



Home and beyond

TDP now believes its political fortunes lie with a nationwide grouping of opposition parties

Electoral competition, not ideological conflict, is the biggest obstacle to the making of political alliances. The coming together of the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party is not on account of any new-found affinity, but because of the cessation of an old rivalry. With the Congress no longer posing a threat to the TDP in Andhra Pradesh, and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi emerging as the principal rival of the Congress in Telangana, the Congress and the TDP are not competitors for power in either of the two States. All the reasons that drove the TDP away from the Congress and into the arms of the Bharatiya Janata Party have disappeared like ghosts in daylight. For the TDP, which is facing a robust challenge from the breakaway group of the Congress, the YSR Congress Party, the electoral campaign is built around the failure of the BJP-led government at the Centre to grant special category status to A.P. The BJP is the new political target, and the Congress suddenly is a friend. In Telangana, the TDP, which opposed the bifurcation of A.P., is a marginal player, and stands to benefit by entering into a seat-sharing agreement with the Congress. The 2014 bifurcation not only drew new boundaries, but also laid the basis for political realignments in both A.P. and Telangana.

The coalition-building exercise of A.P. Chief Minister and TDP president N. Chandrababu Naidu comes after the failed attempt of the TRS to forge a national 'federal' front of regional parties in opposition to both the BJP and the Congress. TRS leader and Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao made some headway in talks with West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee, but an opposition front that did not include the principal opposition party at the national level was bound to be a non-starter. In contrast, from the start Mr. Naidu saw the Congress as the main agent of an anti-BJP front, and the TDP as a catalyst in the new political equation. If the TRS chose to uncouple the Assembly election from the Lok Sabha election by dissolving the Assembly prematurely, the TDP wanted to become a player at the national level in time for 2019 when elections will be held to the A.P. Assembly along with the Lok Sabha poll. Clearly, Mr. Naidu's effort goes beyond an electoral understanding with the Congress in his home State. Besides meeting Congress president Rahul Gandhi, he engaged in wide-ranging consultations with leaders of the Nationalist Congress Party, the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the National Conference, indicating his interest in playing a larger role in a nationwide alliance against the BJP. The TDP's first priority remains retaining A.P., but in Mr. Naidu's modified understanding of the political situation, this is also tied up with the effort to unseat the BJP at the Centre. The battle for Andhra Pradesh is now part of a larger war.

Too faint for comfort?

While the spurt in GST collections brings cheer, it must be sustained to be impactful

As the Central government struggles to contain its widening fiscal deficit, there is some good news on the revenue front. Goods and services tax (GST) collections in the month of October crossed the ₹1 lakh crore mark, with total collections for the month standing at ₹1,00,710 crore. This momentum, coming in the midst of a marginal increase in the total number of filings compared to September, is expected to be sustained in the coming months, supported by the festive season that is under way. GST collections had crossed the comfort level of ₹1 lakh crore for the first time in April this year. The average GST revenue during 2017-18 was ₹89,885 crore. The reduction in tax rates under GST in July seems to have helped improve compliance among small businesses, leading to an increase in overall tax collection. It also helps to reduce the distortionary effect of indirect taxes. The increase in GST collections comes at a time when the Centre has been unable to control its spending in the run-up to the general election due by next summer. According to data released last week, the government's fiscal deficit reached 95.3% of its budgeted estimate by the first half of the year. Direct tax collections too have increased over the past few years, reaching an all-time high of ₹10 lakh crore in 2017-18, helping to fund the deficit.

But all is not well on the revenue front. Tax revenues reached only 39.4% of the full-year target by the end of September. The festive season too has failed to meet expectations as of now with many consumer-facing businesses reporting lacklustre sales. Car sales reported by major companies until now, for instance, are flat. Various other economic indicators also have failed to impress in recent months. Core sector growth dropped to a four-month low in September. These growth-related factors will weigh negatively on tax collection in the coming months. Apart from the general macroeconomic environment, there are specific implementation issues that plague the indirect tax system. The export sector, for example, has been affected by undue delays in GST refunds worth thousands of crores of rupees. The GST collection in October is also still significantly below the expectations of ₹1.10 lakh crore. So the current spurt may be simply owing to the festive season. It may also be too soon to say that GST collections are on a sustainable uptrend simply based on the October collections. Collections during the first six months of the current fiscal year fell short of target by over ₹22,000 crore despite record collections in April. The government should continue the effort to make the GST more taxpayer-friendly, bringing down the cost and hassle of compliance, to achieve a sustained rise in collections.

How not to choose among allies

A sanctions waiver from the U.S. may prove to be a rather hollow victory for India



SUHASINI HAIDAR

In May 2012, Hillary Clinton, then U.S. Secretary of State, visited Delhi on behalf of the Western countries negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the nuclear deal, with Iran, to convince India to cut its oil imports from Iran. In her book *Hard Choices*, she later recounted her tough battle with the Indian government, as she ran through the reasons India needed to help put pressure on Iran to return to the negotiating table for the six-party talks. Eventually, India agreed to cut its imports by only about 15%. But cumulative global pressure had the desired impact on Iran, where inflation had risen more than 40% and oil exports declined from 2.5 million barrels of crude each day to about 1 million. JCPOA negotiations that followed eventually led to a deal hailed by the United Nations, that had quarterbacked the talks all through.

Changed times

As U.S. officials have led a series of delegations to New Delhi in the last few months, they have had a similar mission, but with a completely different backdrop. For starters, the sanctions that the U.S. now proposes trying to ensure India adheres to have been placed not in order to forge any deal, but because the Trump administration has walked out of the JCPOA. In this the U.S. has no support



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

from any other country involved in the deal, and the UN has expressed grave misgivings about the decision. The U.S. has given no evidence that Iran in any way violated the terms of the JCPOA – in fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency's June report concluded that Iran's stockpile of uranium and heavy water as well as its implementation of additional protocols were “in compliance” with the agreement.

Unlike in 2012, the U.S.'s EU allies are now working closely with arch rivals like Russia and China to put a “special payments mechanism”, primarily with a view to supporting trade to Tehran to ensure that the Iranian regime does not walk out of the nuclear deal as well.

While the U.S. may succeed in squeezing Iran economically, it is increasingly isolated politically, as was evident at the most recent Financial Action Task Force meet in Paris where the U.S. proposed sanctions on Iran for terror funding. Even so, the U.S. has continued on its unilateral path, without a care for the very “rules-based international order” that it so often invokes.

For India, the impact of the American sanctions plan would be

manifold, regardless of the waiver. To begin with, there is the shock that sanctions would deal to the oil import bill, given that Iran is India's third largest supplier. There are not only rising costs of oil to contend with, but also the added cost of having to recalibrate Indian fuel refineries that are used to process Iran's special crude. The second impact would be on India's investment in the Chabahar port, which would face both direct and indirect sanctions: as shippers, port suppliers and trading companies refuse to participate in the project. When India had opened the tenders for cranes for heavy lifting at Chabahar a few years ago, for example, it found no takers, and eventually was forced to award the contract to ZPMC in 2017. This problem will only get more acute as sanctions kick in, threatening India's \$500 million investment in the port and its \$2 billion plan for a railway line to circumvent Pakistan and reach Afghanistan and Central Asian trade lines. Finally, there would be the impact on India's regional security situation, which could see the Iranian-Arab divide deepen, Afghanistan's choices dwindle and an angry Iran pitched closer into the China-Russia corner.

A judgment and its aftermath

Protests in Pakistan over Asia Bibi's acquittal underline the urgent need to reassure religious minorities



FARAHNAZ ISPAHANI

The reaction by extremist Islamist groups to the Pakistan Supreme Court's decision to acquit a poor Christian woman, eight years after she was charged with blasphemy, highlights the country's deeper problem.

After years of religious rhetoric as an essential element of national politics and statecraft, Pakistan often finds itself at the mercy of hardline clerics and unscrupulous individuals seeking to exploit religion for political gain. The result is not only loss of individual liberty but also a state of permanent crisis.

Inherent weaknesses

The Asia Bibi case has all the elements of Pakistan's inherent weaknesses. First, the law allowed neighbours with a grudge to persecute Asia Noreen, usually referred to as Asia Bibi, and now, even belated judicial recognition of her innocence seems unacceptable to those rioting in the streets. They want to kill someone against whom the Supreme Court found no credible evidence and are threatening apex court judges as well senior military commanders while trying to force Pakistan to a halt.

Ms. Bibi, an illiterate berry picker, was convicted of defiling the name of the Prophet Mohammed.

She was accused by her Muslim neighbours who objected to her drinking water from the same glass as them because she was Christian. Under Pakistan's blasphemy law, her alleged comment is punishable by death. In 2010, Ms. Bibi, at age 39, was sentenced to hang, but her final appeal remained pending until the Supreme Court decision on Wednesday.

In intervening years, Ms. Bibi's case became an international cause célèbre. Earlier this year, Rome's Colosseum was lit in red in support of persecuted Christians, including her, and Pope Francis described Ms. Bibi, alongside a Nigerian woman who was captured by Boko Haram, as “martyrs”.

The Pope's attention to Ms. Bibi's case paralleled efforts by the European Union's Special Envoy for the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief to secure her release by making it a condition for continued European market access for Pakistani products. The Pakistani government was informed that the future of Generalised System/Scheme of Preferences (GSP) status to Pakistan, which allows Pakistan duty-free access to EU markets, would be directly linked to the peaceful resolution of the blasphemy case.

The reason the Supreme Court heard Ms. Bibi's appeal and acknowledged in its judgment what had been widely known – that witnesses against her had either retracted their testimony or contradicted each other – can be found in Pakistan's severe financial woes. Ms. Bibi got relief she should have been entitled to as a right just be-



APF

cause the Chief Justice wanted to help a weak new government struggling to manage the country's external finances.

Zia's legacy

Pakistan's blasphemy laws date back to the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. A series of changes were introduced in the 1980s, making derogatory remarks against any Islamic personage a crime under Section 295 of Pakistan's Penal Code and punishable by three years in prison; prescribing life imprisonment for “wilful desecration of the Quran”; and punishing blasphemy against Prophet Mohammed with “death, or imprisonment for life”.

Ms. Bibi's case illustrates how blasphemy laws are used to persecute the weakest of the weak among Pakistan's religious minorities. As a poor Christian from a low caste, she was among the most vulnerable and susceptible to discrimination. And the legal system – which, in theory, should be designed to protect the innocent – failed her in every way until political expediency necessitated otherwise.

Laws prohibiting blasphemy or harming religious feelings exist in

many countries, although in some places they are rarely used even if they still exist on the statute books. But in Pakistan, which has one of the highest numbers of blasphemy cases in the world, the charge is used widely to settle grudges or property disputes.

There is also political advantage to be gained by appealing to the religious sentiment of majority Muslims against Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and members of other minority communities. The constant state of religious frenzy that Pakistan's machinery of state maintains as a guarantee of Pakistani nationhood heightens vigilante violence against alleged blasphemers and their alleged protectors.

As with her previous trials and appeals, large crowds gathered outside the court in Islamabad on Wednesday demanding that Ms. Bibi's conviction be upheld, and the execution carried out. In messages sent to the media, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan asked soldiers to rebel against the Army Chief, saying that the acquittal presumably had the military's backing.

As Pakistan gets increasingly isolated internationally, the military may have sought Ms. Bibi's acquittal and reported departure to safety abroad to relieve some pressure on Pakistan's image around the world. She is reported to have left Pakistan and to have been reunited with her husband, daughters and grandchild.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, which, like Tehreek-e-Labbaik, has a very strong street presence, has asked its members to come out in Islamabad to demand that the acquittal

with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Given the heavy costs and in the complete absence of any benefits, it is surprising that the Modi government has not been more vocal in its protest against the U.S.'s actions. In May this year, when asked, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had said very emphatically that India adheres only to “UN sanctions, not unilateral ones”. Yet, all the government's moves have been to the contrary, as American delegations have been allowed to come to Delhi and issue dire warnings, of the kind Nikki Haley, the U.S.'s envoy to the UN, did. Meanwhile, Indian officials have made a beeline for Washington to discuss the reasons why India deserves a waiver, from both Iran and CAATSA sanctions. According to these officials, the U.S. has been apprised of India's energy requirement compulsions, and of the cut of about 35-50% in its oil purchases from Iran. On the CAATSA front, the U.S. has also been assured of a significant reduction in Indian defence dependence on Russia, and that no weapons procured, like the recently purchased S-400 missile system, would be used against American interests.

As a result, if the U.S. presses on with sanctions, it would be a marked failure of Indian diplomacy. And if the waiver does come through, as is indicated, it will be no victory, but signify an abject submission to the sanctions themselves. With no gains in the offing from a policy of ‘pragmatism’, India may have been better off sticking to principle instead.

suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

be reversed. Even the army's overt protégé, Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, has joined the call for protests over the Supreme Court judgment.

Amidst reports of violence, the national media, especially television channels, have gone totally silent about Mr. Bibi's release. They, too, are under threat from the bay-ing mobs.

Imran Khan's appeal

To claim moral leadership, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan attacked hardliners and appealed for calm in a televised address, taking a U-turn from his pre-election rhetoric that had projected him as a defender of the Prophet's honour and a crusader against blasphemers.

According to Mr. Khan, the hardliners were “inciting [people] for their own political gain” and were “doing no service to Islam”. But Ministers have also started negotiating with the extremist clerics, and it is only a matter of time before another U-turn is taken to fashion some compromise with the hardliners.

The Supreme Court's decision in the Asia Bibi case is a small step in the right direction but a long journey awaits Pakistan in reversing the cumulative injustice it has meted out to its religious minorities over the decades.

Farahnaz Ispahani is a former member of Pakistan's National Assembly. She is Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington DC, and the author of 'Purifying the Land of the the Pure: A History of Pakistan's Religious Minorities'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Forging a front

It is inconceivable that the Telugu Desam Party, which considered the Congress party its sworn enemy till now, has suddenly developed warmth towards it after becoming disenchanted with the Bharatiya Janata Party (“Congress, TDP to forge front against Modi-led BJP govt.”, November 2). In the past, many regional parties have allied with the BJP either before or after elections. Did it not strike them then that the autonomy of public institutions was being eroded? Did it not strike them then that the BJP was communal? Or that the BJP was anti-Dalit? The new coinage that the Congress and the TDP seem to be suggesting, which is “save

nation, save democracy”, is a hackneyed slogan to hoodwink the electorate. People do not feel that democracy is in any danger. Talk about a grand alliance is often heard but fizzles out. The anathema towards the BJP is opportunistic.

BADRINARAYANAN R.,
Bengaluru

■ The Congress has got a shot in the arm ahead of Assembly elections. The stance of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and TDP leader N. Chandrababu Naidu would gladden the hearts of Congress leaders but definitely put the other ambitious Opposition leaders in a piquant situation. If the Congress performs well in the forthcoming Assembly elections, its bargaining power to be the number one among equals will gain

strength. As far as the BJP is concerned, it may be wary of the manoeuvring capabilities of Mr. Naidu who, bring by the past, is adept in going together warring parties into one fold. The success of the BJP now depends upon how effectively and convincingly it can reach out to the people about stable, single-party rule versus a hotchpotch alliance of many ambitious leaders with divergent policies trying to take the top slot.

VENKATRAMAN S.,
Chennai

Elephant deaths

It is shocking that “461 elephants have been electrocuted in India in 8 years since 2009” (November 2). People are increasingly encroaching into areas once occupied by wildlife with the result that

man-animal conflict is on the rise. Perhaps the data cited do not include deaths after being hit by railway trains and poaching. The deaths show that the efforts being taken by the forest and other officials are far from adequate. The Indian elephant has a pride of place in our country and must be saved.

J. EDEN ALEXANDER,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

■ The sight of lifeless pachyderms is heart-rending. Ardent neglect and official apathy in ensuring simple measures to reduce casualties such as of cabling of power lines is startling. Radio tagging of elephants can help identify danger spots and also avoid man-animal conflict.

KARTHIK VIMAL,
Hyderabad

Covered by smog

People might blame bursting of crackers on Deepavali or the burning of straw in fields as the main reason for air pollution in the Delhi region but the fact is that it will always be industrial pollution. People are casual about environment issues and do not keep the larger

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the graphic “A tall order” that accompanied the report, “Towering statue of Patel dedicated to the nation” (Nov. 1, 2018, early editions), the total cost of construction was erroneously given as ₹2, 979 crore whereas the text of the report had the correct figure - ₹2,989 crore. The text had also erroneously stated that the statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel exceeded the height of China's Spring Temple Buddha by 177 ft. Actually, it exceeds by 29 metres. The errors were corrected in the city editions.

CARA stands for Central Adoption Resource Authority - and not Child Adoption Resource Authority as given in the report headlined Missionaries of Charity joins adoption system (Oct. 30, 2018, some editions).

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com