a fugitive from justice, Sharif would have to be arrested under the law, but it’s unclear if that will happen as the party is planning to approach a court of law for his bail-before-arrest. His lawyers have not yet filed for court protection from arrest for him.

The main hurdle so far to his homecoming was the ‘circumstances’ in the country. It is an open secret that Sharif waited until the retirement of Ex-chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial. The other impediment was the



Khan's massive following which, according to the political observers, also delayed the general elections in the country.

The PML-N is currently bearing the brunt of public discontent in the country, primarily because the party led the former coalition government that took certain decisions, major among them raising the price of petrol, electricity, and gas. Compounded by the absence of Nawaz Sharif from the country, the PML-N is also grappling with internal pressures, as calls within the party intensify for the return of the party supremo. In a recent interview, senior PML-N leader Khawaja Asif had also said that the party's senior leadership — the Sharif brothers — needed to be in Pakistan.

The PML-N leadership a week ago deliberated on the return of Mian Nawaz Sharif and also explored the possibility of applying for bail in the Islamabad High Court before his return to the country. Pressure is increasing on Sharif to return to the country as early as possible. There are also reports of grouping in the party.

It is pertinent to mention here that in June 2023, in what was seen as a move to pave the way for Nawaz's return, the National Assembly and Senate approved the Elections (Amendment) Act 2023 which empowered the Election Commission of Pakistan to unilaterally fix the date for elections. The legislation also limited the lawmakers' disqualification period to five years with retrospective effect though it is debatable in view of the court judgments.

Furthermore, the legislation was dubbed "person-specific legislation" by the opposition which they believed was to benefit Nawaz and the patron of the newly-formed Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), Jahangir Khan Tareen. The two were disqualified for life more than five years ago after a Supreme Court judgment ruled that the disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution was for life.

After the coalition alliance came into power in April last year following the ouster of PTI chief Imran Khan as the prime minister through a no-confidence vote, several members of the Sharif family were cleared from cases. However, the cases have been reopened in the wake of a Supreme Court verdict.

Nonetheless, the return of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to Pakistan has stirred up the country's already tumultuous politics as it heads toward an election season. The PML-N supporters are hopeful of having a leader with the clout to lead a campaign against the allies of former prime minister Imran Khan.

Political experts believe Pakistan will see a general election soon, although the timing remains uncertain. According to the constitution, polls must be held by early November, although the Shehbaz Sharif government's approval of a new census has raised the prospect of a long delay.



President Arif Alvi suggested to the Election Commission of Pakistan in a letter that elections should take place by November 6, adding the commission must seek advice from the judiciary on the date. However, the ECP announced that elections would be held in the last week of January.

Nawaz is coming back at a very challenging time for the PML-N. He will have a conviction waiting for him and also faces other corruption charges. The bad governance and economic mismanagement during the 16-month government of Shehbaz Sharif has severely damaged the political stock of PML-N. Political observers predict Nawaz Sharif would have a very hard time campaigning for his party amid the economic meltdown.

Political observers are trying to tell Nawaz that Pakistan has changed now. Now it's quite a different Pakistan than Nawaz had left in 2019 for medical treatment, the political experts believe. Since the elder Sharif left the country in 2019, youth bulge and social media have fundamentally changed the electoral landscape of Pakistan, which will be very hard for Sharif to navigate. Contrary to the past, people and even political figures are not willing to leave a political party on some other's instructions. Rather, they preferred 'hardships' to a 'press conference' to part ways with the PTI.

With the elections imminent, Nawaz, contrary to his younger brother, may not find PPP leadership including Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari so soft and sober once he lands in the country.

Nawaz has keenly observed the political situation in the country before announcing his return. Pakistan has been in deep political turmoil since Khan's ouster last year. The fate of the PTI chairman remains uncertain as the former ruling coalition is breaking apart. The Nawaz party is hugely unpopular and the PML-N supremo is facing a test of his popularity as he returns to the country. Even then, everything hinges on his relationship with the powers-to-be.



Constitutional Conundrum: Pakistan Contemplates Election Delay Amidst Political Turmoil

By Hussnain Ahmad

In an unprecedented turn of events, Pakistan finds itself trapped in a vortex of political tumult as the nation's leadership grapples with the contentious proposition of delaying its imminent general elections. The deliberation on this grave matter has stirred vigorous debates within the corridors of power, igniting a fierce discourse that portends far-reaching implications for the nation's democratic fabric.

The pivotal question at the forefront of Pakistan's political discourse pertains to the feasibility and legitimacy of postponing the forthcoming democratic elections—a question that carries profound implications for the nation's democratic principles. At its core, this quandary hinges upon a fundamental tension between the exigencies of the present and the enduring principles that underpin Pakistan's political landscape.

To evaluate the potential postponement as either a justifiable recourse or an insult to foundational political tenets requires a nuanced examination of multiple dimensions. Advocates for delay contend that the prevailing climate of political instability, characterized by fractious disputes, allegations of corruption, and divisive controversies, jeopardizes the possibility of conducting elections that adhere to democratic norms. They argue that deferring the electoral process temporarily can serve as a safeguard, preserving the integrity of the nation's democratic architecture.

On the other hand, opponents of postponement emphasize the sanctity of holding periodic, timely elections as a cornerstone of democratic governance. They posit that any deviation from established electoral timelines may set a precedent that undermines the very essence of democratic ideals, potentially eroding public trust in the political system.

In this intricate deliberation, the nation grapples with the delicate balance between safeguarding democratic integrity and upholding the sanctity of constitutional processes, making it imperative for Pakistan's leadership to tread judiciously in navigating this complex terrain. Ultimately, the decision will resonate not only within the nation's borders but also throughout the international community, exemplifying the intricate interplay between political pragmatism and democratic principles on a global stage.

This precipitous quandary has its genesis in a complex concatenation of factors catalyzed by the political instability and discord that has permeated the nation's polity in recent months. As competing political factions engage in protracted wrangling, allegations of corruption, and controversies, the prospect of holding free and fair elections under such a cloud of discord has become increasingly nebulous.

The necessity for electoral integrity and transparency, enshrined within the fundamental democratic doctrine, commands



unwavering attention. In light of this, proponents of election postponement argue that the current atmosphere is unconducive to the moral conduct of an election cycle, maintaining that a delay is a sine qua non for safeguarding the democratic sanctity of Pakistan's electoral process.

However, detractors vehemently disagree, contending that any such deferment would trample upon the very bedrock of democratic governance, potentially setting a dangerous precedent. The sanctity of periodic, timely elections, they argue, is paramount in upholding democratic norms, irrespective of the turbulent political landscape.

Furthermore, international observers and diplomatic voices have chimed in on the debate, urging Pakistan's leadership to tread cautiously, emphasizing the indispensable nature of democratic continuity and adherence to constitutional timelines.

The proposed delay, should it come to pass, would necessitate rigorous constitutional amendments, an intricate process fraught with its own set of political hurdles and intricacies. Such alterations to the nation's supreme legal document necessitate unassailable consensus and meticulous constitutional rigor.

The dilemma confronting Pakistan today, whether to delay its forthcoming general elections, is a microcosm of the broader debates pertaining to democracy and governance. The nation stands at a crossroads, where principles of democratic integrity intersect with the difficulties of a turbulent political landscape.

As Pakistan's leadership weighs the pros and cons, the watchful eyes of the international community, as well as its citizens, are poised in anticipation. The decisions made in the coming days will indelibly shape the nation's democratic destiny, echoing far beyond its borders.

This contentious juncture is but a chapter in Pakistan's ongoing narrative—a narrative that underscores the imperative of nurturing a democratic ethos, even in the face of fierce political storms.



Nawaz Sharif's Destiny



By Asadullah

The impending return of former Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif has stirred anticipation, with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) having set a specific date for his arrival. However, there looms uncertainty following the Supreme Court's recent judgment, which invalidated the amendments to the accountability laws. Consequently, there are speculations that Mr. Sharif may not touch down in Pakistan on the planned date of October 21.

Yet, the undoing of the amendments that were introduced during the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government is unlikely to pose a significant hurdle for the former premier. Given the legal intricacies surrounding the Avenfield and Al-Azizia references, it is probable that Mr. Sharif will find himself acquitted under the provisions of the National Accountability Ordinance (NAO).

On September 15, the Supreme Court nullified the 2022 amendments made to the NAO 1993 and instructed the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to resurrect

all inquiries and references that had been closed as a result of last year's legislative changes to NAB's law.

Mr. Sharif had been embroiled in multiple cases, with three of them tied to the Panama Papers scandal. While he faced convictions in two cases – the Avenfield Apartment and Al-Azizia references – he managed to secure acquittal in the Flagship reference. Notably, the evidence and nature of the Al-Azizia reference mirrored those of the Avenfield case. Therefore, it stands to reason that the former premier is likely to be exonerated in the Al-Azizia reference, for which he had received a seven-year prison sentence.

Adding an intriguing twist, the judge, Arshad Malik, who had convicted him in this reference, later admitted to having authored the judgment under duress. Subsequently, Mr. Sharif was granted bail in this case for a period of eight weeks, during which he sought medical treatment in the UK.

In another twist, the Islamabad High Court

(IHC) declared Mr. Sharif a proclaimed offender in the Al-Azizia reference and postponed the hearing of his appeal against conviction until his surrender.

Regarding the Avenfield Apartments case, Mr. Sharif had also been an absconder. Nevertheless, the judgment delivered by the IHC division bench, comprising Chief Justice Aamer Farooq and Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, essentially cleared Mr. Sharif of the allegations. Consequently, it appears to be a mere formality for him to seek acquittal in this reference.

Interestingly, Maryam Nawaz and retired Capt Safdar opted not to seek any relief under the 2022 amendment and instead chose to face trial in the IHC under the previous law, which has since been reinstated. In its judgment, the division bench had delved into Nawaz Sharif's role in connecting Maryam Nawaz and Capt Safdar to the alleged crime.

The court order stated that Maryam Nawaz had been "convicted for production of bogus trust deeds and being instrumental in



concealment of properties of her father Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, hence as an aider/abettor and attempting to act in conspiracy with her father." However, since Mr. Sharif remained an absconder, the bench decided to merely glance at his case.

The bench astutely observed, "it abundantly clear that the allegations levelled are vague inasmuch as precise role of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and his aider and abettor...has not been specified in categorical terms."

The judgment harked back to 2016, noting that "in the wake of the Panama Papers leak by the firm Mossack Fonseca, it came to light that Avenfield Apartments are the ownership of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and/or his children."

"The principal accused, in all regards, is Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif as per allegations of the prosecution, therefore, evidence which was to be led by the prosecution, was to the effect that in reality, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif is the owner (legal or beneficial) of the Avenfield Apartments, purchasing the property in the name of Maryam Nawaz, as she was his dependent, to conceal the true identity," read the judgment.

The bench noted that "the case of appellants [Maryam Nawaz and Capt Safdar] cannot be separated from the case of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, and some of the observations need to be made, as the liability of appellant No.1 [Maryam

Nawaz] directly hinges on the culpability of the principal accused."

The bench opined that "the prosecution had to prove that in fact Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif purchased Avenfield Apartments in the name of Maryam Nawaz through corrupt and illegal practices and she, being his dependent, aided and abetted him by concealing the true ownership."

"It was to be proved by the prosecution that Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif was a holder of public office; the nature and extent of pecuniary resources of properties, which were found in his possession/his dependents," "it was to be proved that those were his known sources of income that is known to the prosecution after thorough investigation and that by objectively such resources of property found in possession were disproportionate to his known sources of income."

However, the prosecution failed to provide evidence regarding Mr. Sharif's known sources of income. The court noted, "nothing exists on record by means of income tax returns or bank accounts or other sources from the investigation of the prosecution that, at the relevant time, those were the known sources of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif."

Moreover, the prosecution did not establish the worth of the Avenfield Apartments in relation to Mr. Sharif's known sources of income. "No cogent evidence exists on record as to the known resources/income

of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif; likewise, there is nothing on record as to the worth of Avenfield Apartments at the relevant time or even the price paid for the purchase of the said properties."

The bench also observed that the prosecution failed to substantiate that Maryam Nawaz, Hussain, and Hassan Nawaz were dependents of Mr. Sharif. The general concept of 'legal dependent' is provided as "a person who is depending according to the law; a person derives principal support from another and usually may invoke laws to enforce that support." Notably, no evidence exists that, at the relevant time, appellant No.1 was financially dependent upon Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif.

Legal experts believe that the IHC division bench has already responded to the questions that will likely be raised in Mr. Sharif's appeal. Since the court has acquitted Maryam Nawaz and Capt Safdar in this case, Mr. Sharif is expected to face no difficulty in seeking similar relief for himself.

Beyond these developments, Mr. Sharif also faces a reference related to the purchase of a vehicle from Toshakhana. This case has recently been revived under the Supreme Court's instructions. However, experts maintain that the case against Mr. Sharif related to the Toshakhana vehicle is weak, and he is likely to secure relief in this matter as well.





Election strategy or real issues, what's cooking in PMLN and PPP?

By Sarfraz Raja

The political landscape is changing as elections draw nearer in Pakistan, the political atmosphere is charged and heating up with some new allies in pursuit of building bonds and some old are becoming rivals with the exchange of accusations, reservations, and questions. Two major allies of the previous government Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) are now seemingly the future rivals at least before the elections. The developments Pakistan's politics have been going through for the last few weeks certainly indicate something cooking among the political parties and within them too. As the future of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf (PTI) is uncertain and unpredictable, it seems that PMLN and PPP will be the major rivals and competitors in coming elections. Both these parties have a history of sweet and bitter relations during the last three decades.

A history of rivalry and joint struggles

PML-N and PPP are historically known to be the top political rivals, with occasional alliances and tactical cooperation on certain issues. Especially in the last decade of the 20th century, when both parties were indulging in overthrowing each other's governments' their overall relationship was marked by mutual distrust and competition for power. Both parties have accused each other of corruption, misgovernance, and authoritarian tendencies. It is worth noting that individual politicians within both parties have occasionally defected or formed alliances with members of the opposing party, reflecting the fluid nature of political alliances in Pakistan. The PML-N and PPP's relations have been shaped by a combination of ideological differences, personal rivalries, power struggles, and strategic calculations in Pakistan's dynamic political landscape.

Although Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party



(PPP) have had a complex and often fluctuating relationship throughout Pakistan's political history but they have occasionally formed alliances and shared power, they have also been fierce rivals at other times. No doubt the 1990s was the worst political era in the country's political history but the new century brought new terms of mutual relationship and the top leadership of both parties came closer and shook hands for future cooperation.

During the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf, both the PML-N and PPP faced repression and targets by the regime, leadership of both parties had to face years in exile and in 2006, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif signed a mutual document named Charter of Democracy, a historic agreement aimed at restoring democracy, ending military interference, and promoting political reconciliation.

After the end of Musharraf's rule, the PML-N and PPP were the major contenders in the 2008 general elections. The PPP, who lost its chairperson Benazir Bhutto in an assassination attempt during the election campaign in Rawalpindi along with dozens of their party workers, emerged as the largest party in the parliament, and husband of assassin leader Benazir Bhutto,



Asif Ali Zardari, who led the party in elections, became the President of Pakistan as well. The two parties formed a coalition government, with Yousaf Raza Gillani as the Prime Minister. However, the coalition lasted for a very short time as PMLN parted ways on the issue of restoration of judges deposed by former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, and the honeymoon period of friendly relationship ended in just a few months of joint rule.

In the 2013 general elections, both the PML-N and PPP competed against each other although both were facing a mutual rival Imran Khan. The PML-N, led by Nawaz Sharif, secured a majority in the center and largest province of the country Punjab, and formed the government, while the PPP became the main opposition party with their opposition leaders in both center and Punjab. Over the years during that tenure, the PML-N government and PPP opposition clashed on several policy issues and engaged in political confrontations but in that time both these parties were threatened by a joint rival Imran Khan who tried to show his power on roads and both these parties joined hands to confront Imran Khan's political adventures.

After the 2018 elections when Khan came



in power both PMLN and PPP leadership faced the hardship of the Imran regime which encouraged them to go for a joint struggle against the hybrid regime with Imran Khan in the prime minister's office.

Joint struggle rewarded both parties with a joint government where they ruled for 16 months till the completion of the assembly term.

New elections, new scenario

Both PMLN and PPP were allies in a 16-month coalition government where they were defending each other and shared the burden of unpopular decisions the government had to take in pursuance of stabilizing the drowning economy. With both coming out of power after the completion of the term now different ground was ahead for them as both had to participate in elections with their own identity and narratives which is very much understandable, but how PPP leadership started to target their ally of recent past is bit surprising for many but not for those who understand the political dynamics and election strategies. Even when these parties were sharing the power they had started to work on their election plans, with targeting electable to join them, and getting closer to their potential election allies. There were some discussions earlier that PPP and PMLN could shape seat adjustment plans especially in Punjab to counter PTI, but 9th May changed the whole political dynamics.

Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf is now struggling for its survival, most of their top leadership has left or disassociated themselves from the party or even politics, some are behind bars and others have gone underground to avoid an arrest. PTI top leadership or even the party could contest elections? There are many serious questions about this possibility. Accessing the developing new political scenario, political parties are redefining their strategies. In the case of PTI in elections, it would be PTI vs. PMLN or anti-PTI in Punjab and in the case of minus PTI, it would be PMLN vs. anti-PMLN. So in the first case, former allies have to join hands and the previous seat adjustment strategy can be redesigned to take on their joint enemy, as this has the rare chance the second option is very much on cards where PPP has to target PMLN to get the attention of Its anti-vote bank and also to distance themselves from the fall out of unpopular decisions of previous regime which has made them unpopular too. So right now keeping in view the possible minus PTI scenario PPP has started their election campaign, and if something surprisingly happens in favor of PTI with a much talked about level playing field, then PPP could redraft its strategy.

On the other hand, PMLN is still trying to find something out of a gloomy picture. The party leadership has realized that It's very much difficult for them to throw away the burden of the tough decisions they had to make in their 16-month tenure causing

record inflation in the country as so the miseries of its people.

The party finds Nawaz Sharif their only rescuer, who could come and save their ship. 21st October as the date of his return was announced but still, there are many things that are unclear, especially after the decision of the Supreme Court of Pakistan against the NAB amendments passed by the outgoing parliament, after which NAB has started to reopen cases against Nawaz Sharif, Shehbaz Sharif, Asif Zardari and other leaders of these parties. So despite party leadership making this clear that Nawaz will come back on the date announced but still political circles and raising questions about his return to politics.

So targeting PMLN could be the part of PPP election strategy but what about PMLN? Its plans are still unclear, even after Nawaz Sharif's return, what would be party policy and narrative, who to target, who to not? things are still not mature enough. party sources say that all of their campaign depends upon the return of Nawaz Sharif without that it would be hard run for them to go in the elections, carrying the burden of people's miseries they suffered under the PML N government, and now as the ECP has announced to hold elections in last week on January, the time boundary is defined and what these parties has to do has to be done as soon as it could be, for their supporters and candidates to go in election campaign with clear head.





A house called 70-Clifton

By Mazhar Abbas

I last met Mir Murtaza Bhutto, son of the executed prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, on September 20, 1996, hours before he was killed near his house 70/71-Clifton, which remained the centre of Pakistani politics for nearly four decades.

“Why don’t you accompany me to the public meeting and see for yourself people’s response,” he asked after addressing a press conference. I politely declined and said I would certainly have joined you, had it not been my eldest daughter’s birthday. With the pleasant exchange of words, he departed for the meeting and we journalists went to the Press Club.

As we were leaving the 70-Clifton I told one of my colleagues that I couldn’t say with authority but I had noticed some unusual movements of plainclothes intelligence people from the house till Teen Talwar. None of us had even thought that within hours we had to return to the same spot to report the assassination of yet another Bhutto and that too in the era of none other than his beloved sister former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Tragically but surely politics never remained the same at 70-Clifton and his widow Ghinwa Bhutto tried her best to keep Murtaza’s party, PPP (Shaheed Bhutto), alive but politically failed. Had Mir’s charismatic daughter, author of three books, Fatima Bhutto, not distanced herself from mainstream politics or son Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr carried the political legacy with a different political line, 70-Clifton would still have political relevance.

About two years back I met Ghinwa Bhutto just to get a feel of the place which once used to be the centre of political activities and witnessed many ups and downs of our charred political history. It was basically to get some updates on Murtaza Bhutto’s case and the appeal filed by PPP (SB) against the acquittal of the police officers accused of killing him and his companion. I found her utterly dejected with our criminal justice system and I don’t blame her.

Years back Fatima Bhutto met me as part of



her research on ‘political movements’ in Pakistan and even at that time I noticed that she had that intellectual depth and wished she would be active in mainstream politics which hardly had any leaders with deep insight. She still could not recover from the loss of her father and the way he was killed, which still looked like a case of ‘target killing’ or a fake encounter.

I have seen the rise and fall of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his trial and execution as a student of ‘Mass Communication’ and politics but never physically met him. That said, my schoolmate Yusuf Nazar, still remembers his last meeting with Bhutto at 70-Clifton after he was released just weeks before he was re-arrested. Yusuf at that time was the president of Premier College Student Union and he, along with some other student leaders including Sardar Hanif, a former President of NED University Student Union, met Bhutto at 70-Clifton.

“I still remember he told us that they (Martial Law authorities) would again arrest him as they got scared after people’s response. So, continue your struggle, he advised us,” he said, adding that he was soon re-arrested from Larkana and never freed again.

When Bhutto was executed on April 4, 1979, many thought it was not only the end of Bhutto’s clan but also PPP’s politics but his widow Begum Nusrat Bhutto continued her husband’s political legacy with unmatched courage. Bhutto, during the

prison, had made party’s senior Vice-Chairman Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad, also known in political circles as ‘Baba-e-Socialism’ for his commitment to socialism as acting chairman but the latter declined this offer on the pretext that the party’s feudal lords would not accept him. “I myself requested Bhutto sahab to appoint Begum Sahiba as acting chairperson,” he told me in one of his interviews at his Lahore residence years later. She led the movement and the election campaign after Bhutto’s arrest as General Zia-ul-Haq promised elections in October 1977. Her last public meeting was at Nishtar Park, Karachi. It was huge after which elections were postponed till 1979, but were again called off and for an indefinite period.

70-Clifton remained the axis of politics and both Begum Bhutto and young Benazir Bhutto were kept under house arrest and the bungalow was declared as ‘Sub-Jail’ from where Benazir Bhutto was for the first time produced as a witness in the famous Jam Saqi case and she recorded her lengthy statement.

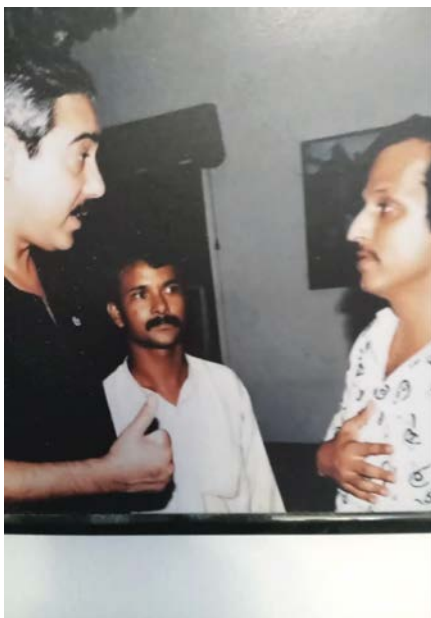
It is the same house where the longest-serving political alliance called the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was formed in January 1981. It was never easy for Begum Bhutto to invite those political leaders, some of whom were against Bhutto but she finally agreed and from the same house the first organised movement was launched against Zia.



However, the trauma did not end there as a month later a PIA Boeing was hijacked and the two sons of Bhutto, Mir Murtaza Bhutto and Shahnawaz were named as prime suspects as they had announced a militant war against Gen Zia and his cronies. The hijacking drama lasted 14 days and 54 political prisoners, mostly those belonging to PPP, were released in exchange for the safety of the passengers. This however came at a colossal political cost. It dealt a serious blow to the MRD as one of its parties, the Muslim Conference of Azad Kashmir, led by Sardar Qayyum quit the alliance.

It was in April 1986 when politics returned to 70-Clifton with the arrival of Benazir Bhutto from exile. She was received by hundreds and thousands of people in Lahore and a month later in Karachi, when she addressed her first press conference at 70-Clifton, it was a revival of political activities at the historic house of Bhuttos.

A year later in 1987, she got married to Asif Ali Zardari, son of former NAP leader, Hakim Ali Zardari. Asif till then was almost an unknown political entity but Hakim Ali was a well-known name in politics. In one of the most unique wedding receptions, both Benazir and Asif decided to arrange a grand reception in Lyari beside one at a park near 70-Clifton. Ironically, nine years later Murtaza was killed just outside that park.



Benazir also brought out a procession in August 1986, from 70-Clifton but the last time she visited 70-Clifton was when she had come to mourn the death of her brother. Begum Bhutto was completely shattered and the last time she was seen politically active was in 1993, when Murtaza had finally returned to Pakistan amid Benazir's opposition. Benazir wanted him to accompany her in 1986, but in 1993 she advised Mir to stay back for some time and offered him to contest polls from the PPP platform. He refused as he thought his sister was under pressure from Asif Ali Zardari.

Begum Bhutto first tried a patch them up but later sided with her son and even rejected the plea from the then-top general to ask Murtaza not to come.

Mir was the last of the family who addressed a press conference at 70-Clifton beside Bhutto, Benazir and Begum Bhutto before the 'house of Bhutto got divided' along with the PPP's politics.

Begum Nusrat Bhutto, whom I had interviewed several times and also had had many off-the-record discussions like with Benazir, used to tell some very interesting stories about both Benazir and Mir from their early days when they were very young.

"They both used to fight over petty issues,

even toys but they also loved each other. Once Bhutto bought a toy car for Mir but Benazir took it," she said and laughed.

PPP's sitting Chairman Bilawal Bhutto is unlucky in many ways. He made his political debut from Bilawal House and not from 70-Clifton. One can have a different opinion but the politics that revolved around Bilawal House or Zardari House were far different than what was witnessed at 70-Clifton with the changing political environment and commitment.

Benazir Bhutto once regretted why she could not convince her brother Murtaza to accompany her in 1986 and why he did not listen to her when she had advised him to stay back in 1993 as she had apprehended danger. Murtaza on his part always loved his sister and even during his days in Afghanistan and Syria he never allowed anyone to speak a word against Benazir.

Although Benazir kept politics alive, her own assassination on December 27, 2007, was seen as perhaps the death of political resistance within PPP. Tragedies followed the Bhutto clan from Bhutto to Benazir Bhutto as today, we mourn the 26th death anniversary of Murtaza.

As for the 'killers' of Bhuttos from Zulfikar to Murtaza and from Murtaza to Benazir, the stories remain mysterious and forgotten.

Declining Value of Dollar and Rising Expectations of Masses

The World Bank's report claiming a 39 percent poverty rate in Pakistan must be an eye-opener for the interim government



By Javed Mahmood

The ongoing crackdown of law enforcement agencies against the hoarding and smuggling of the US dollar and essential commodities especially sugar and flour has yielded much-awaited positive results. Resultantly, once the mighty currency, the US dollar has declined to 293 rupees in the open market, from 333 rupees before the launching of the crackdown in September this year. It shows a serious blow to the dollar as it lost about 40 rupees value in less than a month after crackdowns. Similarly, in inter-bank trading, the greenback has descended to 290 rupees (by Sept 25), from 307 rupees when the government decided to kick-start a nationwide action against the notorious hoarders and smugglers. So far, the US dollar has shed 17 rupees value against Pakistani rupee in inter-bank trading.

Every day, the greenback is plunging against the PKR mainly because of the crackdown. The evil forces in the market that used to propagate artificial hikes in the worth of the dollar have been sidelined after seeing the entry of

law enforcers. Now, the analysts are talking about the real value of the dollar around 250 to 260 rupees. Nevertheless, this will solely depend on the government's action against the hoarders and smugglers. Before the beginning of the crackdown, the greenback was bashing the economy daily and igniting frustration among the masses in addition to triggering inflation. In Pakistan, the value of the dollar matters a lot as the country is dependent on imports of essential consumer items such as petroleum products, gas, edible oil, ghee, tea, and many other consumer items.

Like the dollar, the value of sugar, flour, poultry chicken, and eggs has also declined in recent days as manipulators in the market have given up extortion of consumers in the name of artificial price-hike. Poultry chicken price in Islamabad has fallen to 560 rupees/kg (meat), from 800 rupees when the government initiated a nationwide crackdown. Similarly, the prices of eggs and flour have also declined after hitting a record-high

level in September 2023. It is the first time that the retail price of eggs hit the 300 rupees mark in the summer season because of the exploitative approach of the market forces.

Additionally, a couple of federal ministers of the interim government are talking about a possible decrease in oil prices in the wake of a decline in the value of the dollar. However, they hinted at a 10 to 12 rupees decrease in petroleum products that may not give any relief to motorists and consumers. This is because the retail prices of petrol and diesel crossed 330 rupees per liter in September 2023 and in this situation, a minor decrease in petrol prices would not alleviate the sufferings of the masses in the country.

Another important problem is that despite a decline in the value of the dollar, the interim government would not be able to give relief to consumers in the electricity and gas prices. The government has linked a hike in power and gas tariffs with the IMF program. However, in a recent meeting between

the caretaker Prime Minister Kakar and the IMF managing director in New York, the IMF chief again asked Pakistan to tax the rich and give relief to the poor.

Like the IMF chief, former finance minister Miftah Ismail has also asked the government to tax the elite class to save Pakistan from destruction.

Former finance minister Miftah Ismail emphasized that the nation's survival hinges on taxing the elite class. Miftah argued that fiscal challenges cannot be resolved unless the wealthy are subject to

Previously, Miftah Ismail advocated for continuing load shedding during the summer season to conserve energy and proposed early market closures. He also suggested raising gas prices during the winter season and shifting the load to electricity appliances, along with supporting market closures at 8 p.m., as part of an energy conservation plan. Ismail stated that continuing summer season load shedding is the only viable option for Pakistan to reduce expenditures on generating expensive electricity.

few months, the foreign exchange reserves of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) have surged by \$56.4 million, amounting to \$7.7 billion during the week ending on September 15, 2023. The central bank disclosed this in its latest data released on Sept 21. Meanwhile, the national reserves of Pakistan increased by \$107 million, settling at \$13.2 billion during the period quoted above.

Like SBP, the commercial banks' reserves improved by \$51 million, settling at \$5.49 billion.

The central bank did not mention any reason for this unexpected increase in the foreign exchange reserves. However, experts believe that the rapidly falling value of the dollar amid the ongoing crackdown positively impacted the reserves. Notably, when Pakistan received \$1.2 billion from the IMF while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates gave \$3 billion, the total foreign exchange reserves expanded to \$14.07 billion.

Consequently, in the current fiscal year, total liquid foreign reserves have increased by \$4.01bn or 43.62%. However, ever since the boost from the IMF and the Arab countries, fresh inflows seem to have dried up, with the total reserves slowly depleting almost every week.



taxation. He recommended that the government reduce expenses as a means to bolster the economy. He said that taxing the existing taxpayers would not serve the purpose. Hence, the government should target the elite class to enhance tax collection, he added. Ismail pointed out that the impact of a 40% inflation rate has not only adversely affected the middle class but has also begun to impact the upper class.

He criticized the government's delayed decision-making, stating that in 2017, taxes on salaried individuals were raised by 15. It led to the current collection of 261 billion from salaried individuals, compared to a mere 61 billion from major exporters. Furthermore, Ismail noted that the government has not imposed property and agriculture taxes in the provinces. He also expressed opposition to taxing retailers and wholesalers.

Regarding relief for electricity consumers, he believed that the IMF would reject the relief proposal for 90% of power consumers using up to 400 units. He, nonetheless, supported the caretaker government's decision to provide relief to consumers using 200 units. Ismail pointed out that the impact of a 40% inflation rate has not only adversely affected the middle class but has also begun to impact the upper class.

He criticized the government's delayed decision-making, stating that in 2017, taxes on salaried individuals were raised by 15. It led to the current collection of 261 billion from salaried individuals, compared to a mere 61 billion from major exporters.

Foreign Exchange Reserves of Pakistan Surge in Sept

After experiencing a consistent decline for a

Stock Market Regaining Lost Momentum

The stock market maintained its upward momentum, extending gains from the previous day, as the benchmark KSE-100 index closed at 46,421 on Sept 22. This marked a rise of 219.03 points or 0.47% on a day-over-day basis. On Sept 25, the KSE-100 index hovered around 46,390 points with a marginal decline of 30 points. The ongoing crackdown against smugglers and hoarders has revived investors' confidence who were unhappy with a consistent rise in the value of the dollar. Investors remained upbeat, influenced by the positive market sentiment following the recent announcement of the general election date. The breach of the 46,000-point threshold the previous day, along with a weekly closing above this level, signifies a continued upward trend in the market.

Furthermore, over the course of the week, the KSE-100 index recorded a substantial gain of 667.63 points, equivalent to 1.46%. The strength of the KSE100 index was bolstered by sectors such as Power Generation and distribution, Commercial Banks, Oil and gas Exploration Companies, Investment Banks/Investment Companies/Securities Companies, and Pharmaceuticals.

Current Account Deficit Shrinks in August 2023

In August, the current account deficit (CAD) saw a significant reduction of nearly 80 percent, decreasing to \$160 million compared to July's \$775 million, despite the relaxation of import restrictions as part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Data released by the State Bank on Sept 21 indicated that the CAD contracted by 54 percent to \$935 million during the July-August period of FY24, down from \$2.035 billion in the same period of the previous fiscal year.

A closer look at the data reveals that both exports and imports of goods experienced declines. Imports declined to \$8.49 billion in the first two months of FY24, down from \$11.457 billion in the same period of FY23. Meanwhile, exports of goods also decreased to \$4.542 billion over the two months, compared to \$4.951 billion in the corresponding period last year.

It is worth noting that the relaxation of import restrictions is expected to widen the trade gap, subsequently contributing to an increase in the current account deficit. Import restrictions played a pivotal role in reducing the CAD to \$2.4 billion in FY23 from \$17.5 billion in FY22. The government had to ease import restrictions by the IMF Stand-By Arrangements for \$3 billion. However, banks still impose import restrictions in a different form, requiring letters of credit to be opened only after securing the necessary dollars. The government has set a target of \$6 billion for the CAD in FY24.

Remittances Decline in August 2023

In August 2023, the inflow of remittances from overseas workers reached \$2.1 billion, marking a 3.1% increase compared to the \$2.03 billion recorded in July 2023, as per

the latest data released by the State Bank of Pakistan. However, when viewed on a year-over-year basis, the monthly remittance inflow experienced a decline of 24%, standing at \$2.7 billion in the same month of the previous year. Remittances sent by overseas workers hold significant importance in supporting Pakistan's external accounts, stimulating economic activity within the country, and supplementing the disposable incomes of households that rely on remittances.



During the first two months of FY24 (July-August), a total of \$4.1 billion in workers' remittances flowed into the country. This reflects a YoY decline of 22%, equivalent to \$1.13 billion, compared

to the \$5.3 billion recorded in the same period of FY23. Last month, the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet approved the SBP's proposal to modify six incentives to enhance remittance inflow and promote the use of formal channels for remittances.

Breakdown of remittances

Overseas Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia sent the largest amount in August 2023, totaling \$490.1 million for the month. This amount increased by 1% every month but decreased by nearly 29% compared to the \$692.6 million sent by expatriates in the same month of the previous year. Inflows from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) decreased by

2% every month, falling from \$315.5 million in July to \$308 million in August. However, a more significant decline of 43% was observed every year compared to the \$540.4 million reported in the same month last year. Remittances from the United Kingdom amounted to \$331.3 million during the month, marking a 10% decline compared to the \$369.7 million in August 2022. In contrast, remittances from the European Union increased by 4% year-on-year, reaching \$290.4 million in August 2023.

Overseas Pakistanis in the United States sent \$262.4 million in August 2023, reflecting a year-on-year decline of 12%.

Conclusion

As the value of the dollar has dropped substantially in recent weeks in the wake of a nationwide crackdown, the people are demanding significant relief in the electricity, gas tariffs, and domestic petroleum prices. Like the IMF and the World Bank, the people of Pakistan are using social media platforms to influence the government to tax the rich instead of throwing the maximum burden of tax collection on the masses. To satisfy the inflation and price-hikes hit people, the caretaker government would have to address the concerns of the masses. Otherwise, the ongoing efforts of a nationwide crackdown against smugglers and hoarders will be meaningless for the people. The World Bank's report claiming a 39 percent poverty rate in Pakistan must be an eye-opener for the interim government.

World Bank suggests ‘National Council of Ministers’

Points to flawed devolution and institutional weaknesses as key governance challenges



By Khaleeq Kiani

High-lighting ‘incomplete devolution’ and institutional weaknesses as key development and governance challenges and pinning little hopes on technocratic government, the World Bank has advised Pakistan to create a ‘National Council of Ministers’ — comprising key federal and provincial representatives — to fill the vacuum for simultaneous and coordinated strengthening of poorly performing federal and provincial institutions, policies and accountability systems.

“While technocratic interventions are unlikely to transform Pakistan’s institutional environment in the short term, the current contextual factors — deteriorating economic conditions, demographic change and social media — may present some windows of opportunity for positive change,” said the Washington-based lending agency in policy advice.

It said Pakistan did not effectively implement devolution initiated through the 18th Amendment and the Centre continued to

deliver many devolved functions, creating overlaps in service delivery, increasing fiscal costs, and blurring accountabilities. Thus, prevailing fiscal arrangements weaken accountability for revenue collection and complicate tax administration. “Performance reviews are rare and incentives reward adherence to the rules rather than good operational performance” and promotions are made on seniority and informal networks, rather than qualifications.

To address such obstacles, the World Bank has asked the government to take “immediate measures” to improve coordination between different layers of and provincial governments.

It said that since the decisions made by the Economic Coordination Committee or the federal cabinet are no longer binding on the provinces, the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and the National Economic Council (NEC) should play a critical role in supporting national policy coordination and coherence.

“A National Council of Ministers, consisting of the federal and provincial ministers working under the aegis of the council for Common Interests (CCI) should formulate and monitor the implementation of key national policies, including in education, health, food security and agriculture, water and sanitation, and transport,” it said.

The bank said the newly elected government should immediately begin to build consensus around technical implementation arrangements for a decentralised system, including expenditure cuts, tax and revenue assignments as well as transfer of functions and tax instruments.

An appropriate constitutional body (likely CCI) should develop an implementation plan based on the agreed vision, through a consultative process with broad provisions.

This plan should provide a clear and mutually agreed division of responsibilities between the federal, provincial and local governments, arrangements for tax

devolution, grants, and subnational revenue collection to ensure that each level of government has adequate resources to finance its respective cities, based on costing of service delivery responsibilities and assessment of revenue potential at each level, and necessitating revisions to the 7th NFC award.

Federal-provincial fiscal coordination

In parallel, federal-provincial fiscal coordination should be improved including further efforts to harmonise tax policy and administration and ensure the effective implementation of a national medium-term fiscal framework, in line with new federal and provincial fiscal responsibility legislation.

It said a series of measures should be prioritised to strengthen institutions and support implementation that helps strengthen accountability and counteract elite capture while building the administrative capacity of government to deliver critical reforms and investments. This will have important impacts on private sector confidence and investment, by improving the quality of public services, addressing policy instability and corruption, and better aligning policies with the interests of citizens and firms.

The bank called for improving processes for public sector appointment, performance management, and tenure as implementation of public sector reforms was being impeded by the vested interests of senior bureaucrats in maintaining the status quo.

For this, strong political leadership will be required to change incentive structures within the public service through the introduction of a Performance Management System (PMS) across the public sector, under which public servants be assessed against the achievement of agreed performance indicators, with performance assessment feeding into career progression, salary increases, and in cases of persistent poor performance early retirement.

Also, the security of tenure should be strengthened for all government officers and any decision to remove a government officer from the position before the end of an appointment term should require a written justification, with the affected person provided the right to challenge this decision through an independent, formal process.

The processes for the open, competitive appointment of chief executives to public sector agencies with critical economic and social functions (including PIA, WAPDA,

PSO, and Pakistan Railways) should be strengthened and maintained and their appointments be safeguarded from political interference.

The chief executives be provided with operational autonomy and a fixed tenure and held accountable for results against a set of clearly defined objectives and goals.

Moreover, in-service training of government officers should be strengthened to close important skills gaps, while recruitment should be recalibrated to focus on key relevant skills and expertise, rather than strong performance against the public service exam.

On top of that, digitalisation should be pursued to increase efficiency and reduce opportunities for corruption as Pakistan already has a conducive environment with significant penetration of smart mobile phones, many electronic databases, computerised land records, automated banking apps, a vast fibre optic network, and a burgeoning IT industry.

This provides a ready system of electronic platforms and e-service centres to provide a single platform for all forms, clearances, NOCs, and seeking rulings.

Courtesy Dawn



Privatization of Pakistan International Airlines



By Zahra Khurram

Following extensive conversations, the Cabinet Committee on Privatization (CCOP) has made the decision to incorporate Pakistan International Airline (PIA), the national flag carrier, into an ongoing privatization initiative. The airline has consistently posed a significant challenge for the country and its fiscal position due to the substantial accumulation of financial losses amounting to billions of rupees. The responsibility for these losses lies solely with the government. Over the course of several decades, there has been a persistent failure to disengage from PIA, either through maintaining a majority stake or prolonging the privatization process. These actions have had negative consequences for the nation. Although the timing of this recent development is belated, it is nonetheless comforting to observe a modicum of endeavor being directed toward rectifying conspicuous issues within the state-owned firm.

Under the leadership of Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, the Cabinet Committee on Privatization (CCOP) has granted its approval to the proposal put out by the

Privatization Commission to incorporate Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) into an operational program. The judgment was made after a thorough evaluation of the airline's financial records, which revealed a cumulative loss of Rs.742 billion over several decades. The airline's financial statement reveals a significant loss of Rs.80 billion in the previous fiscal year, with projections indicating a further increase to Rs.112 billion in the near future.

The presence of these alarming figures is to be expected in light of the numerous accounts detailing mismanagement and corruption within the corporation. The presence of pilot license controversies, an overstaffed workforce, subpar aircraft quality, sluggish restructuring efforts, difficulty in securing money, and increasing expenses have placed significant strain on the national budget, thereby constraining the government's capabilities. The optimal moment for overhauling the PIA would have been upon the initial emergence of reports highlighting its operational inefficiencies as an airline. However, it is still preferable to address these issues belatedly rather than not at all.

Outsourcing of Islamabad Internal Airport

The Minister for Aviation, Khawaja Saad Rafique, made an announcement at a session of the National Assembly, stating that the Islamabad airport is set to undergo a 15-year outsourcing arrangement aimed at enhancing its operational efficiency. The individual provided clarification that the proposed action should not be interpreted as a kind of privatization. Rather, its objective is to introduce skilled operators with the intention of improving airport operations.

The federal minister underscored the importance of implementing open competitive bidding to guarantee that the most qualified bidder is selected to run the airport. Additionally, the minister highlighted that this process will be profit-oriented, ultimately resulting in financial benefits for the national exchequer. According to the speaker, the International Finance Corporation has been appointed as the consultant for the project.

It has been reported that a total of 12 to 13 companies have expressed their interest in participating in the bidding process. Additionally, he provided assurance that the procedure will exhibit transparency and comply with all established norms and regulations. Nevertheless, the aviation ministry explicitly said that the outsourcing process will exclude the runway and navigation operations.

The decision has been made to only consider outsourcing for Islamabad International Airport at the outset. The evaluation of potentially outsourcing Jinnah International Airport in Karachi and Allama Iqbal Airport in Lahore would be conducted by drawing upon the expertise and lessons gained from the previous outsourcing experience of Islamabad International Airport. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader emphasized the achievements of outsourced airports in various nations, such as India and Turkey. Furthermore, the leader pointed out that even the Madina airport has effectively undergone outsourcing to provide improved services.

Privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills

Pakistan Steel is supported by three major institutional creditors, namely Sui Southern

Gas Company Limited (SSGCL), the Government of Pakistan, and the National Bank of Pakistan. All three creditors, including the Government of Pakistan, are accruing interest on this loan at significantly elevated rates. As a result, the accumulation of these loans results in an approximate yearly interest charge of Rs20 billion, contributing to the losses incurred by PSM. This amount accounts for roughly 70% of the corporation's overall annual losses. According to industry experts, the outstanding obligations stemming from the closure of the Mills in 2015 persist despite the considerable passage of time. Numerous endeavors have been undertaken to achieve a mutually agreed-upon resolution with creditors, although these efforts have been unsuccessful. Currently, the Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) is indebted to the Government of Pakistan (GoP) with a principal amount of Rs.102 billion and an additional Rs.48 billion in accrued interests. The National Bank of Pakistan has a total outstanding amount of Rs. 38 billion, comprising of Rs. 38 billion in principal and an equivalent amount in interest. Similarly, the Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGCL) is owed Rs. 23 billion in principal, along with a disputed amount of Late Payment Surcharge (LPS) on this principle sum.

The revitalization of Pakistan Steel Mills is

a significant goal within the privatization plan, as the mills have been non-operational since 2015. Consequently, the government has devised a strategy to attract both global and domestic investors in order to revive the largest industrial organization in Pakistan. Consecutive meetings have been held with the stakeholders and Ministries in order to address and resolve the issues at hand. Based on the transaction characteristics approved by the Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCoP), the core operating assets that have been identified will be transferred to a newly established subsidiary called Steel Corp. (Pvt) Ltd, which is controlled by PSMC. Subsequently, the disposal of equity holdings in the subsidiary would be conducted through a bidding procedure, with a range of 51-74%.

The utilization of an outright sell-off is not the sole approach that may be employed to revitalize the Mills. There exist alternative avenues that merit investigation for procuring private financing, private operations, and technical competence, all of which are necessary for the revitalization of Pakistan Steel. An official proposed considering a gradual and systematic revitalization of the factory, employing a blend of domestic and international resources while prioritizing the utilization of locally sourced raw materials.



How top 10 emerging technologies of 2023 can revolutionise Pakistan?

Pakistan's role in adopting and adapting to these technologies and innovating with them is crucial

By Amir Jahangir

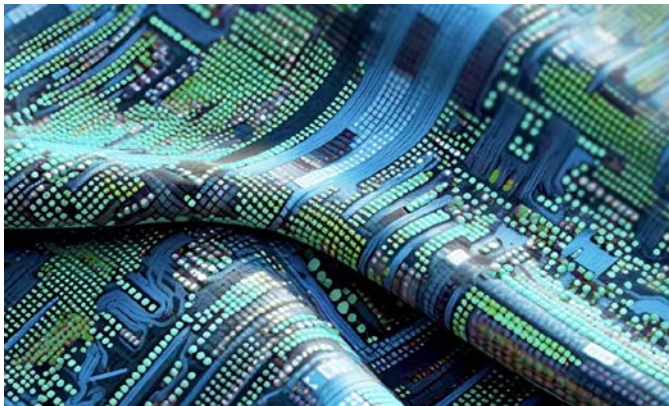
The World Economic Forum's 2023 Report on the Top 10 Emerging Technologies highlights groundbreaking innovations with global implications. These technologies span healthcare, AI, sustainability, and flexible electronics. Pakistan must grasp their importance.

These technologies offer Pakistan opportunities in healthcare, agriculture, education, and sustainability. Yet, Pakistan needs to invest in research, infrastructure, and education. Collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society is vital for inclusive progress.

While some technologies originate elsewhere, their impact on people, prosperity, and equity matters globally. Pakistan's role in adopting and adapting to these technologies and innovating with them is crucial.

For instance, AI and generative AI can transform healthcare and education in Pakistan, while sustainable aviation fuel and computing align with Pakistan's climate goals.

The World Economic Forum's selection of these technologies recognises the interconnectedness of innovation. Pakistan should align its strategies with these innovations to contribute globally and benefit from a more connected and prosperous future.



Flexible batteries: Powering innovation

Pakistan, like the rest of the world, is witnessing a surge in wearable devices, flexible electronics, and bendable displays. These innovations require adaptable power sources, making standard rigid batteries outdated. Enter flexible batteries, a significant leap towards a more versatile future.

Flexible batteries revolutionise energy storage. Lightweight and easily bent, they offer portability and convenience. These recharge-

able batteries come in various types, including lithium-ion and zinc-carbon systems, with conductive polymer current collectors. Some even have additives for improved conductivity and flexibility.

The real innovation lies in the electrodes. Flexible battery electrodes can be coated with materials like graphene, carbon fibres, or cloth, enabling diverse applications.

In Pakistan, flexible batteries have promising applications in healthcare and e-textiles.

- a) Healthcare: They power wearable medical devices and sensors, enabling wireless health data transmission for remote patient monitoring, especially beneficial in rural areas.
- b) E-Textiles: Imagine clothing that monitors your health. Flexible batteries can power textile-based electronics, revolutionising Pakistan's textile industry.

The global flexible battery market is set to grow by \$240.47 million from 2022 to 2027, with a 22.79% annual growth rate. Pakistan's interest in wearable tech aligns with this trend.

Generative AI: Transforming innovation landscape

Generative AI is revolutionising creativity and innovation in Pakistan. This AI subset, capable of generating text, programming code, images, and sound, has diverse applications, from healthcare to architecture and engineering. Understanding its implications in Pakistan is crucial.

Generative AI learns from data patterns using complex algorithms, offering adaptability for various sectors. In healthcare, it can accelerate drug discovery, benefiting Pakistan's healthcare challenges. Architects and engineers can use it to create imaginative designs and enhance construction processes, potentially transforming urban planning.

NASA's use of generative AI for scientific advancements can inspire progress in Pakistan, from space exploration to local research initiatives. The National Aerospace Technology Parks in collaboration with the Pakistan Airforce and Ignite can foster this technology's growth.

Even the food industry and consumer products like furniture could innovate with generative AI in Pakistan's diverse market.

Generative AI can revolutionise education, offering personalised curricula for students. However, imaginative public policies and innovative leadership are necessary for successful implementation.

In the workplace, AI-based models like ChatGPT enhance productivity, particularly in Pakistan's growing IT sector.

While generative AI holds immense potential, addressing job displacement through upskilling and reskilling is essential.

Ensuring ethical AI use, transparency, and privacy protection is crucial. Policymakers should develop clear ethical guidelines and governance structures.



Sustainable aviation fuel: A green flight path

Pakistan, facing severe climate change impacts, seeks innovative solutions to cut carbon emissions. The aviation sector, contributing 2-3% of global CO₂ emissions, is a prime focus. Sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) offers promise for reducing emissions, particularly in Pakistan's climate-vulnerable context.

Aviation's CO₂ emissions are alarming, demanding immediate attention. Electric or hydrogen-powered planes face hurdles for long-haul flights. SAF provides a practical solution without the need for major infrastructure changes or fleet replacements.

SAF, derived from biological and non-biological sources, combined with efficiency improvements and carbon offsets, can lead the aviation industry toward net-zero emissions.

Currently, SAF represents less than 1% of global jet fuel demand. Achieving 13-15% by 2040 is vital for net-zero aviation by 2050. Pakistan can contribute in several ways.

Challenges like raw material availability and green hydrogen production need attention, with potential solutions in engineered microorganisms for biomass breakdown.

Designer phages: Innovating health, agriculture

With a youthful population of 250 million, Pakistan faces healthcare and agricultural challenges. Designer phages, and engineered viruses, offer solutions for microbiome-related diseases and agriculture, transforming Pakistan's future.

Designer phages reprogram bacteria within the human microbiome, offering the potential to treat diseases like HUS caused by E. coli. In Pakistan, they can improve healthcare access, particularly

for prevalent infections.

Pakistan's agriculture, a vital sector, can benefit from designer phages. They can boost livestock growth, combat plant diseases, and enhance food safety, aligning with the "One Health" approach.

For Pakistan's youthful population seeking innovative healthcare and agriculture, designer phages offer hope. These technologies can make treatments efficient and sustainable, driving progress and prosperity.

Metaverse for mental health: A solution for youth's struggles

Pakistan, with a population of 250 million, faces complex mental health challenges, especially among its 60% youthful population. The metaverse offers a unique solution to address these issues, exacerbated by the "Great Resignations."

Pakistan's youth encounter various mental health pressures due to academic, social, and digital demands. Increased screen time and the Great Resignations have added to their anxiety.

The mental health crisis in Pakistan affects an estimated 50 million people, largely due to stigma, awareness gaps, and a lack of services. Mental health remains under-resourced, with just 500 psychiatrists for the entire country.

Technology can play a crucial role in addressing mental health issues, with gaming platforms already being used for treatment. In Pakistan, where economic uncertainties amplify the crisis, the metaverse can offer a lifeline. As interface technologies evolve, they can enhance social connections and even integrate with neurotechnologies for real-time emotional feedback.

Leveraging the metaverse to address mental health needs in Pakistan can be transformative. It supports the well-being of the youth and showcases innovation in tackling societal challenges.



Wearable plant sensors: Transforming agriculture

In Pakistan, agriculture is vital to the economy, contributing 22.9% to GDP and employing 37.4% of the workforce. Challenges like extreme weather events threaten food security. Wearable plant sensors offer a technological solution to enhance resilience and productivity.

Traditional crop monitoring methods are costly and time-consuming. Recent advancements include sensor-equipped drones and tractors for better insights. The next step is monitoring individual plants.

Wearable plant sensors are compact devices that attach to crops, providing continuous data on temperature, humidity, moisture, and nutrients. They offer benefits like optimised yields, resource efficiency, early disease detection, and data-driven decisions.

However, challenges include installation and maintenance costs and data interpretation. Further research is needed to understand their long-term effects on plant growth.

Despite challenges, wearable plant sensors can revolutionize Pakistan's agriculture.

Spatial omics: Illuminating molecular mysteries

The human body consists of 37.2 trillion cells working together, a scientific quest for understanding. Spatial omics, a transformative tool, holds promise for Pakistan, a country with healthcare challenges and research opportunities.

Spatial omics combines advanced imaging and DNA sequencing to map molecular-level biological processes. It involves slicing tissues into thin sections and using groundbreaking imaging to pinpoint biomolecule locations.

To make spatial omics accessible in Pakistan, technology democratization and scaling are essential. The global spatial omics market was valued at \$232.6 million in 2021, with projected revenues of \$587.2 million by 2030. Addressing technical challenges related to data is crucial.

In Pakistan, where healthcare research and innovation are vital, spatial omics can address challenges and deepen scientific knowledge.

Flexible neural electronics: Bridging humans, machines

Brain-machine interfaces (BMIs) hold promise for controlling machines with thoughts. They capture brain-generated electrical signals and translate them into computer commands. While BMIs have advanced in treating epilepsy and neuroprosthetics, there are challenges due to rigid implant materials.

Flexible brain-interfacing circuits offer hope. They use biocompatible materials, conform to the brain's shape, reduce scarring, and can accommodate multiple sensors. This surpasses traditional hard probes.

In Pakistan, where healthcare and innovation are vital, flexible neural electronics can blur the line between humans and machines. They offer enhanced healthcare solutions and groundbreaking discoveries.

Sustainable computing for data future

Data centres, essential for services like Google, consume 1% of global electricity, a figure set to rise. Net-zero-energy data centres are the goal, achievable through emerging tech and AI optimising energy use.

AI, exemplified by DeepMind, reduces data centres' energy consumption by up to 40% without performance loss. Modular, demand-responsive infrastructure, including cloud and edge computing, spreads data processing across devices and locations.

To achieve net-zero-energy data centres in Pakistan, innovative integration with new energy tech is crucial. Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad host a total of 21 data centres, highlighting digital infrastructure's growth.

AI in healthcare: Transforming health systems

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in Pakistan's healthcare systems, prompting the exploration of AI and ML in healthcare, as seen in initiatives like AI4PEP. These efforts aim to predict and manage pandemics better while expanding healthcare access.

By leveraging AI and quality data, Pakistan can optimize resource allocation, reducing wait times and improving care, as demonstrated in Canada. AI can also enhance healthcare delivery to underserved areas, taking cues from India's success in reaching remote communities.



However, AI in healthcare must address privacy, public acceptance, compliance, and security concerns. Balancing innovation and ethics is crucial, necessitating legal frameworks to guide responsible AI use.

In the coming years, AI-facilitated healthcare can make a significant impact in Pakistan, particularly benefiting underserved populations.

These innovations address critical challenges, offer economic opportunities, and position Pakistan as a forward-thinking player on the global stage, contributing to progress, prosperity, and sustainable development.

Revenue generated from petrol smuggling being used by terrorists, reveals report

By Ashraf Malkham

A report submitted to the Prime Minister's House (PMO) revealed that terrorists are using revenue generated from petrol smuggling as a key source of financing.

The report, incriminating politicians and government officials revealed that 2.8 billion litres of petrol is smuggled annually to Pakistan from Iran.

The petrol smuggling costs Rs60 billion to Pakistan each year, it added. "A total of 995 petrol pumps across the country are involved in the illegal sale of Iranian petrol. Around 90 government officials and 29 politicians are involved in the smuggling of petrol."

However, a startling revelation made by the report is that Pakistan State Oil's (PSO) vehicles are involved in the transportation of Iranian petrol.

The report also addressed the issue of Hundi-Hawala (illegal money trade and smuggling) accentuating that 722 currency dealers are involved in the illegal forex activity.

In, Punjab 205 currency dealers — the highest among all the provinces — are involved in the illegal activity followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) with 183 dealers.



Meanwhile, Sindh, Balochistan, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have 179, 104 and 37 such dealers, respectively.

In Islamabad, 17 dealers are involved in the Hawala-hundi business.

FIA given 'go-ahead' for action against smuggling

The development comes as earlier this

week, Caretaker Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar issued directives to implement strict measures to curb smuggling at border crossings.

The premier instructed the officials concerned to improve surveillance and establish a comprehensive monitoring mechanism at irregular border crossings to prevent smuggling in the country.

Also, the interim government on Friday, directed the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to exercise its authority and take necessary measures to curb the smuggling of sugar and US dollars in the country.

The FIA will tackle activities pertaining to the smuggling of sugar, fertilisers, petroleum products, US dollars and other foreign currencies.

The investigative agency will be able to exercise its authority and take necessary measures at all entry and exit points of foreign currencies.

Furthermore, FIA's zonal directors have been instructed to report to the agency's headquarters on a day-to-day basis via relevant channels.



China's Belt and Road Amidst Emerging Waves in Global Politics



By Umer Farooq

Comparing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the European Union and the United States strategic move to link up with India through the land route of the Middle East through the newly announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) will be a futile exercise. Firstly, IMEC is on the drawing board stage, whereas Chinese BRI is already ten years old. Secondly, the Belt and Road Initiative is much bigger and larger than IMEC: As part of BRI, which was announced in 2013 China has signed cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations, mobilizing finances amounting to nearly \$1 trillion. It involves work on 3,000 projects. Some IMEC signatory countries are also part of BRI, such as Italy, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. However, Italy has now decided to pull out of it. Last but not least IMEC is an afterthought that came to the minds of planners in Western capitals as a rival to Chinese BRI. There are insurmountable political and geo-political obstacles in the way of making IMEC a success. Saudi Arabia, a key country in the

whole scheme, doesn't see eye to eye with the American objective of making the Economic Corridor a facilitator of the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and other major Muslim countries on the one hand and Israel on the other. The American planner wants IMEC to link Saudi Arabia and the Middle East not only with Europe but with Israel. Saudis are so far reluctant. This will be a major political obstacle in the way of making IMEC a success. Secondly, there is no way India could be land-linked to Europe and the Middle East without the roads and railway lines passing through Pakistan. It will not be geographically possible. Pakistan, which is a critical country in Chinese Belt and Road initiative projects, is unlikely to agree to a project that will leverage India's economic growth—and which will rival Chinese BRI—BRI being the project in which Pakistan has a geo-political and economic role.

So, both the Arab-Israeli and Pak-India conflicts can prove to be a major obstacle in implementing IMEC in the region. The United States is not part of this planned corridor but the Biden

Administration is particularly interested in pushing the deal to contain Iran and to check Chinese influence in the Middle East. Recently many Western experts have described, "A Beijing-brokered deal to restore Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties, announced in March, as a wake-up call for Washington".

The Western capitals are particularly and deeply concerned about Chinese BRI. As recently as June 2023 G7 group—mostly a club of Western industrial nations -- pledged to raise \$600 billion in private and public funds over five years for infrastructure projects in developing countries to counter BRI, and according to U.S. President Joe Biden demonstrated "the concrete benefits of partnering with democracies". The G20 summit conference doesn't have a permanent secretariat and therefore the IMEC announcement was lacking in details. The IMEC signatory states will spend the next 60 days developing an action plan, including setting timing benchmarks and establishing standards on financing and regulation, among other topics.

It appears that Washington's interests

in IMEC are purely political and security-oriented. They want to contain Iran and cut the Chinese influence in the region. “The US plan aims to reshape the Middle East’s geoeconomic landscape through connectivity projects like IMEC. The US plan aims to reshape the Middle East’s geoeconomic landscape through connectivity projects like IMEC, helping to alleviate Gulf countries’ doubts about its commitment, reduce tensions with Iran, and bolster its leadership in the Gulf. The corridor would complement other coalitions of friendly powers such as the India–UAE–Israel–US I2U2 and the G7-led Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) – seen as a rival to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”. Saudi Arabia is still reluctant to normalize relations with Israel, although it sees the Corridor project as part of its business and economic diversification strategy. Saudi Arabia’s relations with China have improved substantially in the past decade. Whether Washington will be able to wean Saudi Arabia away from China and into a world where it will be part way with its traditional foreign policy objectives, will be something to watch in the coming months and years. And how these possibly new developments will affect Pakistan and what will be Pakistan’s response to these changes will be interesting to watch.

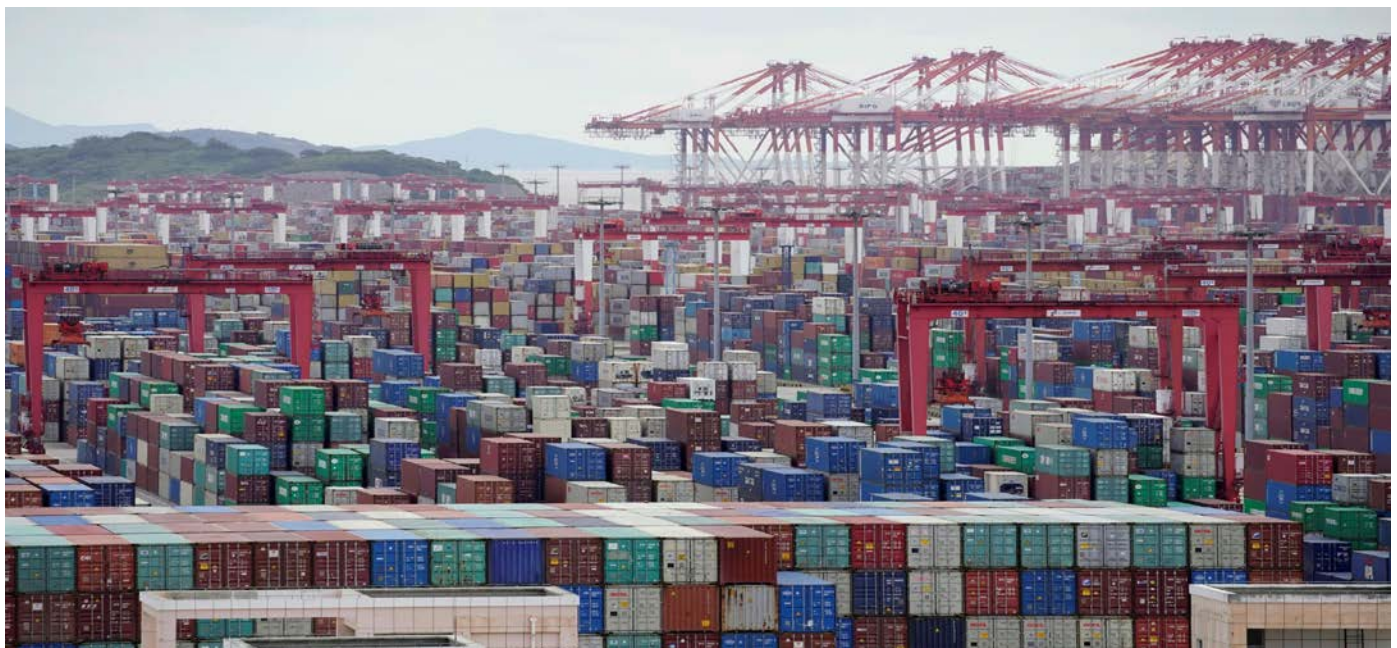
The IMEC policy document makes no mention of China or its grand Belt and Road Initiative. Although it is obvious that

the EU’s plan rivals the Chinese plan. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is a “global trade and infrastructure plan based on the lines of the old Silk Road that linked China and the West”. Similarly, IMEC plans to do the same. According to plans announced at the G20 Summit in New Delhi, the technical teams of signatory states will be meeting in two months’ time to firm up the details related to finances and other issues. So far there are no detailed plans for the implementation of the scheme. IMEC may be at a drawing board stage but the signatories have also started touting its potential. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expects IMEC “will drive sustainable development for the entire world.” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s 2023 State of the Union address emphasized the shared interest of the participating governments to make trade “faster, shorter, cleaner.” She anticipates that IMEC “will make trade between Indian and Europe 40% faster.” Saudi Arabia’s Investment Minister Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al-Falih expressed IMEC’s potential “to be more significant and relevant” than the Silk Road “because it’s going to be about new energy, data, connectivity, human resources, aviation routes, and it’s about aligning countries that are of the same mind and same vision.

The land route linking Asia with Europe passes through Turkish territory and Turkish is not particularly happy with IMEC. He has announced plans for an

alternative trade corridor to the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). According to the US and the EU, IMEC will connect Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Israel by rail, entirely bypassing Turkey as it leads on to Europe and India by ship, “A significant chunk of Erdogan’s alternative corridor relies on co-opting Iraq’s Development Road project. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan insisted that “intensive negotiations” were underway with Iraq, the UAE and Qatar for a transport route into Turkey from the Great Faw Port in the oil-rich Basra province in southern Iraq”.

IMEC and the political objectives of the West to normalize Israel’s relations with the Muslim world may prove to be a pipe dream. But these are wake-up calls for weak countries like Pakistan which are too dependent on its friends for its economic and political survival. Pakistan needs to understand which way the wind is blowing. Old traditional molds of running foreign policy are cracking. New Alliances are being formed and new alignments are taking place. In such a situation we must learn two lessons from our geo-political environment. Firstly, Pakistan must do away with its traditional patterns of running foreign policy and seek new alliances and alignments. Secondly, we must start to learn how to balance between our erstwhile friend Washington, and our time-tested ally, China. Because let there be no doubt that they will clash in the coming years.



Canada and India Rift over murder of Sikh leader



By Anum Akram

Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Canadian-Sikh and leader of a separatist party, was killed in a targeted attack in June. At the onset of the murder, the Canadian government and Nijjar's family held India accountable for his murder as he was labeled a terrorist by the Indian government a few years back. However, India has continuously denied any involvement in his assassination, calling Prime Minister Trudeau's allegation absurd and motivated.

On June 16, as Hardeep was leaving the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey, three masked and armed men gathered around him and killed the Sikh leader on spot. Hardeep Singh advocated openly for Khalistan, which loosely translated to "land of pure for the Sikh." The main aim of the Khalistan movement is to gain independence from India, and form a separate home for the Sikh population, which has accumulated to 2% in the country.

After the assassination of Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's

allegations of possible involvement by Indian agencies, diplomatic tensions between the two nations have escalated significantly. Trudeau emphasized that Canada's intention was not to provoke India, but he underscored the substantial legal implications of the issue on a global scale, stating, "The Indian government must treat this matter with utmost seriousness. We are doing so, not with the aim of inciting conflict or intensifying tensions."

In the realm of diplomacy, it is uncommon for two nations regarded as "strategic partners" to openly accuse each other of grave transgressions within a brief timeframe and transition from cooperation to adversarial relations. However, a similar scenario is unfolding between India and Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau voiced his concerns about the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in the Canadian House of Commons. India contends that Hardeep Singh Nijjar was a fugitive terrorist whom Canada granted refuge, while Canada views his actions there as an exercise of free speech and a commitment to the "rule of law." Nevertheless, Trudeau made some unusual allegations, insinuating

that India was overly sensitive. Furthermore, Trudeau announced Canada's decision to expel an Indian diplomat implicated in the case. This diplomat held the position of station chief for India's highly classified RAW agency at the Indian embassy in Canada.

India's response to these accusations was stern, resulting in the prompt request for the expulsion of a Canadian diplomat. Tensions between the two nations have persisted since then, with no indications of either side relenting.

Traditionally, Canada has been a preferred destination for Indian immigrants, attracting thousands of people each year seeking better opportunities in life, education, and employment. Earlier this month, The Washington Post revealed that Canada hosts the largest Sikh community residing outside of India, with a total of 770,000 members. This Sikh population constitutes approximately 2.1% of Canada's total population, surpassing the 1.7% represented by individuals of Indian descent in the country. As a response to Nijjar's murder, certain Sikh organizations in Canada

organized a Khalistan referendum, leading to the alleged display of inflammatory posters on Hindu temple walls, depicting Indian diplomats as murderers. In March 2023, Sikh protesters breached security and entered Indian diplomatic posts and consulates in Canada.

The Indian government views Khalistan as a national security threat, with the movement predominantly centered in northern India, specifically Punjab. This Sikh separatist movement had a profound impact on all of India and endured for over a decade. However, it was eventually suppressed by the Indian government through raids on gurdwaras, staged gunfights, and the targeting of prominent Sikh leaders and youth. In 1984, following orders from Indira Gandhi, Indian armed forces launched an assault on the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, in an attempt to eliminate Sikh separatists demanding a separate homeland known as Khalistan. This operation resulted in the deaths of hundreds, though according to the Sikh community, the toll was in the thousands.

The aftermath of these attacks on Sikh holy sites saw the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. This event triggered widespread violence against Sikhs, with Hindu mobs targeting them in northern India, particularly in New Delhi. Sikhs



were pulled from their homes, beaten to death, and, in some cases, burned alive. While the armed forces quelled the immediate threat, the Khalistan movement has retained some supporters in Punjab and among the sizable Sikh diaspora in countries like Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Hardeep Singh Nijjar's murder occurred just ten days after a parade held in Canada, where one participant held a poster depicting Indira Gandhi in a bloody white saree with Sikhs aiming guns at her,

alongside the word "revenge." Nijjar was the third prominent Sikh separatist figure to be unexpectedly killed in recent months.

Before the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Canada and India had maintained a positive relationship. Both nations had been working to enhance their limited trade, which in 2022 amounted to only C\$13.7 billion (\$10.2 billion) out of Canada's total of C\$1.52 trillion. However, these efforts have been put on hold, as confirmed by both parties. Tensions were evident during Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to India for the G20 summit, reminiscent of the strained relations during his 2018 visit when no senior officials welcomed him at the airport. Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi met him only at the end of his eight-day visit, which was a significant departure from diplomatic protocol. This behavior from India was linked to concerns about Khalistan activities in Canada.

Additionally, on September 24, a Hindu community in New Delhi protested against Prime Minister Trudeau for his perceived support of the anti-India Khalistan movement. They suggested that if Trudeau was so supportive of Khalistan, he should consider partitioning a part of Canada to create a separate Khalistan for Sikhs, with their full support. Canada's repeated accusations against India, coupled with India's consistent denials, attest that the situation between the two nations remains far from ideal.



Unveiling the Future: Key takeaways from UN General Assembly 2023 in New York



By Kanwal Munir

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) convened in New York in September 2023 under the compelling theme, "Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity: Accelerating Action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals Towards Peace, Prosperity, Progress, and Sustainability for All." This global event gathered world leaders, diplomats, and stakeholders to address the most pressing challenges facing humanity. In this comprehensive analysis, we delve into the major takeaways from this landmark UNGA meeting, exploring how the theme reverberated through various discussions and initiatives.

A Strengthened commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development took center stage at the UNGA 2023, with a renewed commitment to accelerate progress towards its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Leaders emphasized the urgent need to rebuild trust in the

international community's capacity to achieve these goals. It was recognized that sustainable development is not only essential for addressing global challenges but also for fostering peace, prosperity, and global solidarity.

Progress towards the SDGs was extensively reviewed. While some achievements were celebrated, many nations acknowledged that more robust efforts were required, particularly in addressing poverty, inequality, and climate change. The assembly agreed on the necessity of aligning national policies with the SDGs and mobilizing resources to bridge the funding gap, demonstrating a commitment to global solidarity.

Climate Action as A Cornerstone of Solidarity

Within the broader context of rebuilding trust and solidarity, climate action emerged as a cornerstone. The impending COP29 in Brazil was a focal point of discussions, with leaders recognizing the urgency of the climate crisis and the necessity for bold, collective action. Countries pledged to enhance their climate commitments, emphasizing that addressing climate

change transcends borders and demands global cooperation.

The assembly called for a holistic approach to climate action, encompassing not only emissions reduction but also climate adaptation and resilience-building, especially in vulnerable communities. The transition to renewable energy, reforestation efforts, and technology sharing were identified as key drivers of progress in the fight against climate change.

Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution

In the pursuit of rebuilding trust and global solidarity, the UNGA 2023 tackled several ongoing geopolitical conflicts and tensions. Diplomats and leaders engaged in dialogue to seek peaceful solutions to crises such as the Ukraine situation, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and regional disputes in the South China Sea. The commitment to diplomacy, dialogue, and adherence to international law emerged as crucial factors in preventing further escalations and fostering lasting peace.

The international community collectively

acknowledged that conflicts are a hindrance to achieving the 2030 Agenda's goals. Therefore, resolution efforts were seen as not only morally imperative but also essential for global stability and progress.

Global Health and Pandemic Preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic remained a dominant concern, illustrating the necessity of international cooperation and solidarity in addressing global health crises. Leaders emphasized the importance of equitable vaccine distribution and access to healthcare. The assembly called for the strengthening of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the establishment of a comprehensive global pandemic response framework.

Pandemic preparedness was regarded as a vital component of rebuilding trust in the international community's capacity to respond effectively to global challenges. Nations acknowledged the importance of sharing knowledge, resources, and expertise to ensure a coordinated and efficient response to future health emergencies.

Technology and Cybersecurity

The digital age and the increasing role of cyberspace in global affairs were explored through the lens of rebuilding trust and solidarity. Discussions revolved around the responsible use of artificial intelligence, data privacy, and the need for robust cybersecurity measures. Member states recognized the potential benefits of digital technology in achieving sustainable development but also stressed the importance of addressing the associated risks.

The consensus at the UNGA was that building trust in technology requires clear regulations and international cooperation. Cybersecurity measures were discussed to protect nations from digital threats and promote responsible AI and data practices.

Human Rights and Gender Equality

The UN General Assembly reaffirmed its commitment to human rights and gender equality, recognizing them as integral to global solidarity and progress. Leaders discussed the imperative of protecting and

promoting the rights of marginalized communities, including refugees and migrants. Gender equality was a central theme, with calls for greater representation of women in leadership roles and efforts to combat gender-based violence and discrimination. Rebuilding trust and global solidarity necessitated addressing disparities and ensuring that all individuals enjoy their fundamental rights and opportunities.



Humanitarian Assistance and Refugees

The global humanitarian crisis remained a pressing concern. Member states pledged to increase support for humanitarian assistance and refugee resettlement, reflecting a commitment to shared responsibility. Discussions revolved around addressing the root causes of displacement and conflict, providing adequate humanitarian funding, and ensuring the safety and dignity of refugees and internally displaced persons. The international community recognized that solidarity extends to those most vulnerable and affected by crises, underscoring the need for collective action.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2023 United Nations General Assembly, framed by the theme of rebuilding trust and fostering global solidarity, epitomized the imperative of unified action. The assembly, attended by leaders and representatives from across the globe, highlighted the shared commitment to a future characterized by peace, prosperity, progress, and sustainability. The resonance of this commitment reverberated throughout the discussions, underlining the significance of multilateral cooperation in addressing the

world's most pressing challenges.

This session provided a platform for a renewed dedication to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing their integral role in shaping a sustainable and equitable future. The urgency of climate action was underscored as countries pledged to accelerate efforts to combat climate change, recognizing it as a universal concern transcending borders.

In the realm of diplomacy and conflict resolution, the assembly demonstrated the capacity for dialogue and adherence to international law as pivotal tools in ensuring global stability. The response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic showcased the importance of equitable access to healthcare and the need for a comprehensive pandemic response framework.

The digital age, marked by technological advancements, prompted discussions on responsible technology use and the necessity of robust cybersecurity measures. Gender equality and human rights emerged as non-negotiable principles, integral to the pursuit of global solidarity. Amid the myriad discussions and pledges, the session resonated with a resounding call for humanitarian assistance and support for refugees, reaffirming the global community's commitment to safeguarding the most vulnerable.

In summation, the UNGA 2023 served as a testament to the international community's collective resolve to navigate a complex and interconnected world. The takeaways from this historic assembly underscore the significance of unity, cooperation, and trust as the world endeavors to realize a brighter, more equitable, and sustainable future for all.

Breaking Barriers: Sobia Cheema's Journey to Empower Women in Pakistan's Media Landscape



By Ahmad Waleed

Sobia Cheema stands as a trailblazer among the rare female journalists in Pakistan who defied societal barriers to ascend to the pinnacle of broadcast journalism. Commencing her journey in the world of broadcast media as a producer in 2004, she would go on to assume the role of Director of Programming at 92 News in 2013. Born and raised in the unassuming town of Arifwala, Punjab, her early education was rooted in these humble surroundings.

"In remote locales like Arifwala, the birth of daughters often goes unnoticed, and the idea of educating them remains largely overlooked," Sobia shared during our conversation, conducted from her current residence in Texas. She recollects the prevailing mindset that relegated girls to the sole role of caretakers within their families, a mindset that significantly contributes to the persistently low literacy rates in such towns and villages. "We adhered to the joint family system, where familial decisions were rendered by other family members, and individual voices were stifled. Thankfully, my father was a man of progressive ideals who championed the cause of educating his daughters," she continued. "I have one brother and a sister, both now established in their careers as a banker and lecturer, respectively. My father, a government employee, sadly passed away just last year," Sobia disclosed.

"The environment in which I was raised was one where the plight of women was characterized by oppression. It was a world devoid of independence and the autonomy to make one's own choices. The deficiency in literacy and power was palpable. Invariably, sons were accorded preferential treatment over daughters. Even within the confines of my joint family, I encountered prejudices, as my male cousins

were undeniably esteemed in many regards, while my gender made me feel inferior."

Speaking of the opportunities available to women in her hometown, Sobia pointed out that Arifwala did indeed have women's colleges, yet the prevailing sentiment still discouraged women from pursuing careers, instead relegating them to domestic chores. "In many instances, women in these areas are married off while they're still in school, thus truncating their educational journeys. This is a deeply concerning issue that afflicts our nation," she lamented.

Following her primary education, her family relocated to Lahore, where she completed her secondary education at a government-run school. "In Lahore, I also ventured into athletics and achieved district-level victories," Sobia mentioned.

Sobia pursued her undergraduate studies at Lahore College for Women University, one of Pakistan's premier women-only institutions of higher learning. Following her undergraduate degree, she majored in journalism and earned an MSc in Mass Communication. Throughout her academic pursuits, she maintained a strong focus on sports, amassing several medals. She attributes all of her accomplishments to the unwavering support and encouragement of her father.

Lahore, she found, was a city brimming with opportunities, and she soon secured a position as a producer at the newly-launched Geo News, Pakistan's largest media outlet. "It was a dream come true, as I had always harbored the ambition of proving myself in this field, one that offered a pathway to empower the women of Pakistan," she

expressed. "While society tends to cast a disparaging eye on women in media roles, I did not face direct opposition from my family. However, the extended relatives were another matter altogether. My aunts and uncles exerted pressure, particularly on my father, urging him to dissuade me from pursuing a career in media, deeming it 'inappropriate' for women. Instead, they insisted on marriage," she recalled.

Sobia notes that workplace pressures and discrimination form another formidable hurdle that working women must navigate, in addition to familial and societal criticism. "Working as a female team leader in most of the news outlets I've been part of was no walk in the park, primarily due to the lingering presence of male chauvinism," she recounted.

"Notwithstanding, not all male colleagues subscribed to this viewpoint. I encountered difficulties in executing tasks, especially when dealing with the Master Control Room, and sometimes my male team members would decline to assist. Managing live outdoor shows posed distinct challenges. Yet, I refused to yield, taking charge of every situation with a positive and determined approach. This demonstrated my leadership abilities and my capacity to uplift my team, fostering a sense of unity that propelled us forward," Sobia elucidated regarding the challenges she confronted.

Sobia observes that media organizations in Pakistan have much ground to cover when it comes to providing on-the-job support and facilities for their female employees. In her pursuit of equality, diversity, and inclusion, she contends that women, just like their male counterparts, deserve a work environment that is respectful, accommodating, and conducive to their professional advancement. "Women are consistently underpaid, and the glass ceiling remains intact, with few women ascending to top-tier positions," she noted.

Sobia has lent her expertise to several prominent news channels in Pakistan, including Geo News, Express News, 92 News, Dunya TV, ATV (an entertainment channel), and Suno News. Presently, she serves as a Special Correspondent for Suno News, stationed in Texas, USA.



Her illustrious career has afforded her the privilege of being selected for the US State Department's International Visitors Leadership Programme (IVLP). Additionally, she received Honorary Citizenship from the Mayor of South Dakota. Sobia has also been an active member of the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), an organization dedicated to fostering peace among South Asian nations.

As for her future endeavors, Sobia aspires to become a part of global organizations addressing women's rights issues and promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration.



Chitral's Resilience: Unity, Peace, and the Fight Against Terrorism



By Danyial Wali

On the morning of September 6, a tragic and alarming event unfolded in Chitral, a peaceful and welcoming valley in northern Pakistan. Terrorists armed with advanced weaponry launched a coordinated attack on two military checkpoints, sparking a fierce exchange of gunfire. The attack was particularly significant in the famous tourist spot of Bomboret, home to the indigenous Kalash Tribe. Reports indicated that these attacks were orchestrated from neighboring Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Afghanistan. Despite the early hour, Pakistani forces along the border were already on high alert, prepared to respond to the threat. The clash resulted in the loss of at least four Pakistani soldiers and 12 armed militants, with the outlawed Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claiming responsibility.

This event highlights the ongoing security challenges in the region, particularly along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Despite the peaceful and hospitable nature of Chitral, it has become a focal point for security concerns, necessitating swift and

effective responses from Pakistani security forces. The resilience of the local population and their support for counter-terrorism efforts serves as a testament to their determination to maintain peace and security in the region. The situation also underscores the need for continued cooperation and vigilance in addressing the menace of terrorism that affects both Pakistan and its neighboring countries. The response of the local community was marked by appreciation for the security forces' operation and full support for the eradication of terrorism from the country, as stated by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) in a press release.

Chitral Scouts and Pakistan Army Repel Terrorist Attack

Despite facing a surprise attack in the early hours of the day, the brave soldiers of Chitral Scouts displayed remarkable courage in their fight against the terrorist. Even facing adversaries armed with

modern weapons, the security forces retaliated with full force to defend their homeland. A prolonged exchange of gunfire persisted for hours, intensifying throughout the day.

As evening approached, the Pakistan Army swiftly mobilized its forces to eliminate the terrorist threat. Special forces equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry were deployed to the region, showcasing the government's commitment to addressing the situation. Pakistan's military reported that they successfully repelled the attack, forcing TTP militants to retreat across the border into Afghanistan. The imposition of a three-day curfew in the mountainous region signaled the seriousness of the situation and the need for security measures to restore stability. On September 10, the military reported the elimination of seven more militants in ongoing "sanitization" operations, indicating that some TTP militants had entrenched themselves in the area. The use of gunship helicopters further emphasized the challenges faced in rooting out these insurgents.

A new front in the war against Islamabad

The tranquil Chitral region, which was once known for its peace, now finds itself at the center of TTP's attention. The TTP's insurgency has gained significant momentum since its ideological and organizational partner, the Afghan Taliban, regained power in Afghanistan two years ago. Analysts believe that the surprising infiltration into Chitral underscores the TTP's efforts to establish a territorial stronghold once again within Pakistan. This incursion hints at the possibility that the TTP is exploring a fresh front in its conflict with Islamabad.

In contrast to other border areas adjacent to Afghanistan, like FATA, Chitral has historically maintained peace primarily due to its formidable terrain, characterized by severe winters and heavy snowfall, making it extremely challenging for terrorists to traverse. However, the recent attack signifies an assertive shift in TTP's strategy as it seeks to disrupt the tranquility of the valley. This presents a significant strategic challenge for Pakistan, as an incursion from Chitral's extensive borders could evolve into a major threat, potentially destabilizing the region further.

Response from the public

A critical examination of the public response in Chitral to the recent attack provides valuable insights into the regional dynamics and the resilience of its people. The traditionally peaceful residents of Chitral were profoundly affected by the

news of the attack, leading to a significant disruption in the valley. This reaction reflects the vulnerability of the community to such incidents due to their relative isolation and the rarity of such security threats in the past.

One noteworthy aspect of the public response was the rapid dissemination of rumors and fake news, akin to an unstoppable force like erupting lava. This highlights the power of misinformation in times of crisis and the need for effective communication channels and information verification processes. Initial shortcomings in the response of the district administration, such as delayed communication about the incident, added to the confusion and chaos. This underscores the importance of timely and transparent communication from authorities during security crises to help manage public perceptions and minimize panic.

However, despite the flood of fake news and initial communication issues, the resilience and unity of the Chitral residents shone through. The public condemnation of the TTP's attack and demands for a swift response from law enforcement agencies were evident on social media platforms, illustrating a strong community spirit and a firm stance against terrorism.

Notably, Chitral stood out from other regions in its disowning attitude towards the terrorists. The collaboration between the residents and law enforcement agencies in the fight against terrorism showcased a determination to maintain peace and stability in the region. The peace walk organized by various political and community leaders further emphasized solidarity with the state

of Pakistan while rejecting the menace of terrorism.

The response of the people of Chitral to the TTP attack magnifies their commitment to peace and their willingness to cooperate with authorities to combat security threats. It also highlights the challenges posed by misinformation during crises and the importance of effective communication and information management in such situations.

In the face of adversity, Chitral's response to the recent terrorist attack stands as a testament to the unwavering spirit of its people and the determination to preserve the region's peace and tranquility. This incident, which shook the once peaceful valley, has revealed both the vulnerabilities and the strengths of the community. Chitral, known for its stunning landscapes and hospitable inhabitants, has shown that it is not willing to let the specter of terror tarnish its reputation. Despite the shock and disruption caused by the attack, the people of Chitral have rallied together with resilience and unity, denouncing the perpetrators and demanding swift action from the authorities.

As Chitral faces this new front in the war against terror, it calls upon the collective strength of its people and the unwavering commitment of its security forces to safeguard its peace and stability. The region's response serves as a beacon of hope, reminding us all that in the face of adversity, unity and resilience can triumph over terror. Chitral's journey towards lasting peace continues, and the world watches in admiration as its people stand firm against the forces of darkness.



The Silent Killer: Hypertension's Grim Toll on Pakistan and the Global Challenge

By Romana Afsheen

Hypertension, often referred to as the silent killer, is a global health crisis that affects millions of individuals, with dire consequences for public health systems. A recent report titled "The race against a silent killer" sheds light on the concerning situation of hypertension in Pakistan. The report underscores that only 44% of the 32.2 million hypertensive individuals in the country are diagnosed, and of those diagnosed, a mere 35% receive treatment, with an even smaller fraction having their hypertension under control. These alarming statistics demand immediate attention and action from healthcare authorities and policymakers.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a medical condition characterised by elevated blood pressure in the arteries, which can lead to severe health complications, including stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney damage, and more. While age and genetics contribute to the risk of developing hypertension, modifiable factors such as diet, physical activity, and alcohol consumption play a significant role in its prevalence.

Hypertension poses a significant public health challenge worldwide, affecting one in three adults and causing an enormous burden on healthcare systems and economies. In this comprehensive report, we will explore the recent findings from Pakistan, where hypertension is silently taking its toll, and examine the global implications and challenges associated with this condition.

The Hypertension Crisis in Pakistan

The report titled "The race against a silent killer" provides a sobering picture of the hypertension crisis in Pakistan. Among the 32.2 million hypertensive people in the country, only 44% are diagnosed, leaving a staggering 56% undiagnosed. This



alarming gap in diagnosis is a critical issue that needs to be addressed to prevent severe health complications down the line.

Of the diagnosed hypertensive individuals, just 35% are receiving treatment, indicating that a significant portion of those identified with the condition is not adequately managed. Even more concerning is that only 11% of hypertensive patients have their condition under control. This lack of control can lead to a myriad of health problems and highlights the inadequacy of the healthcare system in managing hypertension effectively in Pakistan.

Key Risk Factors

The report also highlights several key risk factors that contribute to the high prevalence of hypertension in Pakistan. It reveals that daily salt consumption per capita stands at a worrisome 9 grams, well above the recommended limit, which can lead to elevated blood pressure. Furthermore, 21% of the population are smokers, with a notable gender gap of 34% males and 8% females, indicating a higher prevalence among men.

Physical inactivity is another major concern, with 34% of the Pakistani population classified as physically inactive based on 2016 data. Sedentary lifestyles, coupled with poor dietary

habits and high salt consumption, create a perfect storm for hypertension to thrive in the country.

Mortality and Economic Impact

The dire consequences of hypertension are tragically evident in Pakistan. In 2019, approximately 450,000 people succumbed to cardiovascular diseases, with a staggering 58% of these deaths attributed to high blood pressure. This places an enormous burden on the healthcare system and the economy, as the costs associated with treating cardiovascular diseases and their complications are substantial.

Challenges Faced by Pakistan

The report underscores several critical challenges faced by Pakistan in addressing the hypertension crisis. First and foremost, Pakistan lacks treatment guidelines for the management of hypertension, which hampers healthcare professionals' ability to provide standardised, effective care to patients. Additionally, the country lacks a national target for blood pressure, which is essential for setting goals and tracking progress in controlling hypertension at the national level.

Furthermore, Pakistan has no national target for salt consumption, a significant factor contributing to hypertension. A targeted approach to reducing salt consumption is essential to mitigate the risks associated with high blood pressure.

Moreover, the country lacks a functioning system for generating reliable cause-specific mortality data, making it difficult to understand the full impact of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases on the population.

Recommendations and Future Outlook

The report proposes a comprehensive plan to address the hypertension crisis in Pakistan. To achieve a 50% control rate, an additional 12.5 million hypertensive individuals would need to be effectively treated. Implementing this plan could avert around 839,000 deaths by 2040, demonstrating the life-saving potential of effective hypertension management.

On a global scale, the World Health Organization (WHO) report highlights that the number of people living with hypertension doubled between 1990 and 2019, from 650 million to 1.3 billion. A striking finding is that nearly half of individuals with hypertension globally are unaware of their condi-

tion, emphasising the need for increased awareness and early detection.

The report also emphasises that lifestyle changes, such as adopting a healthier diet, quitting tobacco, and increasing physical activity, can help lower blood pressure. Additionally, medications are available and can effectively control hypertension, preventing related complications.

Global Implications and Challenges

Hypertension is not limited to Pakistan; it is a global concern. The WHO report reveals that more than three-quarters of adults with hypertension live in low and middle-income countries, where access to healthcare resources may be limited. Approximately 4 out of every 5 people with hypertension globally are not adequately treated, highlighting the need for improved healthcare infrastructure and awareness campaigns. The report provides hope by stating that if countries can scale up coverage, 76 million deaths could be averted between 2023 and 2050. The prevention, early detection, and effective management of hypertension are among the most cost-effective interventions in healthcare and should be prioritised as part of national health benefit packages at the primary care level.

Conclusion

"The race against a silent killer" brings to light the gravity of the hypertension crisis in Pakistan and its global implications. The statistics are alarming, with a significant portion of the population going undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in dire consequences for public health and the economy. Urgent action is needed to address the challenges faced by Pakistan, including the lack of treatment guidelines, national targets, and reliable mortality data.

Globally, the silent killer is wreaking havoc, particularly in low and middle-income countries. The burden of hypertension can be alleviated through awareness campaigns, early detection, lifestyle changes, and effective medical management. It is imperative that countries prioritise hypertension as a public health concern and invest in healthcare infrastructure to combat this deadly condition effectively.

As we navigate the challenges posed by hypertension, both in Pakistan and on a global scale, we must remember that simple interventions can save lives. By taking action now, we can turn the tide against the silent killer and prevent countless deaths and suffering in the years to come.



Community-led wildlife tourism finds its niche in the Himalayas

Wildlife tourism projects that benefit local communities can be found across the Himalayas, offering hope for livelihoods and the conservation of unique mountain species



By Rishika Pardikar

The small village of Latpanchar, located next to Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary in the Himalayan foothills of India's West Bengal state, attracts visitors from across the country and beyond. They travel to see rare and beautiful birds like the rufous-necked hornbill, long-tailed broadbill and red-headed trogon, many of which can be found in the village itself.

Home to around 15,000 people, Latpanchar boasts 17 homestays, 15 bird guides and 20 drivers, according to Parag Gurung, a local home-stay owner. The village is an example of a trend visible across the Himalayas, of locally-led, small-scale tourism that serves visitors interested in lesser-known species than the tigers and elephants typical of mainstream safaris.

Wildlife-based tourism is big business in India. In the year 2015-16, tourism revenue generated by the country's tiger reserves was approximately INR 24.9 million (USD 301,100), while on average, tiger reserves are estimated to

generate around 5 million days of employment annually. While there may be a long way to go before other wildlife tourism models produce equivalent figures, experts say there is great potential in the Himalayas to develop models of wildlife tourism that benefit local communities as well as biodiversity conservation.

Tourism potential in the Eastern Himalayas

In Latpanchar, everyone involved in ecotourism operations, from home-stay owners to drivers, cooks and birding guides, comes from the local community, says Gurung, adding that this drives a widespread recognition of the value of conservation.

"Tourism will remain only if these birds and these forests remain," he says. Gurung notes that the growth of wildlife-focused tourism in the village over the past decade has provided many in the community with their entire livelihood, reducing their reliance on the forest for resources like firewood.

Tourism will remain only if these birds and these forests remain.

The Himalayan region is a biodiversity hotspot, with many species of plant and animal having evolved in the region's diverse valleys, separated by high ridges and peaks. The Eastern Himalayas, designated an 'Endemic Bird Area' by the NGO Bird Life International, is home to 23 bird species that live nowhere else on Earth.

India boasts an active community of birdwatchers, with thousands of volunteers regularly contributing to bird counts. The country's Himalayan areas are also standard destinations for high-end, international birding tour companies, demonstrating a healthy demand among global enthusiasts for trips to see the region's special birds. As such, the potential for building specialist tourism around this biological uniqueness – which can then have spillover benefits for conservation – is high.

Anirban Datta Roy, a conservation biologist who has worked with tribal communities in India's north-east, says: "Considering the terrain and habitat in north-east India that influence ease of sightings, birds have proven to be successful for tourism, especially since there are many takers for the rich bird diversity of the region." Some of the most attractive species for visiting birdwatchers include hornbills (including great, rufous-necked and wreathed), pheasants (such as Blyth's tragopan, Mrs Hume's Pheasant and the Himalayan monal) and cranes. "Ideally the focus species should have a cultural connection with the community that may help in taking forward [community-led tourism] initiatives," Roy adds.

Aside from Latpanchar, other examples from the Eastern Himalayas include community-conserved areas around the high-altitude village of Thembang in Arunachal Pradesh, where tourists come to see red pandas in the surrounding forests; and community-based butterfly-watching in the Garo hills of Meghalaya.

Meanwhile, in the mid-hills of Ilam district in eastern Nepal, local communities benefit from tourists hoping to see red pandas, and earn a living from providing hospitality services like home-stays and working as forest guides, says Janita Gurung, an ecologist at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).

"The Red Panda Network is building capacity of the local communities for tourism centred around the endangered red pandas. They also know when it's best to conduct these trips so that the red pandas are least disturbed," she says, adding that the income panda tourism brings in acts as an incentive for the community to ensure the animals and their habitat and food – bamboo in particular – is conserved.

Chinese villages focus on bird photography

In the Himalayan foothills of China's Yunnan province, bird photography has grown into a mini-industry that supports the livelihoods of entire villages. In Baihualing, on the outskirts of Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve, tourism operations are collectively run by the 60 households that make up the community,

says Yi Shaoliang, intervention manager for rangeland and wetlands at ICIMOD. Local residents operate lodges and hotels and provide guiding services, targeted at the sizeable community of bird photography enthusiasts hoping to photograph the region's special bird species, like the Sclater's monal and Yunnan fulvetta. Yi estimates that annual income from bird photography-related tourism in Baihualing averages USD 3,000-5000 per household.

A 2021 ICIMOD case study looked at bird photography in the nearby village of Hanlong, also adjacent to Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve. Since 2009, villagers have erected hides and dug ponds on their property to attract bird species which are highly sought after by photographers. 86% of households in the village are now involved in some way with bird photography, the study found.



The study concluded that bird photography tourism had provided local communities with new employment opportunities; reduced their extraction of resources such as wood from forests; and provided villagers with detailed knowledge of their local biodiversity. Villagers have also developed cooperative mechanisms to decide where hides and ponds should be built (allaying concerns they would impact the area's ecology) and share resulting income. "Bird photography tourism offers new opportunities and hope for sustaining local livelihoods and biodiversity in conservation priority areas," the study concludes.

"Wildlife tourism can help sustain local livelihoods. Governments play a big role in providing the enabling conditions for such tourism. And scientists can provide the right guidance," says Yi.

Engaging local voices

Earlier this year, in meetings with India's Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, a group of young Indian pastoralists made a case for skills development programmes that would help them participate in ecotourism, including as naturalists and tour guides.

"Pastoralists, living and sharing space and time with the charismatic and endemic antelope and carnivores, have the best knowledge about their presence and habitat use," says Rashmi Singh, an affiliate researcher at PASTRES: Pastoralism, Uncertainty, Resilience, an international research programme focused on understanding pastoralism.

Singh emphasises the importance of including local institutions like village or

tribal councils in the management of ecotourism, to ensure resources are used sustainably and benefits are shared equitably among the community. She also suggests that in order to reduce adverse impacts on wildlife, visits to core habitats should be restricted. In similar vein, Roy says that disturbance to wildlife can be managed and regulated via use of designated trails and trained guides.

More broadly, Roy says that to be successful in the long run, community-led wildlife tourism initiatives have to address three key areas: acceptance and support from the community; assessment of impacts on wildlife and implementation of necessary safeguards; and sustainable financing options and long-term commercial viability.

Pakistan World Cup Squad

By Ali Abdullah

After much anticipation and a flurry of rumours, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has finally unveiled its squad for the 2023 World Cup. Speculations had been circulating on social media regarding disputes between various players and PCB officials.

In response to the unfortunate injury of Naseem Shah, who requires an extensive recovery period, Hasan Ali has been selected as his replacement in Pakistan's ODI World Cup team. Usama Mir, who made his ODI debut earlier this year against New Zealand but was omitted from the Asia Cup squad, has been included as the second leg spinner for Pakistan. The pace attack for Pakistan is bolstered by the likes of Mohammad Haris, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf, and Mohammad Wasim, while the versatile spin bowler Mohammad Nawaz retains his spot, with Faheem Ashraf left out.

Inzamam-ul-Haq, Pakistan's chief selector, addressed the situation with the fast bowlers, saying, "Naseem was injured, he was our main bowler and it was unfortunate. [Mohammad] Hasnain has an ankle injury and is sidelined, as is Ihsanullah. If you see how Hasan Ali performed in the LPL or his other recent performances, he has outperformed most others. He is an experienced bowler with a track record of delivering in major tournaments for Pakistan. When Naseem was ruled out, we needed someone who could bowl effectively with the new ball. Hasan Ali excels with both the old and new ball and brings a significant energy boost to the team."

Naseem's shoulder injury, sustained during the Asia Cup, will keep him sidelined for an extended period, and Inzamam confirmed that his absence would extend beyond just the World Cup. Inzamam expressed his disappointment, saying, "Unfortunately, according to our doctors' assessment, Naseem will be out of action for longer than just the World Cup. At the time, he was, in my opinion, the world's best bowler. It's a significant



loss for Pakistan, and we hope for his swift recovery."

Hasan Ali's last ODI appearance was in June 2022, and he last represented Pakistan in any competition during the second Test match against New Zealand in Karachi in January of the same year.

The PCB delayed the announcement of Pakistan's World Cup squad for a few days while assessing the team's underwhelming performance at the Asia Cup, where they finished last in their Super Four group after losses to India and Sri Lanka. Additionally, the board awaited a second opinion on Naseem's injury, but unfortunately, no positive news emerged.

The PCB issued a statement stating that Chairman Zaka Ashraf held meetings with team captain Babar Azam, vice-captain Shadab Khan, members of the technical committee Misbah-ul-Haq and Mohammad Hafeez, head coach Grant Bradburn, and bowling coach Morne Morkel. While the details of these discussions

remained confidential, there was considerable speculation about the timing and content of Pakistan's team announcement. Adding to the intrigue, Mohammad Hafeez resigned from the technical committee on the eve of the team release.

Pakistan's journey to the World Cup has been far from smooth, despite their current status as the No. 1 ODI team. They faced challenges during the Asia Cup, with frequent disruptions in their schedule due to ongoing negotiations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This led to a crushing defeat to India and a heart-wrenching loss to Sri Lanka. Injuries also plagued the team, with Afridi, Agha Salman, Imam-ul-Haq, Naseem, and Haris all missing games.

To prepare for the World Cup, Pakistan is scheduled to play two exhibition matches against Australia and New Zealand on September 29 and October 3, respectively. Their opening match of the tournament will take place on October 6 in Hyderabad, where they will face the Netherlands.

The Asian Games 2023



The Asian Games, also known as Asiad, bring together athletes from across Asia in a multi-sport event that occurs every four years. Historically, the Asian Games were overseen by the Asian Games Federation (AGF) until the 1978 Games, which were first held in New Delhi, India. However, following the dissolution of the AGF, the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) has been responsible for organising the Games since the 1982 edition. It's worth noting that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognizes the Asian Games, ranking them as the second-largest multisport event after the Olympic Games.

Since 2010, host cities have had the privilege of overseeing both the Asian Games and the Asian Para Games, the latter being a competition designed for athletes with impairments. It's important to clarify that, although the Asian Para Games are held immediately after the Asian Games, they operate separately and are not included in any agreements with the host cities for the Asian Games. Initially scheduled for 2022, the event was postponed to 2023 due to rising COVID-19 cases in the host city.

Pakistan is a proud participant in these prestigious Games, and its volleyball team has recently made headlines. During the current Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China, the Pakistan volleyball team achieved a remarkable victory by defeating their arch-rivals, India, in straight sets. The scoreline of Pakistan's victory stood at 25-21, 25-20, and 25-23, showcasing their dominance throughout the match.

Prior to this achievement, Pakistan faced Qatar in a dramatic quarterfinal game. The Pakistani team, ranked 51st, went head-to-head with the 17th-ranked Qatari team. Pakistan initially took the lead in the first set but saw Qatar mount a remarkable comeback, ultimately taking the set. Nevertheless, Pakistan demonstrated their strength in the third set and clinched it convincingly. Unfortunately, Qatar outperformed Pakistan in the fourth set, securing a decisive victory. The final scoreline was 24-26, 19-25, 25-23, and 18-25.

Notably, Pakistan's path to the quarterfinals included a 3-0 victory over South Korea (25-19, 25-22, and 25-21), solidifying their position as one of the top six teams. This

marked the first time since the 1990 Asian Games that a Pakistani team secured a place in the top five. Pakistan also dominated in group B by defeating comparatively weaker teams from Chinese Taipei and Mongolia. They outclassed Chinese Taipei in three sets (25-18, 25-20, and 25-19) and triumphed over Mongolia with scores of 25-17, 25-19, and 25-20. Pakistan's best volleyball-related achievement remains their third-place finish in the 1962 Asian Games in Jakarta. In 2018, Pakistan finished in the 8th position.

In addition to volleyball, Pakistan is participating in 24 other sports at the Asian Games. As of now, Pakistan has yet to secure a place on the medal tally. China leads the medal count with an impressive 50 gold medals, followed by the Republic of Korea with 13 golds. Japan holds 7 gold medals, while Uzbekistan and Hong Kong have secured 5 each. India and Indonesia have each won 3 gold medals, while Chinese Taipei and Thailand have 2 each. The United Arab Emirates is also in the top 10 with a single gold medal.

By Ali Abdullah



Punjab Notes: Qabil's poetry and Razi's translation

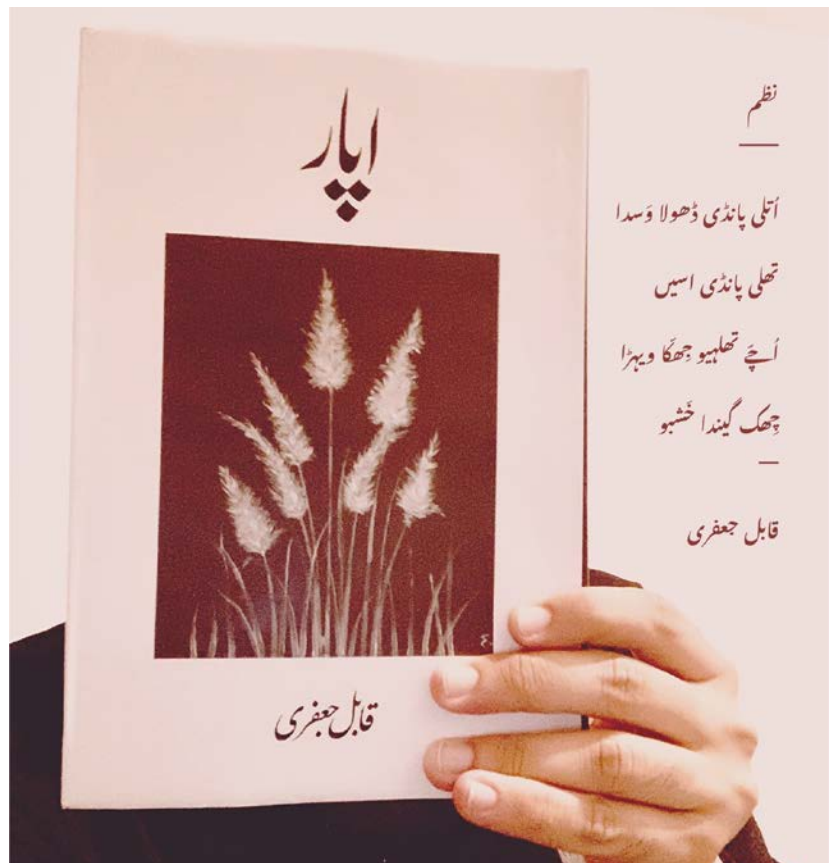
Qabil Jafri has made his debut as a poet with his book "Apaar (shoreless / infinite)" published by Sanjh Publishers, Lahore

By Mushtaq-soofi

The biographical note reads that he was born in the Chakwal city of Punjab. His ancestor had moved into Dhun Kahun from Amritsar centuries ago. His clan has made a significant literary contribution in Punjabi language. It's interesting to note that years before another towering figure named Pilu had migrated from Amritsar and settled in Dhun. He immortalised the tale of legendary Sahiban and Mirza. Other well-known classical poets of the region are Shah Sharaf and Shah Murad.

Jafri in a way represents the continuation of a rich poetic tradition. He in fact adds to the tradition by forcefully expressing the contemporary situation of his society and what it has historically faced; foreign incursions, deprivation, poverty and misery. His Dhun region has paradoxical character. On the one hand, it has been a recruiting area for military from the times of Emperor Ashoka to the present day and on the other a spectacle of houses with sad women waiting for their men to return. Its people have been used at best as the defenders of regimes and at worst as mercenaries that protected whoever could hire them.

Such a predicament is subtly reflected in Jafri's poems but at times loudly with anguish. To subvert this desolate picture of the past that has bearing on the painful present, he juxtaposes it with the stunning magic of what has survived the ravishes of time; the grand ancient Katas Raj complex, Shiv Temple, Kallar Kahar's lush gardens enlivened by peacocks' cries, freshwater lakes, Mount Sakesar's misty summits, Dhun's celebrated bulls, tough horses, natural fountains and falls, men's tall turbans and women's delicately embroidered shawls. Such vividly painted landscapes alleviate the sense of suffering and blandness of prosaic life. Thus he creates a sort of wonderland out of the mundaneness of social and individual life and



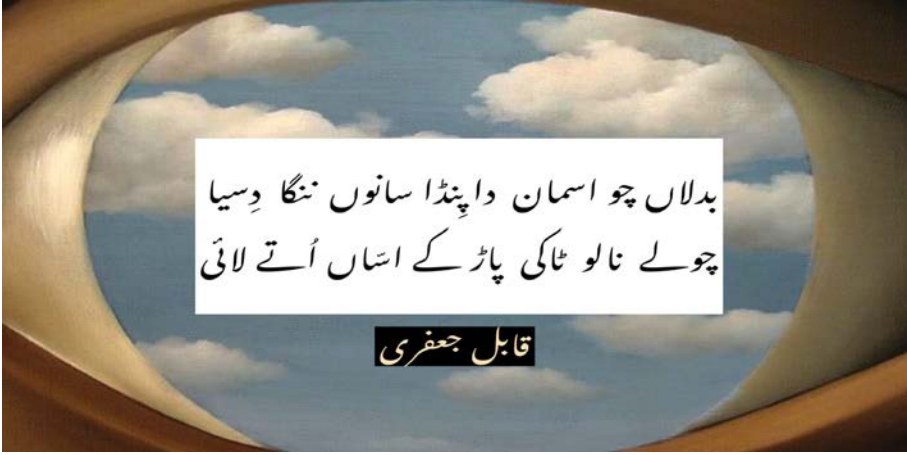
ever-amazing freshness of the natural world that surrounds him. He usually draws his imagery, similes and metaphors from the nature and country life. He has passion for songs and lyrics which are light and springy, makes them at times sounds as pleasant as nursery rhymes that can lull you into day-time somnolence. His penchant for folk rhythms gives his verses a titillating flow. The book has two segments; Ghazal and Nazm.

Ghazal doesn't have long history in Punjabi literature and as yet hasn't struck deep roots in our poetic soil. His Ghazals nonetheless attempt to capture his existential and social experience to the extent that is possible in this alien poetic construction. Jafri's command over language is commendable; it blends the contemporary use of language with that of traditional. Here is one of his short poems: "The night at

its half-way point/gusty glow/sickle like moon/blurred moonlight/shadowy figures/lovers face to face/eyes full of yearning!" Cultural consciousness, social rootedness and aesthetically created landscapes makes *Apaar* an enjoyable book of verses.

Herta Muller is a novelist and a poet. She writes in German language. Britannica says: "Herta Muller, Romanian-born German writer who won the Nobel Prize for 2009 for her works revealing the harshness of life in Romania under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu.

The award cited Muller for depicting 'the landscape of the dispossessed' with "the concentration of poetry and frankness of prose." Her novels include *The Passport*, *Traveling on One Leg*, *The Fox Was Ever the Hunter*, *The land of Green Plums*, *The Appoint*



with a different political system. Here she comes across a young man, junior to her in age and a student, and develops a sort of emotional relationship which proves short-lived. While in Berlin she first finds refuge in a hostel and then in a lackluster apartment building. Struggling to cope with bureaucratic indifference regarding her precarious situation, she develops an uncertain relationship with a sociologist. Lastly she falls for a man who is gay and is beset with his unending psychic-emotional crisis. It's a story of a woman's painful ordeal who has to fight to retain her sanity in the face of loneliness and alienation from the roots. The world for Irene is at best indifferent and at worst suffocating. She can hardly be Pollyannaish about the place she leaves and the place she lands up at.

Hameed Razi has done a good flowing translation of the novel which is no mean feat. He is an experienced hand and knows how to place the story in another language without damaging the structure and the beauty of the original. Thought-provoking and insightful, it's a source of aesthetic delight that delineates a terrible predicament of contemporary life of an uprooted individual. One hopes the publisher would take care of typos and misspellings in the next edition. The book should be on the shelves of all private and public libraries.

Courtesy Dawn

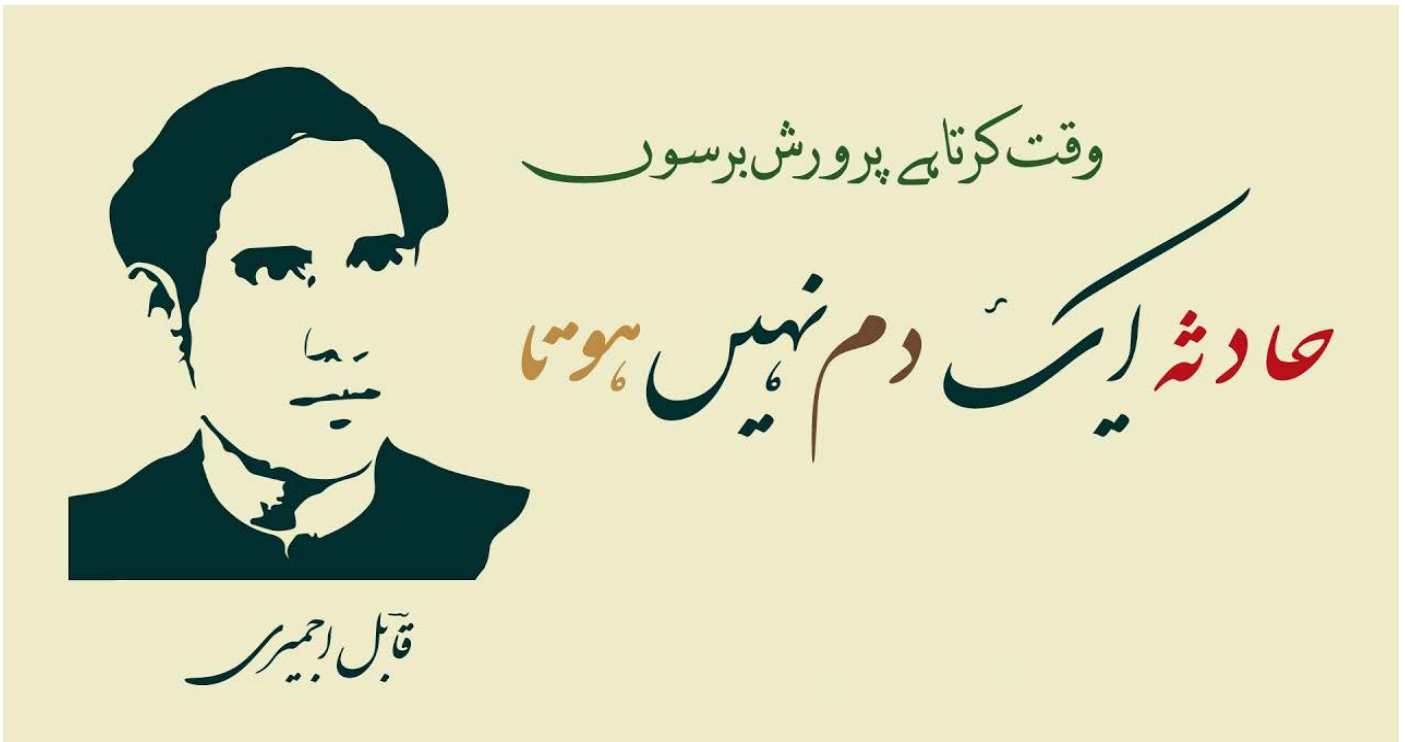
ment and The Hunger Angel. She has also published some books on poetry and essays. To get rid of intellectual repression, censorship and denial of freedoms under a totalitarian regime she moved to Germany in 1987. To explore and expose the grueling conditions under dictatorship and individual's struggle for survival and retaining sanity became her major concern in her fiction.

One of the Muller's novels Traveling on One Leg has been translated into Punjabi language by Hameed Razi under the title 'Aukhay Painday'. Its publisher is Aks Publications, Lahore.

Hameed Razi is a well-known travelogue writer, translator and novelist who has a

number of publications to his credit. His translations have already won him accolades. He has translated a selection of articles Ikivin Asadi de Buhay, Ignorance by Milan Kundera, The Day the Leader was Killed by Naquib Mafouz and Who Killed Palomino Molero by Mario Vargas Llosa. He has published three travelogues and a novel and two collections of short stories.

Aukhay Painday is a story of a young woman, Irene, who waits to cross into West Germany from some East European country ruled by an authoritarian regime that uses repression and persecution as political tools to control its citizens. She agonisingly waits for her documents which would facilitate her entry into a country



Pakistan's Theatrical Brilliance



By Sara Danial

The Pakistan Theatre Festival 2023, organized by the Arts Council of Pakistan (ACP) Karachi, commenced on September 8 and is slated to enchant audiences for an entire month. This extravaganza boasts a stellar lineup of 45 captivating shows. Notably, it bridges cultural divides by featuring seven international theatre groups in addition to 27 diverse theatre troupes from across Pakistan. As the most significant theatre festival in the nation, it is an ongoing spectacle with performances conducted in a myriad of languages, including Urdu, English, Sindhi, Sinhala, Punjabi, Turkish, German, and Persian. The plays on display tackle a wide array of contemporary themes, distinguishing this event from its predecessors, such as the Aalimi Urdu Conference and Youth Festival, by introducing an international flair to the local theatre scene.

Among the standout performances, the Punjabi play presented by the renowned Ajoka Theatre from Lahore, titled 'Unhi Mai Da Sufna,' captivated the audience. This masterful production, both written and directed by Shahid Nadeem, the head of Ajoka Theatre, received resounding applause for its impeccable staging and

direction. A talented cast featuring Naseem Abbas, M Usman, Razia, Malik Qaiser, Usman Zia, Bilal Mughal, Shahzad Sadiq, Rizwan Riaz, Haifa Mudassar, and Rania Mohsin breathed life into a narrative that delved into the human suffering and tragedy stemming from the aftermath of the 1947 Partition.

Another emotionally resonant play, 'They Both Sit in Silence for a While,' featuring Ali Junejo and Rasti Farooq, explored intricate family dynamics, reproductive choices, and the struggles of a career-oriented woman trapped in a role that hinders her pursuit of motherhood. This thought-provoking piece also sheds light on mental health issues, particularly the dismissive attitudes towards depression, even when experienced by men. It showcased live theatre at its finest, addressing contemporary subjects with adventurous acting, dark satire, experimental form, and an engaged and relatable audience.

'Dinner with Darling,' directed by Uzma Sabeen and written by Babar Jamal, ventured into the realm of farce, reviving a classic comedy style appreciated by audiences both young and old for the past

six decades. Directed by Farhan Alam Siddiqui, 'Taleem-e-Balighan' paid heartfelt homage to the original writer Khawaja Moinuddin, evoking nostalgia for traditional comedic storytelling. 'Insha ka Intezaar,' a tragic comedy by the renowned theatre group Tehrik-e-Niswan and directed by Anwar Jafri, starkly depicted Pakistan's current challenges and its gradual descent into a burdensome wasteland where basic rights have eroded. 'Ken B Eniwan's Story,' presented by Ruwanthie de Chickera from Sri Lanka, centered on Ken's journey through life's milestones.

The performance 'Waves' employed acrobatics, dance, and movement to portray a woman coping with the loss of her husband in an accident. This visually compelling enactment depicted the emotional rollercoaster she experienced, from grief and fear to numbness, all while using the metaphor of waves to convey the ebb and flow of her emotions. As a non-verbal piece, it allowed the audience to connect with the emotions on a deeply granular level, transcending dialogue, and delving into the raw essence of human experience.

Another standout, 'Say No,' directed and written by Shah Nawaz Bhatti from Aashkara Art Production, featured an exceptional cast. Set against the enchanting backdrop of the Thar region, the play explored the intricacies of matrimony intertwined with age-old traditions, including the captivating custom of 'Belly Talk.' Amidst this rich cultural tapestry, the performance unraveled a poignant narrative of tragedy, offering profound insights into the significance of promises, destinies, and the delicate interplay between tradition and the passage of time.

In tribute to the renowned writer Saadat Hassan Manto, the Ajoka Theatre Group presented 'Kaun Hai Yeh Gustakh' in Urdu. The production kicked off with heartfelt words from Muhammad Ahmad Shah, President of the Arts Council, and writer Shahid Nadeem. Shah lauded Nadeem's unwavering dedication, both within and outside Pakistan, emphasizing the invaluable contributions of the entire team in shaping contemporary theater. Nadeem, the writer and director, praised Ahmed Shah as a cultural luminary,

highlighting his pivotal role in fostering art and culture. The play itself served as a tribute to Manto, delving into his life and featuring a talented cast.

Another noteworthy production, 'Social Pagal,' written and directed by Shah Fahad, offered a tragicomedy in Urdu. This play invited the audience to delve into the complex psyches of six individuals grappling with their inner demons while navigating a mysterious world where life imprisonment was seen as a path to recovery. The battle for sanity unfolded as they journeyed through this enigmatic realm, revealing a disturbing odyssey that blurred the line between fractured minds and the glimmers of inner illumination. 'Into the Abyss of Minds' delved into the uncharted depths of the human psyche, where the quest for redemption blurred the line between shattered fragments and the faint glow of the human mind.

Prominent figures such as Khurshed Hyder, a senior media person and journalist, and Sania Saeed, an advocate for international theater exchange, lauded the festival's

significance in promoting cultural exchange, breaking down stereotypes, and fostering meaningful dialogue.

The Pakistan Theatre Festival is not merely entertainment for Karachi's residents, as emphasized by Ahmed Shah, CEO of ACP Karachi. It serves a larger purpose, offering solace to a population grappling with everyday challenges. Through meaningful entertainment and collaboration with stakeholders, the festival aims to present a softer, kinder image of Pakistan. These theatre festivals are essential in celebrating the nation's rich cultural tapestry. They entertain, educate, and provoke thought, providing a much-needed mental workout for Karachi's populace. ACP raises the bar by providing a platform for emerging and established playwrights, directors, actors, and artists to showcase their talents, share diverse narratives, and engage with critical social issues. In a country where traditions and contemporary voices coexist, such festivals serve as a vital bridge between the past and the present, enabling the vibrant expression of stories that deserve to be heard and celebrated.









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