

TWO events in Lahore in 2009 highlighted two contrasting approaches to solving a complex political problem. In the first instance the government was forced to accept the view of the opposition under duress while in the other a consensus was reached over a thorny issue through give and take and dialogue. The two cases were the restoration of the judiciary to the pre-Nov 2007 position and passage of the National Finance Commission Award.

In December, representatives of the four provinces and the federation met in the Punjab metropolis to iron out a share formula of the National Finance Commission that had divided the parties for almost two decades. The last NFC award that had some claim to consensus was decided in 1990-91 when Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N was in power both at the centre and in Punjab. The proceedings in the Punjab metropolitan were far from a walk in the park but the final hurdles were cleared by the participants in a show of maturity rarely on display in the history of Pakistan.

The NFC award was hailed as a sign that the Pakistani politicians were capable of reaching an accord through dialogue and negotiations. Sadly, the partnership was missing earlier where the politicians, by all appearances, were goaded into a compromise after they failed to amicably settle the matter of the restoration of the judiciary sent home by retired general Pervez Musharraf. The return of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and many other judges in the early hours of March 17 as a result of a short long



been hit before.

In another telling incident in Rawalpindi suicide bombers and shooters busted into a mosque in the cantonment in December; the victims included many officers, civilians and some 17 children. Also in December, there were suicide attacks in marketplaces in Lahore and D.G. Khan which caused largescale loss of life and the ISI offices in Multan were blown up resulting in the death of 15 people.

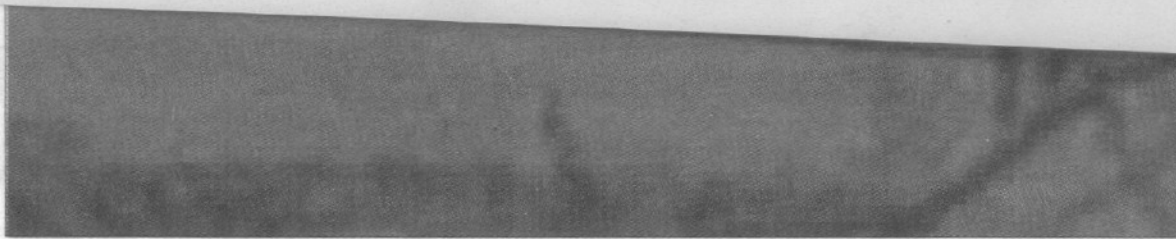
Other than terrorism, the government of Shahbaz Sharif faced other law and order challenges throughout the year, the most disturbing among them the deadly attacks on Christians in Gojra city and a nearby village in August. Seven Christian Pakistanis were burnt alive in the incidence, while in another case, houses belonging to Christians were set ablaze in Kasur. In either instance, the strike by the mob was preceded by allegations of blasphemy against Christians.

A senior ruling PML-N member was named in the FIR of the Gojra attack, and as they say, 'investigation into it continues'. The PML-N members courted more controversy when their names were taken in connection with certain acts that went against the much vaunted morally-correct image of the party. MPA Shumaila Rana was however the only N member of some standing to succumb to the demands of resignation after she was implicated in a credit card fraud. MPA Chaudhry Ghafoor from the Sharifs' Raiwind Road estate emerged unscathed from allegations that he had used his influence to help his friends pass through customs at the Allama Iqbal Airport illegally. Another PML-N

Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and many other judges in the early hours of March 17 as a result of a short long march was the other stand-out event of the year in Lahore, even while the cynics would argue that no event in the outgoing year could match the occasion when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave the Lahoris an audience in October.

While the two big parties were united in according a warm welcome to Ms Clinton, a variety of factors may have prevented an accord between politicians on the revival of the deposed judges. Just as the prime minister's announcement to restore the judiciary was said to have been inspired by the internal and external power brokers, many Pakistan People's Party sympathisers at the time said President Asif Ali Zardari would have ordered a restoration if he could — that is if it was an issue just between the politicians. But whatever the circumstances, the politics that unfolded in the runup to the eventual surrender by the federal government provided some people enough opportunity to paint the politicians as a mutually quarrelling clan.

The biggest loser in the episode was Mr Zardari who committed the ultimate folly of seeking to oust a provincial government through exercise of executive powers in defiance of democratic principles. On February 25, reportedly on the advice of a usually impatient and always vocal governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, President Zardari imposed emergency rule in Punjab. The government lamely explained that it had no option after a court disqualified Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif from sitting in the assembly in the Hudaibya Paper Mills loan default case. However, this official version failed to convince the critics who said that, following Mr Shahbaz Sharif's disqualification, the government should have allowed the speaker of the Punjab Assembly to move a session for the election of a new leader of the house from within the party in majority, the Pakistan Muslim League-N.



GUNMEN attacking a vehicle carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in March.—AFP

Terror-hit Punjab and politics

By Asha'ar Rahman

By resorting to governor rule, the federal government betrayed its long suspected design of dislodging a Punjab government that was firmly in the hold of Nawaz Sharif, who was himself disqualified from contesting an election in the Plane Hijacking Case, and Shahbaz Sharif. The action badly backfired on the PPP which subsequently failed to carry out any scheme that it might have had for installing a government of its own in Lahore.

The PPP's attempt at wooing the PML-Q members of the Punjab Assembly for obtaining a majority in the House bore little fruit. On the other hand, under the leadership of Dr Tahir Ali Javed and Mian Ata Maneka, many a Q Assembly member chose to side with the PML-N whose popularity graph was rising.

By the time Shahbaz Sharif returned to the position of the chief minister in end of March, the num-

ber in his camp had soared and what is more, the judiciary for which the PML-N had been fighting so vociferously had been restored. Bar an election and a military coup, this was the most humiliating defeat that the PPP had suffered both nationally and on the Punjab level since the party's inception four decades ago.

The PML-N's politics certainly got a boost from the governor-raj fiasco, yet those who had hoped that the return of Shahbaz Sharif will improve law and order that had deteriorated during the governor's rule had to face disappointment.

Terrorists delivered a staggering blow to the country with their dual strike in Lahore in March. On March 3 they attacked the Sri Lankan cricketers at the Liberty roundabout. The assault was readily blamed on the administrative vacuum created by the imposition of governor raj, and as the protests gathered momentum

less than three weeks later, on March 30, a prolonged terror episode unfolded at the Manawan police training centre on the outskirts of the Punjab capital.

The reign of terror however extended beyond the period for which Governor Salman Taseer was in charge of the province. The suicidal ramming of a van into the ISI offices in Lahore on May 27 was a sign of dangerous things to come and over the following months, key installations were attacked in various Punjab cities. The most devastating among them was the audacious foray by the militants into the GHQ territory in Rawalpindi which left six soldiers and five SSG commandos dead. Five days later, the adamant militants targeted three towers of law enforcement in Lahore. Intriguingly, two of these targets, the FIA building on Temple Road, and the police school in Manawan, had

through customs at the Allama Iqbal Airport illegally. Another PML-N member of the Punjab Assembly, Munawar Gill, was accused of raping a married woman, but the case disappeared from the news pages after some kind of agreement was reached between the two parties.

The PML-N's guns meanwhile remained focused on the incorrigibly provocative Governor Salman Taseer and the task of tit-for-tat statements in the Sharif camp fell once again on Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah. Alternatively, Rana Sana was spotted defending the Sharifs against television show hosts seeking to probe the assets of the Ittefaq group and denying that there were any safe havens for militants in south Punjab or there was any movement for the creation for Seraiki province. Notwithstanding the governmental rebuttals, the movement for a separate province seemed to be picking up, with observers noting that the PPP was set to use it as a political plank in near future.

The biggest financial controversy of the year saw the prosecutors going after the accused in the Bank of Punjab scam. The arrest and extradition to Pakistan of Sheikh Afzal and members of his family with whom he jointly owned the Harris Steel Mills and that of the former BoP boss, Hamesh Khan, in the United States, led to some startling revelations.

Towards the end of the year though, these fiscal scams were eclipsed by controversies that involved loss of precious lives. The death of Huma Akram, the wife of cricket star Wasim Akram, and that of three-year-old Imanae Malik, due to alleged negligence of doctors in Lahore, brutally shook the entire society. A solution to all these problems will consume quite a lot of our energies, provided that we are allowed to do so by the biggest two issues we are faced with: terrorism and political instability. ■