

March 2024

PAKISTAN NEWS DIGEST

*A Selected Summary of News, Views and Trends
from Pakistani Media*



Prepared by
Dr. Zainab Akhter
Dr. Nazir Ahmad Mir
Mr. Afroz Khan
Dr. Ashok Behuria

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MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The return of Shehbaz, Editorial, *The Express Tribune*, 04 March¹

In one of the most divisive and contestable parliaments, Shehbaz Sharif has been elected as the 24th Prime Minister of Pakistan. *This is his second tenure, and incidentally is a repeat of his previous coalition government with the same partners and same memento. The recast of PDM2, however, has come with extreme political instability since its inception, and the controversy of ballot tampering and the litigations of Form 45 will keep it on tenterhooks.* On the other hand, the entire opposition strata inside and out of the assembly are rallying for protests, and unwilling to concede. This volatility will leave little room for the bandwagon of the treasury to look into real issues of economic revival as well as indispensable socio-administrative reforms. There is no death of misgivings, however, as the new parliament gets down to business. It is quite unfortunate that the Election Commission held back awarding of reserved seats as the new chief executive was elected, and this is tantamount to violation of the Constitution. *Indeed, for reasons of proximity and vested political consideration this move was undertaken and it will surely cast its long shadows of illegality in weeks and months to come. It seems, nonetheless, that the reserved seats enigma will be prolonged till the presidential vote on March 9, sealing the fate of legislatures' transparency and credibility.* Perhaps, this is why the JUI-F chief casted aspersions on the fairness of the general elections, and the parliament that has come into being. He had a point as he uttered that “democracy is losing its case and the parliament is losing its value”. With Shehbaz grabbing 201 votes against Omer Ayub’s 92 in the voting held yesterday, one statistical aspect was noticeable. The elected Independents under the PTI banner held their ground, and there wasn’t any horse-trading. Likewise, the day also saw the beleaguered PTI limp back to normalcy as it successfully held its intra-party elections, consolidating its identity on the radar of the electoral module.

¹ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2458272/the-return-of-shehbaz>

Reserved seats verdict, Editorial, *The Express Tribune*, 05 March²

The reserved seats verdict is in. And the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has ruled – in a 4-1 verdict – that the PTI-backed Sunni Ittehad Council is not eligible for the reserved seats allotted to women and minorities. *The remaining 77 reserved seats will now be allotted to other political parties. But the dissenting note by the Punjab member of the ECP says that, while the reserved seats cannot be allocated to the SIC, as the priority list was not submitted in time, the constitution will need to be amended before these seats are allocated to the other parties.* Needless to say, this verdict comes as quite a blow for the PTI, which will now challenge it in court. Legal experts say that the ECP could have used this precedent as even the PTI's case is unique in the sense that its election symbol was taken away right before the elections and thus it had no way of knowing it would have to merge with the SIC, which never submitted a list for reserved seats. *To the PTI, this verdict will be seen as a continuation of what started with the bat symbol being taken away from the party just before the general elections.* One school of thought has always maintained that just like the bat symbol should not have been taken away from the PTI despite its intraparty elections being a farce or not taking place at all, the reserved seats should either have been given to the PTI-SIC or at least should not be given to the rest of the parties.

Justice denied, Editorial, *Dawn*, 07 March³

The apex court was hearing a reference filed by Asif Ali Zardari in 2011, when he was president, seeking the court's opinion on Bhutto's death sentence. *The PPP founder had been convicted by a Lahore High Court bench of the 1974 murder of Mohammad Ahmed Khan Kasuri; the SC, in a split 4-3 decision, had upheld the LHC verdict, paving the way for the execution of Pakistan's first popularly elected prime minister.* While noting that the law does not provide a mechanism to set aside the original judgment, the Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa noted in the short order that the LHC trial and the SC appeal in Bhutto's case did “not meet the requirements of the fundamental right to a fair trial and due process”. The SC's observations have validated what legal experts have been saying for

² <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1164448-reserved-seats-verdict>

³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1819765>

decades: that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's conviction was a travesty of justice — a 'judicial murder' as his party has put it. It can be asked why an over four-decade-old case was dusted up when blatant injustice continues to be meted out today. Perhaps revisiting the Bhutto case is relevant because of these very injustices. It shows that even popularly elected prime ministers can be humiliated, incarcerated and even sent to the gallows when the state desires it, and that the legal system can be manipulated to suit the whims of powerful forces. *Similar criticism of the judiciary has followed Imran Khan's iddat case, as well as Nawaz Sharif's run-ins with accountability courts in years past. That is why, as the chief justice observed in the short order, the judiciary should, "confront our past missteps and fallibilities with humility, in the spirit of self-accountability"*.

New, but old Cabinet, Editorial, *The Express Tribune*, 12 March⁴

A 19-member federal cabinet is at the helm of affairs to steer a country mired in economic recession and political instability. None of the nominees are new to power dispensation, and their names are from the who's who list of the previous, PDM1 government. The only noticeable addition is the former HBL chief, Muhammad Aurangzeb, who is certain to take on as finance minister. *The naming of Ishaq Dar as would-be foreign minister has raised many eyebrows, as his Senate tenure stands lapsed, but he has been asked to continue in office.* Likewise, former caretaker Punjab chief minister Mohsin Naqvi's induction into the Shehbaz Sharif's flanks as interior minister confirms the speculations that there is enough to read between the lines as the PML-N has been put on the power saddle. *The exclusion of PPP will keep the coalition on tenterhooks, especially as the beleaguered PML-N leadership goes on to decide on matters of life and death in a sinking economy, and on indispensable reforms.* With Asif Ali Zardari enthroned in the Presidency, the PPP is in a win-win situation. As if in a scene from Sherlock Holmes, the PPP has tactfully sought a pound of flesh without spilling a drop of blood. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, thus, has insurmountable challenges to face as the opposition is unrelenting and the dark shadows of ballot tampering hovering over its wafer-thin majority are unlikely to wither away.

⁴ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2459071/new-but-old>

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Economic agenda, Editorial, *Dawn*, 14 March⁵

At his first formal interaction with reporters after assuming control of Q Block, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb dropped some clear hints about the kind of financial policies he intends to pursue, at least in the short to medium term. Signalling the continuation of IMF-mandated stabilisation policies under the \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement, the former banker said that Pakistan, a sovereign, nuclear state, could no longer afford to continue with a ‘patchwork’ approach to deep-rooted economic woes if it wanted to address the challenge posed by low economic growth and inflation. He was also clear about the Sharif government’s plan to kick-start discussions for a new, larger and longer IMF loan during the international lender’s visit for the second and final review of the current nine-month facility that ends soon. *The question is: will he get enough room to execute the stabilisation policies for as long as it is required? What is the guarantee that the ruling party will support his attempts to effectively tax its core political constituency of retailers or the powerful real estate mafia?* Last but not the least, how long will the government resist the temptation of spurring growth without executing the long-standing structural reforms once forex reserves rise to a comfortable level, as it panders to its vote bank?

Managing the economy, Editorial, *The News*, 15 March⁶

The new finance minister has his job cut out for him: jumpstart the stalled engines of the domestic economy to put it on a path to sustainable growth. There is no reason why a healthy, growing economy should not be able to return a positive current account balance and service its debts, which should in turn strengthen the currency and put the brakes on inflation. *There is no doubt that Pakistan’s real economy is in tatters after years of mismanagement and stagnation, and it will take more than band-aids to get*

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1821372>

⁶ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1168196-managing-the-economy>

back into shape. Equally, the county's unsustainably high external debt is a huge drain on what little resources the sputtering economy can generate, leaving the nation at the mercy of the global financial markets. Aurangzeb will need to find and implement innovative ways to effectively manage the debt burden. Fiscal consolidation is another key challenge the new finance minister will have to face in the course of his job. This will involve both bringing government spending under control by cutting the rot and keeping unfunded subsidies at bay and increasing revenue by broadening the tax base and improving collection. Bringing the rent-seeking farm and retail sectors under the tax net are two long overdue steps in the right direction, as is the task of oiling the wheels of the snail-paced privatization program. *His biggest test will be boosting exports by creating a business-friendly environment to attract foreign investment with a strong focus on foreign direct investment. Pakistan's general economic policy direction has been right through the last two short-lived governments, although progress has been slow on account of the very nature of those governments and the political challenges that beset them.* Aurangzeb's job will be to maintain that policy direction and accelerate progress.

Nod from IMF, Editorial, *The News*, 21 March⁷

Pakistan is to stay put with the IMF. The Staff-Level Agreement reached with the donor has come as a jiff of fresh air for a struggling economy, marred by serious balance of payments issues. *The deal, if endorsed by the Fund's Executive Board, will fetch \$1.1 billion, and come to close the current Review Programme. The \$3 billion bailout package had seen many crests and troughs in the last three years, including a guarantee that the Fund sought from the disposed PTI, but had survived the thick and thin to keep Pakistan afloat by avoiding a sovereign default.* The delicate talks that were held in Islamabad with the new dispensation were in the eye of the storm as the Fund was very particular about reforming sectors of the economy that are reliant on subsidies, and ensuring that a vibrant tax base is forthcoming. The tasks before the beleaguered government, groped with problems of credibility, are to broaden the tax base; evolve a working formula to address the electricity and gas tariff adjustments; and avoid circular debt accumulation.

⁷ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2459993/nod-from-imf>

The soaring energy prices have not only taken down the industry by making it uncompetitive, but have also axed the purchasing power of commoners. Millions of people have dipped below the poverty line, coupled with socio-economic unrest in the wake of unemployment and a dismal law and order situation. This entails Pakistan to take a dig at a long-term strategy and sever the strings of aid. Seeking new debt for retiring old ones is myopic.

Tax reform season? Editorial, *The News*, 26 March⁸

Flogging the dead horse of tax reform has been the favourite pastime of the high and mighty in our country for well over a decade now, and every successive government indulges in this sport with added zeal. True to this tradition, the newly elected government is finding tax reform seasonable. *Indeed, it seems to believe it has more of a right to indulge in the sport because it is buttressed by the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). To wit, the opening shot has been fired. And going by what we know of a briefing delivered by the dead horse called the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) to the SIFC headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the said horse is itself keen on being reformed and is trying all in its power to be thoroughly reformed.* Curiously, however, the vaunted fruits of the putative reform have always failed to materialize, and it is difficult to see why the exercise will meet a different end this time around. The side deck of the briefing is a curiosity of rare provenance, obviously put together by a fresh mind with vestigial reason and unfettered imagination. Not only is it rich in omissions of the most blatant kind ever seen in an official document even going by the standards of the land of the pure, it also exhibits unparalleled disregard for common sense. It enlightens us that the federal government gobbles up a hefty 12.9 per cent of the nation's revenue on an annual basis, leaving only about 6.1 per cent for the provinces and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) so that the total expenditure totals to some 19 per cent of GDP.

⁸ <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1172264-tax-reform-season>

SECURITY SITUATION

Neglected region: Gilgit Baltistan, Sajjad Ahmad, Dawn, 04 March⁹

Periodically, GB has been embroiled in days of protests and strikes but recent demonstrations were unprecedented for two reasons. First, these protests were the longest in the region's history. People braved the harsh weather and continued their sit-ins for more than a month until their demands were accepted. Second, the Awami Action Committee an alliance of political, religious and traders' unions which led the protests, had a 15-point demand list, including reduced wheat prices and the suspension of the Finance Act. *In GB's context, it is difficult to accept the remaining demands unless there is a major policy shift on the region on the part of the federal government. However, there is significant pressure on the newly elected dispensation to take GB's political and economic matters seriously. Lack of necessities such as health, electricity, transport, and communication has added to the people's hardships.* No serious attempt has ever been made by any government to improve the health infrastructure in the region. The shortage of doctors, critical machinery, medical labs, and hospitals has resulted in several deaths. Stories periodically surface on social media, if not mainstream media, about the suffering of patients due to the absence of medical staff and facilities. The new government will have to take up challenging tasks for the betterment of GB. Pakistan, which is already passing through grave economic and political crises, cannot afford another problem. The habit of lingering on issues that require urgent attention needs to end. *Time is of the essence in the resolution of pending issues and urgent practical steps are needed. The only way for the government to upgrade the region, satisfy the population and build trust among the public is to display its commitment and seriousness this time.*

Afghan turbulence, Editorial, Dawn, 19 March¹⁰

Relations between the newly formed government and Afghanistan's de facto Taliban rulers have begun on an inauspicious note. After seven security personnel were martyred

⁹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1818491/neglected-region>

¹⁰ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1822453/afghan-turbulence>

in a terrorist attack in North Waziristan on Saturday, Pakistan hit targets in Paktika and Khost provinces early on Monday targeting “terrorists belonging to [the] Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group”, according to an FO statement released yesterday. Both sides must verify where the attacks targeting Pakistan originated from. *While Afghan Taliban officials insist their territory is not being used by terrorists, there is a lot of evidence suggesting otherwise.* Pakistan has raised the issue of militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan at the UN whose officials have similarly highlighted the presence of numerous militant groups in Afghanistan. Instead of feigning ignorance, the Afghan Taliban should take action to stop anti-Pakistan fighters from launching attacks inside this country, especially if they are serious in their quest to be accepted as Afghanistan’s legitimate government. While clear threats to national security must be immediately neutralised, Pakistan has to use carrots and sticks with the Taliban to permanently solve the militancy problem. The FO has hinted at a similar line of action and of working “towards finding joint solutions in countering terrorism”. Communication channels should remain open, and Pakistan should ask Afghanistan to take action against verified terrorist sanctuaries across the border. *Moreover, China, which offers a financial lifeline to the Kabul regime, can also be asked to take punitive measures if the Taliban refuse to crack down on militants on their soil.* The terrorist threat from Afghanistan-based groups can destabilise the entire region, which is why all regional states should work on a common counterterrorism agenda with Kabul, along with using bilateral channels.

Gwadar attack, Editorial, Dawn, 21 March¹¹

Yesterday’s audacious attack on Gwadar’s Port Authority Complex is yet another reminder of the grim trajectory of militancy in the country. *Within days of a major terrorist attack in North Waziristan, militants targeted a facility which houses government offices, including those of the security agencies.* The Majeed Brigade, affiliated with the banned Balochistan Liberation Army, claimed responsibility. At least eight terrorists were killed by security forces, while two soldiers were martyred. The ambush shows that far from being neutralised, separatist militants in Balochistan very much remain a threat to the province’s security. This is not the first time Gwadar and its environs have been targeted

¹¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1822893>

by insurgents. Here, separatism and geopolitics combine in a lethal cocktail, as militants believed to have the support of hostile agencies target Chinese interests in what is supposed to be the jewel in the CPEC crown. *A proper investigation must uncover how the attackers were able to strike such an official facility housing LEAs. Even otherwise, Gwadar is said to be under a security blanket, mainly to protect Chinese nationals and others associated with CPEC projects in Balochistan.* In fact, several observers have pointed to the ‘working relationship’ between religiously inspired militant groups such as the TTP, and Baloch separatist outfits, including the BLA.

Terror wave, Editorial, *The News*, 27 March¹²

Pakistan is under an ongoing terror threat, and it seems the targets this time are our strategic projects, the aim seemingly to disrupt any progress the country tries to make. Tuesday saw a terror attack killing six people including five Chinese engineers in Shangla. The details thus far say that a woman was among five Chinese citizens and a Pakistani driver killed when their vehicle was attacked in Shangla's Besham city when a suicide bomber crashed an explosives-laden vehicle into the car carrying the victims. *The Chinese nationals were reportedly working on the Dasu Hydropower Project. The condemnations have come fast. Most importantly, Pakistan's military has pledged that all those involved in aiding terrorism, directly or indirectly, will be held accountable.* In a statement by ISPR, the military has said that "certain foreign elements" are complicit in aiding and abetting terrorism in Pakistan and that "strategic projects and sensitive sites" vital for the country's economic progress are being targeted. It has certainly been a bad few months for the country as far as attacks go. In particular, the targeting of Chinese projects is alarming. *The military too has pointed to this and said this seems to be an attempt to "sow discord between Pakistan and its strategic allies and partners, most notably China".* The Chinese embassy in Pakistan has said that the Chinese are trying to handle the aftermath together with the Pakistani side and has requested Pakistan to “thoroughly investigate the attack and severely punish the perpetrators” while saying that all measures are being taken to protect Chinese citizens and projects in Pakistan.

¹² <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1172614-terror-wave>

Amnesty in Balochistan, Editorial, Jang, 05 March¹³

After the establishment of Pakistan, Balochistan was continuously neglected by every government that came to power to bring it in line with other provinces. With the passage of time, the feeling of deprivation increased, which was taken advantage of by anti-national elements by instilling a sense of separatism and militancy by misleading the Baloch. In the recent decades, India has used its secret agency R&AW to do terrorism in the province. This also helped the banned organization Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to increase its activities. Its main agenda remains to create anger among the people of the largest province against Pakistan. Analysts describe the situation in Balochistan as a political problem. They suggest it should be solved through political means. The new Chief Minister of Balochistan, Sarfaraz Bugti, while talking to the media on the occasion of his visit to Mazar-e-Quaid during his visit to Karachi, informed that amnesty has been given to those who returned from the mountains and every effort was made to find a solution to their problems. The announcement seems to have a solution to the problems of the largest and mineral-rich province. How this province has lagged behind others in construction and development needs to be understood. On a sustainable basis, the provincial government under the auspices of the federation, together with the tribal elders and representatives of the disaffected people, has to sit down for short, medium and long term to resolve the issues that Balochistan faces. The announcement of amnesty will be effective only when the people of the province are provided with equal opportunities to come forward in every sphere of life.

Forces raid house of journalist Asad Toor, increase in physical remand Daily Sangar, 06 March¹⁴

Journalist Asad Toor, who was arrested in the case of mockery of judges and military generals was handed over to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) for another 2 days of physical remand. Asad Toor's lawyer, Hadi Ali said that the forces raided the house to get Asad Toor's

¹³ <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/642751>

¹⁴ <https://dailysangar.online/?p=44773>

phone and other devices, but they did not find any devices there that could prove that the source of Asad Toor's news on his vlogs. Hadi Ali said that Asad takes responsibility for the content of all his vlogs. Despite this, finding out the sources of his news will not only cause a lot of discredit to journalism but also to the state of Pakistan. First 5 days, then 3 days and now another 2 days' remand and Asad has been handed over to the FIA. Asad, who was arrested in the case of running a campaign against institutions by the FIA, was presented in the court of Judicial Magistrate Muhammad Shabbir on completion of his 3-day physical remand. FIA's lawyer said that after the amendment of the law physical remand can be extended for 30 days. There has been progress in the investigation, there is a request for more physical remand. *Asad's lawyer Hadi Ali said that the prosecution will have to convince the court that for what purpose further remand is needed. There is no evidence as far as the record is concerned. The case needs to be discharged, he said.* It should be noted that on the night of 26 and 27 February, the FIA filed a complaint against Asad Toor for running a malicious campaign against the higher judiciary for its decision to deprive the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of its 'bat' symbol before the elections. He was arrested under these charges.

Why is the People's party refusing to join the government? Editorial, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, 12 March¹⁵

The People's Party (PPP) has announced that it will not be a part of the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Talking to private TV, Senator and Secretary Finance PPP Saleem Mandviwala said, "We will not be a part of the negotiations with the IMF. If we are not included in the cabinet, in what capacity should we negotiate with the IMF?" *If the PPP did not support it, the Muslim League could not have formed a government at the center. There is a coalition government at the center but the PPP has refused to take cabinet berths. Like without the support of the PPP the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) could not form a government at the center, similarly it cannot make policies without the PPP. If policies are not made, how will the government run?* How could Asif Ali Zardari become the President of Pakistan without supporting the PML-N? He is also the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. According to the agreement between the PPP and PML-N, he also

¹⁵ <https://www.nawaiwaqt.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/1771830>

gave governorships to the PPP in many provinces. Irfan Siddiqui, the leader of the PML-N, said that if the People's Party wants to join the ruling party, then it will have to be a part of the wreckage as well. The PPP was part of the government with PML-N for 14 months but during the election campaign it blamed the PML-N for the failures of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) led government. The situation took a different direction and the two parties were fighting against each other. It seems the situation is going in the same direction again. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has already tried to create hurdles in the IMF program. If the PPP walks the same path then whom is it serving? *Now they have decided to walk together, the PPP should not look too much at political benefits; it should think in the country's national interest.* The IMF is asking that to increase revenue and tax collection. The IMF's demands are not wrong. If it is accepted, then what is wrong in negotiating with the IMF together with the government?

Problems in Balochistan and Sarfraz Bugti as the chief minister, Pir Farooq Baha-ul Haq, *Jang*, 12 March¹⁶

Balochistan is considered to be the largest province of Pakistan in terms of area and the least developed province in terms of economy. Due to its specific geographical background, its problems are different from other provinces of Pakistan. India and other hostile countries are busy trying to deepen their roots in Balochistan. Some armed organizations operating with foreign aid are a constant headache for Pakistan and Pakistani institutions. *Many attempts were made in the past to resolve the issues of Balochistan but they did not bear much success: the basic problems of the people of Balochistan remained the same.* Politics in Balochistan has always been dominated by certain families and for a long period of time they were successful in the elections and reached the assemblies as well. The senators were also selected in a specific way, due to which the backwardness and deprivation of Balochistan increased day by day. The main problems of Balochistan are the lack of education, health and clean water. ... The province has been a victim of extremists and separatist movements for decades. Apart from these basic problems, Balochistan is facing environmental problems as well. *Sarfraz Bugti, the new chief minister of Balochistan belongs to the Bugti tribe.* His father, Mir Ghulam Qadir Bugti was among the fiercest opponents of Nawab

¹⁶ <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/646939>

Muhammad Akbar Khan Bugti, the head of the Bugti tribe. Qadir Bugti joined the People's Party in 1988. But later he ended up supporting Pervez Musharraf's policies in Balochistan when the latter took power in Pakistan 1999. *In 2008, Mir Sarfraz Bugti participated in the general elections from Dera Bugti on the ticket of PPP, but he was defeated by his cousin Mir. Tariq Bugti.* In 2013, he was elected as an independent member of the Balochistan Assembly from Dera Bugti for the first time, but later he joined the Muslim League-N. He served as the Home Minister in the coalition government of Balochistan formed in 2013.

Economic agenda of the new government! Editorial, Jang, 13 March¹⁷

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during his address in the first meeting of the federal cabinet on 11 March openly pointed out the national problems and asked for concrete steps to solve them. This is certainly a reflection of his long experience as an administrator and feeling the suffering of millions of people. He openly underlined the economic reality in which a handful of elites control 90 percent of the country's resources while the poor are suffering inflation. Various global organizations are demanding tax on retailers who are barely making a living while wholesalers are being ignored for their profiteering. The prime minister described price control as the major test of the new government. He reiterated his commitment to end subsidies to the elite and increase the tax net instead of taxes. Currently, electricity worth 500 billion rupees has been stolen and the poor have to bear the price. The Prime Minister emphasized on increasing investment, instead of debt to revive the economy. He said that the government's job is not to do business but to facilitate the private sector. He directed to immediately form a committee for price control which will work with the provincial governments. *The inclusion of elected and unelected technocrats and non-technocrats, old and new, experienced and young faces in the 19-member federal cabinet that was sworn in on 11 March implies that the government is serious about addressing the problems faced by the people. In particular, overcoming the economic crisis is its first priority.* In this regard, experienced banker Muhammad Aurangzeb has been made the finance minister. He has left his highly paid and Dutch citizenship to serve the country.

¹⁷ <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/647424>

First step for reconciliation? Editorial, Jang, 15 March¹⁸

The meeting of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif can be said to be the beginning of reconciliation. Since more than a month has passed since the general elections were held, some concrete work should be done in this regard. Given the mandate that the people of Pakistan have given, two things are important. One is that the ongoing tension since the time of elections should be reduced through mutual communication and understanding. The second is that governance and performance should be the focus of the new rulers so that public problems are removed and people can see the performance graph. *KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur did well to go to Islamabad and meet the Prime Minister and put a stop to many negative speculations. Even the Prime Minister gave time on the same day to meet Gandapur thus the meeting was held in a good atmosphere. It is hoped that many matters may improve. Talking to the media, Gandapur said that in the meeting issues like the captive workers of Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), ban on meetings with PTI chairman Imran Khan and payments due to KP and alleged rigging of elections were discussed. He said that we know the economic conditions of Pakistan, we will not make any demand which is impossible for the federation to fulfil.* According to Gandapur's statement, the Prime Minister has assured respect for the mandate and assured full cooperation. The premier also said that meetings with Imran Khan would be allowed. Gandapur said that the problems of the province and Pakistan have to be solved.

PAF targets TTP hideouts in Afghanistan, Muhammad Qasim, Ummat, 19 March¹⁹

After the suicide attack on a check post in Mirpur, North Waziristan on 16 March, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) carried out aerial strikes at two targets in Khost and Paktiya provinces of Afghanistan at am on 18 March. According to security sources, in Khost a Pakistan extremist's center was hit in which many extremists were killed and the center destroyed. In Paktia the house of commander Abdullah Shah was hit in which he was killed. However, a spokesperson of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has denied the report

¹⁸ <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/648803>

¹⁹ <https://ummat.net/epaper/news.php?date=2024/03/19/&p=story4.gif>

of the killing of Abdullah and released a small video clip of him. According to a local journalist, after the attack common people and media have been stopped from going to the area. Meanwhile, *spokesperson of the Afghan Taliban Zabihullah Mujahid has warned Pakistan for violating the sovereignty of Afghanistan and said that this might affect bilateral relations between two countries. Zabihullah said that the person that Pakistan claimed was killed is not present in Afghanistan.* He said that the people of Pakistan should stop the new government from taking such actions. He said that Pakistan should not blame others for its security failures. On the other hand, *TTP spokesperson Muhammad Khorasani said that the abandoned homes were targeted. According to security experts, there is a contradiction in the statements of the TTP and Afghan Taliban. The statement of the TTP validates the position of Pakistan that TTP hideouts are present inside Afghanistan.*

Pakistan-US relations, Editorial, Jang, 21 March²⁰

United States (US) Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu has submitted a written statement to the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs, giving an in-depth review of Pakistan's elections 2024 and Pakistan-US relations. He said that the US is an important partner of Pakistan. The US is determined to strengthen its democratic institutions. Referring to the election review, he said that there was particular concern over the incidents of violence before the general elections. Many journalists, especially women journalists, were harassed by party supporters. According to the Election Observers Organization, they were prevented from observing in almost half of the constituencies of the country. Many political leaders could not register their particular candidates and parties. *According to Donald Lu, the election was not all bad. On the positive side, despite threats of violence, more than 60 million voters exercised their right to vote, including more than 2.1 million women voters. Voters elected more than 50 percent more women to parliament than in 2018.* In a statement issued a day after the general elections of 8 February, the US State Department noted that it had noted "unnecessary restrictions on the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly" and that allegations of election interference or fraud should be investigated. *It may be noted that former Prime Minister Imran Khan had accused Donald Lu of bringing down his government. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's chapter in the US had claimed that*

²⁰ <https://e.jang.com.pk/detail/652227>

the Congress was holding an important hearing on the matter, although the US State Department has repeatedly denied this.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Big Challenges for Shehbaz Sharif 24th PM of Pakistan: Economy is the biggest challenge, Sawal Yeh Hai with Maria Memon, ARY News, 03 March²¹

Shehbaz won the prime minister's election today after clinching 201 votes against his PTI-backed opponent from the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) Omar Ayub Khan, who managed to secure 92 votes. Shehbaz Sharif elected prime minister for 2nd time, vows to steer Pakistan 'back to shore' in victory speech. The host asked how far this government will go, will the new government able to bring out the country from economic crisis. *Zahid Hussain*, journalist underlined that it is difficult to say how long it will run but it is clear that the PML-N does not have a clear mandate and PPP has not supported the government completely but from outside. It is a minority government and the biggest challenge is the economic crisis and how to bring it out from the crisis. How the government will deal with IMF will be a game changer for the government and on the other hand the opposition is led by PTI. Also it has been supported by allies from the PDM government. *Athar Kazi*, analyst pointed out that there is a question mark on the mandate of this government and even PPP and MQM is doubtful and their mandate is questionable. There is protests in the assembly and the winners are sad because of the strong opposition in the assembly. The narrative the government is holding against the PTI will not work in the long run. In Punjab the new CM Maryam Nawaz has cracked down on the protests as they are scared of the public review. *Aarifa Noor*, journalist pointed out that economic crisis is the main issue and the economy will define the role of the government in the coming days. There are still doubts on the elections and the questions on the capacity of the new PM Shehbaz Sharif will define the government's future. *Syed Shabbar Zaidi*, Economist Analyst pointed out that it most of it depends on who will be the finance minister. He added that there

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiSkG771A0M>

is no indicator that our economic situation is improving and there is no hope in the immediate future. Adding to it the new government will have to take decisions that will be political suicide for the parties but good for the country. But the problem is that the government is formed on a requirement and the alliances will not support government's decision. This government will not give any long term agenda on economy because it will not fir their political ambitions. The PKR is out of record balance and there is a fiscal deficit. Going to the IMF is a need of the hour and there is no option to skip IMF, if we do not go the IMF will come to Pakistan to take back its money.

The 19-member Federal Cabinet: Why did the PPP not join the Federal Cabinet?
Capital Talk with Hamid Mir, Geo News, 11 March²²

The host pointed out that Asif Zardari has an interesting history, he has been President once before, has been behind bars and left the country and stayed in a foreign land for a long time. Zardari has once said that he is not interested in becoming President for a second time. He was labelled as under trial criminal during Imran Khan's time and was put under arrest soon. Hamid Mir asked now with Asif Zardari as the President and Shehbaz Sharif as the PM how far will this government go. *Qamar Zaman Kaira*, senior leader of PPP pointed out that Zardari in the past talked on the basis of environment that he did not want to become President but this time things are different and it was the demand of the time that he become the President of Pakistan and oversee things of the government and take this country forward. He added that Achakzai did not get vote from Balochistan his own constituency but in fact Sunni Etihad party voted for him in Punjab. Talking about the PTI and its rigging blames he informed that they should go to the courts and fight it out. When asked about why PPP has not joined the cabinet he pointed out that political forces should sit down and chart a way forward. He added the main aim of PPP is to keep running the government or go for new elections. About leaving the government anytime, that is not the option till now and the lead party had an option to form the government. In this case lead party was PML-N as PTI was not ready to sit with any other party that is why they lost the opportunity. Senator *Walid Iqbal* of PTI pointed out that this government has been formed on the basis of lies, even though we are in the national

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxE5hJP2Yw>

assembly but we will keep pointing towards the loopholes. It is an alliance of convenience and from inside they know that they have captured the seats of other deserving candidates. Although we put an alternative to Asif Ali Zardari in the form of Achakzai but it was long back decided that Zardari will be the President and the elections are a farce. He added that there was rigging all over and we are ready to audit in KP, likewise every province should do such an audit, a forensic audit. He added that the popular vote has not gone to the PTI and if the government does not complete its five year plan, the PTI should be considered as an alternative. He also underlined that PTI will be a deciding factor in the future. When asked why the PTI did not join other parties to form government, he added that PTI totally rejected the two party system that is PML-N and PPP. In fact PTI came in power with the narrative to remove the two party system in Pakistan and break their monopoly so if we would have sat with PML-N or PPP it would be against the narrative of the PTI.

Ali Amin Gandapur's U-turn: Meets PM Shehbaz Sharif, Capital Talk with Hamid Mir, Geo News, 14 March²³

The host informed that Ali Amin Gandapur, the Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has taken a complete U-turn from his stand on the current government who he blamed came to power by rigging. He did not attend the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister Imran Khan citing the reason that he is not democratically elected. But after the Election Commission of Pakistan summoned him in one of the cases of declaration on 26th March, Amin took changed his stance and came to meet Shehbaz Sharif at PM's house. *Attaullah Tarar*, information minister on this show pointed that there should be strong coordination between centre and the provinces *and Amin Gandapur's meeting is a positive development* and is part of the strategy of PM Shehbaz Sharif to talk with everyone and take this country forward. He added wherever the parties have got mandate they should work accordingly and not interfere in others activities. Talking about PTI's effort to remove *GSP plus status of Pakistan*, he added that this petition is based on Imran Khan's health issues and human rights violation in jail. I did this press conference because they also wrote letter to IMF not to give money to Pakistan, he added but the question is why

²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1Pnhvjj_WY

Pakistan needs money, it is for the people. *Zain Qureshi*, PTI pointed out that all the MNA's have won through mandates, Ali Amin Gandapur also came with mandate and today's meeting is a positive step where KPK CM met PM Shehbaz Sharif. He agreed that there should be coordination between centre and provinces and Amin Gandapur has asked for its rights and funds for the region of KPK. The thing is that we will be a changed PTI and we will fulfil people's wishes as they have voted us in power again in KPK. He added that PTI has nothing to do with the petition on GSP Plus status of Pakistan written to European Union and about the IMF letter Pakistan did not had a free and fair elections and PTI wanted an audit from the IMF on this issue. There is no harm in doing an audit of the 2024 elections. The European Union delegation who visited Pakistan last week, has said that Pakistan is not able to complete its commitment and they have said if it is not worked out they will remove the GSP status.

Pakistan's Action in Afghanistan - What will happen next? - Talk Shocks, 18 March²⁴

Asif Bashir Chaudhary and Azaz Syed in today's episode of *talkshock* discusses Pakistan's deep strikes inside Afghanistan. Before engaging with what led Islamabad to go for a targeted strikes inside Afghanistan, Azaz Syed gives a brief detail of Afghanistan's recent history. Ever since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, Pak-Afghanistan relations are on an edge and partly this has resulted due to the Taliban regime's support for the TTP and other Pakistan enemy groups notes Azaz Syed. On March 16, 2024, terrorists attacked Mir Ali of North Waziristan which led to killing of seven Pakistani soldiers. Both President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari and Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen. Asim Muneeer were seen taking part in the funerals and in fact gave their shoulders to the coffins of the martyred soldiers mentions Azaz Syed. This was a symbolic gesture and it certainly signalled that Pakistan will surely respond in tough manner. Within 24 hours to this incident, we saw Pakistan conducting operations against the terrorists belonging to Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, which along with the TTP, was responsible for multiple terror attacks inside Pakistan. While Pakistan has conducted surgical strikes inside Afghanistan in the past as well but this time around Pakistan openly admitted of conducting such strikes. How will the situation go from here now? This is bound to sharpen anti-Pakistan

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PzkjAEnyls>

feelings within Afghanistan and these strikes will act as facilitating factor in strengthening Afghani nationalism. Azaz Syed also anticipates that the Taliban regime may now openly express its support for the TTP and other anti-Pakistan terror groups. Asif Bashir Chaudhary raises important points with regard to Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan. Ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan’s policy towards Kabul and its support for various *mujahideen* factions were never thoughtfully discussed. No deliberations or Pakistan’s different stakeholders were not involved in such policy measures rather were carried by few individuals who had their own interests in such measures. Such policies were mostly pursued by dictators and heaps of money were received for such endeavours, which ironically also didn’t face any audits, and implications of such policies is what the entire nation is facing now. There is a need for a national debate and in the recent past some debate has occurred. We should no longer seek strategic depth in Afghanistan says Chaudhary. The war we fought in alliance with America in Afghanistan in the past says Chaudhary is now being fought alone by Pakistan without American support. Adding further details to what may lead next, Azaz Syed says that Pakistan may close the border post which will come to affect trade and there is also likelihood of Pakistan going for second phase of deportation of Afghan refugees after Eid.

BOMBINGS, SHOOTINGS AND DISAPPEARANCES

(Select incidents culled out from the Pakistan media)

Place	Date	Description	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa				
Bisham ²⁵	26/03/2024	5 Chinese nationals killed in KP’s Bisham suicide blast	05	00

²⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/1823903/5-chinese-nationals-killed-in-attack-in-kps-bisham-police-officials>

Balochistan				
Turbat ²⁶	26/03/2024	FC soldier martyred, 4 terrorists killed as security forces thwart attack on naval base in Turbat: ISPR	05	02

²⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1823879>