

Fortnightly

The Truth International

Islamabad - Karachi

1st - 15th June 2024

IMF and Budget

Pakistan has to get approval for dictated targets from parliament for new programme

Politics and Courts

Future political landscape has to be formed by judiciary

Massacre of Palestine

Israel is not ready to pay attention to world call for peace

Budget 2024-25 Another Bitter Pill



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Web: www.thetruthinternational.com
Price: Rs. 435

Publisher:
Muhammad Fahad Thaheem

Printer:
Masha Allah Printers
Basement # 9, Ratta Mansion, Fazal e Haq
Road, Blue Area, Islamabad.

Design & Layout:
Abdul Qadir

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Another IMF-dictated budget, another bitter pill for Pakistanis

The government is set to revoke tax concessions that disproportionately benefit high-earning individuals over the middle-class workforce



By Javed Mahmood

Last week, the IMF team left Pakistan after holding a crucial round of talks with the government's team about the upcoming budget for the fiscal year 2024-25. After discussing the salient features of the new budget, the IMF people have asked the government to get approval of the budget from the Parliament in June. Once this is done, the IMF and Pakistan's economic team will resume talks for the new bailout program involving more or less a 6-8 billion dollar loan for a period of three years. In other words, the IMF has linked the approval of the new bailout package with the approval of Parliament for the budget envisaging tough conditions, including the elimination of subsidies, tax-base expansion, tight fiscal control, energy sector reforms, etc. Neither the IMF nor the government has shared with the media the key proposals of the IMF for the new budget.

Nonetheless, according to the media reports, the IMF-dictated budget is

being seen as another bitter pill for the ruling coalition and the masses, as well as the new budget is expected to create more miseries for all segments of society, especially consumers, taxpayers, and non-filers.

Before leaving Pakistan last week, the IMF mission chief Nathan Porter issued a press statement after concluding initial talks with the government and said, "At the request of the Pakistani authorities, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) team, led by the IMF's Mission Chief to Pakistan, visited Islamabad during May 13-23, 2024, to discuss Pakistan's plans for a home-grown economic program that can be supported under the IMF's Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

At the end of the visit, Mr. Porter issued the following statement:

"Building on the economic stabilization achieved through the successful completion of the 2023 Stand-by

Arrangement, the IMF and the Pakistani authorities made significant progress toward reaching a Staff Level Agreement (SLA) on a comprehensive economic policy and reform program that can be supported under an Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

"The authorities' reform program aims to move Pakistan from economic stabilization to strong, inclusive, and resilient growth. To achieve this, the authorities plan to continue to strengthen public finances to reduce vulnerabilities by improving domestic revenue mobilization through fairer taxation while scaling up spending for human capital, social protection, and climate resilience; secure energy sector viability, including reforms to reduce the high cost of energy; continue progress towards low and stable inflation by appropriate monetary and exchange rate policies; improve public service provision through state-owned enterprise (SOE) restructuring and privatization; and promote private

sector development, by securing a level-playing field for investment and stronger governance.

"The mission and the authorities will continue policy discussions virtually over the coming days aiming to finalize discussions, including the financial support needed to underpin the authorities' reform efforts from the IMF and Pakistan's bilateral and multilateral partners.

"The IMF team is grateful to the Pakistani authorities, private sector, and development partners for fruitful discussions and their hospitality throughout this mission."

According to media reports, the International Monetary Fund has informed Pakistani authorities that consideration of the next bailout package under the Extended Fund Facility depends on the approval of the upcoming budget by parliament. This development could initiate formal discussions and lead to the signing of a staff-level agreement for a new bailout package of \$6 to \$8 billion and additional climate change funding.

Analysts are of the viewpoint that the government would have to demonstrate its ability to increase tax revenue, achieve a primary surplus by reducing expenditures, and implement structural reforms to minimize losses of state-owned enterprises. Additionally, the government will need to raise electricity and gas tariffs in July and August 2024 to reach an agreement with the IMF. Therefore, the upcoming 2024-25 budget will be a crucial test for the current regime to demonstrate its ability to meet the IMF's stringent conditions which can be annoying for the masses.

Meanwhile, the IMF team has gathered relevant data on all major economic indicators and has informed relevant authorities about the budget expectations for 2024-25. The IMF's directives are clear: the government must create a roadmap to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio, which may fall to 9% of GDP for the current fiscal year.

Therefore, the FBR is facing challenges in meeting its revenue collection target of Rs 9.41 trillion, with predictions of a shortfall. The IMF may demand an increase in the collection to over Rs 12 trillion for the next budget, requiring an additional Rs 3 trillion in tax collection.

Consideration is being given to introducing a carbon levy to boost non-tax revenue in the upcoming budget. Expenditure rationalization, particularly for state-owned enterprises, pensions, and subsidies, is necessary to reduce current expenditures. Provincial nature projects will be abandoned in favor of federal development projects.

The IMF has recommended raising power and gas tariffs through baseline adjustments and quarterly tariff adjustments. Also, solar net metering is under scrutiny due to its impact on distribution companies' grids, leading to an independent study. There are



concerns about surplus electricity generation from solar panels during low consumption periods, exacerbating the fiscal challenges of the power sector. Officials hope the IMF will avoid front-loading the next bailout package to mitigate the inflationary pressures experienced in recent years.

FBR to revoke tax concessions

Furthermore, the government is set to revoke tax concessions that disproportionately benefit high-earning individuals over the middle-class workforce. The IMF has advised the government to treat salaried employees' incomes similarly to those of non-salaried individuals as personal income. However, the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) disagrees, arguing that the two types of income cannot be considered equally. If the IMF's recommendation is implemented, the tax burden on the salaried class will increase significantly.

So far, the government has devised revenue measures totaling Rs500 billion for the 2024-25 budget. However, the final revenue measures will be agreed upon after receiving the IMF's final projections for the revenue collection target. Unlike the traditional practice of working at the FBR headquarters, the Ministry of Finance handles all computations for tax recommendations.

According to FBR forecasts, autonomous revenue collection (based on GDP growth and inflation) will exceed Rs11.5 trillion in FY25. The federal government will consult with the IMF before finalizing revenue

measures. In the previous budget, the government announced revenue measures totaling Rs415 billion. The FBR has suggested raising the annual tax exemption limit for the salaried class to Rs1.2 million in 2024-25. However, this proposal has been amended downward to Rs900000 from the existing exemption limit of Rs600000, due to increasing inflation.

The FBR has also discussed the mechanism of the pension tax with the IMF. The IMF aims to align the salary slab with the income of pensioners. However, the FBR's activity is confined to the pensions of federal government employees, which are estimated to be worth around Rs700 billion. The FBR has objected to introducing a salary slab for pensioner income and has proposed an alternative mechanism for taxing wealthier pensioners.

In the private sector, large companies provide pensions to their employees. "There has been no final decision on this so far," a tax official told media persons. He

mentioned that the finance ministry is discussing pension-related tax changes with the IMF. However, the FBR has not calculated the actual revenue impact of taxing pensions.

The elimination of exemptions will also be addressed in prior consultation with the IMF. The FBR has provided all relevant data on possible revenue after these exemptions are withdrawn. The IMF has asked the FBR to collect taxes from traders and wholesalers, who are currently not contributing to tax collection. No agreement has been reached to increase regulatory tariffs on imports. The IMF typically does not suggest import duties, focusing instead on sales tax and income taxes, particularly withholding taxes. Currently, sales tax

2024, up from a revised surplus of \$434 million in March 2024, according to data released by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) in May. Overall, during the first ten months of the ongoing fiscal year, the current account balance recorded a deficit of \$202 million, significantly lower than the \$3.92 billion deficit in the same period of the previous year.

"This surplus exceeded our expectations as the SBP reported a much lower trade deficit than the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS)—72% of PBS's figure compared to a 10MFY24 ratio of 90%," stated brokerage house Topline Securities in a note. Low economic growth and high inflation have contributed to reducing Pakistan's current account deficit, with increased exports

Foreign Investment in Pakistan

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has pledged a substantial investment of \$10 billion in Pakistan, providing a critical financial boost to the struggling South Asian nation. This commitment was announced during Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, where the Prime Minister is currently on a day-long visit.

Pakistan's economy has been facing severe financial difficulties, prompting the government to seek investments from allied nations. In addition to the UAE's pledge, Saudi Arabia has committed to accelerating a \$5 billion investment. Prime Minister Sharif emphasized during his visit that Pakistan is no longer reliant on "begging bowls" when seeking assistance from friendly countries.

Despite a relatively stable foreign exchange reserve position of \$14.5 billion as of May 17, Pakistan still requires further financial support. While the completion of a short-term \$3 billion program last month helped avert a sovereign default, the government is advocating for a new, longer-term program to address ongoing fiscal challenges.

Although Pakistan's economy has shown signs of stabilization, with inflation decreasing to around 17% in April from a record high of 38% last May, the country continues to face significant fiscal deficits. Import control mechanisms have managed the external account deficit but have resulted in stagnant growth, projected to be around 2% this year compared to negative growth last year.

Signs of Economic Stability are More Evident: Economic Update & Outlook

As we approach the end of the outgoing fiscal year, signs of economic stability are becoming more evident. GDP growth is on the recovery path, while inflation continues



exemptions exceed Rs1.2 trillion. The government faces difficult decisions in revoking exemptions for food, international agreements, and pharmaceutical products. However, some items, such as insecticides and solar panels, may be subjected to sales tax.

Simultaneously, the government plans to raise existing withholding tax rates and introduce new ones, such as reviving the tax on cash withdrawals from banks, to maximize revenue. Furthermore, the finance ministry is considering imposing a tax on the import of exempted raw materials while increasing tax rates on existing ones.

SBP reports current account surplus

Pakistan's current account posted a provisional surplus of \$491 million in April

also playing a role. High interest rates and certain import restrictions have further supported the policymakers' goal of narrowing the current account deficit. In April 2024, Pakistan's exports of goods and services totaled \$3.28 billion, while imports amounted to \$5.28 billion. Meanwhile, remittances in April reached \$2.81 billion.

For the 10MFY24 period, the country's total exports of goods and services exceeded \$32.1 billion, while imports were \$51.7 billion, according to SBP data. Worker remittances for the same period totaled \$23.85 billion, marking a 4% increase compared to the previous year. The current account balance is a crucial indicator for cash-strapped Pakistan, which relies heavily on imports to sustain its economy. A widening deficit pressures the exchange rate and depletes official foreign exchange reserves.

its steady decline. Fiscal consolidation efforts are apparent from the positive primary balance, and the resilience of the external sector is evident from the positive current account balance. Despite the challenging situation during the past ten months, the government completed the IMF Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) program. To sustain the economic recovery, the government has initiated formal discussions for a new three-year IMF program. This initiative is a vital component of the stabilization strategy, aimed at strengthening the external sector and boosting investment flows, thus, steering the economy toward its potential growth. The Finance Division has mentioned these positive developments in its latest monthly report, Economic Update & Outlook, May 2024, released on May 29.

Agriculture emerged as a main driver of economic growth in the current fiscal year, registering a growth of 6.25 percent. The agriculture sector's recovery is mainly attributed to government initiatives through improved input supply and increased credit disbursement to farmers. Jul-Apr FY2024, the input situation remained encouraging as farm tractor production and sales increased by 54.8 and 56.6 percent, respectively.

Whereas a 33.8 percent surge was observed in agricultural credit disbursement during

Jul-March FY2024. However, there was a mixed trend in fertilizer usage in April 2024, with Urea off-take decreasing by 19.7 percent and DAP off-take increasing by 82.5 percent. Large Scale Manufacturing (LSM) growth in 2024Q3, became positive and is expected to remain moderately positive on average throughout the second half of the current FY. It witnessed a minor decline of 0.1 percent during Jul-Mar FY 2024 against the contraction of 7.0 percent same period last year. During this period, 11 to 22 sectors witnessed positive growth.

The CPI inflation stood at 17.3 percent on a year-on-year basis in April 2024 as compared to 36.4 percent in April 2023. The major drivers include Housing, water, electricity, gas & fuel, Perishable food items, Furnishing & Household equipment maintenance, Clothing & Footwear, and Transport. On the fiscal front, during July – March FY24, the revenue growth outpaced the growth in expenditures. Within revenues, both tax and non-tax collection grew significantly by 29.3 percent and 90.7 percent, respectively. Moreover, measures to control non-mark-up spending helped in improving the primary surplus to Rs 1615.4 billion (1.5 percent of GDP) from Rs 503.8 billion (0.6 percent of GDP) last year. While, overall fiscal deficit remained at 3.7 percent of GDP, the same as recorded last year. On the

external front, the current account for FY2024 (July-April) narrowed down significantly, recording a deficit of \$0.2 billion compared to last year's \$3.9 billion, primarily due to an improved trade balance.

In April 2024, the current account surplus was recorded at \$491 million, an increase from \$434 million in March 2024. Year-on-year, exports in April 2024 increased by 23.4 percent to \$2.6 billion, fueled by eased import restrictions that enhanced the supply chain for export industries. In the same period, imports also rose by 22.8 percent to \$4.4 billion. The trade deficit for April 2024 was recorded at \$1.8 billion. Furthermore, the FDI witnessed an increase of 39.1 percent and reached \$358.8 million in April 2024, as against an inflow of \$ 258.0 million last month. Remittances in April 2024 were encouraging, as they increased on a year-on-year basis by 27.9% to \$ 2.8 billion. On the back of a persistent policy rate at 22 percent, during 1st July – 03rd May, FY2024 money supply (M2) shows growth of 7.1 percent (Rs 2,229.8 billion) as compared to a 7.0 percent growth (Rs 1,943.4 billion) in last year. Although the signs of a moderate economic recovery are evident. But to sustain this positive momentum, the policy efforts and reforms to raise productivity, and competitiveness are imperative.



An IMF Budget in Offing

A recipe for gradual discontent with the system



By Naqi Akbar

The budget season is soon expected to cast its shadow on the prevalent mood of the economy, the investors, and above all the economic managers under the watchful eyes of the key decision makers; the establishment. Such budget-making exercise under the IMF program has been a mix of surprises, adjustments as well as the jugglery of words with hidden meanings to ensure that the common man is deceived about the true color of the budgetary document.

Under normal political circumstances and dispensations, the June budget is regarded as trend trendsetter for the next fiscal year. Given the fact that the system has been in peril, politically, in a geo-political sense, and above all in the financial crunch sense, the exclusivity of the budgetary exercise has practically lost its worth; specifically in the last five years of the existence of the nation-state.

Pakistan's dialogue with IMF amid the prolonged political turmoil, the inability of the caretaker government to strike any amicable deal with the IMF, and the

Damocles sword of political instability have all combined to create a situation, where the compliance list has been handed over to the key decision makers in Pakistan continues to escalate in terms of the demands.

Practically during the last two years, the economy has been in a state of suspense, where the investor is scared. Furthermore, the preprogram compliance to the conditionalities like the haphazard withdrawal of subsidies as well as a progressive push towards a cost-push-oriented inflation has all combined to create a situation of stagflation.

The stagflationary situation in simple words means that inflation continues to rise, not due to the demand-pull factor; which in fair weather days means, people have purchasing power. Here it means there are other factors like the factor costs, which push inflation to prohibitive limits.

Needless to point out, the prices of average everyday vegetables and fruits continue to escalate, not due to any failed crop; but to

the factors that emanate from the macroeconomic policies having their bearing on the microeconomic calculations.

The price of POL products, impacted by the subsidy removal and also by the faulty management of the exchange rate by the central bank has caused the transportation costs to the point, where the advantage of efficient production costs is effectively evaporated. That impact does not only affect the local price tag, but has unfavorable bearing on the international cost competitiveness.

Like the price impact of transportation on the food/kitchen basket, the overall impact on the economy means that the costs of production continue to escalate. Mixed with a general slow pace of investment decision making on part of the scared investor, the result is minimal growth of the economy and consequent a very slow employment generation.

The failure or refusal of the economy to jump start or boot is understandable. Coupled with high inflation, a Stagflation-

any situation cannot be expected to generate positive results in the context of the economic recovery.

In the backdrop of these harsh ground realities, another IMF inspired budget is not likely to endear the masses or the common man to the reform process supposedly led by the managed political leadership in connivance with the foreign principals. In a political economy where the variables of political debate are mature, it means a potent street power in place for the entrenched dispensation to deal or negotiate.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, fast transforming into a police state, with majority of polity complying with the established order, with few political movements in wilderness, it means that the people will have no other option but to make up with the state in one way or another.

Consequently, it might seem that a compliant population might become docile in the long and short run and the system is able to survive with its current package of a client state like Egypt managed through the IMF handouts. However, any student of political science will disagree with that scenario.

With majority of population comprising of youth; both in the form of disgruntled voters as well as the growing army of the

unemployed, political peace can be a commodity naively sought. It might not happen that the upcoming budget will open the floodgates of revolt all of a sudden; but have the potential to add up to the fire in the hearts and minds of the common man in general and the restless youth in particular.

The federal budget; as the expectation develop will be a jugglery of words with few incentives announced in the intro paragraph, coupled with few encrypted tax proposals; with much in the Finance Bill. While the common man will be satisfied in the above-mentioned intro paragraphs, it will be the experts in the Pakistani business houses; the chambers who are expected to cry wolf. Here it may be pointed that the degree of 'cry wolf' will be invariably determined by the degree of influence the establishment is able to curry with the business houses.

So, except for the few dissenting voices communicated in the form of press statements as well as revised budget proposals, the devastating impact of the IMF led budget statements will be felt in the long run.

Apart from the continued pace of political alienation between the rulers and the ruled, the economy might well continue its journey of being characteristically high cost in nature. That developing scenario will dash any credible hopes of jump starting the

economy. Here one might find few sectors showing promise; due to exceptionally high comparative advantage index as well as incentive from the government; not much might be happening in positive sense.

Going forward, the dissent might not translate itself into any short-term tremor, but can precipitate a long-term earthquake. Towards that end any political movement, other than the ones known all over will have to take the lead. As said before many times in different fora, the vanguard for the new social contract, revolt and the establishment of a new nation state preamble, might look 'utopian' in essence, but it will be completely new faces with no political history who might be able to seize the moment. Pakistan has seen that phenomenon at country level as well as in urban only environs. In most of the cases the movements have been compromised by the all-powerful state in one way or another.

The developing scenario suggests that the established order might have to take a back seat for the interest of the nation state. Options can be evolutionary or blatantly radical. Much depends upon the prime stakeholders, the new vanguard. The controlled budgets might not ignite small fires, but have the potential to ignite infernos.



Properties of Pakistanis in Dubai



By Syed Shabbar Zaidi

In 2019 when I was the Chairman of Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) I asked my Director General International Taxation to collect the data of persons holding 'Iqamas' of the United Arab Emirates so we can ensure their tax compliance in Pakistan.

There was complete non-cooperation by the UAE Government and I had to backtrack. The revelation of Dubai properties by a Pakistani by the name of Dubai Leaks is a very satisfactory moment for me for the reason that I am fully aware of the fact that it is one of the most favourite parking lots for corruption and untaxed money for our countrymen in the UAE. Unlike other jurisdictions, it provides good living facilities along with a non-transparent OR opaque regulatory environment.

Many rich Pakistanis do not consider Pakistan as their destination. For them it is only a place to earn, rightly or wrongly, but not to invest or spend. In May 2024, the market capitalization of Pakistan Stock

Exchange is USD 23 billion whereas the market capitalization of BSEIndia (formerly Bombay Stock Exchange) is USD 4.5 trillion.

The reported investment of Pakistanis is USD 11 billion whereas Indians own only around USD 17 billion. This means that Pakistanis have more confidence in investment in bricks and mortar in the UAE than industries in Pakistan. The percentage of investment viz-a-viz PSX value is 47%, whereas in India it is 0.037% for investment in Mumbai.

After these revelations there are repeated statements by the relevant persons that such properties are declared in Pakistan's tax records. I have dealt with two Asset Declaration Laws in Pakistan in 2018 and 2019 and it is my estimate that the amount declared will not be more than 25% for various reasons. Furthermore, it is important to note that this data represents the properties acquired in the names of individuals in Pakistan.

It does not include properties held in the names of companies incorporated in the UAE and outside the UAE, which are beneficially owned by Pakistanis. As per my estimate, the total amount will be around USD 20 billion.

I have repeatedly stated that Pakistan's foreign exchange regulations from 1992 to 2018 in the form of the Protection of Economic Reform Act, 1992 have eroded the financial strength of Pakistan. Prior to this law the money held outside Pakistan was not the money sent from Pakistan; it was the corruption money earned and kept outside Pakistan.

After this obnoxious Act a substantial part is the money sent from Pakistan. In other words, these are our hard earned export USDs. The story of Pakistanis' assets outside Pakistan is briefly described in the following paragraphs.

When Pakistan came into existence it was an un-industrialised country. We were the

product of the Imperial world; therefore, under the Bretton Wood institutions the US and her allies decided to industrialize the country to the extent that does not hamper their own economic interests. Accordingly, they provided long-term foreign currency financing to the Pakistan government for industrialisation.

This money was doled out to Pakistani businessmen through Pakistan Industrial Credit & Investment Corporation of Pakistan (PICIC). In addition, there were projects of the government-owned institutions such as Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC).

The funding from PICIC was used for acquiring plants and machinery from suppliers outside Pakistan. There used to be direct payment to the supplier of the plant by PICIC and the loan amount was booked in the name of the borrower. It is now an open secret that there was a commission on the acquisition of such plants ranging from 5 to 10%, which was placed by the supplier in Switzerland in the name of Pakistani businessmen through our expert bankers based in London and New York.

There was a nominal share of bureaucrats due to which the most important government servant used to be Secretary Industries who was supposed to issue licences for every new industry. Some of these loans were repaid from the income of the industries whilst others became bad and PICIC ultimately wound up as a bankrupt entity. Comparatively, ICICI is one of the best financial institutions in India. The foreign currency assets of Pakistan, held outside Pakistan prior to 1974, in substance are the accumulations out of such commission.

When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to power the same demand came from the next group of exploiters and the same story was repeated in National Development Finance Corporation (NDFC) and Bankers Equity Limited (BEL). They were second tier generations of accumulators of commissions outside Pakistan. The point I want to emphasise is that in this case there was no outward flow of USD from Pakistan; it was the commission held outside Pakistan.

By the 1980s during Gen Zia's regime there was a huge accumulation of corruption and untaxed money as USD was flowing in for

the Afghan War. Furthermore, commissions were accumulating outside Pakistan, which were required to be brought for a new wave of industrialisation after the sentiments of nationalisation had died down.

In order to cater for that, various methods were introduced in the law to deregulate the foreign exchange regime and Pakistan may be the only country where all kinds of money is considered 'Kosher' if the same is remitted from outside Pakistan. Two windows were opened to send the money outside Pakistan and bring back the same as 'Kosher'.

This was the biggest economic crime that could have been committed with a nation. Ultimately, that wrong system was properly

transferred to the UAE. Obviously, the State Bank of Pakistan was not involved.

For a person like me, these revelations do not matter. It was fully known to me as a professional and as the Chairman of FBR. However, our hands were tied. The second element in this respect is the declaration of rent earned on such properties in Pakistan.

There is a view that such rent is not taxable on account of an interpretation of the Agreement for Avoidance of Double Taxation between the UAE and Pakistan. I have written a detailed article on that matter for this newspaper. I do not subscribe to that view.

Those who consider that there would be some direct tangible results of these



legislated by the name of 'Protection of Economic Reforms Act, 1992'. It remained as law from 1992 to 2018, when it was amended after the Panama Leaks. For thirty six years there was effectively no foreign exchange law in the country.

Accordingly, a very high amount out of our hard earned USD was purchased by people for acquiring properties and assets outside Pakistan. This is how the money got transferred. The Pakistan government and regulators are so careless that there used to be road shows of properties in the UAE in big cities in Pakistan with the offer that one can get an apartment in the UAE by paying the company in Pakistani rupees. Nobody bothered to ask how that money will be

revelations are not fully aware of the capability and capacity of our taxing authorities. However, as stated by me at the time of the Panama Revelations, this is a blessing in disguise for Pakistan for the reason that the UAE had created a non-transparent environment that suited unscrupulous people in Pakistan for hiding their undisclosed wealth.

Now that environment and confidence have shattered. There is a need for further revelations of companies ultimately beneficially owned by the Pakistanis whether tax resident in Pakistan or otherwise, which own properties and businesses in the UAE.

Courtesy www.brecorder.com

Pakistan's power sector puzzle

Until we understand what caused this massive explosion of circular debt, we will not be able to identify the root cause



By Asad Umar

With the new round of negotiations with the IMF, the power sector and its continued ailment is once again under discussion. The mounting circular debt and its crippling impact on the entire energy value chain directly, and the negative impact on the larger economy are not in debate.

The causes of this seemingly intractable problem are multifarious. Inefficient governance, decaying infrastructure, inability to collect receivables from both public and private consumers, theft of electricity, under budgeting of power subsidy etc are well known factors and have been discussed for years.

However, despite all this the total cumulative circular debt stood at Rs450 billion in 2013 and the annual additions to this number were not worryingly large. From this state, what happened that the increase of circular debt within four years jumped to about Rs450 billion in a single year and in a

matter of just a few years the cumulative circular debt increased by more than Rs2,000 billion?

Until we understand what caused this massive explosion of circular debt, we will not be able to identify the root cause of our current problems and may take decisions that make matters worse. The root cause of this massive burden of crushing electricity bills for the people and businesses of Pakistan is the flawed, to the extent of being divorced from reality, expansion of power generation capacity.

The PML N government came to power inheriting a power shortage crisis and decided rightly to prioritize the building of new capacity. However, they made two critical mistakes in this regard, and missed an opportunity to rectify past policy mistakes, and it is the cost of these which the 250 million people of Pakistan are collectively paying.

The missed opportunity was not moving away from the disastrous take-or-pay model to a competitive market structure. With the shortage in the market, investors would have been willing to come in and those who moved fast would have made excellent returns in the first couple of years while the shortage lasted and then prices would have normalized.

This structural problem was compounded by two huge mistakes. First, the guaranteed rate of return was increased and that too in dollar terms. This made the new capacity prohibitively expensive specially as the country faced chronic current account deficits and the rupee came under pressure and started to devalue rapidly.

The second mistake was going overboard and allowing far too much capacity to be built. Remember this massive unneeded capacity was built under an incentive structure in which the citizens and businesses of Pakistan have to pay for this in the

shape of capacity charges whether this electricity is used or not. In the seven years between 2016 and 2023, the installed capacity in the country increased from 25,374 MW to 45,885 MW or an 81 per cent increase in a short period of time.

As a result, the annual capacity payments, which were only Rs280 billion in 2015-16 according to Nepra's State of Industry report published a couple of months back, will exceed Rs2100 billion this year. Capacity had gone up by 81 per cent but actual generation only increased by 23 per cent in the same period due to insufficient demand. Consequently, capacity utilization rates crashed and per unit fixed capacity payments sky rocketed nearly six-fold to more than Rs15 per unit.

This massive increase in per unit fixed capacity charges is the main cause behind the doubling of electricity base rate charges from Rs11.72 to more than Rs23 in just the last five years. Newspapers are reporting that an increase of another Rs7 per unit is under discussion with the IMF as part of the new package for implementation effective July this year. This is considered to be needed because despite the sharp

increase of electricity prices the circular debt is still continuing to grow. This is a bureaucratic way of looking at the problem and trying to fix it by increasing prices even more despite massive underutilized capacity.

This is not how a business approaches the pricing of the product it sells. The major reason for the continued buildup of circular debt is the massive under-utilization of the capacity brought online. The sharp price increases have decimated demand growth both in the industry and of households who find the pricing unaffordable. Businesses have been made uncompetitive by the extremely expensive electricity and we will make matters worse by increasing prices sharply again. If the electricity system of Pakistan was being run by private business in a deregulated environment, without doubt they would be looking to increase demand by pricing the electricity at a more affordable level, especially for industry.

This was done in the year 2021-22 by the PTI government. Industry was given discounted prices for consumption above the base level for the previous year. The result was a strong increase in demand and

that resulted in much stronger overall economic growth. As long as the marginal consumption is priced above marginal variable costs, the cash flows are positive.

Businesses receiving this incentive prosper and the burden on the taxpayer to foot the capacity charges burden reduces. How much room does that give for price discounts? The expected price structure for next year is expected to be more than 60 per cent fixed charges and less than 40 per cent variable cost. This means there can be a very steep reduction in price and it will still be more than the variable costs and provide positive cash flows.

This is just the direct impact on the cash flows of the electricity sector. If you add to this the impact on FBR revenues of the additional economic activity generated, the overall positive impact on the economy would be even greater. It is time to take some smart business-oriented decisions to deal with the existential threat posed by the power sector to the economy, instead of making matters worse by taking a bureaucratic approach and reinforcing failure.

Courtesy The News



Pakistan's drift into chaos

PTI's young followers are an ahistorical cult, with their sense of history beginning in 2011 or February 8, 2024



By Yousuf Nazar

If the conflict between the establishment and a section of the judiciary continues, it could lead to more chaos and ultimately to increased repression and authoritarianism.

The PTI's young followers are an ahistorical cult, with their sense of history beginning in 2011 or February 8, 2024. Some activists believe that Pakistan is ripe for a democratic revolution. It may instead end up with its own version of Sisi soon.

Largely ignored by the electronic media, Pakistan's debt and energy issues are the two most critical near-term challenges requiring immediate attention. Next year, the country will pay around Rs9 trillion (\$32 billion) in interest on federal government debt, plus Rs2.1 trillion (\$7.5 billion) in capacity payments to private power generation companies. In total, it will pay nearly \$40 billion in fixed charges, representing more than 10 per cent of GDP. The tax burden will increase with a new IMF arrangement. Any delay in reaching an agreement with the IMF could put renewed pressure on the currency and worsen the plight of a hapless population through higher inflation.

A sovereign debt crisis could lead to prolonged economic stress and a humanitarian crisis similar to Greece's recent experience. The Greek debt crisis, which began in 2009, took nearly a decade to resolve, with the country suffering the longest recession of any advanced mixed economy. The Greek political system was upended, social exclusion increased, and hundreds of thousands of well-educated Greeks emigrated.

Those who believe new elections can resolve these issues fail to appreciate that this grave crisis has little to do with the form of government. In fact, Pakistan's debt problem has worsened in recent years, with both the PML-N and PTI governments sharing responsibility. No political party has offered concrete and clear solutions beyond blame games and rhetoric.

Pakistan cannot be run via social media, television talk shows, or in courts. The road ahead is rocky and perilous, with shrinking space for ethnic and other minorities (47 per cent of the population). The desire for political reconciliation, no matter how sincere, is merely wishful thinking in the current environment.

Forty per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, and the majority of the poor and working classes struggle daily to pay bills and buy food. Meanwhile, much of the upper middle class is obsessed with accumulating wealth and lives in a bubble, unmindful of the working classes' misery. People cannot eat democracy; they need jobs and food.

Old methods are being used by the powerful, who are unable to find a more productive use of raw power than micromanaging TV channels or crushing dissent. They acted to remove Imran Khan only when some of Pakistan's closest allies became concerned about the country's future due to his reckless policies, which antagonized even close allies like China and Saudi Arabia. Former army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa once held Khan in high regard. A Russian diplomat told a member of Pakistan's visiting delegation to Moscow on the eve of Khan's meeting with Putin in February 2022 that the Russian president had no patience for sermons and "your PM seems to be fond of it". This caution came immediately after Khan lectured a Russian TV interviewer on Sufism and morality.

Political leaders cannot agree on even a basic modus vivendi due to personal vendettas. The leaders of the two biggest parties, Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan, have at different points sought to rule as dictators, actively working with the establishment to pursue their ambitions.

Nawaz Sharif once aspired to be a Khalifa. He won more than enough seats in his second term after a massively rigged election in February 1997 but failed to get his 15th constitutional amendment bill, the 'Shariat bill', through the Senate. This bill, introduced on August 28, 1998, and passed by the National Assembly on October 9, 1998, empowered the prime minister to enforce his interpretation of right and wrong in Islam and Shariah, irrespective of the constitution or court judgments. The Senate, where the PML-N was in the minority, refused to table the bill. Sharif was so angry at this defiance that he publicly demanded the senators be forced to pass the bill.

Even after signing the Charter of Democracy in 2006, Nawaz Sharif worked against the PPP's elected government in 2011, attempting to topple it with the help of then CJ Iftikhar Chaudhry. Only seven years later did Nawaz Sharif express regret over his role in the 'Memogate' conspiracy, hatched by then ISI chief Shuja Pasha.

Imran Khan publicly supported Pasha's allegations. Even the PTI's current president, Pervaiz Elahi, alleged in a 2019 interview, before joining the PTI, that General Pasha tried to force him and others to join the PTI in 2010.

Imran Khan has replaced Nawaz Sharif as Punjab's most popular leader. Perhaps few remember a story published in the February 1995 issue of Herald magazine: "With an agenda more ambitious and novel than any other political force in the nation's history, cricket idol turned philanthropist Imran Khan – along with former ISI chief General Hamid Gul and Pasban's Mohammad Ali Durrani – is about to launch his much speculated about 'pressure group'. Key players within the all-powerful establishment, inside sources argue, foresee the group as being a second, rather than third force, with Imran Khan viewed as an eventual anti-PPP alternative to Nawaz Sharif, should Sharif and his group of Muslim Leaguers fail to deliver."

Recently, well-known TV anchor Mubasher Lucman confirmed the widely known 'London plan'. Once a strong supporter of Khan, Lucman claimed to have hosted the meeting of Imran Khan, Pervaiz Elahi, and Dr Tahirul Qadri at the Dorchester Hotel in London in June 2014. It is alleged that former ISI chief Zaheerul Islam, who openly supported the PTI after his retirement, backed this coalition.

Imran Khan is no doubt popular, but he has a fascist mindset. Democracy is more than just winning elections; it requires governments to work with the opposition and others in a spirit of compromise and accommodation. One of his federal ministers declared on national TV on June 11, 2019, that the country's problems would be solved only if they could hang 5,000 people, but the constitution was a hurdle. Imran Khan never contradicted that statement.

Imran is also confused about which governance model to follow: Westminster democracy, Khomeini's Iran, the Chinese authoritarian system, or a vague notion of Riyasat-e-Madina.

Even now, the PTI has given no programme for reform. For example, would it cut defence spending? If yes, by how much? What percentage of GDP would the PTI spend on education, and how would it find the money given its terrible record of high fiscal deficits?

Other political leaders are incapable, corrupt, and suffer from cronyism and nepotism, reminiscent of a bygone era, and are out of touch with modern challenges. They should retire. But what about the 99 per cent? Unfortunately, their suffering is unlikely to end soon unless Pakistan's ruling elites learn from the remarkable development stories in East Asia. But do any among the powerful elites read? Even if they do, do they care about the country's long-term future? Evidence suggests otherwise.

Given the track record of the establishment and its current and former favourite politicians, it is naive to believe any power arrangement among them has a realistic prospect of addressing the grave and complex challenges head-on. The country cannot remain in denial of the leadership vacuum and pervasive crisis of competence. Pakistan will need extraordinary measures to fill this gap, or the self-inflicted crises will continue to drive it inexorably toward chaos.

Courtesy The News



Balancing banking scales

By Mutaheer Khan

One of the drawbacks of the modern economic system is how it rewards certain professions over others, completely detached from the underlying utility; for example, school teachers earn a fraction of what treasury bankers do.

One of them commits their entire lives to building the future of coming generations while the other sits at a desk all day putting public money in 'risk-free' government securities and pretends to be part of the high-finance community.

On a completely unrelated note, the advances-to-deposits of full-fledged Islamic banks in Pakistan fell to just 48.7 per cent by the end of 2023, while that for window operations reached 50.9pc. Though still slightly better, the ratios are converging with the conventional industry, which stood at 44.4pc.

This has been the most prominent theme in Pakistan's Islamic banking, which was nascent until a few years ago. Locked out of government securities for the most part, it made money by lending to individuals and businesses.

Perhaps seeing their conventional counterparts make a killing without too much effort motivated Islamic banks to join the bandwagon. With high interest rates and the ever-growing fiscal needs of a cash-strapped government, the choice was quite clear: double down on risk-free securities and cut back on lending.

Over the last five years, more than 30pc, or Rs 4.5tr, of all new deposits have been Islamic, as some big names in the conventional banking sector have aggressively shifted towards Shariah-compliant finance.

Unlike conventional banks, Islamic banks had a big advantage: there was no minimum deposit rate (MDR), so they could pay a much lower return (or whatever they want to call it) to customers. In Q4FY23, almost a quarter, or Rs6.7 trillion, of all banking deposits were Islamic. Out of this, around two-fifths of the customer money was in the current accounts anyway — ie at zero cost. Another Rs2.4tr was in



savings accounts where the prevailing remuneration was lower than the rest of the industry.

This gave Islamic banking an edge over the rest, so much so that everyone has started following suit. Over the last five years, more than 30pc, or Rs 4.5tr, of all new deposits have been Islamic, as some big names in the conventional banking sector have aggressively shifted towards Shariah-compliant banking.

Similarly, the Shariah factor in terms of new branches is even stronger. Between 2019 and 2023, Pakistani banks opened 2,714 net branches, of which 2,104 were Islamic. That's more than three-fourths of all new branches and does not incorporate the 634 additional windows.

An ever-growing part of this network is simply being used to collect cheaper deposits and then use them to fund the government's fiscal misadventures. In the last five years, full-fledged Islamic banks have increased net investments by Rs2.6tr, or twice as much as their financing. As a result, the investments-to-deposits (IDR) ratio has tripled to 63.5pc by 2023 from 21.4pc. This is an improvement compared to the overall industry's IDR of over 90pc.

Between 2019 and 2023, Pakistani banks opened 2,714 net branches, of which 2,104 were Islamic.

Plus, the reason this IDR is lower is not because Islamic banks don't want to put more money in sovereign papers but that there aren't enough Shariah-compliant avenues available. With the government

planning to make the financial system completely Islamic by 2027, that will obviously change, and the hedge fund managers will double down on capital deployment.

The challenge with banking, whether Islamic or conventional, lies in the dominance of the opportunity cost of treasury. The Shariah-compliant segment often faces more scrutiny, possibly due to concerns about the treatment of depositors. However, it's encouraging to see that the government has recognised this issue and has suggested the possibility of removing the minimum deposit rate exemption for these banks.

However, this adjustment will primarily help reduce the profitability gap between conventional and Islamic branches. The more significant challenge lies in the overall approach to banking. Beyond credit concerns, which can be influenced by interest rates and macroeconomic factors, there's a notable reluctance among institutions to facilitate the opening of basic accounts.

Just consider the fact that scheduled banks opened only a little over 134,000 net accounts during FY23. Consider that it is most likely that executives of the same institutions spoke at many conferences about the importance of financial inclusion. Transitioning Pakistan towards Shariah-compliant finance wouldn't change the industry's DNA.

Courtesy Dawn

Judicial Relief, Anti-Establishment Rhetoric, and Future Prospects for Imran Khan and PTI

By Daniyal Wali

The political landscape in Pakistan has been tumultuous, particularly concerning the ongoing tussles between Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the establishment. Recent developments indicate a nuanced scenario where PTI, under the leadership of Imran Khan, is receiving some judicial relief. However, this perceived alleviation from the judiciary does not unequivocally suggest an alignment or mutual understanding between PTI and the establishment. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of legal, political, and institutional factors.

Judicial Relief and the Role of the Judiciary

Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister and PTI chief, faced significant legal challenges, including his arrest on May 9, 2023, which led to widespread violence and unrest. The Supreme Court of Pakistan declared his arrest unlawful, and the Islamabad High Court granted him bail in the Al Qadir Trust case. These decisions were perceived as a significant relief for Khan and his party. Additionally, senior analyst Najam Sethi suggested that Khan might be acquitted in several cases, indicating a judicial trend that favors PTI to some extent.

The judiciary's role in providing relief to Imran Khan has been pivotal. This intervention underscores the judiciary's independence and its function as a check on potential executive and military overreach. It is essential to recognize that judicial relief does not necessarily imply political alignment. Courts operate within a framework of law, and their decisions are based on legal merits rather than political convenience. The Supreme Court's declaration of Khan's arrest as unlawful and the subsequent bail by the Islamabad High Court highlight the judiciary's commitment to due process and legal standards.

Despite the judicial relief, the relationship between PTI and the



establishment remains strained. Dr. Arif Alvi, in his first press conference after leaving the presidency, emphasized his efforts to bridge the gap between PTI and the establishment, albeit with limited success. He acknowledged the need for recognizing PTI's mandate but admitted that his efforts to mediate had not borne fruit. This suggests an ongoing discord between PTI and the military leadership, contradicting any notion of a comprehensive understanding or alliance.

Anti-Establishment Sentiment and Internal PTI Dynamics

Imran Khan's anti-establishment narrative has been a cornerstone of his political strategy, especially post his ousting. This rhetoric has resonated with a significant portion of the populace, further complicating any potential reconciliation. The PTI's stance against the establishment was evident during the May 9 protests, where the primary targets were military installations and senior military officials. This antagonistic stance was marked by slogans and acts of defiance against the military, indicating deep-seated grievances and mistrust.

The May 9 incident was particularly telling. Following Khan's arrest, widespread protests erupted across the country, targeting military installations such as the Corps Commander's residence in Lahore and the Frontier Corps Headquarters. These protests were characterized by anti-army slogans and direct confrontations with military personnel, illustrating the depth of PTI's dissatisfaction with the establishment. This incident marked a significant escalation in the anti-establishment sentiment within PTI, making any rapprochement more challenging.

Furthermore, PTI's internal dynamics also reflect this tension. While some leaders, like Shibli Faraz, expressed readiness for dialogue with the establishment, others, including Imran Khan himself, ruled out any deal. The mixed messages from PTI leadership highlight a fragmented approach towards dealing with the establishment, reflecting internal disagreements and a lack of cohesive strategy.

The establishment's stance has been to publicly distance itself from political affairs, as indicated by statements from Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and others. Despite allegations and perceptions, official narratives maintain that no negotiations or deals are in place.



between PTI and the military. This public posture aims to reinforce the apolitical stance of the military, amidst accusations of political interference and engineering. The establishment, represented primarily by the military leadership, has maintained a narrative of neutrality and non-interference. This is in line with broader efforts to rehabilitate its public image and distance itself from allegations of political meddling. However, the persistence of such allegations suggests that the military's historical role in Pakistan's politics continues to cast a long shadow over current events.

Strategic Dimensions and Future Prospects

It is also worth considering the strategic dimensions of the judicial relief granted to Khan. While the judiciary operates independently, the timing and nature of legal decisions can have significant political ramifications. The relief given to Khan might serve as a pressure valve, mitigating immediate unrest and providing a semblance of judicial fairness. This does not imply a broader political strategy but highlights the interconnectedness of legal decisions and political stability.

While there are signs of possible communication channels opening up, any substantial reconciliation appears distant. The relief provided to Khan in legal matters might be interpreted as a tactical move to maintain stability rather than an indication of a broader political rapprochement. The meetings between PTI leaders and military officials suggest some level of engagement, yet these do not confirm a complete thaw in relations. The future of PTI's relationship with the establishment will likely depend on several factors, including the outcome of ongoing legal cases, the political climate leading up to the next elections, and the broader geopolitical context. Any reconciliation would require substantial shifts in both rhetoric and strategy from PTI, alongside a willingness from the establishment to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Public perception plays a crucial role in shaping the political dynamics in Pakistan. PTI's anti-establishment stance has garnered significant support from a section of the populace that views the military's

influence in politics with skepticism. This support base is critical for PTI's political capital, and any perceived alignment with the establishment could alienate these supporters. Therefore, PTI's leadership must navigate this delicate balance carefully to maintain its political momentum.

The judiciary's actions, while rooted in legal principles, also influence public perception. The relief granted to Khan reinforces the narrative of judicial independence and adherence to due process. This enhances the credibility of the judiciary and provides a counter-narrative to allegations of political victimization. However, the judiciary's role remains under scrutiny, and its decisions continue to be analyzed through the lens of political implications.



The economic and social context of Pakistan also influences the political dynamics. The country is grappling with economic challenges, including inflation, unemployment, and debt. These issues exacerbate political instability and influence public sentiment. PTI's narrative of economic mismanagement by successive governments, including the current administration, resonates with the public. This economic context amplifies the stakes of the ongoing political tussle and influences the strategies of both PTI and the establishment. Dr. Arif Alvi, in his remarks, highlighted the economic downturn and the need for unity to address these challenges. His call for recognizing PTI's mandate reflects a broader concern for political stability and effective governance. The economic pressures create an imperative for

dialogue and cooperation, yet the entrenched political divisions make such cooperation difficult to achieve.

To conclude, the relief Imran Khan and PTI are receiving from the courts does not unequivocally signify an understanding or alignment with the establishment. Instead, it reflects the judiciary's role in upholding legal principles and maintaining checks and balances. The ongoing anti-establishment narrative from PTI, coupled with the establishment's efforts to maintain an apolitical stance, indicates persistent disagreements and mistrust. While there are signs of potential communication, substantial reconciliation remains uncertain, dependent on evolving political and legal landscapes. The situation underscores

the complexity of Pakistani politics, where judicial decisions, political narratives, and institutional relationships intertwine, shaping the country's democratic trajectory. The interplay of legal, political, and institutional factors creates a dynamic and often unpredictable political environment. PTI's judicial relief, the establishment's public posture, and the broader socio-economic context all contribute to the unfolding political narrative. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced analysis that considers multiple perspectives and acknowledges the fluid nature of political alliances and conflicts in Pakistan. As the country navigates these challenges, the actions of key stakeholders, including PTI, the establishment, and the judiciary, will continue to shape the future of Pakistan's democracy and governance.



High-Profile Cases across Pakistan's Judicial Courts

By Nimra Atiq

In the year 2024, Pakistan witnessed a series of captivating courtroom dramas, as the judiciary took center stage in shaping the country's future. These legal battles ranged from high-stakes political conflicts to groundbreaking human rights decisions, garnering attention both nationally and internationally. The first half of 2024 was marked by significant developments in Pakistan's courts, with numerous high-profile cases making headlines. These cases spanned from corruption scandals to pivotal human rights issues, leaving a lasting impact on Pakistan's trajectory. Here are some of the most notable court cases that defined Pakistan in 2024:

£190m corruption case:

Imran Khan's most high-profile legal battle this year has been the corruption case initiated by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The case pertains to allegations of corruption and abuse of authority associated with a financial settlement during the tenure of the PTI, reportedly resulting in a £190 million loss to the national exchequer. During his time as the Prime Minister, Mr. Khan permitted a businessman to utilize the funds to partially settle a fine of approximately ₹450 billion imposed by the Supreme Court, instead of depositing the amount in the national treasury.

Reportedly, as part of this arrangement, the businessman gifted around 57 acres of land to a trust established by Mr. Khan and Bushra Bibi, intended for the establishment of the Al-Qadir University in the Sohawa area of the Jhelum district of Punjab.

The Islamabad High Court (IHC) has granted bail to PTI founder Imran Khan in the £190 million case, contingent on the submission of a surety bond of Rs1 million. However, it is important to note that this order will not lead to the release of the former Prime Minister from Adiala jail, as his sentences in the Iddat and cypher cases are yet to be suspended.

Remember, this is the case in which Mr Khan was arrested on the 8th of May 2023



after which certain elements caused the unfortunate and inexcusable events of the 9th of May. Mr. Khan was taken away from outside the Islamabad High Court by a large group of Rangers before being detained. The timing and manner of the arrest have led Mr. Khan's supporters to cry foul and complain that the case is more about political victimization than legal merit.

There are concerns that this case could become tainted as it involves a former prime minister, the country's most powerful real estate tycoon, and is linked to another case related to Bahria Town Karachi. The money returned by the NCA was meant to pay a Rs 460 billion fine that Bahria Town owed for its Bahria Town Karachi project to the Supreme Court. If Bahria Town is unable to pay the fine, it may be heading towards default. So, this case has far-reaching implications beyond just the fate of Imran Khan.

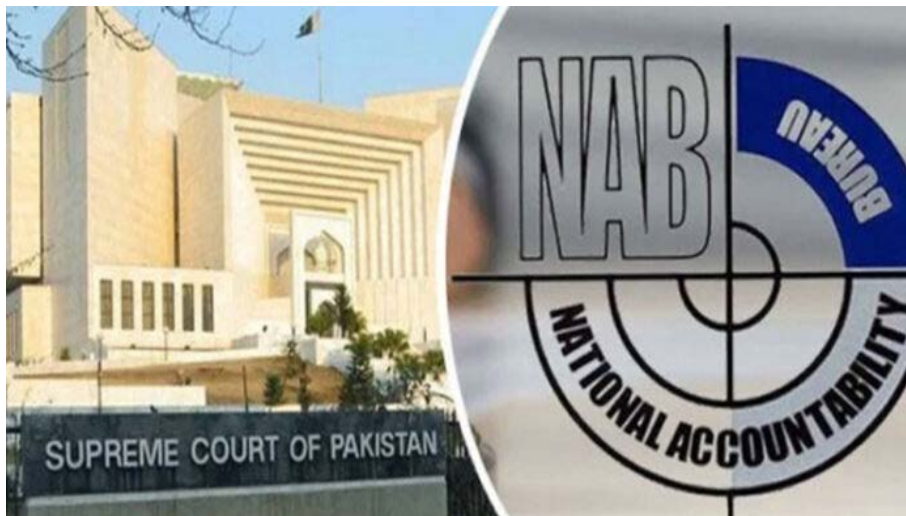
NAB Amendments Case:

The Supreme Court of Pakistan has nullified the amendments to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) law, reverting to its original provisions. The amendments, enacted by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government in May 2022, had significantly curtailed NAB's powers and jurisdiction, triggering widespread controversy and deliberation.

The case, ongoing since 2022, was instigated by Imran Khan, the founder of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Prime Minister of Pakistan at the time. Khan contested the validity of the amendments, contending that they would effectively eliminate white-collar crimes committed by public office holders.

Under the leadership of Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, the Supreme Court unanimously reinstated the original provisions of the NAB law. This ruling was regarded as a significant triumph for Imran Khan and his party, while posing a setback for the PDM government. The amendments had introduced several notable alterations to the law, including restricting NAB's jurisdiction to cases involving over Rs500 million, exempting corruption cases involving less than Rs50 crore from NAB's investigation, and transferring the authority to appoint Accountability Court judges from the President to the federal government. The restoration of the original provisions of the NAB law holds far-reaching implications for Pakistan's political landscape and the pursuit of accountability. It signifies that corruption cases, irrespective of their magnitude, will be subject to scrutiny and investigation by NAB.

The ruling has also prompted inquiries into the future of the PDM government, as the amendments were introduced to limit NAB's powers and shield its leaders from corruption charges. The government had



The unexpected declaration of a public holiday by the PML-N government on Youm-i-Takbeer delayed the much-awaited conclusion of proceedings on the appeals of PTI leaders Imran Khan and Shah Mehmood Qureshi against their conviction in the cipher case.

Missing Poet Ahmad Farhad Case:

Another case of alleged enforced disappearance has shed light on the perceived impunity enjoyed by certain forces in the country, who consider themselves exempt from legal consequences in an increasingly repressive environment. The disappearance of Ahmad Farhad Shah, a Kashmiri journalist and poet, from his residence in Islamabad has garnered significant attention in Pakistan. This incident contributes to the growing number of missing persons, revealing the deteriorating human rights situation and escalating repression within the nation.

The case gained prominence following the Islamabad High Court's summons of officials from various security agencies and government ministries for the upcoming hearing. Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, the senior judge of the IHC, also mandated the live-streaming of all missing persons-related cases to enhance public awareness and comprehension of pertinent legal matters.

During the court session, the Attorney General disclosed that Ahmad Farhad has been located and is presently in police

asserted that the amendments were necessary to prevent political manipulation and ensure that NAB was not utilized as a tool to target political adversaries.

Nevertheless, critics of the amendments contended that they were designed to safeguard corrupt officials and undermine the accountability process. The Supreme Court's ruling has validated these criticisms, placing pressure on the government to reconsider its position on the amendments.

Cipher Case:

Former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and a senior leader of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, have been sentenced to 10 years in prison. They were charged with leaking state secrets, mishandling sensitive diplomatic documents, and face accusations that have put the former Prime Minister's political career at stake.

This case has raised concerns about the transparency and accountability of the country's leadership. The cipher case has highlighted political tensions and power struggles within Pakistan's political landscape. Imran Khan has denied the charges, alleging that the case is a political vendetta aimed at keeping him and his party out of the political arena. The case has also raised questions about the independence of the judiciary and the role of foreign powers in Pakistan's domestic affairs.

The legal battle surrounding the cipher case has been marked by controversy and

political maneuvering. Khan's lawyers have challenged the trial process, citing a lack of evidence and political bias. The Islamabad High Court has questioned the prosecution's evidence, noting that there is no record of the cipher being in Khan's possession. This case has also involved high-ranking officials, including the former US diplomat Donald Lu, whose alleged conversation with Pakistan's ambassador in Washington has been at the center of the controversy. The Cipher case has not only been a legal saga but has also become a political battleground, with the PTI expressing a lack of trust in the judiciary and demanding the recusal of the Chief Justice from hearing cases related to Imran Khan. This move underscores the deep-rooted tensions and suspicions surrounding the case, reflecting a broader narrative of political maneuvering and power struggles within the Pakistani political landscape.





custody as a suspect in a case registered in the Bagh district. Meanwhile, despite awaiting the governor's endorsement to enact it into law, the Punjab government, under Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz, has announced its intention to pursue legal action against former Prime Minister Imran Khan and other PTI leaders for allegedly propagating a narrative of animosity towards state institutions. This suggests the potential utilization of the defamation law to suppress opposition and silence dissident voices.

Spy Agencies 'Interfere' in Cases:

Senior judges in Pakistan have publicly accused the country's powerful intelligence agencies of interfering in judicial affairs and coercing them into making favorable rulings, particularly in politically sensitive cases. The allegations stem from a letter written by six out of eight judges of the Islamabad High Court (IHC), which was made public in late March 2024.

In the letter, the judges claimed that Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), had used tactics such as abducting relatives, torturing judges, and installing hidden cameras in their homes to pressure them into hearing and ruling on cases against the former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The judges alleged that they were forced to take up a case against Khan even after they had decided it did not meet the legal requirements to be adjudicated. They urged the Supreme Judicial Council, the country's top judicial oversight body, to investigate the "continuing policy" of the executive branch to "intimidate judges" through the

intelligence agencies. The Peshawar High Court and Lahore High Court have both admitted that the interference of intelligence agencies in judicial affairs was an 'open secret'.

The Peshawar High Court referred to the famous judgment of the Supreme Court in suo motu case No.7 of 2017, commonly known as the 'Faizabad Dharna case,' and quoted different directives issued by the apex court in it. The report pointed out that had the directions issued by the apex court in the said judgment been followed by the executive/parliament and the role of the intelligence agencies, more particularly its interference in politics, media, and judiciary, was prohibited through the Act of parliament, the present spiraling atmosphere would have never arisen.

The explosive letter has sent shockwaves through Pakistan's political and legal landscape, with the Supreme Court quickly taking up the matter and seeking responses from the government as well as bar associations across the country. Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, known for his staunch defense of judicial independence, has vowed that any interference will not be tolerated.

ToshaKhana Case:

The Toshakhana case pertains to allegations that Imran Khan, during his tenure as Prime Minister, abused his authority by retaining gifts from foreign dignitaries instead of depositing them in the state treasury, known as Toshakhana. According to Pakistani law, officials are obligated to declare and deposit any gifts received in their official capacity. Khan purportedly retained several high-value items without proper declaration and failed to pay the

requisite retention fees. In October 2022, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) concluded that while Khan's sale of items was not illegal since he had paid for them and therefore owned them, he had engaged in unethical conduct and made false assertions and declarations. Consequently, the ECP disqualified him from holding public office for a period of five years.

The most valuable among the watches, a "Master Graff limited edition," is estimated to be worth \$300,000, as per Pakistan's information minister. Khan's media team has criticized the ruling, asserting that it will be contested and claiming that the decision was reached through a "pre-determined process."

Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, currently incarcerated, is unlikely to resolve his legal entanglements soon, as an inquiry report has revealed that another Toshakhana case, involving the sale of state gifts, has been lodged against him. In this new case, he stands accused of illegally acquiring and selling at least seven luxury watches, as well as retaining and selling 10 valuable gifts, diamond, and gold sets, in contravention of the regulations.

The ongoing surge of notable court cases in Pakistan mirrors the intricate blend of politics, governance, and legal hurdles in the nation. The results of these proceedings will not just decide the destiny of important figures but also establish standards for Pakistan's legal and political trajectory. As these cases progress, they underscore the crucial function of a separate judiciary in upholding the rule of law and protecting democratic ideals in Pakistan.





Do we need a Charter for Change?

There is abundance of policies and counter-policies, each designed with specific objectives in mind

By Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri

In public policy literature, 'policy silos' describe the phenomenon where policies are developed in isolation from other policy areas and without coordination.

This term highlights the negative consequences of fragmented policymaking, such as inconsistency, inefficiency, suboptimal decision-making, and poor policy delivery. Pakistan presents a compelling case study of policy silos, with numerous examples demonstrating the detrimental effects of this ad-hoc approach to governance.

First things first, let's recognize that Pakistan is not lacking in policies. On the contrary, there is an abundance of policies and counter-policies across various sectors, each designed with specific objectives in mind. However, the implementation of these policies often occurs within isolated departmental boundaries, leading to missed opportunities for synergy and collaboration. This lack of an integrated approach results in policies that do not complement or support one another, ultimately undermining their effectiveness. This fragmentation is particularly problematic for a country like Pakistan, where interrelated challenges require cohesive and coordinated responses.

Take, for example, the development projects in Islamabad's Blue Area. Many Islamabad residents must have noticed that just a few months ago, a 1.75 km stretch of road from the F-8 signal at the Seventh Avenue intersection to the F-10 roundabout was widened. While it can be argued that an efficient mass transit system could reduce the need for road widening and thereby prevent traffic congestion and environmental degradation, let's accept the necessity (again, as an ad-hoc measure) of road widening. This project likely cost a couple of hundred million rupees.

Initially, the plan included linking the service road of the new Blue Area and Fatima Jinnah Park Gate through an overhead bridge. However, without public consultation or an environmental impact assessment (as always), the plan was



abruptly changed from an overhead bridge to a pedestrian underpass. As a result, the newly constructed road is now being dug up to accommodate the underpass, leading to double expenditures: first, for the original road construction and now for its modification.

This situation could have been avoided with a holistic and participatory planning process that integrated urban development, transportation, and environmental sustainability. This project highlights the inefficiencies and added costs that arise when policies are made in isolation and then whimsically modified.

Some might argue that a few hundred million rupees spent on beautifying the capital are relatively inconsequential. However, consider another example with far greater financial implications: the energy sector in Pakistan. The country has been consistently inconsistent in pursuing the right energy mix. At one point, compressed natural gas (CNG) was heralded as the solution to our energy needs, particularly in the transport sector. This led to the mushroom growth of CNG stations and substantial investments by consumers in CNG kits for their vehicles.

However, the government soon realized it lacked the gas reserves to support this policy, and importing gas was too costly; hence, it curtailed CNG supply and raised

its prices to bring them to par with petrol and diesel. Ironically, this was done a few months after the government announced duty-free CNG bus imports in 2014. The CNG pump investors and consumers lost billions of rupees due to this abrupt policy shift.

Billions of rupees may still seem negligible to some when considering government actions or inactions. Therefore, let's examine another example of policy silos that is costing trillions of rupees now. I am referring to the power purchase agreements with independent power producers. These agreements include a 'take-or-pay' clause, obligating the government to make capacity payments in dollars, which have now ballooned to a staggering Rs2 trillion in capacity payment charges (CPC).

In an attempt to manage the CPC, the government may come up with another ad-hoc solution. It is considering measures to make solar power less attractive to consumers to ensure they continue to buy grid electricity, thereby reducing the CPC burden. This was done when the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) successfully brought 'Sinosolar', a Chinese solar panel manufacturing company, to start manufacturing panels in Karachi so that consumers could get them cheaper.

The 'novel solution' to reducing CPC will create an unpredictable environment for investors, consumers, and stakeholders.



Discouragement of solar energy adoption will not only hinder the country's ability to meet its environmental targets but will also keep the country dependent on imported fossil fuels for conventional power plants, draining precious foreign reserves.

The use of fossil fuels will make Pakistani exports uncompetitive under the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) regime. Thus, it will be a lose-lose situation, but right now, it will help add numbers for the IMF. A coordinated approach that aligns energy, environmental, and financial policies is essential to avoid such policy dilemmas.

Another glaring example of policy silos is the untimely wheat import this year, leading to a significant crisis for wheat farmers in Pakistan. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute developed and handed over (on a pro-bono basis) a 'Food Security Dashboard' for the Ministry of National Food Security (MNFSR) in 2021. Among other food items, this portal provided real-time data on wheat stocks, demand, inter-district movement, and prices at the district level. It also displayed real-time data on wheat imports and their intended consumption areas. Chief secretaries were responsible for data authenticity, and provinces had started updating the data daily.

The purpose of the portal was to assist decision-makers in making data-based decisions. However, one morning, someone at MNFSR decided to discontinue the use of the portal. As a result, policy-

makers lost sight of the bigger picture and made the mistake of importing wheat right at harvest time, which led to a decrease in the prices of the incoming crop.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Numerous policies are made hastily to qualify for loans or grants from lenders and development partners. These policies are often designed to meet the deadlines or conditionalities set by lenders or donors rather than being driven by a cohesive national strategy. This approach aggravates the problem of policy silos, as different ministries rush to implement isolated measures that satisfy specific conditions but fail to align with broader, integrated goals.

This approach also hinders the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 13 (climate action) can conflict if pursued in silos. Policies aimed at boosting economic growth through industrial expansion could increase carbon emissions, undermining climate action efforts. Similarly, aggressive climate policies without consideration for economic impacts could stifle job creation and economic growth.

To address the issue of policy silos in Pakistan, a whole-of-policy and whole-of-the-government approach is essential. This approach involves fostering inter-ministerial communication, encouraging collaborative planning, and establishing integrated policy frameworks. Providing financial and administrative

incentives for departments collaborating on joint initiatives can ensure, to some extent, that policy objectives are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

Developing policy frameworks that require cross-ministerial input and review will help consider relevant perspectives before making policy decisions. Successful examples from other countries, such as integrated urban planning frameworks or cross-sectoral environmental policies, can serve as models for Pakistan.

Moreover, embracing evidence-based and data-driven policymaking is crucial for overcoming the challenges posed by policy silos. 'Data for development' initiatives can play a significant role in informing policy decisions and ensuring they are based on robust evidence rather than assumptions or whimsical preferences. For instance, utilizing comprehensive data analytics and triangulating energy, fiscal, and climate change data may help harmonize investments in renewable energy and fossil fuels, ensuring that environmental, balance of payments, and social goals are aligned.

After mixed results with the Charter of Democracy and unsuccessful attempts at a Charter of Economy, how about trying for a 'Charter of Change' – not between the government and opposition, but within government ministries and departments? By changing the policy silos culture, we can achieve more effective and efficient governance in Pakistan.

Courtesy The News





AJK and GB movements



By Sajjad Ahmad

Amid a grave economic crisis and the recent Dubai leaks embarrassment, the situation in what people generally believe are ‘peripheral’ areas of Pakistan has drawn the attention of the authorities. Be it Haq do Tehreek in Balochistan, the Awami Action Committee of Gilgit-Baltistan or the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) demanding their rights, what is common in all these movements is that their issues lie in the centre, Islamabad. Through protests, sit-ins, strikes and politics of agitation, these so-called per-ipheral and marginalised areas are gaining centre stage. A general feeling of dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement among the population seems to be the driving force behind these movements.

The recent protests in AJK led by JAAC didn’t happen overnight. According to one of the senior leaders of JAAC — an alliance of labour leaders, traders, transporters, and civil society members — which led protests and a march towards Muzaffarabad, the demands, which were neither irrational nor

unfair, go one year back. They were asking for the electricity rate to be set according to hydropower generation costs in AJK, subsidised wheat flour, and downsizing government officials to spend resources on the public rather than on the ruling elites. Their argument is simple: the AJK government is oversized, and in a population of only four million, it doesn’t need so many ministers and bureaucrats. Their perks are a burden on the region’s budget. However, given the abysmal record of managing crises, the authorities, rather being proactive, adopted a reactive approach.

The unrest began when activists and members of JAAC were detained pre-emptively in overnight raids by law enforcement agencies. This prompted JAAC to call for a strike on May 10 and a march towards Muzaffarabad on May 11. During the several days of unrest, four precious lives were lost and over a hundred were injured. Consequently, in an emergency meeting in Islamabad, PM Shehbaz Sharif met all the demands, and the JAAC called off the protests. The PM

announced a grant of Rs23 billion to AJK, which included subsidies on flour and electricity prices. Senior PML-N leader Rana Sanaullah acknowledged that the situation was mishandled and that the damage could have been avoided through early negotiations.

In Pakistan, it has become a pattern to address issues only when they get out of control and result in a full-fledged crisis. The wheat subsidy is not a new issue for the government. Just a few months ago, GB was embroiled in mass protests, sit-ins and strikes for the restoration of the wheat subsidy granted to the region. The anger was also due to the unilateral decisions of the federal government. The demonstrations were led by the Awami Action Committee GB — an alliance of trade unions, religious and political leaders, and CSOs. This was also a repeat telecast. In 2022, similar protests erupted on the same issues. In 2024, however, the AAC had a 15-point demand list which included the restoration of wheat subsidy, suspension of Finance Act, land ownership rights for



locals, a share for GB in the NFC Award, royalties from the Diamer-Bhasha dam, an end to prolonged power outages and exploitation of GB's mineral resources, among others.

A new generation of educated young people is redefining politics in AJK and GB.

The regions of AJK and GB both have a disputed status. They are semi-autonomous regions which have gone through various reforms since 1947. AJK has its own constitution, government and legislative assembly, while GB has only a legislative assembly. However, both regions are politically and financially dependent on the centre. Islamabad maintains a strong grip on their administration through federal bureaucracy. Representatives contest elections on the platforms of mainstream political parties and enter local assemblies with their hands tied. They cannot deviate from their parties' policies. They often acknowledge the public demands during such protests — as in the case of AJK's recent protests — but also admit like AJK's Rural Development Minister Faisal Mumtaz Rathore, that the solution falls in the centre's jurisdiction.

In both AJK and GB's cases, the protests and marches occurred only when negotiations with regional governments failed. With these repeated episodes, one wonders why conciliation and crisis management are so difficult for the centre.



Perhaps the starting point for the federal government to manage affairs should be to first realise that a new generation has come of age in both regions, which is detached from traditional politics. This young generation is educated, aware of their rights, and in the majority. They are shaping these rights movements and redefining politics in both AJK and GB. The government of Pakistan should have the answers to their questions. Relying on old methods won't work and this AJK episode is a glimpse of that. There is no harm in empowering regional governments and granting autonomy in local affairs. It is perhaps the best solution to regain the trust of the people and avoid future unrest.

Self-determination, a catchword linked to Kashmir, generally refers to the right of

people to constitute themselves as a nation-state or to integrate with an already existing one. Salvatore Senese divides it into two categories: internal and external. The latter has been already mentioned. Internal self-determination, according to Senese, is 'the right of people to freely choose their own political, economic, and social system'.

Can Pakistan provide internal self-determination to AJK and GB? The time is ripe for it. The PM has already stressed for permanent solutions to AJK's problems, which is a promising sign. Only time will tell how serious the government is about providing permanent solutions to the chronic problems of AJK and GB.

Courtesy Dawn



Pakistan's Gwadar port shows China's Belt and Road can fail

Pakistan's Gwadar port was meant to be a shining success for China's Belt and Road Initiative. But almost two decades later, it still sits empty.

By Kira Schacht

In November 2016, Gwadar port symbolized stability, peace and prosperity for Pakistan — at least according to then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

"This day is the dawn of a new era," he told the opening ceremony crowd, which had gathered to witness a row of Chinese trucks arriving to load cargo onto the first-ever container ship to pass through the port.

It was the official launch of the port's operations nearly a decade after its completion. The ceremony also marked the start of the prestigious China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of China's global collection of infrastructure projects and trade networks known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Yet today, nearly eight years later, this new era has yet to dawn. A DW analysis shows what went wrong.

'Investors thought Gwadar would become Dubai'

The idea behind the CPEC was to connect China's western Xinjiang province with the sea via Pakistan. This would shorten trade routes for China and help avoid the contentious Malacca Strait choke point, a narrow waterway between Malaysia and Sumatra that links the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Pakistan, meanwhile, would benefit from increases in trade, infrastructure and industry along the 2,000-kilometer corridor (1,240 miles), all financed by China.

These deals are lucrative for China, said Jacob Mardell, a former analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies, a German think tank, and a journalist covering the BRI.

"This model almost kind of acts as a subsidy for Chinese companies," he



told DW. He explained that Chinese banks loan money to governments that then give that money to Chinese construction companies and pay the loan back to the bank over time. This means the money essentially never leaves China, "while the bill is ultimately footed by taxpayers in other countries."

One common pattern appears to be building new ports relatively close to already established ones, as is the case with Gwadar and Karachi. The new ports are often meant to supplement or replace the older, less efficient ones over time.

This is also the case in Cameroon and Nigeria, for instance. In Cameroon, the newly built port of Kribi is set to replace the congested and far too shallow port of Douala, while in Nigeria, the port of Lagos is supplemented by the just-opened Lekki deep-sea port, less than 100 kilometers away. Both ports were financed and built by Chinese state-owned companies.

Similarly, in 2017, the government of Sri Lanka granted China a 99-year lease and majority stake in its relatively new Hambantota port, which was originally intended to supplement the country's main port of Colombo.

Gwadar performs worse than other new ports

Lekki port received 26 ships in 2023, its first year of operation, according to ship tracking and maritime analytics provider MarineTraffic. It's a modest number compared to bigger ports — but Gwadar, despite being completed in 2007, has only logged 22 ships in its best year to date. It has also failed to attract any regularly scheduled deep-sea shipping lines.

This means Gwadar processes almost no cargo that could generate income for Pakistan — or, for that matter, for the Chinese operating company. And it's no wonder: Gwadar is operating at very limited capacity. The port's three berths, where loading and unloading takes place, can handle 137,000 standard 20-foot shipping containers per year. In contrast, Karachi and its 33 berths can handle the equivalent of 4.2 million 20-foot containers per year.

While ports like Kribi or Lekki are comparatively small, they outshine Gwadar, the supposed new centerpiece of trade for South and Central Asia.

Khalid told DW that although Gwadar

has the potential to eventually surpass Karachi, a lack of investment is holding it back. A \$1.6 billion (€1.5 billion) expansion was promised in 2015, but little progress appears to have been made at the port since then. Much of the supporting infrastructure, including roads and railways needed to transport cargo to and from Gwadar, is also missing.

Publicly, investors like the China Pakistan Investment Corporation still claim Gwadar port is "becoming a focal point for trade and investment in the region." But the empty port site suggests the opposite.

Mardell and Khalid said that behind the scenes, both Pakistan and China have become disillusioned with the project.

"Jobs promises were not met. Industrial promises were not met. The business opportunities for Pakistanis were not met," said Khalid. "They [China] promised nine special economic zones. Not one is fully functional to date."

CPEC hampered by political, economic instability

The of development in Gwadar broadly mirrors the situation in the rest of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. "CPEC has had problems since its inception," said Mardell.

Some of these problems are specific to the border region of Balochistan, where Gwadar is situated. It is among the poorest regions of Pakistan and has strong separatist militias that commonly carry out attacks, including some that have specifically targeted Chinese nationals. In turn, the militias have been violently suppressed by the Pakistani military.

At the national level, Pakistan has been experiencing a severe economic crisis in recent years, and the country is still struggling to stabilize politically after the ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022.

"Since the political and security situation in Pakistan has deteriorated more recently, that's hampered CPEC even more," said Mardell.

China learning from its mistakes in Pakistan

On the Chinese side, Mardell thinks decision-makers might have miscalculated.

"When it comes to investment decisions, the Chinese are famously not risk-averse," he told DW. He says "basically unlimited" state backing for state-owned investment and construction companies, coupled with the political will to rapidly step up competition with Western economies, has led China to fund even very risky projects in less stable countries worldwide.



"I just don't think they fully understood the situation in Pakistan going in," said Mardell, though he believes this might change for other projects going forward. "I think they've learned from their mistakes with the BRI and with CPEC, and they're probably more reluctant to commit capital nowadays."

In the last few years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, China's spending on BRI projects has slowed. But while the country may now be more selective in which projects it funds, it is starting to invest more again, with total BRI investment amounts having reached pre-pandemic levels.

Unsustainable investment pushes countries into debt

Still, countries like Pakistan are now stuck paying back large amounts of debt to Chinese lenders. "Pakistan has to pay billions of dollars back in loans, because of

reckless investments in the name of CPEC," said Khalid.

Similar cases have previously led to criticism that China is conducting debt-trap diplomacy, allowing partner countries to go into unsustainable amounts of debt to gain political influence.

Moreover, part of the revenue from the newly built projects also goes back to China.

"China gets the lion's share of everything," Khalid said, referring to CPEC investments. With Gwadar port, for

instance, 90% of the quite limited revenue goes to the Chinese operating company. The Pakistani government receives 10%, while nothing goes to the Balochi regional government.

Mardell said that the CPEC and Gwadar port with it will likely continue despite all its issues.

"There's no way that China will lose face and admit that it's a disaster. And pulling out of CPEC and abandoning Pakistan isn't an option now. They're in too deep, and Pakistan is too important an ally," he said.

Instead, he thinks it's likely China will continue to drag its feet on large investments in Pakistan, but still show token amounts of effort to keep the project going.

Yet, he said, there's still a chance for Gwadar. "If the situation in Pakistan changes for the better, then maybe CPEC will make progress."

Courtesy www.dw.com

FBR's Senior Officers Suspended and Transferred Amid Rs 360 Million Tax Fraud Investigation



By Ashraf Malkham

An inquiry into the transfer of a senior officers from the Inland Revenue Offices (IRO) in Lahore revealed that officer had been suspended after reports of a scandal involving fake invoices, amounting to Rs 360 million, had been revealed.

The reports said that two officers had exchanged hot words in the presence of senior officers. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) constituted a committee comprising three seniors to inquire the matter.

The FBR has transferred three officers of Grade 21 and three officers in Grade 20 and Grade 18 officers. Khurram Fakhar Siddique, serving as DC Inland Revenue at Regional Tax Office, Lahore, has been suspended for 120 days. Among the Grade 21 officers who were transferred are Mehmood Hussain Jafari, Chief Commissioner of Large Taxpayers Office, Lahore; Muhammad Abid Raza, Chief Commissioner of Corporate Tax Office Lahore; and Asem Iftikhar, Chief Commissioner of

Regional Tax Office Gujranwala. Grade 20 officers of Inland Revenue services who were transferred include Amjad Farooq, Chief Commissioner (OPS) of Regional Tax Office Lahore; Muhammad Majid, Commissioner of Zone-IV Large Taxpayers Office, Lahore; and Rana Waqar Ali, Commissioner of Zone-II Large Taxpayers Office, Lahore.

The News learnt of authority in connivance with officials of Inland Revenue Lahore offices Rs 360 million were received from as tax refund through fake invoices. When the time of distribution came different officers had objections on their share. A source told that differences erupted between officers of two field formations of Lahore on distribution of fraud money. He further said that Revenue Tax Office (RTO) Lahore received Rs 82 million which was distributed among different employees of the FBR. There was also an additional Rs 15 million given to serving officers at FBR, Rs 11 million to the chief of Large Taxpayers Office (LTO) and Rs 11 million to commissioner office and legal advisor.

An officer, on condition of anonymity, told that in the chief LTO's a severe fight took place in between Commissioner Rana Waqar and DC Headquarter RTO Khurram Fakher in presence of Chief LTO Headquarter. Reportedly both the officers are very close to high ups in FBR Headquarter, Islamabad.

Spokesperson FBR Muhammad Bukhtiar confirmed that following reports of fraud in tax refund senior officers have been transferred and one suspended so that they being keeper of record should not hinder investigation into the issue. An Inland Revenue record could not hinder the working of the Inquiry Committee. He further said that one officer has been suspended as his suspension authority is Chairman FBR. He further stated that DC Income tax was suspended on his misbehavior with a senior officer. Spokesperson further said in light of the report from committee cases of senior officers would be sent to the Prime Minister for disciplinary action.

The Enigma Surrounding Iran's President Raisi's Helicopter Crash



By Romana Afsheen

Following the death of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi over a week ago, there remains considerable uncertainty surrounding the circumstances of the helicopter crash that claimed his life, as conflicting details continue to emerge.

The Iranian Armed Forces have issued an initial report on the helicopter crash that tragically resulted in the loss of President Ebrahim Raisi and his delegation. The report, released on Thursday, highlights findings gathered by an investigative team dispatched to the crash site.

According to the report, the helicopter was following its designated flight path when it collided with mountainous terrain, leading to a fire upon impact. No evidence of external damage, such as gunfire, was found on the wreckage. Iranian drones identified the crash site early on Monday, with rescue teams promptly dispatched. Pre-crash communications between the aircraft and ground control showed no abnormalities. The investigation remains ongoing, with further updates promised to the public. The Tehran Times published the report on Friday.

The tragic crash occurred on Sunday in northwestern Iran, as officials were returning from a dam inauguration. In response to the loss, the people of Tehran gathered in large numbers for the funeral ceremony, reflecting a deep sense of grief and respect. Mourners from all parts of the city came together to honor President Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian. Their collective sorrow demonstrated the profound impact of their service to the nation.

Prior to the official start of the funeral, a significant number of mourners flooded the streets, converging at Tehran University to pay their respects. The Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, led funeral prayers, joined by prominent officials and military commanders. The procession, from Tehran University to Azadi Square, was attended by thousands, who endured the heat to bid farewell. Messages of tribute adorned their hands, expressing pride in voting for a martyr and gratitude for their service to the nation.

The outpouring of grief not only honored the legacy of President Raisi

and Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian but also emphasized the enduring connection between these leaders and the people they served. Iranian figures, including Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, praised President Raisi's commitment to serving the Iranian people, highlighting his legacy of humility and dedication.

A formal report released by the General Staff of the Armed Forces addressed the incident but stopped short of providing a definitive explanation for the crash, ruling out the possibility of it being shot down and stating that further investigation is required.

Adding to the confusion is the revelation that the President's bodyguard was conspicuously absent from the helicopter.

Discrepancies between accounts have compounded the confusion. Gholamhossein Esmacili, Raisi's chief of staff and a member of his entourage, provided an interview that shed additional light on the events leading up to the tragedy.

In the early hours of May 19th,

President Raisi set off from Tehran to Tabriz accompanied by his entourage, setting the stage for a journey that would end in tragedy.

According to the Iran's President's chief of staff, the events of May 19th unfolded as follows:

At 6:00 AM (Tehran Time), the President and his entourage departed from Tehran to Tabriz via plane.

Around 7:15/30 AM, three helicopters were deployed from Tabriz for a project visit in Agh Band.

By 9:00 AM, the journey continued from Agh Band to Khoda Afarin, near the Giz Galasi Dam, with plans for further travel.

At 1:00 PM, the final leg of the journey was intended to be from Khoda Afarin back to Tabriz, but the helicopter crash prevented its completion.

Around 1:35 PM, while en route to Tabriz, the helicopters attempted to navigate a cloud layer by increasing altitude. While the first and third helicopters succeeded, the one carrying the President disappeared and later crashed, resulting in the loss of all passengers. Esmaili noted, "We emerged from the cloud layer very normally, even without any turbulence."

Esmaili's account emphasizes two key points: firstly, that the weather conditions were favorable with no issues, and secondly, that all necessary safety measures were taken to secure the President's helicopter flight, as reported by Noor News, an agency close to the Supreme National Security Council.

The brief report by the General Staff of the Armed Forces, consisting of six items, did not address weather conditions at the time of the incident. Additionally, it stated in item six that "no suspicious issues were observed in the communications between the control tower and the flight crew," raising questions about the suddenness of the crash.

The account provided by Esmaili also illuminates his communication with cleric Mohammad Ali Al-Hashem, a passenger aboard the helicopter, following the crash.

Esmaili recounts his attempt to contact the pilot, only to have Al-Hashem answer the phone instead. He recalls questioning Al-Hashem about the incident, to which Al-Hashem responded that he didn't

comprehend what had occurred.

During the interview, Esmaili mentioned that he remained in contact with Al-Hashem for three to four hours post-crash. However, despite Al-Hashem allegedly surviving the crash, he was discovered deceased when rescue teams arrived. Notably, his body showed no signs of burns, unlike those of Raisi and others.

While it's speculated that either the transponder system was turned off or the helicopter lacked one, as suggested by the Turkish transport minister, questions arise regarding the presence of a mobile signal for up to three hours after the crash. This raises inquiries about why it took 15 hours to pinpoint the coordinates of the helicopter wreckage.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi's bodyguard was notably absent from the helicopter that crashed, despite typically being by his side in recent images. The released casualty list revealed this discrepancy, prompting questions about why the bodyguard did not accompany Raisi.

The Bell 212 helicopter, capable of accommodating 15 passengers, had only 8 individuals on board, raising further queries about the bodyguard's absence. Javad Mehrabi, Raisi's bodyguard, continued the journey in one of the other two helicopters accompanying the president.

General Esmail Kosari, a former IRGC commander and current member of parliament, refuted claims regarding the status of the president's guards, stating that media outlets were fabricating irrelevant statements. He clarified that the second guard was in a separate helicopter due to the lack of necessity for multiple guards in one aircraft.

However, HamMihan Newspaper in Iran reported suggestions that some passengers may have been reassigned to another helicopter at the last minute before the flight. Additionally, a video report published by state broadcaster IRIB on May 26 showed the bodyguard getting off the President's helicopter during a landing.

Determining the precise cause of the fatal crash on May 19 presents a considerable challenge. Investigations of this nature are intricate and protracted affairs. However, skepticism is warranted when considering reports from the Iranian government.

The Armed Forces Staff, responsible for the investigation, is the same entity that initial-

ly denied any involvement in the downing of Ukrainian Airlines flight PS752, which was later revealed to have been struck by missiles from the Revolutionary Guards. This admission came after 73 hours of attributing the crash to technical failure. Several nations, including Canada, Ukraine, Sweden, and Britain, have criticized Iran for its lack of transparency and fair investigation into the incident.

Moreover, the Ontario Court of Justice's ruling in 2023 classified the downing of Flight PS752 as "terrorist activity."

Potential causes of the helicopter crash may include:

1. Weather conditions: Some in Iran cite adverse weather as a possible cause. However, this contradicts accounts from the president's entourage, who described the weather as favorable.
2. Technical failure: Catastrophic mechanical malfunctions, akin to the rear rotor mechanism failure seen in the King Power Stadium crash, could have played a role.
3. Human error: Errors in altitude readings or other pilot mistakes may have contributed.
4. Explosive sabotage: The communication between the pilot and another helicopter moments before the crash raises suspicions of a sudden incident. Some experts, such as Farzin Nadimi, suggest the possibility of sabotage, emphasizing the importance of a thorough investigation. Various types of explosives, including remote-controlled or altitude-triggered devices, could have been employed.

Farzin Nadimi, a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, did not dismiss the possibility of sabotage in the helicopter crash. He emphasized the necessity of conducting a comprehensive investigation and proposed that a range of "small bombs" might have been utilized, such as remote-controlled or altitude-triggered explosives. Analyzing the wreckage could provide essential evidence.

The mysterious death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, who attempted an unsuccessful coup against Russia's Vladimir Putin and perished in a crash involving his private jet, underscores the impact of such incidents on both leaders and adversaries.

How to make war crimes accountable?

Legitimacy is the issue because the imposition of international humanitarian law would remain a myth



By Dr Moonis Ahmar

History was made when on May 24 the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in a mandatory ruling of 2-13, asked Israel to cease its military operations in Southern Gaza and open Rafah crossing in order to provide emergency assistance to the beleaguered Palestinian population of Gaza. Prior to that on May 20 prosecutor of International Criminal Court (ICC) had requested arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Hamas Chief Yahya Sinwar, Commander of Hamas military wing Mohammad Al-Masri and Head of Hamas Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh. Both the rulings have, however, failed to have any bearing on Israel because of the lack of enforcement capacity.

When the ICC prosecutor called for the issuance of arrest warrants for the Israeli Prime Minister, the Defense Minister and three leaders of Hamas, the reaction was mixed. Earlier, the ICC had issued arrest warrants for former President of Sudan General Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir and Russian President Vladimir Putin on

charges of war crimes but failed to get its orders implemented. The Office of Prosecutor ICC, justifying request for the issuance of war crimes against Israeli and Hamas leaders, stated: "My Office submits that the war crimes alleged in these applications were committed in the context of an international armed conflict between Israel and Palestine, and a non-international armed conflict between Israel and Hamas running in parallel. We submit that the crimes against humanity charged were part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population of Israel by Hamas and other armed groups pursuant to organizational policies. Some of these crimes, in our assessment, continue to this day."

If Hamas leadership was implicated by ICC to initiate war against the Jewish state on October 7, 2023 by attacking Israel, the Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister were held responsible for committing crimes against humanity by ceaseless attacks against Palestinians, killing more than 35,000 people and displacing millions.

Both Hamas and Israel criticised the ICC decision on different grounds. Hamas argued that the ICC equated victim with executioner whereas Israel condemned the request for issuance of arrest warrants. And now, the ICJ ruling on cessation of Israeli military operations in southern Gaza and opening of Rafah crossing may not have any impact on the Jewish state because of the US backing.

Prior to the ICC's bold step to issue arrest warrants against Israeli officials and Hamas leadership, the court had, on the South African request, held Israel responsible for the genocide of Palestinians since October 7 last year. Elaborating his request to issue arrest warrants, ICC prosecutor Karim Khan stated: "Israel, like all states, has a right to take action to defend its population. That right however, does not absolve Israel or any state of its obligation to comply with international humanitarian law." Likewise, "Hamas leaders face allegations of bearing responsibility for crimes committed by the group including extermination and murder, and other acts of violence."

So far out of 193 UN members, 123 adhere to ICC and commit to immediately arrest the wanted person if they are on a member state's territory. It is yet to be seen how ICC will use its moral authority to get its decision implemented in case of war in Gaza but by requesting issuance of arrest warrant against the Israeli PM and Defense Minister, the ICC further exerted pressure on the Jewish state by providing ample evidence of Israel denying food, water, medicine and energy to augment the sufferings of the besieged Palestinian population of Gaza since October 7.

Well-documented and well-researched evidences provided by ICC against the Hamas leadership and the Israeli government of killings, abductions, ceaseless bombings of civilian population of Gaza cannot be denied. War crimes against humanity whether committed by a state or a non-state actor are reprehensible and those responsible must be taken to task. Composed of a panel of judges, the ICC collected hardcore evidences from multiple sources forming the basis of its request that arrest warrants be issued against the two highest Israeli government officials and three top Hamas leaders.

The ongoing debate on ICC's prospector

request to judges for arresting Israeli officials and Hamas leaders on charges of war crimes needs to be examined from three angles.

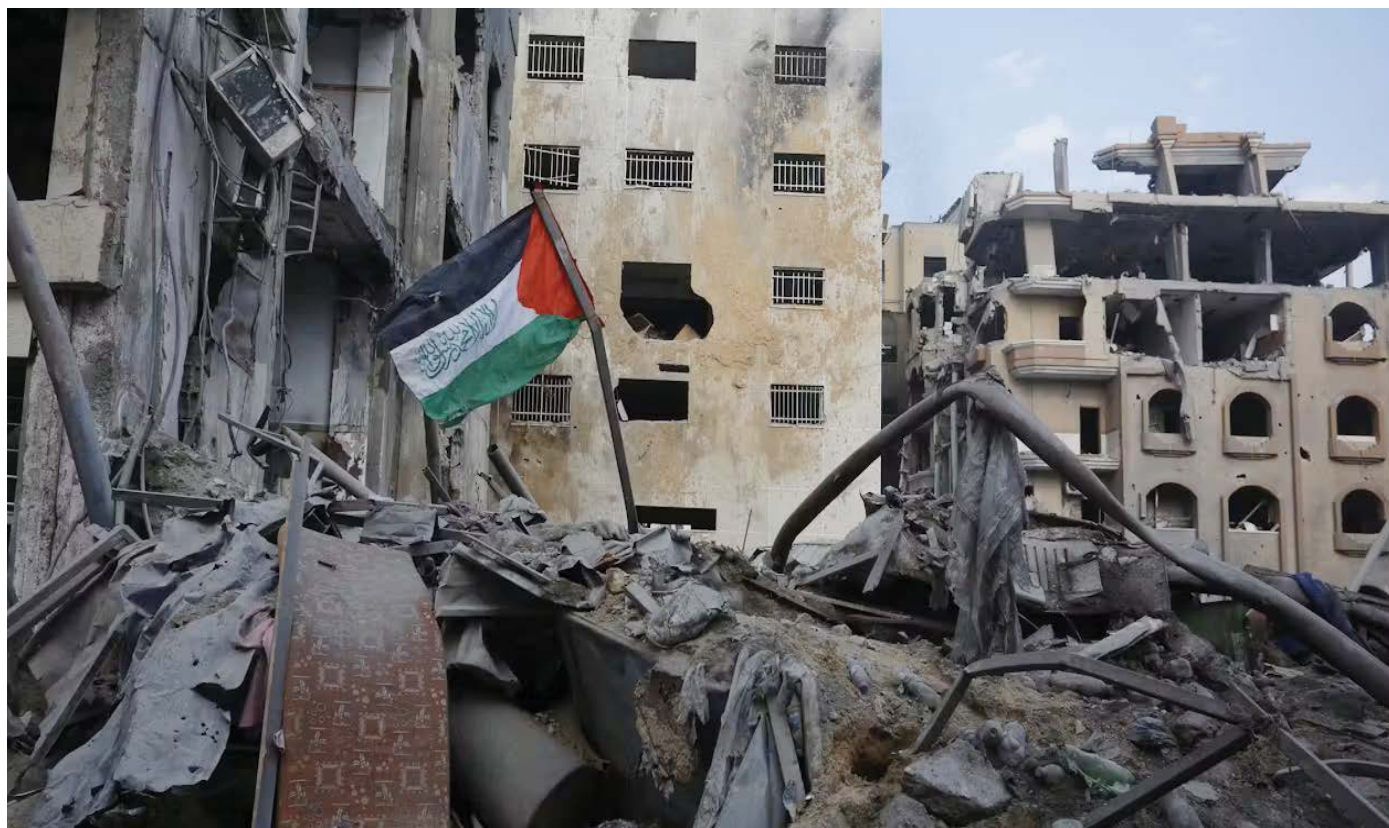
First, making war crimes accountable would require political will and determination particularly for the powerful states to not endorse blatant violation of human rights. Both the US and Russia refuse to endorse the ICC steps to punish war crimes. When the ICC endorsed Putin's arrest for alleged war crimes in Ukraine, Moscow was outraged and refused to comply with the verdict. Putin failed to show up for BRICS summit in South Africa for the fear of his arrest. US President Joseph Biden totally rejected the ICC-demanded arrest of the Israeli PM and Defense Minister for the war crimes in Gaza. When war crimes are committed with the connivance of powerful states, international institutions like the ICC, ICJ and UN appear helpless in implementing their decisions. War crimes and genocides are bound to continue when those who are supposed to prevent such acts are themselves involved.

Second, legitimacy is the issue because the imposition of international humanitarian law would remain a myth as the world order is devoid of accountability of those

who get a free hand in committing war crimes and are able to get away. There must be a consensus among permanent UNSC members that they will have zero tolerance for all such acts which target non-combatants and adopt the use of genocide as a policy of state. War crimes and genocide are not a new phenomenon but after the end of the WWII, one can observe massive involvement of state and non-state actors in committing acts which clearly violate the UN charter. When there is a lack of accountability and punishment in cases of gross violation of human rights in the form of war crimes or genocide, the outcome is chaos and disorder in the global order, which can trigger another round of global hostilities in the shape of a third World War.

Finally, rejection and hatred against war crimes and genocide is possible when steps are taken at the grassroots level, like focus in educational syllabi on zero tolerance for crimes against humanity. When truth is unveiled on how war crimes and genocide are committed by various countries, policy-makers will also transform themselves and respect human rights.

Courtesy tribune.com.pk



Israel says war on Gaza likely to last another seven months

National security adviser says he expects another 'seven months of fighting' as Israel expands Rafah offensive



Israel's national security adviser says the continuing war on Gaza is likely to last through the end of the year.

In an interview with Israel's Kan public broadcaster on Wednesday, Tzachi Hanegbi said "we are expecting another seven months of fighting" to destroy the military and governing capabilities of Hamas and the smaller Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) group.

His remarks came as Israel finds itself increasingly isolated on the world stage nearly eight months into the assault, with even the United States and other close allies expressing outrage over the civilian death toll.

Hanegbi defended Israel's ongoing operations in Rafah, on Gaza's border with Egypt, saying the frontier had become a "smuggling kingdom" since 2007, when Hamas began governing Gaza.

"Every rocket, every explosive device, every shot fired at Israel is because that border was breached," he said.

Later on Wednesday, an Israeli military spokesman said the army had gained "oper-

ational control" over the narrow Philadelphi Corridor, a buffer zone between Egypt and Gaza that was created as part of the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

"In recent days, our forces have taken operational control of the Philadelphi Corridor," army spokesman Daniel Hagari said in a televised address.

Egypt has expressed grave concerns about Israel's Rafah offensive, saying it threatens the peace treaty.

Hanegbi's remarks raise questions about the future of Gaza and what kind of role Israel will play in it. Already, top ally the US has demanded that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu produce a postwar vision for the Palestinian territory, and his defence minister and a top governing partner have warned that he must take steps to ensure that Israel does not remain in Gaza indefinitely.

Israel's assault has already devastated Gaza's urban landscape, displaced most of the territory's population and sparked a humanitarian catastrophe and widespread hunger. Israel claims it must dismantle

Hamas's last remaining battalions in Rafah and also said it will seek indefinite security control over the Gaza Strip.

Hamas has rejected any postwar plan that excludes the group, reiterating that it will remain in Gaza.

The Rafah offensive has so far killed dozens of Palestinians as NGOs and professional unions declared Gaza a "famine-stricken" zone.

Recent attacks have struck so-called safe humanitarian zones near Rafah, killing dozens of people, according to Palestinian officials.

Israeli tanks moved into the heart of Rafah city on Tuesday despite an order from the International Court of Justice for Israel to end its attacks on the area.

Situation 'getting worse'

Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud, reporting from Deir el-Balah, said that in the central part of Rafah city, there is "a confirmed report of families trapped inside their residential homes, caught in the line of artillery fire".

Israeli quadcopters had pursued people there, he said, preventing them from evacuating to safer areas.

“From the northeast to the northwest of Rafah, where tent camps have been attacked in recent days, the situation is getting worse by the hour because of the expansive military operations,” Mahmoud said.

“At the same time, nearly all health and public facilities are pushed out of service right now.”

The World Court said Israel had not explained how it would keep evacuees from Rafah safe and provide food, water and medicine. Its ruling also called on Hamas to release hostages taken from Israel on October 7 immediately and unconditionally.

Rafah residents said Israeli tanks had pushed into Tal as-Sultan in the west and Yibna and near Shaboura in the centre before retreating towards a buffer zone on the border with Egypt, rather than staying put as they have in other offensives.

Palestinian health officials said on Wednesday that 19 civilians had been killed in Israeli air strikes and shelling across Gaza.

Health Minister Majed Abu Ramadan urged Washington to pressure Israel to open the Rafah crossing to Egypt for aid supplies, saying that there was no indica-



tion that Israeli authorities would do so soon and that patients in besieged Gaza were dying for lack of treatment.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, reiterated its opposition to a major ground offensive in Rafah on Tuesday while saying it did not believe such an operation was under way.

The armed wing of Hamas and that of its ally PIJ said they confronted invading forces in Rafah with antitank rockets and mortar bombs and blew up explosive devices they had planted, resulting in numerous successful hits.

The Israeli military said three Israeli soldiers were killed and three badly wounded.

In the nearby city of Khan Younis, an Israeli air strike killed three people overnight, including Salama Baraka, a former senior Hamas police officer, medics and Hamas media said. Another killed four people, including two children, medics said.

In northern Gaza, Israeli forces shelled Gaza City neighbourhoods and moved deeper into Jabalia, where residents said large residential districts were destroyed.

More than 36,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's Gaza offensive, according to health officials.

Courtesy www.aljazeera.com



The Key Issues Shaping the Upcoming UK Elections



By Dr Khalid Bajwa

The Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called for the general election on July 4, 2024. The announcement surprised many, including his own party, albeit excluding a small inner circle. The prime minister is known for taking cool and calculated decisions and being risk averse. The big question is whether this decision was also well calculated. At stake were six more months of government and build up on the back gradual economic recovery to demonstrate to the electorate that his plans are working and that he can be relied upon to steer the country out of the turbulent economic times marked by high inflation and a crippling 'cost of living crisis'. The Consumer price index (CPI) was hovering around 11 percent, and food price inflation was rising above 13 percent. High energy costs, elevated CPI and unbearable food inflation made life difficult for the people. The government extended a helping hand to the families which were struggling to meet both ends meet. The Sunak government oversaw tight fiscal and monetary policies to bring inflation down to the Bank of England's target of two percent.

At the time of announcing the election, the CPI was 2.3 percent, which is very near to Bank of England's inflation target. The economy also came out of recession, and GDP growth entered into positive territory. The economy grew by 0.6 percent in the last quarter bringing an end to the recession. This growth rate is a leading GDP growth in the EU. However, an important thing to remember is that this is the first parliament tenure in which people got worse off. During the last few years, the people have been battered by bad economic conditions and have also witnessed internecine conservatives fighting for power. The circumstances that led to the fall of maverick Boris Johnson and traumatic experience of ill-fated Liz Truss's short but catastrophic government shook people's confidence in the Conservative Party. The incumbent prime minister, Rishi Sunak, steadied the ship but not enough. This is reflected in the opinion polls where conservatives consistently trail behind labour by 20 points. Labour is at 43 percent as against 23 percent of conservatives.

Everyone was hoping that Rishi Sunak would build upon the nascent economic recovery in the next six months to narrow down the gap between Labour and Conservatives and demonstrate that Conservatives could be relied upon to steer the country out of trouble. However, the prime minister thought differently and called for an election. Prima facie, the decision to call the general election appears to be laden with risks. This choice has disappointed, frustrated, and angered many Conservative MPs who decided to stand down in droves. The people are terming it as exodus of MPs which also includes MPs from labour and other parties.

There could be several plausible reasons for the prime minister's decision. A storm was brewing in the Conservative Party that could have led to a leadership contest. The prime minister clearly wanted to avoid such a contest before the general election. As for economic recovery it could have taken a worse turn again as the regional and world conflicts are abound that can derail the economic recovery and have adverse effects

on inflation. Therefore, calling for an election made sense to showcase GDP growth and falling inflation as success while they lasted. As no one was expecting this, the prime minister caught the opposition off-guard. Furthermore, he aimed to capitalise on internal conflicts within the Labour Party where left was feeling squeezed, and Sir Keir Starmer's stance on the Gaza conflict resulted in a significant revolt against his leadership.

Mr Nigel Farage must be weighing heavily on the mind of the prime minister as he announced the general elections. Mr Nigel Farage had been maintaining a low profile and the prime minister wanted to call the elections before Mr Farage could jump into the fray and strengthen Reform UK party. It's essential to remember that Mr Nigel Farage is the politician who has significantly shaped the UK's political landscape over the last decade and a half. Everything else revolves around his agenda, which powerfully influences the policies of the two mainstream parties. For instance, Brexit was Mr Farage's project, that fundamentally altered the UK's politics in unprecedented ways. His politics is a politics of far-right.

The influence of far-right politics has led the Conservative party to shift from centre-right position toward the fringes of far-right ideology, adopting the far-right agenda in a bid to deprive it of fuel. This shift is evident in the rhetoric of many prominent conservatives, who express Islamophobia and disdain for immigrants. Meanwhile, the Labour Party has also moved away from its left-leaning stance and shifted toward the centre and centre-right. Essentially, UK's politics veered rightward.

Unfortunately, this rightward shift has serious consequences for all minorities, particularly Muslims, as Islamophobia is on the rise unchecked. During a recent interview on Sky news, Mr Nigel Farage, blamed Muslims for being against British values and unpatriotic. As an example, he cited pro-Palestine protests that regularly occur on weekends. The same marches have been described as 'Hate Marches' by some of the prominent Conservatives. Interestingly though, Muslims make only a small proportion of these marches. A vast

majority of the participants are non-Muslims. This fact is being ignored by the opponents as facts do not matter in such a scheme; what matter to them are inflamed emotions.

Mr Farage influence remains significant, and his agenda is likely to resonate with mainstream political parties. As a result, challenging times lie ahead for minorities, immigrants and especially Muslims. At a time, when cohesiveness of the society is needed most, splintering forces are at work.

In the last general elections, the Reform UK party secured one in five conservative votes. Currently, Reform UK stands at 11 percent in the opinion polls as compared to 23 percent for the Conservatives and 43

the doldrums; it needs more funding, more doctors and more nurses. Its management needs to be streamlined and reformed to achieve efficiency, higher productivity and better rate of return on funds invested in it.

State school education is in a state of disrepair: it lacks adequate funding, faces a shortage of teachers, declining education standards, and unmanageable class sizes.

Tax and spending are other critical issues that will define the campaign for this election. The Labour is often labelled as a 'Tax and Spend' party, in contrast, the Conservatives claim to be more responsible when it comes to finances. The labour is reassuring businesses that it will provide a stable business environment for growth,



percent of labour. Mr Farge's active role could further boost Reform UK. Mr Rishi Sunak and Conservatives will try their best to curtail this loss. How they are going to achieve this goal is anybody's guess.

The disenchantment of Muslim voters with Sir Keir Starmer and Labour is another issue that can affect Labour's electoral performance in many constituencies. The Muslim voters used to vote labour en bloc but no more. The recent local elections in England have shown significant drop of Muslim voters for the Labour Party. The Labour Party needs to revisit its policies that resulted in this embitterment if it wants to woo back Muslim voters.

The main issues on which this election will be fought are immigration, health (NHS), education, defence, and economy. Unfortunately, the Conservatives' record on all these issues is not enviable. The NHS is in

with no tax increases.

The Defence is another area that will shape the election result. Ongoing conflicts worldwide including the Ukraine war pose risks that could threaten the security of the UK. To mitigate such possibility, the UK must allocate substantial funds to enhance the training and equipment of its armed forces. Both major parties assert that they can ensure that the UK's defence will be more secure under their leadership.

There are many other issues and aspects of the coming elections that needs to be elaborated. These elections are being held in the backdrop of very difficult economic conditions and divisive politics. The cohesiveness of the society hangs in balance. One can only hope that the electorate chooses leaders who prioritise unity, principled governance, and moderation, steering clear of extreme politics.

Submarines are Key to India's Evolving Force Posture in the Indian Ocean



By Bashir Ali Abbas

Maritime commerce in the Northwestern Indian Ocean has been vulnerable to twin threats in the last six months. On the one hand, the Yemen-based Houthis have attacked international shipping passing through the Red Sea to draw global pressure on Israel to stop its war in Gaza, which has now killed about 35,000 people. On the other, taking advantage of this disruption, maritime piracy off the Somali coast and the Gulf of Aden has made a dramatic comeback.

Amidst these developments, between late March and early April, the Indian Navy embarked on a 23-warship deployment, its largest ever in the Indian Ocean, with 12 ships in India's Western seaboard, ten in the Arabian Sea, and two in the Gulf of Aden. More notably, the Indian Navy also deployed 11 of its 16 active submarines — a first in over three decades, signaling an ongoing shift in the Indian Navy's external and internal postures. Externally, the deployment reflects the Navy's greater willingness to use its submarine arm as a

deterrent against regional adversaries. Internally, it is a signal of reassurance to its domestic audience; affirming the potency of India's submarine fleet amidst recent acquisition troubles.

Externally, the deployment reflects the Navy's greater willingness to use its submarine arm as a deterrent against regional adversaries. Internally, it is a signal of reassurance to its domestic audience; affirming the potency of India's submarine fleet amidst recent acquisition troubles.

Looking Outward: Regional Deterrence

Almost a decade ago, external observers such as Walter C Ladwig argued that there is little backing for the idea that "concern about extra-regional navies is driving Indian naval modernization" Indeed, the Indian Navy's submarine arm has historically been its weakest — presently operating five French Scorpenes (Kalvari class), four German Type-209s (Shishumar class), and

seven Russian Kilo (Sindhughosh class) submarines. By comparison, China presently operates 60 submarines of various classes, with plans to expand the underwater fleet to 80 by 2035.

Now, several sources point to a causal connection between the Indian Navy's increased attention to submarines and its concerns about extra-regional navies. The Indian Navy has long had concerns with China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), now the world's largest maritime force by personnel and has steadily increased its presence in the Indian Ocean in recent years. For instance, in August 2022, India unsuccessfully attempted to pressure Sri Lanka to disallow a Chinese surveillance vessel, Yuan Wang 5, from docking in Hambantota port. More recently, another Chinese research and surveillance vessel docked in the Maldives amidst New Delhi's diplomatic tiff with Male. Similarly, other ships, such as the Yuan Wang 3, have entered the Indian Ocean multiple times before key Indian missile

tests. At least six Chinese vessels, including submarines, operate in the Indian Ocean at any given time, with 13 vessels present at the time of publication.

Moreover, while mitigating the threat from the PLAN is the long-term objective, preserving the Indian Navy's edge over Pakistan's navy remains a strategic interest. In August 2023, a few months before the latest iteration of China and Pakistan's flagship exercise in the Arabian Sea, "Sea Guardian", India's Chief of Defense Staff referenced the "joint threat" from China and Pakistan, particularly China's support for the expansion of the Pakistan Navy (most of whose platforms are now Chinese). Pakistan also already operates the French Air-Independent-Propulsion (AIP) equipped Agosta 90-Bs and is the first navy in South Asia to do so. AIP systems allow a submarine weeks of submerged operations, an inarguable advantage during active hostilities.

Looking Inward: Maintaining Credible Submarine Capabilities

The lack of an AIP, then, is the main contemporary concern of the Indian Navy. Pakistan's 2016 deal with China for four new AIP-equipped Yuan class submarines triggered concerns in India about the Indian Navy losing its qualitative edge. The former commander of India's first nuclear submarine, the INS Chakra, termed India's current underwater capabilities "pathetic." On April 28, 2024, China launched the first of the Yuan class vessels built for Pakistan, commissioned as the Hangor class, proving the deal's vitality. China emerged as a late but formidable entrant in the AIP manufacturers club in 2018, with its Type 039A becoming the quietest submarine in the PLAN fleet.

Additionally, the Indian Navy's submarine fleet is facing multiple issues, with its second nuclear submarine (INS Arighat) facing inordinate delays and its Kilo class boats set to be decommissioned in the near future. India's own quest for an AIP system through Project 75-I has stalled across its various stages, with multiple original equipment manufacturers failing to meet the Indian Navy's required specifications. This

includes Russia, which does not have a proven AIP system of its own. India's continuing determination for an AIP under 75-I is evident in its continued engagement with Germany and Spain, and its recent approval of USD \$7,187,712 tender for six new AIP-equipped submarines with over 60 percent indigenous components in early May. Arguably, as a stop-gap, the Indian Navy has resorted to purchasing additional Kalvari class Scorpines under its older submarine program and a future retrofit of India's older Scorpines with the AIP system by Naval Group France.

In the short term, the Indian Navy is driven to ensure that its present submarine capabilities are credible and that its current operational effectiveness remains unaffected.



Breaking records with new deployments helps this cause. For instance, in August 2023, the Indian Navy's most recently commissioned Scorpene—the INS Vagir—embarked on an extended-range deployment to reach Australia's Fremantle. It marked the first time an Indian submarine has undertaken a mission of over 4,350 miles to Australia and the longest deployment for a Scorpene globally.

The Indian Navy is among the oldest hands in combating piracy off the Somali coast.

Law-Enforcement with a Side of Deterrence

Since January 2024, the Indian Navy has been proactive in its anti-piracy operations, intercepting attacks, rescuing contain-

er-turned-pirate-ships, and liberating ship crews in the Northern Indian Ocean. Tactically, this reflects the Indian Navy's efficacy in mitigating non-state maritime threats, as the Indian Navy is among the oldest hands in combating piracy off the Somali coast. Strategically, it establishes the Indian Navy as the preeminent resident naval power in securing Indian Ocean Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

However, while surface warships remain key to the Indian Navy's law enforcement operations in the Indian Ocean, submarines are the "platform of choice" for the Navy's latest doctrine emphasizing sea denial in choke points and the interdiction of enemy SLOCs. The Indian Navy's willingness to display its submarine prowess is designed to

both placate internal apprehensions about its underwater capabilities as well as deter regional and extra-regional adversaries, adding geopolitical signaling to its larger law-enforcement deployments. In any case, Chinese reactions to the large-scale Indian deployment have been negative, characterizing it as "muscle flexing" rather than addressing the root causes of the Red Sea threat.

While such deployments do not affect the historical hurdles that Indian defense acquisition has traditionally faced, they do well to service the Navy's doctrinal objectives and reaffirm the deterrent capabilities of its extant submarine fleet, ultimately shoring up India's position as a net security provider in the region.

Courtesy southasianvoices.org

Majority of people in African state threatened by hunger

Zimbabwe's government has vowed to work hard to prevent people from dying of starvation



More than half of Zimbabwe's population will require food aid this year due to a severe drought that has caused widespread crop failure, the southern African nation's government has announced.

Between May 2024 and March 2025, 6 million people in rural areas and 1.7 million in urban regions, totaling 51% of the country's population, will need assistance, the cabinet said on Tuesday, citing a report by the Zimbabwe Livelihoods Assessment Committee (ZIMLAC).

The figure excludes an additional 4.5 million people who will require school meals, according to ZIMLAC.

"Government is working hard to ensure that no one will die of hunger," the cabinet stated in a message published on the website of the country's Information Ministry.

"Going forward, Zimbabwe's food security thrust will center on the reduction of reliance on rain-fed food production by strengthening initiatives such as

climate-proofed agriculture, with a focus on conservation agriculture and expanding the area under irrigation," it added.

Zimbabwe is one of the southern African countries hardest hit by the El Nino-induced drought, which the government says is the worst it has experienced in 40 years. Zambia and Malawi are also facing food shortages this year. El Nino is a naturally occurring weather phenomenon that disrupts wind patterns, resulting in warmer ocean surface temperatures in the eastern and central Pacific.

Most provinces in landlocked Zimbabwe have experienced crop failure since November, with hotter areas writing off harvests of corn and other staples.

The country declared a national state of disaster last month, with President Emmerson Mnangagwa announcing that his government needs \$2 billion in aid to feed millions facing hunger.

According to the latest crop assessment presented to Zimbabwe's cabinet this week, cereal production in the African country is

expected to fall by 77% from 2,579,237 metric tons to 744,271 metric tons during the 2023-2024 summer season.

Apart from the impact on crop farming, the "El Nino-induced weather conditions on water supply and grazing availability for livestock have resulted in the loss of 9,941 cattle at the beginning of the 2023-2024 season," the report stated.

The UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has launched an appeal seeking \$84.9 million to provide life-saving interventions to 1.34 million Zimbabweans, including 866,000 children, describing the situation as a "complex humanitarian crisis."

Zimbabwe was among six African countries that received 25,000 tons of humanitarian wheat from Russia in February as part of Moscow's commitment to assisting food-insecure countries in fighting hunger.

Courtesy [swentr.site](https://www.swenetr.site)

Smash hit song quenches the thirst of women in Thar

Located on the southern outskirts of Umerkot district, the birthplace of the third Mughal Emperor Akbar, Meghwar village is home to the Hindu Meghwar community, which is considered one of the indigenous communities of over 5,000-year-old Indus Valley civilization



By Mian Aamir

Until last month, Savita had to trudge through burning dunes of sand under the midday broiling sun to fetch drinking water. It would take her and hundreds of other women from remote Meghwar village at least two hours to cover a five-kilometer grueling distance on a teetering sandy path every day with temperatures soaring to 45 degrees Celsius to fetch water from another pump.

It's been a routine affair for women in most parts of the sprawling Thar Desert, where periodical droughts have become a new normal due to climate change ravages. But, she no longer has to go through this arduous exercise after the establishment of a state-of-the-art water filtration plant in her village.

Established by a leading beverage company, Coca-Cola, the solar-powered plant can supply 1,000 liters of clean water per hour, benefitting over 8,000 inhabitants of this rundown

locality even by the standard of impoverished Thar Desert. To ensure sustainability, the new plant has been installed with Solar, GPS, and flowmeters as the village has no electricity.

Located on the southern outskirts of Umerkot district, the birthplace of the third Mughal Emperor Akbar, Meghwar village is home to the Hindu Meghwar community, which is considered one of the indigenous communities of over 5,000-year-old Indus Valley civilization.

The desert, which forms a natural boundary with neighboring India, spans a region of 200,000 kilometers, and has a population of 1.5 million, which makes it one of the world's most densely populated deserts. It is ranked by the World Food Program as the most food-insecure region in the country. The desert's annual rainfall is just 250mm, making life extremely challenging with temperatures soaring to 50 degrees Celsius in the summer.

Fetching water is not a piece of cake

While the Tharis have been able to struggle through previous droughts, each year makes the situation more desperate and now many of their traditional go-to sources of water have gone dry.

"Fetching a few pots of water after covering a two-hour tiring distance, especially in the summers, is no less than a challenge. And I had to do that every day," Savita, 45, a mother of five children said. Her trip to get water in this far-flung village is a balancing act as she teeters across burning sand, grabbing one pot in her arm, and placing a couple on her head amid swirling winds and sand.

Fetching water is not here only duty. Without taking a break, she prepares food and rushes to a nearby mine where her husband works. Her neighbor and tour-mate, Parmeeshi had a similar

ordeal to share, saying that fetching water is not only a daily challenge for Thari women but “it’s a battle.”

“It’s relatively easier in winters to trek this distance but in summers it’s unbearable. But we have no choice,” said Parmeeshi, whose real age is 30 but, with her wrinkled skin, looks in the late 40s—a result of the region’s merciless weather conditions. “But thanks God, this huge problem has been resolved after setting up of this plant. Now we don’t have to take such an exhausting walk,” she said with a huge smile on her face.

Behind this fuss-releasing development is a song, which is about a folktale story from Sindh province, which shares a major chunk of the Thar desert, dating back to the 14th century. The melodic and rhythmic lyrics of the smash hit “Aayi aayi aayi aaye” song narrates the story of Marvi, who resists the overtures of a powerful King Umar and the temptation to live in the palace as a queen, preferring to be in a simple rural environment with her own village folk.

Her resistance and love for her homeland were immortalized by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai’s celebrated poetic compendium ‘Shah jo Risalo’ (book of his poems). Shah Latif also named one of the seven musical notes he invented after Marvi, commonly

known as “Sur Marvi.” Marvi later returned to her home village, Bhalwa, untouched.

‘My only demand was water for my people’

With its rich history and culture, Umerkot is Pakistan’s largest Hindu-populated district, with a population of slightly above 50 percent. Apart from Meghwar, other indigenous communities inhabited here include, Kolhi, Malhi, Manganhar, Bheel, and Oadh. One of the singers of this song, who bears the same name as the heroin of the folktale, belongs to Meghwar village, and demanded water for her people, in addition to her fee.

“Water is life. And no one can understand this saying more than us,” Marvi donned in traditional embroidered shalwar-kameez and covered her head with a matching dupatta. “They (music company) asked me what they do for my people in return. My straightaway reply was, water,” she went on to say.

“I had been watching this since my childhood. I wanted to change it but I had no idea how to do it.”

“Here I found a lifetime opportunity to make it, and I did that,” Marvi said,

smiling. Marvi’s niece and co-singer Sahiba followed suit. “I have placed the same demand for my village after watching women’s ease here,” Sahiba said, wearing her signature smile that raised her to fame. The company has approved another water filtration plant for her village located in Diplo town some 130 km from Meghwar village.

“This (song) has brought money and fame to us. But they can’t match the ease that it has brought to our women,” she maintained.

Aisha Sarwari, senior director of public affairs at Coca-Cola-Pakistan, emphasized the importance of access to clean drinking water, particularly for women and children. “Pakistani women struggle with access to clean drinking water nationwide, especially in arid areas. Their children often fall sick due to gastrointestinal diseases. This initiative is a small step towards sustainably solving this massive issue.”

The “Water For Women” program, under the Paani Project, has already served around 17 million people across 53 plants in Pakistan. The initiative aims to empower women and communities by providing clean drinking water, thereby improving their health, education, and economic opportunities.



Only unpredictability is certain' as climate extremes grip Pakistan

Rapidly fluctuating patterns have made it almost impossible even for climate scientists to accurately forecast weather conditions, which is affecting preparedness in vulnerable countries like Pakistan

By Aamir Latif

The sprawling plains of Pakistan and neighboring India are currently in the grip of a scorching heat wave, which has hit the region quite late this year but will be more severe, according to environment experts. Pakistan's weather agency has forecast the ongoing spell of abnormally hot and humid weather to continue until at least the end of the first week of June.

Mercury levels have already touched a rare 53 degrees Celsius (127.4 degrees Fahrenheit) in the Larkana district of the southern Sindh province, followed by 50C (122F) in Jacobabad, 49.5C (121.1F) in Dadu and 49.3C (120.74) in Khairpur.

This scorching wave came on the heels of what was the wettest April in Pakistan's history, and much later than 2022 when it started in the last few weeks of March, a glaring reflection of the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns.

"When it comes to the impacts of climate change ... only unpredictability is certain," environmentalist Zabardast Khan Bangash told Anadolu.

"We never know when we will swing from heat waves to droughts or unseasonal rains."

He said the rapidly fluctuating patterns have made it almost impossible even for climate scientists to accurately forecast weather conditions, which is affecting preparedness in vulnerable countries like Pakistan.

"This is all around the globe. We are saying volatile weather everywhere, while other things such as the duration or time of onset of heat waves are also changing," he said.

For Pakistan, mid-June is expected to bring monsoon rains, which have wreaked havoc in the country over recent years, in terms of human casualties and the destruction of already fragile infrastructure.



Hit to agriculture

All this extreme weather – unseasonal rains, periodic floods, searing heat, and lingering dry spells – has a cascading impact on Pakistan's agriculture sector, which directly employs 38% of its population of some 230 million.

"Agriculture here in Pakistan is still largely traditional, which makes it dependent on all-natural factors – climate, weather, and water availability," said Abdul Razzak, an environment expert in Karachi.

"So that makes it particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. We can see just how much extreme weather and other climate-related disasters are impacting everything from crop growth to production capacities."

Among the agricultural products most affected by climate change in Pakistan are mangoes, one of the country's most prized exports. Mango production in Pakistan has declined for three consecutive years, and it is all down to the effects of climate change, Waheed Ahmed, head of the Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Exporters Association, told Anadolu.

"Pakistan produces 1.8 million metric tons of mangoes – 70% in Punjab, 29% in Sindh and 1% in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," he explained. "This year production in Punjab is around 35% to 40% and less than 20% in Sindh, so the total output is expected to be some 0.6 million metric tons lower," he said.

Keeping this in mind, Ahmed said the export target has been pulled down to 100,000 metric tons, from 125,000 metric tons in 2023, which would generate around \$90 million in revenue, but it is still likely to be missed.

Apart from agriculture, Pakistan has also seen the effects of climate change in various other manifestations, such as rampant sea erosion and intrusion that has forced massive internal migration in the south.

There is also a heightened threat of landslides and glacier lake outburst floods in the northern regions of the country, while devastating floods just two years ago – made more severe because of unusually heavy monsoon rain and melting glaciers – claimed hundreds of lives and caused massive economic losses.

Welcome to the summer of AI

April saw the release of Meta's Llama 3 generative large language model, notable for being open-source



By Dr Ayesha Razzaque

For decades, research in artificial intelligence (AI) has advanced in fits and starts, alternating between decades of euphoric optimism and, when those promises do not come to pass, falling into ruts called AI winters.

But this season is shaking out to be the summer of AI. April saw the release of Meta's Llama 3 generative large language model, notable for being open-source. A few days ago, Google showed off Project Astra and Gemini 1.5 generative AI (GenAI) models at its Google I/O developer conference, and expectations are high for Apple's 2024 Worldwide Developers Conference in June where it usually unveils updates and new features for its mobile and desktop operating systems, alongside other product announcements. While tech companies large and small have been falling over each other to release one AI product after another, Apple – known to be a last-mover – has been very quiet so far.

But I would probably not be wrong in my assessment that the showstopper this season thus far has been OpenAI's release of GPT-4o GenAI model which it front-ran on Google I/O. The 'o' stands for omni (short for omni-modal) meaning it can input and output not only text, like earlier models, but can

also understand and produce images and audio. In demos, multiple users interact with it by speaking to it and engaging with it through camera video feed and on-screen activity.

For me, what was the most fun to see was the wide variety of intonations in which GPT-4o can 'speak' to users, expressing excitement, patience, encouragement, mystery, drama, singing, and more. It promises to make interactions much more natural and, dare I say, fun. In fact, several commentators have criticized GPT-4o for sounding too flirtatious in its default mode.

The preview of OpenAI's GPT-4o included some demos, including one of solving a simple linear equation in one variable. It was accompanied by the online release of a series of short demo videos. One featured Sal(man) Khan, of Khan Academy fame, and his son getting tutored and answering questions about right triangles in conversational style while interacting with it through screen sharing on an iPad and a pen/stylus. GPT-4o was able to interact and respond to the student's on-screen annotations and activities and guide him, step-by-step, towards answers like a good tutor would.

These demos look very promising but are still too few in numbers to make any definitive claim about their usefulness to students and the education sector in general. However, given that the two demonstrated use-cases were education-related, this is an application area that is at the fore of developers' minds. The pace of improvements in capabilities and the addition of guardrails has been rapid but I was not expecting a multi-modal GenAI model of this kind this soon, but here we are!

From an educationist's perspective, what stands out most to me in this generation of models is their ability to not simply spit out an answer. Instead, they are able to gradually nudge and guide learners through multi-step problems while encouraging them to pick up the thread, as a human tutor would.

Duolingo is the world's largest language learning platform that is free and comes in the form of an app. Following the release of GPT-4o, in an interview on a business channel, Duolingo's CEO Luis von Ahn shared how Duolingo plans to replace its person-to-person chat feature and replace it with chat with GPT-4o. Learners are hesitant to use the existing person-to-person chat feature, possibly

due to social anxiety, fear of embarrassment, and similar factors. Knowing that they are talking to a (good) chatbot might address that.

However, not all education service providers will come out as winners. Chegg, describes itself as a “24/7 homework help”. In academia, investigations often find it having a role in cases of plagiarism. Chegg’s fortunes rose during the pandemic. Its stock price hit an all-time high of \$113+ in February 2021 but has been on a steady decline since then. The release of multiple GenAI models and increased access to them by the public is probably a contributing factor in that decline. Two days back, its stock closed at an 11-year, all-time low of \$4.38. Why (blindly) copy an answer when it might actually be easier to show the problem to a personalized tutor that is available round the clock, who can walk you through the solution without any personal judgement?

The distinction between winners and losers among education service providers will extend to learners as well. In terms of resources, accessing a GenAI model requires access to at least a smartphone (or computer or tablet), Internet access, and (depending on the specific model) a subscription which, in turn, will require a credit card.

Beyond that, although several GenAI

models presently support a few dozen languages, the primary language for which they are developed is English, the language of the Internet. That is fine for everyone who knows English or any well-supported language, but what about everybody else? In terms of numbers, various reports put Urdu as the 10th or 11th most widely spoken language worldwide but do not expect support for it to arrive any time soon.

Such decisions are linked to prioritizing more lucrative markets and customers’ ability to pay which goes back to the state of economies. In our context, we can expect a further widening of the gap between the haves with the resources and requisite command of the English language and the have-nots who lack both. Even if a GPT-4o-like model became available in Urdu tomorrow, that would still exclude millions of learners who are fluent in their local language but not in Urdu.

As we navigate this summer of AI, the transformative potential of multi-modal GenAI models like GPT-4o, Project Astra, Gemini and others in education is undeniably exciting. The ability to offer personalized, interactive tutoring can revolutionize learning, making education more engaging and accessible for many. However, the disparity in access to these advanced tools highlights a critical challenge. In Pakistan, where economic constraints and language

barriers are prevalent, the divide between those who can benefit from these technologies and those who cannot may widen further.

It is imperative for policymakers, educators, and technology developers to address these gaps. There are a few groups in the private sector working on some of the necessary pieces but taking on this challenge requires significant investments, some of which I talked about in an earlier op-ed (‘The AI frontier at WGS’, The News International, March 1, 2024). Investing in infrastructure to improve Internet access and affordability, fostering digital literacy, and advocating for the development of AI tools in Urdu and local languages are essential steps. Moreover, public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in ensuring that the benefits of AI are equitably distributed.

The potential of AI in education is vast and is slowly coming into focus and materializing, but its promise must be inclusive. By actively working to bridge the digital divide, we can ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the opportunity to benefit from the educational advancements AI offers. Only then can we truly harness the power of this technological revolution to create a brighter, more equitable future for all learners in Pakistan.

Courtesy The News



Elon Musk wins court battle against Australia

The tech billionaire's X platform has insisted that Canberra's order to remove a stabbing video was invalid



An Australian Federal Court judge has decided not to extend an order banning Elon Musk's X (formerly Twitter) platform from displaying a video of a stabbing attack in a church in Sydney.

On Monday, Justice Geoffrey Kennett denied an application by the country's eSafety commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, to extend restrictions on the clip, which she had deemed to be "class 1" material relating to high-impact violence. The judge hasn't yet provided explanations for his ruling.

The initial ban on the video, which was imposed by the Federal Court in Melbourne on April 22, expired on Monday.

X had refused to comply with the order, which would have made the clip inaccessible to users worldwide. The platform only agreed to block the content in Australia.

Musk insisted back then that one country should not have the power to censor the whole internet. The eSafety commissioner argued that a blanket ban was needed as Australians could still access the video through a VPN.

The clip in question showed a stabbing that took place during a live-streamed sermon at an Assyrian Christian church in the suburbs of Sydney on April 15. Four people, including Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel, were injured in what the Australian authorities described as a "terrorist incident." The footage of the attack was widely shared online and allegedly prompted heated protests near the crime scene.

During the hearing on Friday, lawyer for the eSafety Commissioner, Tim Begbie, argued that the refusal to comply with the order by X amounted to mockery of the Federal Court. "What that says about the authority of the court is pretty striking," he said.

X's lawyer Bret Walker argued that the platform did not implement the ban on the stabbing video because the commissioner's initial take-down notice was invalid and "manifestly inadequate" due to the absence of a detailed description of the reasons for the ban.

The social media company believes that "global removal is reasonable when X does it because X wants to do it, but it becomes unreasonable when it is told to do it by the laws of Australia," Walker told the judge.

In late April, Bishop Emmanuel supported Musk during a sermon, saying that he wanted the video of the attack against him to remain online because it is "our God-given right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion."

Courtesy [swentr.site](https://www.swentr.site)

Weight Loss and Maintenance Strategies

By Ayesha Shaeban

Weight loss refers to the reduction of body mass, typically resulting from a decrease in body fat, muscle mass, or water weight. It can occur intentionally, through changes in diet, exercise, or lifestyle, or unintentionally due to underlying medical conditions. Several factors contribute to weight loss, including:

1. Caloric deficit: Weight loss occurs when there is a deficit between the calories consumed and the calories expended. Consuming fewer calories than the body needs for maintenance leads to the utilization of stored energy, primarily in the form of fat.

2. Dietary changes: Adopting a balanced and nutritious diet is crucial for sustainable weight loss. This often involves reducing the intake of high-calorie, processed foods rich in sugars and fats, and increasing consumption of fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains.

3. Physical activity: Regular exercise aids in burning calories and increasing metabolism, contributing to weight loss. Cardiovascular exercises such as walking, running, cycling, and swimming, as well as strength training, help build muscle and boost calorie expenditure.

4. Metabolism: Individual metabolic rates influence weight loss. Factors such as age, gender, genetics, and body composition affect how efficiently the body burns calories. Metabolism can be influenced through diet, exercise, and lifestyle changes.

5. Water intake: Adequate hydration is essential for overall health and can support weight loss by promoting satiety, enhancing metabolism, and aiding in the breakdown of fats.

6. Behavioral and psychological factors: Emotional eating, stress, sleep deprivation, and social influences can impact eating habits and contribute to weight gain. Addressing these factors through mindfulness, stress management techniques, and behavioral therapy can support successful weight loss efforts.



7. Medical conditions and medications: Certain medical conditions such as thyroid disorders, hormonal imbalances, and gastrointestinal diseases can affect weight. Additionally, some medications may cause weight loss or gain as a side effect.

It's important to approach weight loss in a balanced and sustainable manner, focusing on long-term lifestyle changes rather than quick fixes. Consulting with healthcare professionals, such as doctors, dietitians, and fitness trainers, can provide personalized guidance and support for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.

Benefits of maintaining weight loss:

Maintaining weight loss poses a significant challenge, with many individuals regaining lost weight within a few years. One contributing factor is a decline in the body's calorie-burning rate following calorie restriction during weight loss, making further weight loss increasingly difficult over time. Rapid weight loss and extremely low-calorie diets are discouraged due to the likelihood of regaining weight. A gradual weight loss of no more than 1/2 to 2 pounds per week is recommended, alongside adopting long-term lifestyle changes for sustained success. Achieving a healthy weight offers numerous health benefits, such as improved cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure levels, reduced stress on

bones and joints, and decreased strain on the heart. Maintaining weight loss requires ongoing effort, incorporating changes in diet, eating habits, and exercise routines to achieve and sustain weight loss goals for long-term health benefits.

How to manage weight loss with good diet:

Managing weight loss with a good diet involves making mindful food choices, controlling portion sizes, and adopting healthy eating habits. Here are some strategies to help achieve and maintain weight loss through a nutritious diet:

1. Eat whole, nutrient-dense foods: Base your diet on whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, and healthy fats. These foods are rich in vitamins, minerals, fiber, and antioxidants, providing essential nutrients while keeping you feeling full and satisfied.

2. Control portion sizes: Be mindful of portion sizes to avoid overeating. Use smaller plates and utensils, and pay attention to hunger and fullness cues. Eating slowly and savoring each bite can help prevent overeating.

3. Balance macronutrients: Aim for a balanced intake of carbohydrates, protein, and fat. Include complex carbohydrates (such as whole grains and legumes), lean proteins (such as poultry, fish, tofu, and beans), and

healthy fats (such as avocados, nuts, seeds, and olive oil) in your meals.

4. Limit processed and high-calorie foods: Minimize the consumption of processed foods, sugary snacks, sweets, sugary beverages, and high-calorie fast foods. These foods are often low in nutrients and high in calories, leading to weight gain.

5. Watch your sugar intake: Be mindful of added sugars in foods and beverages, as they can contribute to weight gain and increase the risk of various health issues. Choose whole fruits over fruit juices and opt for unsweetened versions of foods whenever possible.

6. Stay hydrated: Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Sometimes, thirst can be mistaken for hunger, leading to unnecessary calorie consumption. Water also helps with digestion and can increase feelings of fullness.

7. Plan and prepare meals: Plan your meals ahead of time and prepare them at home whenever possible. This allows you to have more control over ingredients and portion sizes, making it easier to stick to your weight loss goals.

8. Practice mindful eating: Pay attention to what you eat and how it makes you feel. Avoid distractions such as television or smartphones while eating, and focus on enjoying your food and listening to your body's hunger and fullness signals.

9. Seek professional guidance: Consider consulting with a registered dietitian or nutritionist for personalized dietary advice and support. They can help you create a balanced meal plan tailored to your individual needs and preferences.

Remember that sustainable weight loss is achieved through gradual changes in eating habits and lifestyle. It's essential to find a dietary approach that works for you and can be maintained in the long term for lasting results.

Dietary patterns that could contribute to excess weight:

- Consuming minimal or no meals in one's own abode.

- Choosing foods rich in fats and high in calories.
- Preferring fatty snacks from conveniently located vending machines or snack outlets while not allocating ample time for preparing cost-effective, healthier options.
- Dining at restaurants with extravagant portion sizes or indulging in "all-you-can-eat" buffets.

Basic alterations that can transform the dining atmosphere:

1. Cook meals at home and pack lunches to go.
2. Develop skills in estimating or measuring portion sizes when dining out.



3. Enhance awareness of the fat content in menu selections and buffet offerings.
4. Quit smoking and cut back on alcohol intake.
5. Swap high-calorie foods for low-calorie alternatives.
6. Alter the commute route to avoid temptation from favored food outlets.

High-Protein, Low-Carbohydrate Diets:

High-protein, low-carbohydrate diets have surged in popularity as a weight loss approach for several compelling reasons. Firstly, the inclusion of more protein in one's diet contributes to increased satiety levels, surpassing the filling effect of carbohydrates or fats. This prolonged feeling of fullness reduces the tendency to overeat or

snack between meals. Secondly, these diets aid in the preservation of lean muscle mass, a critical component of effective weight loss. Adequate protein intake supports muscle maintenance and growth, essential for sustaining overall metabolic health and a higher metabolic rate. Additionally, high-protein diets can enhance metabolic function through thermogenesis, where the body expends more energy to digest and metabolize protein, potentially leading to greater calorie expenditure and fat loss.

Moreover, reducing carbohydrate intake supports better blood sugar control by stabilizing levels and minimizing insulin spikes. This aspect is particularly advantageous for individuals with insulin resistance or diabetes and helps mitigate cravings and energy crashes associated with high-carbohydrate meals. Furthermore, by limiting carbohydrate consumption, especially

refined carbs and sugars, the body is prompted to utilize stored fat as its primary energy source, facilitating fat loss over time. Despite their effectiveness, it's crucial to acknowledge that high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets may not be suitable for everyone. Some individuals may struggle with long-term adherence to these diets, and concerns exist regarding potential health risks associated with very low carbohydrate intake, such as nutrient deficiencies and increased strain on the kidneys. Therefore, consulting with a healthcare professional or a registered dietitian before embarking on any new diet or weight loss strategy is essential to ensure it aligns with individual health needs and goals. Emphasizing whole, nutrient-dense foods and maintaining a balanced diet remains paramount for long-term health and sustainable weight management.

ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024

By Ayesha Shaeaban



Structure

The upcoming ninth edition of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup promises an unprecedented level of participation, featuring a record-breaking 20 teams. Scheduled from June 1 to 29, the tournament will be co-hosted by the USA and West Indies.

In the initial stage, the 20 teams will be divided into four groups of five, with each team slated to play a minimum of four matches against other members of their respective groups. Following this phase, the top two teams from each group will advance to the Super 8s stage, while the bottom three teams from each group will be eliminated from the competition.

During the Super 8s phase, the remaining eight teams will be split into two groups, where they will compete in three matches against their group rivals to determine the semi-finalists. The semi-final matchups will feature the top two teams from each Super 8s group, with the winners progressing to the highly anticipated one-off final, set to take place in Barbados on June 29.

Venues

Throughout the tournament, a total of three venues in the USA and six in the Caribbean will be utilized. Sixteen matches are slated to be held in Lauderhill, Dallas, and New

York, including the highly anticipated showdown between India and Pakistan, set to unfold at the new Nassau County International Cricket Stadium in Long Island on June 9th.

Meanwhile, forty-one matches are scheduled to take place in various Caribbean nations. Semi-final matches will be hosted in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, leading up to the championship finale scheduled for June 29th in Barbados.

Groups

Group A comprises India, Pakistan, USA, Ireland, and Canada.

In Group B teams include England, Australia, Namibia, Scotland, and Oman.

Group C features West Indies, New Zealand, Afghanistan, Uganda, and Papua New Guinea.

Group D consists of South Africa, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Netherlands, and Nepal.

Team rosters

Most teams have announced their preliminary squads for the T20 World Cup, with the provision to make unlimited changes to their 15-player rosters until May 25th. Any modifications beyond this deadline will necessitate approval from the ICC's Event Technical Committee.

Fixtures

June 1, 2024 - USA vs. CANADA in Dallas at 07:30 PM LOCAL

June 2, 2024 - WEST INDIES vs. PAPUA NEW GUINEA in Guyana at 10:30 AM

June 2, 2024 - NAMIBIA vs. OMAN in Barbados at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 3, 2024 - SL vs. SOUTH AFRICA in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 3, 2024 - AFGHANISTAN vs. UGANDA in Guyana at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 4, 2024 - ENGLAND vs. SCOTLAND in Barbados at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 4, 2024 - NETHERLANDS vs. NEPAL in Dallas at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 5, 2024 - INDIA vs. IRELAND in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 5, 2024 - PAPUA NEW GUINEA vs. UGANDA in Guyana at 07:30 PM

June 5, 2024 - AUSTRALIA vs. OMAN in Barbados at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 6, 2024 - USA vs. PAKISTAN in Dallas at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 6, 2024 - NAMIBIA vs. SCOTLAND in Barbados at 03:00 PM LOCA

June 7, 2024 - CANADA vs. IRELAND in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 7, 2024 - NEW ZEALAND vs. AFGHANISTAN in Guyana at 07:30 PM

June 7, 2024 - SRI LANKA vs. BANGLADESH in Dallas at 07:30 PM LOCAL

June 8, 2024 - NETHERLANDS vs. SOUTH AFRICA in New York at 09:30 AM

June 8, 2024 - AUSTRALIA vs. ENGLAND in Barbados at 01:00 PM LOCAL

June 8, 2024 - WEST INDIES vs. UGANDA in Guyana at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 9, 2024 - INDIA vs. PAKISTAN in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 9, 2024 - OMAN vs. SCOTLAND in Antigua at 01:00 PM LOCAL

June 10, 2024 - SOUTH AFRICA vs. BANGLADESH in New York at 09:30 AM

June 11, 2024 - PAKISTAN vs. CANADA in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 11, 2024 - SRI LANKA vs. NEPAL in Florida at 07:30 PM LOCAL

June 11, 2024 - AUSTRALIA vs. NAMIBIA in Antigua at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 12, 2024 - USA vs. INDIA in New York at 09:30 AM LOCAL

June 12, 2024 - WEST INDIES vs. NEW ZEALAND in Trinidad at 08:30 PM

June 13, 2024 - ENGLAND vs. OMAN in Antigua at 03:00 PM LOCAL

June 13, 2024 - BANGLADESH vs. NETHERLANDS in St. Vincent at 10:30 AM

June 13, 2024 - AFGHANISTAN vs. PAPUA NEW GUINEA in Trinidad at 08:30 PM

June 14, 2024 - USA vs. IRELAND in Florida at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 14, 2024 - SOUTH AFRICA vs. NEPAL in St. Vincent at 07:30 PM LOCAL

June 14, 2024 - NEW ZEALAND vs. UGANDA in Trinidad at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 15, 2024 - INDIA vs. CANADA in Florida at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 15, 2024 - NAMIBIA vs. ENGLAND in Antigua at 01:00 PM LOCAL

June 15, 2024 - AUSTRALIA vs. SCOTLAND in St. Lucia at 08:30 PM LOCAL

June 16, 2024 - PAKISTAN vs. IRELAND in Florida at 10:30 AM LOCAL

June 16, 2024 - BANGLADESH vs. NEPAL in St. Vincent at 07:30 PM LOCAL

June 16, 2024 - SRI LANKA vs. NETHERLANDS in St. Lucia at 08:30 PM

June 17, 2024 - NEW ZEALAND vs. PAPUA NEW GUINEA in Trinidad at 10:30 AM

June 17, 2024 - WEST INDIES vs. AFGHANISTAN in St. Lucia at 08:30 PM

June 19, 2024 - A2 vs. D1 in Antigua at 10:30



Special conditions for the T20 World Cup

In the event of a tie in any match, a Super Over will be played. If the Super Over also ends in a tie, subsequent Super Overs will be played until a winner is determined. Furthermore, additional time has been allocated to ensure the completion of all knockout fixtures, particularly at the semi-final and final stages of the event. For both semi-finals, a total of 250 minutes of extra time is available. The first semi-final on June 26 has 60 minutes of extra time allocated at the end of the day's play, with an additional 190 minutes available on June 27. Similarly, the second semi-final on June 27 has an additional 250 minutes of available time scheduled for the day. Additionally, the final on June 29 has a reserve day on June 30, allowing for any unforeseen circumstances.

ICC MEN'S T20 WORLD CUP WEST INDIES & USA 2024			
1ST ROUND FIXTURES			
6 JUNE	VS	9 JUNE	
			
DALLAS		NEW YORK	
11 JUNE	VS	16 JUNE	
			
NEW YORK		FLORIDA	
PROBABLE SUPER 8 FIXTURES			
19 JUNE	VS	21 JUNE	
			
ANTIGUA		BARBADOS	
23 JUNE	VS		
			
BARBADOS			
PAKISTAN FIXTURES			

'Nadal's success made Roland Garros feel like the Bernabeu'



By Jonathan Jurejko

When you arrive through the gates at Roland Garros one of the first things that catches your eye is a sculpture depicting its finest champion.

The pose is unmistakable.

Rafael Nadal, left arm across his chest, feet levitating above the court and mouth agape, has just walloped a trademark forehand winner.

The next fortnight will be the final time it will be seen in the flesh at the French Open.

Nadal, who turns 38 during the tournament, is set to play the clay-court Grand Slam for one last time before retiring, having won a record 14 men's singles titles.

"The French Open is the most important tournament of my tennis career. All the things that I lived there, enjoyed there, stays in my heart forever," said Nadal, who faces German fourth seed Alexander Zverev in a tough first-round draw.

The 'unbelievable' numbers behind Nadal's success

No player in tennis history has been as synonymous with a tournament as Nadal has been with the French Open.

The Spanish left-hander's dominance at Roland Garros is why he is known as the 'King of Clay'.

The facts and figures - supplied by OptaAce and the International Tennis Federation - clearly illustrate his dominance:

Nadal is the only player in history to win 14 singles titles at one Grand Slam tournament

Nadal has won 112 of his 115 matches there – the highest winning percentage of any singles player at a major

Nadal is the only player to win five successive titles at Roland Garros (2010-2014)

Nadal is the only man to win four Grand Slam titles without dropping a set (2008, 2010, 2017 and 2020)

Nadal has only ever lost to two men – Robin Soderling (2009 fourth round) and Novak Djokovic (2015 quarter-finals, 2021 semi-finals)

Five of Nadal's victories in Paris are among the top 20 most dominant Grand Slam men's singles title runs by games dropped

Nadal won the first 16 of his 22 Grand Slams under the tutelage of his uncle Toni, who watched him hit a tennis ball for the first time aged three and coached him until 2017.

"When Rafael was young I tried to teach him how important it was to improve every day, every single match and every single tournament. We weren't thinking Roland Garros was more important than Wimbledon or the US Open," Toni Nadal told BBC Sport.

"I grew up watching Bjorn Borg, I could see how good Borg was on clay and saw him win Roland Garros six times.

"For me that was unbelievable - six times. Years later I saw my nephew win it 14 times. It is incredible what we have seen him do."

Why is Nadal so good on clay?

Nadal's main weapon is the vicious, lasso-style forehand that is immortalised in steel at Roland Garros.

That, combined with his sharp movement and supreme athleticism, is what has made him so great in Paris.

"He has the uncanny ability of being able to hit a lot of forehands and move very well on clay," Michael Chang, the American who won the 1989 title, told BBC Sport in 2018.

"He knows how to manipulate the angles and get people out of position.

"He is very aggressive, although patient when he needs to be, but if the shot is there he is going for it."

Clay slows the ball down more than grass, enabling Nadal to construct his points and tee up that famed forehand.

The hotter summer temperatures in mainland Europe - where the majority of the clay-court season takes place - also help Nadal generate more bounce.



It is notable that his successes at the Monte Carlo and Rome Masters tournaments outnumber those in Madrid, as the high altitude of the Spanish capital means the ball has less top spin and bounces lower.

"Spin is very important at Roland Garros," Toni Nadal said.

"Rafael moves his wrist very fast to get a lot of spin - we worked on that from a young age.

"To play flat is more difficult and Rafael has incredible feeling in his hands."

Why Roland Garros means so much to the Spanish

Clay is the natural surface for Spanish players, with about 100,000 courts across the country - most small villages have them.

So it is not surprising that Nadal emerged as the latest in a long line of Spanish success - albeit far more sustained than his predecessors - at Roland Garros.

Nadal's 14 wins, plus triumphs for Sergi Bruguera (two), Carlos Moya, Albert Costa and Juan Carlos Ferrero, means the nation has accounted for 19 of the past 30 men's champions.

Carlos Alcaraz, the two-time major winner who is the Spanish heir apparent to Nadal, is expected to add to that in the coming years.

Wandering around Court Philippe Chatrier - particularly before Nadal played a French Open final - felt like being outside the Santiago Bernabeu in the build-up to a big Real Madrid match.

Spanish speakers can be heard everywhere, chattering about the prospect of seeing one of the nation's favourite sons creating more history.

Splashes of red and yellow are ubiquitous on flags, football kits and hats. Super-fans wear Nadal-branded 'raging bull' hats and t-shirts.

Ferrero, the 2001 champion, says it feels like a home from home.

"Roland Garros is the closest Grand Slam and the fact that it is held on clay makes it even closer to Spain," he said.

"The fact that Spanish players have won it a lot, and especially thanks to Nadal, [means] tennis fans relate Roland Garros with good moments for Spanish tennis."

Courtesy BBC



Football's Growing Popularity in Pakistan: A Glimpse into the Future



By Hammad Hassan

Football, the world's beloved sport, continues its meteoric rise in Pakistan. The passion for football, fueled by global icons like Messi, Ronaldo, Mbappe, and Neymar, is now gripping the hearts of Pakistani fans. This burgeoning enthusiasm was evident when approximately 23,000 spectators filled Islamabad's Jinnah Stadium for a World Cup qualifier match between Pakistan and Jordan, marking a historic moment for football in the country.

The question on everyone's mind: where does Pakistan stand in the global football arena? The answer is found in the exceptional talent of players like Syed Ali Raza. A seasoned national football player, Syed Ali Raza's journey is a testament to Pakistan's hidden potential in the sport. His remarkable skills and dedication have earned him recognition and accolades, making him a beacon of hope for aspiring footballers in the country.

Syed Ali Raza's achievements are nothing short of spectacular. He has shone brightly in numerous tournaments, including the National Challenge Cup 2021 in Lahore, the All Pakistan Diamond Jubilee Cup 2022 in Quetta, and the Pakistan under-23 National Camp in 2023. His prowess was also on display in international friendly matches in Thailand and the National Challenge Cup in Islamabad in 2024. His participation in the All Pakistan National Futsal Cup 2023 in Quetta further solidified his reputation as a top-tier player.

Raza's trophy cabinet boasts several prestigious awards: a gold medal in the All Pakistan Inter Board Football Tournament (2022), top player recognition from Hazara Star Football Club Quetta, and gold medals in the All Pakistan Inter Region Football Tournament (2020/2021). He also secured a first-place finish at the Inter Board Sports Committee camp office in Karachi and a second-place position in the All Pakistan ISWA Football Under-19 Tournament (2023). His accolades reflect not just his talent but also his relentless pursuit of excellence.

One of the pivotal moments in Raza's career was his discovery by the international football club TFA, which is affiliated with UEFA and FIFA. This affiliation represents a significant milestone for Pakistani football, as TFA is dedicated to promoting local talent on a global stage. The club's director and head coach, Ali Al Jaishi, recognized Raza's passion and potential, deciding to further nurture his skills. TFA's annual talent hunt programs, conducted not only in Pakistan but worldwide, are instrumental in identifying and developing new talent, paving the way for a brighter future for football in Pakistan.

TFA, known for its commitment to excellence and talent development, has played a crucial role in transforming the landscape of football in Pakistan. The club operates with a vision to scout, train, and elevate local talent to international



standards. By hosting talent hunt programs in various countries, including Pakistan, TFA ensures that promising players receive the exposure and training necessary to compete at higher levels. Their efforts are not just limited to scouting but extend to comprehensive training programs that focus on both the physical and tactical aspects of the game. This holistic approach ensures that players like Syed Ali Raza are not only identified but also developed into world-class athletes.

As Pakistan's football landscape evolves, Syed Ali Raza stands as a testament to the nation's untapped talent and potential. His journey inspires countless young footballers to dream big, and with the support of international clubs like TFA and local initiatives, the future of Pakistani football looks brighter than ever.



Eight of the best films of 2024 so far

By Nicholas Barber and Caryn James

BBC Culture film critics Nicholas Barber and Caryn James pick their highlights of the year so far, including a vision of a war-torn America, a wonderfully creepy nun horror, and an outrageous Kristen Stewart crime thriller.

1. The Beast

I came out of *The Beast* thinking "This is the weirdest film I've seen since *Poor Things*", but also that I loved it. Bertrand Bonello has created an audacious, imaginative film about love, memory, pain and artificial intelligence that roams over three time periods, each featuring versions of Gabrielle and Louis, played by Léa Seydoux and George MacKay. In a stark and chilling 2044, AI can be used to erase feelings of pain, including a broken heart, but that means reexperiencing those memories to erase them. Gabrielle begins the process, which leads her to Belle Époque Paris, where she is unhappily married and George is an unsettling attraction, and Los Angeles in 2014, where she is housesitting and he is her stalker. Careening through the time periods, *The Beast* is the kind of head-spinning story that may not piece together neatly at first, but is so filled with unexpected turns and set pieces – such as Gabrielle and Louis caught in the flooded basement of a doll factory in Paris – that it is constantly exhilarating. (CJ)



2. Immaculate

Sydney Sweeney (also the film's producer) stars in this wonderfully creepy horror movie about an American novice nun who learns that all is not as it seems in an Italian convent. *Immaculate* could easily have been a trashy nunsploitation B-movie, but it's (mother) superior in many



ways, from the bold commentary on men's treatment of women to cinematography that recalls Renaissance religious art. What's most striking about the film, though, is its willingness to take things to jaw-dropping extremes. There are countless moments when you're watching it and you think, "No... they're not going to go there... they wouldn't..." And then they do. (NB)

3. Civil War

Reactions to this film were almost as polarised as the divided country it depicts, a sure sign that Alex Garland hit a nerve with his vision of a near-future US that has descended into civil war under a fascist president. Kirsten Dunst is at the centre as a photojournalist who, along with her colleagues – played by Wagner Moura, Cailee Spaeny and Stephen McKinley Henderson – put themselves at great risk to witness and report the action around them. Garland makes that action visceral and explosive, from guns and tanks on the streets of Washington DC to violent one-on-one encounters in the supposedly calm countryside. But the most harrowing aspect of the film is how acutely and convincingly he positions the fiction as a hairsbreadth away from the real world around us. Some viewers complained that Garland didn't set up a more pointed political conflict, but to me the film is chilling enough in its vision of an all-too-credible war-torn future. (CJ)



4. Love Lies Bleeding

Kristen Stewart's character has a miserable life at the start of *Love Lies Bleeding*, as Kristen Stewart's characters so often do. She manages a dingy gym in a small town, she avoids her gangster father (Ed Harris), and she tries in vain to persuade her sister (Jena Malone) to end her abusive marriage. But everything changes when a charismatic drifter played by Katy O'Brian stops off on her way to a body-building contest in Las Vegas. Sparks fly, and the fireworks of sweaty sex, shocking violence and all-round craziness keep exploding. A stylish, blackly comic lesbian film noir from Rose Glass, the British director who made her feature debut with acclaimed horror *Saint Maud*, *Love Lies Bleeding* is the most fun and imaginative indie crime thriller since *Good Time* (2017), which happened to star Stewart's *Twilight* co-star, Robert Pattinson. (NB)

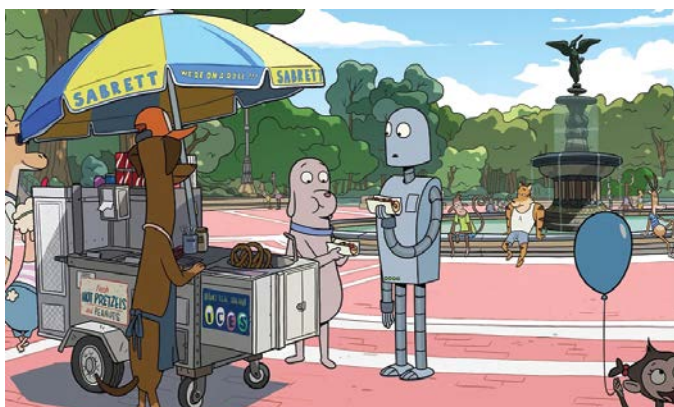
5. La Chimera

Alice Rohrwacher's films – like 2018's great, fabulistic *Happy as Lazzaro* – are tinged with magic realism. *La Chimera*, set in Tuscany in the 1980s, is among her best as it walks the line between richly-textured realism and dreams. Josh O'Connor stars as Arthur, an Englishman who works with a band of local Italian graverobbers to find ancient artifacts in Etruscan tombs to sell on the black market. Seedy looking and sad, Arthur is reeling from losing his love, Beniamina. As one character puts it, he is searching in the underground for "a door to the afterlife" and at times seems to find it. Rohrwacher has an eye for finding beauty in ruins, whether the big crumbling house where Beniamina's mother (Isabella Rossellini) lives, or Arthur himself. The plot keeps moving, with danger, crime and escapes from the police, but the film is shaped by O'Connor's poignant, low-key but charismatic performance and Rohrwacher's elegant vision, lushly filmed by the great cinematographer Helene Louvart. (CJ)



6. Robot Dreams

Robot Dreams is a cartoon like no other. It's a Spanish-French production, and yet it's a loving homage to the vibrancy of 1980s New York. It's animated in a 2D picture-book style, and yet it's bursting with tiny details. It doesn't have any dialogue, and yet it's peppered with wit and wisdom. It's all about a dog and a robot, and yet it's a richly human exploration of loneliness and companionship. Adapted from Sara Varon's graphic novel and directed by Pablo Berger, this Oscar-nominated gem tells the enchanting tale of two friends who find heartwarming joy in each other's company – and then have to work out whether they can learn to live apart. (NB)



7. Io Capitano

Few migrant dramas are as stirring, humane and suspenseful as this one, about the treacherous journey of a 16-year-old boy as he leaves Senegal in search of a better life. Matteo Garrone (*Gomorrah*) won the award for best director at the 2023 Venice Film Festival for the film, and his non-professional star, Seydou Sarr, won best young actor as the fictional Seydou, a gentle boy determined to make it to Italy along with his cousin, Moussa. Each stage of the boys' travels presents a different danger. They set out across the Sahara with a group of other migrants, and when one woman dies, Seydou sees her gliding through the air, as if the reality is too much to take in. In Libya he is imprisoned and tortured. In the final stages he must pilot a boat full of migrants toward Italy, giving the film its title, *Io Capitano* (I Captain). With relatively few words, Garrone and Sarr create an eloquent, piercingly real film about one person, whose story resonates with the situation of millions around the world. (CJ)



8. Perfect Days

You wouldn't necessarily think that someone who cleaned public toilets for a living had found the secret to happiness, but Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days* makes a strong case for the idea. A Japanese-language film from the German writer-director, this hypnotic character study follows Hirayama (Kōji Yakusho) around Tokyo as he carries out his janitorial duties, waters his plants, reads novels, listens to American rock music and takes photos of trees, all with the same quiet diligence and pride. There are hints here and there about how Hirayama's life has changed, and how it might change in the future, but the core of the film is a documentary-like meditation on the serenity of an existence stripped to its essentials. Also, the public toilets themselves are so well designed that *Perfect Days* could well turn them into tourist attractions. (NB)

Courtesy BBC





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