

Fortnightly

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General Elections 2024

Elections are surrounded by calls for delay leading to a contentious debate over its postponement

Maulana's Afghanistan Tour

Visit may have several motives for visiting Afghanistan, both political and his personal security

Economy in 2024

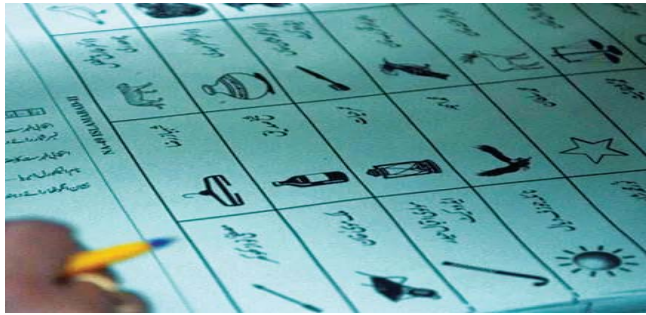
Wave of terrorism, inflation, heavy Taxation and High Power Tariff are major hurdles in the way of foreign investment in Pakistan

General Election Uncertainty persist despite all Hurdles Removed



Politics

2024 Election Anticipation: Stirring Controversy Before the Ballots are Cast By Nimra Atiq – **Page 04**



Not 'advisable' to put off Feb 8 polls, ECP says in response to Senate resolution-TTI Report – **Page 06**

PTI loses 'bat' as Supreme Court sets aside PHC decision-TTI Report – **Page 07**

Pakistan's Impending General Elections: A Landscape of Complexity By Daniyal Wali – **Page 09**



PPP nominates Bilawal for premiership By Faizan Bangash – **Page 11**

Reliving a historical blunder By Husain Haqqani – **Page 12**

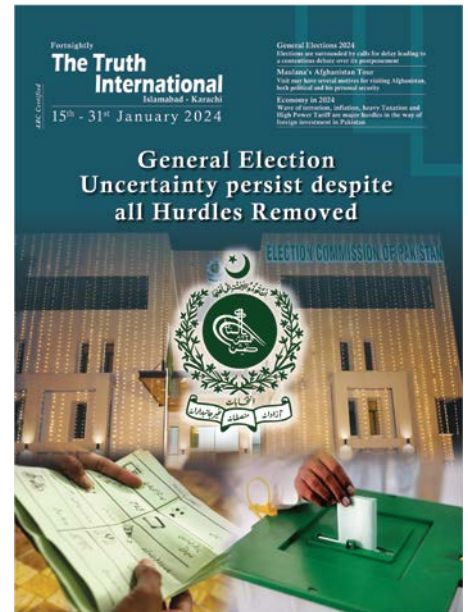
Photo Finish amidst Political Engineering By Naqi Akbar – **Page 14**



Foreign Affairs

A Comprehensive Report on the Ongoing Israel-Gaza Conflict and Regional Ramifications By Romana Afsheen – **Page 16**

Maulana's bet By Muhammad Amir Rana – **Page 18**



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US election 2024: Can Nikki Haley really stop Donald Trump? By Holly Honderich – **Page 20**



Russia warns Ukraine of nuclear attack if Kyiv targets its missile launch sites By J. Choudhry – **Page 22**

Economy

Pakistan urgently needs a big injection of foreign investment to bolster economic activities By Javed Mahmood – **Page 24**



Tackling the electricity challenge By Dr Khalid Waleed – **Page 27**

2024: Rocky road ahead By Shahid Kardar – **Page 29**

31 public entities caused Rs730b loss in FY22 By Shahbaz Rana – **Page 31**



Realistically speaking By Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri – **Page 33**

Embracing a new dawn By Dr Khaqan Hassan Najeeb – **Page 35**

National

Lack of focus on real issues By Dr Moonis Ahmar – **Page 37**



Amendments draft in Pension Scheme-2023 By Natasha Ali – **Page 39**

Regression of Media in Pakistan By Zafar Malik – **Page 41**

A deep dive into CSS exam data — gatekeeping or gateway to ranks of bureaucratic elite? By Osaama Shehzad – **Page 43**

Sports

Pakistan vs New Zealand T20I Series 2024 By Kanwal Munir – **Page 46**



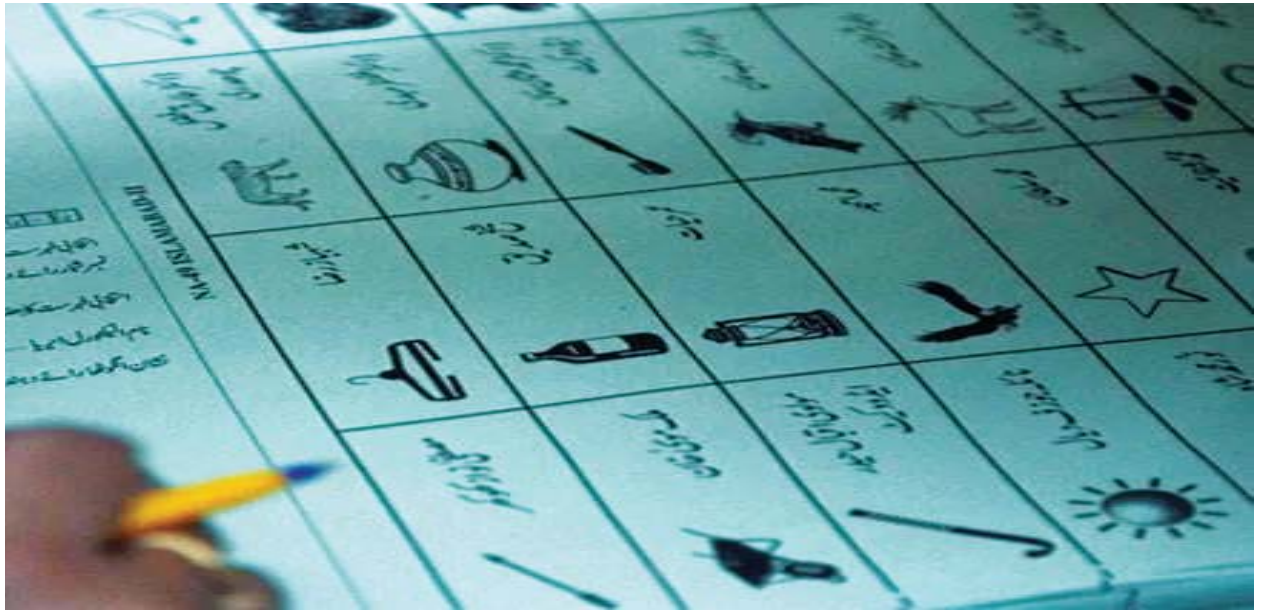
Australian Open 2024 results: Andy Murray loses to Tomas Martin Etcheverry By Jonathan Jurejko – **Page 48**

World's most expensive private jets, their owners – **Page 50**

Entertainment

'It was just a pay cheque': Fawad Khan didn't love Humsafar as much as you did – **Page 51**

2024 Election Anticipation: Stirring Controversy Before the Ballots are Cast



By Nimra Atiq

As Pakistan braces for the crucial 2024 elections, the political landscape is buzzing with anticipation and controversy, setting the stage for a democratic showdown unlike any other in the nation's history. While elections have always been a hotbed of contention in Pakistan, the upcoming polls are shrouded in an unprecedented level of complexity, leaving citizens and observers alike on the edge of their seats.

The upcoming election, scheduled for February 8, 2024, has been surrounded by calls for its delay, leading to a contentious debate over its postponement. Additionally, prohibiting ex-PM Imran Khan's cricket bat election symbol and the rejection of his party's claims by the Election Commission have further fueled the controversy. The interplay of political, economic, and security issues has necessitated a careful examination of the democratic process, with concerns about the fairness and credibility of the electoral process. The potential for election manipulation and the alignment of political and military interests have also raised questions about the transparency of the upcoming elections.

Symbol Allotment to Candidates

In addition to these issues, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has allotted election symbols to 145 political parties across Pakistan before the general election of 2024. The ECP has been criticized for its handling of the elections, and there are concerns about the fairness of the process. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has submitted a list of electoral emblems for 145 political parties to returning officers (ROs).

Major parties, which have been allotted symbols, include PPPP (arrow), PML-N (tiger), PTI-Nazriyati (batsman), PTI-Parliamentarians (turban), Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party (eagle), MQM-P (kite), JUI-F (book), BNP-Mengal (axe), Jamaat-i-Islami (scale), Sunni Ittehad Council (horse), BAP (human eye), Pakistan Muslim League (tractor) and PkMAP Party (tree).

In a parallel development, the iconic bat symbol of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has become the subject of a landmark legal battle that has reverberated through the highest

echelons of the judiciary. It has been emphasized that independent candidates will not be assigned election symbols associated with political parties. The list of exclusive election symbols for independent candidates has been forwarded to the Returning Officers (ROs). The Election Commission has instructed the ROs to refrain from assigning symbols that are not included in the provided list.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) lost the "bat" as an election symbol when the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SC) pronounced the Peshawar High Court ruling null and void. The PTI has been denied the symbol since the ECP pronounced its intra-party elections null and void, while the ANP failed to hold the polls and thus became ineligible to get election emblems under the law. The controversy surrounding the allocation of electoral symbols, particularly the PTI's bat symbol, has reached the Supreme Court, where a verdict is pending. This unfolding situation adds complexity to the political landscape in the lead-up to the 2024 general elections in Pakistan.

PTI chairman Barrister Gohar said



that all party candidates would contest elections independently.

The electoral emblem assigned to Barrister Gohar Ali Khan, who lost his position as PTI chairman due to a ruling by the Supreme Court, was "teapot," whereas Shaukat Yousafzai's symbol was "racket."

Shahryar Afridi of the PTI will run for office using a "bottle" emblem, while Shandana Gulzar will use a "bowl" symbol.

The electoral symbols of chimta (tongs) for the NA-151 and shoe for the NA-150 constituency of Multan have been assigned to the children of PTI senior leader Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Mehr Bano Qureshi and Zain Hussain Qureshi, respectively.

The decisions made by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) regarding symbol allotment hold significant implications for political participation in the electoral process. Ongoing legal disputes and judicial proceedings, especially related to the PTI's bat symbol, contribute to the heightened pre-election controversy, emphasizing the high-stakes nature of Pakistani politics.

The attention garnered by these developments highlights the broader importance of electoral symbols in the democratic process. With the 2024 elections on the horizon, the resolution of these issues will profoundly influence the political dynamics, as the ECP and Supreme Court decisions will shape the electoral landscape and impact the participation of political parties.

With less than a month remaining before Pakistan's 12th general elections, there is growing unease among analysts and some political figures that the upcoming vote could be one of the most manipulated in the country's history of democracy. The nomination process has been controversial, with the election body rejecting former Prime Minister Imran Khan's nomination to contest the elections. This has led to concerns about the transparency of the nomination process and the potential for election manipulation.

Critics highlight the state authorities' crack-down on Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its charismatic leader, Imran Khan, as proof of extensive rigging that may prevent

the former prime minister and his party from having a fair chance in the competition. Concerns about election manipulation are not new in the 240 million-strong country. Those who have been closely following Pakistani politics and elections over the years say that for the most part, elections in the country have been influenced to some extent.

In the last two general elections of Pakistan, voters have indeed given mandates to three different political parties to lead the country. In the 2013 general elections, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) emerged as the largest party. Similar to the previous general election, the outcome once again resulted in a hung parliament, with the PML-N securing the most votes and winning the most seats in the National Assembly. However, they were six seats short of a majority.



The 2018 general elections saw the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) winning the most seats in the National Assembly. Numerous analysts and political opponents of Khan have proposed that the Pakistani military played a significant role in Khan's ascent to power, allowing him to succeed while undermining his competitors. The upcoming 2024 elections will further shape the country's political landscape. The dynamic nature of these election results reflects the evolving preferences of the Pakistani electorate and the diverse political landscape of the country.

The pre-election period for the upcoming and last elections displays a similar pattern of manipulation. The major difference is that those old tactics are facing stronger resistance this time, and secondly, the party

at the wrong end of the establishment, the PTI, has been more successful in popularizing its narrative of victimhood, compared to the PML-N.

Both Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif, the leaders of the two main parties in Pakistan, the Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), faced ineligibility in the elections. However, the Supreme Court granted Nawaz Sharif a green chit and removed his lifetime disqualification, while Imran Khan remains ineligible to contest in the 2024 elections. The ECP disqualified Khan from politics for five years due to his corruption conviction.

On the other hand, Nawaz Sharif faced no such restrictions, and the ECP accepted his nomination after a court overturned two graft convictions. However, Sharif still needs a life ban on holding any public office to be

removed to qualify to stand, but he filed nomination papers for the elections regardless.

The controversial prelude to the 2024 elections is shaping the political narrative and capturing the attention of the nation. As political players intensify their campaigns and the electorate closely watches unfolding developments, the questions surrounding electoral reforms, and symbol allotment persist. With the nation on edge and political tensions running high, the upcoming elections are poised to be a defining moment in the country's democratic journey. The controversies preceding the event only serve to underscore the significance of robust and transparent electoral processes in safeguarding the democratic principles upon which the nation was founded.



Not 'advisable' to put off Feb 8 polls, ECP says in response to Senate resolution

TTI Report

Now Senator Hilalur Rehman has submitted another resolution in Senate of Pakistan asking to delay general elections scheduled for February 8th. Senator Dilawar has again written a letter to Chairman Senate Sadiq Sanjrani asking to take concrete steps to ensure that February 8th elections are postponed.

In response to Senate Resolution, The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has informed the Senate that all arrangements for the February 8 elections have been completed and it will not be "advisable" to put off the polls.

The ECP's statement came in response to the January 5 Senate resolution seeking a delay in the February 8 polls moved by Senator Dilawar Khan and passed by the house amid thin attendance.

The resolution cited harsh weather conditions in hilly areas and the deteriorating security situation as reasons for delaying the polls.

In the statement today, the ECP said it deliberated on the resolution in the meeting and observed that caretaker governments had been issued directions for "beefing up security matrix and provide congenial environment to the electorate" for peaceful elections.

Moreover, the electoral body said it submitted a commitment before the Supreme Court to hold elections on Feb 8, 2024.

Similarly, the ECP said it would not be out of place to mention that in the past general elections and local government polls have been held in the winter season.

Senator demands 'tangible steps'

Earlier today, Independent lawmaker Dilawar Khan urged Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani to ensure implementation of his resolution — recently adopted by the upper house of parliament — seeking a delay in the February 8 polls.

To the surprise and disbelief of many, on



January 5, the Senate unanimously passed a resolution to postpone the February 8 general elections in the country.

In a letter sent to the Senate chairman, Senator Dilawar said despite the House's explicit urging and the subsequent dispatch of a copy of the resolution to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), "it is disconcerting that no tangible steps have been taken by the ECP to postpone the General Elections scheduled for February 8, 2024".

As mover of the resolution, Senator Dilawar said he firmly believed that the concerns articulated in the resolution must be promptly addressed.

"The essence of holding free and fair elections appears compromised without a resolution to the issues raised."

The senator said it is imperative to ensure the postponement of the elections for effective "participation of people from all areas of Pakistan and across the entire political spectrum in the electioneering process".

"Your [the Senate chairman] swift

attention to this matter is highly appreciated, and I eagerly anticipate an update on the steps taken in this regard," the letter added.

Following the passage of Senator Dilawar's resolution, two more resolutions were submitted to the upper house's secretariat by independent Senators Hidayat Ullah and Hilal-ur-Rehman last week.

All three senators have cited cold weather and security situation as reasons for delaying the elections in the country.

The general elections in the country are scheduled to take place on February 8 with all political parties and independent candidates have been allocated electoral symbols.

The Supreme Court's last month verdict invalidating the Lahore High Court (LHC) decision on suspending the appointment of returning officers (ROs) ended the uncertainty surrounding the elections.

However, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) Maulana Fazlur Rehman has also suggested delaying polls in view of a spike in terror incidents in the country particularly KP.



PTI loses 'bat' as Supreme Court sets aside PHC decision

*Five-page unanimous verdict says 'it cannot be stated that ECP was victimizing PTI'
It states the PTI's petition filed in PHC was 'not maintainable'*

TTI Report

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) suffered yet another blow, as the Supreme Court on Saturday declared the Peshawar High Court's (PHC) January 10 order 'null and void', depriving the embattled party of electoral symbol 'bat.'

The decision comes moments before the expiry of the deadline for allotment of electoral symbol, which was extended till midnight by the ECP earlier in the day.

In the unanimous verdict, the three-member bench, comprising Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faiz Isa, Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar and Justice Musarrat Hilali, declared that the PTI's intra-party elections were unconstitutional. The court reserved the verdict after marathon hearing for two day, which was broadcast live on the apex court's website.

CJP Faez Isa stated that the plea in Peshawar High Court was inadmissible as a single case cannot proceed in two High Courts at the same time.

The verdict said Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) failed to present evidence of holding transparent intra-party elections as all political parties are bound to hold free and fair intra-party elections.

The apex court's unanimous verdict came after hours of wait as Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa-led three-member bench decided to uphold the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) plea.

The top court allowed ECP's petition by setting aside the high court's ruling, and upheld the December 22 decision of the electoral body.

The five-page verdict stated that the apex court judges "do not agree with the learned judges [of the PHC] that the ECP did not have 'any jurisdiction to question or adjudicate the intra-party elections of a political party.'"



It stated that accepting any such interpretation would render all provisions in the Election Act, 2017, that require the holding of intra party elections "illusory and of no consequence and be redundant".

The verdict stated that since the ECP had been calling upon PTI to hold its intra-party elections since 24 May 2021, the time when the party was in power, "it cannot be stated that ECP was victimising PTI".

In its reasoning for today's verdict, the top court stated that the PTI's petition filed in the PHC was "not maintainable" as it failed to disclose that another similar petition was pending before the five-member bench of the Lahore High Court (LHC).

The apex court underscored that although a petitioner "may elect to avail of his remedy before either court, but having chosen a particular court the same dispute cannot then be taken to the other court".

It further stated that 14 PTI members, with stated credentials, had complained to ECP that the party's internal elections had not been held, but PTI brushed aside these claims, saying that the complainants were not the party members.

"[...] this bare denial was insufficient, particularly when they [complainants] had credibly established their long association with PTI," the verdict read.

"Democracy founded Pakistan, a fundamental aspect of which is the ability to put oneself forward as a candidate and to be able to vote, both within a political party and in general elections. Anything less would give rise to authoritarianism which may lead to dictatorship."

Earlier, the court reserved the judgment after conclusion of arguments by all the parties. The court administration informed that the verdict will be announced at 9:30pm. However, the announcement was delayed and subsequently announced at 11:30pm.

Also, the verdict announcement coincided with the timeframe for allotment of electoral symbol, which was extended till midnight by the ECP earlier in the day.

In a statement, an ECP spokesperson indicated that the extension of the time limit was attributed to the anticipation of the Supreme Court's decision.



Earlier during hearing, a senior member of the bench remarked that for a level playing field, PTI should have extended itself internally and conducted intra-party elections according to its constitution, which would have made it the most transparent party in the country.

The SC judge's remarks came during the hearing of the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) petition challenging the Peshawar High Court's (PHC) decision to restore the PTI's 'bat' election symbol.

"You ask for a level playing field, you must also give one to your members," Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar remarked.

The proceedings of the case are being broadcast live on the SC website and YouTube channel.

Barrister Ali Zafar is representing the PTI in the case, while Makhdoom Ali Khan is ECP's counsel.

Hearing earlier in the day

At the outset of the hearing today, Chief Justice Isa said that the Peshawar High Court had issued a detailed order restoring PTI's electoral symbol. "The party's counsel hailed it as an excellent decision," he said.

Hamid then came to the rostrum, noting that today was the last day to submit the party tickets to the ECP so he would try to wrap up his arguments soon.

Justice Mazhar raised two crucial questions whether the court's jurisdiction and the ECP's authority to investigate intra-party polls.

PTI's lawyer, Zafar, argued that neither the Constitution nor the Elections Act 2017 granted the ECP the right to review intra-party elections.

Referring to Article 17 of the Constitution, he asserted that contesting elections with an electoral symbol was a political party's right, accusing the ECP of discrimination.

Zafar contended that PTI's intra-party elections adhered to the party's constitution. "Despite responding to the ECP's 32 questions in writing, the watchdog set aside the polls".

Zafar claimed that none of the PTI members challenged the intra-party polls, stressing that the party complied with the 20-day timeframe set by the ECP to avoid exclusion from the elections.

Reiterating his stance on democracy, Chief Justice Isa emphasized the need for democracy within political parties and the country. He underscored the importance of verifying that intra-party elections were conducted, acknowledging Akbar S. Babar's role within the PTI, even if disliked by the party.

CJP urged PTI's counsel to either provide the full context for allegations of mala fide against the ECP or keep the arguments strictly legal.

"It should at least be seen that [intra-party] elections were conducted," he said, adding that Akbar S. Babar was also a party member "even if disliked" by the party.

"Did we appoint them? You all appoint these people. We don't appoint them," he remarked, adding that the apex court could "force" the commission to perform its duties but "not take on their responsibilities".

The CJP told the PTI counsel: "Substantiate if you are taking the angle of mala fide."

Chief Justice Isa pressed the PTI counsel to substantiate claims of mala fide.

At this, the PTI counsel, Hamid, opted to keep arguments non-political when asked if he was withdrawing the mala fide allegations.

Previous hearing

The Supreme Court (SC) on Friday said regulating political parties is the job of the Election Commission of Pakistan.

These remarks were made by Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Justice Qazi Faez Isa while hearing the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) appeal against the Peshawar High Court (PHC) verdict restoring the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) electoral symbol — bat.

"SC will not interfere in the domain of the Election Commission of Pakistan. However, if ECP commits any

unconstitutional act then the court can look into it," the CJP added.

PTI's lawyer Hamid Khan in his remarks said the SC has clarified that no institution can file an appeal against the verdicts.

The ECP can file a review on appeals else there will be no worth of its decisions, the CJP remarked and added if the argument of PTI is accepted then questions will also be raised on its appeal in Peshawar High Court.

The CJP Isa asked Makhdoom whether the PHC's written order had been issued or not, the latter replied that it had not been.

The lawyer then read out the PHC order that restored the PTI's 'bat' symbol. He said that the ECP had not yet received "any notice" of the PHC order, to which the chief justice said, "I have not read the case file either."

The top judge asked Makhdoom when he would be ready to present the case, at which the counsel urged the SC to adjourn the hearing till Monday. Makhdoom further said that the political parties would be allotted electoral symbols tomorrow.

The top judge observed that to adjourn the hearing till Monday, the PHC's recent verdict would have to be suspended, adding that the apex court was ready to hear the case on Saturday and Sunday as well.

The ECP lawyer then sought time till tomorrow to prepare for the case.

PHC verdict

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Wednesday got back 'bat' as its election symbol after the Peshawar High Court (PHC) nullified the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) order to strip the party of using the 'bat' symbol.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf moved Peshawar High Court to challenge the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) decision declaring the intra-party election as null and void and revoking their electoral symbol "bat".

A two-member Peshawar High Court (PHC) bench comprising Justice Ijaz Anwar and Justice Arshad Ali announced the verdict.



Pakistan's Impending General Elections: A Landscape of Complexity

By Daniyal Wali

As the date for Pakistan's impending general elections approaches, set for February 8, 2024, the nation is enveloped in a climate of heightened political activity, teeming with intrigue and strategic maneuvering. This pivotal moment in Pakistan's political trajectory is marked by a palpable sense of anticipation and uncertainty, as major political parties engage in complex alliances, and accusations reverberate regarding potential manipulation of the electoral process. Adding a layer of complexity to the pre-election scenario is the speculation surrounding the upcoming board meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which holds the key to approving Pakistan's second review of the nine-month Stand-By Arrangement (SBA). Despite the successful completion of a staff-level agreement in the preceding month, Pakistan's absence from the IMF board's schedule has triggered conjecture. Many analysts in Pakistan posit that the strategic placement of Pakistan's case on the IMF's agenda, closer to the elections, serves as a litmus test to gauge the commitment of Pakistani authorities towards ensuring fair and transparent elections.

Amidst these political intricacies, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) stands as a steadfast guardian of the electoral process, assuring the public that the elections will proceed as scheduled, with a commitment to impartiality and transparency. The ECP also affirms its preparedness by being ahead of schedule in various activities related to the delimitation of constituencies and the appointment of election staff, reinforcing the notion that international decisions, such as those of the IMF, should prioritize economic stability and development rather than being influenced by election timelines.

However, as the political landscape unfolds, former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is poised to confront significant challenges that could reverberate through its political standing. In stark contrast, established



political entities like Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) actively engage in forming alliances, strategically positioning themselves to vie for governmental leadership. Major political parties in Pakistan have started their election campaign with a hope to appeal to the hearts and minds of the people.

PML-N's Manifesto and Electoral Strategy

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has officially declared the launch of its eagerly anticipated election campaign, set to kick off on January 15 in tandem with the unveiling of a meticulously crafted manifesto. Fueled by collaboration from over 30 sub-committees, the PML-N's election manifesto strives to resonate with the masses and set itself apart from rival parties. Party leaders, including PML-N Punjab president Rana Sanaullah, have emphasized the manifesto's significance in dispelling perceptions of being the establishment's favorite, a concern Nawaz

Sharif is keen to address during the upcoming electoral battle. Despite delays in ticket distribution and seat adjustments with other parties, the PML-N exudes confidence, attributing it to a perceived amicable relationship with influential quarters. Concurrently, the PPP, led by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, adopts an aggressive stance in challenging the Sharifs. Meanwhile, PML-N's Attaullah Tarar has already launched his campaign in NA-127, anticipating a fierce competition with Bilawal Bhutto. The PML-N's commitment to free and fair elections remains unwavering as it prepares for a challenging yet strategically significant electoral endeavor. In anticipation of the campaign, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, convener of the manifesto committee, sheds light on a practical and ground-fact-based manifesto, ready to contribute positively to the national interest. The party plans to establish a Monitoring and Implementation Council to ensure the manifesto's diligent execution upon assuming power, reflecting a dedication to genuine change and progress. The comprehensive preparation, involving 32



sub-committees and active engagement with citizens through a portal, underscores PML-N's commitment to a transparent and people-centric approach, setting it apart from others making lofty promises. As the PML-N aims to showcase the achievements of its past government, it envisions a manifesto that not only resonates but serves as a guarantor for positive change in the country.

PPP's Aggressive Stance and Comprehensive Manifesto

The PPP officially announced the commencement of its election campaign on December 27, coinciding with the 16th death anniversary of former party leader and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The decision was made during a meeting at Bilawal House, chaired by PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who endorsed the consensual resolution. Despite reservations and concerns about a level playing field in the upcoming general elections, the party is determined to proceed with a full-fledged campaign. The meeting, attended by senior leaders via video link, discussed mobilizing activists and planning election-related activities at the local level. PPP leaders emphasized their commitment to timely elections and highlighted the party's role in advocating for free, fair, and prompt electoral processes. Despite lingering reservations over certain issues, the PPP is geared up for the elections, aiming to address the concerns of the masses through its manifesto, as stated by senior party figures during a press conference following the meeting.

Moreover, Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari revealed a comprehensive 10-point party manifesto for the upcoming 2024 general elections. The manifesto addresses a spectrum of critical issues, including the soaring inflation rate, free electricity distribution, healthcare improvement, and hunger eradication. Bilawal emphasized the competitive spirit of the electoral exercise, expressing determination to engage fervently despite challenges. With inflation at an alarming 29% year on year, the manifesto pledges measures such as free electricity for the average family, free healthcare, and the "Bhook Mitao" (End Hunger) initiative. The manifesto also

addresses the burdens on the salaried class, promising to double salaries, which could provide relief to an overburdened segment. Furthermore, the PPP commits to addressing education and housing challenges, tackling the significant number of out-of-school children and the housing shortage, respectively. While the manifesto may not cover every aspect, it places emphasis on social welfare, leaving room for potential policy developments in areas like foreign policy and state-owned enterprises once in power. Bilawal's indication of abolishing redundant ministries aligns with the party's approach of providing a clear roadmap for addressing the country's challenges. The manifesto positions the PPP as a frontrunner in addressing pressing issues, and the electorate will ultimately determine its impact.

PTI's Challenges and Defiance

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by the jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, is facing formidable challenges as it gears up for the upcoming elections on February 8. The party's ambitious plan to launch its election campaign through a massive national and global telethon, aimed at unveiling its manifesto and raising campaign funds, encountered disruptions in internet and social media services across Pakistan. These disruptions, noted by cybersecurity watchdog Netblocks, have been condemned by the Human Rights Council of Pakistan as a violation of international law. Imran Khan and key PTI leaders have been disqualified as candidates, alleging interference by the military-led establishment. In response, PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan is actively seeking a level playing field for the election campaign. Emphasizing the need for fair electoral conditions, Gohar, after consulting with Imran Khan, declared PTI's decision against forming electoral alliances with parties associated with the PDM. The party's defiance is evident in its opposition to the military establishment and ongoing legal challenges. Gohar called on the ECP to ensure transparent requisites for the elections and denounced any attempts to isolate PTI.

In the diverse landscape of Pakistan's

political parties, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUIF) faces security challenges in its election campaign. Maulana Asad Mahmood, a key leader, has been issued a security alert, leading to restrictions on his campaign activities following an alleged convoy attack on JUIF chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman. Meanwhile, the IPP, led by Jahangir Khan Tareen and Abdul Aleem Khan, is launching a nationwide campaign with a focus on respecting voters and uniting the nation. Emphasizing service delivery over slogans, the party endorses the policies of the Special Investment Facilitation Council for economic growth. On the other hand, the breakaway faction Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians (PTI-P), led by Pervez Khattak, asserts its readiness for the upcoming elections in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Criticizing the mainstream PTI for unfulfilled promises, Khattak pledges to expose other political leaders while emphasizing his past achievements in infrastructure development, contrasting it with religious parties' purported lack of commitment to Islamic ideals. These parties reflect the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Pakistan's political landscape as they navigate security concerns, economic aspirations, and promises of effective governance in their election campaigns.

To conclude, Pakistan's impending general elections on February 8, 2024, present a complex and dynamic political landscape characterized by strategic maneuvering, alliances, and challenges faced by key political players. The speculation surrounding the IMF's decision, the Election Commission's commitment to transparency, and the distinct electoral strategies of major parties such as PML-N, PPP, and PTI add layers of intrigue to the electoral process. As the nation eagerly awaits the unfolding events, the electorate will play a crucial role in determining the trajectory of Pakistan's political future, evaluating manifestos, addressing pressing issues, and navigating the diverse array of challenges presented by security concerns, economic aspirations, and promises of effective governance. The outcome of these elections will undoubtedly shape the country's direction in the years to come.



PPP nominates Bilawal for premiership

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its candidate for the slot of prime minister after completion of the elections process and formation of new government



By Faizan Bangash

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Central Executive Committee (CEC) Wednesday recommended the name of party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as its candidate for the slot of prime minister after completion of the elections process and formation of new government.

The PPP CEC, which met at Bilawal House, Lahore, discussed in detail the party's campaign for the February 2024 general election. Bilawal is also contesting from NA-127 Lahore, where he would compete with Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) leader Shaista Pervaiz Malik and a PTI-backed candidate. The meeting also discussed the party election manifesto, which decided to give priority to youth and women empowerment, employment, health and education.

The CEC also expressed complete confidence in the leadership of Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. PPP leaders including Secretary General Taj Haider, Syed Khurshed Shah, Rana Farooq Saeed Khan, Qamar Zaman Kaira, Samina Khalid Ghurki, Murad Ali Shah, Chaudhry Aslam Gill and Ali Badr were present at the meeting. Later, talking to the media, Bilawal said he had decided to contest election from Lahore, whether anybody liked it or not. Flanked by PPP Secretary General Taj Haider and former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, Bilawal said, "Gen Zia imposed the PMLN on us and Gen Faiz Hameed imposed the PTI." He said both the PMLN and PTI were representative of the ruling elite. Both were unable to address the issues confronted by the country. He said the PPP was the only party that always came up with its vision

and manifesto before polls and kept people on priority.

He said the PPP intended to set up energy parks in every district headquarters and provide free electricity up to 300 units. He also promised free and quality education to people after forming the government. He said wages of employees would be increased by 200 per cent and the BISP network would be expanded. Moreover, Labourer cards would be issued to labourers and for growers, the PPP government would provide Kissan Cards. Bilawal thanked the PPP CEC for nominating him as the candidate for the slot of prime minister. He condemned the incidents of terrorism in the country, saying that to steer the country out of crises, crucial decisions would have to be taken.

Courtesy The News



Reliving a historical blunder

More than half of its 240 million people are below the age of 21



By **Husain Haqqani**

Recent political developments have rightly upset many Pakistanis, who feel that they are being systematically disenfranchised and deprived of a role in determining their future. But those beholden to social media as their primary source of information wrongly believe that the current happenings are somehow unique or are occurring for the first time.

By global standards, Pakistan has a very young population. More than half of its 240 million people are below the age of 21. A younger population, comprising more people who can work, often presents an opportunity for economic growth. But too many young people, lacking education and skills and unable to find employment, as is the case with Pakistan, can be a source of anxiety and restiveness. There are many reasons for Pakistan's current political uncertainty and a large unhappy young populace is one of them.

For decades, Pakistan has failed to educate all its people and the education that is

provided to those lucky enough to go through school does not prepare young people for facing an increasingly competitive world. Lack of knowledge of history, of both the world and even of Pakistan, is one area where the poverty of our educational system is glaringly obvious. Currently, young Pakistanis addicted to social media and lacking in quality education tend to think that everything on social media is true and anything they have not seen on social media has never happened.

The sad fact is that Pakistan's politics have long been elitist, with little regard for the legal and constitutional niceties that characterize a democratic republic. The consequence of not fully knowing the blunders of Pakistan's history is that the younger generation simply relives the mistakes of the past, without understanding what these were and how they might be avoided.

As rumours swirl about the machinations surrounding the forthcoming general elections, it might be useful to revisit the

1965 election of Field Marshal Ayub Khan as Pakistan's president. For those who might only know Ayub Khan as the grandfather of PTI Secretary General, Omar Ayub Khan, and Islamabad High Court judge, Miangul Hassan Aurangzeb, the field marshal was Pakistan's original coup maker. He came to power in October 1958, after first supporting then-president Iskander Mirza in abrogating the 1956 constitution and imposing martial law, and then ousting Mirza to become president.

In an article in the June 1965 issue of the academic journal *Asian Survey*, Professor Sharif al Mujahid, wrote, "For a little less than four years Ayub ruled with a firm hand, but introduced several salutary reforms (such as those relating to land, agriculture, and family laws), toned up the administration and took peremptory measures against such social evils as corruption, hoarding, black-marketing, and smuggling." Pakistan's economy grew impressively under Ayub, with a large



infusion of US and Western economic assistance and investment.

Ayub publicly voiced his belief that developing countries like Pakistan could not progress under the "strains and stresses of the Western democratic system." But he constantly faced the demand for democracy from key segments of Pakistani and international public opinion. By 1964, he felt ready for a relatively controlled exercise in democracy. Under his arbitrarily imposed constitution, the country (then including erstwhile East Pakistan) was divided into 80,000 tiny constituencies each consisting of about 200-600 voters, which elected 'basic democrats.' These Basic Democrats formed the electoral college to elect the President and members of national and provincial assemblies.

Ayub's supporters argued that he should be elected unopposed "in recognition of his unique achievement for the Muslim world," for the sake of "stability of administration and overall development," for "political and economic stability," for ensuring "a bright and prosperous future for the country and unity in the Muslim world." But the opposition overcame its weakness to pull together, blocking Ayub's unopposed election. Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, the much-respected sister of Pakistan's founder, ran

against the field marshal as the nominee of a unified opposition.

Then, "teeming, tumultuous receptions Miss Jinnah received all the way from Peshawar to Karachi in her eight-day tour of West Pakistan put heart into the opposition camp, and made it increasingly bold, vocal and determined." What followed seems to have become a template for future election manipulation.

According to Mujahid's account, the media condemned the opposition as "anti-social". Their activities were described as "nefarious," and their mission as being "to create chaos". There were also disputes over the opposition's access to the media, freedom to campaign, and the appointment of polling and presiding officers. The opposition reported the "kidnapping, coercion and arrests all over the country" of its voters, polling agents, workers, and supporters.

When Pakistan went to the polls on January 2, 1965, "the results gave Ayub a clear, convincing, even thumping victory, and the opposition was stunned by the crushing defeat." Ayub secured 49,951 (62.7 per cent) of the 79,700 electoral college votes cast, and Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah 28,691 (36 per cent). West Pakistan gave Ayub a massive 28,939 (73.3 per cent)

and Mohtarma Jinnah a meagre 10,257 (26.7 per cent)." The large cities had generally gone with the opposition while "Ayub's massive hold in rural areas was indisputable." The national and provincial assembly elections that followed in April also resulted in a huge majority for Ayub Khan's party.

The opposition protested the election results and Mohtarma Jinnah described them as "rigged" but there were no immediate street protests or "dharna." Ayub Khan thought he had secured a five-year term, but he stayed in power only until March 1969, when after violent street protests, he handed power to General Yahya Khan. In between his election victory and his ouster, Ayub also led the country through war, a post-war peace accord with India, a distancing from the United States, and an entente with China and Russia.

This 59-year-old page from history makes it obvious that what young Pakistanis seem angry about these days is not new. But Pakistanis need to figure out a way forward. Being angry about what is happening will be no more useful than it might have been in 1965.

Courtesy The News





Photo Finish amidst Political Engineering



By Naqi Akbar

With barely a month to go before the hastily scheduled General elections 2024, the ground realities as well as machinations of the powers behind the scene, the stage is practically set for an action-packed photo finish for the electoral exercise. Despite the fact that what is happening is not a new phenomenon in the context of Pakistani politics, the timing of the political turmoil of April 2022, the successive developments in the corridors of power all indicated write from the onset that the culmination will not be a routine affair, rather a pack of surprises.

Traditionally, ever since the promulgation of the 1973 constitution as treated by the powers behind the scene, the government booted out of the corridors under the Article 58-B 2 are not allowed an electoral victory in the elections that follow the assembly and government dissolution order. That has happened with PPP in October 1990, with PML N in October 1993, again with PPP in 1997. After the Musharraf era ended in 2007/08, the games of establishment took another form. PPP was understood not to win the 2013 elections and similarly the party led by

former Cricket skipper was understood to be allowed entry into the corridors of power.

The April 2022, palace games proved to be another story. Instead of following the beaten track, the party which was ousted through the vote of no confidence refused to budge in and fought the established order tooth and nail. Much has been written and debated on the developments in various tiers of print and electronic media. The culmination of the confrontation between the prime opponents in the form of incidents of May 9, 2023, proved to be a dividing line, not just for the political parties and players, rather it proved to be the catalyst for dividing the society into two divergent polls. The biggest fall out of that polarization has been that no one player is ready to listen to the argument or the thought process of the other player.

That polarization has helped and benefited the powers behind the scene to undertake their plans of actions; which are likely to be heavily shadowed by the May 9, 2023 developments. Consequently, what seems to be the order of the day is that the

preferred political group or groups are allowed the type of leverage which has been witnessed for the preferred players during the 90s and much of the post Musharraf era. To ensure that the preferred group follows the line, another political engineering bid is being enforced. In electoral politics, it means that the elite state institutions advise, rather enforce that the preferred party only selects for individual national and provincial assembly seats people who are advised so by the deep state.

Such situation creates a position where the old party loyalists are not preferred in the distribution of the party tickets for the seats. That thing is already evident in the case of the preferred faction of the Muslim League in the Pakistani politics. The result of that intrusion into the affairs of the party by the deep state has been that; few senior party stalwarts who even reached the Prime Ministerial slot in the past; found it opportune to part ways. Few others waited in vain and when they were ignored in the distribution of the party tickets, vented their anger in pressers. The underlying mechanics of developments has been very simple. The deep state wants a cover party with people



who can act like a Middle Eastern replica of members of parliament, always ready to accord 99.999.... percent approval to the policy decisions taken by the invisible 'kings circle'.

If on one hand the favorite political party has allowed itself to be steered by the deep state, the resultant situation might have allowed the other parties in the field to pinpoint the 'storm in the teacup' of the favorite party and offering itself for the same job; or simply courting the deep state.

Such a situation potentially hits at the heart of the establishment plans. Instead of the smooth sailing witnessed during much of the 90s, the clear signaling from the establishment towards a party out of favor has not yielded the desired results as was expected. That failure on part of the deep state to make things work, as they wanted to, has created a situation, where the word overkill has found new interpretations.

Without mincing words, as things stand, the party in the political wilderness has been suppressed to such a limit that the voters have been forced to have a sympathetic look at them, despite that fact that when that party was in power, they made many foolish mistakes between 2018-April 2022 period.

With the out of favor party voter radical-

ized and coupled with the economic mismanagement, especially the spiraling inflation, the other party's voter is no different. Practically the establishment is caught between a number of hostile political bee hives; who are going for the kill.

It now does not matter much, if the person elected in from the hybrid period political group, or PPP or PML N, all the voters are angry Pakistani middle income and lower middle-income men and women; who are not likely to settle for a few bucks as are being promised by the aspirants to the throne of Islamabad.

Here the polarization along the haves and have-nots, the ones compromised with the establishment as well as those radicalized, is going to have its bearing on the electoral exercise, if it happens at all. Here one must not ignore the fact that the state institutions do not look above the polarization. News headlines now and then and the new bulletins courtesy social media have created a very strong impression that the establishment or the people who matter are also divided over how to proverbially cook the next political dish.

All these indicators invariably point out to the fact that the political exercise in February will not be a smooth sailing. There can be electoral upsets as well as surprises. Despite the fact that the two political

groups in the musical chairs have the encouragement from the establishment, the sympathy vote for the 'party in the woods' can create a situation where, a fair vote will entrap the establishment in a situation reminiscent of 1991 FIS landslide in Algeria. If the establishment wants to micro manage the elections, it runs the risk of being accused of rigging.

The election exercise has within its fold a recipe for movement which might not be controllable. Given the radicalization of the general environment in the country, coupled with dismal performance on part of the establishment backed PDM, a few buses being introduced in major cities; a few bonanzas here and there are not going to sway the voter.

Here the powers who matter need to realize the reality that political engineering beyond certain limits takes the form of 'self-medication' on 'whims'. Its contraindications can only ruin the patient body and resistance mechanism. The current level of engineering coupled with disproportionate favor as well as repression can take the country towards a situation, where the evening of February 8, 2024 can resemble Tahrir square of February 8, 2011 in Cairo or Tehran of the same date in 1979. Much depends regrettably on the premise; how much sense prevails.



A Comprehensive Report on the Ongoing Israel-Gaza Conflict and Regional Ramifications

By Romana Afsheen

The conflict between Israel and Gaza has given rise to a profound humanitarian crisis, marked by extensive civilian casualties and severe damage to infrastructure. As of today, January 12, 2024, the protracted conflict, spanning three months, continues to exact a heavy toll on the Palestinian population.

The current casualty figures reveal the grim realities of the situation:

- Over 23,900 Palestinians have lost their lives, encompassing more than 9,600 children and 6,750 women.
- A staggering 63,359 Palestinians have sustained injuries, with at least 8,663 children and 6,327 women among the wounded.

The conflict between Israel and Gaza has taken a significant toll on journalists, resulting in the highest journalist casualty rate since CPJ began its data collection in 1992. As of January 11, 2024, CPJ's initial investigations indicate that at least 79 journalists and media workers have lost their lives, contributing to the overall toll of over 24,000 casualties since the conflict commenced on October 7.

The conflict has placed immense strain on the healthcare system, with hospitals grappling to manage the increasing influx of casualties. Medical facilities are experiencing shortages of essential supplies, and medics are encountering difficulties in providing adequate assistance to those in need.

South Africa has taken the initiative to bring Israel's military operations in Gaza to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of conducting a state-led genocide campaign. Israel vehemently rejects these allegations, deeming them baseless and asserting that South Africa is acting as a mouthpiece for Hamas.

Israel continued its bombing attacks in



Gaza, targeting locations such as Khan Younis and Rafah. Unfortunately, these strikes resulted in civilian casualties, including children. The health system in Gaza is facing severe strain, with only one-fifth of the 5,000 beds required to address trauma and emergency needs currently available.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) began hearing arguments in a case brought forward by South Africa, accusing Israel of committing genocide in its campaign in Gaza. The proceedings were generally welcomed by Palestinians, while Israeli officials criticized the ICJ, alleging that it serves as a "legal arm" of Hamas.

Oxfam International released a report characterizing Israel's assault on Gaza as the "deadliest conflict in the 21st century." The report highlighted an alarming statistic – an average of 250 Palestinian deaths per day, surpassing the daily average of other recent conflicts. The dire situation in Gaza was emphasized, with the overstretched health system struggling to meet the urgent medical needs of the population.

In addition to the situation in Gaza, there were reports of explosions in Yemen as the United States and the United Kingdom allegedly carried out airstrikes against Houthi fighters. These actions were said to be in response to Red Sea attacks. Despite these developments, Yemen's Houthi

rebel group remained defiant, expressing a determination to continue supporting Palestinians in Gaza and dismissing attempts to intimidate them.

Meanwhile, reactions from Israel regarding the ICJ case were varied. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the case as "hypocritical," asserting that Israelis would defend themselves against what he deemed as false accusations. Israel's Defense Minister emphasized the moral standing of the Israeli army, highlighting their differentiation between civilians and combatants, along with the provision of humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza. However, reports suggested that comments from far-right, ultra-nationalist Israeli ministers, advocating for the displacement of Palestinians and the construction of illegal settlements within Gaza, were negatively impacting Israel's stance in the international arena.

Simultaneously, Russia has criticized the United States and Britain for military strikes in Yemen, describing them as a violation of international law. Russia has called for an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council to address the escalating tensions.

Global demonstrations expressing solidarity with Gaza have taken place, emphasizing support for the Palestinian population amidst the ongoing

conflict. Oxfam reports that the daily death toll of Palestinians in Israel's war on Gaza surpasses that of any other major conflict in the 21st century.

In the financial sphere, the Governor of the Bank of Israel has appealed to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to uphold fiscal discipline ahead of a cabinet vote on a revised 2024 budget. This budget incorporates substantial funding increases for the war on Hamas.

Journalists reporting from Gaza face elevated risks due to Israeli airstrikes, communication disruptions, shortages, and power outages. The Israel Defense Forces' inability to assure the safety of journalists in Gaza has further heightened the dangers faced by media professionals covering the conflict.

As of January 11, the confirmed casualties include 72 Palestinians, 4 Israelis, and 3 Lebanese journalists and media workers. Additionally, 16 journalists have been reported injured, 3 are missing, and 21 have been arrested. The situation has seen numerous assaults, threats, cyberattacks, censorship, and even the killing of journalists' family members.

CPJ is actively investigating unverified reports of journalists being killed, missing, detained, injured, or threatened. The list is continuously updated based on information from CPJ's regional sources and media reports.

The specific cases of journalists killed during the conflict, providing information such as their names, affiliations, and the circumstances surrounding their deaths. It strongly underscores the significance of recognizing journalists as civilians engaged in crucial work during crises and condemns any targeting of journalists by conflicting parties.

These developments collectively underscore the urgent need for international attention and intervention to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The sustained violence and its severe consequences emphasize the critical importance of finding a diplomatic resolution to bring an end to the suffering of the civilian population entangled in this prolonged and devastating conflict.

A report from Bloomberg states that

European Union member states are in discussions to determine if there is adequate support to fund and equip an operation aimed at preventing Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. According to sources familiar with the matter, plans for the operation could be finalized as early as January 22 during a meeting of European foreign ministers in Brussels.

Western nations, including the United States, have expressed growing concern and anger towards the Houthi group in Yemen in recent weeks. The US has warned of potential "consequences" if the attacks on commercial shipping continue, and there are reports suggesting that strikes from the US and the UK on the Houthi group might be imminent.



The situation has adversely impacted the Suez Canal's revenues, which have reportedly decreased by 40 percent year-on-year since January 1, 2023. The head of the Suez Canal authority, Osama Rabie, attributes this decline to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, causing major shippers to avoid the key international route, resulting in a 30 percent decrease in traffic between January 1 and January 11.

In a related development, there are mixed feelings among Palestinians in Gaza regarding the International Court of Justice's hearing of a genocide case brought against Israel by South Africa. While some express hope that a favorable outcome for Palestine may alleviate their suffering, others remain skeptical that an international decision will make a significant difference.

Despite the growing tensions and potential military actions, a Houthi official has conveyed a defiant stance, stating that the group is not scared of US and UK threats. The official, Abdulqader al-Mortada, emphasized that the threats will not deter the Houthi group from supporting their brethren in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) announced that it successfully delivered crucial food assistance to the center of Gaza City for the first time in several weeks. The WFP director in Palestine emphasized the importance of safe and sustained access to ensure continuous food aid reaches those in need in Gaza.

The conflict between Israel and Gaza is

rooted in a protracted history of political, territorial, and religious disputes, primarily centered around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and subsequent wars have led to ongoing tensions over issues such as land ownership, borders, and the status of Jerusalem. The complex web of historical grievances, national aspirations, and competing claims to the same territory has resulted in a series of conflicts marked by periods of relative calm interspersed with outbreaks of violence. Peace processes, negotiations, and international interventions have been attempted over the years, but a comprehensive resolution to the deeply entrenched issues remains elusive. The live reporting captured a moment in a longstanding conflict, with recent escalations and military actions adding urgency to the need for addressing the root causes and finding a sustainable solution to bring lasting peace to the region.

Maulana's bet

After inflicting intolerable pain on citizenry, governments abandon symptomatic treatment halfway into life of a programme as conditions get tougher to implement



By Muhammad Amir Rana

Maulana Fazlur Rehman's visit to Afghanistan was an ultimate attempt to repair the torn relationship with the Taliban. Pakistan hoped that maulana could help establish a direct communication channel with the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, who has remained secretive, like his predecessors, for enigmatic reasons. Whether maulana was successful in creating such a channel remains a mystery. However, Pakistan's Foreign Office promptly distanced itself from his visit and his announcement about resuming talks with the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Maulana may have had several motives for visiting Afghanistan, both political and related to his personal security. The Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) benefited significantly from the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, securing power in coalition provincial governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan while promising Taliban-style governance in those provinces. He may be expecting a similar

outcome, hoping that a warm reception by the Taliban regime could further solidify his position in these two provinces. Additionally, maulana and other JUI-F leaders are under threat from the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) and the TTP. A satirical social media post by a prominent journalist aptly captures maulana's potential ambitions, suggesting that a direct meeting with Akhundzada might deter the TTP from attacking him and his colleagues.

Maulana's visit was surrounded by controversy from the outset. His followers in Pakistan portrayed it as an official Taliban invitation, but Taliban spokespersons denied this, stating that the visit was at his own request. Despite this, maulana attempted to appease the Taliban leadership by drawing questionable analogies between the situation in Gaza and the Taliban's ban on girls' education in Afghanistan. Informed sources claim that maulana might have carried a message from the Pakistani establishment, but the Taliban leadership remained largely inflexible in their stance regarding the TTP. They

advised him that negotiations with the TTP were the only viable solution and should proceed without interference from Pakistani security agencies.

Pakistani journalists and religious scholars who recently returned from Afghanistan reported that the Taliban leaders are paranoid about the future of their regime, and their fingers are still hovering over the trigger. They suspect potential threats from their immediate neighbours, including Pakistan. This distrust might explain their reluctance to abandon terrorist outfits with transnational reach. The TTP, once a close ally during the Taliban resistance, has become a strategic tool in their hands, now directed against Pakistan.

Maulana's visit to Afghanistan was surrounded by controversy from the outset.

Perhaps the Taliban aim to maintain controlled chaos along the Durand Line, keeping it volatile enough to deter the Pakistani military from blocking trade flows while still facilitating Pakistan's access to Central Asia. However, this

strategy is precarious. Such tactics are familiar to Pakistan and have countermeasures at the ready should tensions escalate.

The Taliban regime would know that conflicts rarely remain at a steady simmer. They know how quickly escalation can spiral out of control. The surprise Taliban offensive, launched while their team was still negotiating with the US, serves as a reminder of how quickly internal and external political-strategic landscapes can shift. Their initial misreading of the potential for internal resistance and the US's response to their actions kept them at the doors of Kabul for a few days. Their entry into the capital without a fight was also a surprise for their fighters.

While some Taliban leaders accuse Pakistan of allegedly supporting IS-K, their reasoning can be attributed to a similar paranoid outlook. They conveniently overlook the fact that IS-K is just as ideologically driven as their own ranks and is actively instigating violence within Pakistan's borders. With such a distrustful mindset, the Taliban are unlikely to offer Pakistan genuine assistance and will ultimately remain suspicious of every initiative it undertakes.

Pakistan is using all conventional channels

to approach the Taliban and still believes that track two diplomacy through religious clergy can work a miracle. The belief is that if a direct communication channel with Mullah Hibatullah had been created, the state institutions would have convinced him to abandon the TTP and their vision of strategic connectivity with the region. However, Mullah Hibatullah and his close aides are very cautious and see Pakistan's institutions through the similar lenses of common Afghans. Pakistani madressahs and clergy have come under the influence of the same perception.

Using religious scholars for diplomacy would not be helpful. Pakistani scholars may have a different take on some religious and political issues, but they believe in the Taliban narrative more than in the Pakistan state narrative. Though the Deobandi madressah and political leadership have not sworn formal allegiance to the Taliban head, in their sermons and writings, they refer to Mullah Hibatullah as 'Ameerul Momineen' (Leader of the faithful), and they do not waste any chance to defend Taliban policies.

Before maulana's visit to Afghanistan, Pakistan had sent a delegation of well-respected religious scholars for confidence-building measures. They were

also well-received by the Taliban, but they have yet to achieve any tangible results from their visit. Instead, the visit proved counterproductive as the Taliban and the TTP embraced them while using their religious decrees to justify their violent campaigns.

Any unsuccessful diplomatic venture through religious channels proves counterproductive as it creates a negative impression of the state and its institutions among the people inspired by the Taliban.

Maulana's visit will likely face a similar fate and potentially increase Taliban influence within Pakistan. He might exploit the visit during his electoral campaigns, but his real test would begin if he succeeded in securing a government in Balochistan. Even a coalition government led by maulana's representative would multiply challenges for Pakistan, including border security, visa-free movement at Chaman, the repatriation of Afghan refugees, trade, and the Taliban's support for the TTP.

The Taliban would likely expect a similar response from maulana, which is precisely what Pakistan has been demanding from them.

Courtesy Dawn



US election 2024:

Can Nikki Haley really stop Donald Trump?

Donald Trump remains the overwhelming favourite for the Republican presidential nomination, but Nikki Haley is surging. If the former president shows any signs of weakness when voting begins next week, her long-shot bid could become a real threat

By Holly Honderich

On a snowy morning in Iowa this week, in the middle of an Irish pub, Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley was giving her stump speech: a tight 13 minutes on spending cuts, education reform and a secure southern border.

At the heart of her pitch was this: a Haley presidency would be a return to normalcy, a drama-free alternative to the current frontrunner, former president Donald Trump.

"Don't you want that again? Because we could have that again," she said.

The line won the loudest applause of the morning from the hundred-odd voters who had braved the icy roads to hear her speak in Waukee, on the edge of the state capital Des Moines.

Eleven months into her candidacy, Ms Haley, 51, seems to finally have the wind at her back.

Heading into the Iowa caucuses on Monday, the first contest in the 2024 Republican race, the former South Carolina governor has claimed a series of well-timed victories - consolidating support from deep-pocketed donors, racking up endorsements and steadily advancing in the polls.

"She's engaging, she's smart, she's personable and I think she has a vision of where we should be 10 years from now," said Haley supporter Doug Stout after watching her speak on Tuesday.

The vision was for the "shining city on the hill" type of Republican Party, he said. "The one I grew up with."

The unfortunate reality for the Haley campaign, however, is that not enough voters seem to be buying that vision. Most polls, including in Iowa, suggest Mr Trump maintains a lead of around 30 points.



Observers say Nikki Haley is running a campaign for the wrong era of Republican politics; that her candidacy ignores the reality of the modern Republican party, whose base has turned so definitively toward Mr Trump that the establishment-friendly conservatism favoured by Ms Haley no longer makes sense.

"Ms Haley's campaign represents a misunderstanding of where the base is and what the base wants," said Gunner Ramer, political director for the Republican Accountability Project.

"To those that want the old Republican party back, Haley is offering a very attractive candidacy. But there aren't enough Republicans out there who do."

So what exactly is her game plan?

Ms Haley's allies say both privately and publicly that she is playing to win.

They insist that as the field narrows, and Ms Haley becomes the clear alternative to Mr Trump, she will pull ahead, propelled by moderates and a growing swathe of Republican voters who have tired of the

former president, or are concerned about his chances in the general election.

In Iowa, Ms Haley looks poised to swipe the second place spot from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

At a Wednesday evening debate between the two, Ms Haley strained to position herself as Mr Trump's sole rival. "I wish Donald Trump was on this stage. He's the one I'm running against," she said.

Campaign aides told the BBC that the goal for Ms Haley in Iowa is simple: build momentum. A strong showing, they said, would carry her into New Hampshire - where polls with Mr Trump are much tighter - and then on to South Carolina, her home state.

Ms Haley may be helped by the sudden exit of anti-Trump candidate, Chris Christie, who suspended his campaign this week. Supporters of the former New Jersey Governor, surveys suggest, are most likely to flock to her.

Less helpful was Mr Christie's hot-mic

moment, when he was caught saying she would "get smoked", presumably by Mr Trump.

"She's not up to this," he said.

Long-time observers counter that Ms Haley has a knack for defying expectations.

"If you look at her career, a lot of people have underestimated her and a lot of people have been wrong," said Randy Covington, a veteran journalist from South Carolina.

Even her critics acknowledge that she is a master of retail politics - the door-knocking and handshaking that delivered her to the statehouse in 2005. She stunned her own party in the primary by unseating Larry Koon, then the longest-serving member of the House. At the time, Ms Haley had no political experience and was a bookkeeper for her family's clothing shop.

Nearly 20 years later, the state representative-turned-governor-turned-UN-ambassador still likes to introduce herself first as an accountant. She points out that she is a mom of two, the wife of a combat veteran and the child of Indian immigrants, running to make her family proud. In televised debates, in pancake houses and town halls, Ms Haley pauses mid-speech for a smile and pointed eye contact. She's a down-home American hard at work for your vote.

"She connects, she has the X factor," said David Wilkins, a former South Carolina House speaker who led Ms Haley's transition to the governor's house. "The more people who are exposed to her, the more support she's going to get, it's just that simple."

Ms Haley's campaign often looks and sounds like something out of 2012: more compromise and pragmatism, fewer grievances and conspiracy theories. She is a staunch conservative, but she speaks with nuance on hot button issues like abortion and immigration, and is less eager to wade into the country's culture wars.

In Iowa this week, it was clear this was central to her appeal. Voters said they valued Ms Haley's tone and her civility - a clear departure from Mr Trump, who spent part of this week in a federal appeals court for one of the four separate criminal cases he now faces.

"She's boring," one Iowan said of Ms Haley, before quickly clarifying he meant it as a compliment. "We need to get out of the era of politics that is dominated by what someone tweeted."

Polls suggest Ms Haley's measured approach could make her the most formidable opponent to President Joe Biden in November's general election.

"Trump is head-to-head with Biden on a good day," she said this week, before citing a Wall Street Journal poll from late last year. "I defeat Biden by 17 points."



But she has to defeat Mr Trump first.

"This is still the party of Donald Trump, until the Republican party says otherwise," said Jimmy Centers, an Iowa Republican political consultant.

At least one-third of Republican primary voters are thought to be in the "always Trump" camp - a group both devoted to the former president and repelled by the establishment politics embodied by Ms Haley.

"I think she's just more of the same... and Trump isn't," said Mike Williams, an Iowa resident. "I want someone who's a bit of an outsider."

The vice-like grip Mr Trump has on the party doesn't give Ms Haley much room for manoeuvre.

She needs to appeal to two very different groups of Republicans: the "never Trumpers" who despise the former president, as well as those who still like him but worry he will lose to Biden. She has to distance

herself from him without alienating his supporters who might yet be persuaded to back someone else.

Ms Haley has been cautious in her criticism of her old boss. At a televised town hall in Iowa, a prospective backer sheepishly admitted he had voted for Mr Trump twice. "Me too," she quipped, beaming.

In nearly every speech, she performs a tightly rehearsed juggling act. Mr Trump "was the 'right president at the right time'", she'll say. "But rightly or wrongly, chaos follows him".

Those close to Ms Haley shot down the suggestion that she may eventually join his ticket as the vice-presidential nominee - something the Trump campaign has also dismissed. But Ms Haley has said yes to him before, when she became his ambassador at the United Nations.

Mr Trump, for his part, has turned his ire increasingly on Ms Haley, whom he dubbed "birdbrain" in September. "She is a globalist," he said last week. "She likes the globe. I like America first."

The escalating critiques are perhaps the clearest sign that the frontrunner is taking her campaign seriously. Some Trump aides have also been downplaying expectations of a blowout victory in Iowa.

The Republican race will not be decided this month. But the upcoming votes in Iowa and New Hampshire will be the first test of whether Mr Trump's power is as strong as it seems. If not, Ms Haley will be waiting in the wings.

Courtesy BBC

Russia warns Ukraine of nuclear attack if Kyiv targets its missile launch sites



By J. Choudhry

A key ally of President Vladimir Putin issued a warning, stating that any Ukrainian attacks on missile launch sites within Russia using arms provided by the United States and its allies could provoke a nuclear response from Moscow. Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian President and current deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, expressed concern that certain Ukrainian military commanders were contemplating strikes on Russian missile launch sites with Western-supplied long-range missiles.

Medvedev refrained from disclosing specific details about the alleged plan or naming the commanders involved. As of now, there has been no immediate response from Ukraine to this threat. Medvedev conveyed his message through the Telegram messaging app, emphasizing the potential consequences. He pointed to paragraph 19 of Russia's 2020 nuclear doctrine, which outlines conditions under which a Russian president might consider deploying a nuclear weapon, particularly in response to an

attack involving nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction or conventional weapons when the state's very existence is threatened.

Specifically, Medvedev highlighted point "g" within paragraph nineteen, which addresses the nuclear response to a conventional weapons attack. While Putin retains the authority over Russia's extensive nuclear arsenal, Medvedev's statements are seen as indicative of hawkish sentiments within the Kremlin, framing the conflict with the West as an existential struggle. Critics of the Kremlin have previously dismissed some of Medvedev's nuclear threats as attempts to garner attention or dissuade the West from supplying more weapons to Ukraine. Despite these warnings, the United States and its allies have committed nearly \$250 billion in military and other support to Kyiv.

Concerns about the potential for nuclear escalation have loomed over the Ukraine conflict since Russia's incursion into its

neighbor in February 2022. In late 2022, Washington expressed apprehension about Russian nuclear escalation, with White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan conveying concerns to Moscow. Both Russia and the United States possess substantial nuclear arsenals, with Putin controlling 5,889 nuclear warheads and U.S. President Joe Biden overseeing about 5,244, as reported by the Federation of American Scientists. Medvedev, once seen as a liberal modernizer during his presidency from 2008-2012, has since positioned himself as a staunch anti-Western Kremlin hawk.

Russia-Ukraine War to enter Europe after defeat of Kyiv

Aslan Mohammed Ocherkhadzhiyev has just taken a seat in a secure residence near Chasiv Yar, one of the last strongholds held by Ukrainians near the city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine. On the table in front of

him, there are piles of paper coffee cups and cans labeled in Arabic. Lost in contemplation, he calmly sips from a coffee cup.

With a mechanical gesture, the 43-year-old places the Makarov pistol he had on his belt on the table, revealing a maimed hand—a reminder of his first war against the Russians in the Chechen mountains in 2000 when he was just 23 years old.

Initially serving as an instructor for the Ukrainian special forces, Aslan later joined the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, a unit of Chechen fighters formed in 2014 by Mouslim Tcheberloevsky, mainly consisting of veterans of the Chechen wars for independence from Russia. Today, he serves as one of its commanders, fighting against Russian troops once again. In the adjacent room, his comrade Walid faces Mecca, engaging in the Asr (afternoon prayer) in front of a foldable mirror. Outside, in the devastated streets of Chasiv Yar, Ukrainian soldiers lean against old T90 tanks in silence, their exhaustion concealed by their masks. In the distance, the artillery of both sides rumbles, and flocks of birds scatter in the sky.

In late December, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrsky, the commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces, reported intense fighting along the eastern front. The Ukrainian army, from Kupiansk to Bakhmut through Lyman, was grappling

with successive waves of Russian assaults. Approximately 10 kilometers north of Chasiv Yar, after months of conflict and numerous casualties, Russian forces had breached Ukrainian positions in the Avdiivka sector, encircling the city.

Aslan remains undeterred, having experienced more challenging situations. A sniper during the Second Chechen War, he is familiar with the taste of defeat. Though acknowledging the complexity of the situation, he maintains faith in the resilience of the Ukrainian army.

"I pray for victory," Aslan shares with a smile. "And when we have liberated Ukraine, we will go on to liberate Ichkeria," referencing the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, an unrecognized state existing de facto from 1991-2000. Exiled in Norway after spending years in the prisons of Kremlin-allied Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, Aslan came to Ukraine in the summer of 2022 to fight against invading Russian forces.

"I came here to get revenge on my old enemy," he says with a mischievous look.

In their safe house near Chasiv Yar, Aslan and Walid discuss the challenging situation faced by the Ukrainian army. Despite acknowledging the difficulties, they emphasize the dire state on the Russian side.

While conceding that both armies are struggling, Aslan insists that the Russian forces maintain the upper hand. He highlights the ruthless strategy employed by the Russian army, sending soldiers as cannon fodder into positions, making retreat nearly impossible.

"The Ukrainian army lacks everything."

Despite the challenges, Aslan and Walid express pride in their battalion's performance, considering it one of the best units in the Ukrainian army. They attribute their success to their strong military background, with many having fought Russian forces in Chechnya before. In terms of supplies, Aslan expresses concern about the overall state of the Ukrainian army, lacking essential resources such as ammunition, shells, artillery, aviation, anti-aircraft defense systems, and equipment. He criticizes the reluctance of Europe and the United States to provide adequate aid to Ukraine.

In the face of adversity, Aslan and Walid assert that Ukraine, though facing some withdrawals, can hold its positions. However, launching offensives to reclaim territory is challenging without additional aid.

"Russia is at the doors of Europe, and it won't hesitate to attack," Aslan warns.



Pakistan urgently needs a big injection of foreign investment to bolster economic activities



By Javed Mahmood

Pakistan is struggling for economic survival even after the resumption of the IMF loan program. Earlier, the PDM government and then caretaker setup tried their best to mobilize mega foreign investment to revive business confidence and bolster economic activities. However, till this time, we have yet to see a big achievement on the front of the inflows of foreign investment. So far, our leaders are relying on foreign borrowings to manage external loan repayment.

For the past two years, except a substantial growth in the stock market, all other economic sectors have depicted the same scenario. For instance, the foreign exchange reserves with the State Bank of Pakistan are fluctuating around \$8 billion and these reserves consist of dollars borrowed from China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. If we minus these countries' loans/deposits, nothing will be left with the central bank.

The previous PDM government formed the SIFC (Special Investment Facilitation Council), comprising the Prime Minister and chief of the army staff with the mandate of fetching around \$100 billion in foreign investment in the

years ahead to put the economy of Pakistan on the path towards growth and prosperity. Unfortunately, the SIFC could not show any laudable and convincing results of bilateral meetings with friendly nations such as China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE, etc.

A few reasons are coming in the way of foreign investment in Pakistan. For instance, the country has been experiencing an unending wave of terrorism and price hikes in essential consumer items including gas, electricity, petrol, depreciation of rupee value, and heavy taxation in the wake of an agreement with the IMF. Moreover, Pakistan is close to the general elections scheduled to be held on February 8, 2024, and the mega investors are waiting for the outcome of the elections. If any political party gets a majority to form the next government, it will be favorable for attracting foreign investors. And if a weak government comes to power with the support of "LOTAS" _ Pakistan will continue to experience political and economic crises that would deter foreign investors from taking the risk of investing in the country.

Now we look at the key economic indicators that determine the economic

revival and stability in a country.

Exports surge in 2023

Pakistani Exports Rise for Fourth Month, Reaching 18-Month High. Merchandise exports increased for the fourth consecutive month in December 2023, reaching an 18-month high. This indicates a potential recovery in export-driven industrial growth.

Strong Growth Figures

Absolute terms: Export proceeds reached \$2.82 billion in December, a 22.21% increase from \$2.30 billion in the same month last year.

Month-on-month: Exports also increased 9.29% compared to November 2023.

Half-year performance: The first half of FY24 saw a 5.17% increase in exports to \$14.98 billion, compared to \$14.24 billion in the previous year.

Reasons for Optimism

Textile rebound: The continued rise in exports suggests that the textile and clothing sectors are regaining traction after a challenging year.

Global orders: This indicates that Pakistani manufacturers are securing new orders from international clients.

Trade gap narrowing: The trade gap (difference between exports and imports) narrowed to \$11.14 billion in the first half of FY24, down from \$12.65 billion in the same period last year.

\$3 billion target: Caretaker Commerce Minister Gohar Ejaz has set a goal of reaching \$3 billion in monthly exports.

\$8 billion goal: The Ministry aims to increase export-led development to \$8 billion per month through a new policy under the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) framework.

Overall, the recent performance of Pakistani exports is encouraging. The sustained growth, combined with ambitious government plans, suggests a positive outlook for the country's export-driven economy. However, it's important to monitor how global economic conditions and other factors might impact this upward trend in the coming months.

Pakistan Exports Rise, Imports Drop, and Trade Deficit Narrows: A Positive Outlook emerges

Exports: Pakistani exports are on the rise! December saw the 4th consecutive month of increase, reaching an 18-month high of \$2.82 billion. This 22% growth compared to last year is promising news for the economy.

Textiles: Semi-finished textiles led the charge, while value-added garments are still lagging. **Food Exports:** Rice and beef exports saw significant jumps, reflecting potential diversification. **Government Commitment:** The commerce ministry pledges support with energy pricing, financing, market access, and product diversification. **Imports:** While exports climb, imports are falling. December saw a 12% drop compared to last year, continuing a downward trend. This could be due to slower economic growth or currency fluctuations.

Overall: The narrowing trade deficit (down 34% compared to last year) is a positive sign. December's lower deficit (\$1.7 billion) compared to last year (\$2.8 billion) reinforces the trend. The government aims for even

higher exports and slightly increased imports in FY24, leading to a smaller predicted trade deficit.

Challenges: Sustaining export growth while ensuring value-added garments recover. Addressing the reasons behind falling imports to ensure healthy economic activity. Overall, December paints a positive picture for Pakistan's trade scene. Continued focus on export growth, diversification, and import management could lead to a stronger and more balanced economy.



Pakistan's inflation remains sky-high, but hints of hope emerge

In December 2023, Pakistan's consumer prices soared 29.7% compared to the same month last year, marking the highest annual inflation in the country's history. However, despite this daunting figure, there are some early signs of potential relief.

Key Points

Record inflation: 2023 was a brutal year for Pakistani consumers, with inflation reaching unprecedented levels. **IMF bailout:** A crucial \$3 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in July helped avert a potential economic collapse. **December rise:** While year-on-year inflation remains alarming, the monthly increase in December was a modest 0.8%. **Potential future decline:** Experts and the central bank governor suggest inflation could dip to 20%-22% in the upcoming fiscal year, fueled by lower oil prices.

The December numbers hint at a possible gradual easing of inflation. **Government action:** The IMF bailout and government reforms aim to stabilize the economy and

curb inflation. **Upcoming elections:** The hope is that political stability after the national elections will further aid economic recovery.

Challenges Remain

High base: Even with a potential decline, inflation will remain significantly higher than before the crisis. **Uncertainty:** Global economic factors and political developments could impact the inflation trajectory. **Vulnerable population:** Many

Pakistanis continue to struggle with the high cost of living. Overall, while the current inflation situation remains severe, there are cautious signs of potential improvement. Continued government efforts and economic stability will be crucial to alleviating the burden on Pakistani citizens and securing sustained economic growth.

Pakistan Exceeds Tax Collection Target: LNG Rush and Inflation Boost FBR Performance

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) exceeded its December 2023 target by Rs7 billion, buoyed by timely clearance of liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments and robust domestic sales tax collection fueled by high inflation. **Revenue Rises:** Total collection reached Rs982 billion, surpassing the Rs975 billion target and marking a 34% increase over Rs732 billion in December 2022. **Expected Boost:** Further adjustments are expected before month-end, potentially raising the figure by another Rs1.5 billion.

Strong Half-Year: For the first half of FY24 (July-December), the FBR collected

Rs4.467 trillion, exceeding the Rs4.425 trillion target by Rs42 billion.

LNG Liftoff: LNG clearance contributed significantly, with the Saturday shipment alone adding Rs3.7 billion. **Tax Types:** Income tax collection grew an impressive 37%, followed by 28% growth in domestic sales tax.

Challenges and Projections

Import stage tax collection remains sluggish due to import slowdown. **Refund Data:** Sales tax refund figures for the first half are unavailable. **Ambitious Goal:** The government's FY24 revenue target is Rs9.415 trillion, a substantial 30% increase from the revised FY23 collection of Rs7.2 trillion.

the 2023 average of \$2.2 billion per month. Where the money's coming from: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the US are the top source countries.

What's behind the surge: Stability in the exchange rate and government action against illegal money dealers are driving the increase.

The rupee is strengthening: The crackdown on illegal currency movements has helped stabilize the rupee, which hit a record low in September 2023. The economy is getting a boost: Remittances are a vital source of foreign currency for Pakistan, helping to finance imports and keep the economy afloat.

People are sending more money home: This shows confidence in the economy and a desire to support families back home.

market, witnessing a substantial surge of 2,211 points on Monday. This marked the second-highest absolute point increase and the highest surge on the first working day of a new year. Positive economic indicators included a historic one-month tax collection of Rs984bn by the Federal Board of Revenue and a notable 40.1% year-on-year reduction in the trade deficit for December 2023. However, the elevated headline inflation number of 29.7% year-on-year in December raised some investor concerns.

State Bank of Pakistan's reserves reached \$8.2bn, the highest level since July 14, 2023, and the rupee strengthened by 0.16% against the US dollar, reaching Rs281.4. As a result, the KSE-100 index concluded at 64,515 points, reflecting a week-on-week gain of 2,064 points or 3.3%.

Positive sector-wise contributions came from oil and gas exploration companies (587 points), commercial banks (392 points), fertilizers (315 points), cement (185 points), and power generation and distribution (166 points). Sectors with negative contributions included miscellaneous (13 points), glass & ceramics (3.2 points), investment banks (1.3 points), modarbas (one point), and leasing companies (0.1 points).

Noteworthy scrip-wise contributors were Pakistan Petroleum Ltd (268 points), Oil and Gas Development Company Ltd (258 points), Fauji Fertiliser Company (151 points), Hub Power Company Ltd (120 points), and United Bank Ltd (102 points). Conversely, negative contributions came from Pakistan Aluminium Beverage Cans Ltd (12 points), Askari Bank Ltd (6 points), Ghani Glass Ltd (4.8 points), Lucky Core Industries Ltd (4.5 points), and BankIslami Pakistan Ltd (3.6 points).

Foreign selling amounted to \$3.1m, up from \$1.9m in the previous week, with major selling observed in exploration and production (\$1.95m) and banks (\$1m). On the local front, buying was reported by other organizations (\$5.5m) and banks (\$5.4m). The average daily volume increased by 5.4% week-on-week, reaching 687 million shares, while the average daily value settled at \$69.6m, up by 11.6% from the preceding week.



Overall: Despite import struggles, FBR's December and half-year performance shows progress, fueled by LNG clearance and domestic tax increases. However, achieving the ambitious FY24 target will require sustained momentum and addressing import tax sluggishness.

Remittances depict encouraging growth in Dec 2023

Overseas Pakistanis are sending more money home. Workers' remittances jumped 13% in December 2023 to \$2.38 billion, a welcome boost for the Pakistani economy. The increase is linked to a stable rupee-dollar rate and a crackdown on illegal currency networks.

Remittances in December were higher than

However, there are also some challenges: Remittances are still down overall: Compared to the first half of last year, remittances are down 7%. Inflation remains high: The increase in remittances may not be enough to fully offset the impact of inflation on everyday Pakistanis. Overall, the surge in remittances is a positive development for Pakistan, but it's important to stay aware of the challenges and work to create a more stable and prosperous economy for everyone.

Stock Market starts 2024 with bullish sentiment

The equities market exhibited strong performance during the initial week of the new calendar year, driven by favorable economic developments. Arif Habib Ltd reported remarkable resilience in the stock

Tackling the electricity challenge



By Dr Khalid Waleed

Pakistan is once again facing a shortfall of electricity in winter. Last year, there was a nationwide electricity blackout on account of similar issues. It then becomes essential to discuss in detail the various conundrums and need for integrated planning in the power sector.

The country's power infrastructure is primarily structured along the south-north, with major power lines connecting the southern and northern regions. These regions are not only geographically distinct but also differ in their electricity generation profiles.

The southern area, extending from the coastal belts of Sindh and Balochistan to the Guddo Thermal Power Station, includes diverse electricity suppliers like K-Electric, Hesco, Sepco, and Qesco. In contrast, the northern region, stretching from Gepco to Gilgit-Baltistan, comprises areas serviced by Iesco, Hazeco, and Pesco.

A closer look at power consumption patterns reveals the gravity of the situation. In 2022, the northern region consumed about 24,389 GWh of electricity, while the

central region, which spans from Guddo to Gujranwala Electric Power Company and includes service areas of Mepco, Fesco, Lesco, and Gepco, consumed a staggering 71,721 GWh.

This geographical distribution of power generation and consumption leads to what can be termed as the 'consumption conundrum'. Each region has a heterogeneous mix of electricity generation sources: the north is rich in hydro resources, the south boasts coal, nuclear, and wind plants, and the central region, being the most urbanized, generates the majority of the electricity demand.

Adding to this conundrum is the power generation mix predominantly reliant on fossil fuels. The majority of these fossil fuel-based power plants, except for a few like those in Kot Addu and Port Qasim, are located in the north. This region also houses major hydro dams like Tarbela and Mangla.

However, the bulk of nuclear power generation, which forms a minor share of the overall mix, is situated in the south. This

uneven distribution creates a 'north-south generation conundrum'. During winter, when hydro dams reduce their output, the central and northern regions increasingly depend on electricity from the south.

This dependency exacerbates the power shortfall, as the dated transmission system struggles with frequent tripping and is prone to nationwide blackouts, especially under foggy or smoggy conditions. This phenomenon is aptly described as the 'south-north barrier'.

The seasonal variation in electricity demand further complicates the situation. Climate change, with its impact on rising temperatures, has led to a significant increase in electricity demand during summer, primarily for cooling purposes. This seasonal fluctuation sees summer peak demands soaring to around 30,000MW, contrasting sharply with the winter demand of approximately 18,000MW.

Concurrently, there is an increased demand for gas in winter, leading to what can be described as an 'energy-economics-conundrum'. Hydro dams, which are dependent

on water availability, cease power generation due to canal closures in winter. Additionally, many fossil fuel plants undergo maintenance shutdowns in preparation for the summer peak season.

Economic constraints compel planners to limit electricity generation from expensive imported power plants (while still incurring capacity charges) and to rely more on indigenous coal-based plants. This strategy, while economically motivated, leaves the system vulnerable to tripping, widespread interruptions, and outages. The energy economics conundrum combined with the south-north transmission barrier and power consumption conundrum cause short fall and inefficient transmission of power in winter.

Addressing these conundrums, especially during the winter season, requires a comprehensive and strategic approach. Implementing an array of solutions that encompass integrated planning, renewable energy transition, digitization, foreign investment, and organizational transformation can pave the way for a more resilient and efficient power system.

Here's a detailed exploration of these solutions:

First, integrated planning is paramount. There is a need for a cohesive national energy strategy that harmoniously integrates the various facets of power generation, transmission, and distribution.

This plan should be sensitive to Pakistan's geographical and seasonal energy dynamics and aim for a well-balanced mix of energy sources, considering the regional disparities in energy production and consumption.

Second, a transition towards renewable energy should be prioritized. Pakistan's rich potential in solar and wind energy, particularly in its southern and central regions, offers a sustainable solution to the 'north-south generation conundrum'. This transition should encompass both large-scale renewable projects and smaller, local initiatives.

Third, the digitization and modernization of the grid system is crucial. Upgrading the existing grid with advanced digital technologies will enhance its efficiency and reliability. Implementing smart grid technologies

can lead to better demand management, reduced transmission losses, and a more responsive system in case of faults or emergencies.

Fourth, attracting Chinese investment into the transmission system can be a game-changer. Building on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) partnership, Chinese expertise and funding can significantly contribute to upgrading Pakistan's transmission infrastructure, bringing in both capital and technical knowledge.



Fifth, implementing and upgrading the SCADA system at the National Power Control Center (NPCC) is essential. This upgrade will enhance real-time monitoring and control of the national grid, facilitating quick decision-making and efficient management of grid operations.

Sixth, promoting distributed generation can mitigate transmission losses and reduce dependency on the central grid. Encouraging small-scale renewable installations, like rooftop solar panels and local wind turbines, can contribute significantly to the energy mix.

Seventh, sector coupling is an innovative approach that needs exploration. Linking the electricity sector with other energy-consuming sectors, such as transportation and heating, can provide added flexibility and storage options for the energy system.

Eighth, transforming key institutions like the NTDC, CPPA, and distribution utilities to operate on more corporate and efficient

cy-driven principles is vital. This transformation will lead to better financial management, operational efficiency, and enhanced customer service.

Ninth, establishing a robust policy and regulatory framework will support these technical initiatives. Such a framework should incentivize investment in the energy sector, ensure fair energy pricing, and promote energy conservation and efficiency.

Tenth, fostering public-private partnerships

can bring additional resources and expertise into the energy sector. Private sector involvement can introduce innovation and efficiency, especially in areas like renewable energy projects, grid modernization, and distributed generation.

Last, investing in capacity building and public awareness is critical. A team of engineers, economists and environmental experts can steer the power sector towards sustainability. Training programmes and awareness campaigns about energy conservation and the benefits of renewable energy will be key in the successful implementation of these policies.

A comprehensive approach that combines technological innovation, infrastructural improvements, strategic planning, regulatory reforms, and collaborative efforts across various stakeholders is essential for Pakistan to overcome its winter electricity transmission challenges and move towards a more sustainable and efficient energy future.

2024: Rocky road ahead



By Shahid Kardar

The most challenging year in recent memory has closed with some indicators prognosticating a nascent economic rejuvenation of sorts. So, what lies in store in 2024? Are the gloomy days now behind us that a possible rising tide from improved growth prospects will lift all boats?

The public at large cannot be expected to go into a trance on being informed that we have achieved both a primary and current account surplus. For them the fallout of back-breaking inflation and stringent austerity under the IMF programme has been a stifling of growth and economic opportunities.

And that these factors combined with supply chain disruptions caused by administrative restrictions of imports have amplified the market manipulative powers of a minority class, eroding the purchasing power of large segments of the population.

For them, unemployment rates and poverty levels are rising. And, although growing, these rates would have been higher but for the annual remittances of \$30 billion and the informal sector which have kept the

wheels of the economy somewhat running.

However, many in the lower-middle income group hovering around the poverty line, if unable to take on multiple jobs, have been pushed below it, while significant proportions of the middle-income group have been coping by adjusting their lifestyles or by running down available savings or by liquidating assets. A disturbing development is the loss of morale of the limited available quantity of the skilled. They are articulating their loss of faith in the future of the country by seeking any opening for an exit.

Meanwhile, an annual requirement of \$25bn and reserves well below recommended levels are placing our ability to service external obligations increasingly at risk. The problem has become so acute that it may be too difficult to even deal with it through a reshuffling of maturities.

The country, therefore, appears poised to be invited into the IMF's parlour for the 24th time. The second round of stabilisation and austerity will, with the depletion of these buffers, be more excruciating. A worrying outcome of the ensuing weariness could be

the worsening of the already fragile social cohesion.

Our 'friends' have lost patience with us and are no longer agreeable to doling out lifelines.

Our "friends" have ostensibly lost patience with us and are no longer that readily agreeable to doling out lifelines without a change of our behaviour, while multilaterals on whose benefactions we live from year to year are, although coming so lately and equally to blame, openly expressing their exasperation at our repeated abandonment of commitments on reform.

Although our creditors are seemingly pondering over whether they should lend their names to our quest for international banker generosity so that we can live to borrow another day, they do not appear to be in the mood to pull the plug on our life support system, just yet.

A view fairly widely aired is that for pushing the economy onto a higher and sustainable growth path and attaining solvency much remains to be done to address the fundamental structural issues.

The list of these concerns is lengthy. It broadly includes political instability and unprecedented polarisation; the general state of uncertainty; policy unpredictability; a corruptible rule of law; bloated governments with their unproductive expenditures running wild; the huge footprint of the state in the economy (through profligacy, bankrolling loss-making inefficient SOEs and obsolete and excessive regulation) bludgeoning the fiscal accounts; different organs of the state crumbling with mechanisms of checks and balances in disarray (if not dysfunctional); a distortionary and predatory tax regime; lack of a sensible exchange rate policy; a system that continues to protect and support powerful “rentiers” at the expense of the economy’s competitiveness; unaffordable pricing of energy (because of the generous terms and conditions accorded to IPPs and continuing governance issues of DISCOs); lack of trade with our neighbours and high transaction costs of cross-border business; the restrictive regulatory environment and its cost (especially for investment whose rate now places us in the 130s among 151 countries); a country image unattractive for potential FDI; poor work culture/ethics and the weak quality of human capital.

It has been argued before in these columns that while the fiscal correction demanded by our donors is important, it is the quality anchored in the composition of the correction that is more important. The effort to



achieve it must begin from the expenditure side of the fiscal equation.

Today, resources are being increasingly absorbed in the maintenance of state operations and not even maintenance of assets. By reprioritising expenditures, decentralising functional distribution and organisational structures of different tiers of government based on the principle of subsidiarity, we can modernise governance systems, thereby reducing opportunities for rent-seeking and corruption, improving resource allocation, reducing management costs and enhancing administrative and work capacities and efficiencies.

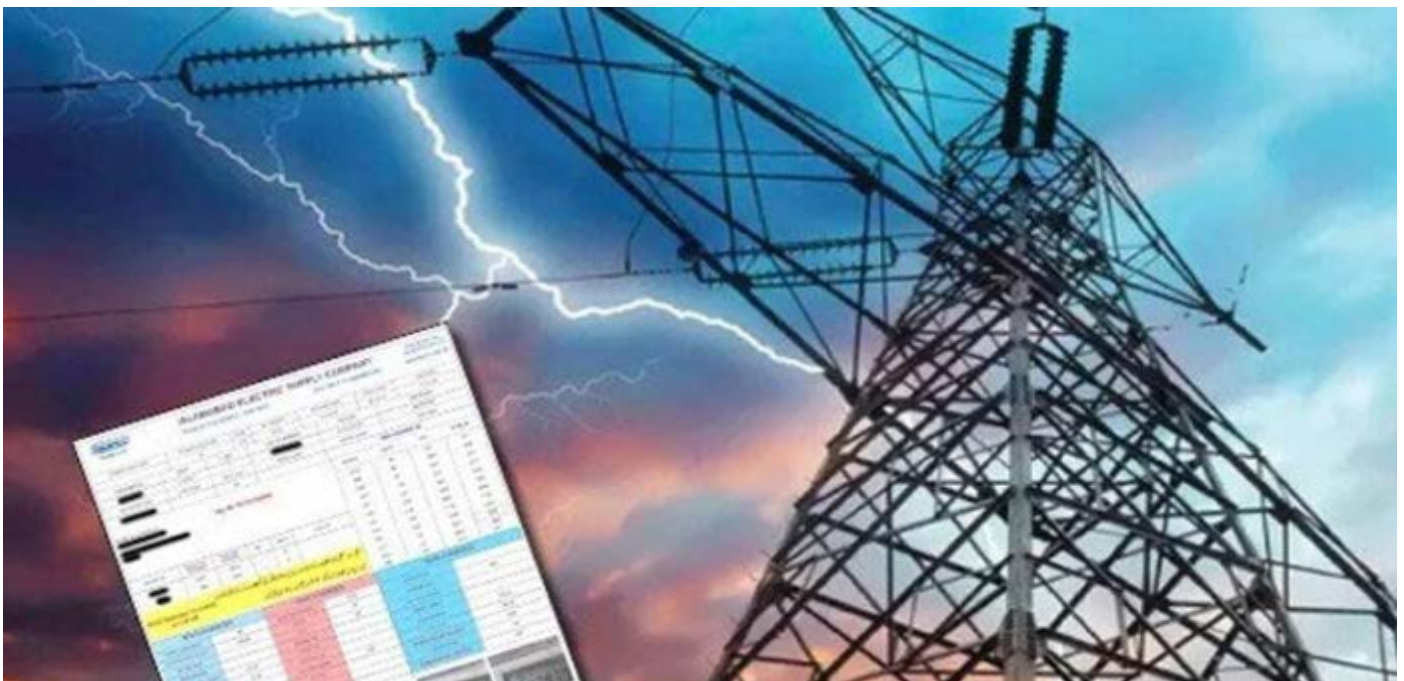
To conclude, we can only be complacent in tackling the above referred perennial fault lines (by continuing to embrace a ‘business as usual’ approach) at our own peril. The

emergency for embarking on the long-overdue associated reforms is upon us since the state’s domestic and global credibility has been severely damaged.

Since these problems have been accumulated over decades, the task ahead is a massive and long-drawn painful one, requiring a leadership (not visible to the naked eye today) with the vision and capability to distribute this pain equitably, based on the ability of the different economic groups to bear the burden of the required adjustment.

This would test the forbearance and determination of any leadership to stay on course, raising the obvious question whether the government likely to be assembled after the election will be able to fabricate the changes that will endure the test of time.

Courtesy Dawn



31 public entities caused Rs730b loss in FY22

Report reveals NHA tops list of these state-owned firms



By Shahbaz Rana

Pakistan's 31 state-owned commercial companies caused colossal losses of Rs730 billion with the National Highway Authority topping the list, revealed a report released by the finance ministry as part of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) condition.

Titled 'The Federal Footprint, SOE [state-owned enterprises] consolidated report for fiscal year 2021 and 2022', the report has ended many myths.

All the power distribution companies, including four based in Punjab, suffered losses in the year 2022.

The Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) is not the highest loss-making entity. Surprisingly, the closed Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) was the 14th highest profit-making company of the government.

The findings of the report, prepared and released on the instructions of the IMF, indicated that the privatisation ministry was not working on the area, where it should have done so urgently – the power sector.

The interim government had excluded the

power sector from its priority and just focused on the PIA – the third highest loss-making entity in 2022.

The report reviewed the performance of 133 SOEs from the fiscal year 2020 to 2022.

It covered 88 commercial enterprises and 45 non-commercial entities.

The report showed that out of 88 entities, 50 earned Rs560 billion in profits but the rest of the 31 incurred losses of around Rs730 billion.

The country's highest loss-making entity was the NHA, which caused a loss of Rs168.5 billion. It was followed by the Peshawar Electric Supply Company (Pesco) that suffered a loss of Rs102 billion.

The PIA was the third biggest loss-making entity, causing a loss of Rs97.5 billion to the national exchequer in 2022.

Despite receiving extraordinary support, the privatisation ministry has been unable to sell the PIA so far.

The 88 commercial SOEs have a total asset base of Rs30.5 trillion and generated a sum of Rs10.4 trillion in the fiscal year 2022.

Out of this Rs10.4 trillion revenue, the share of the oil and gas sector was Rs6 trillion, according to the report.

These 88 SOEs employed 349,573 people.

However, they collectively incurred a net loss of Rs162 billion.

The federal government provided them with financial aid worth Rs179 billion in the fiscal year 2022 to keep them afloat.

This amount is exclusive of any subsidy given for the benefit of the consumers.

The top 10 loss-making entities caused a total depletion of Rs650 billion in 2022.

Out of these 10, three were the NHA, PIA and Pakistan Railways while the rest of the seven were power sector companies.

The power sector is now the biggest drain on the national exchequer.

All the 10 power distribution companies cumulatively caused a loss of Rs376 billion. This sum is more than half of the total losses caused by the public sector companies.

The power generation and transmission companies were in profit. It is the distribution link in the chain that is causing the losses.

The power distribution companies of Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, Gujranwala and Faisalabad were profitable at one time.

However, the report revealed that all these companies suffered losses in 2022 -- the last year of the PTI government.

The privatisation ministry is taking no steps to privatise the power sector and instead advised to outsource their managements.

The power sector employs about 140,000 people. The Lahore Electric Supply Company (Lesco) -- once considered efficient -- caused a depletion of Rs30.2 billion in 2022, making it the country's seventh highest loss-making public-sector firm.

Pakistan Railways caused a deprivation of Rs47.5 billion in 2022 -- the sixth highest loss-making entity but still not on the privatisation list.

The Etisalat-run Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) also caused a depletion of Rs7.8 billion -- the 14th highest loss-making enterprise and also negating the notion that a state-owned firm managed by the private sector could be turned profitable.

Pakistan's three federal secretaries sit on the PTCL board and earn hefty fees.

There was only one company that earned more than Rs100 billion -- the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) that generated a profit of Rs134 billion in 2022.

Among 50, there were only three companies that earned over Rs50 billion in profits -- the Pakistan State Oil (PSO), Pak-Arab Refinery Company (Parco) and Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL).

There were in total 13 companies, whose annual income was more than Rs10 billion and 25 SOEs had earned over Rs1 billion per annum in the fiscal year 2022. These firms included the PSM, which earned Rs7.2 billion in 2022.

The PML-N government had shut down the PSM in 2015.

All the three multilateral creditors -- the World Bank, IMF and Asian Development Bank (ADB) -- have been directly involved in the restructuring and privatisation of these entities.

However, all these efforts have remained unproductive yet.

The finance ministry released the report only because of its commitment with the IMF.

The report underlined that the government had initiated a comprehensive reform agenda to enhance SOE governance and performance.

This agenda involves restructuring, privatisation, and introduction of professional management to improve operational efficiency and financial sustainability.

It added that emphasis had also been placed on effective monitoring, structured performance evaluation against defined benchmarks, and prompt corrective action.

The Central Management Unit (CMU) -- set up under the diktat of the IMF and ADB -- will review the performance of these state-run entities.

These SOEs were primarily established to guarantee the provision of essential goods and services to the people in areas, where the private sector investment was hindered because of various factors including significant capital requirements, limited profitability, trade restrictions, market size constraints, and lack of competitive dynamics.

However, over the years, these entities were used as tools by politicians and bureaucrats to extract benefits.

Courtesy Tribune



Pakistan State Oil



PAKISTAN STEEL



Islamabad Electric Supply Company

Realistically speaking

Economic recovery after the elections will require decisiveness, transparency, and inclusive collaboration



By Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri

One may argue that Pakistan's challenges are mutually nonexclusive and interrelated. It is not easy to address any single issue or challenge in isolation. While acknowledging the interconnected nature of Pakistan's challenges, the impact of these issues on the population varies.

Economic concerns, notably, wield significant influence over the political landscape. The echoes of past voting patterns, such as the desire for a third party (Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf) in 2018; the hope for an end to power outages (under Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) in 2013; and sympathy for the Pakistan People's Party-Parliamentarians in 2008, following Benazir Bhutto's assassination; show the enduring impact of economic issues on voter behaviour, and can be heard in the run-up to the forthcoming elections.

Challenges for the national economy have intensified in recent years, both at the macro and micro levels. Macro-level issues, including food and fuel-driven inflation;

depreciation of rupee against major currencies; unsustainable debt levels; declining creditworthiness; low foreign exchange reserves; minimal foreign direct investment; meagre saving-to-GDP ratio; high indirect taxes; a substantial fiscal deficit; and very high-interest rates, are impacting human development and human capital indices, pushing a large number of citizens down the socioeconomic ladder.

Barring the last few months, when some course correction measures were taken administratively, thanks to the support of the SIFC, Pakistan's economic strategy in the recent past has been inconsistent, particularly in dealing with the International Monetary Fund. The focus on securing a single tranche from the lender of the last resort and deviation from agreed reforms led to a series of economic shocks for the masses.

The pattern continued until the current stand-by agreement was secured. However, by the time the SBA was secured, it was

already too late for a large number of citizens feeling the heat of an avoidable economic meltdown.

How did we come that close to a default? Who had what role in bringing Pakistan to where it is today? What needs to be done in the future to avoid a default etc, are irrelevant questions for most of the voters. The majority of voters is interested instead in finding the answers to questions such as whether the deterioration on the economic front can be reversed? Can the cost of living come down? Can a unit of electricity or gas and a litre of fuel again cost what it used to a few years ago? Can the rupee-dollar parity go back to what it was a few years ago? Can the masses buy food at the price they were paying a few years ago? The answers to these questions shape the economic aspect of electoral campaigns.

One simple answer to these questions is "yes." Almost all political parties are using this answer to lure their voters. The promises range from doubling the salaries

of government servants to providing free electricity to the consumers using up to 300 units per month (PPPP); bringing the food, fuel and dollar prices to the level where they were in 2017 (PML-N); and breaking the “shackles of the IMF” and saying goodbye to modern interest system (Jamaat-i-Islami).

While political parties make grand promises, crucial details about how these pledges will be fulfilled, the timeline for implementation, and the implications for the nation remain largely unaddressed. The electorate, eager for economic relief, is buying into these promises without a clear understanding of the practicalities or the potential costs.

Let's assume that one or a coalition of political parties, with the right intention to fix Pakistan's economic woes (provide relief to the masses), comes into power after the elections. How would the election outcome impact the economy?

That depends on who has done the homework on crucial details of the abovementioned questions.

Before answering this question, let us consider the two things that any government, irrespective of political affiliation, will have to do immediately after coming into power. The next government will have to get the final review of the current standby agreement of the IMF completed in March 2024. Likewise, it will have to prepare the federal budget for the next fiscal year within three months after coming into power. In other words, willingly or unwillingly, the next government will have to engage with the IMF.

Any government with a plan ready for the next IMF programme can turn that engagement into an opportunity for successful negotiations. For me, one indicator of the level of preparedness will include a pragmatic plan to minimise the burden of policy reforms on the economically marginalized sections of society. An early engagement with the IMF will help the government complete that review successfully. It will also help the government to incorporate its vision of any targeted subsidies/social protection in the federal budget that it will have to present three months later.

One possible scenario is similar to 2013,

when the PML-N approached the IMF immediately after coming into power and capitalising on IMF's trust in the government strengthened Pakistan's macroeconomic indicators. This may be the best-case scenario. Any party/parties aspiring to form the next federal government should have an indigenous plan for negotiation with the IMF ready. Once they form the government, they should try to secure the next package before the current SBA expires (at the end of March 2024). Along with fiscal consolidation measures, that plan should clearly spell out how the burden of reforms on the economically marginalised sections of society will be minimised.



Such an approach becomes even more important as the new government will be responsible for the last review of the current SBA. An early engagement with the IMF will help the government complete that review successfully. It will also help the government incorporate its vision of any targeted subsidies/social protection in the federal budget that it will have to present three months later.

Any delay in engaging with the IMF due to unrealistic promises made to the electorate or attempts to find funds from bilateral partners while bypassing the IMF will make the process of macroeconomic recovery more painful.

In the current global political economy,

there is no viable alternative to the IMF. If the IMF is not engaged before April 2024, the federal budget will become a prior condition for the next programme. To avert a looming default, the government will then have to make abrupt economic decisions setting aside its campaign promises.

Another factor affecting the economy after the elections will be how well the new government can use the SIFC mechanism. In the best-case scenario, to capitalise on the success of administrative measures taken during the last three months, the SIFC membership will be broadened to include the leaders of opposition in the National and Provincial Assemblies at the

appropriate level. This collaborative engagement - seeking doable alternatives from the opposition when faced with economic policy rejection will be essential for the government.

The path to economic recovery after the elections lies in decisive and early engagement with the IMF; transparent policy-making; and inclusive collaboration through mechanisms like the SIFC. Refraining from making unrealistic promises before elections and balancing any promises made with practical solutions will be pivotal for Pakistan's post-election economic trajectory.

Courtesy The News

Embracing a new dawn

After inflicting intolerable pain on citizenry, governments abandon symptomatic treatment halfway into life of a programme as conditions get tougher to implement



By Dr Khaqan Hassan Najeeb

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the lender of the last resort, in every engagement, tries to manage Pakistan's recurring balance of payments crisis by almost always pushing for austerity policies. Instrumentally, programmes with the IMF have focused on macro stability measures including fiscal adjustment, monetary tightening, devaluation, and price hikes. The impact of these adjustments has been harsh on the less fortunate in our society.

Historically, after inflicting intolerable pain on the citizenry, governments abandon the symptomatic treatment halfway into the life of a programme as conditions get tougher to implement. Political expediency entices governments to then push stimulus-fueled growth through expansionary fiscal and monetary policies. Pakistan's import-led growth model causes yet another balance of payments crisis – as the essential deeper reforms elude the policymakers. This flair for discarding prudence ensures Pakistan's trajectory back to the doorsteps of the IMF every few years.

Unfortunately, the economy remains in a perpetual state of muddling through, with

fragile macro-fundamentals and external support to keep the boat from sinking. Pakistan has somehow surrendered to this undesirable equilibrium. It is presently availing its 23rd IMF facility in the shape of a Stand-by Arrangement (SBA). And looking towards a new one.

Relying on bailouts, debt monies, and external advice has left a deeper scar. The country's thinking and governance capability have severely eroded over time. The ideological dictums of development practitioners of building good institutions and getting the policy right have largely ignored the role of building human agency in Pakistan. The more discouraged think of the country becoming a kakistocracy.

The same period has witnessed the tides of time turn for many a nation in Asia – a story of success almost entirely crafted through self-prescription and innovation by some exceptional policy leaders. Pakistan's transition to economic freedom and sovereignty and weaning itself off the IMF drip is also intimately linked to crafting its serious strategy of reform. Pakistan's destiny for better or worse will be determined by its ability to engage a set of smart policymak-

ers – minds that can conduct a macroeconomic diagnosis and envisage, write, and execute a credible homegrown overhaul plan. This is now a necessary condition.

The country has to believe that good economic theory applies to Pakistan as much as it does anywhere else. In economic policy terms, at the minimum, channeling investment in productive sectors, managing high consumption levels, some kind of market orientation, international trade, and some macroeconomic stability, are prerequisites for long-term prosperity. Pakistan has missed out on most of the above.

We remember the nerve-racking first half of FY23 – overshadowed by an intermittent relationship with the IMF. Pakistan struggled to secure the 9th review with the IMF in the last programme which was eventually abandoned. The delay hurt dearly. Foreign reserves held with the State Bank of Pakistan plummeted to an uncomfortable low of \$2.9 billion on June 20, 2023, consequently, the rupee lost 22 per cent in value in FY23, and inflation rose to 29 per cent as ordinary folks paid through their nose.

The dilly-dallying option about entering a new programme with the IMF is no more. The external vulnerabilities require keeping the IMF umbrella intact for a few more years. Professional policymakers should be spending endless hours designing a smooth transition from the current nine-month SBA to a longer-term Extended Fund Facility (EFF) with the IMF. The current SBA ends in April 2024.

This is essential to avoid a bumpy ride in the first half of 2024. One has observed that countries which use their national plan as the basis for designing a Memorandum of Economic and Financial Performance do better with the Fund. That's how Pakistan should approach the next EFF. The design of the EFF and many additional reforms leaning towards structurally altering the economic landscape are crucial.

However, aid programmes alone are never the determining factor for prosperity hence not a push for substantive change. Economies only transform with accompanying longer-term remedies. Tragically, at nearly 7.5 per cent of GDP in FY23, Pakistan's high federal fiscal deficit is a serious drag on the economy. It is a difficult area and remains unaddressed for too long.

Crucially, fiscal prudence can help free up resources for the private sector and raise productive investment. Here again, the IMF must be convinced that remodeling public and tax expenditures, and sharing subsidies with provinces, rather than raising taxes on those already paying, is the route

to meaningful fiscal adjustment. Trapped in a cycle of debt, the country's case for reprofiling public and IPP debts, and undertaking debt or development and environmental swaps is strong. Smart debt management can free up financing space and avoid the asphyxiating effects of austerity.

The good news is that, with the right reform interventions taking hold, life will become less painful for the underprivileged. A well-organized economic overhaul will question privileged groups' interests and shift the economy to competitiveness. It will restrict state largesse, concessional financing, and exemptions.

Economies function most efficiently when governments concentrate on a well-organized provision of public goods, and let the market allocate resources in the private sector. Pakistan longs for a seminal investment and growth architecture redesign. This will require detailed work on a sustained productivity agenda, intent to deregulate, improvement of financial intermediation, and policies of divestment and foreign direct investment in export sectors.

However, economic reforms at the national level will bring selective productivity gains at the micro level. Evidence suggests that substantial changes initiated by reforms at the micro level of the economy across corporates, firms, and individuals who work on assembly lines are indispensable for raising the competitiveness of most industries. These changes will require

patience. They will also require path-breaking digital infrastructure support by the state.

Local doctors have to manage both the macro and micro-operations skillfully. Deeper reforms are likely to make deficits sustainable and growth more resilient. Beyond the EFF, this work should sustain the economy on its own merits. Many of the intellectuals with whom I am lucky to brainstorm would argue that I have narrowly focused on an economic agenda for revival. They are quite right in their observation. We know that deeper social issues of quality education, gender mainstreaming, and population management need utmost care. No longer bound by the intricate web of policy patchwork, work in these areas would become possible.

It is time for Pakistan to break the shackles of economic dependency. With every new dawn, we have to blossom some hope in the minds of many talented young people who are thinking of emigrating. Leaderships have to reimagine Pakistan's agenda of unimpeded economic growth. They have to convince the 240 million Pakistanis that the spirit of the nation can shine brighter within the next election cycle.

Pakistan's destiny in the coming years will be defined by the ability and courage of the people we put in important positions. As Iqbal says: "nahin hai na-umeed 'Iqbal' apni kisht-e-viran se/zara nam ho to ye mitti bahut zarkhez hai saaqi".

Courtesy The News



Lack of focus on real issues

Feudal, tribal, authoritarian and corrupt tendencies prevent leadership from focusing on issues to transform Pakistan



By Dr Moonis Ahmar

Pakistan has long been lacking a leadership that can focus on remedying its fragile economy, political malaise, bad governance, etc to transform the country into a successful model of development. A lack of focus to deal with issues that pose serious challenges to the country is a major problem for the 240 million people of this country.

One can quote innumerable examples to prove that countries where the leadership has a focus on ameliorating the lives of their people are role models. The focus of Japan and Germany, the two defeated powers of WW-II, was on utilising the positives to move on — and emerge as world's second and third largest economies within a span of four decades. Likewise, China, India, Singapore and the UAE prioritised seeking excellence in industrialisation, modernisation of infrastructure, GDP, per capita income, foreign exchange reserves, educational standards, research and development to lead to good quality of life for their people.

Where Pakistan is standing today is not difficult to gauge. Barring minor achievement like reduction in the balance-of-payments gap, there has

been no success over the last one year as regards controlling inflation and poverty, raising foreign exchange reserves and tackling foreign debt. Poor performance in sports, education, R&D and human security like access to clean and safe drinking water, better health, housing, transport reflects the fragility of the leadership in focusing on areas which can augment the quality of life of people.

When the powers-that-be only focus on bringing favourites to the helm, one cannot expect anything else that political instability, economic degeneration, worsened governance, lack of ethics and the absence of the rule of law.

Why does a 76-year-old Pakistan lack focus on human and social development? What has been the price of the lack of focus on democracy, viable justice system, political pluralism, good governance and rule of law? How can there be a shift of focus to issues which can ensure a viable political process and raise the life standard of people? These are the questions that are being raised in the prevailing political situation in the country at a time when the general elections are just a month away. The

absence of brainstorming in civil society, academia and political parties on the fallout of state-sponsored narrative can be counterproductive. When more than 20 million children are out of school and more than half the youths are disappointed enough to leave the country for better future, it reflects lack of imagination and vision to focus on issues that tend to deepen the country's fragility in the realm of human security.

Why there is lack of focus and how Pakistan's leadership can concentrate on battering things require proper brainstorming from three angles.

First of all, feudal, tribal, authoritarian and corrupt tendencies prevent the leadership from focussing on issues to transform Pakistan into a role model in the areas of human development, good governance, the rule of law, accountability, democracy, political pluralism, religious tolerance, etc. When the focus of state is to maintain the status quo, it is bound to cause a surge in anger and antagonism. Unlike in 1971 and 1977 when the country suffered political upheavals, in 2024 the situation on the ground is different mainly because of social media which is shaping people's perceptions on the various issues.



Despite being in possession of instruments of power, state has its limitations in influencing the will of people. Faced with multiple serious crises domestically and externally, the state needs to focus on: economy, governance, rule of law, human security and a level-playing field in the political arena. Instead of pursuing biases on political matters, state must focus on holding free, fair and transparent elections and transferring power to elected representatives so that a future government empowered with legitimacy can take effective measures in dealing with issues that threaten the very foundations of the country.

Second, there should be focus on adherence to merit and eradicating commercialisation

of education by providing fee, compulsory and quality education to all. Investing at least 10% of GDP on education instead of the current 1.7% and ensuring proper utilisation of resources will help empower youth as well as vulnerable segments of society. When merit is compromised and the culture of corruption and nepotism is acceptable, a country cannot succeed in seeking excellence in education, R&D and human and social development. One can cite the example of Germany where every political party, having a certain percentage of representation in parliament (Bundestag), has a foundation which gets state funding. Such foundations representing political parties have offices all over the

world which project Germany's foreign and domestic policy interests thus strengthening the image of the country. It is because of German leadership's vision and planning that foundations representing political parties focus on projecting their country's interests abroad rather than patronising a handful of political figures.

Third, it is not only state which has a responsibility of focusing on critical issues, but the society also has a role in this regard. Human security and social development, education, research, good governance, rule of law and poverty alleviation cannot be ensured without the contribution of social actors like media, academia, workers, students and different segments of intelligentsia. Pakistan can emerge as a successful model of development, democracy, governance and rule of law if its leadership, both at state and societal level, focuses on improving things instead of augmenting the culture of corruption and nepotism.

Only a leadership that possesses ownership, integrity, hardwork and intelligence can focus on the aforementioned issues to transform Pakistan into a model society. If institutions representing bureaucracy, judiciary, military, education, economy and parliament focus on their mandated jobs, most of the issues facing the people of Pakistan will be resolved.

Courtesy Tribune



Amendments draft in Pension Scheme-2023



By Natasha Ali

Government pension, a financial provision extended to retired public servants and their families, constitutes a cornerstone of social welfare policies. This monetary benefit, commonly referred to as pension, serves as a tangible manifestation of a government's commitment to provide financial security and support to individuals who have dedicated their professional lives to public service.

A balance must be struck between fiscal responsibility and the welfare of government employees and their families. A thoughtful and balanced approach is needed to ensure that these policies achieve their intended goals without causing unintended harm to those they affect. A look at early retirement and pension policies for government employees.

In recent times, the sustainability of government pension programmes has emerged as a focal point of concern within fiscal policy discourse. The rising expenditure associated with these programmes has prompted financial authorities to revisit existing policies, to ensure fiscal responsibility and equitable treatment of retirees. Among the

proposed revisions are measures such as penalties for early retirement, recalibrations in pension calculations, temporal limitations on family pension entitlements, uniform retirement age mandates for armed forces personnel, and alterations in pension structures for re-employed individuals in the public sector.

The statement makes it clear that government employees opting for early retirement after completing 25 years of service will be subject to a penalty, entailing a three percent reduction in their pension each year, starting from the year of retirement until they reach the age of superannuation. A key concern arises from the possibility that this penalty could dissuade experienced workers from opting for early retirement, potentially resulting in an older workforce that may not possess the same level of productivity or adaptability to new challenges. Moreover, there is a potential negative impact on employees with valid reasons for early retirement, such as health issues or family responsibilities, as they would also bear the brunt of a financial penalty.

To fully comprehend the broader implications of this penalty, careful consideration is necessary. This includes a thorough examination of how it might affect the overall dynamics of the workforce and the individual circumstances of employees. Striking a balance between incentivizing a timely workforce transition and accommodating genuine reasons for early retirement is essential to ensure a fair and effective retirement policy.

Limiting family pension to 10 years, with exceptions for Shaheed families or disabled children, may be perceived as a cost-cutting measure. However, this approach raises valid concerns about the financial stability of affected families, particularly those who have lost their primary breadwinners, especially in nuclear family setups. Pensioners not only bear the responsibility of supporting their immediate family but may also have additional obligations due to various factors such as medical issues or orphaned family members.

The ten-year restriction might prove insufficient in providing sustained financial assistance to the family, especially when

there are ongoing needs such as education expenses for children. The escalating cost of living compounds these challenges, and the dwindling employment opportunities further exacerbate the financial strain on affected families. Therefore, it becomes crucial to reevaluate the duration of family pension support to ensure it adequately addresses the long-term financial needs of families grappling with the loss of their primary earners, taking into account the evolving economic landscape and the specific challenges faced by these households.

It's a concerning situation when armed forces personnel and other employees are treated alike in terms of retirement age. The issue lies in the fact that physical capacities and health tend to decline with age, and for armed forces personnel, maintaining peak physical condition is crucial due to the demanding nature of their roles, which require stamina and fitness. Individuals aged 40 and above may experience a decline in stamina and physical performance, impacting their effectiveness in military duties. Moreover, having an aging armed forces population could lead to increased health-related expenses to sustain their well-being. Considering the physically demanding nature of their job, it might be more practical for armed personnel to retire earlier, allowing for the introduction of younger, more physically capable individuals into the force.

The uniform application of retirement rules needs to be reevaluated to ensure they align with the specific requirements of different professions. It's not just about having rules; it's about ensuring those rules are tailored to the unique demands of each occupation, promoting efficiency, and optimizing the distribution of opportunities across generations.

The statement concerning the entitlement to only one pension for individuals with multiple pension options lacks a crucial consideration. It fails to address the essential aspect of whether the single pension being offered is sufficient to support the individual and his or her family. It is advisable to assess the financial background of the person and the amount they are receiving from the pension before granting them the option to choose.

By taking into account the individual's financial circumstances and the adequacy of the offered pension, both the government and the individual stand to benefit. This thoughtful evaluation ensures that the chosen pension aligns with the individual's needs and obligations, avoiding potential financial strain on the recipient and optimizing the utilization of government resources. Implementing a comprehensive approach that considers the economic well-being of the pensioner will contribute

to a more equitable and sustainable pension system.

The statement's early retirement and pension policies may have been designed with the intention of cost control and equitable treatment. However, it's extremely important to carefully assess what might happen as a result of these policies. We need to understand the possible outcomes and impacts they could have. This means looking at both the positive and negative effects these policies might have on government employees and their families.

The penalty for early retirement may discourage valuable employees from leaving the workforce prematurely but on the other hand, the old-age workforce will not be as efficient as young ones. Limiting the duration of family pensions may create financial insecurity for survivors. Ensuring equal treatment for armed forces personnel may not be healthy for both the government and individuals because it is going to cost both ways.

A balance must be struck between fiscal responsibility and the welfare of government employees and their families. A thoughtful and balanced approach is needed to ensure that these policies achieve their intended goals without causing unintended harm to those they affect.



Regression of Media in Pakistan



By Zafar Malik

In the mid-1980s, when I stepped into the field of print media, it was just a few months after the long era of General Zia-ul-Haq. Following an extended period of martial rule, general elections were held, and a gentleman Muhammad Khan Junejo, hailing from Sindhri, was appointed as the Prime Minister.

This was the era of the rise of print media. Telecommunications were being hailed, and computerized typesetting had paved its way into the editorial offices of newspapers. Prominent newspapers like Jang, Nawai Waqt, Dawn, and The Muslim were at the forefront. Urdu newspapers were in circulation by the millions, and the newsrooms of newspapers presented a bustling scene, reminiscent of a fish market, especially during the evening hours.

This was the time when the sanctity of words was still revered. The written word was considered valid and sacred. In humorous programs broadcasted on PTV Peshawar Center, an interesting phrase related to this would often be repeated, “Akhbar Kehnda Ae Maloo,” to which the listener

would respond, “Phir Theek Hi Hosi” (then it’s true).

News transmission to newspapers was handled by two major news agencies. The government agency was the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP), while the private sector had its own agency, Pakistan Press International (PPI). These news stories were printed on the installed telex machines in the newsrooms of newspapers, and after translation, they were incorporated into the pages of the newspapers.

It would be apt to say that social media operates more like a free-spirited entity than one subjected to stringent regulations.

The number of press corps in the federal capital was not more than two dozen, and everyone knew each other, maintaining mutual respect in their relationships. The Principal Information Officer, appointed by the government, served as the most crucial liaison officer, carrying an aura of both immense authority and respect.

In Rawalpindi on Hilal Road, in the old

barracks, the ISPR housed a team consisting of a Brigadier, a Colonel, and several officers at the Major rank. The team was equipped with a still and a video camera as the entire asset of the ISPR. The realm of military secrecy was such that, upon publishing the Corps Commander Rawalpindi’s name along with the Corps’ number, the Colonel of the ISPR not only sent a stern warning to a senior reporter of a major media organization but also lodged a complaint with the editor, demanding an explanation.

Even in those days, fake journalists existed, but their recognition was distinct. A journalist was considered someone who worked for daily newspapers, weekly publications, and monthly magazines. However, even among them, membership in the press club was granted only to those who held editorial responsibilities.

In the second year of the 21st century, in 2002, when electronic media opened its eyes in Pakistan, the public witnessed a new phenomenon. TV mics started roaming from street to street. Instead of once a day,

news began to be available every moment, and live coverage of significant events became a norm, happening 24 hours a day.

During that era, the significance of editorial pages in newspapers began to diminish, and the importance of evening talk shows on news channels started to rise. Caught up in the TRP race, instead of seasoned journalists and analysts, makeup-clad individuals took their place. The concern was that many of them could only articulate their thoughts when prompted by the producer. These TV anchors began to identify themselves as journalists.

As the preference for receiving news in real-time moments was fulfilled by news channels, the significance of newspapers started dwindling day by day, leading many individuals in print media to switch to electronic media. Every major newspaper also established its TV channel. Before this shift, television reporters were not recognized as “journalists,” but with the surge of private news channels, news anchors, program anchors, producers, and cameramen all became labelled as “journalists.”

An interesting aspect is that this boom in electronic media continued for nearly fifteen years, after which touch screens and android technology completely transformed the world. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok – these platforms orchestrated a revolution in the media landscape to an extent unimaginable by anyone until 2001. The world of



electronic media has become so ubiquitous and interconnected that individuals sitting at home, engaging in vlogging, messaging on Twitter, and posting on Facebook, would all be considered journalists.

Today, we live in the world of social media, where every individual with a smartphone in hand is free to express their opinion. Newspapers are abandoned, and TV news channels have become irrelevant. It's not just the means of expressing opinions that have changed; the language itself has undergone a complete transformation. Newspapers and magazines adhered to a certain standard of language that was strictly enforced, but now, on social media, a new language has emerged, incorporating not only standard expressions but also profanity and vulgar words.

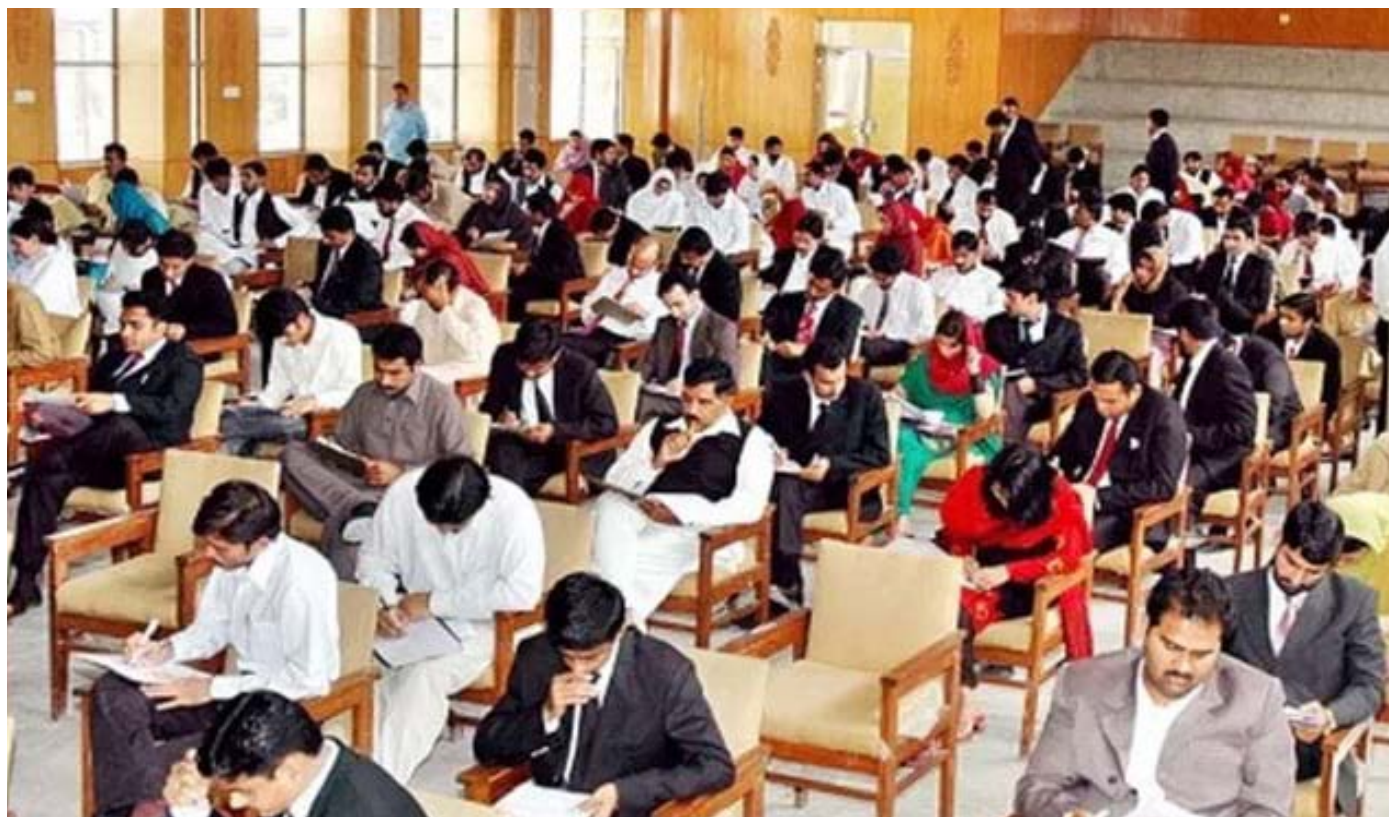
In controlled societies, including North Korea, China, and Iran, measures have been taken to control and regulate social media to some extent. However, in Pakistan, like many other sectors, this domain remains largely unrestricted, and it would be apt to say that it operates more like a free-spirited entity than one subjected to stringent regulations.

After print media, we have also left electronic media far behind. Now, the leadership in social media lies in the hands of those whom neither the press talk of Muhammad Khan Junejo nor the charisma of Benazir Bhutto could sway. However, the helm of national politics rests in the hands of these very individuals. They are the heroes and villains of today's media world, shaping the image of the future for a population of 240 million.



A deep dive into CSS exam data – gatekeeping or gateway to ranks of bureaucratic elite?

This report underscores the need for continual reforms and a more balanced approach in CSS recruitment, ensuring that Pakistan's civil service thrives efficiently and fully taps into its pool of qualified candidates



By Osaama Shehzad

The Central Superior Services (CSS) examinations, conducted annually by the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC), stand as a hallmark of prestige and opportunity in Pakistan. These exams have served as a gateway to coveted positions within 12 government departments for decades.

Known as the country's most competitive assessments, the CSS exams seek to identify and recruit individuals who epitomise brilliance, discipline, and capability from areas across Pakistan.

CSS officers, often referred to as bureaucrats, carry the distinction of being appointed at a Basic Pay Scale-17 (BPS-17) position — of which the minimum is one and maximum 22 — within the government. Beyond this, they assume key responsibilities within government secretaries, cabinet offices, and civil bureaucratic operations, effectively shaping the country's governance landscape.

This unique examination process attracts the youth of Pakistan year after year, each aspirant seeking to join the ranks of the country's bureaucratic elite. The CSS exams have become more than just a career choice — they symbolise a commitment to public service, a strive for excellence, and an opportunity to contribute significantly to the country's development.

A look into the cycle

This report focuses on the CSS recruitment cycle in Pakistan — spanning 2004-2023— which has witnessed a multifaceted evolution. It explores critical dimensions of CSS recruitment trends, ranging from the ebb and flow of applications influenced by political transitions to the examination system's emphasis on theoretical assessments.

Notably, there exists a strong correlation between political transitions and fluctuations in application numbers. During the tenures of different political parties, the CSS exams appeared to attract varying levels of interest, reflecting the nation's ever-evolving aspirations. The data underscores the predominance of theoretical assessments in CSS selection, with consistently low success rates in the written test. However, the interview phase does not exhibit significant quality control measures, suggesting the need for a more balanced approach in assessing potential civil service officers.

The introduction of the MCQ Preliminary Test (MPT) in 2022 and its subsequent impact in 2023 raises questions about evolving candidate dedication and examination methods. The data suggests a shift in applicant commitment but also signals potential challenges in

maintaining exam quality. Gender disparities persist, with male candidates consistently being favoured over their female counterparts. This emphasises the need to foster gender equality within CSS recruitment.

Lastly, the Hire-to-Pass (H2P) ratio analysis brings forth a crucial narrative. Despite their commitment and success in assessments, only approximately 61 per cent of candidates secure positions, necessitating comprehensive reforms in government policies and structures.

Below is a breakdown of each category mentioned above using a combination of sources such as FPSC annual reports, notifications, related publications, news articles, and the online CSS Forum.

Year of Year	applied only	appeared only	passed written exam	passed interview (male)	passed interview (female)	passed interview (total)	hired (male)	hired (female)	hired (total)
2004	5,731	3,455	327	214	67	281			167
2005	5,921	3,673	276	181	43	224			160
2006	7,065	4,125	275	224	48	272			180
2007	4,810	3,505	194	131	59	190			189
2008	6,571	4,247	689	527	157	684			357
2009	9,057	5,707	905	683	212	895			337
2010	11,888	7,759	641	472	154	626			205
2011	13,071	9,063	883	607	179	786			239
2012	14,335	10,066	799	588	200	788			222
2013	15,998	11,447	238	161	59	220			195
2014	24,640	13,170	439	256	121	377			233
2015	22,412	12,176	379	220	148	368			238
2016	20,171	9,643	202	114	85	199	108	83	191
2017	23,025	10,254	312	199	111	310	154	106	260
2018	24,010	11,887	569	355	212	567	168	110	278
2019	23,403	14,521	372	214	151	365	132	82	214
2020	39,630	18,553	376	226	138	364	142	79	221
2021	39,650	17,340	365	218	131	349	134	73	207
2022	32,059	20,265	393	223	151	374	146	91	237
2023	28,024	13,008	398						

The report underscores the need for continual reforms and a more balanced approach in CSS recruitment, ensuring that Pakistan's civil service thrives efficiently and fully taps into its pool of qualified candidates.

Recruitment trends: From aspiration to bureaucracy

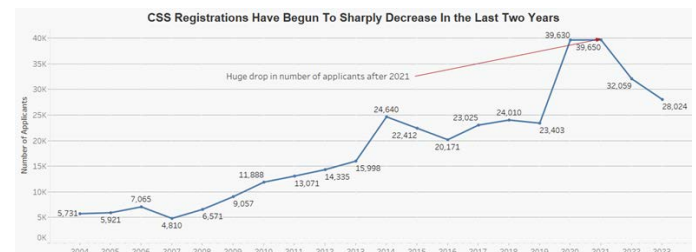
The CSS exams have consistently attracted a growing number of aspirants, reflecting the enduring enthusiasm for public service roles. The competitiveness of the process becomes evident in the transition from the written exam to the oral exam. As the number of successful candidates narrows down, it underlines the fierce competition that individuals must navigate to proceed.

Finally, the 'hired' phase marks the culmination of this rigorous journey, with the number of allocated positions reflecting the government's need for bureaucratic expertise. Over time, the CSS exams have evolved to remain highly competitive, with fluctuations in application numbers, but a consistent demand for candidates who excel in both written and oral assessments.

Politics and fluctuation

A closer look at the exam application data reveals a compelling connection between political transitions and the ebb and flow of public service aspirations within Pakistan. Notably, during the PML-Q government's tenure from 2003 to 2007, the number of applicants steadily increased, reflecting a sense of optimism and motivation to serve the nation. This trend persisted through the PPP's governance from 2008 to 2013, showing the public's interest in public service roles despite political shifts.

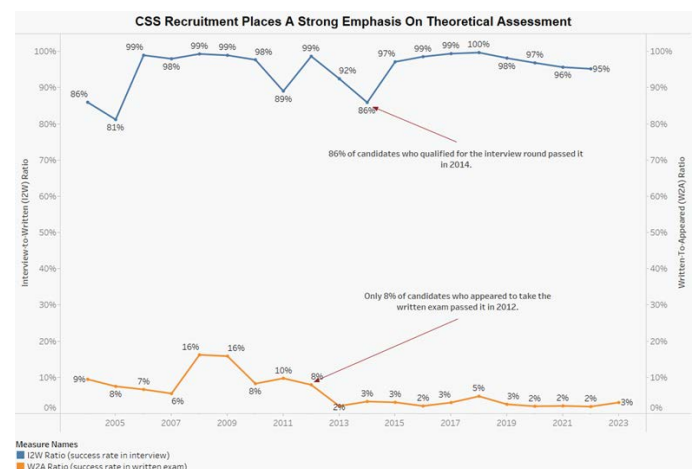
However, during the PML-N's tenure from 2013 to 2018, there was a notable decline in applications, possibly influenced by economic challenges. An intriguing twist emerged during the PTI's rule from 2018 to 2022, as the data exhibited a remarkable resurgence in interest, marked by a substantial spike in applications. This data underscores how government tenures can significantly shape the aspirations of individuals seeking to contribute to Pakistan's public service sector, highlighting the intricate interplay between politics and public service ambitions.



However, in 2022 and 2023, applicant interest fell once again, possibly due to increasing inflation and political instability after the Pakistan Democratic Movement takeover of the federal government.

Balancing the scales between theory and practice

The data shows that the CSS exam heavily relies on theoretical assessments for evaluating potential civil service officers. The consistently low written-to-appeared (W2A) ratio — indicating the success rate in the written exams — underscores the weight placed on theoretical knowledge.

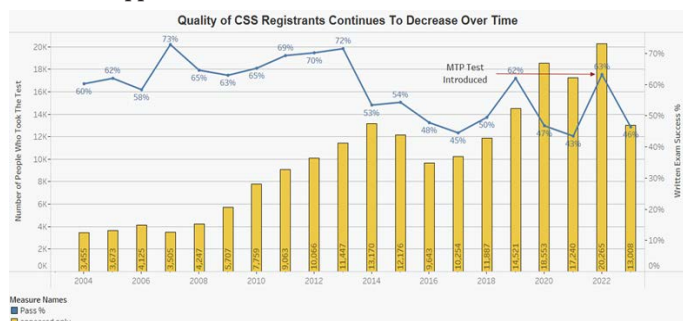


In contrast, the interview-to-written (I2W) ratio — which represents the ratio of successful interviewees — consistently displays a meticulous quality control system for the interview phase. This pattern highlights that the selection process predominantly focuses on the theoretical component. The highest success rate in the W2A was 16pc, whereas the lowest I2W ratio was 81pc.

While theoretical knowledge is undoubtedly essential, the CSS examination system may benefit from a more balanced approach that includes practical skills and a broader range of competencies, ensuring the selection of the most capable officers.

The impact of MCQ preliminary testing

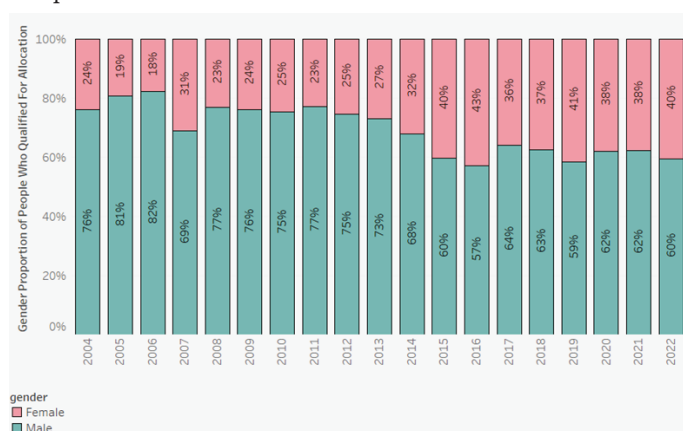
In 2022, the MCQ-based preliminary test was introduced to the exam. There was a notable surge in appearance percentages for the written test, signifying an increase in the number of serious and dedicated applicants.



However, this trend took an unexpected turn in 2023 as the appearance percentage once again dropped. This decline could signal either a waning interest in CSS — perhaps due to the political shifts mentioned above — or an increase in the difficulty of the preliminary test, potentially leading to a drop in the quality of test-takers. These findings underline the intricate balance between aspirants' commitment and the evolving landscape of CSS examination methods, raising questions about the factors influencing the quality and dedication of future CSS candidates.

The CSS gender gap

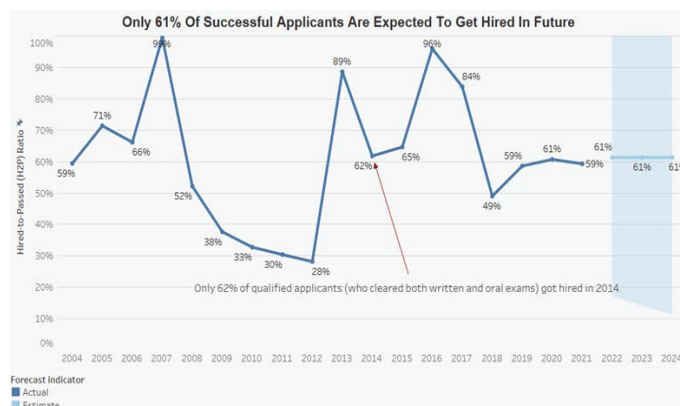
Male-to-female exam success percentages paint a picture of persistent gender disparity. The data shows a consistent trend that favours male candidates with a much higher proportion of men clearing both the oral and written exam phases. This gender gap underscores the need for a targeted effort to promote gender equality and create an inclusive environment that enables all aspiring civil servants, regardless of gender, to excel in these competitive examinations.



Bridging the gap between success and recruitment

A close examination of H2P ratios in CSS recruitment unveils a compelling narrative. Over the years, despite candidates dedicating substantial time and effort to navigate the demanding written and oral exams, the data reveals that on average, only approximately

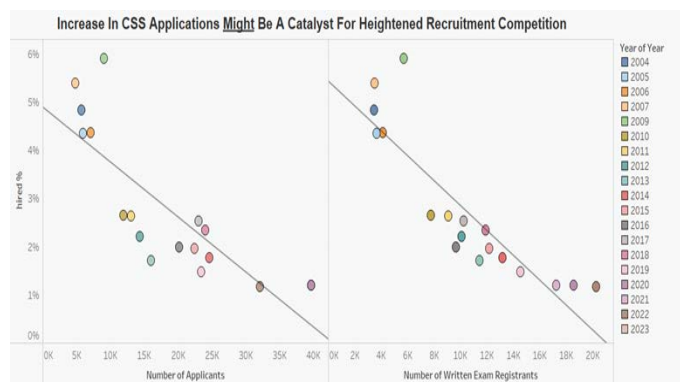
61pc of those who successfully clear these assessments ultimately secure positions.



This finding serves as a powerful call to action, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms in government policies and organisational structures. To harness the full potential of the talented individuals who successfully navigate all rounds of assessments, CSS recruitment must adapt and evolve, ensuring that Pakistan's civil service is not just efficient but fully utilises the rich pool of qualified candidates.

Exploring the relationship between applicant and hiring ratio

To identify a relationship between the volume of applicants and the hiring rate, a regression analysis was conducted. The results indicate a noteworthy finding: as the number of applicants increases, the hiring percentage experiences a slight decrease, suggesting that a higher volume of applicants may lead to increased competition, making it relatively more challenging for individuals to secure positions after the written and interview rounds.



Similarly, when assessing the relationship between hiring percentage and the number of individuals who appeared for the written test, a weaker but still inversely proportional relationship is observed. This suggests that the appearance rate may have a significant impact on the likelihood of being hired.

These insights provide valuable considerations for policymakers and aspiring CSS candidates, shedding light on the complex dynamics governing the recruitment process.

Courtesy Dawn

Pakistan vs New Zealand T20I Series 2024



By Kanwal Munir

The year 2024 kicked off with an enthralling cricket series as Pakistan faced New Zealand in a five-match T20I contest. This series served as a crucial stage for both teams to fine-tune their skills ahead of the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. Played across four beautiful venues in New Zealand, it was an exhibition of cricket at its best, combining the traditional spirit of the game with the modern-day excitement of the T20 format.

Leadership Transition in Pakistan Cricket

Pakistan entered this series with a significant change in their leadership dynamics. Shaheen Shah Afridi was appointed as the captain of the T20I squad, taking over from Babar Azam, who resigned after the team's disappointing campaign in the World Cup. This series was Afridi's first major test as a leader, and the cricketing world watched keenly to see how he would marshal his troops.

Team Composition and Strategy

The Pakistan squad for this tour was carefully selected by the national men's selection committee, led by Wahab Riaz. It reflected a strategic mix of experience and youth, aiming to build a team capable of adapting to the unique challenges of New Zealand's pitches. The pace attack was particularly emphasized, with six fast bowlers included to exploit the seam-friendly conditions expected in New Zealand.

The Inaugural Match: Afridi's Captaincy Debut

The first T20I at Eden Park, Auckland, turned out to be a baptism by fire for Afridi. New Zealand amassed a towering 226 runs for the loss of seven wickets, with Mitchell and Williamson contributing crucial half-centuries. Pakistan's chase was aggressive but lacked the necessary control, ending 46 runs short of the target. Tim Southee's landmark achievement of 150 T20I wickets and his match-winning four-for were the highlights of the day.

Shaheen Afridi's Captaining Milestone

Afridi's first over as captain was a display of his raw pace and swing, as he claimed a wicket off the second ball. His aggressive intent was clear, and his personal performance was a silver lining on an otherwise challenging day for Pakistan.

New Zealand's Dominant Batting

The New Zealand batsmen, particularly Daryl Mitchell and Kane Williamson, took advantage of Pakistan's bowling, which seemed a tad lackluster. The short boundaries at Eden Park played into the hands of the Kiwi batsmen, allowing them to pile up a formidable score.

Pakistan's Valiant Batting Effort

Despite the steep chase, Pakistan showed glimpses of brilliance. Babar Azam's half-century stood out, but the team's inability to build partnerships and keep up with the climbing run rate led to their downfall.

The Rise of New Talent

The series highlighted the emergence of young talent in the Pakistan squad. Debutant Mohammad Abbas Afridi's bowling performance was commendable, and Sahibzada Farhan showed his batting prowess. These players are a testament to Pakistan's rich cricketing nursery and the selection committee's focus on nurturing young talent.

The Road Ahead in the Series

With four more matches to go, Pakistan has the opportunity to reassess their approach and bounce back. The upcoming games in Hamilton, Dunedin, and Christchurch will test the team's ability to adapt to different conditions and respond to the challenges posed by the New Zealand side.

Strategy and Player Roles

As the series progresses, the importance of clearly defined roles for each player cannot be overstated. The senior members of the team, such as Babar Azam and Haris Rauf, need to provide stability and guidance, while the younger players should focus on seizing their moments to shine.

Conclusion: A Crucial Phase for Pakistan Cricket

This T20I series is more than just a set of matches; it's a critical phase for Pakistan cricket. With the World Cup on the horizon, the



team needs to harness the blend of youthful energy and experienced wisdom. Shaheen Shah Afridi's leadership is under scrutiny, and his ability to inspire his team will be key to their success. As Pakistan writes this new chapter in its cricketing journey, each game is a step towards building a team that can compete with the best in the world on the biggest stages.

In totality, the series against New Zealand is not just about the immediate results but also about the long-term vision for Pakistan cricket. It's about honing skills, strategizing for different conditions, and most importantly, building a team ethos that will carry Pakistan cricket forward. The T20I series is a litmus test for the team's resilience and will serve as a benchmark for their preparation leading into the T20 World Cup. Each match is an opportunity to grow, and each player's performance is a building block for the future. As Pakistan navigates through this series, the entire cricketing fraternity looks on with anticipation to witness the evolution of a team aiming to reach the zenith of cricketing excellence.



Australian Open 2024 results: Andy Murray loses to Tomas Martin Etcheverry



By Jonathan Jurejko

Andy Murray says there is a "definite possibility" he has played his final Australian Open after a subdued display against Tomas Martin Etcheverry in a first-round exit.

The 36-year-old Briton showed little emotion as he lost 6-4 6-2 6-2 on the second day of the Melbourne tournament.

Murray, a five-time finalist, failed to reach the second round for only the second time in his past 13 appearances.

"I won't win many matches playing that way," Murray said.

"It's a definite possibility that will be the last time I play here."

After conceding in pre-season that 2024 could be his final season before retirement, the Scot has lost both of his matches this year.

Murray told BBC Sport in Brisbane he would think about ending his stellar career if he did not enjoy playing this year, having struggled for form in the closing stages of

the 2023 season.

Since the start of the US Open in August, Murray has lost eight of his past 12 matches - including the past four.

"Whilst you're playing the match, you're obviously trying to control your emotions, focus on the points and everything," the former world number one said.

"When you're one point away from the end, you're like, 'I can't believe this is over so quickly, and like this'.

"I was disappointed with the way I played and all of that stuff. It was a tough, tough way to finish."

Murray is the second Briton to fall in the singles at Melbourne Park, following Jodie Burrage's defeat on Sunday.

Five more of the nation's players - Emma Raducanu, Katie Boulter, Cameron Norrie, Dan Evans and Jack Draper - play their opening matches on Tuesday.

Did Murray wave goodbye to Melbourne?

Known for his long and gruelling encounters last season, Murray said he wanted to avoid another marathon match against Argentine 30th seed Etcheverry.

Unfortunately for the British number four, it was a quick match for the wrong reasons.

Both of the two previous meetings between the pair - three-set matches which they split on the ATP Tour last season - lasted more than three hours.

This five-set match finished much quicker as the Scot toiled in a worryingly below-par performance.

Murray had his serve broken six times, including twice when he lost the final five games, and did not threaten Etcheverry's serve after the second game of the match.

Having shown little expression throughout, Murray appeared emotional as he waved farewell to all sides of the Kia Arena on his way back to the locker room.

Five years ago, the Australian Open played a video montage in tribute to Murray when they thought it would be his last appearance because of an impending hip surgery.

It turned out to be very premature. But if there are many more performances like that this season then Murray will not be back here next year.

"I have an idea of when I would probably like to finish playing. So much of that depends on how you're playing," Murray, a three-time major champion, said.

"The timeframe for that narrows when you play and have results like today.

"I know that Tomas is a really, really good player. I'm aware of that. Even if I play well today, I can still lose the match.

"It's just the nature of the performance that makes you question things."

Barely a flicker of emotion in below-par performance

Speaking last week in Melbourne, Murray discussed how he was trying to show less frustration on court when he was not playing as well as he would expect.

There was plenty of emotion during his matches last season - chuntering at his box, screaming at himself and threatening to smash racquets in the difficult moments.



But in his defeat against Etcheverry on Monday, there was barely a flicker of emotion as the match ran away from him.

One of the things that left Murray particularly frustrated last year was the struggles with his service game.

He was working hard to improve in that area during pre-season, but Murray landed just 46% of his first serves, and won just 33% of points behind his second, in a costly first set against Etcheverry.

Etcheverry, known for his supreme fitness and solidity from the baseline, coped with everything Murray could throw at him.

Even when the former world number one tried to mix things up by bringing him

forward, he kept his composure and responded with delicate touches.

A double fault and two poor baseline returns from Murray gifted more break points in the third game of the second set, but even saving the third opportunity with a delicious drop-shot was not enough.

Murray succumbed to the fourth and the sight of his shoulders slumping as he walked back to his chair demonstrated the scale of the task facing him.

The unforced errors continued to tot up from Murray and it helped Etcheverry, still playing at a high level, cruise to only his second win at Melbourne Park.

Courtesy BBC



World's most expensive private jets, their owners

The second most expensive private jet in the world is owned by Joseph Lau

Private jets are not only a convenient way of traveling, but also a status symbol for the wealthy and powerful. Some of these jets are so luxurious and customized that they cost more than some countries' GDP. Here are some of the most expensive jets in the world owned by people, and who they belong to.



Alisher Umanov's Airbus A340-300 - \$400 million: The most expensive private jet in the world is owned by Alisher Umanov, a Russian billionaire and the owner of Metalloinvest, a mining company. He bought an Airbus A340-300, a long-range, wide-body airliner that can carry up to 375 passengers, and turned it into his personal flying mansion. The jet is rumored to be the largest private jet in Russia and possibly in all of Europe. It has a spacious and lavish interior with various amenities and security systems.



Joseph Lau's Boeing 747-8 VIP - \$367 million: The second most expensive private jet in the world is owned by Joseph Lau, a Hong Kong billionaire and real estate tycoon. He owns a Boeing 747-8 VIP, a customized version of the Boeing 747-8, which is one of the largest and most advanced passenger airliners in the world. The jet can fly up to 8,000 nautical miles at a speed of Mach 0.855, which is close to the speed of sound. The jet has a luxurious and elegant interior with a master bedroom, a lounge, an office, a dining room, and a state-of-the-art entertainment system.

Sultan of Brunei's Boeing 747-430 - \$230 million: The third most expensive private jet in the world is owned by the Sultan of Brunei,

who is known for his lavish lifestyle and wealth. He owns a Boeing 747-430, a variant of the Boeing 747 family, which was originally designed for Lufthansa. The jet has a gold-plated interior, with gold accents on the furniture, fixtures, and even the washbasins. The jet also has a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a throne room for the sultan.

Roman Abramovich's Boeing 757 - \$170 million: The fourth most expensive private jet in the world is owned by Roman Abramovich, a Russian billionaire and the owner of Chelsea Football Club. He owns a Boeing 757, a medium-sized, narrow-body airliner that was produced by Boeing until 2004. He spent \$170 million to upgrade his jet, which he named The Bandit. The jet has a luxurious interior with a master bedroom, a dining room, a kitchen, an office, and a lounge. It also has an anti-missile system, a radar jamming device, and bulletproof windows for security.



Kim Kardashian's Gulfstream G650ER - \$150 million: The fifth most expensive private jet in the world is owned by Kim Kardashian, one of the most famous celebrities and influencers in the world. She owns a Gulfstream G650ER, the extended-range version of the Gulfstream G650, which is one of the fastest and most advanced business jets in the world. It can fly up to 7,500 nautical miles at a speed of Mach 0.925, which is close to the speed of sound. She spent \$150 million to customize her jet, which she calls Kim Air. The jet has a sleek and modern interior with a bedroom, a bathroom, a lounge, a bar, and a cinema. It also has a high-speed internet connection, a satellite phone, and a video conferencing system.

At the highest levels of wealth, private jets aren't just transportation—they're statements of luxury. Take Alisher Umanov's revamped Airbus or Kim Kardashian's high-speed Gulfstream; these aircraft are like palaces in the sky. They might cost a fortune, but for the super-rich, they're a way to showcase their style and comfort while flying. These jets aren't just about travel; they're about flaunting extreme wealth in the most glamorous way imaginable.

Courtesy The News

'It was just a pay cheque': Fawad Khan didn't love Humsafar as much as you did



The versatile actor talked about his journey in the showbiz industry from music to movies and how he doesn't want to be too available.

Fawad Khan, the heartthrob of the Pakistani entertainment industry, made some surprising revelations about everyone's favourite Pakistani drama Humsafar on Ahmad Ali Butt's podcast Excuse Me, including the fact that he didn't want to do it at all.

Khan revisited the start of his journey, a time when social media had little to no presence and music and film were their escape from reality. For the unversed, Khan's claim to fame was his band Entity Paradigm. The self-taught musician's musical career kicked off in the year 2000 as the lead singer of the iconic Pakistan band. Butt, who was also part of the rock band, asked him about his departure from the venture. Khan reassured fans that it was not due to creative differences, but there was definitely some drama there. "I don't like to create controversies, but EP's breakup was an ugly one and it had its reasons but it's all in the past now."

In the midst of quitting music and not having any promising acting prospects lined up, the actor chose to tie the knot with his sweetheart, Sadaf Khan. He explained how he didn't even think

twice when deciding to get married. "When you marry, God provides means for you, when you have children, those means grow," said the actor, clarifying, however, that was not the reason he chose to get married. Clearly, in his case, his wife did prove to be his lucky charm.

Not a Humsafar fan

Speaking of milestones in his career, Khan confessed how he thought Humsafar was a very common story and was not interested in doing the project. He initially rejected the script twice because he wanted to do something different but Momina Duraid, the producer of Humsafar, was very persistent.

He joked about how he thought of the show as just his pay cheque. Even though he is grateful to Humsafar for bringing further opportunities his way and advancing his career, the actor hilariously said, "It's like a scenario where you don't get to choose your parents or your siblings".

Khan candidly expressed how music or the drama industry don't fascinate him anymore — cinema is his true love. He emphasised that the phenomenon of movies and movie stars cannot be avoided. Watching a movie in the theatre does not allow one to turn it off,

whereas watching TV, you can flip through channels and switch between dramas, he said.

Heading to India

The actor discussed his first Bollywood venture, Khoobsurat, opposite Sonam Kapoor. He admitted that the opportunity landed in his lap because of the buzz from Humsafar, although he also gave a screentest for the project.

He also spoke about his fascination for his other Bollywood project, Kapoor and Sons, how remarkable the story was and that the project truly harnessed the actor in him. When Butt asked whether he was seen as a threat to his Bollywood counterparts, Khan replied, "I got a lot of love from India, but look, every industry has its politics. In Pakistan as well, but it's easier to combat in your own industry".

In an era where celebrities are the stars of social media, Khan's account is pretty dead, save for ad campaigns or trailers from his movies. He is, he confessed, not a social media person and his accounts are handled by his team. "Social media and constant availability dilutes the power of a movie star," said one of Pakistan's biggest movie stars — and we believe him.



Hany El Beha
Haute Couture



Hany El Beha
Haute Couture









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