

DAWN

DEBATE ON DAMS

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He warning signs are present and all sides, including the protagonists, ought to pay heed and help reduce tensions.

Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has said that critics of the Diamer-Bhasha and Mohmand dams fundraising initiative will be taken to task and that no opposition would be allowed to stand in the way of the construction of the dams. The chief justice's comments appear to be in response to senior PPP leader Khursheed Shah's veiled criticism of the court and the national drive to build major dams that has gained political and media momentum in recent months and weeks. It is unfortunate that the national discourse has taken this unwelcome turn. In recent days, the chief justice has inaugurated the judicial year by demanding that the judiciary improve its performance, and has separately also spoken of the need to regulate the superior court's suo motu powers. It is arguably there that the superior judiciary's attention should lie and not in the policy domain of the executive.

Certainly, there is a vital national debate on water to be had. By all independent and objective measures, Pakistan's growing population is either already in the grip or on the verge of an acute water crisis.

But the reasons for the shortage are many, as are the potential responses. While dams may and this remains to be determined by expert consensus have a role in addressing Pakistan's water woes, it is already apparent that they cannot be the only solution. What is needed is a democratic national debate that is anchored in science and informed by water policy experts. Unhappily, well intentioned as the current push for building specific dams may be, there appears to be a growing element of pressure involved in the debate. Indeed, it is not apparent where the science, technical input and expert opinion in support of the current dam-building drive has come from.

The necessary scientific research and professional endorsements may well exist, but they have still to be made public.

Yet, political opposition to the building of dams also needs to be rooted in science and sound policy. Chief Minister of Sindh Murad Ali Shah has made a better effort than Khursheed Shah in highlighting issues of inadequate water flow to support big dams and the effects on coastal Sindh of diverting water away from the Arabian Sea. With the nation's attention on dam-building at the moment, the political leadership ought to take the opportunity to inform and educate the public instead of reflexively and glibly opposing measures proposed by others. From a democratic perspective, it is undesirable that the superior court and elected representatives engage in public sparring. All sides agree that there is an existing or imminent water crisis in the country. Surely, a national solution to a national problem can be found.