

## Perilous waters

Page NO.07 Col NO.01

No one doubts that Pakistan is facing a water crisis. We are already a water-insecure country and as the global climate change takes its toll the problem will only become worse. Where there is disagreement is on the political question of how best to manage our water resources. The Supreme Court is now weighing in on the matter of constructing the controversial Kalabagh Dam – a project that was first proposed in 1953 and on which there has never been a consensus. The lawyer who had filed the petition calling for a referendum on the issue claimed that all four provinces agreed that construction of the dam is necessary. This, however, is not the case. Sindh is worried that its share of water will be reduced as water run-off from the dams will be used to irrigate land in Punjab, affecting the flow of water from the Indus to the Arabian Sea, leaving lands in Sindh barren. Similar concerns have been expressed elsewhere. Then there is the very relevant debate on how beneficial or harmful big dams are for the environment and what the consequences are in the long run. Chief Justice Saqib Nisar seems to recognise that no consensus exists on the Kalabagh Dam project but he does insist that dams somehow will have to be built if we are to meet the water challenge that faces us. In a separate case, the chief justice showed that he meant what he said when he announced the construction of two new dams. He said a consensus on the dams had been reached between himself and the experts he spoke to. The case the chief justice was hearing involved the recovery of loans that were improperly written off in the 1990s. He said that these funds would be used to construct the new dams. This is, to put it very carefully, an extraordinary intervention. Dams, as everyone recognises, are also a very sensitive political issue and normal democratic procedures being bypassed might make them even more controversial here.

There is no doubt that Pakistan needs to improve its water storage capacity. Existing dams only have a storage capacity of 30 days and that too will be reduced as the pace of sedimentation increases. But the answer isn't necessarily as simple as just ordering the construction of new dams. The Neelum-Jhelum Hydroelectric Project is an example of how technical delays and cost overruns can derail major infrastructural projects. What the country needs above all is a national water policy that focuses on conservation and the more efficient use of water. Since agriculture is, by far, the largest single consumer of water, we need to better allocate how water is used for agricultural purposes. Rather than simply allotting water based on the size of land holdings, water distribution needs to account for how much water is actually needed depending on the crops that are being cultivated. Once we have shown that we are serious about tackling the water crisis, it will be easier to judge how many dams need

to be built. This solution needs to come through debate and implementation. As our history of constructing dams has shown, imposing a solution from on top rarely works. 'Democratic Reason' cannot be done away with on any national issue – more so in matters of development.