

Fortnightly

# The Truth International

Islamabad - Karachi

1<sup>st</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> April 2024

Shahbaz Sharif Govt  
Obituaries for the government led by  
Shehbaz Sharif has already been written

## Afghanistan Situation

Chaos in Afghanistan isn't just a threat to  
Central Asia and Russia but to the very  
fabric of global security

## Pakistan Economy

There have been brief periods of growth in  
FDI, trend has been decline in recent years

# Will Shahbaz Sharif Government Complete Term

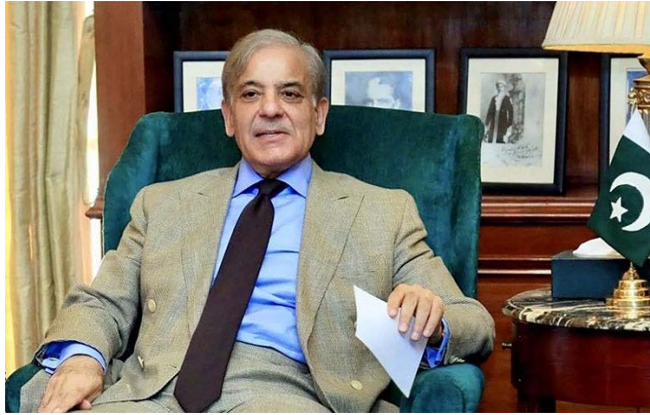
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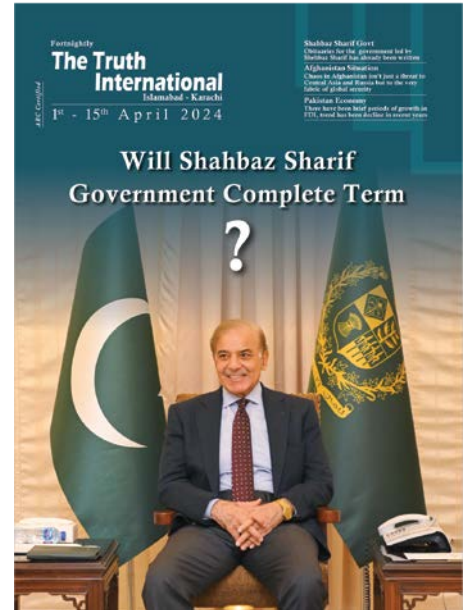
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### Editor:

Zaheer ud Din Babar Thaheem

### Circulation & Marketing / Advertisement:

Aghaz Ullah Raj

Contact: 0340-9850810

Email: admin@tti.org.pk

### Letter to Editor:

Feel free to mail us at: editor@tti.org.pk

### Postal Address:

Fortnightly "The Truth International"

### Head Office:

205-D, 2nd Floor, Evacuee Trust Complex,  
Agha Khan Road, F-5/1, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Contact: +92 51 2820180-1

### Karachi Office:

Shop No. 08, Mezzanine Salalah Apartments,  
Dawood Pota Road, Karachi Cantt.

Contact: +92 21 35221000-1

Email: info@tti.org.pk

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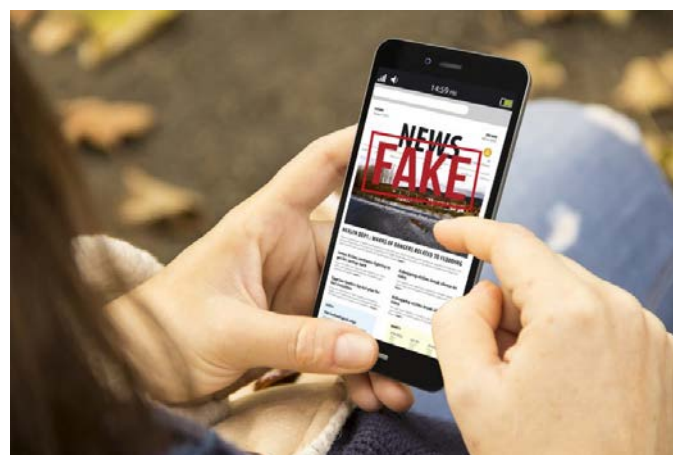
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# Shehbaz's "Hybrid Pro-Max" Regime: How Long Will It Last?

By Nimra Atiq

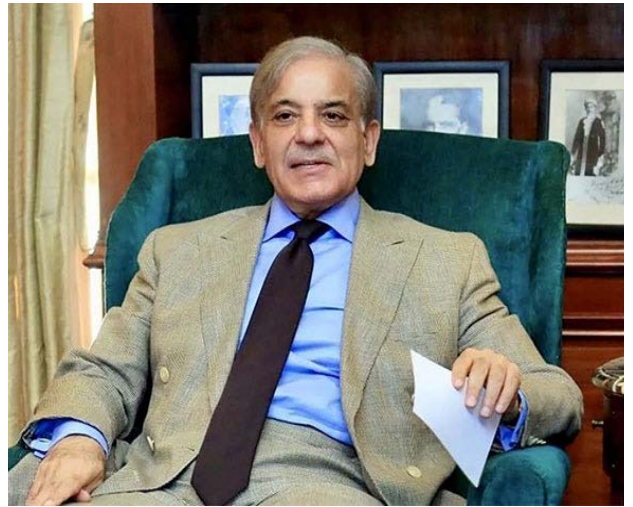
Shehbaz Sharif's return to the Prime Minister's office is accompanied by high expectations and even bigger challenges. Known for his adaptability, he is considered capable of providing relief to both the establishment and his coalition partners. In Pakistan, the pundits usually start predicting how long a new administration will last within weeks of it taking office. However, even before the appointment of the next prime minister, obituaries for the "Hybrid Pro Max" government led by Shehbaz Sharif had already been written.

One could only characterize the Shehbaz government as weak insofar as it lacks much independence of action. The military establishment, which essentially makes all the decisions, put together this government. Pakistan's establishment has been the most important institution in the nation for many years. While it often interfered to remove elected administrations, a lot of Pakistanis regarded this as a way out of the corrupt politicians who plagued their nation. It was believed that the army was the only thing that could keep the nation united.

From the coalition's perspective, there is no turning back. Though they will continue to back the administration, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) will not stop voicing its opinions. The Shehbaz government in Pakistan has been under pressure from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), as the two parties fight to keep a united front inside the coalition government. Every dispute will be a ruse to seek something from the federal government and engage in some classic virtue signaling to minimize the harm to its popular base. Beyond that, however, the PPP's history is the same as Shehbaz Sharif's in terms of being subservient to the establishment.

Parties pursuing their agendas and interests could lead to numerous internal problems inside the coalition, which is a convenient union arranged by influential quarters. Tensions are escalating within Pakistan's coalition government as a looming showdown over the contentious issue of privatizing key state-owned enterprises, including Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and Steel Mills, threatens to fracture the fragile alliance. This clash, set against the backdrop of discussions surrounding the National Finance Commission Award (NFC), presents yet another formidable challenge for the coalition to navigate. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has emerged as a vocal opponent to the privatization of PIA, the national flag carrier.

Their resistance stems not only from concerns over the potential decline in PIA's performance post-privatization but also from apprehensions regarding mass layoffs that could affect tens of thousands of employees. Many of these employees were hired during various tenures of the PPP government, heightening fears of widespread unemployment should



privatization proceed without safeguards. The leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentary (PPPP) confronted each other over the controversial appointment of a retired bureaucrat as the new chairman of the Indus River System Authority (Irsa), and as a result, the ruling coalition began to show signs of strain. The coalition administration has begun to tremble in its first month of office, despite the PPPP's decision to abstain from joining the federal cabinet. This is because they were divided among themselves in important constitutional positions.

The dispute over the appointment of the Irsa chairman is not the first time that the two sides have publicly disagreed. Earlier this month, the PPPP objected to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) demand that Pakistan review the National Finance Commission (NFC) formula during talks with the government, questioning why the international lender would push the Center to encroach on provincial share.

In addition to these numerous obstacles, Sharif's administration would also need to deal with a great deal of bureaucratic, administrative, and political roadblocks that have impeded development. Comparisons with neighboring countries heighten the pressure on Sharif's administration to show measurable progress and economic resilience, particularly given India's rapidly expanding economy and Bangladesh's steady growth.

Shehbaz Sharif's leadership will be put to the test in this maze of chances and difficulties, and the country is waiting anxiously to see if he can guide Pakistan through a crucial phase of political and economic development. As the coalition government navigates these internal disagreements and external pressures, the ability to find common ground on critical economic and financial policies will be essential to maintaining stability and coherence within the government.



# The Cost of Electable politics

*Pakistan suffers absence of a political movement*



By Naqi Akbar

It seems all is well, with no upsurge in the stream or the sea; metaphorically. Pakistan seems to be on the road of 'proverbial progress' as projected by a prominent anchor and voucher payment mode spokesman of the deep state. However, from the viewpoint of an economic analyst sitting in the Pakistani financial capital or in the international capitals, the normalcy is superficial. It is superficial on the count that many questions are unresolved, and the system is not be managed day to day on the basis of a working democratic culture, rather it is the deep state in a police state mode, which is pretending to be managing the show, from fighting terror to negotiating the IMF program.

The reasons for that emanate from the absence of a political movement in the Pakistani political landscape. Apart from the 1970 elections when the two political movements, for good or for bad dominated the polls count; and their domination, being mishandled resulted in the dismemberment of the Pakistani nation state in 1971, Pakistani electorate has been deceiving itself by voting in people, who are electable.

To put it more clearly, what comes out of the magic box of electoral exercise is not a political movement confident enough to call the shots and steer the country according to its worldview. What we see is the 'compliance' of the electable parliament and senate to the powers to be the deep state. Practically, it has been a matter of who wins the patronship of the deep state in the electoral exercise.

To begin with a so-called reform based political party seeking to change the political culture of Pakistan, rested its hopes on that very deep state, it sought to dismantle. For the sake of appeasing the deep state, it gradually compromised its ranks and file, the radical cadre, in a manner that it is able to grab power with the help of the power brokers. Regretfully the movement repeated the same mistakes which were made by the left leaning political movement, which was borne out of the reaction to the civil-military complex development strategy of 60s, with late dictator Ayub Khan the face of that set up.

The PPP, made out of the study circles of the left leaning students and intellectuals

was to shed its social democrat credentials soon to be in the good books of the establishment after the 1970 elections and formal ascension to power in 1972. That erosion of the political movement blew up in the face of the party leadership when in 1979, there were not enough people on the streets to defend that movement. It was because the party has long deserted its ideology and rested its hopes on the term electable.

The political movement failed to learn from its mistakes and ended up the same opportunistic political group when it approached the 1988 general elections. The party PPP was lucky that the dictator was not physically present on the scene, forcing the establishment to even allow the 'moth eaten' PPP to ascend to power on December 2, 1988. The story of other elections for the party namely 1993, 2008 and now the award of Presidency to the party by the establishment in the aftermath of the 2024 exercise are more or less the same story.

Regretfully, we witness the same trends in the political scene vis a vis another political movement in the recent history. Its entry



into the corridors of power in 2018, its alienation with the power centers and final unceremonious exit from the same, illustrate that the party failed to learn from its mistakes. The absence of a political movement intact with political, tactical cadre exposed it to the full might of the state since April 2022, with high point witnessed in February 2024 electoral exercise.

Despite the fact that the absence of the political movement cadre did not impact on its electoral standing, with people making their presence on the scene and doing their bit through the ballot, the party cadre in place of the political movement simply failed to take the initiative. The party cadre was at loss to appreciate the gravity of the situation. It played, literally into the conclusions made by the deep state think tank organizations as well as institutions. The result, the state back on the driving seat. Such a state might be suited for a day-to-day discourse, but is at loss to offer a long-term strategy for the development and stability of the society and the economy. Practically the days of late dictator Zia adhocism seems to have returned with the increasing trend of pushing things beneath the rug and focusing on day-to-day fire fight.

At this point, the readers might feel that the political movement is the need of a political party. The answer is negative. A political movement is imperative for the political grooming of a nation as well as an elector-

ate. Political movement with their stable brisk pace can gradually reset the direction of the state in a manner that is necessary for moving forward. We might disagree with the rise of political trends in India and might have positive views about the Turkish Islamist experience. The fact is that the political movements in both the nation states were able to sustain themselves and do not disintegrate when the wrested power. If the Turkish Islamists have been sitting idle, the July 2016 military coup could have succeeded without much hassle.

That was regrettably not the case in Pakistan, whether it was 1977 or 2022 or the 2024 elections. The absence of a political movement in Pakistan is dangerously allowing the concentration of power amongst the few, whether they are families or institutions. The failure to challenge the nonpolitical actors in the period between 2022 to date has fast transformed the state into a private club, where all one needs are the right connections of blood and rank.

The reform based political group which cooperated with the establishment (2018-2022) or the electable party (PMLN) or the past reformists (PPP) have all collectively pushed the nation state into a tail spin, where solutions might be difficult to espouse and advocate within. with international players generally oblivious of what is happening on the political front, they seem to be equally agreed on sustaining that state in its present 'medical condition'.

Solutions, regrettably are long term in nature. Much depends upon the young intelligentsia which is apparently naïve with no past political record to take on the scene gradually. That new blood needs to be clear in minds what are its priorities. As things stand, the division of spoils might manage the country, polity, economy and society on set pattern. In the absence of an inspiring political movement binding the nation together, any crisis can land it into unmanageable scenarios. The 1965 war was one such crisis points. Its propaganda value notwithstanding, the economic tail spin translated into the political unrest. The polarization as the result of a unified political movement not present in both wings of the country, allowed the separatist movement to chart its path independently. The result were the political upheaval and war in 1971. Pakistanis failed to understand that political unification wins conflicts and not better weapon systems. Regrettably, we have again reverted to the evaluation of strengths of the 1971 standard and feel strong defence rests in weapons. Not knowing the masses and the young identifying with the system are the best defence. The intelligentsia needs to come out with courage to divert the tide. The disfranchised younger generation can make the difference on the basis of political education; not any time-tested personality cult. It is an imperative which cannot be ignored; failing which, the 70 or so year old nation state can degenerate into a confirmed banana republic!





# Shehbaz Sharif's Government and its Ability to Tackle Challenges

By Romana Afsheen

In a historic turn of events, Shehbaz Sharif, a seasoned politician, and the brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has once again risen to the position of Prime Minister, marking a significant shift in Pakistan's political landscape. His victory, secured with a resounding 201 votes in the National Assembly, signals a notable change in the country's political dynamics and raises questions about the future direction of governance and leadership.

## A Narrative of Resilience

Shehbaz Sharif's victory is underscored by a tale of resilience and political acumen. His decisive mandate, secured with 201 votes in the National Assembly, marks a notable shift in Pakistan's political dynamics.

Supported by the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) President and a coalition of seven other parties, Shehbaz's triumph highlights his enduring influence within the political sphere. His defeat of Omar Ayub Khan, backed by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and nominated by the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC), solidifies his position as Pakistan's 24th Prime Minister.

Although slightly delayed, the inaugural session of the National Assembly was filled with anticipation. As lawmakers gathered to witness this historic moment, the solemn recitation of religious texts and the national anthem set a fitting stage for the inauguration.

Prominent political figures, including Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto, lent gravity to the occasion with their presence, emphasizing the significance of Shehbaz's return to power.

However, the path forward for Shehbaz Sharif is laden with challenges. Economic instability, political polarization, security threats, and diplomatic complexities loom large, demanding urgent attention and decisive action.



As Shehbaz assumes office, the electorate, fueled by hopes of change and progress, looks to him for leadership and solutions to the nation's pressing issues.

## Reviving the Economy

Foremost on Shehbaz Sharif's agenda is the task of revitalizing Pakistan's economy. With rising inflation, dwindling foreign reserves, and a widening fiscal deficit, economic stability is imperative for the nation's well-being. Shehbaz has pledged to implement a comprehensive economic reform agenda, focusing on stimulating growth, attracting foreign investment, and creating employment opportunities.

His previous tenure as prime minister witnessed significant infrastructure development and economic reforms, providing a blueprint for his current administration's economic policies.

In addition to economic challenges, Shehbaz Sharif must navigate the intricate political landscape of Pakistan. With a diverse array of political parties and interest groups vying for power and influence,

coalition-building and consensus-building will be essential for effective governance.

Shehbaz's experience in coalition politics, coupled with his diplomatic skills and political acumen, positions him favorably to navigate the complexities of Pakistan's political arena.

## National Security and Foreign Relations

Security remains a top priority for Shehbaz Sharif's government, with internal strife, terrorism, and regional tensions posing significant threats to stability and peace. His administration must prioritize national security, strengthen law enforcement agencies, and bolster counter-terrorism efforts to safeguard the nation and its citizens.

Shehbaz Sharif faces a complex array of diplomatic challenges on the international front. Pakistan's relations with neighboring countries, particularly India and Afghanistan, remain strained, with longstanding disputes and territorial conflicts exacerbating tensions.



Shehbaz's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, centered on dialogue, cooperation, and conflict resolution, offers a potential pathway to peace and stability in the region. His extensive network of international contacts and diplomatic experience will be instrumental in navigating Pakistan's foreign relations.

Amid Pakistan's myriad challenges, Shehbaz Sharif's government must prioritize national reconciliation and unity. Political polarization and ideological divisions have hindered progress and efforts to address the nation's pressing issues.

Shehbaz's inclusive leadership style and commitment to consensus-building offer hope for bridging the political divide and fostering cooperation among all stakeholders. Allegations of election rigging and concerns about political accountability have also come to the forefront of Pakistan's political landscape.

Addressing these concerns requires a concerted effort to strengthen democratic institutions and ensure the separation of powers. The opposition parties' claims of manipulation by powerful institutions point to a broader problem that needs to be addressed to uphold democracy in Pakistan.

## Foreign Policy Challenges

The challenges facing Pakistan extend beyond domestic issues, with foreign policy playing a crucial role in the new government's agenda. Maintaining Pakistan's strategic autonomy and balancing relations with the United States and China amid their escalating rivalry pose significant challenges.

In his inaugural address to the parliament, Prime Minister Sharif pledged that Pakistan would not align exclusively with either the US or China in their ongoing friction, emphasizing a commitment to independence. However, navigating this stance is increasingly complex, given tensions arising from Chinese investment projects, particularly under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and diplomatic events such as Pakistan's withdrawal from a US-led summit.

The Pakistan-US relationship is currently strained, with declining American support post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite this, the US remains a significant export market for Pakistani goods, making the direction of this relationship crucial for Pakistan, particularly regarding IMF loan approvals. While the Biden administration may show willingness to collaborate, significant changes in US policy are unlikely in the near term.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's relationship with China remains vital for economic stability, with urgent financial support needed to address inflation and bolster economic growth. Prime Minister Sharif is expected to prioritize reinvigorating CPEC projects and securing additional Chinese investment during his term. However, balancing this relationship with Pakistan's ties to the US is essential for diplomatic and strategic interests.

While Pakistan aims to serve as a bridge between the US and China, deepening strategic rivalry between the two powers poses challenges. Historical diplomatic successes, such as facilitating US-China reconciliation in 1971, are unlikely to be replicated amidst current geopolitical tensions. As Pakistan seeks stability at home, navigating a delicate balance between the US and China will remain a foreign policy priority.

## Economic Challenges and International Support

Pakistan's fragile economy faces mounting pressure with plummeting exports and a complete halt in foreign direct investment, largely attributed to the country's turbulent political climate and deteriorating security situation.

The newly installed government desperately needs an emergency \$bn bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stave off economic collapse. Financial experts underscore Pakistan's urgent need to restart stalled negotiations with the IMF.

The country has significant financial commitments to the IMF that are rapidly coming due. Failure to secure an agreement

with the IMF could have disastrous consequences for the nation's economy.

Time is of the essence, and the Sharif-led government must address this economic crisis immediately. The success of their efforts to pull Pakistan back from the brink remains uncertain.

## Saudi Perspective

Dr. Ali Awadh Asseri, a veteran Saudi diplomat, expresses optimism about Pakistan's future under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's leadership. Despite economic challenges and electoral controversies, Sharif's re-election marks a crucial moment for Pakistan.

Asseri highlights Sharif's political experience and proactive steps, such as engaging with the IMF for economic assistance. He emphasizes the need for Pakistan to address corruption and promote good governance.

Asseri anticipates a strengthening of the Saudi-Pakistan relationship under Sharif's leadership, citing historical ties and shared values. He also advocates for de-escalation between Pakistan and India, suggesting a potential mediating role for Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Overall, Asseri's insights underscore the potential for positive developments in Pakistan under Sharif's leadership.

In conclusion, Shehbaz Sharif's return to power marks a pivotal moment in Pakistan's political landscape, offering both opportunities and challenges. As he embarks on his second term as Prime Minister, the nation looks to him for decisive leadership in navigating economic turmoil, addressing security threats, and fostering stable foreign relations. With a legacy of resilience and political acumen, Shehbaz Sharif holds the potential to steer Pakistan towards prosperity and stability. However, the road ahead will require concerted efforts, inclusive governance, and strategic diplomacy to overcome hurdles and realize the nation's aspirations for progress. As the global community watches, the coming years under Sharif's leadership will undoubtedly shape Pakistan's future trajectory.



# Charting Pakistan's Course: Shehbaz Sharif's Leadership in Politics and Diplomacy



By Daniyal Wali

In the intricate tapestry of Pakistan's political landscape, transitions in government often signify pivotal moments laden with promises and challenges. As Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif assumed leadership once more, the nation braces itself for a renewed trajectory under the Pakistan Muslim League-N party and its coalition allies. The recent swearing-in ceremony of the 19-member cabinet heralds a new chapter in Pakistan's governance, marked by a fervent commitment to navigate the country through the turbulent waters of economic distress and security threats. The resurgence of Shehbaz Sharif to the political forefront signals a semblance of continuity in Pakistan's leadership landscape, as he assumes the daunting responsibility of navigating the country through an unparalleled crisis. Against the backdrop of mounting challenges, including concerns over electoral integrity, the efficacy of the coalition government stands under scrutiny.

In this critical juncture, the coalition's ability to foster unity and collaboration

across partisan lines will be pivotal in surmounting the myriad challenges confronting the nation. Achieving consensus on policy initiatives and instituting robust governance mechanisms will be imperative to instill confidence among stakeholders and international partners alike. Against this backdrop, it is imperative to scrutinize the composition and priorities of the incumbent cabinet vis-à-vis its predecessor. As we delve into the contrasting narratives of governance, one propelled by the fervor of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) in 2018 and the other spearheaded by Sharif's coalition government, a nuanced understanding emerges of the challenges, promises, and divergent strategies shaping Pakistan's political landscape.

## Contrasting Finance Ministries: PTI vs PML-N in Pakistan's Economic Landscape

During their respective tenures as Finance Minister under the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf

(PTI) government, both Asad Umar and Shaukat Tarin embarked on a challenging journey to navigate Pakistan's economic landscape amidst formidable challenges. Umar, drawing upon his extensive corporate experience and a clear vision for economic reform, assumed office after PTI's historic victory in 2018. His leadership was characterized by a commitment to safeguarding vulnerable segments of society while bolstering support for exporters, aligning with PTI's electoral promises. Umar's tenure saw the introduction of ambitious initiatives aimed at addressing structural deficiencies in the economy, highlighted by amendments to the budget for fiscal 2018-2019 and the presentation of a corrective finance bill. Despite facing hurdles such as low growth, high inflation, and a depreciating currency, Umar's steadfast negotiation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) aimed to stabilize Pakistan's economy. However, amidst mounting pressure and speculation surrounding the efficacy of his policies, Umar resigned from his position on April 18, 2019, marking a significant transition in



the Finance Ministry's leadership.

Following Umar's resignation, Shaukat Tarin assumed the mantle of Finance Minister during a period of economic uncertainty exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Armed with a wealth of experience as a seasoned economist and his previous tenure as Finance Minister under the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) administration, Tarin's pragmatic approach prioritized bolstering economic resilience, fostering sustainable growth, and enhancing fiscal discipline. His tenure witnessed the implementation of targeted initiatives aimed at reviving key sectors of the economy, enhancing revenue generation, and mitigating the adverse impact of the pandemic on vulnerable segments of society. Moreover, Tarin's efforts to forge consensus on critical economic reforms underscored his commitment to fostering a conducive environment for economic growth and development. Despite the challenges posed by the evolving economic landscape, Tarin's tenure was characterized by notable achievements, including securing vital financial assistance from international financial institutions and charting a course towards economic recovery.

However, amidst the backdrop of global uncertainties and domestic constraints, PTI's management of the Finance Ministry exhibited both successes and shortcomings. While the government showcased a technical approach to tackle economic issues, there were lingering loopholes that persisted. These complexities underscored the intricacies of navigating Pakistan's economic challenges and highlighted the need for continued diligence and adaptability in addressing the nation's economic priorities.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the finance ministry in Pakistan's current coalition government has undergone a significant transition. Muhammad Aurangzeb, the former CEO of Pakistan's largest bank, HBL, was appointed as the finance minister, heralding a new chapter in Pakistan's economic management. Tasked with steering the country through its economic challenges, Aurangzeb brings a wealth of experience from the banking sector to his new role.

One of the immediate priorities of the

finance ministry has been to negotiate a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize Pakistan's economy. With the country facing high inflation and external financing requirements, securing financial assistance from global lenders has been imperative. The successful completion of negotiations with the IMF for the release of \$1.1 billion underscores the government's commitment to implementing necessary policy reforms to address economic vulnerabilities. However, the road ahead remains challenging, with Pakistan's economy burdened by debt obligations and dwindling foreign reserves. Inflation, though gradually declining, remains high, posing a significant challenge to the government's efforts to stabilize the economy. Aurangzeb has emphasized the need for a "longer, larger" IMF bailout package to address these pressing issues effectively. In addition to negotiating with international financial institutions, the finance ministry is also exploring avenues for revenue generation and expenditure reduction. Privatization of state-owned enterprises has been identified as a potential strategy to generate revenue and streamline government expenditure.

Nevertheless, the government faces tough decisions ahead, as compliance with IMF requirements may entail increased taxation and broader taxation nets, potentially burdening the salaried class. Balancing the need for economic reforms with the welfare of the public will be a key challenge for the finance ministry under the current coalition

government. Overall, the finance ministry under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's leadership is tasked with navigating Pakistan through its economic challenges, implementing policy reforms, and fostering sustainable economic growth. With the successful negotiation of the IMF agreement as a milestone, the ministry remains focused on addressing the deep-seated economic vulnerabilities and steering Pakistan towards a path of stability and prosperity.

## Contrasting Diplomatic Visions: PTI's Legacy Versus Shehbaz Sharif's Foreign Policy Direction

In terms of Pakistan's foreign affairs, transitions in government often signify pivotal moments laden with expectations and opportunities. The evolution from the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government's tenure under Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi to the current leadership helmed by Ishaq Dar marks a shift in diplomatic strategy, encapsulating both continuity and change.

Under PTI's stewardship, Pakistan's foreign ministry navigated a complex array of global challenges with commendable dexterity, leaving a distinctive imprint on the country's diplomatic landscape. Chief among these was the persistent strain in relations with India, particularly regarding the Kashmir dispute. PTI earnestly





endeavored to internationalize the issue, leveraging diplomatic channels and advocating at prestigious forums such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The government's proactive approach in shedding light on India's actions in the region brought renewed international attention to the longstanding conflict, highlighting Pakistan's unwavering commitment to resolving the issue through peaceful means. Simultaneously, PTI played a pivotal role in facilitating the Afghan peace process, contributing significantly to brokering a historic deal between the United States and

development path but also offered a potential avenue for collaboration amidst strained relations with other regional partners. Despite occasional scrutiny over certain foreign policy matters, PTI's tenure witnessed a balanced and pragmatic approach to navigating global challenges, setting a promising trajectory for Pakistan's future diplomatic endeavors.

As Pakistan transitions under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's leadership, the appointment of Ishaq Dar as foreign minister heralds a new chapter in the country's foreign policy landscape. Dar inherits a

in Afghanistan remains volatile, requiring deft diplomacy to manage relations with the new Afghan government and navigate regional complexities. Additionally, dialogue with India and Iran is crucial to address mutual concerns and promote stability while safeguarding Pakistan's national interests.

As Ishaq Dar assumes the mantle of foreign minister, he is poised to shape Pakistan's foreign policy agenda and navigate the complex geopolitical landscape. With his experience and expertise, Dar is tasked with advancing Pakistan's interests on the global stage while addressing the formidable challenges ahead. In essence, the transition from PTI's tenure to Shehbaz Sharif's leadership signifies continuity in Pakistan's diplomatic engagements, underscored by the unwavering commitment to safeguard national interests and promote regional stability. As the country charts its course in the global arena, the efficacy of Dar's leadership will be crucial in steering Pakistan through the complexities of international relations, ensuring a prosperous and secure future.

To conclude, the intricate tapestry of Pakistan's political and diplomatic landscape reflects a nation at a critical juncture, navigating through challenges and promises under new leadership. As Pakistan traverses these complex terrains, unity and collaboration across partisan lines will be imperative for the coalition government to garner public trust and address national issues effectively. Whether in economic management or diplomatic engagements, fostering consensus on policy initiatives and instituting robust governance mechanisms will be crucial for instilling confidence among stakeholders and international partners alike.

In essence, the contrasting narratives of governance and diplomatic strategies between PTI's legacy and Shehbaz Sharif's vision provide a nuanced understanding of Pakistan's evolving political and diplomatic landscape. Through cohesive and decisive action, the nation can chart a path towards stability, prosperity, and greater prominence on the global stage under the leadership of Shehbaz Sharif and his coalition government.



the Taliban. This landmark achievement not only underscored Pakistan's instrumental role in regional stability but also paved the way for a peaceful resolution to the protracted Afghan conflict. PTI's diplomatic efforts resonated beyond South Asia, as the successful hosting of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Islamabad showcased Pakistan's pivotal role in the Muslim world, fostering greater unity and collaboration among member states.

Amidst these accomplishments, PTI navigated intricate great power dynamics with finesse, fostering a burgeoning relationship with China. This strategic partnership not only symbolized China's steadfast support for Pakistan's independent

significant challenge in the stalled trade relations with India, arising from the unresolved Kashmir issue. Known for his expertise in economics, Dar advocates for maintaining economic ties with India, albeit hindered by the Kashmir stalemate.

Furthermore, amidst the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Pakistan finds itself in a delicate balancing act, calling for diplomatic finesse to navigate relations with both nations and advocate for peace. The Israel-Palestine conflict presents another diplomatic hurdle, with Pakistan expected to uphold its unwavering support for the Palestinian cause while advocating for a just resolution based on international law. Moreover, Pakistan faces challenges posed by its neighbors, including Afghanistan, India, and Iran. The situation



## Pakistan ‘unlikely to break free from IMF support, incomplete PM terms’, says IIF



By Khaleeq Kiani

On its way to missing targets in the current financial year, Pakistan’s biggest challenge now is fiscal consolidation and reforms amid a weak coalition government and political instability stemming from accusations of electoral fraud, the Washington-based Institute of International Finance (IIF) has said.

On the other hand, exchange rate, monetary policy, energy subsidies and state-owned enterprises (SOE) reforms are unlikely to be a barrier to the new IMF programme on the back of good progress on all these fronts over the past year, said the IIF, a global association of financial institutions comprising the world’s largest commercial and investment banks, insurance companies and investment management firms.

“The biggest challenge will come from fiscal consolidation,” the IIF said, noting that this was an area of particular importance, as large fiscal deficits have led to public debt increasing from 55pc of GDP in the fiscal year 2009-10 to 79pc in 2022-23.

“New estimates now show an overall fiscal deficit of 8.1pc of GDP and a primary deficit of 0.2pc of GDP,” the IIF said. This coincided with a Ministry of Finance report stating that the seven-month fiscal deficit increased to 2.6pc of GDP (Rs2.721 trillion) from 2.3pc of GDP (Rs1.974tr) last year, although the contained primary expenditures helped in improving the primary surplus to Rs1.939tr from Rs945 billion last year.

Global financial body calls fiscal consolidation, reforms amid weak coalition, political instability ‘biggest challenges’

The IIF noted that historical precedence, along with a politically weak government, meant that risks were tilted to the downside. There is a high chance that the Rs9.4tr tax-revenue target will be missed, while further expenditure and significant subsidy cuts will be difficult, the IIF said. The IIF forecasted “a primary deficit of 0.3pc.

‘Turbulent politics to add to risks’

“Turbulent, unstable politics will add to the risks facing Pakistan,” the IIF said. Fraught elections characterised by the suspension of cellular service during the elections, a large delay in releasing results, mass protests, a deadly bombing, and failure to allocate reserved seats to PTI-backed independents have exasperated tensions within the country.

“It is clear that Imran Khan is the most popular politician in Pakistan. This puts him at odds with the powerful military,” it said.

The report anticipated the tensions between the two sides to continue escalating, most likely leading to another round of heavy military crackdown on PTI-backed politicians and supporters. Added to this is the weak nature of the coalition government.

“The PPP seems reluctant to sign on to politically costly reforms. Without their support, it is hard to see a way forward for the PML-N, which could hinder or prolong negotiations with the IMF,” the IIF said.

It said the historical precedence did not bode well for either the government or a new IMF programme. “To date, no prime minister [in Pakistan] has ever finished their five-year term, while Pakistan is currently in its 23rd IMF programme since 1958. A horrible track record that shows no signs of being broken any time soon”, it observed.

“Close to \$90bn in public debt is set to mature in FY24, a large part of which is expected to be rolled over,” the IIF said.

This delicate financing picture makes a new IMF programme all the more imperative, especially considering that countries that have previously aided Pakistan with official lending — such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and China— are now making financing contingent on an IMF programme.

# Red Heifer Sacrifice Planned by Jewish Third Temple Advocates for April Event

## TTI Report

A Jewish group affiliated with the Third Temple movement has announced plans to conduct a ceremony for the sacrifice of a red heifer in late April. According to Jewish tradition, red cows or heifers hold significant importance for the construction of the Third Temple in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Yitzchak Mamo, a member of the Third Temple group known as Uvne Jerusalem, disclosed details of the planned ceremony during an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network. The event is reportedly scheduled to coincide with Passover, which falls in late April this year.

In a related development, a conference convened on Wednesday in the vicinity of Shilo, an Israeli settlement near Nablus, to discuss the religious significance of red heifers in Jewish tradition. The conference attendees explored interpretations from Torah teachings while considering the role of these animals in Jewish rituals.

Kobi Mamo, head of the ancient Shiloh archaeological site, mentioned concerns raised by Hezbollah, a Lebanese militant group, regarding the conference. The presence of Israeli settlers and discussions about red heifers have apparently attracted attention and generated discussions on platforms like Telegram.

Notably, five heifers are reportedly located atop a hill in the occupied West Bank. However, adhering to Jewish tradition, a red heifer meeting specific criteria is deemed necessary for performing purification rituals essential for the construction of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. Yahuda Singer, a resident of the Mitzpe Yericho settlement and a pamphlet translator, mentioned that these heifers, imported from Texas, have been raised under specialized conditions to maintain their purity.

The quest for a red heifer aligns with some Jewish groups' aspirations to construct the Third Temple on the Temple Mount, where the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock shrine currently stand. This endeavor holds symbolic significance for various groups, including certain Jewish activists and evangelical Christians in the United States, who view the temple's construction as a precursor to significant theological events.

Despite the symbolic and religious importance attached to the sacrifice of a red heifer, concerns have been raised by Palestinian groups like Hamas regarding potential implications for the Al-Aqsa Mosque's safety and stability. Hamas officials have indicated their intention to monitor developments closely to safeguard the mosque's sanctity.

While the prospect of a red heifer sacrifice generates interest and discussions, some individuals remain cautious about the implications and controversies surrounding the Third Temple movement. A Los Angeles student from Shilo expressed awareness of the historical significance of red heifers but



voiced concerns about potential tensions arising from temple construction plans.

Boruch Fishman, a leader of the Third Temple movement, acknowledged the challenges associated with implementing their vision and emphasized the importance of adhering to religious protocols and procedures. The movement aims to purify the red cows through sacrificial rituals, enabling worshippers to perform rites and rituals in the mosque's courtyards.

Furthermore, Bar Ilan University researchers have conducted studies indicating that the ashes from a red heifer can be utilized for purification rituals, facilitating millions of purification processes. In the past, attempts by Third Temple activists and rabbis to conduct sacrifice rituals in the Al-Aqsa Mosque's courtyards have been met with resistance from Israeli soldiers.

Fishman proposed the idea of engaging the Waqf, the Islamic religious trust responsible for managing the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, in collecting offerings and raising funds for the temple's construction. He suggested that private discussions with the Waqf might yield opportunities for collaboration, potentially easing tensions and facilitating mutual understanding. Members of the Third Temple community are actively organizing conferences and initiatives aimed at locating red heifers that adhere to their stringent criteria. These heifers must possess specific physical attributes, including being pure red, virgin, and free from blemishes, to fulfill the requirements of Jewish tradition.

As discussions and preparations for the red heifer sacrifice continue, social media platforms have been abuzz with speculation and commentary on the potential implications and significance of this event. However, it is essential to approach these discussions with a nuanced understanding of religious beliefs, historical contexts, and geopolitical sensitivities surrounding the issue.

It is important to note that while the sacrifice of a red heifer holds profound religious significance for certain Jewish groups, interpretations and implications of these events may vary widely among different communities and stakeholders. As such, ongoing dialogues and engagement are crucial for fostering mutual respect, understanding, and peaceful coexistence in the region.

# A looming abyss: How Afghanistan threatens global security

*Afghan branch of the Islamic State, has claimed responsibility, a chilling confirmation of the fears many held*

By Jan Achakzai

The images of the aftermath in Moscow - the blood staining the cobblestones outside the concert hall, the faces etched with shock and grief - are a stark reminder of the brutal reality of terrorism. ISIS-K, the Afghan branch of the Islamic State, has claimed responsibility, a chilling confirmation of the fears many held.

This isn't just about a name. The attack, linked to Central Asian militants emboldened by the chaos in Afghanistan, lays bare a terrifying truth: the embers of terror thought extinguished in that war-torn nation are flickering back to life. This isn't just a threat to Central Asia and Russia, but to the very fabric of global security.

The warnings from the battlefield are clear and urgent. General Michael Kurilla, head of US Central Command, paints a grim picture: terrorist groups operating freely in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan could launch attacks on US soil within six months.

This chilling assessment is echoed in a recent Foreign Policy exposé, detailing al-Qaeda's alarming resurgence. They're rebuilding networks, training new recruits, and exploiting the power vacuum left by the international withdrawal. The idea of a global terror organization finding a safe haven under the Taliban is a nightmare scenario.

The ripples of instability don't stop at Afghanistan's borders. Pakistan, a neighbor with a complex history, is already feeling the heat. Pakistani militant groups like the TTP are operating from Afghan sanctuaries, leading to a surge in attacks within Pakistan itself. The fear of resurgent terrorism hangs heavy in the air, and the potential for a domino effect destabilizing the entire region is a chilling prospect.

China, a major player in the region's economic and political landscape, isn't immune either. A successful attack on



Chinese interests could be a seismic event, disrupting regional connectivity and jeopardizing initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative.

While the burden of containing this crisis ultimately falls on the Afghan leadership i.e. the Taliban, their current approach offers little hope. Critics point out a lack of clear strategy and a tendency to blame Pakistan for regional security issues.

This is unproductive and ignores the complex web of historical grievances that have fueled instability for decades. Pakistan, itself grappling with its own internal security challenges, expects a more collaborative approach.

The international community must unite to address this crisis before it's too late. This requires a united front, including powers like the US, Russia, China, and regional players like Central Asia and Iran. A multi-pronged approach is crucial: fostering diplomacy to facilitate dialogue between regional players, providing resources and expertise to help the Afghan government tackle terrorism, and establishing robust intelligence-sharing mechanisms to track and disrupt terrorist networks. However,

the heavy lifting has to be done by the Taliban themselves.

But security concerns are only part of the equation. We need to address the root causes of terrorism in Afghanistan. This means investing in long-term solutions: promoting economic development, fostering human rights and democratic values, and supporting education and social services for the Afghan people. Only by tackling these issues can we create a foundation for lasting peace and stability.

History is a harsh teacher. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s created a breeding ground for extremism, leading to the rise of al-Qaeda and the devastating 9/11 attacks. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past. A stable Afghanistan is not just a regional imperative. It's essential for global security.

We stand at a precipice, and the consequences of inaction are dire. Only through united action and a commitment to long-term solutions can we prevent Afghanistan's unraveling from becoming a global abyss.

Courtesy The News

# Afghanistan's attack on Pakistan with context to their bilateral relations?



By Nadia Aleem-ud-Din

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has long been characterized by a mixture of cooperation, suspicion, and occasional hostility. Recent events, including attacks allegedly originating from Afghan soil, have once again brought to the forefront the complexities and challenges inherent in their bilateral relations. This article aims to delve into the historical context, underlying issues, and current dynamics that shape the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## Historical Background:

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a porous border that has been a source of both connectivity and contention. The Durand Line, drawn in the late 19th century by the British Empire, serves as the de facto border between the two countries. However, Afghanistan has never officially recognized this border, leading to territorial disputes and mistrust.

During the Cold War, Pakistan supported

Afghan mujahedeen fighters against the Soviet occupation, while Afghanistan accused Pakistan of meddling in its internal affairs. Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into a civil war, with Pakistan backing the Taliban movement in the 1990s.

## Post-9/11 Era:

The events of September 11, 2001, drastically altered the dynamics in the region. The United States-led invasion of Afghanistan ousted the Taliban regime, which had enjoyed Pakistan's support. Pakistan, under pressure from the international community, pledged support for the US-led coalition against terrorism.

However, suspicions persisted regarding Pakistan's alleged support for elements within the Taliban and other militant groups. Afghanistan accused Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), of providing sanctuary and support to insurgents launching attacks across the border.

## Challenges and Contentions:

Several factors contribute to the strained relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Firstly, the issue of cross-border militancy remains a significant concern. Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of harboring and supporting Taliban factions, including the Haqqani Network, which allegedly carry out attacks on Afghan soil.

Secondly, the historical mistrust stemming from the Durand Line dispute continues to undermine efforts to build trust and cooperation between the two countries. Afghanistan's refusal to recognize the border exacerbates tensions and complicates efforts to manage the shared frontier.

Moreover, both countries have accused each other of using proxy tactics to advance their respective interests in the region. Pakistan views Afghanistan's close ties with India with suspicion, fearing encirclement and Indian influence in Kabul. Conversely,

Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of seeking to maintain strategic depth by supporting militant proxies.

## Diplomatic Efforts and Regional Dynamics:

Despite the challenges, there have been concerted efforts to improve bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Initiatives such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) seek to address security concerns, enhance economic cooperation, and promote people-to-people contacts.

Furthermore, regional powers such as China have played a significant role in facilitating dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) envisions enhanced connectivity and economic integration in the region, which could incentivize cooperation between the two neighbors.

## The Role of the United States:

The United States remains a key stakeholder in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, given its military presence in Afghanistan and its role as a mediator. Washington has pressured Islamabad to crack down on

militant sanctuaries and support peace efforts in Afghanistan.

However, US-Pakistan relations have also experienced strains, particularly over divergent interests in Afghanistan. While the United States seeks a stable Afghanistan free from militant threats, Pakistan is concerned about Indian influence and seeks a friendly government in Kabul.

## Recent Escalations and the Way Forward:

Recent attacks allegedly originating from Afghan soil have escalated tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The attack on a military outpost in Pakistan's border region, purportedly carried out by militants with links to Afghanistan, has reignited mutual recriminations and calls for action.

In response, Pakistan has reinforced security measures along the border and called for greater cooperation from Afghanistan in tackling cross-border militancy. Afghanistan, meanwhile, has denied involvement in the attacks and called for dialogue to address security concerns.

Moving forward, both Afghanistan and Pakistan must prioritize dialogue and cooperation to address their shared security

challenges. Confidence-building measures, such as intelligence-sharing and joint border patrols, can help mitigate tensions and build trust.

Furthermore, regional stakeholders, including China and the United States, should continue to support efforts aimed at fostering stability and economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Enhanced connectivity and trade linkages can create mutual benefits and incentivize cooperation.

## Conclusion:

The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is fraught with complexities and challenges, stemming from historical mistrust, cross-border militancy, and divergent regional interests. Recent escalations underscore the need for sustained dialogue and cooperation to address shared security concerns and build trust.

By prioritizing diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and regional cooperation, Afghanistan and Pakistan can work towards a more stable and prosperous future. Despite the hurdles, concerted efforts from both sides and support from regional and international stakeholders can pave the way for lasting peace and security in the region.



# Gaza's risk of famine is accelerating faster than anything we've seen this century

*Everyone in Gaza is facing crisis levels of hunger. It's entirely preventable*



By Ellen Ioanes and Nicole Narea

Every resident of Gaza is at risk of crisis levels of food insecurity — and half are at risk of famine.

Yes, you read that right: Nearly six months into the Israeli invasion after the October 7 attacks, every single Gaza resident is at risk of at least crisis-level food insecurity — defined as households having high levels of malnutrition or resorting to “irreversible” coping mechanisms like selling livestock or furniture to afford even an insufficient diet.

It's a crisis that has unfolded at a speed utterly unprecedented this century — and also one that was repeatedly predicted and entirely avoidable if Israel were not placing severe restrictions on aid.

It comes as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a ceasefire resolution on March 25 that calls for the release of all hostage and an immediate cessation to all hostilities for the remainder of Ramadan. All members of the UNSC voted in favor of the resolution — which also demands increased humanitarian aid to Gaza — except for the US, which abstained.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the primary organization tracking food insecurity worldwide, defines five levels of food insecurity: Phase 1 (minimal), Phase 2 (stressed), Phase 3 (crisis), Phase 4 (emergency), and finally, Phase 5 (famine). More than 1 million people in Gaza could face famine by mid-July if a Rafah escalation occurs, according to a new IPC report.

Soon, “more than 200 people [will be] dying from starvation per day,” a UN aid spokesperson told reporters last week.

Prior to the October 7 attacks on Israel, the Israeli government tightly controlled the flow of goods entering Gaza, having ramped up oversight since Hamas took over the territory in 2007 and created what many international law experts call a de facto occupation. Then, two days after the Hamas attacks, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant ordered a “complete siege” on Gaza, barring fuel, food, water, and electricity from entering the territory. (Siege warfare against an occupied territory is illegal under international law.) While Israel later allowed limited supplies, includ-

ing food and medical aid, to enter Gaza, and minimal sources of clean water have been restored, none of these necessities are near the level that they were before the war started.

Though the Israeli government, through its official channels and to Vox, denies the possibility of famine in Gaza and disputes numbers released in the IPC report, facts on the ground show increasing desperation for the people of Gaza.

“If you cut off food, water, and power to a population that is fully dependent on importing, this is what you get,” Jeremy Konyndyk, president of Refugees International, told Vox in an interview. “I mean, that is just math.”

## Experts have warned about this crisis since the beginning of the war

Around 80 percent of people in Gaza relied on humanitarian aid prior to the invasion, putting them in an already vulnerable position.

And even a month into the Israeli invasion, there were many indications that hunger was spreading very rapidly in Gaza, Konyndyk said. According to reports from the World Food Program, by mid-November only 10 percent of the necessary food items were reaching Gaza through the Rafah border with Egypt, which at the time was the only open border crossing.

The amount of aid that has entered since has been irregular and is not nearly enough to sustain the population regardless.

“One-fourth of calories needed is what’s getting in,” Tak Igusa, professor of civil and systems engineering at Johns Hopkins University, a contributor to a joint Johns Hopkins and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine report on death projections in Gaza due to the war, told Vox. “So just imagine having one-fourth of what you usually eat for such a long duration. And it’s getting worse.”

The Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the Israeli military unit charged with overseeing civilian matters in Gaza and the West Bank, told Vox in a statement that it does not block entry of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

While Israel is no longer maintaining an all-out blockade as a matter of policy, accounts from NGOs on the ground show that in practice Israel prevents huge amounts of aid from entering.

Oxfam published a report this week accusing Israel of deliberately doing so, with aid trucks waiting an average of 20 days to enter and Israel rejecting a warehouse’s worth of supplies, including oxygen, incubators, water, and sanitation equipment.

James Elder, a spokesperson for UNICEF, described to Vox witnessing plentiful aid, ready and waiting to cross into the region — then seeing only a dozen trucks cross through.

Ciarán Donnelly, the International Rescue Committee’s senior vice president for crisis, response, recovery, and development, told Vox that the organization’s partners on the ground tasked with delivering medical supplies and food to Gaza have experi-

enced delays due to Israel’s “complicated, burdensome system of often arbitrary checks on supplies that are being brought in across the land border through Rafah.”

“It has taken us an inordinate amount of time to be able to get those supplies in,” he said, even if the process has sped up somewhat recently.

COGAT said that it requires a permit to bring in certain “dual-use equipment” intended for civilian use but that could be repurposed for military purposes. Food products are not included in the list of such equipment and are admitted to Gaza after screening without a permit, the agency said. But water testing kits and chlorine, which is

said, adding that any of the organization’s workers suspected of engaging in violence should be investigated.

The fighting has also made distribution difficult, with the bombardment of infrastructure — including food infrastructure such as bakeries and flour mills — and the attacks on civilians and aid operations, Donnelly said. Israel has also accused Hamas of stealing aid; however, the US envoy overseeing the delivery of aid said in February that Israel had provided “no specific evidence of diversion or theft of assistance.”

Famines were supposed to be in decline worldwide — but not in Gaza

## Famine is looming in Gaza

Gaza’s *entire* population is projected to face acute levels of food insecurity between March and July under the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system.

Minimal Stressed Crisis Emergency Famine



Data as of March 19, 2024.

Source: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

**Vox**

necessary for treating water, have been restricted, and there are reports that at least some food items, including dates, have also been caught in bureaucratic limbo.

COGAT said that Israel has worked hard to improve its security screening capacity, but that “it appears that the most significant hurdle in the way of delivering the humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip residents is the United Nations organizations’ capacity to collect and distribute the humanitarian aid inside the Gaza Strip.”

But the UN, and particularly the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, has been a target of Israel for years for its perceived anti-Israel bias. UNWRA has recently been defunded by the US and other major donor countries over allegations that some of its workers participated in the October 7 attacks. That has real consequences: UNWRA is the “mainstay of aid administration in Gaza and it’s not possible to replace it,” Donnelly

The speed at which Gaza has reached its current depth of food insecurity is practically unheard of in the 21st century.

“I can’t think of another situation in which you have the entire population of an area in this level of food insecurity in such a short space of time,” Donnelly said.

Famines have become rarer because the world produces far more food than is necessary to feed the global population, and humanitarian networks have stepped up to address gaps in access. Though the world is starting to see the effects of climate change driving global hunger, most modern famines tend to have political causes. Those include wars and authoritarian rule, which can magnify the destructive effects of natural disasters on the food supply.

The IPC has only officially designated two famines since its founding in 2004: the 2011 famine in Somalia and the 2017 famine in South Sudan. But there have also been

more recent food crises that threatened to become famines.

Somalia, for example, was again on the brink of famine in 2022 and 2023. An escalating decades-long conflict made the country increasingly reliant on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine, where supply chains have been disrupted due to the ongoing war there. Humanitarian workers have faced difficulty reaching certain parts of Somalia controlled by armed insurgent groups where there were reports of food deliveries being burned and water sources being poisoned or eliminated.

Those human-made problems compounded the effects of Somalia's worst drought in 40 years and the later severe flooding that displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Though the situation has improved, nearly a quarter of Somalia's population is still facing acute food insecurity in 2024.

Unlike in Somalia, however, the looming famine in Gaza has no natural causes.

The share of Palestinians in Gaza facing the highest levels of food insecurity as defined by the IPC system makes this one of the worst acute hunger crises in recent memory. Even at the peak of the crisis in Somalia and amid the ongoing civil war in Yemen, there was not such a high concentration of people experiencing crisis and emergency levels of food insecurity and famine.

## Famine in Gaza would lead to even more death

If the food insecurity crisis continues on its current trajectory, more Palestinians in Gaza will die of hunger. There is also the threat of infectious diseases, which should be easily preventable, attacking the weakened immune systems of hungry people.

"What happens after famine is really simple: People die in very large numbers," Donnelly said. "The cause of deaths will start to shift. Whereas the majority of the 31,000 deaths so far have been from the conflict, what we will see is not just large numbers of people dying of hunger, but dying of preventable diseases, particularly children."

Those diseases include diarrhea, pneumonia, measles, cholera, and meningitis — "diseases that people don't need to be dying from in the 21st century," he added. Similarly, some of the 43,000 excess deaths that occurred during Somalia's droughts in 2022 were likely from such diseases.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University project that by August, absent a ceasefire, the number of excess deaths in Gaza — including from disease outbreaks — could reach 67,000 and potentially exceed 85,000 if there's an escalation in the conflict. And an escalation seems likely: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claims he has no choice but to order an imminent ground invasion of Rafah, Gaza's southernmost region.



The Johns Hopkins researchers also estimate that as many as 46 percent of children in Gaza between the ages of 6 months and 5 years could suffer from malnutrition by August. That would represent a nearly 16-fold increase from the prewar rate of malnutrition.

NGOs, the United Nations, and international law experts have warned that Israel's direct role in Gaza's acute hunger crisis could amount to a war crime.

The Biden administration has insisted to its ally Israel that more humanitarian aid must be allowed into Gaza and, absent its cooperation, is coordinating airdrops of food into Gaza and constructing a port on the coast to facilitate international aid shipments by sea — moves that will provide some small help, but that some critics say simply cannot match the scale and immediacy of the need.

"The airdrops and the recent amount of

food coming in through World Central Kitchen — every little bit helps," Paul Spiegel, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health, told Vox. But "the US plan to have a pier — that may take another four to six or even eight weeks to develop that. It's too long. And so to address the extreme situation right now, there needs to be a massive amount of trucks coming in and it can only be through land."

After vetoing multiple ceasefire proposals in the UN Security Council, the US abstained from Monday's Security Council vote, which represents a shift from its previous position. This will likely further strain the relationship between Israel and its most important ally; Netanyahu has threatened to cancel an upcoming delegation to the White House should the US do anything but veto a ceasefire resolution, Reuters reported.

While that presents a significant shift in US policy over the nearly six months of the war, the White House has failed to use the real, powerful leverage it has to push for a ceasefire or even more aid — leverage that could include curtailing weapons shipments and funding to Israel, as many advocates have pointed out.

"The US has resorted to these expensive, complicated, frankly desperate workarounds to get aid into Gaza and to be seen as getting aid into Gaza," Brian Finucane, senior adviser for the US program at the International Crisis Group, told Vox.

And what limited pressure the US has put on Israel does not appear to be dissuading Netanyahu's government from proceeding with a likely incursion into Rafah. If that does happen, things are only likely to get worse, meaning more preventable deaths.

"So many, many warnings have been made," Elder said. "And history will judge very, very poorly those who had the decision-making power — and we must be very clear, children are suffering, children are dying, dehydrating to death, because of decisions made by those in power. Children's pain is avoidable. Their loss is avoidable."

Courtesy [www.vox.com](http://www.vox.com)

# Will famine in Gaza force an end to Israel's war?

*The UN ceasefire resolution could signal a turning point in global support for Israel, but will the international community take further action?*

By Dario Sabaghi

The looming famine long warned about in Gaza as a result of Israel's war increasingly appears to be materialising.

A report from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) released last week warned of imminent famine in North Gaza, with severe food crises expected to spread throughout the strip by mid-March to May.

About 210,000 people in northern Gaza face catastrophic conditions, categorised as IPC Phase 5, the most severe level.

Overall, this phase could affect up to 1.1 million people, half of Gaza's population, if the conflict continues. As a result, with 20% of the population facing extreme food shortages, two out of every 10,000 people could die daily from starvation or related causes.

**"The turning point will be if Israel proceeds with its plan to invade Rafah, which will result in even greater disaster"**

But Gaza has already witnessed its first victims of famine. The Gazan Health Ministry said that at least 27 children have died from malnutrition and dehydration, with the actual starvation death toll likely much higher and expected to increase.

Four out of 10,000 children per day could die due to starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease.

This crisis wasn't unexpected. United Nations agencies have long warned it was coming as Gaza was already grappling with food insecurity.

Before the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October, about 500 lorries used to enter Gaza daily. Today, only about 150 are allowed into the strip, which isn't enough to meet demand, not even with additional aid from airdrops and sea.

The IPC's announcement has shaken part of the international community. Among the



others who expressed concerns, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres defined the famine as an "entirely man-made disaster," while European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell accused Israel of provoking famine in Gaza and using starvation as a weapon of war, calling on Israel to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza.

However, international criticism has left Israel unmoved. While the UN Security Council on Monday called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for the month of Ramadan, and emphasised the need for more humanitarian aid, it remains to be seen if mass starvation will be the turning point that forces the international community to comprehensively halt Tel Aviv's war.

Rafe Jabari, a French-Palestinian political science analyst, told The New Arab that it would be difficult for the United States, the United Kingdom, the EU, and other partners to withdraw political, diplomatic, and military support to Israel following the 7 October attack.

"I'm not very optimistic about a shift at this current moment. Some voices are rising from the international community, but they are only urging Israel to act according to international law. I think the turning point will be if Israel proceeds with its plan to

invade Rafah, which will result in even greater disaster," he said.

Yara Asi, an assistant professor of global health management and informatics at the University of Central California, told TNA that the famine in Gaza is the result of the international community's inaction in the face of documented Israeli war crimes and human rights violations over decades.

"This international community's pushback seems to be only a louder verbal condemnation. Until we see countries taking action, famine won't be a breaking point to stop Israel. I have been waiting for a breaking point my entire life," she said.

The humanitarian toll of Israel's war in Gaza is pressuring Western governments, according to Andreas Krieg, senior lecturer at the School of Security Studies at King's College London and CEO of consulting firm MENA Analytica.

He told TNA that Israel's reluctance to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza is eroding its global standing, as well as altering Western perceptions of the country. Many from the international community now view Israel's actions as contrary to democratic principles and emphasise the futility of military solutions against Hamas.

**"Until we see countries taking action, famine won't be a breaking point to stop Israel"**

"The resort to airdrops and the construction of an artificial pier to deliver aid into Gaza indicate that Israel is not cooperating and is deliberately weaponising humanitarian aid, which is something that nobody, even those who support Israel, can endorse because it constitutes a war crime," he said.

But something is slowly changing. Canada has become one of the first countries to take a major step to act against Israel's interests by halting the approval of new arms export permits, despite having authorised over \$21 million worth of permits since 7 October.

The UK is also considering restricting some arms exports to Israel if it launches an offensive on Rafah.

Krieg suggests that the international community could halt arms sales, following Canada's steps, escalating Israel's isolation. Arab states like the UAE could influence trade routes, increasing pressure on Israel. However, as Israel perceives the conflict as existential, it might not give up.

"These combined efforts aim not to change Israel but to create conditions for Netanyahu to be replaced by someone more moderate and responsive to external pressure," he said.

The Israeli government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is using famine as a weapon to achieve several goals, according to Jabari and Asi, who believe that it serves to exert pressure on Hamas, sway the population against Hamas, and force Palestinians to leave Gaza.

"Netanyahu's goal is not only winning the war against Hamas. He wants to eliminate the essence of the Palestine question, which is the perspective of a Palestinian state," Jabari said.

Israel's reluctance to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza reflects not only Netanyahu's government but also the sentiments of some Israeli citizens. A February survey by the Israel Democracy Institute found that 68% of Jewish-Israelis respondents opposed such aid, while 85% of Palestinian-Israelis supported it.

Asi explained that famine is only the latest stage of a restrictive food policy pursued by Israel in Gaza over the years. Prior to 7 October, Gaza faced high poverty and food insecurity due to Israel's 2007 blockade, which restricted imports, including arbitrary bans on items like strawberries and chocolate.

Reports suggested Israel limited calorie intake to prevent famine and further damaged Gaza's food sovereignty by targeting agricultural land, production facilities, and infrastructure since 2008.



The blockade - Asi continued - has led to widespread unemployment, limiting residents' purchasing power for nutritious food, and with Israel now targeting humanitarian agencies like UNRWA, the situation has worsened, reflecting an acceleration of longstanding policies under Israeli control since 2007.

**"Famine is only the latest stage of a restrictive food policy pursued by Israel in Gaza over the years. Prior to 7 October, Gaza faced high poverty and food insecurity due to Israel's 2007 blockade"**

This explains why, without coordination with Israel, the international community and aid agencies are limited in assisting Palestinians in Gaza.

At a political level, Jabari suggests Israel's stance also reflects disagreements between Netanyahu and the US administration in terms of humanitarian aid, and the two-state solution.

However, Netanyahu's focus on weakening the Palestinian presence through the use of famine may potentially fuel support for Hamas and resentment from the international community.

Asi argued that the international community "has many levers that it has refused to pull" against Israel to mitigate the suffering in Gaza, such as halting arms sales, compelling Israel to open borders and humanitarian corridors, and enforcing ceasefires.

"While we keep hearing about the predicted

famine, there have already been several dozen deaths from starvation. This is happening with the complicity and full knowledge of the international community. I believe this will be a stain moving forward on the so-called 'rules-based order' that we tried to build after World War II," she said.

Krieg said that the future of the relations between the EU and Israel hinges on Israel's political direction and adherence to international norms.

**"Prolonged conflicts like this one will stain Israel's history and risk alienating younger generations in Europe, potentially straining future diplomatic relations. New generations are witnessing what is happening at this time, and that will leave a stain on the relations between the West and Israel. And I think this is Israel is burning its ties with the West, especially with the younger generations."**

Courtesy [www.newarab.com](http://www.newarab.com)

# Strategic Appraisal of Indian Maritime Ambitions

By Noreen Akhtar

During the last 2 weeks, two news items related to Indian Navy made headlines. First, Indian cabinet approved the construction of yet another aircraft carrier for its navy. Already Indian Navy operate 2 aircraft carrier groups in Indian Ocean. Apart from that it operates 8 Landing Crafts, 12 Destroyers, 12 Frigates, 18 Corvettes, 1 nuclear submarine, 16 Diesel Submarines, 10 Offshore Patrol Vessels and 110 Patrol vessels along with 4 oil tankers and other auxiliary vessels. Indian Naval aviation operates 150+ multi-role fighters and Maritime Petrol Aircraft (MPAs). Second news came earlier this week when it was announced that Indian Navy demonstrated the simultaneous deployment of 11 out of its 16 submarines. This exercise was a demonstration of Indian Navy's enhanced operational preparedness.

Meanwhile, India's Defence Budget has touched ₹ 6,21,540.85 crore in the Financial Year 2024-25 which is approximately 75 billion USD. The budgetary allocation to Defence for FY 24-25 is higher by approximately one lakh crore (18.35%) more than the allocation for FY 2022-23 and 4.72% more than the allocation for FY 23-24. Indian defense budget growth has outpaced Chinese defense spending increase over the years. Consequently, the gap between Chinese and Indian defense spending has reduced during the last 10 years from 1:5 to 1:3. Despite having limited resources compared to China, India has decided to be part of maritime chessboard at global scale. These grand ambitions have forced India to build a blue water naval capability as well similar to that of Chinese attempt to be able to operate in international waters far away from home ports.

Concurrently, India has also become the strategic partner with the US in the ensuing Great Power Competition. This partnership with the US has given India new impetus to pursue an aggressive maritime grand strategy with ultimate goal to claim Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean". Along with growing maritime power projection capabilities, Indian strategy has a visible economic diplomacy component where India's prominent businesses are helping New Delhi.

At the strategic level, Indian maritime strategy is based on projection of Indian influence through economic diplomacy and naval power projection across the IOR and get a foothold in areas which are critical for Chinese energy and raw materials import from the GCC and Africa. This new phase of Indian maritime strategy is usually considered as a part of new role assigned to India as regional net security provider in IOR. But a closer appraisal of these developments exposes the real strategic ambitions of New Delhi where the ultimate goal is to emerge as a global player capable of exerting political influence through economic and military muscles in regions far and away from Indian sea shores. India has envisioned a global role for itself and under the rule of a ultra-nationalistic regime, it has already begun behaving like a global player. Indian military actions in Myanmar, Bhutan and Pakistan in recent years are examples of India playing regional power role.

This strategy has footprints from Strait of Malacca to Assumption Island in Seychelles, from Andaman to Mozambique Channel in



Africa. Acquisition of sea ports as far as in Israel and establishment of radar and listening stations in Sri Lanka and Maldives. Strategic partnerships with Japan, US and Australia (QUAD) provides an even greater operational autonomy for Indian Navy. In a way, India is trying to replicate Chinese strategy to establish maritime footprint on foreign shores through acquiring or building sea ports.

Acquisition of Israeli port of Hafia in an open bid against Chinese and Turkish companies presents India a foothold in Mediterranean Sea to expand its maritime diplomacy beyond Middle East which has traditionally considered as India's desired area of influence in line with its previously known ambitions of becoming a regional net security provider. Clearly, Indian maritime diplomatic and economic outreach is pointing to something even bigger. Indian maritime strategy is becoming visible part of India's long term global ambition of becoming a global player with UNSC permanent representation. India is navigating in that direction at considerably fast pace employing all facets of national power. If India is entering into Mediterranean in the west, it has established its footprint at the gates of South China Sea in the east by entering maritime cooperation deal with Singapore and Indonesia.

India's global ambitions to emerge as expansion of UNSC's P5 group (5 permanent member states) are being propelled by regional geopolitics, ongoing great power competition between the US and China, weakening of global order, and growing ultra-nationalistic zeal in domestic politics where Indian ruling elite is using these Indian grand ambitions to control the narrative and domestic discourse in order to divert public attention from brewing socio-economic problems and growing communal unrest within India.

Indian ambitions are a multi prong challenge for all regional countries especially for Pakistan as it is no longer a mere maritime balance of power problem in the Arabian Sea. It has far reaching implications for Pakistan's vital long term national interests including Kashmir, water security and economic feasibility. In this backdrop, it would be suicidal for Pakistan to ignore fast unfolding developments in the region and beyond to secure its own vital strategic interests in the long run. Strategic clarity in our diplomacy, political cohesion, and economic discipline must be key milestones in path forward for Pakistan!

# Nurturing Diversity: Norway's Commitment to Freedom of Speech for minorities in Norwegian society

By Amna Iqbal

In the Norwegian fundamental focus on democracy, the delicate balance between citizen rights and governmental responsibilities finds itself in the protection of freedom of speech. This fundamental right, enshrined in Norway's legal framework and international human rights conventions, serves as a beacon of liberty for all citizens, particularly for marginalized and minority groups whose voices have historically been silenced or ignored. Yet, it is important to note that Norway still has certain challenges with this, but has come a long way and definitely provides a better framework than the global south where challenges of such rights are still at a difficult challenge.

Norway's dedication to safeguarding freedom of speech is exemplified through its proactive measures to protect the rights of minorities. One such example is the case of Muslim communities, who have faced discrimination and prejudice in Norwegian society. In response to rising Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, Muslim activists and allies have utilized their right to freedom of speech to challenge stereotypes, combat prejudice, and promote interfaith dialogue. Through community forums, cultural events, and educational initiatives, Muslims in Norway have advocated for greater understanding and acceptance, fostering a more inclusive society where diversity is celebrated and respected through different initiatives through both local communities and the government.

Moreover, Norway's legal framework provides robust protections for freedom of speech, even in cases where controversial or unpopular opinions are expressed. The case of a mosque construction project in Oslo exemplifies Norway's commitment to upholding freedom of expression while respecting religious diversity. Despite opposition from some quarters, Norwegian authorities have upheld the right of Muslims to build places of worship and practice their faith freely, affirming the



principles of religious freedom and tolerance in Norwegian society. Additionally, the government has implemented policies to foster interfaith dialogue and promote understanding among different religious communities. Through initiatives such as cultural exchange programs, religious tolerance education in schools, and support for interfaith organizations, the Norwegian government actively works to create an environment where individuals of all faiths feel respected and valued.

In addition to legal protections, Norway's vibrant civil society plays a crucial role in defending freedom of speech for all citizens. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements, and community-based initiatives serve as bulwarks against censorship and oppression, providing platforms for marginalized voices to be heard and amplifying their concerns in public discourse. Through collaborative efforts and solidarity, Norwegian civil society champions the rights of minorities and ensures that freedom of speech remains a cornerstone of Norwegian democracy. The government supports these initiatives through grants, subsidies, and partnerships, recognizing the importance of civil society in safeguarding democratic values. Moreover, government agencies actively engage with civil society organizations to address systemic issues and develop inclusive policies that reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of Norwegian society. By

fostering a dynamic partnership between government and the local society, Norway reinforces its commitment to protecting freedom of speech and ensuring that all voices are heard in the public sphere, despite disagreements within the political system and even in civilian society.

However, challenges persist in the quest to safeguard freedom of speech for all citizens. The rise of online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and targeted attacks against minority groups pose threats to open dialogue and democratic values. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines legislative reforms, media literacy programs, and community-based interventions to promote respectful dialogue and protect marginalized voices.

In conclusion, Norway's commitment to freedom of speech for all citizens, particularly for marginalized and minority groups, is a testament to its democratic ethos and respect for human rights. Through legal protections, civil society activism, and inclusive dialogue, Norway continues to nurture diversity and uphold the principles of liberty and equality for all. In the ongoing journey towards a more just and inclusive society, the preservation of freedom of speech remains paramount, ensuring that every voice has the opportunity to be heard and valued.

# FDI Flows to Neighboring Countries, but Pakistan Lagged Behind - Why?

By Nimra Atiq

It reflects how attractive a country is to international investors. Among the prominent players in this arena are India, Bangladesh, and China, each strategically positioning themselves to harness the benefits of FDI influx. However, notably absent from this narrative is Pakistan, which has been facing challenges attracting significant foreign investment. This contrast raises important questions about the economic policies and investment climate of these countries.

Pakistan has been seen as a possible solution for some time now. However, the country's foreign direct investment (FDI) has gone through ups and downs. Although there have been brief periods of growth, the overall trend has been a decline in recent years.

## India: A Magnet for FDI

India, with its burgeoning economy and vast market potential, continues to be a magnet for FDI. When India and Pakistan became independent states after the Partition in 1947, both inherited a similar economic legacy of under-investment and neglect from Britain. Both nations' colonial economies were among the poorest in the world, and following their independence, they saw significant gains in education, healthcare, and other areas of development, leading to strong growth. However, during the first four decades, Pakistan experienced faster growth rates than India, while India lagged behind. Eventually, India became the world's third-largest economy by purchasing power and the "I" in BRICS.

India has been a stable democracy for 75 years, whereas Pakistan has experienced a tumultuous political history with several changes in military and civilian rule. However, Pakistan's economy has consistently shown promising growth during the periods when it was geopolitically important to the US/West, regardless of the type of



regime in power. In other words, Pakistan's economic growth has been less reliant on internal reforms, policies, and capacities, and has instead mostly depended on external monetary support that was available during times such as SEATO, CENTO, Afghan Jihad, and US GWOT, when Pakistan was of significance to the US/West in the global order.

India has successfully managed to attract foreign investments by liberalizing foreign direct investment (FDI) in key sectors such as defense, real estate, railways, and insurance. Additionally, they have made progress towards energy efficiency.

The Indian government's aggressive cut in subsidies has released funds for development needs, and an increase in ventures under public-private partnerships, such as in renewable energy, adds to the momentum. India has attracted \$33 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the first half of the current financial year, which started in April 2023. In the last financial year (2022-23), the country recorded FDI of \$71 billion. Despite expecting its economy to grow by 7.3%

in this financial year, which is the highest rate among major global economies, India still faces the significant challenge of high unemployment rates among young people. This issue could play a key role in the upcoming elections.

India is working closely with Apple to enhance the company's manufacturing and retail presence in the country. Currently, India accounts for about 12-14% of global iPhone shipments.

According to the Centre for Economics Business and Research, India could become the world's third-largest economy after 2030. The think tank also suggested that India and Brazil have the potential to replace France and Italy in the Group of Eight (G8) in the next 15 years.

## Bangladesh: Emerging as a FDI Hotspot

Bangladesh became an independent country in 1971 and has made significant progress since then. The country is widely recognized as a leading manufacturer of textile products and has experienced rapid economic growth

due to high remittance volumes and its efforts to reduce poverty and develop its infrastructure. However, some challenges may impede the country's economic potential, such as increasing commodity prices and inflation.

Bangladesh has outpaced Pakistan in its ability to attract foreign investors, signaling a significant shift in investment dynamics between the two nations. This shift is evident in the notable surge of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flowing into Bangladesh compared to Pakistan.

In 2024, Bangladesh received \$3.6 billion in FDI inflows, surpassing Pakistan's \$1.9 billion during the same period. This rise in FDI underscores Bangladesh's success in fostering an appealing environment for foreign investors, resulting in a substantial increase in investment inflows.

Bangladesh's success can be attributed to its strategic economic policies and initiatives, which have greatly enhanced its attractiveness to foreign investors. By prioritizing internal strengthening efforts and enhancing worker productivity, Bangladesh has successfully attracted significant investment. Despite Pakistan's advantageous strategic position and potential, its economic performance and investment climate have not been as conducive to foreign investment as those of Bangladesh.

## Pakistan's Lagging Behind:

Pakistan shares its borders with India to the west, Iran to the east, and Afghanistan to the south. Being a predominantly Muslim nation, Pakistan has trailed behind India in terms of economic growth but has made significant strides in alleviating poverty for millions of its citizens.

The country's economic growth is predominantly driven by both private and government consumption. While Pakistan has experienced some benefits from investments, particularly from China, and from exports, it has also grappled with a series of economic crises. These crises have been largely attributed to factors such as political instability and frequent occurrences of floods. Pakistan is grappling with stagnating foreign direct investment (FDI), which will only reach USD 1.77 billion in 2023.

The predicted spike in foreign direct investment (FDI) has not materialized, despite the Special Investment Facilitation Council's (SIFC) sincere efforts to foster an environment that is supportive of enterprises and investors during the last year.

Current policies have failed to attract foreign investment as FDI figures decline to 0.59% of GDP, indicating a need to address structural issues impeding Pakistan's economic growth.

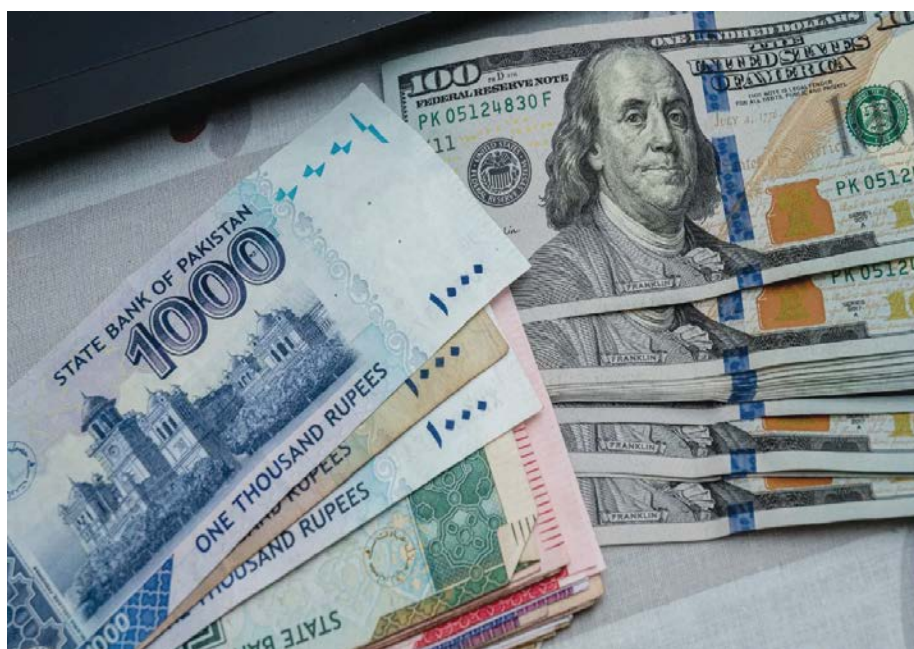
## Challenges and Barriers to FDI in Pakistan:

Pakistan is struggling to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) due to several challenges. Firstly, the country's security

inconsistent economic policies, and government bureaucracy are among the major impediments to attracting foreign direct investment (FDI).

Thirdly, Pakistan's infrastructure and human capital require improvement. The limited access to electricity and poor road and rail networks increases the cost of doing business. Furthermore, while Pakistan has a large youth population, many lack the skills and education that multinational companies seek.

Finally, Pakistan's regulatory environment can be overly bureaucratic. Policies like high tariffs, complex tax codes, and restrictions on firing employees make it difficult to invest and operate a business. For



and political instability have left investors feeling uneasy. The frequent occurrence of terrorist attacks, ethnic conflicts, and a history of military coups have contributed to this perception.

Secondly, Pakistan's economy is vulnerable to external shocks, such as spikes in oil prices, which lead to high inflation and budget deficits. Public debt, currently around 85% of GDP, is also a major concern. These macroeconomic weaknesses undermine investor confidence. Inconsistent economic policies have also been a major deterrent to foreign investment in Pakistan. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has noted that urban violence,

instance, starting a business in Pakistan takes around 10 procedures and 25 days compared to only 6 procedures and 10 days in South Asia, according to the World Bank.

Pakistan needs to tackle these significant challenges if it wants to attract greater FDI and achieve sustainable economic growth. This requires major reforms and investments in areas such as security, macroeconomic stability, infrastructure, human capital, and the ease of doing business. With the right policies and political will, Pakistan can follow the success of its neighbors in attracting foreign investors. However, it needs to act quickly.

# Tax collection gap stands at whopping Rs5.8tr in Pakistan

*The highest tax-evasion exists in the Sales Tax, and as per some estimates, it could go up to Rs2.9 trillion on annual basis*



By Mehtab Haider

Pakistan faces a whopping tax-evasion (tax compliance gap) of around Rs5.8 trillion annually, making 6.9 percent of GDP. The evasion on account of POL products is estimated to be Rs996 billion caused by smuggling and other means.

According to a presentation given to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), the tax-evasion (revenue gap) was estimated to be around Rs5.8 trillion on an annual basis on the basis of fiscal year data of 2022-23.

The participants were told that oil was allegedly being smuggled into Pakistan through Iran and other border areas.

The retail sector evasion has been estimated at Rs888 billion, transport sector Rs562 billion, independent power producers (IPPs) Rs498 billion, smuggled-prone items Rs355 billion, exports Rs342 billion and real estate Rs148 billion on annual basis. In the category of 'others', the evasion is estimated at Rs1.607 trillion annually.

The highest tax-evasion exists in the Sales

Tax, and as per some estimates, it could go up to Rs2.9 trillion on annual basis. The customs gap is estimated at around Rs0.6 trillion (Rs600 billion) on annual basis, including under-invoicing and smuggling.

On the other hand, the IMF has analysed in its Diagnostic Report that the policy level tax gap was not on much higher side and it could go up to maximum 12.9 percent of the GDP.

The presentation — given to the premier and SIFC — also analysed how the compliance gap surfaced between the total revenues and expenditures. The federal tax revenues stood at 9.1 percent of GDP, while the federal non-tax revenue was at 1.2 percent of GDP.

The contribution of provincial taxes to the GDP hovered around 1 percent of GDP. The total revenues stood at 11.4 percent of GDP.

On the expenditure front, the federal expenditure to the GDP stood at 12.9 percent, while the provincial expenditure to the

GDP stood at around 6.1 percent, so the total expenditure jacked up to 19 percent of the GDP. There is a gap of 7.6 percent of GDP between the total revenues and expenditures of the country. According to the presentation, tax compliance alone could plug leakages, injecting 5.8 percent of the GDP into the national kitty on annual basis.

This tax-evasion, also called fiscal gap or fiscal deficit, is financed through borrowing from the domestic and external avenues, thus, plunging the country into a debt trap, an independent economist told this reporter.

Keeping in view the grim fiscal position, the government is considering restructuring the FBR through the Federal Policy Board, separation of Tax Policy Office, joint valuations, separation of Customs and Inland Revenues, collaboration with Nadra, PRAL restructuring, digital invoicing, SWAPS, Tajir Dost Retailers Scheme, documentation law and modern governance structure and oversight boards.

Courtesy The News

# Brief note on draft special procedure for small traders and shopkeepers (Tajir Dost Scheme)



The FBR, vide SRO 420(I)/2024, dated 21st March 2024, has published draft special procedures for small traders and shopkeepers for objections or suggestions within 7 days of the publication the said draft.

The scheme is titled as “Tajir Dost Scheme, 2024” (“Scheme”) and is as follows:

The scheme shall apply to traders and shopkeepers operating in fixed place of business such as shop, store, warehouse, office or similar physical place located within the territorial civil limits including cantonments in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Quetta and Peshawar.

Further, the registration shall be effective from 1st April 2024 while payment of advance tax shall be effective from 1st July 2024. This scheme is not applicable to a company, national or international chain stores operating in more than one city or to any persons specifically specified by the FBR.

## Definitions:

### 1. Annual rental value:

- a. 10% FMV of business premises.

### 2. Business premises:

- a. Includes all business places such as store, warehouse or any other place connected to business or an office or a home operating as a business place.

### 3. Indicative income:

- a. Amount calculated on the basis of the annual rental value in accordance with the formula as may be prescribed.

### 4. Fair Market Value (“FMV”) of business premises:

- a. The amount calculated as per the valuation of immovable properties notified by the FBR.
- b. Where such valuation is not notified, then the values fixed by the District

Officer (Revenue) or Provincial or any other authority authorized to fix such values for the purpose of stamp duty.

### 5. National Business Registry:

- a. A central repository database of traders and shopkeepers which is accessed through the Tajir Dost module of the Tax Asaan App or FBR’s portal for the purpose of registration and payment of advance tax.

### 6. Person:

- a. Traders and shopkeepers falling under the scope of this scheme.

### 7. Shopkeeper:

- a. Wholesaler, dealer, retailer, manufacturer cum retailer, importer cum retailer or such person who combines the activity of retail and wholesale with any other business activity or other person in the supply chain of goods.

## Provisions of the Income Tax Ordinance, 2001 (“ITO”) applicable to this scheme:

1. Computation of income for a tax year and tax payable thereon;
2. Collection and deduction of tax;
3. Computation and payment of advance tax liability;
4. Sections 4C and 7E if liable; and
5. Minimum tax, procedure of returns, assessments, appeals, collection of taxes, advance tax, audit, administration and all schedules of the ITO.

## Registration - W.E.F. 1ST APRIL 2024:

Every trader and shopkeeper shall register through either of the modes before 30th April 2024 with the National Business Registry (Tajir Dost):

1. Under section 181 of the ITO; or
2. Through the Tax Asaan app; or
3. On FBR’s portal; or

## 4. Through FBR’s Tax Facilitation Centers.

If a person who is required to be registered and does not get registered, the provisions of section 182 of the ITO shall be applicable and the Commissioner Inland Revenue (“CIR”) is empowered to register the trader or shopkeeper on his own.

## Payment of Advance Tax- W.E.F. 1ST JULY 2024:

Every person shall be liable to pay a monthly advance tax and this amount shall be the minimum tax in respect of income from business covered under this scheme. The amount of monthly advance tax shall be computed according to the manner as may be prescribed. However, if the advance tax liability is zero, then a minimum of Rs 1,200 per annum shall be payable as advance tax. However, payment of advance tax will not apply on the income of the person who is exempt from income tax

Furthermore, the advance tax payable shall be reduced by 25% of the whole or the balance if:

1. The person pays in lump sum the whole or the balance on or before the due dates for payment; or

2. The person who has not filed income tax return, files income tax return for the Tax Year 2023 before the due date for payment of the first monthly installment.

The Advance tax shall be payable monthly from 1st July 2024 and the first payment will be due on 15th July 2024 and thereafter on the 15th of every month.

For example, if a shopkeeper registers himself on 1st April 2024, and his advance tax liability is computed at zero, then he shall be eligible to pay a minimum of Rs 1,200/- per annum, and this liability would be divided into 12, resultantly, he shall be liable to pay Rs 100/- for the month of July and it shall be due on 15th July 2024, this shall continue on for the upcoming months such as, 15th August 2024, 15th September 2024 and so forth.

A separate Computerized Payment Receipt (“CPR”) against the Payment Slip ID (“PSID”) will be generated by the Tajir Dost module/FBR’s portal/FBR’s tax facilitation centers. Further, the FBR (with the approval from the Minister in Charge) may amend the scheme from time to time to add, alter, omit or modify any provisions therein.

Courtesy Tola Associates



# Capitalizing on coal



By Ammar Habib Khan

The government has been the biggest borrower from banks over the last decade, making up more than 70 per cent of banking assets. This has effectively crowded out private sector credit, stalling overall economic growth in the process.

Banks are now effectively deposit mobilization shops to finance the government's fiscal extravagance. Since banks can generate historically high profits just by lending to the government, there is little incentive to actually lend to the private sector, do long-tailed project finance, and contribute to economic growth.

Pakistan being in the very early stages of development needs long-tailed capital to execute infrastructure and other industrial projects that can contribute to economic growth. Banks being largely focused on short-term have barely been doing any such financing, with loans having a maturity of greater than three years being less than one-fifth of total financing.

The inability to mobilize local capital has led to a situation such that major infrastruc-

ture projects are executed through external debt, which strains the foreign currency reserves and increases exposure to the depreciation of the rupee. The inability to execute projects also means heavy reliance on imported energy sources, which further drains foreign currency reserves.

The incumbent finance minister recently announced that lending would be directed towards priority sectors. A sector that should be among the top priorities is indigenous coal. Over the last year, Sindh has been able to extract coal from the Thar Coalfields. Currently, more than 15 million tons of coal are extracted from the Thar Coalfields, powering 2,400MW of power plants. As initial excavation has been done, there exists potential to considerably scale up the mines to eliminate the need for imported coal.

Through local coal power plants, Thar Coalfields can generate the cheapest electricity, with a fuel cost in the range of Rs4.4 per unit (kWh). Meanwhile, power plants operating on imported coal generate electricity at an average of Rs15 per unit

(kWh). Effectively, the fuel cost of electricity generated from Thar Coal is almost one-third of electricity generated from imported coal power plants. The same is from the latest available merit order of the National Transmission & Despatch Company.

There are currently around 4,600+ MW of power generated from imported coal, while significant coal is also imported by the cement industry. Through the conversion of power plants designed to operate on imported local coal, it will not just be possible to significantly reduce the cost of power generation, but also save the outflow of precious foreign exchange reserves. It is estimated that to completely substitute imported coal, local coal mines need to scale up to produce more than 50 million tons of coal. Through such a maneuver, it will be possible to save more than \$3 billion of foreign currency outflows, while also significantly reducing the cost of electricity – spurring industrial growth in the process.

Such a turnaround reduces electricity cost, reduces imports, and catalyzes economic

growth in the process. But the same cannot be done without access to capital. Due to an ever-increasing circular debt situation, banks already shy away from taking exposure to power and energy segments.

Financing for indigenous resources needs to be prioritized, as the economic multiplier of the same would be the highest among other sectors. Unlocking long-term capital for coal can enable coal mines to scale up, and substitute imported coals. This can enable generation of power at considerably lower rates, resulting in a decline in weighted cost of electricity. The availability of lower-cost electricity can then be redirected towards export-oriented segments to catalyze exports.

There can never be any sustainable industrial growth, and neither can there be any industrial policy without reforming the power sector and ensuring the availability of affordable electricity. Another key ingredient is availability of long-term capital. It is only after the presence of these building blocks, an industrial base can be established. Before we prioritize specific industries, it is time to prioritize capital accumulation, and power.

The government has multiple tools at its disposal to nudge the same. The same can be done through mandating lending targets for coal-oriented financing, whether conversion of power plants or scaling up of mining operations. Another tool is to have



in place a lower tax rate for revenue generated through such financing. The same tool can also be utilized for other export-oriented priority sectors as well. Before any of this can be done, the government will also have to plug its fiscal deficits as well and reduce its borrowings from banks to create the fiscal space for reallocation towards private sector lending. None of this can be done if fiscal deficits continue to increase incessantly.

There exists an argument that utilizing coal would lead to a more expansive carbon footprint. Important to note here that Pakistan has one of the lowest carbon emission rates on a per capita basis. Any incremental emissions are already being countered by a fairly carbon-neutral energy mix, which heavily relies on nuclear, and hydel power for baseload. Pakistan is in

fairly early stages of development. To achieve any semblance of sustainable growth above its population growth rate, it needs access to affordable and indigenous energy. There can never be a prosperous country without access to affordable energy.

If policymakers are serious about sustainable growth, it is time to double down on capital accumulation and allocate the same indigenous energy and export-oriented industrial growth. We can either create policies for increasing incomes across the board, or we can continue to increase the income of a rent-seeking elite, succumbing the rest of the country to misery, while moving from one bailout to another. The choice should be fairly clear at this point.

Courtesy The News



# Comment: Pakistan's new ruling troika

*The country last saw troika rule in 90s when the President had the power to remove the government and dissolve the National Assembly*

By Ansar Abbasi

After many years, Pakistan is now again under the rule of a troika - President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Asim Munir.

The country last saw troika rule in 90s when the President had the power to remove the government and dissolve the National Assembly. Such presidential powers were taken away through a constitutional amendment in late 90s, which had turned the president merely into a figurehead.

Constitutionally and legally the prime minister though became powerful, the traditional influence of Army Chief remained unaffected as has been witnessed after the end of last military rule. For some time, the office of the Chief Justice of Pakistan also emerged as a third member of the troika. However, in the post Feb 8 elections the split mandate, the strategically important number of National Assembly seats won by the Pakistan People's Party and election of Asif Ali Zardari as the head of the state have once again made the incumbent president member of the ruling troika.

President Zardari has no constitutional and legal powers to repeat what has been happening three-four decades back but because of PPP's number in the National Assembly the Presidency became really relevant to give strength or jolt the Shehbaz Sharif-led government.

At present, the ruling troika appears to be on the same page and resolves to work together to bring the country out of its present economic challenges. In the economic front, the lead role is being played by the all-powerful Special Investment Finance Council (SIFC) - which was the brainchild of incumbent Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Asim Munir.



Set-up during the last PDM government, the President Asif Ali Zardari fully supports the Shehbaz government and has shown his determination to support SIFC to meet the economic challenges of Pakistan.

In his speech on the occasion of 23rd March parade in Islamabad, the President said a democratic government was in place, following the electoral exercise and the responsibility now "rests with all of us to collectively address the challenges ahead. Our people are hardworking and intelligent. The youth, equipped with immense capabilities, are the trustees of the country's development."

The president said the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) had been established to improve the economy and expressed his confidence that under that platform, foreign investment would develop agriculture, livestock, mineral and mining, information technology and energy sectors. He called upon all political parties to rise above their political interests and work collectively for the country's security and prosperity. Understanding and working relationship between Shehbaz

Sharif and General Asim Munir have been remarkable during the PDM government. After the Feb 8 elections, Army Chief-led corps commanders conference reiterated to continue providing full support to the government in combating security threats and uplifting the socioeconomic growth in the country including wholehearted assistance in curbing all illegal activities including smuggling, hoarding, electricity theft, implementation of One Document Regime and respectable and safe repatriation of all illegal foreigners.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also leaves no opportunity to praise the Army Chief for his contribution towards the setting up of SIFC and to help the government meet economic challenges. Presently all the three players of the troika appear to be focused on delivering what the nation expects from them. Some people do say that the PPP, which is part of the treasury benches but has not joined the cabinet, is a weaker link and it may leave the government side in a few months. However, others insist that Zardari will not do it while the military establishment will also try to keep all together to get the country out of its present economic quagmire.

# Rethinking strategic assets

By Sardar Ahmad Nawaz Sukhera

The term 'strategic' is mostly used in military connotations, although its literal meaning translates into key or crucial. Oxford English Dictionary describes it as "a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim".

In Pakistan, for example, we often hear strategic being used for military assets, especially nuclear assets, and the military formation responsible for everything concerning such assets is called the Strategic Plans Division. While there is understandable pride in such strategic assets, the national leadership needs to also consider the 240 million plus Pakistanis as potentially its greatest strategic asset and formulate policies towards realizing that potential as its first and foremost priority.

Let's first examine the case of how Singapore dealt with this issue. At the time of its independence in 1965, Singapore was poverty-ridden, had divergent ethnic groups, and was facing serious regional security challenges. It had no natural resources, rainwater was its principal source of drinking water, malaria was widespread, there was hardly any industry, insurgencies and wars were happening in its neighbourhood, the population was divided into strong ethnic lines, and Britain had announced the closure of its Royal Naval Base there, which had been the main pillar of Singapore's economy and security.

So how did prime minister Lee Kuan Yew convert Singapore into Asia's wealthiest economy on per capita basis, and turn it into the de-facto commercial center of Southeast Asia, in the span of a single generation? He designed a foreign policy that kept Singapore out of regional conflicts, created domestic cohesion to permit long-term policies, and pursued economic growth to sustain the population.

While doing all this, it was his insistence on, and pursuit of, excellence that not only generated individual excellence but also formulated and implemented policies that ensured that excellence permeated the entire society, be it government service,



business, medicine, education, or anything else, while ensuring zero tolerance for corruption. Lee Kuan Yew's primary focus was on converting his biggest liability – the population – into his strategic asset, and this unrelenting pursuit of excellence of his people is what made Singapore as we know it since the 1980s.

Now let's look at the state of our society. Over 37 per cent of the population has already slid below the poverty line. The World Bank's recent publication of the Human Capital Index (HCI) places Pakistan at 141 out of the 171 countries examined. Pakistan's HCI of 0.41 is lower than the South Asian average of 0.48. Forty per cent of our children under the age of five suffer from stunted growth. This means a newborn child is expected to be only 40 per cent as productive as they could be by the age of 18 years if substantial improvements in human capital outcomes don't happen. The economic loss, accounting for stunting alone, is estimated at 5-7 per cent of the per capita income. Some recent research data from the World Bank and PIDE publications helps us understand the plight of our people.

One needs to remember that Article 25A of the constitution requires the state to provide free education to all our children between the ages of 5-16 years. Yet, 24 million of our children are out of school. The magnitude of our learning poverty can be judged from the fact that out of the 73 per cent of the children fortunate enough to be enrolled in schools, 78 per cent of 10-year-olds are unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text. We are not just behind other countries in the region but are languishing below the average for low-income countries. The effect of this can be gauged from the fact that in a recent study Pakistan was ranked 57th out of the 58 participating countries in terms of knowledge of mathematics and science.

Coming to the graduate level, one finds the unemployment rate hovering over 31 per cent (rural-43.5 per cent; urban-20.3 per cent), with 15.9 per cent for men and 50.8 per cent for women. This high unemployment rate of our graduates, especially for women, indicates not just a lack of opportunities but also serious issues with the knowledge and skills they have supposedly acquired during university education and their relevance to the job market.

On the health side, 40 per cent of our children under five are suffering from stunted growth, over 37 per cent population is now below the poverty line and possibly malnourished, the fertility rate is still at 3.3 while the regional countries have already gone below or around the replacement fertility rate, neonatal disorders still are the number one cause of deaths, and the population is growing at 2.55 per cent per annum, which is the highest rate in the region. How can we expect a healthy and productive labour force?

The World Bank has estimated that Pakistan needs to raise its spending from the current level of 2.4 per cent to 5.4 per cent of GDP to address the issue of basic education, and investment of 1.0 per cent of GDP would be required for the next 15 years to reduce child stunting levels to under 5.0 per cent and reduce fertility to replacements levels by 2035.

The constitution stipulates Pakistan to be a democratic state, where people's representatives are to be elected through adult franchise. Pakistan's demographic profile shows that 64 per cent of Pakistan's population is below the age of 30, with 29 per cent in the 15-29-year age bracket. The total number of voters in the 2024 elections was 128.58 million, with young voters in the age bracket 18-35 numbering 56.86 million – 44.22 per cent; 22.5 million new voters were registered for GE-2024.

This would mean that young voters will be a much higher proportion of total voters in the next elections. One can expect this majority group to be decisive in the formation and continuation of future governments. Their sensitivity to the current situation, and their expectations of the future, are going to force their voting behaviour. How and what their expectations will be from the governments and how they will react to public policies, given the rampant poverty, high inflation, malnutrition, and soaring unemployment, is not a difficult thing to imagine.

Not much sensitivity is required to understand how they feel on seeing roads in posh localities being carpeted over and over again, fancy underpasses being refurbished time and again, important city roads being turned into signal-free corridors, and new

motorways being built, but no bike lanes for them, or zebra-crossings and overhead bridges for the poor pedestrians to cross over safely, and beautifully kept parks in rich neighbourhoods while they don't even have basic sports facilities in their areas?

Isn't it becoming a story of two Pakistans, one for the privileged elite and another for the masses? Over 700,000, including many doctors, engineers and IT specialists who were desperately needed here, have tried to escape these domestic realities by legally migrating abroad last year. How the state is going to respond to the expectations of the youth to have better economic opportunities and more sensitive governance here is of paramount interest now.



Given the dire financial state of the economy, what should be the government's response? Is the solution to pacify the imminent anger and frustration of the youth to dole out a few ration packets in Ramazan, a few laptops, and e-bikes to a few of the students? Is it to continue providing tax exemptions and subsidies to the vested interest groups? Is it to keep doling out handouts under BISP forever, with no known measures to help the recipients graduate out of poverty? Is the state waiting for trickle-down to happen, by making the rich richer? These are just some ticklish issues that would come to any sensitive mind.

It's for the government to figure out their policies to address such issues. But the

voice of the youth needs to be immediately heard - and with empathy. Clamping down on social media and frequent slowing down of the internet, after controlling electronic and print media, rather than responding to their cries for help, is poor or no policy. The government needs to create a better stake in the system for its youth, lest they become utterly hopeless, and their frustration leads to a social upheaval.

Perhaps, all national and provincial leadership need to sit together in the CCI (Council of Common Interests) and devise a plan for improving the human development indicators of Pakistan, and announce that plan, so that ordinary people know what will be done for them over the next five

years. The government should set a target for getting Pakistan to improve its HCI ranking from 141 to under 75 by the time they finish their tenure in five years.

One way could be to evaluate all development budget proposals on the criteria of how that expenditure would lead to an improvement in the HCI rankings. Perhaps the SIFC would like to monitor this direct 'investment' in the Pakistani people too.

It may already be too late for hollow political statements. It's high time the government takes up the challenge in earnest, like Lee Kuan Yew did, to convert the Pakistani youth into its biggest strategic asset.

# What should Pakistan do?

*We have three neighbours with whom we share a significant border, our relationship with neither of them is ideal, However, in 76 years we have not been able to make democracy work, It has become a norm for the first task of any government to be to sign a new IMF package*



By Asad Umar

Let's face it. There is something seriously wrong with the way this country has been run for decades now. Consequently, the world has passed us by as we watched – from a time when Pakistan was not just the best-performing economy in South Asia but also a star in the developing world to the current situation where we are the laggards even in South Asia.

Globally and even regionally our slide into increasing irrelevance is glaring and irrefutable. We have hit a point recently where trust in the state and faith in the future of the country both seem to be at an all-time low. Surely a country of nearly a quarter of a billion people, a nuclear-armed state, endowed with substantial natural resources, can and must do better.

However, there is a saying that if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you always got. So, continuing with what we have been doing and thinking it will get us different results is simply delusional. Clearly, things need to be different.

This is the first of three articles in which I will try to cover the major decisions that Pakistan needs to take if we want to break out of the morass we have sunk into. The first article covers our relationship with the world, especially our neighbours. The second will cover our political and governance system. The final article will deal with the economy.

We have three neighbours with whom we share a significant border. Our relationship with neither of them is ideal. India is of course a special case and there are plenty of legitimate grievances that Pakistan holds in this bilateral relationship. However, despite these differences, we have come close to a breakthrough in the Indo-Pak relationship on more than one occasion in the past. So, the lesson is that it can be done.

The advantages of improving the relationship are huge for both countries. One of the biggest drivers of economic growth for any country in the world is intra-regional trade. South Asia has the lowest intra-regional trade as a percent of the regional economy. For Pakistan, the obvious advantage is the

massive Indian market with significant cultural and linguistic overlap.

India is regionally boxed in with Pakistan controlling the access to Iran, Afghanistan and through them the Central Asian states for India. Just in the field of energy, the advantages are massive. During a seminar in Delhi, I once presented what an integrated regional energy grid, both for gas and electricity, might look like and the massive advantages it would create for all the countries of the region.

The benefits of an improved India-Pakistan relationship would not just be economic. Forces in both countries that pursue extremist agendas based on hate have been strengthened by the hostile relationship between the two countries. A reduction in hostilities would strengthen forces in both countries that promote peace and social harmony. In my opinion, the benefits in both countries, based on the current state of politics in India and Pakistan, would be even greater for India – even though Pakistan would also significantly benefit.

Unless there is peace and prosperity in Afghanistan, any peace in Pakistan will continue to be fragile. Our relationship with Afghanistan has been moving between cold and hostile for most of the past three decades. This obviously needs to change. With such huge cultural, linguistic, and religious overlaps, the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship has to be one of our biggest assets. The relationship with Iran is not hostile but is a far cry from the days of the RCD (Pakistan, Iran and Turkey). Again, the common heritage means that there is so much more to build upon and strengthen this relationship. The improvement in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran creates more space for Pakistan also in this regard.

Globally, we need to have clarity on where we are going to stand in our relationship with the West led by the US and with China and Russia. We have bitter lessons from our past of the consequences of getting dragged into camp politics in a global rivalry. We have major interests aligned with both China and the US. China has been the biggest foreign investor in Pakistan in recent years, a big bilateral debt provider, an increasing source of military technology, and has stood with Pakistan in its strategic interests consistently over the years on all global platforms. So clearly this is a relationship with our 'iron brother' that should be cherished and nurtured.

However, the importance of our relationship with the US must not be underestimated. The US is the largest export market for Pakistani goods by a large margin. It is also the fourth largest source of remittances. A large number of Pakistanis go to study and work in the US, getting access to the best educational institutions and leading tech companies in the world. This is a tremendous asset for Pakistan that we could do much more to take full advantage of. Of course, Pakistan's continued reliance on global multilateral lending agencies and the critical role the US plays in these institutions cannot be ignored.

While we are not in a hostile relationship with the West, the bonds have continued to weaken, and Pakistan is worse off as a result. Almost none of the leading Western companies that have world-leading positions in the most significant sectors of

the global economy have any significant operation in Pakistan. Even worse, some of the biggest names in the corporate world who had operations in Pakistan have either left or significantly reduced their footprint in Pakistan. This is a cause for very serious concern and has been largely left unaddressed.

There are evidently some big decisions that Pakistan needs to take in its relationship with the world without which the massive challenges we face may be insurmountable.

Pakistan was the first country in the history of the world to have been created through the power of the vote. Quaid e Azam had said that "Democracy is in the blood of the Muslims, who believe in complete equality of mankind".



We can say that democracy is built into the DNA of Pakistan. Even otherwise, a country which comprises multiple ethnic and linguistic groups can only be successful if all the communities of the nation feel they are equal stakeholders. Our inability to put in place, and adhere to, a constitutional democracy based on one person-one vote, is the principal reason why events led to the creation of Bangladesh.

However, in 76 years we have not been able to make democracy work. A government elected by the free will of the people, working for the betterment of the people, and solely accountable to the people is still only a cherished goal. We have during these nearly eight decades experimented with all kinds of permutations of governance models, none of which have had sustainable success. All those who have

exercised power have some share of the blame for this failure including both politicians and the establishment. Having exercised the most influence and the longest period of direct control, the establishment should be assigned the biggest share in this failure.

Having stated that, those of us who believe democracy to be the only path forward for a successful Pakistan, must look towards the political leadership, and not the establishment, to find the way forward and turn this continuous failure into a success.

First and foremost, the political leadership needs to sit together and agree on the rules of the game. Parliamentary democracy is a competitive endeavour in which parties compete with their vision, and whoever is

elected by the people should have a right to govern. However, there has to be a consensus on how this competition will be carried out. What is acceptable conduct and what is not. No such consensus exists.

Politicians have demonstrated that everything, including violating the constitution, is acceptable if it helps defeat the opponent. All political parties have colluded with the establishment at some point of time. As one of the ministers in the previous PDM government said "This is no longer politics, this is enmity". He was castigated for making this statement but he was not far from the truth in describing the state of politics. The biggest stumbling block in the creation of such a consensus is the issue of how accountability will be carried out, particularly of politicians.

The Charter of Democracy was an attempt in the right direction. However, the conduct of the political leadership of the two main parties at that time made it seem to the people of Pakistan that the charter was simply signed to allow both sides to hide their corruption. For any grand reconciliation to succeed in the eyes of the people of Pakistan, it will have to pass the test of not being perceived as what has now commonly been referred to as an NRO.

The second important step that has to be taken for creating a framework of democracy on which an agreement can be reached is an empowered local government system. Such a system not only devolves power to the grassroots where local issues are best addressed but also creates tens of thousands of direct stakeholders in the democratic system.

institution that it must be, it has to be a place where policy debate, and to the extent possible, creation of consensus takes place on all the big challenges facing the nation. The strengthening and protection of real democracy will be done through strong institutions, and not individual leaders or political parties. Parliament is the mother of all democratic institutions and needs to be treated as such in the real sense of the word.

The extreme polarization of politics and the consequent inability to create political consensus in parliament has also had the unfortunate impact of dragging the judiciary into the political battle. Issues that should be settled in parliament routinely end up in the courts and the result is not just judicialization of politics but also in the judiciary looking seemingly divided on partisan lines.

unelected interfering in the democratic process, will continue and will fail the nation again and again. The sooner the political leadership understands this, the sooner Pakistan can start moving in the direction that the people of Pakistan want – and deserve.

Yet another finance minister walks into Q Block, facing the challenge of finalizing an IMF bailout package as his priority. When power was handed over to Benazir Bhutto after the 1988 elections, ending 11 years of martial law, one of the preconditions for the transfer of power was for her to sign off on an already negotiated IMF package. She was sworn in as PM on December 2, 1988 and just 26 days later two agreements were signed with the IMF. Since then, it has become a norm for the first task of any government to be to sign a new IMF package.

However, this economic malaise was not always the reality of Pakistan. Starting its life as an agrarian society with virtually no industry and very low literacy levels, Pakistan was in a worse economic condition than India. Despite this disadvantaged beginning, over half a century Pakistan outperformed India. In 1997 Pakistani per capita income (purchasing power parity data. Source: IMF) was 19 per cent higher than India's. Similarly, the gap between Pakistan and Bangladesh had increased after the 1971 separation, and by 1997 Pakistani per capita income was double that of Bangladesh.

Since then, the story has been very different. Our GDP growth which on a five-year rolling average basis was close to 6.0 per cent at the end of the 1980s had declined to below 3.5 per cent by 2020. That is a dramatic difference and a look at South Asia over the last 25 years shows the result. From a per capita income which was 19 per cent higher than India in 1997, we reached 2022 with a per capita income 20 per cent lower than India. The difference between Bangladesh is even more dramatic. Bangladesh has gone from having a per capita income half of Pakistan in 1997 to 19 per cent higher than Pakistan in 2022.

So what went wrong? The answer in my opinion lies in politics more than economic policy. From 1958 to 1988, the highest



In the context of creating a democratic structure which has something in it for all political parties and not just a do-or-die, winner-takes-all situation, empowered local governments are a vital step. For this purpose, there needs to be a constitutional amendment that binds the provincial governments to hold local government elections within the specified timelines. In addition there needs to be a better defined financial and administrative empowerment built into the constitution itself.

The third critical element that needs to be strengthened is the role of parliament itself. Parliament is treated as a rubber stamp by the parliamentary majority to carry out what the government wants to achieve.

For parliament to be the powerful

Such extreme polarization has put strains even on the US democratic system. One of the key issues under discussion in the US is that democracy is under threat. Already the extreme political divide which has recently developed in American politics has resulted in a gridlock, undermining the effective working of democratic institutions and ability to resolve national issues. If polarization can have this impact in a 250-year-old democracy like the US, with strong institutions, there is no chance for the success of Pakistani democracy in such a frenzied state of polarization.

I know most readers will say that such a political consensus is not possible in the fractious world of Pakistani politics. If that be the case, half-baked democracy with the

growth period in Pakistan's economy, it was clear who was in control, and no uncertainty in the minds of the decision-makers that they were here to stay. Most of this period was under military rule. However, even in the five years of civilian rule, it was clearly the elected government that was in control and seemingly facing no threat of an intervention in the democratic process until after the 1977 elections. So, regardless of who was in power, there was a belief in continuity and decisions taken not just for today but also for the long term.

Starting in 1988, a new era of governance started which can be called the Pakistani hybrid model. In the first 11 years, Article 58(2)(b) of the constitution was used to dissolve the National Assembly. With this sword hanging over their heads, no government had any sense of continuity and soon after forming the government intrigues started and the government was focused on survival.

After the interregnum of the Pervez Musharraf era, a new kind of hybrid system came into being with pretty similar results. Now the National Assembly was not being dissolved but prime ministers kept losing their jobs before the end of their term, with not a single one completing their term. Once again, the incumbents facing the challenge of survival mostly focused on short-term policy measures and firefighting.

Economic policy became a game of finalizing an IMF programme and trying to complete the programme while minimizing the political cost of implementing it. With the deep structural problems facing the Pakistani economy, most of the measures included in the IMF programme like increasing revenue, curtailing nonproductive expenditure, reducing government stranglehold on the economy, stopping the bleeding of SOEs etc need to be taken. However, these will only provide you macroeconomic stability, at best, and lay the foundation on which an economic growth strategy can be built. On their own, these measures will not put Pakistan on the path of sustained growth.

So in addition to negotiating an economically sensible IMF programme and implementing it, what else does the government need to do? We need a clear comprehensive growth strategy based on decisions made

for long-term success and not just short-term survival. Data shows that countries that have higher know-how in their economy produce more complex higher value-added products and services and consequently have higher incomes.

Mapping Pakistan's product map on the complexity chart shows that most of our products are in a narrow cluster of complexity. What's worse is that it has barely changed over the last 25 years. Because Pakistan only produces a few low-value-added products, its exports have stagnated and export growth lags far behind other regional countries. Between 2000 and



2020 Bangladesh's exports grew twice as fast, India's three times faster, China's four times and Vietnam's and Rwanda's more than six times faster than us. The path to higher economic complexity and greater value added is not traveled by an economy without a strategy that focuses resources and nudges the economy on an ever-increasing value addition path.

Without getting into technical details, there are well-established methods of selecting which industries have the highest potential for success given the current state of the economy. In the case of Pakistan, the criteria would include: the ability to attract FDI for transfer of knowhow, high export propensity, hence the selected sector must produce tradable goods or services, high labour intensity to absorb the large youth labour force we have and low energy intensity as we are an energy deficit country and energy is our biggest import.

An excellent example of our low value-added production profile being a drag on our export potential can be seen in our exports to China. If we had the same share of Chinese imports from non-OECD countries as our GDP share of these countries, our exports to China would be more than \$7 billion a year instead of just over \$2 billion (data is a couple of years old). Given the relationship between Pakistan and China, our exports should be much higher than our share of non-OECD GDP.

So, is it China's fault? No. It is because we are not producing what China, or most of

the world, needs. There is virtually no overlap between the top 100 exports from Pakistan to China and China's top 100 imports from non-OECD countries comparison done only with non-OECD countries as the OECD countries produce advanced products that cannot be produced in a country like Pakistan).

The big question is: will this government be able to look beyond firefighting and being in survival mode, and make decisions needed for the long-term which help bring Pakistan out of the debt trap we are in? Lacking the credibility of being a fairly elected government and speculation rife about how long the government will last, the challenge seems daunting. The bottom line: no political stability, no sustainable development.

Courtesy The News

# Manja at Aitchison or in Besham?



By M A Niazi

I see that people have started dying from having their throats cut by kite string. These are kids on the pillions of motorbikes, and the string has been coated with crushed glass. To be fair to the kite-flier, and the maker of the special string, their intention is not to cut the throats of young kids, but to cut the strings of other kites. But the kid is still dead.

Of course, if one were to go with what the late President Pervez Musharraf said, that Basant earned foreign exchange (from all those Indian visitors), would one mind these children dying? It's interesting, but he was President when kite-flying was banned. The fact that kids still die shows that fanatics are still at it.

Still, I couldn't help wondering. Why would anyone fly a kite? Kite flying is a competitive sport, which means that others have to be flying kites so that one sends up one's own with the intention of cutting their strings. If you do, you are a public benefactor, because the cut kite will be looted by some urchin, the one who chased after it longest and hardest. You have also benefited the city's orthopaedic surgeons, because some of the urchins who tried, didn't give up the chase because they decided to let the better man win, but because they stumbled, or maybe misjudged a jump, fell, and broke one or more bones.

There may be a small minority who just send up a kite because they enjoy flying it. But why do they get twine with Manja on it? Are they on the lookout for other kites? Manja has become a sort of deterrent as well. But the end result is that some kid gets his throat cut. It's not the winning kite that kills, but the losing, almost as if it's proverbially kicking a stone on the road.

It seems that these days you could get kites as well as string online. Why don't they come up with a programme that lets them fly kites online. In fact, why don't you get kites flown in what is probably going to be the next big thing after AI-VR, or virtual reality. Virtual reality will let the kite flyers to slit as many throats as they want in VR, without anyone getting hurt in the real world.

Nobody was flying any kites at Besham, which was where some terrorists attacked a convoy of Chinese engineers working on the Dasso hydroelectric project. I know the knee-jerk reaction is to blame India for everything, but in this case, it would certainly benefit.

Motive, however, alone is insufficient proof of guilt. However, the motive has to be proven. If someone can show (which is highly unlikely), that he has a good reason to be in a room full of valuables in the dead of the night, he'll get off. The prosecution wouldn't find it very hard, but it would have to prove that he was there to steal the valuables. Of course, much of the prosecution's case would go up in smoke if the defence could show there were no valuables in the room. But if the prosecution could prove that it was well-known the room had valuables, motive would be shown.

Of course, the accused would have to be there illegally. If he was snoring in bed at home, he couldn't very well be convicted of attempted theft, or breaking and entering. So while India has the motive, that isn't proof enough. Our government is going very carefully about this, because accusing India will mean accusing the USA, which I don't think our government wants to do.

Does all this mean that the TTP and the Baloch nationalists are 'tight' with the Americans? Possible, but that would mean that the Left and the Right are on the same side.

Meanwhile, Aitchison College's Principal has resigned, because of Governor Balighur Rehman's interference and Ahad Cheema's son's fee. The Principal was on his way out, everyone says, but so was the Governor, who is to be replaced by a PPP nominee after the Senate elections on Tuesday.

Reminds me of 1993, when the solution of the Nawaz-Ishaq tussle was both resigning. Nawaz dissolved the National Assembly, and Ishaq went on leave till the end of his term. And the rest, as they say, is history. Well, history is being made at Aitchison too.

# Globally one billion meals are wasted daily: UN Study

*The United States, China, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Germany, France, and Australia are on top of the list of countries that are wasting more food than others*



By Javed Mahmood

A recent study by the United Nations revealed that households worldwide discarded an astonishing one billion meals daily in 2022. Published as the Food Waste Index Report, this study highlighted that both households and businesses collectively wasted over one trillion dollars' worth of food, while over 780 million people faced hunger. The report tracks global efforts to halve food waste by 2030.

In 2022, more than one billion tonnes of food, nearly one-fifth of all available produce, were squandered, predominantly by households. Inger Andersen, the executive director of the UN Environment Programme, emphasized the global tragedy of food waste, stressing its moral and environmental repercussions.

The report underscored that food loss and waste contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, ranking third globally after China and the United States. The collaboration between the UN and the non-profit organization WRAP produced the most comprehensive overview of global food waste to date.

The figure of "one billion meals" wasted daily was deemed a conservative estimate, with potential actual waste likely surpassing this amount. Richard Swannell from WRAP expressed astonishment at the scale of waste, suggesting that the surplus food discarded annually could feed the entire population suffering from hunger worldwide.

While efforts to minimize waste have seen progress through collaboration between producers and retailers, more action is imperative. In 2022, food services and retailers contributed significantly to food waste, but households were the largest culprits, responsible for 60% of wasted food.

Factors contributing to household waste included over-purchasing, misjudged portion sizes, and disregarded leftovers. Additionally, misconceptions surrounding expiration dates led to the disposal of perfectly edible food.

Kalyani Raghunathan, a research fellow, emphasized the disparity between global food production and

distribution, with wastage concentrated in higher-income countries and food loss prevalent in lower-income countries.

The report highlighted the detrimental impact of food waste on both people and the planet, citing its contribution to habitat loss and climate change. Swannell emphasized the urgent need to address food waste across the supply chain to mitigate its environmental and social consequences.

## Which countries are wasting more food than others?

Determining which countries waste more food than others involves various factors such as consumption patterns, food distribution systems, infrastructure, cultural practices, and economic development. While precise data may vary over time and across different sources, several countries are often highlighted for their relatively high levels of food wastage. These countries include:

**United States:** The United States is frequently cited as one of the largest contributors to food waste globally due to its large population, extensive food distribution networks, and consumer habits. Studies estimate that around 30-40% of the food supply in the U.S. is wasted annually.

**European Union:** European countries collectively waste a significant amount of food, with estimates suggesting that around 88 million tonnes of food are wasted annually in the European Union. Countries like Germany, France, and the United Kingdom are among the top food-wasting nations in Europe.

**Australia:** Australia is reported to waste a substantial amount of food each year, with studies indicating that Australians discard around 7.3 million tonnes of food annually. Factors contributing to food waste in Australia include consumer behavior, retail practices, and agricultural standards.

**Canada:** Canada is another country where food waste is a significant issue, with studies suggesting that Canadians waste approximately 35.5 million tonnes of food annually. Factors such as consumer preferences, retail practices, and supply chain inefficiencies contribute to food wastage in Canada.

**Japan:** Japan has high levels of food wastage despite efforts to reduce it in recent years. Cultural factors such as aesthetic standards for produce, retail practices, and food packaging contribute to food waste in Japan. Estimates suggest that around 6-8 million tonnes of food are discarded annually in Japan.

**China:** China's rapid economic growth and changing consumption patterns have led to increasing levels of food waste in recent years. While precise data is challenging to obtain due to limited transparency, China is believed to waste a significant amount of food annually.

It's important to note that food waste is a complex issue influenced by various factors, and efforts to address it require a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, businesses, civil society organizations, and consumers. Additionally, food wastage occurs in varying proportions across different sectors, including

households, restaurants, supermarkets, and the agricultural supply chain. Therefore, interventions to reduce food waste need to target multiple levels of the food system to be effective.

## How to avoid food wastage?

To address food wastage globally, a multi-faceted approach involving individuals, communities, businesses, and governments is necessary. Here are several strategies to reduce food waste on a global scale:

**Raise Awareness:** Increasing public awareness about the issue of food waste and its consequences through educational campaigns, media coverage, and school curriculums can encourage behavioral change.



**Improve Food Distribution:** Enhance infrastructure and logistics to ensure efficient distribution of food from surplus regions to areas of need. This includes investing in transportation, storage facilities, and technology for better inventory management.

**Support Smallholder Farmers:** Provide support and resources to smallholder farmers to improve their agricultural practices, reduce post-harvest losses, and increase yields. This can involve access to better seeds, training in sustainable farming techniques, and assistance with storage and preservation methods.

**Implement Food Recovery Programs:** Establish programs to rescue surplus food from farms, supermarkets, restaurants, and other sources that would otherwise be wasted. This food can be redistributed to food banks, shelters, and community organizations to feed those in need.

**Standardize Date Labels:** Implement clear and consistent date labeling regulations to reduce confusion among consumers and prevent premature discarding of edible food based on arbitrary expiration dates.

**Encourage Sustainable Consumption:** Promote responsible consumption habits such as planning meals, making grocery lists, buying only what is needed, and utilizing leftovers creatively. Encourage portion control in restaurants and food services to minimize plate waste.

**Invest in Food Waste Reduction Technologies:** Support research and development of innovative technologies for food preservation, processing, and packaging to extend shelf life and minimize spoilage.

**Policy Interventions:** Enact policies and regulations at the local, national, and international levels to incentivize food waste reduction and discourage wasteful practices. This may include tax incentives for food donations, landfill bans on organic waste, and subsidies for composting and anaerobic digestion facilities.

**Promote Circular Economy:** Encourage the adoption of circular economy principles in

the food system, where resources are used efficiently, waste is minimized, and by-products are repurposed or recycled.

**Collaborative Efforts:** Foster partnerships and collaborations between governments, businesses, NGOs, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies, share best practices, and coordinate efforts to tackle food waste holistically.

By implementing these strategies collectively and collaboratively, it is possible to significantly reduce food wastage globally and create a more sustainable and equitable food system.

## Strategies to utilize surplus food globally

Utilizing surplus food globally involves implementing strategies to redirect excess food from being wasted to where it can be consumed. Here are several approaches to effectively utilize surplus food:

**Food Redistribution Programs:** Establish partnerships between food businesses, charities, and community organizations to collect surplus food and distribute it to those in need. This can include food banks, shelters, soup kitchens, and community centers.

**Food Recovery Networks:** Develop networks of food recovery organizations and volunteers to rescue surplus food from

farms, markets, restaurants, and food manufacturers. This food can then be redistributed to vulnerable populations or used for food preparation programs.

**Community Refrigerators and Food Sharing Platforms:** Install community refrigerators in public spaces where individuals and businesses can donate surplus food for others to take freely. Similarly, develop online platforms or apps that connect individuals and businesses with surplus food to those who can use it.

**Food Preservation and Processing:** Invest in technologies and infrastructure for preserving and processing surplus food to extend its shelf life and make it suitable for distribution. This can include freezing, canning, drying, and pickling techniques.

**Animal Feed and Composting:** Redirect surplus food that is not fit for human consumption to animal feed or composting facilities. Food scraps can be processed into animal feed for livestock or composted to produce nutrient-rich soil for agriculture.

**Surplus Food Redistribution Policies:** Implement policies and regulations that encourage or require food businesses to donate surplus food rather than sending it to landfill. This can include tax incentives, liability protection, and streamlined donation processes.

**Educational Programs:** Raise awareness and provide training on food waste reduc-

tion and surplus food utilization among businesses, consumers, and food industry stakeholders. Educate individuals and organizations on proper food handling, storage, and donation practices.

**Food Waste Reduction Targets:** Set targets and benchmarks for reducing food waste at the national, regional, and corporate levels. Monitor progress regularly and incentivize businesses to meet or exceed these targets through recognition, awards, and financial incentives.

**Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between government agencies, businesses, NGOs, academic institutions, and community groups to develop coordinated strategies for surplus food utilization. Share resources, expertise, and best practices to maximize impact and efficiency.

**International Cooperation:** Promote global cooperation and knowledge-sharing on surplus food management through international organizations, conferences, and partnerships. Address systemic issues such as food distribution inequalities and supply chain inefficiencies on a global scale.

By implementing these strategies and fostering collaboration across sectors and borders, surplus food can be effectively redirected to where it is needed most, contributing to food security, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability on a global scale.



# How to fight fake news

*The stories must stay relevant and must appear on people's timelines to help them separate truth from fiction*



By Aimen Siddiqui

A couple of years ago, a clip from an Indian soap went viral on social media. The clip shows the 'ideal' Indian bahu washing her husband's laptop (literally) with a detergent, rinsing it thoroughly and then hanging it on the clothes string.

As she ticks off one task from her to-do list, her husband looks on in shock, paralyzed by the indescribable idiocy on display. What happens next is irrelevant, but the husband's reaction is exactly how I feel when I see our government and experts dealing with all things tech-related.

The new buzzword in town is 'fake news', but surprisingly those who have taken it upon themselves to do something about it are unable to understand the ever-evolving world of the internet. Experienced journalists have one thing in common: their surprise upon learning that most young people do not refer to multiple sources to verify the information they come across on social media apps, TikTok or Facebook.

This is not surprising; according to a 2022 study, almost 40 per cent of Gen

Zs use apps like TikTok and Instagram for search. The question of going to other apps is not relevant to them. The reason why this behaviour seems odd to most of us is because of our relationship with the internet.

Gen Z is the first generation to have been born into a near-complete digitized world where the internet is part of their lives. But for us, Millennials and previous generations, the internet was an add-on. I can recall the classes we had in school where the textbook would have small boxes with warning signs, encouraging young students to refrain from giving away private information on the internet – and we have now reached a position where the little device in our hands can tell the best places to eat near our locality, a major leap!

Gen Z has also been born in a world where media institutions have faced several attacks on their credibility, deliberately orchestrated by populist leaders who see any criticism as a threat to their survival. In the early 2000s, during my school years, Pakistan was in the grips of suicide

attacks. Every morning, my classmates and I would check the number of dead before coming to school. In case there were discrepancies, we would go with the number quoted by a well-known Urdu newspaper. Such was the credibility the institutions enjoyed.

Over the years, the prestige of these institutions was replaced by the brand of journalists. With the advent of social media, people get direct access to journalists. Scoops posted on apps go more viral than the actual published reports. While this seems harmless, the exercise abandons the layers of checks media institutions have in place to ensure the authenticity, transparency, and credibility of reports.

Truth be told, my credibility as a journalist is heavily influenced by the media organization I am associated with. When I file a report, there are three parties involved to ensure the authenticity of the report – me, my editors, and the newspaper. Any misreporting would be a big crisis for all the parties involved. Such checks also allow established institutions to rely on anonymous sources. The editor would

know who the source is and the on-the-record conversation I have had with them.

It takes years for a journalist to make a name separate from the institution. In Pakistan, while several journalists do not require any institutional tags, some early-career journalists pivoted to social media platforms to further their careers. While there is no harm in that, journalism is not a one-man/woman show.

There are multiple independent institutions around the world – DemocracyNow! in the US, for example, has produced powerful reporting. And while these institutions have one name behind them (Amy Goodman in the case of DN!), there is still an entire system in place to ensure credible reporting.

Social media users are not concerned about any of that. They see information on these apps as unfiltered and uncensored. When they read something on the internet, they readily believe it.

Banning social media apps – looking at you, Pakistan – is not the answer. In fact, establishing small fake news-buster accounts is also a futile exercise. Social media users are not going to come to a certain page to verify the information – the information has to reach them.

Previously, social media apps relied heavily on their users' consumption patterns.



People would log into the app at their convenience, interact with people they were friends with/or followed, and leave at their convenience. This partly changed when tech giants introduced mobile versions of their apps, allowing people to stay logged in round-the-clock and sending regular notifications to push users to check the apps.

But there used to be a point – Millennials can relate to this – when the mindless scrolling would have an end; the app would tell that the feed had no new updates. All of this changed largely by TikTok's For You page which brought content from all users on the app to a person's timeline.

There is now a popular meme on the internet about the frustration people feel when their timeline auto-refreshes and they lose the post they were looking at. The fact

that they lost the post is a win for social media apps that do not want the content on the app to be finite.

In a digitized world where apps are largely reaching out to users, those interested in doing something about fake news or changing the narrative have to employ the same strategies to reach out to users. Relatable content that speaks to users is key to building people's trust.

The answer to fake news is a flood of genuine, verified news posts and less use of click-bait fluff. The stories must stay relevant and must appear on people's timelines to help them separate truth from fiction. Anything less than this is a tech suicide.

Courtesy The News

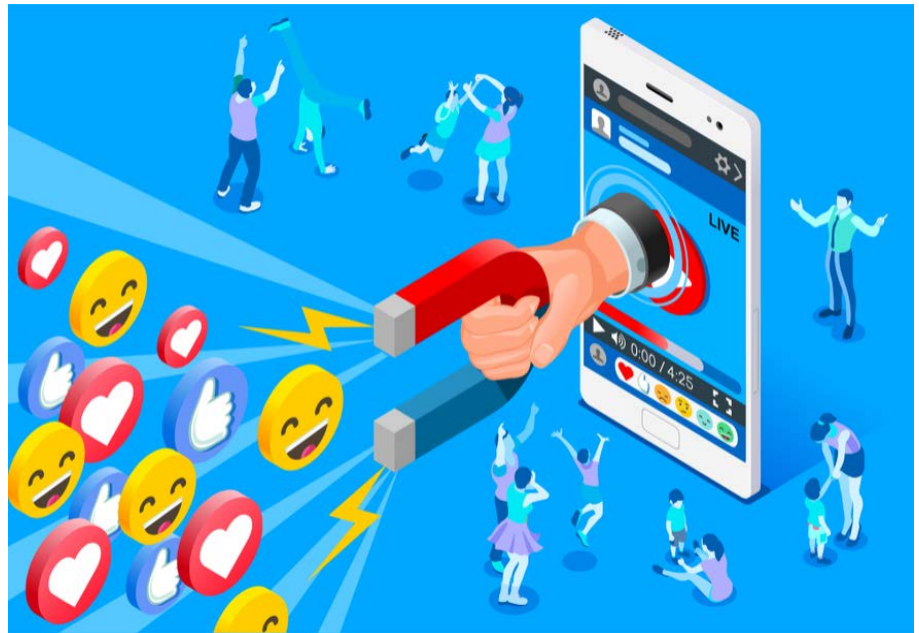


# Power of Social Media

By Ayesha Shaeban

As we all know social media refers to a group of internet-based applications that allow users to create and share content or participate in social networking. These platforms enable people to interact, communicate, and build relationships with others from various parts of the world. Examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. These tools have revolutionized the way we connect, share information, and express themselves, playing a significant role in modern society and culture. Like any other technology, social media has both advantages and disadvantages. It all depends on us, how we use it. Social media has become an integral part of our lives due to so many reasons. People are utilizing social media to generate income through methods such as building a paid membership, working with brands for revenue-generating partnerships, and generating revenue directly from their audience.

Social media has significantly impacted the recruitment and hiring landscape, with professional networks like LinkedIn playing a crucial role. These platforms serve as essential social media avenues for individuals seeking to establish a strong presence in their respective professions. They provide users with the opportunity to create and promote their personal brand, thereby enhancing their professional visibility and attracting potential employers or collaborators. As a relatively newer technology, social media's long-term impacts, both positive and negative, are still being evaluated. While it offers numerous benefits such as connectivity, information sharing, and networking opportunities, there are concerns regarding its potential adverse effects. Numerous researchers have also identified a strong association between heavy social media usage and increased risks of depression, self-harm, anxiety, and loneliness. This highlights the need for responsible use and ongoing assessment of social media's influence on our mental well-being. Let's begin by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of social media;



## Advantages of Social Media:

### • Education

The integration of social media in education is indeed commendable, as it opens up avenues for learners and educators to participate in global collaborative platforms. These platforms encourage constructive learning experiences, fostering skill improvement by nurturing knowledge and creativity. By embracing social media in education, we can enhance the overall learning process and promote a more inclusive, interactive, and innovative educational environment.

### • Awareness

Social media has significantly heightened public awareness and consciousness by providing a platform for information dissemination. This access to diverse knowledge and resources fosters innovation, success, and personal growth. By offering comprehensive coverage of global events, social media keeps individuals informed and connected to their surroundings, ultimately broadening their perspectives and fostering a more globally-minded society.

### • Mental Health

Social media platforms can indeed function as valuable stress relievers by offering support to individuals facing challenges such as stress, depression, and loneliness. Through various groups and communities, users can find solace, empathy, and understanding. These online spaces often foster a sense of euphoria and positivity, which can contribute to an improved mental outlook. By nurturing healthy connections and relationships within these supportive environments, social media can play a crucial role in enhancing mental health and well-being.

### • Share Anything With Others

Social media serves as an exceptional platform for expressing emotions, sharing opinions, and disseminating information in real-time. It allows users to connect and engage with others instantly, fostering an environment where thoughts and experiences can be freely exchanged, promoting open communication and global interaction.

### • Connectivity

It possesses the ability to foster connectivity on a massive scale. Users can

interact with one another seamlessly, irrespective of their geographical locations. This global connectedness enables the rapid dissemination of information across borders, thereby strengthening international relationships and promoting a more interconnected world. Social media serves as a powerful platform for fostering communication and understanding among diverse communities.

- **Brand Awareness**

Networking platforms significantly enhance brand recognition by showcasing visually appealing products and information. This captivating content not only boosts a brand's visibility but also increases customer awareness about specific goods and services. By effectively leveraging these platforms, businesses can effectively communicate their offerings and foster stronger connections with their target audience.

- **Promotion**

Social media plays a pivotal role in boosting internet commerce and marketing efforts. Through engaging posts and targeted promotions, businesses can foster meaningful connections with users, ultimately enhancing their profitability. By nurturing user relationships and promoting customer loyalty, social media significantly contributes to a company's growth and expansion. This platform serves as an essential tool for businesses to thrive in the digital landscape.

- **Information and Updates**

Social media serves as a powerful platform for staying updated on global events and personal experiences, transcending the limitations of traditional media like television, radio, or newspapers. Unlike these conventional sources, social media enables users to share accurate, real-time information and depict authentic scenarios. This unique feature allows for the widespread dissemination of genuine, real-world news, fostering a more connected and informed global community.

- **Noble Cause**

Social media serves as an exceptional platform for promoting noble deeds and endorsing valuable causes. By sharing information about initiatives such as

donating to cancer patients in need of financial support for treatment, individuals can raise awareness and inspire others to contribute. This powerful medium allows users to effortlessly support worthy causes and make a positive impact on society.

## Disadvantages of Social Media:

- **Lack of Privacy**

Social media users often encounter risks such as stalking, identity theft, inappropriate comments, and misuse of data. Many times, users unknowingly contribute to these issues by posting sensitive information publicly. This confusion stems from a lack of clarity regarding the distinction between private and public aspects of an online presence.



- **Fear of Missing Out**

Prolonged usage of social media can lead to addiction, as you constantly seek updates on others' activities to avoid the fear of missing out (FOMO). This fear often stems from the perception that others are enjoying better lives or having more fun than you, causing you to compulsively check notifications in hopes of alleviating such feelings. It's also causing distress to someone's feelings as individuals who rely on social media for communication may exhibit reduced empathy, they can often disregard the emotional impact of their words. This insensitivity is evident in the prevalence of online trolls, negative comments, and critical feedback. The detached environ-

ment of social media seems to foster a heartlessness that has unfortunately become more common.

- **Present Physically Not Mentally**

Sharing experiences and being fully engaged in the present moment is essential when spending time with loved ones. Encourage meaningful conversations about past, current, and future events. However, the prevalence of social media on mobile devices can lead to people interacting with one another by merely scrolling through posts instead of genuinely connecting. It has led to numerous strained relationships among families, as they struggle to engage in meaningful bonding experiences. The prioritization of individual interests and privacy, driven by the content shared on social platforms, has negatively impacted the quality of family time.

- **Hacking**

The exposure of social media has highlighted the simplicity of collecting personal information. It is crucial to regularly update privacy settings and secure profiles to prevent such occurrences. According to various cybersecurity reports and statistics, it is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands to millions of hacking attempts and incidents daily. These include various levels of severity, from minor website defacements to major data breaches.

- **Addiction**

Youth social media addiction has emerged as a significant concern, resulting in

detrimental outcomes. Balanced usage of social media platforms and smartphones is not problematic; however, excessive engagement leads to the squandering of valuable time and potential for productivity. It's addiction can be dangerous for us. Excessive social media usage may lead to adverse impacts on one's mental health, personal connections, efficiency, and general well-being. To uphold a wholesome lifestyle, it is crucial to strike an appropriate equilibrium between online activities and genuine, face-to-face interactions and experiences.

#### • Cyberbullying

Children and individuals, in general, have fallen prey to the detrimental effects of cyberbullying. This digital menace involves threats, deceptions, and other malicious acts that easily trap unsuspecting victims. The rapid dissemination of false news and rumors contributes to mental health issues such as depression and, in severe cases, suicide. It often involves criminal activities like harassment, defamation, and invasion of privacy also may lead to legal consequences for the perpetrators and can be challenging for law enforcement to handle due to the anonymous nature of online platforms.

#### • Defamation

The act of harming someone's reputation by making false statements or spreading damaging information about them. It can occur in two forms: libel and slander. Libel refers to defamatory statements made in written or visual form, such as in print media, online posts, or broadcasts. Slander, on the other hand, involves spoken defamation.

## Main impact of social media on society

Social media as we know it has barely reached its 20th birthday, but it has changed the fabric of everyday life. It has significantly transformed our daily experiences. It has reshaped how we perceive our environment. Once unthinkable, social platforms have emerged as crucial avenues for businesses to connect with prospective clients. To ensure a balanced lifestyle, it's essential to use social media responsibly

and be mindful of its potential impacts. Within just over ten years, social media's influence has evolved from a mere source of amusement to a deeply ingrained element in numerous facets of daily routines for numerous individuals. As rapidly as social media has permeated various aspects of life, including politics, work environments, and personal spheres, its constant evolution at an astonishing pace makes it challenging to foresee its future transformations. Social media should not be considered a utility; it's not like electricity or water, where the primary concern is functionality. Instead, young individuals focus on the perception that using one platform or another has on their identity. Certainly, numerous individuals are recognizing that the most significant concern regarding social media's influence might be its effect on our society. The "attention-grabbing algorithms within social media platforms" contribute to the promotion of authoritarian practices, which are designed to create confusion, ignorance, prejudice, and chaos. Consequently, these practices enable manipulation and hinder responsibility and accountability.

## Role of Digital Activism

As a valuable educational tool, social media has emerged as a platform for digital activism, addressing various social justice concerns. Movement like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have gained widespread momentum due to social media's immense influence. A single hashtag can ignite significant change, such as the enactment of anti-sexual harassment laws following #MeToo or the push for criminal justice reform driven by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Social media has uniquely empowered individuals with shared beliefs to unite and advocate for specific causes in ways previously unimaginable. The influence of these platforms cannot be understated, as they have contributed immensely to the national focus on movements like #MeToo and BLM.

Social media serves as a powerful tool for equal communication and an extensive, unfiltered content source. Despite the challenges faced by the generation growing up with these platforms, marketers still find social media crucial for reaching their target audience. Regardless of whether one

believes social media has more advantages or disadvantages, it is undeniable that it has significantly transformed global communication. Through every like, comment, share, and view, we learn more about social media's influence on our thoughts and perspectives. However, until we discover ways to hold social media platforms more responsible for the worldwide impact of their use, it is up to marketers to utilize these digital resources as vehicles for positive messaging. We may not control the negative aspects of the internet, but we can contribute by promoting beneficial content and ensuring that social media continues to be a force for social progress.

## Harnessing the Power of Online and Digital Work

People are utilizing social media to earn money through various approaches, including establishing paid memberships, blogging, content creation, collaborating with brands for income-generating collaborations, and directly monetizing their audience and much more. It offers diverse job prospects in numerous specializations, assists employers in recruiting through social platforms, and enables users to capitalize on their accounts by employing different revenue-generating tactics. We all know the power of online and digital work by adopting new technologies, tools, and practices enable us to work more efficiently, collaborate effectively, and adapt to the evolving work landscape. Some of the online work include:

1. **Remote work:** With advancements in technology and communication tools, we can work from anywhere in the world, making it possible for companies to tap into global talent pools.
2. **Collaboration platforms:** Online platforms like Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom enable teams to collaborate and communicate effectively, even when working remotely.
3. **Cloud-based services:** Cloud computing allows teams to access shared documents, files, and applications from anywhere, making it easier to work together on projects.
4. **Online learning and training:** Digital

platforms offer numerous opportunities for us to learn new skills, attend webinars, and access e-learning resources, helping them stay updated and productive.

5. **Virtual meetings and events:** Digital tools have made it possible to conduct meetings, conferences, and even job interviews virtually, saving time and resources while maintaining productivity.
6. **Freelancing:** Online platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer have made it easier for people to work as independent contractors, offering flexibility and diverse opportunities for professionals across various industries.
7. **Social media marketing and advertising:** Businesses are leveraging social media platforms to reach a wider audience, engage with customers, and promote their products or services.
8. **Data analytics and automation:** Digital tools help companies analyze data, automate processes, and improve efficiency, allowing them to make informed decisions and save time.
9. **Cybersecurity measures:** With increased online activity, we are becoming more aware of the importance of cybersecurity, implementing measures to protect sensitive information.

## Understanding Online Work and Scam:

In today's digital age, the concept of online work has gained immense popularity,

providing numerous opportunities for individuals to earn an income from the comfort of their homes. However, with the rise of online work, there has also been a surge in online scams. It is crucial to recognize the difference between legitimate online work and scams to protect oneself from potential financial and personal harm. It refers to tasks and jobs performed over the internet, such as freelancing, remote work, or online business management. These jobs can range from data entry, content writing, web development, graphic design, social media management, and more. On the other hand, online scams are fraudulent activities designed to deceive individuals into providing personal or financial information, or to partake in schemes that promise unrealistic returns.

### • Common Types of Online Scams and How to Identify

Investment scams are fraudulent activities that involve deceiving individuals or entities into investing their money in non-existent or high-risk ventures. The perpetrators aim to mislead investors by providing false information about the potential returns, safety, and legitimacy of the investment.

Advance Fee Fraud: Scammers promise large returns on investments but require an upfront payment for fees, taxes, or other expenses. Once the payment is made, the scammer disappears, leaving the investor with a loss.

Pyramid Schemes: These involve a hierarchical structure where participants must recruit others to earn money. Those at the

top earn substantial profits, while those at the bottom often lose their investments.

**Cryptocurrency Scams:** Fraudsters may pose as cryptocurrency experts or represent fake exchanges, luring investors into non-existent investments or stealing their cryptocurrencies through phishing or hacking.

**Employment Scams:** In these scams, fraudsters pose as employers offering attractive job opportunities, only to later request upfront payments, personal information, or even ask the victim to participate in money laundering activities.

**Pressure for Immediate Action:** Scammers often create a sense of urgency to prevent victims from verifying the legitimacy of the offer. **Request for Personal or Financial Information:** Legitimate businesses will not ask for sensitive information via email or unsecured channels.

**Protect Your Information:** Never share sensitive information like passwords, credit card details, or personal information unless you are certain of the source's legitimacy.

**Poor Grammar and Spelling:** Many scams originate from foreign countries, and poor language skills can be a red flag.

Internet offers a wealth of opportunities for online work, it is essential for us to remain vigilant and well-informed to avoid falling prey to online scams. By recognizing the signs of a scam and following safety precautions, we can protect ourselves and maintain a positive experience in the world of online work.



# Facing the Facts: Insights from the Latest UN Climate Change Report

By Kanwal Munir

In the dynamic and ever-evolving saga of climate change, the UN Report on Climate Change, released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 2024, emerges as a poignant reminder of the urgent challenges confronting our planet. With the passage of time, the evidence grows increasingly indisputable, offering a vivid portrayal of a world ensnared in a climate crisis fraught with significant and widespread repercussions.

As we delve deeper into the findings of this report, it becomes evident that the stakes have never been higher. Each year brings forth a mounting body of evidence, underscoring the imperative for decisive action. From rising temperatures to escalating extreme weather events and melting ice caps, the signs of a planet in distress are unmistakable.

The UN Report on Climate Change serves as a wake-up call, sounding the alarm for immediate and concerted efforts to address the pressing challenges before us. It is a call to action that transcends borders and ideologies, emphasizing the collective responsibility we bear to safeguard the future of our planet and its inhabitants. As we navigate through these turbulent times, it is imperative that we heed the warnings of this report and embark on a path towards sustainability and resilience.

## RECORD-BREAKING TEMPERATURES

According to the report, 2023 emerged as the warmest year on record, with temperatures soaring to  $1.45 \pm 0.12$  °C above the pre-industrial average. This alarming statistic underscores the relentless march of climate change and the urgent need for decisive action. Rising temperatures not only disrupt ecosystems but also pose significant risks to human health, exacerbating heat-related illnesses and mortality



rates, particularly in vulnerable communities.

The warming trend observed in 2023 is part of a broader pattern of increasing global temperatures driven by human activities, notably the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes. These activities release greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O), into the atmosphere, trapping heat and leading to the phenomenon known as global warming.

## UNPRECEDENTED GREENHOUSE GAS LEVELS

Concentrations of greenhouse gases have reached record highs, further exacerbating the warming trend. Carbon dioxide levels, primarily from burning fossil fuels and land-use changes, have surged to unprecedented levels, surpassing 415 parts per million (ppm) in 2023. Methane, a potent greenhouse gas emitted from agriculture, livestock, and fossil fuel extraction, has also experienced a sharp increase, reaching concentrations of over 1,900 parts per billion (ppb).

Similarly, nitrous oxide levels have surged to approximately 333 parts per billion (ppb), driven mainly by agricultural activities and industrial processes.

The relentless emissions of greenhouse gases underscore the urgent need for comprehensive climate mitigation strategies, including transitioning to renewable energy sources, enhancing energy efficiency, and implementing nature-based solutions such as reforestation and sustainable land management practices. Additionally, international cooperation and policy measures are essential to curb emissions and limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, as outlined in the Paris Agreement.

## RISING SEA LEVELS

Perhaps one of the most concerning revelations of the report is the unprecedented rise in global mean sea levels. Over the past decade (2014–2023), the rate of sea level rise has more than doubled compared to the preceding decade, as documented by satellite records. This acceleration poses grave threats to coastal communities worldwide, amplifying the risk of flooding, erosion, and saltwater intrusion into

freshwater sources.

The rise in sea levels is primarily driven by thermal expansion—where water expands as it warms—and the melting of land-based ice, including glaciers and polar ice caps. As temperatures rise, polar ice loss accelerates, contributing to the observed sea level rise. Moreover, the loss of ice mass from glaciers and ice sheets increases freshwater input into the oceans, further exacerbating sea level rise and altering ocean circulation patterns.

Coastal regions are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of rising sea levels, with millions of people at risk of displacement and infrastructure at risk of damage or destruction. Low-lying island nations, such as those in the Pacific and the Caribbean, face existential threats from sea level rise, with the potential for entire nations to become uninhabitable in the coming decades if mitigation efforts are not accelerated.

## POLAR ICE LOSS

The plight of Antarctica, a bellwether for climate change impacts, is equally distressing. Antarctic sea-ice extent plummeted to an all-time low in February, underscoring the rapid disintegration of polar ice caps. Such phenomena not only contribute to rising sea levels but also disrupt fragile ecosystems, endangering iconic species like penguins and seals. Moreover, the accelerated melting of polar ice contributes to the destabilization of global climate patterns, leading to more frequent and intense extreme weather events.

In addition to polar ice loss, the report highlights the alarming retreat of glaciers across the globe. Preliminary data from the global set of reference glaciers for the hydrological year 2022-2023 indicate unprecedented ice loss, particularly in western North America and Europe. Glaciers in Switzerland, for instance, have witnessed a staggering 10% reduction in volume over the past two years alone, sounding alarm bells for mountain communities reliant on glacial meltwater for freshwater supply. This rapid glacial retreat not only threatens water security but also exacerbates risks of downstream flooding and ecosystem disruption.

## ESCALATING EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

The cascading effects of climate change are perhaps most acutely felt through extreme weather events, which continue to wreak havoc on communities worldwide. From scorching heatwaves to devastating wildfires and catastrophic floods, the socio-economic toll is staggering. In 2023, Hawaii, Canada, and Europe were ravaged by infernos, claiming lives, destroying homes, and blanketing entire regions in thick smoke. Meanwhile, Mediterranean Cyclone Daniel unleashed torrential rainfall, triggering deadly floods in Greece, Bulgaria, Türkiye, and Libya, exacerbating food insecurity and population displacement in already vulnerable regions.



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS AND VULNERABILITY

Indeed, the report underscores the intertwined nature of climate change with broader socio-economic challenges, amplifying existing vulnerabilities and exacerbating inequalities. Food security remains a pressing concern, with erratic weather patterns disrupting agricultural systems and exacerbating hunger and malnutrition in vulnerable populations. Likewise, population displacement driven by climate-induced disasters continues to strain resources and exacerbate social tensions, under-

scoring the urgent need for holistic and equitable climate adaptation strategies.

## CONCLUSION

In the wake of the alarming findings of the UN Report on Climate Change, the imperative for urgent action looms large. With each passing moment, the window of opportunity to mitigate the impending crisis narrows, underscoring the critical need for bold and concerted efforts across all sectors of society. From local grassroots initiatives to sweeping international policy agreements, every level of engagement is essential in the fight against climate change.

Mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, fortifying resilience, and preserving the integrity of our planet demands immediate

attention and unwavering commitment. Complacency is a luxury humanity can no longer afford. We stand at a pivotal juncture in history where collective action and steadfast resolve hold the key to securing a sustainable future for generations to come.

As we grapple with the gravity of the situation, it is abundantly clear that the time for decisive measures is now. Together, we must rise to the challenge, united in purpose and unwavering in determination, to address the climate crisis and forge a path towards a more resilient and equitable world.

# PCB appoints Babar Azam as Pakistan's T20I, ODI skipper

*Babar Azam stepped down from captaincy of all formats of cricket in Nov last year after humiliating World Cup campaign*



By Sohail Imran

Pakistan cricketer Babar Azam has been reappointed as the national side's captain for the white-ball matches, said the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Sunday.

The decision to change the team's skipper comes ahead of the Green Shirt's five-match T20I series against the New Zealand which will begin from April 18.

The 29-year-old batter stepped down from all formats of captaincy in November last year after the humiliating World Cup campaign, ending his years-long stint in the leading position.

Before his removal, the former skipper was under fire for several months after Pakistan failed to perform in the Asia Cup and continued the same momentum into the World Cup — where they crashed out before reaching the semis.

Babar was previously appointed white-ball captain in 2019 and as Test skipper in 2020, but the Green Shirts have not won any ICC or Asia Cup titles under his leadership.

Following this, the PCB under Zaka Ashraf appointed Shaheen Shah Afridi as white-ball captain after the team's drubbing in the ICC World Cup 2023.

Meanwhile, Shan Masood was given the red-ball captaincy by the previous management.

Babar Azam has played 52 Tests, 117

ODIs and 109 T20Is for the national side. He has lead 71 T20 matches including T20 World Cup as the team's captain.

Under his leadership, the Men in Green won 42 matches and lost 23 matches.

Courtesy The News



# Gladiators 2024: Winners crowned after grand final

By Noor Nanji

**F**inlay Anderson and Marie-Louise Nicholson have been crowned Gladiators champions after Saturday night's grand final on BBC One.

The pair beat fellow contenders, Wesley Male and Bronte Jones, to lift the coveted trophy after a competition that has lasted 11 weeks.

The reboot of the 1990s show has proved to be an audience hit.

An average of eight million viewers have tuned in each week, and a second series has been confirmed.

In the final showdown, Anderson and Nicholson raced to the top of the travelator and burst through the paper to become champions.

The 34-year-old, from Edinburgh, said it was "the most surreal moment ever" to go from being five years old and playing The Eliminator in his grandmother's living room, to "lifting the real deal".

Meanwhile, Nicholson, a personal trainer from Dublin, entered The Eliminator with a two-second head start on Sheffield firefighter Jones and kept her lead in the race to the top.

"Bronte was on my tail the whole time, what a competitor to go up against, she was so close to the end there. I think we're both winners in my eyes," the 28-year-old told host Bradley Walsh.

The series, which was filmed at Sheffield Arena, launched 16 new Gladiators, including Sabre, Legend, Giant and Diamond, who have become fan favourites.

Over the course of 11 weeks, they have been competing against the contenders in classic events such as Duel and the Eliminator.

Anderson said the hardest part of the final was The Edge, a challenge in which contenders and Gladiators chase each other on an elevated grid, as he had injured his ribs in that event in the quarter-finals and "didn't want to get hurt again".

Nicholson's least favourite game was Duel, in which participants have to knock their opponents off a podium. "I'm quite petite and not as strong as some of the Gladiators," she said. "They had great stability and knock you straight on the head."

Earlier this week, the BBC announced in its annual plan that Gladiators will return to Sheffield Arena for a second series.

"It has been wonderful to hear how much families have loved watching this together," said Kalpna Patel-Knight, the BBC's head of entertainment.

She added: "We can't wait for more action from the Gladiators."

Keeping the original format has been key to the show's success, media experts have said.



"When you watch Gladiators, it's exactly the same as it was in the 1990s, in terms of the challenges, the music and the eliminations," Tom Harrington, an analyst at the media research firm Enders Analysis, told the BBC.

Mr Harrington said some other revived shows have failed because they've "been tinkered with" to the point they end up losing what made them good originally.

"With Gladiators, the producers understood what made it great to watch in the first place, and they've not messed with that at all," he added.

First broadcast on ITV on 10 October 1992, Gladiators was like nothing seen before in the prime time Saturday slot.

The Lycra-clad combatants, including Wolf, Warrior, Shadow and Cobra, became household names, while contenders took on an exhausting array of challenges.

The show ran on the network until 2000, before being resurrected by Sky between 2008 and 2009.

The BBC began showing the current series this January, with father and son duo Bradley and Barney Walsh presenting.

Compared with when Gladiators started in the 1990s - when there were only a handful of TV slots - there is much more competition for viewers' attention now.

But it has been one of the most successful TV reboots in recent years, with the opening episode attracting an audience of nearly 10 million, including 28-day catch-up figures.

Mr Harrington said the Gladiators reboot had achieved a rare feat of getting families to come together on a Saturday night to watch TV.

"It's a declining phenomenon," he said. "Especially when you consider that younger viewers are moving away from TV to short-form video or streaming services.

"But here you have a show that's on at a particular time slot, and people [have tuned] in."

## The force that is Ayesha Omar



By Zainab Mossadiq

Ayesha Omar's journey in the entertainment industry is nothing short of remarkable. With an unfaltering commitment to excellence and a relentless drive to succeed, she has left a lasting mark on the hearts of audiences.

A Fine Art graduate from the National College of Arts (NCA), Ayesha's passion for painting and singing preceded her foray into acting and modeling. From her maiden vehicle, Kollege Jeans to her standout performance in Geo TV's Dolly Ki Ayegi Baraat, where she shared the screen with industry stalwarts, Ayesha has consistently delivered stellar performances.

However, it was her portrayal of the endearing character Khoobsurat in the uproarious sitcom Bulbulay that truly skyrocketed her to national recognition and stardom, turning the show into a household favorite across Pakistan.

Venturing onto the silver screen, Ayesha made waves with her debut in Karachi Se Lahore, a role that showcased her versatility and charm. Subsequent ventures in films like Yalghaar

and Dhai Chaal cemented her status as a force to be reckoned with in the cinema world.

In 2024, Ayesha embarked on a new chapter with the release of Taxali Gate, a project close to her heart, as she not only graces the screen but also takes on the role of a producer. Directed by Abu Alecha, the film delves deep into the lives of Taxali Gate's inhabitants, weaving a tale of justice and societal complexities. Ayesha's portrayal of Muskan, a strong-willed sex worker, showcases her range and commitment to challenging roles.

In a candid conversation, Ayesha Omar shares her insight into her film Taxali Gate and her evolving acting career.

Reflecting on her journey with the film, Ayesha shares, "the story itself and the central character Muskan attracted me to do this film." Delving deeper into Muskan's persona, she elaborates, "Muskan's character is very feisty and independent. She is very self-sufficient and strong, and has to care of a lot of people."

As Ayesha talked about the role of

Muskan in the film, who lives in the red-light area, there is a hint of pride in Ayesha's voice, signifying that she truly embraced her character and owns it completely.

Muskan's resilience and determination resonate deeply with Ayesha, who recognizes the character's unrelenting spirit in the face of adversity. "She had to take responsibility at a very young age," Omar reflects, empathizing with Muskan's journey. "She was shoved into a situation because of her circumstances and didn't choose her life, but she did choose how to navigate through all of that."

As the movie progresses, Muskan's character evolves into a representation of bravery as she advocates for justice on behalf of a girl who has experienced sexual assault.

Recognizing the pivotal nature of her role, Ayesha discusses her approach to preparing for the character, aiming to do full justice to it by portraying it in a way never seen before.

"I have never played such a character so I wanted to see how I would put my own essence into it. I didn't want the

character to resemble anything I have ever done before, and I wanted to put in effort to design the looks of the character. I knew this would be a visually rich character.”

Ayesha added, “I wanted the character to look authentic, so I did a lot of research. I did some mental workshops with myself about how not to feel self-conscious. I was lucky that I had such an environment on set that I felt safe and could portray the character as best as I could.”

Collaboration proved instrumental in shaping Omar’s portrayal of Muskan, with the actress acknowledging the invaluable support of her colleagues. “I was very lucky to have people around me who helped me build this character,” she acknowledges gratefully, highlighting the contributions of makeup artist and dialect coach Qasim Liaquat and actor Nayyar Ijaz.

Ayesha also dived deeper into the struggles it took during the shooting. She described the process as “challenging,” and added, “we were shooting in very narrow streets, and we were surrounded by a lot of people all the time. I got injured during the shoot, so I was on painkillers the entire time and even had to get physiotherapy done.”

Despite the challenges posed by the shoot, including physical injuries and logistical constraints, Ayesha appreciated the environment of the set and how she found solace in the creative vision of director Abu Aleeha. “I am very impressed with the way Abu Aleeha works and knows what he wants from the shot and his actors,” she praises, underscoring the director’s passion and efficiency.

Ayesha was also all praises for her co-actor Yasir Hussain, with whom she has previously worked in Kara-chi Se Lahore and Javed Iqbal. “Yasir is a great co-actor,” she remarks. “It is a lot of fun working with him - and Abu Aleeha - since they both are so passionate and driven.”

As the film discusses social issues and important themes, Ayesha echoed this sentiment and elaborated on how the film achieves this. She emphasizes the importance of storytelling in fostering dialogue and social change. “The conversation in this film, Taxali Gate, is a really important one,” reflects Ayesha.

“It is about rape, consent, the justice system, and the need for boundaries.” She further added, “It is a story about people who are not privileged and don’t have access to connections and how they navigate through situations and deal with whatever unfolds in their lives.”

“I think Taxali Gate will contribute to starting conversations about important social issues,” she predicts optimistically. “I think it is very, very important to start such conversations. We don’t aim to give people a lecture or tell them what to do.”



Ayesha reflects on her career as an actor, emphasizing the paramount importance of script and character when choosing projects. “When it comes to choosing a film, the factor that takes the highest priority will always be the script,” she asserts. “If the script is not good, then your film is gone.” She acknowledges the significance of various elements like screenplay, dialogues, cast, producer, and director, highlighting their impact on the overall project.

Transitioning from cinema to television, Ayesha values the opportunity to explore her craft thoroughly. “Every actor wants to practice their craft on different platforms,” she explains. Regarding her role in Taxali Gate, she appreciates the challenge it presented, noting her inclination towards unconventional characters.

“The character was challenging, but I like doing things that are offbeat,” she shares. “Every actor wants to do a character that is challenging and allows them to explore and

play with different moods and layers in a person.”

Ayesha underscores the transformative effect of each role on her as an actor, recognizing the emotional impact and the need for proper coaching to navigate through it. “Every role helps you diversify as an actor and helps you understand your own range and skills,” she reflects.

“Some characters take away something from you while some add something. Some characters can even destabilize your emotions and your nervous system.” She

emphasizes the importance of learning to separate from characters once the role is completed and managing the emotional aftermath effectively.

With Ayesha Omar’s talent and dedication taking the entertainment industry by storm, we eagerly await her next steps, and are excited for what she brings to the table next.

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Courtesy The News

## Celebrating milestones



By Maheen Sabeeh

### Representation matters

The representation of South Asian artists has significantly increased at the Academy Awards, colloquially known as the Oscars. 2024 marked another remarkable year in this regard, with Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, a two-time Oscar winner, representing Pakistan at a pre-Oscars party. However, she wasn't the sole representative. The accomplished Ali Sethi also graced the event for a second consecutive year, filling us with pride. While Sethi may not have an Academy Award to his name, his music and the thematic depth of each of his releases continue to evolve, showcasing his unparalleled talent.

### Flying the flag

Earlier this month, on the occasion of Pakistan day, several artists from Pakistan's performing arts and cultural industry were conferred with civilian awards. We wholeheartedly support the government's recognition of these individuals.

Bilal Lashari (Sitara-I-Imtiaz), Shabnam ((Sitara-I-Imtiaz), Mai Dhari (President's Award for Pride of Performance), Zubaida Begum (President's Award for Pride of Performance), Adnan Siddiqui (President's Award for Pride of Performance), Sheema Kermani (President's Award for Pride of Performance), Baqir Abbas (President's Award for Pride of Performance), Hamayoon Khan (President's Award for Pride of Performance) and Sajal Aly (Tamgha-I-Imtiaz) were among the honorees, including several others.

Note: Sarmad Khoosat's omission from the actual list is conspicuous, despite his nomination for the Sitara-I-Imtiaz Award, as confirmed by the multi-talented artist on his Instagram page. Khoosat, a tremendous talent, stands out as an artist deserving of this honor, especially ahead of others like Rahat Fateh Ali Khan (RFAK), whose reprehensible behavior came to light in a controversial video showing RFAK allegedly assaulting an employee.

### Beyond geographical boundaries

Arooj Aftab's talent and character defy adequate description. She showcased exceptional production skills by producing a four-track mini album for Anoushka Shankar titled Chapter I: Forever, For Now. Just when we thought her accomplishments couldn't surpass this, Aftab released another spectacular album in 2024, an LP titled Qasr for American composer and vocalist Sheherazade, of Indian descent. Although nominated for two awards at the 2024 Grammy Awards, Aftab did not win. However, like many other artists worldwide, she has called for a ceasefire in the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Gaza. Furthermore, she is scheduled to perform at the upcoming Glastonbury Festival in the United Kingdom. Throughout all of these achievements, she remains a humble spirit, expressing universal emotions of love, loss, heartbreak, grief, and exploration of identity through her art.

## An unexpected and wonderful surprise

When Pakistan's longest running music group, Strings (ft. Bilal Maqsood and Faisal Kapadia), decided to disband, Bilal Maqsood revealed his intention to pursue a solo career in music and create material for children. Conversely, Faisal Kapadia welcomed the end of the musical chapter in his life, shifting his focus to other endeavors such as travel. Although Coke Studio 14 seemingly brought him out of musical retirement with 'Phir Milenge' (in collaboration with Young Stunners). Faisal has also established a record label called Twenty Nine Records and released a surprisingly beautiful solo album called Zindagi Jahan Le Jaye in 2024.

## Cinematic courage

In an age where Pakistan's cinema industry struggles to attract audiences to cinemas (as opposed to streaming platforms or online services), Ayesha Omar deserves credit for not only acting in Taxali Gate but also for having the courage to produce the film.

## A landmark for fashion

To some, Mohsin Naveed Ranjha (MNR) is a fashion designer known for dressing stars like Ranveer Singh from India and



Atif Aslam from Pakistan. However, his greatest accomplishment lies in his tireless work ethic. His creations exemplify a mind dedicated to craftsmanship and a deep respect for tradition. When combined, they transcend mere attire, becoming enduring and powerful pieces of art.

His capacity to establish a standalone design studio on London's Regent Street not only demonstrates his entrepreneurial skills, but also serves as a beacon for the burgeoning fashion scene originating from Pakistan and South Asia.

## The heart of a documentary filmmaker

Jawad Sharif avoids the spotlight, allowing

his work to speak for itself. For years, he has told extraordinary stories with sincerity and compassion. Behind each documentary such as The Color of Smog, Natari, K-2 & The Invisible Footmen and Indus Blues, Sharif illuminates the lives of ordinary people, the richness of culture, and the forgotten traditions amidst urban chaos. As a National Geographic Explorer and the sole representative from Pakistan at the National Geographic Storytellers Summit this year, Sharif's work stands as a testament to honesty, compelling narratives, and unique perspectives. Through both released and unreleased material as well as through personal conversations, it is evident that Sharif remains steadfast and undeterred in spirit.





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