

Army chief's remarks

THERE is a rough road ahead for Pakistan, and national institutions must play their role in reviving the economy.

On that score, at least, everyone is on the same page. There is, however, a difference of opinion about how we have arrived at this juncture. On Friday, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa, speaking at a seminar on the economy at the National Defence University, contended that `fiscal mismanagement` and timid decision-making in the past are responsible for the dire straits the country finds itself in. Further, he endorsed the PTI government for the `difficult decisions` it has taken to resuscitate the economy, citing examples of other countries having overcome similar challenges with the same approach. It is indeed imperative that Pakistan get its house in order, for as the army chief rightly stated, `there can be no sovereignty without economic stability`. The military has demonstrated its own commitment to what is likely to be a long and arduous exercise by foregoing the annual defence budget increment.

It has not been long since Pakistan emerged from years of extremist violence. The relative peace that has been secured is a credit to the armed forces ably performing their constitutional duty to protect the country. Nevertheless, recent terrorist incidents point to the tenuous nature of those gains. The military leadership should not allow itself to be sidetracked from its core responsibilities which include keeping the eastern and western borders secure and instead apply its energies to its area of expertise. Maintaining the separation of powers as defined in the Constitution strengthens institutions and, in turn, the overarching governance framework.

However, by endorsing the PTI government's actions, the army chief is expressing an overt political opinion. That is undesirable for more than one reason.

Politics is seen as the art of the possible, which means it can even in the most evolved democracies - require some bending of principles and the forging of improbable alliances. That is why it is best left to the politicians while other institutions remain above the fray. Moreover, the armed forces play an important role in the conduct of elections; the appearance of impartiality on their part thus has a critical bearing on the credibility of the polls. The PTI government has thrown itself with gusto into the task of attacking the PPP and PML-N for alleged mismanagement of the economy when they were in power; the opposition has responded fiercely to its accusations. This is the nature of the political back and forth in a parliamentary democracy, even a dysfunctional one as ours. Gen Bajwa's remarks unnecessarily expose the military to accusations of encroaching on the political realm. The PTI, by including the army chief in a top economic consultative body the first time this has happened in a civilian government will be much to blame if there are negative repercussions for the military's public standing, and Gen Bajwa's legacy.

Editorial