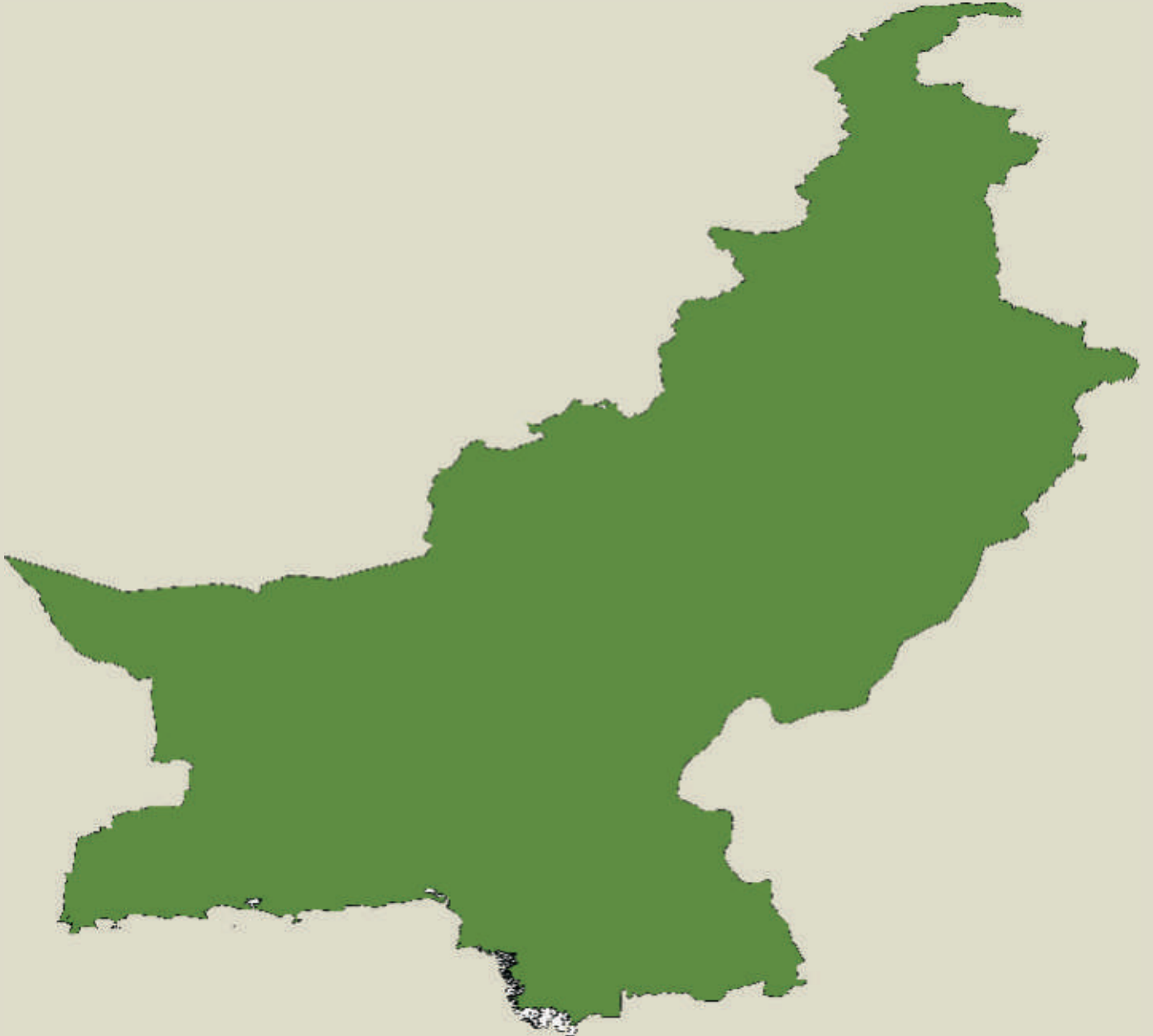


March 2021

PAKISTAN NEWS DIGEST

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



Prepared by

Dr. Zainab Akhter

Dr. Nazir Ahmad Mir

Dr. Mohammad Eisa

Dr. Ashok Behuria



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर परिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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PAKISTAN NEWS DIGEST, March 2021

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Sri Lanka cremations, Editorial, Dawn, 01 March¹

Prime Minister Imran Khan, it has now been reported, spoke to the Sri Lankan president and prime minister on the matter during his recent visit and urged them to respect the sentiments of the Muslims. It was primarily due to the prime minister's persuasion that the Sri Lankan government decided to lift the ban and allow Muslims to fulfil their religious requirements. The news has made international headlines. *Mr. Khan deserves praise for taking this initiative and resolving an issue that was deeply troubling for Muslims in another country.* What must have helped the Sri Lankan government reverse its order was the fact that the prime minister had a successful tour of the country and was able to generate significant goodwill. *It is also safe to assume that Sri Lanka would be happy to have Pakistan on its side on various issues and especially those that figure in international forums.* Both Islamabad and Colombo deserve credit for resolving the matter amicably and making it a win-win for all. *It is foreign policy wins like these that add gravitas to governance and improve relations between countries. The prime minister has done well and the Muslims of Sri Lanka are better off and relieved due to his initiative.*

SC on Senate polls, Editorial, Dawn, 02 March²

The Supreme Court has declared in its short order on the reference sent by the president under Article 186 of the Constitution that "The Elections to the Senate of Pakistan are held 'under the Constitution' and the law". *The order issued on Monday makes it clear that the election of the Senate is to be held under the Constitution, which means it will be conducted through a secret ballot. The court order is in essence a repudiation of the government's position, and the ordinance it promulgated through the president, that the Senate election should be held with an open ballot.* However, there is a twist. The order then proceeds to quote a 1967 judgment "where it has been held that secrecy is not absolute..." From this observation, the Supreme Court then declares that the "Election Commission is required to take all available measures including utilizing technologies, to ensure that the election is 'conducted honestly, justly, fairly and that corrupt practices are guarded against'." This has added an element of ambiguity to the real meaning of the order. *Now that the Supreme Court has clearly stated that the mode of voting in the Senate elections is under the Constitution, it would be better if the*

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1610091/sri-lanka-cremations>

² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1610264/sc-on-senate-polls>

political parties brought back the issue for discussion in parliament and legislated electoral reforms, including the mode of voting for the next Senate elections.

The game is on, Zahid Hussain, Dawn, 03 March³

*While no surprise is expected regarding the provinces, the entire focus is now on the contest for the Islamabad seat. It's the most critical test indeed for a fledgling ruling coalition with a pumped-up opposition alliance trying to snatch a surprise victory. The wheeling and dealing is in full swing to win over disgruntled members of the opposing camps. The prime minister who is rarely seen in parliament has now camped out in his chamber to do some damage control. The Supreme Court's decision on the eve of the Senate election has cost the PTI heavily. The constant rhetoric about buying and selling of votes in the Senate election may have also been a factor in fueling discomfort in the party ranks. It denotes the leadership's lack of faith in its members. In comparison, the opposition PDM appears much more confident despite the fact that it is lacking in numbers. It is also a psychological war that the two sides are engaged in. More interesting is the opposition's upbeat mood over the perception of the establishment's neutrality in these elections. *There is also a feeling in the PDM leadership that half the battle is won with the establishment distancing itself from the PTI government.**

Sab pe bhaari, Asif Zardari, Najam Sethi, The Friday Times, 05 March⁴

Yousaf Raza Gilani's win in the senate elections against the odds favoring Hafeez Sheikh, has given a resounding fillip to "*Sab pe bhaari, Asif Zardari*". Not only has Mr. Zardari increased the PPP's tally in the Senate to 20 seats and the PDM's to 53, including the Chairmanship if required, he now has the upper hand within the PDM in devising a strategy to oust Imran Khan because he has proved his mettle. *Mr. Zardari took full advantage of the visible disgruntlement within the PTI to stitch up a dozen or so MPAs from Sindh to get an extra seat in the Senate, likewise by adding critical MNA votes in Islamabad to edge Yousaf Raza Gilani past the post.* He also suggested that, under desperate SOS pressure from Imran Khan, some last minute discreet phone calls by the Miltablishment to errant MNAs may have served to reduce his candidate's winning lead. The Miltablishment has invested heavily in the current hybrid system under Imran Khan. In particular, two of its leaders have personal stakes in its longevity. But Imran Khan's dismal performance has left the Miltablishment gasping for breath to salvage its pride and credibility after Nawaz Sharif's stinging attacks on its

³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1610432/the-game-is-on>

⁴ <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/sab-pe-bhaari-asif-zardari/>

leadership. If it sticks to Imran, it will be targeted and degraded by the PDM, which is against its longer-term institutional interests. If it doesn't, it will have to seek out options to keep both Imran and Nawaz at bay. That won't be easy, considering that between the two of them they control an overwhelming majority of the popular vote. But it's not impossible either. *The Establishment has a well-trodden history of both seizing power when the moment is ripe and retreating when there is a popular upsurge against it.*

Vote of confidence, Editorial, Dawn, 08 March⁵

Imran Khan's decision to take a vote of confidence from parliament today is a bizarre move with a fairly obvious outcome. It will mark the first time a prime minister has undertaken such an exercise after the passage of the 18th Amendment. The Senate shock jolted him and the party to such an extent that the latter feels compelled to publicly affirm its faith in the prime minister. *The confidence vote, too, is an indication of this mistrust. Unfortunately for Mr. Khan, despite taking such a measure, the reality that there are people in his party who defected and voted for his rivals will not change? It would have been better if the prime minister left the subject of a no-confidence motion to the opposition, and then consolidated his position.* Instead of focusing his energy on a show of bravado, Mr. Khan ought to reflect on the future of legislative business. *The way to prove his strength in parliament is by getting bills passed something that has proved to be a challenge time and again. This entire effort appears to be a remedial attempt by Mr. Khan to put salve on the wounds inflicted on his party's morale by the stunning upset on the Islamabad Senate seat.*

Buzdar in or out? Editorial, Daily Times, 10 March⁶

When handpicked by PM Khan in August 2018, Sardar Usman Buzdar was to embody the common man's empowerment. In spite of rampant skepticism within his party, he was touted to be in the best position to understand problems of the neglected areas. Three years down the road and Punjab's chief minister has taken a steep climb down. *Whether he is finally shown the door, speculations about his imminent ouster are on the rise. Again. Some claim that the establishment is not too happy with Punjab's governance but the skipper is still standing behind his Wasim Akram Plus; with a keen eye on his interests.* However, no amount of criticism on his capacity has been successful in paving the way for change. It is quite clear that this little known

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1610982/vote-of-confidence>

⁶ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/732548/buzdar-in-or-out/>

politician from Barthi still enjoys the limelight of the forces that be. Despite signs of visible decline in his promising portfolio, he is still turning the wheels of the most important province however slow he wishes. PML-Q's Pervaiz Elahi was an administrative giant who invested heavily in bringing about visible signs of development and service delivery. *Still, the Chaudhry's are in no mood to see Buzdar go. Could it be the CM's unflinching support for projects in their strongholds—no matter how modest—or his submission to their power-sharing formula that has helped him curry favours with the PML-Q.?*

Rift in the PDM, Editorial, Dawn, 18 March⁷

Resigning from the assemblies was a 'nuclear option' in which the PPP always had the most to lose among its allies in the Pakistan Democratic Movement. After all, it alone of the component parties has a stake in the current set-up, including the Sindh government. Now that push has come to shove, the PPP's reluctance to take that step has become crystal clear. *The alliance on Tuesday announced the postponement of its March 26 anti-government long march owing to differences over submitting the resignations. Certainly, the rift in the alliance does not make for good optics, and government ministers are having a field day proclaiming the 'demise' of the PDM, once again.* Moreover, while the opposition alliance is well within its rights to call for early elections, to do so halfway through the PTI's tenure can be considered unreasonable, even a non-starter, given that poll rigging allegations are par for the course in this country. *Compounding the challenge, the establishment for its own reasons is evidently still backing the same horse. Without its support, effecting a change in the political set-up is extremely unlikely.*

Opposition alliance in trouble, Editorial, Dawn, 23 March⁸

The PDM is in trouble. If the dispute over resignations symbolized the first crack within the opposition alliance, *the disagreement over which party has claim on the office of the leader of the opposition in the Senate poses a graver threat to the unity of the alliance.* After the defeat of PDM candidates in the election for chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate, it was expected that the scheduled long march would get a booster shot. *Instead, the opposite happened. The PPP made it as clear as possible that it was not interested in resigning from the assemblies, saying that was the action of last resort and*

⁷ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1613167/rift-in-the-pdm>

⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1614115/opposition-alliance-in-trouble>

the time was not opportune for it. The open and very public spat between the PPP and PML-N over who gets the post of leader of the opposition threatens to undo much of the goodwill generated by the opposition parties since the formation of the alliance six months ago. The war of words raging between the two parties has ominous overtones for what lies ahead for PDM.

A fresh start? Editorial, Dawn, 25 March⁹

Efforts are clearly afoot to de-escalate tensions in South Asia, with most of the action taking place behind the scenes, though some aspects of the nascent process are being highlighted for public consumption. *The Pakistan Day message received by Prime Minister Imran Khan from his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi certainly comes under the heading of public diplomacy, designed to bring down the temperature in the region.* The need right now is to move forward with guarded optimism as hawks on both sides who thrive on confrontation may well try and derail matters. *The next opportunity for a high-level exchange will come in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, where both states' foreign ministers are due to attend the Heart of Asia meeting later this month.* That meeting may point the way forward for the peace process. As a former Pakistani foreign minister and an Indian expert have written in this paper, if there is seriousness of purpose, everything standing in the way of peace including Kashmir can be resolved. This latest opportunity for peace must not be lost.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

Generous support, Editorial, Daily Times, 16 March¹⁰

Pakistan is in urgent need of a helping hand from its Gulf friend. Again. As the deadline to return the UAE's goodwill loan of USD 1 billion is upon us, the finance ministry has reached out to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nayhan for a one-year rollover. Given the brotherly relations between the two states, Islamabad is pretty optimistic about retaining this cash deposit. And why wouldn't it? *Returning such a huge amount would, surely, incur economic damages—that know no bounds—on any economy, let alone one catastrophically shrunk by the pandemic. As per a World Bank estimate, Pakistan's real GDP growth nosedived to negative 0.38 per cent in FY 2019-20.* Positive gains aside, Pakistan is still not in a position to have any pressure on the rupee. The UAE's financial assistance had been roped in to buy the

⁹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1614489/a-fresh-start>

¹⁰ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/734302/generous-support/>

Khan administration some time to negotiate a deal with the IMF. *But given the 13-months long delay in the third loan tranche of over \$500 million (the deal was salvaged just recently), there still remains a shortage of cash influx.* As Pakistan gears up for the fiscal, monetary and structural framework required by the IMF programme, fears of ruining the much-celebrated bullish market sentiment hang heavy. Any such negative development would upend the recent economic gains. *While fruitful negotiations with the UAE would help quash monetary panic in the short-term, it is high time Pakistan realizes why it keeps finding itself with a desperate begging bowl at other countries' doorsteps.*

Skyrocketing food prices, Editorial, Daily Times, 18 March¹¹

The runaway prices of food items have become the new normal in the country. This consistent pressure on the shoestring budget of low-income groups has left the government with egg on its face. Though it continues its fight against the inflation mafias, the resounding success (lowest level in two years in January) does not resonate as loudly. *As Muslims in Pakistan are getting ready to welcome Ramadan celebrations, the mounting prices of many essential commodities add to their stress. Already, many have been speaking about how expensive food would make the coming month incredibly tough for them.* No matter how well-intended Islamabad's resolve may be, prices cannot be controlled without effective market governance. Unscrupulous hoarders and self-serving millers need to be acted against, that too, in the earliest. *More devastating is the impact of middlemen on the food chain who add considerable cost to the retail prices. We have a big farmer working as Food Security Minister. Why is he missing in action?* Shouldn't his expertise have averted the food crises being rammed down our throats? A workable strategy to develop the country's production capacity as well as getting the better of mafia havens is the need of the hour. *After all, we are an agro-industrial country and no controversy can be a bigger blot on our escutcheon than ones involving food.*

Monetary policy, Editorial, Dawn, 22 March¹²

The State Bank's decision to keep an easy monetary policy in place is a clear sign that it doesn't want to upset the ongoing economic recovery. The decision signals the bank's willingness to hold steady interest rates in the near term to support recovery until it becomes "more durable" and the economy returns to full capacity. Yet the bank has kept its doors open for "measured and gradual adjustments" to achieve mildly positive real interest rates going

¹¹ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/735559/skyrocketing-food-prices/>

¹² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1613928/monetary-policy>

forward. The State Bank's dovish monetary stance is in line with broader market expectations, and the global trend of central banks supporting recovery from the effects of the coronavirus. *It is, therefore, safe to assume that the low-interest-rate environment will continue for a while despite revival of the IMF programme and higher world oil and food prices fuelled by stronger global growth projections that could feed into domestic inflation.* However, risks remain because of the emergence of a virulent third wave of Covid-19, plus uncertainty regarding inflation and growth outlook. So far, inflationary risks have been outweighed by the uncertainty spawned by the pandemic in monetary policy determination. *But for how long? The government's failure to tackle the supply-side factors fuelling inflation could compel the bank to reverse its accommodative stance.*

BRI alternative? Editorial, *The Express Tribune*, 30 March¹³

US President Joe Biden recently pushed a competitor to China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a move that could further heighten the trade war with China that he inherited from former president Donald Trump. CPEC, incidentally, is a tiny part of the BRI the \$60-odd billion valuation of all CPEC projects is barely 1% of the total estimated cost of the BRI. That alone should give an idea of the scale of the BRI and what any Western alternative would have to entail. *Biden has suggested that the proposed alternative led by "democratic" countries presumptively the Western countries that are at odds with China for various trade and political reasons.* The US and several other Western nations have shown concern over the BRI for a while. Unfortunately, while some of their concerns are worthy of debate such as the terms of lending to various countries many are just examples of the pot calling the kettle black. *The truth is that China is just beating the Western powers at their own game. Any Western competitor for CPEC would require agreement between several countries just to get it off the ground, making it a non-starter at least in terms of scale.* Then there are issues concerning what China gets out of BRI versus what an alternative would offer the West.

Finance minister's removal, Editorial, *Dawn*, 31 March¹⁴

This election, as it turned out, was a do-or-die one for Mr. Sheikh. As adviser on finance, he had been barred by the decision of the Islamabad High Court to chair important forums such as the National Finance Commission and the Economic Coordination Committee. *The court in its decision had declared that unelected advisers could not perform executive functions and head*

¹³ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2292090/bri-alternative>

¹⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1615610/finance-ministers-removal>

ministries. To bypass this restriction, the government had made Mr. Sheikh a minister through an ordinance. However, the ordinance was set to lapse in June, which meant that either he had to get elected before that, or pack his bags. The government considered finding another way to get him into the Senate but, as is clear from his sacking, it decided it was not worth the cost. For PTI, the liabilities that Mr. Sheikh now carried outweighed the assets he had brought to the job. It was, therefore, strange, and a bit unfortunate, that it decided to rather ungraciously throw Mr. Sheikh under the bus. Government spokespersons were tutored to say that Mr. Sheikh had been sent packing because he could not control the spiraling inflation in the country. Had this been the case, the government would not have cashed its chips in a bid to get him elected. If Mr. Sheikh won, it is reasonable to expect that he would have stayed on in the job regardless of the inflation rate. Hafeez Sheikh deserved a better send-off than the one he was given. The cabinet reshuffle that appears to be in the offing will indicate the priorities of the prime minister for the rest of his term.

SECURITY SITUATION

Another 'encounter', Editorial, Dawn, 12 March¹⁵

How many 'encounter' killings will there be before murderous law-enforcement personnel are brought to book? On Sunday, a Sindh University student, Mohammed Irfan Jatoi, was gunned down in Sukkur in an ostensible encounter with the cops, who described him as a "notorious dacoit" wanted in connection with several crimes. Except, Irfan's friends and social media activists denounced this version as a pack of lies, claiming he had been taken away from the campus on Feb 10 by the police and remained in their custody until they killed him almost a month later. Following the public furore, IG Sindh Mushtaq Mahar ordered an inquiry. The investigation could bring to an end the impunity with which extrajudicial killings are committed in this country, especially in Sindh and Punjab, or it could turn out to be yet more lip service to the notion of accountability for trigger-happy law-enforcement officials. The case bears striking similarities to one that caused a furore some three years ago that of Naqeebullah Mehsud who was gunned down along with three other individuals in a deserted farmhouse in Karachi's Malir district on Jan 13, 2018.

¹⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612062/another-encounter>

Attack on Rangers, Editorial, Dawn, 17 March¹⁶

Monday's bomb attack targeting paramilitary personnel in Karachi left one Rangers official martyred and injured several people including members of the force. Though it is too early to say whether this incident signals the return of militancy to Karachi, the group that has claimed responsibility for the attack has also been behind several previous such incidents in the city. Though the previous attacks were foiled by a rapid and effective response from security forces, there is still a need for better intelligence gathering and vigilance. CCTV footage and evidence from the attack site should offer some clues to investigators, who must dedicate resources to getting more information in order to thwart the group's future plans. The BLA time and again has signaled its intent to attack both security forces and Chinese-backed projects, citing its grievances with China's involvement in Balochistan. BLA is part of a handful of armed resistance groups in Balochistan who for years have run an insurgency in the name of fighting for a greater share of resources in the province. *Alongside counterterrorism operations, it is important for the authorities to address the grievances of disgruntled Baloch people to put an end to the bloody militancy that has hurt both the economy and the objective of peace in the country.*

URDU MEDIA

Restoration of trilateral train service, Editorial, Jang, 02 March¹⁷

After a hiatus for over a decade, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey have decided to resume trilateral international container train service from 4 March. The train would start from the Lahore dry airport, pass through Quetta, Tehran and finally would reach Istanbul. It would cover a distance of 6,500 kms in 275 hours. *The train was started on 14 August 2009. It had to be stopped because of terror activities in the country. The purpose for running goods and passenger trains between the three countries is to implement the agenda of the Regional Development Cooperation (formed 1964).* If the agenda is implemented successfully, it would help in promoting tourism. The train service needs to be restored. The service would promote cooperation in agriculture, industries and businesses. In the coming days, under CPEC, the service would be useful.

¹⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612988/attack-on-rangers>

¹⁷ https://jang.com.pk/news/892094?_ga=2.262371980.1631082243.1614578250-835994399.1598849708

Decision to seek vote of confidence welcome step, Editorial, Daily Ausaf, 05 March¹⁸

The defeat of finance minister Hafeez Sheikh by five votes to joint candidate of PDM, Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani has shocked the government. *The ruling alliance got 16 less votes than expected. The government has announced that Imran Khan would seek a vote of confidence in the national assembly. The ministers in the government accused the election commission for not holding free and fair elections. The result of the Islamabad general seat has given rise to the question whether the government enjoys a majority. That is why the government is throwing allegations of horse-trading. In fact the government has tried to target the election commission directly. It is not appropriate in any sense.* The election commission has been given authority by the constitution of Pakistan to act at its own. As far as the government getting less than expected votes is concerned, *a member of the assembly can vote against his/her party constitutionally. No action can be taken against him/her. The dramatic unfolding of the situation demands that the opposition try to bring reform in elections through the parliament. Instead of indulging in blame-game, the flaws in the system need to be corrected.* The inflation is an issue that is troubling the come man. If the Prime Minister is able to bring the inflation under control, no one would raise questions on defence, foreign and other policies. Even the elected representatives are under pressure from the people. The Prime Minister should take a stock of the situation and announce a big relief and big steps to help people.

GB as a provisional province, Editorial, Daily Dunya, 10 March¹⁹

GB assembly has passed a unanimous resolution for seeking a provisional provincial status for GB from the Government of Pakistan. The assembly demanded for a fair representation of GB in the parliament and other national institutions. An amendment should be made in the constitution to meet the demands of GB, the resolution read. *The demand is in line with the statement made by the minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan during the elections in GB last November that the PTI led government had decided to make GB a provisional province. The first major development in this regard happened when the government and the opposition both agreed in September 2020 that GB should be given provisional provincial status. The third development was the setting up a 12-member committee by none other than Prime Minister Imran Khan himself in December for seeking recommendations in this regard.* The committee included the minister for

¹⁸ https://www.dailyausaf.com/epaper/popup.php?newssrc=issues/2021-03-05/130542/p8_01.gif

¹⁹ https://e.dunya.com.pk/detail.php?date=2021-03-10&edition=LHR&id=5544862_62911458

Kashmir Affairs and GB, Chief Minister GB, Attorney General of Pakistan, federal secretaries of finance and defence, and representatives from foreign affairs, parliamentary affairs and security institutions. *The committee was given the responsibility to come with recommendations by keeping into account the Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue, the UN resolutions on Kashmir and the Supreme Court of Pakistan's judgment on the possible provisional provincial status to GB.* The committee was supposed to complete its mandate in two months' time and then the parliament was supposed to follow the recommendation and make an amendment in the constitution. But the committee never met in the allocated two months.

Pak-China strong friendship, Editorial, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, 12 march²⁰

Chinese ambassador in Pakistan Nong Rong said, while giving an interview to *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *The National* yesterday that "Pakistan is a brother, good friend, best neighbour and trustworthy partner. The two countries have many other prospects to cooperate and improve relations besides the investment in CPEC". *Young further added that "I have been appointed ambassador four months ago and I have tried to promote cooperation between the two countries in every aspect of life"*. The Chinese ambassador said that he was trying to learn Urdu. *Pak-China friendship indeed has become exemplary in the world. The higher than the Himalayas, sweeter than honey and deeper than the sea friendship has achieved integrity and trust.* This trustworthy and true friendship has completed 70-years. On this occasion, many functions are going to be organized in the current year. On 2 March Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, while speaking on an occasion along with his Chinese counterpart, released a "logo". It is hoped that the friendship would grow further. The two countries would play a role for regional and world peace, development and welfare.

Anti-Pakistan narrative unacceptable, Political parties must be careful, Editorial, *Ausaf*, 16 March²¹

PML-N MNA Javed Latif had said if anything happens to Maryam Nawaz, PML-N will not say "*Pakistan Khappay*". This statement from Javed Latif has angered the government and ministers see it as anti-Pakistan. *The strangest part is that a person who is close to PML-N's central leadership talks about breaking the country on mere fear of his leader's possible rejection of bail in a*

²⁰ <https://www.nawaiwaqt.com.pk/E-Paper/lahore/2021-03-12/page-10/detail-4>

²¹ https://www.dailyausaf.com/epaper/popup.php?newssrc=issues/2021-03-16/131368/p8_01.gif

corruption case. And the party in question is mum for the last two days. No one disassociates from the statement. The whole country including members of PML-N feels disappointed by the statement. Pakistani as a nation can tolerate anything but nothing against the country as whole. *It was expected that PML-N's national leadership will disassociate itself from the statement. But national leadership's silence means they endorse Javid Latif's thoughts. Nawaz Sharif's statement from Gujranwala on the eve of the Senate election strengthens the idea that words used by Javed Latif are of the PML-N's leadership. Federal ministers rightly advised PML-N leadership to learn from MQM founder Altaf Hussain.* All politicians should be careful not play with the future of the country in pursuit of their interest.

An irreparable national loss, Saleem Safi, Jang, 17 march²²

Economy of Pakistan is in crisis as per most of the indicators. Pakistan is lacking behind in GDP growth and inflation from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Afghanistan. *The biggest loss in the last few years has been that the institutions of Pakistan have been made). In the name of change, the way judiciary was used and the way political matters were settled through it, the judiciary has lost the integrity and status that it had gained after the restoration of the judges.* It is the worst kind of situation for any national institution if it is associated with a particular section of society or group. *Yet another fallout of the last three years has been that the military as an institution has been associated with PTI.* The anti-PTI political as well as non-political forces are raising questions on the military. One more casualty has been freedom of media. *But the loss that the people do not pay much attention to is the rise of polarization in Pakistan in recent years and destruction of social norms. In this regard the role played in Pakistan by Imran Khan is the same that was played by Donald Trump in America.* They both fueled hatred. ...

"No aurat-march next year", TLP chief, Azmat Khan, 19 March²³

The head of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYRA), Chief Dr Asif Ashraf Jalali has said that no obscenity would be allowed in Pakistan in the name of aurat-march. *He said that aurat-march is meant for promoting obscenity. Aurat-march would spread vulgarity and destroy the future*

²²https://jang.com.pk/news/898693?_ga=2.218166559.725015333.1615969046-835994399.1598849708

²³ <https://www.ummat.net/2021/03/19/news.php?p=story4.gif>

generations. The vulgar sloganeering and statements given at the aurat-march on 8 March have generated strong reactions from religious and political groups. The government, instead of accepting the mistake, is trying to defend the march and is threatening action against those criticizing it. *On the issue, TLYRA Chief Asif Ashraf Jalali said to Ummat that aurat-march is being promoted to spread vulgarity in Pakistan. The country has no space for such women. The anti-Islam forces want to spread obscenity to overcome the Muslims. Modesty is special feature of Islam. Some foreign forces through some NGOs are attacking Pakistan's Islamic identity.*" Ashraf Jalali said that aurat-march would destroy the future generations. *By allowing aurat-march means washing off hands from spirituality and morality.* Why the rulers want to harm the basic structure of the society by allowing such marches, Jalali added. Whether man or woman, once they read the kalimah, neither of them can operate according to their wishes but only according to the rules of Allah, Jalali said.

America's on time withdrawal from Afghanistan Editorial, Jang, 30 March²⁴

Spokesperson of the Foreign Office has rejected any military solution to the Afghan conflict. Repeating the long standing position of Pakistan, *the spokesperson said that the withdrawal of the American troops should take place according to the Doha agreement.* The statement came in the background of a statement given by the US president in an interview in which he had said that Washington was considering delaying the troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan. The American NSA has also implied that the US was resisting the Doha Agreement. *The Taliban have warned the US of severe consequences if the Doha agreement was not implemented. The participant countries in the peace agreement are growing restless because of the situation.* No other country can feel the implications and destruction of the four decade war in Afghanistan better than Pakistan. Peace-loving countries want the Doha agreement to be implemented and timely withdrawal of the American troops. *The Taliban and the Afghan government seem serious about intra-Afghan talks. But some inimical hidden forces do not like this progress. It is important that the warring factions do not indulge in any act that would delay the troop's withdrawal.* The US should abide by the peace agreement to prove its sincerity.

²⁴ <https://jang.com.pk/news/904495>

Pak-Saudi touch base, Editorial, Jang, 31 March²⁵

It is important for Pakistan, given its abysmal economic situation and the threats that it faces from its enemies, to enhance relations with its friendly countries. The countries with which Islamabad has been having good relations for a long time need special attention. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have stood with each other through thick and thin. It was a statement made by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi that had affected the relations between the two countries. Both the civilian and military leadership have made serious efforts to clear misunderstanding. *It is a good news that Prime Minister Imran Khan has finally spoken to the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The leaders have agreed to promote relations in every aspect. Prime Minister Imran Khan assured the Crown Prince that Pakistan would protect sovereignty of the kingdom and its security.* Muhammad bin Salman invited the Prime Minister to visit Riyadh which the latter has accepted. *The contact with Saudi Arabia was established at a time when Pakistan needed countries like UAE and Saudi Arabia who have helped Pakistan whenever it has faced an economic crisis.* The relations should only strengthen and remain so.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Supreme Court of Pakistan upholds secret balloting in Senate polls rejecting Presidential Ordinance, Nadeem Malik Live, Samaa TV, 01 March²⁶

After much debate and discussion on the process of Senate elections, open or secret balloting, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has ruled that elections to the country's upper house of parliament, due tomorrow (3rd March), *must be held under a secret ballot, effectively nullifying a government move to require they be held through open ballot.* It also underlined that the election commission was empowered to take steps to ensure there was no corruption in the process. The court, however, ruled that secrecy of the ballot "is not absolute". This verdict is seen as a big blow to the PTI government, which had attempted to change the process for elections. Even one day before the elections allegations and counter allegations of horse trading between government and opposition is on. **Guests:** Khurram Sher Zaman, PTI Sindh; Atta ullah Thadd, PML-N; Maula Bakash Chandio, PPP & Malika Bhukhari, PTI. **Atta ullah Thadd pointed out that by upholding the decision in favour**

²⁵https://jang.com.pk/news/905013?_ga=2.169583841.1581030090.1617083425-835994399.1598849708

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIGHmAU4GSs>

of secret balloting, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has rejected the Presidential Ordinance on open ballot in Senate elections brought by the PTI government. The PTI which initially did not expect that Supreme Court will go against them pointed out that they will follow the verdict of the SC on this matter. **Maula Bakash Chandio pointed out that by alleging that the MPA's have been kidnapped in Sindh, the PTI want to make a case against the PPP.** As proved by the videos of the MPA's they are not under any fear or pressure in fact when it comes to do something for Sindh they will not see which party they belong. Clearly they are not happy with the federal government's attitude towards Sindh and its people. **By coming out with this verdict right on time, SC has increased the significance of the Election Commission as well as Parliament.** **Malika Bhukhari pointed out that the government stressed that Senate elections should be held according to constitution and law but opposition only stressed on constitution.** She challenged the PDM and said that Hafiz Sheikh the PTI candidate will win. About the Sindh PTI MPA's video she pointed out that they look angry with the PTI but the party will talk to them and try to understand their opinion.

Prime Minister Imran Khan addresses the nation, ARY News, 04 March²⁷

Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed the nation after a meeting with his cabinet post the senate elections (after Hafiz Sheikh of the PTI lost the Islamabad seat to PDM candidate Yusuf Raza Gilani. The main focus of his speech was focused on exposing the opposition parties and how money was used in the senate elections. He again talked about the *Riyaste Madina* and how prophet Muhammad (SAW) used justice to serve his people pointing then in Pakistan there is no justice and powerful overshadow the weak. **At last he informed that the PTI is going to the assembly and asking for 'vote of confidence' from his MPA's openly. Some important points from his speech are first,** he pointed out that money is been used in senate elections to buy and sell senators since 30 to 40 years and said that he understood this six years ago when PTI formed its government in KPK. It's from that time **'I decided to fight against this corrupt practice and campaign for open ballot. In the 2018 Senate elections PTI kicked out 20 MPA's for taking money. Second, he argued that the PML-N and PPP has in the past campaigned for open ballot and also signed charter of democracy in favour of open ballot.** This time they fought for secret ballot and also talked against the presidential ordinance the PTI brought to make this transition. **Why?** From the time PTI government started its campaign against corruption, they feared that the cases will come in open and by not agreeing to the government on open ballot they think will get NRO. **Even on the FATF bill they tried to blackmail the**

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkXcxvQYf0A>

government and secretly indicated to remove cases if they want opposition to cooperate on the bill. He argued that this bill is about the security of the country and if Pakistan is blacklisted, then there will be sanctions and it means the country will go into poverty (Inflation will go all high). He questioned the role of Election commission and underlined it failed to give fair results. *He questioned why ECP went to Supreme Court and asked it to keep secret balloting as the option. Why the ECP could not do bar coding in the senate elections.*

PTI demands resignations of Chief election commission & members of ECP
Off the Record with Kashif Abbasi, ARY News, 15 March²⁸

The PTI government is still fuming over its defeat in the Senate elections. *In a press conference on Monday flanked by Federal ministers Shibli Faraz, Shafqat Mehmood and Fawad Chaudhry, the PTI demanded the resignation of the chief election commissioner (CEC) and all the four members of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) over their alleged failure in ensuring transparency in the Senate elections.* Shafaqat Mehmood said that the commission failed in its duty during the Senate polls and could not play the role of a neutral empire, Maryam Nawaz of the PML-N has termed this an attack on institutions and stated that this is live example of attack on institutions. *In this episode Kashif Abbas discusses this development and try to understand the stand of the government and opposition.* **Guests:** Ali Nawaz Awan, PTI; Talal Chaudary, PML-N & Chaudary Manzoor-PPP. **Talal Chaudary pointed out that the PTI will not talk about NAB but when the ECP is not working in their favour they are attacking the institution.** He informed that the present election commissioner is elected by the PTI government but still they are attacking him and the commission as a whole. Reforms should be there but the question is how. The mindset of the PTI is neither political nor parliamentary. The government makes an environment to work in the parliament, now under PTI it's defunct. **Chaudary Manzoor pointed out that the PTI had no issues with the ECP during GB elections and out of the blue when its candidate lost in the Senate elections, they are talking against the commission.** The real issue is that they want to pressurize the ECP as the foreign funding case against the PTI is about to start and they want to divert the attention. The government is not ready to hear the dissenting voices, the media is silenced that point towards the government. **Ali Nawaz Awan pointed out that the PTI was not part of the 18th amendment process according to which the head of institutions like ECP are decided. The Daska election decision by ECP is one sided decision in favour of the**

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKEIs6Y1nQw>

opposition. We are demanding changes and reforms in the ECP and the opposition should sit with the government.

Setback for PDM: Long March postponed, On the Front with Kamran Shahid, Dunya News, 16 March²⁹

The PDM meeting of the heads, with Nawaz Sharif on video link from London on Tuesday did not go quite well as Asif Zardari snubs Nawaz Sharif on the idea of resignations from Assemblies and pointed out that he asked Nawaz Sharif to return to Pakistan and underlined that if we have to fight we have to fill the jails and for that you have to come back to Pakistan and also we can't fight on the mountains but need to use Parliament to fight these issues. The PPP disagreed to go for mass resignations and as a result a visibly upset head of the PDM *Maulana Fazl Ur Rehman left the meeting soon and announced to the press that the long March is postponed till further notice as the PPP has sought more time to think about it.* In this episode this development is discussed and the anchor pointed out that the PPP has spoiled the plans of PML-N and JUI-F and asked if the PDM will survive and what is the future? **Guests:** Ali Mohammad Khan-PTI, Mia Javid Latif-PML-N, Saleem Madavi-PPP. **Saleem Madavi** pointed out that this is not the first time Asif Zardari asked Mia Nawaz Sharif to come back, he has been telling this for a long time because it makes a difference if the leader is physically present here in Pakistan. **Mia Javid Latif** all the parties in the PDM has also fought for the democracy of the country just like PPP. When asked if Nawaz Sharif will come back, he replied that if you know the reason of this going out then you should also understand when he will come back. *The only reason is not only to send PTI government back, the whole process needs to be changed and there is a danger on Nawaz Sharif's life if he comes back.*

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcoEPE73B8A>

BOMBINGS, SHOOTINGS AND DISAPPEARANCES

(Select incidents culled out from the Pakistan media)

Place	Date	Description	Killed	Injured
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa				
North & South Waziristan ³⁰	07/03/2020	Three TTP commanders among four killed in two Waziristan IBOs	04	00
Sindh				
Mastung ³¹	08/03/2021	CTD personnel kill five terrorists during encounter in Mastung	05	00
Balochistan				
Sibi ³²	05/03/2021	Roadside Bombing Kills Five Pakistani Workers, Wounds Two Soldiers	05	02
Quetta ³³	23/03/2021	Three Killed, 13 Injured in Blast at Pakistani-Afghan Border	03	13

³⁰ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2288054/three-ttp-commanders-among-four-killed-in-two-waziristan-ibos>

³¹ <https://nation.com.pk/08-Mar-2021/ctd-personnel-kill-five-terrorists-during-encounter-in-mastung>

³²<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/roadside-bombing-kills-five-pakistani-workers-baluchistan/31136372.html>

³³ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-03-23/three-killed-13-injured-in-blast-at-pakistani-afghan-border>

