



The crisis deepens

Dissolution of Sri Lanka's Parliament negates the letter and spirit of constitutional reforms

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has dissolved Parliament after it became evident that Mahinda Rajapaksa, who he had appointed Prime Minister two weeks ago, did not enjoy a legislative majority. It is an act of desperation to prevent a likely loss of face for both leaders after Mr. Sirisena's controversial dismissal of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister on October 26. Sri Lanka has been roiled by political uncertainty ever since lawmakers of Mr. Sirisena's party withdrew support from the 'national unity government' to facilitate Mr. Wickremesinghe's removal and the swearing-in of Mr. Rajapaksa in his place. With many parties questioning the legality of the dismissal, the President suspended Parliament. This was a move to buy Mr. Rajapaksa time to garner support through defections. With around 100 MPs each in the 225-member House, both rival camps claimed they had the majority. But a 15-member alliance of Tamil MPs and six Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna lawmakers refused to support the newly installed regime, and Mr. Rajapaksa's continuance became untenable. The President had to ask him to face possible defeat in a floor test or call elections as a way out. He has chosen the latter. However, a provision in the Constitution, introduced through the 19th Amendment by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration in 2015, stipulates that the House cannot be dissolved for four and a half years after a parliamentary election, unless two-thirds of its total membership seeks dissolution through a resolution. Mr. Sirisena's action has come in the face of this restriction.

A fig leaf of constitutionality has been made up, citing Article 33(2)(c), which says the President has the power to summon, prorogue and dissolve Parliament. However, it is difficult to see how a general provision enumerating some powers can override a specific provision elsewhere in the Constitution that expressly limits those powers. It is only a little over three years since the last election, and there is no request from MPs seeking the dissolution of Parliament. The promise held out by the 2015 reforms seems to have vanished with Mr. Sirisena's actions. Given the manner in which recent constitutional reforms have been undermined, the process of writing a new, inclusive Constitution for the country may no longer inspire much confidence. The Sirisena-Rajapaksa camp has, expectedly, welcomed fresh elections, claiming it would reflect the true will of the people. Free and fair elections are, no doubt, central to a democracy; but when conducted in the wake of the questionable sacking of Parliament, they may be anything but. The Opposition parties are now set to challenge the President's action. Sri Lanka is at a crossroads where it has to make a crucial choice between democratic consolidation or a retreat to authoritarianism. The judiciary has a crucial task at hand.

Ripples of discord

A forthcoming paper on the detection of gravitational waves will be illuminating

On September 14, 2015, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory (LIGO) made the Nobel prize winning detection of gravitational waves. These waves are ripples in the fabric of space-time, arising from the merger of a pair of black holes in distant space, and their detection had been a long-time pursuit of physics. LIGO's feat was among the most electrifying announcements in recent years. Since detecting this binary black hole (BBH) merger, the LIGO Scientific Collaboration (LSC) has made six such observations. Five of these were mergers of black holes in very different locations in space and with very different characteristics such as mass, and one was the merger of a pair of so-called neutron stars (binary neutron stars). Such mergers had been modelled theoretically even before the detection. The measurement was made easier because the team had templates for the type of signals to expect. The last few detections have been done in conjunction with another detector, Virgo. After the first discovery, the LSC made public its data. Analysing this, in 2017 a group of scientists questioned the validity of the first detection. They argued that the two detectors belonging to LIGO were correlated and that this led to a correlation in the noise factor. Weeding out noise from the signal is crucial in any such experiment, and James Creswell *et al* claimed that this had not been done properly by the LSC. Since then, a version of their preprint has been published in the *Journal of Cosmology and Astroparticle Physics*. After a long silence, on November 1, the LSC has put up a clarification on its website.

The clarification is cryptic, referring to "misunderstandings of public data products and the ways that the LIGO data need to be treated" by those raising objections. This encompasses a range of things, starting with lacunae in the analysis of data by Mr. Creswell and his collaborators. It transpires that in their analysis Creswell *et al* had used the data supplied by LIGO for a figure in their paper rather than the raw time series data that were made publicly available. While responding with a defence regarding processing of data is fine, it is unfortunate that the LSC team supplied data for the figure in the published paper that differed from the raw data. That said, a simpler and more direct corroboration of LIGO's discovery stems from the wide variety of its sources. Now, the LSC plans to come out with a paper that carries detailed explanations. This would not be a second too soon. Put together, this is how science makes progress – in leaps and bounds, with thoughtful critiques and interventions in between. And in this case, the attendant controversy has captured the interest of even those beyond the world of science.

Riding the tiger

The December election will decide whether Bangladesh can protect its socio-economic advance, democratically



KANAK MANI DIXIT

From the outside, Bangladesh appears a country where democratic stability has ushered economic progress and shed the 'basket case' tag carried since its birth in 1971. Bangladesh no longer makes news for mass deaths from famines, cyclones and floods, and is ahead of neighbours India and Pakistan on human development, including life expectancy, maternal and child mortality, rural poverty and food security.

The eighth largest country in the world by population, Bangladesh is shedding the least developing country (LDC) label and is within striking distance of middle-income status. While grassroots development, the readymade garment industry and the phenomenon of mega-non-governmental organisations deserve credit, so does the stewardship of Sheikh Hasina and her two consecutive five-year terms as Prime Minister since January 2009.

She is applauded by the world for providing refuge to the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar pogroms, by the West for serving as a bulwark against Islamic extremism, and by India for the dismantling of camps of Northeast militants.

The run-up to the general elections announced for December 23 is an opportunity to observe Bangladesh from the inside, and the view is unsettling. The Prime Minister has moved progressively from autocracy to authoritarianism, and fears are rife in Dhaka of oncoming political calamity. With Ms. Hasina and her Awami League party expected to return to power assisted by well-oiled poll rigging, the only recourse thereafter for want of political paths of dissent would be self-igniting uprisings.

Dhaka today is a city of guarded whispers. Given the brittle polity created by manifest intolerance, Ms. Hasina seems to have calculated

that she simply cannot afford to lose at the polls. The daughter of 'Bangabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rides a tiger, fearful of dismounting for what she has wrought.

Awami intolerance

Criticism of the Hasina regime is equated with treason against the state. The legislature, judiciary and bureaucracy have become rubber stamps even as the Prime Minister suffocates the polity, with U.S.-returned son and adviser Sajeeb Wazed Joy by her side. The party machine has become her personal fief and the attempt at dynastic continuity is palpable, as seen in the ubiquitous billboards portraying father, daughter and grandson.

The harsh measures taken by the Hasina regime against journalists reflect the political whip being applied across the societal spectrum. Media houses submit meekly to self-censorship in the face of vengeful reaction even to timid criticism, and Parliament just passed a restrictive Digital Security Act in September despite well-articulated concerns about free expression.

In order to crush civil society, Ms. Hasina set out to make examples of well-known media personalities. Mahfuz Anam, editor of *The Daily Star* newspaper, was slapped with dozens of spurious charges of sedition and defamation. Today marks photographer and cultural activist Shahidul Alam's hundredth day behind bars, for having had the impertinence to live-stream the attacks by Awami League goons on young protesters on the streets.

The international outcry on Mr. Alam's imprisonment has failed to move the Prime Minister, who is ever-more belligerent. Terrified of her wrath, consecutive court benches shamefully refuse to consider his bail petition.

The Indian presence

Observers in Dhaka say Ms. Hasina's family tragedy helps explain her political persona, motivations and geopolitical leanings. Her intense survival instinct can be



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traced back to the assassination of her father in 1975, together with her mother, brothers and other family members.

Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister, offered refuge to the two surviving sisters (Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana), which is said to account for Ms. Hasina's decidedly New Delhi tilt. Today, Bangladesh is regarded as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's one foreign policy success in South Asia, and New Delhi has pursued Ms. Hasina for its own ends – the closure of Northeast militant camps, entry into the sizeable Bangladesh market, and access to the Northeast through Bangladesh (even as India surrounds Bangladesh with a barbed wire fence).

Dhaka's opinion-makers grumble that Bangladesh has got little in return besides assurances, while government officials are tight-lipped about the quid pro quo, particularly on water sharing. For a densely populated lower riparian country which would be devastated by any further upstream flow diversion on the Ganga/Padma – salinity, desertification, loss of livelihood and migration – Bangladesh watches fearfully the 'river linking project' so favoured by the Bharatiya Janata Party.

While India has snubbed Bangladesh by abstaining on a December 2017 UN Human Rights Council resolution on the Rohingya co-sponsored by Dhaka, Ms. Hasina has been resoundingly silent on the anti-Bangladeshi tirade of the BJP following the release in July this year of the draft of Assam's National Register of Citizens.

For two decades, Bangladesh politics was marked by the relent-

less feuding of Ms. Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, chair of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). But Ms. Zia has been outwitted by the sure-footed Ms. Hasina, especially after the BNP decided to boycott the general elections of 2014. Today, Bangladesh is essentially a one-party polity under the Awami League.

Ms. Zia, a two-time Prime Minister, is in prison, with her jail term for graft having just been increased to 10 years. She is in failing health, the lone inmate at the old Dhaka Central Jail, the other prisoners having been moved to a new facility outside city limits.

Fake encounters

That the BNP has not been able to build a movement for the release of its leader indicates an opposition in disarray, but also the regime's hounding of BNP cadre countrywide, through outright violence and filing of false court cases. Despite assurances from the Prime Minister of a level field for election campaigning, BNP cadre are swelling the number of inmates in jails countrywide.

The absence of effective political opposition has helped transform Bangladesh into a country with a deathly record of enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings. Fake encounters have been institutionalised by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), while the Prime Minister has activated military intelligence in a manner not seen even under martial law, according to observers.

As people run for cover, the Awami League holds itself out as the sole custodian of the legacy of the Liberation War and of Sheikh Mujib, with all disagreeable forces and individuals variously tagged as 'Jamaati', 'razakar' collaborators, Westernised elite, 'Tagorites', Pakistani intelligence, and even Mossad operatives. Meanwhile, everyone else talks of Indian intelligence infiltrating the layers of Dhaka society.

Ms. Hasina is projected internationally as a fighter against Islamic fundamentalism, but has quietly accommodated the Hefazat-e-Is-

lam, a conservative pressure group of clerics. The regime is busy excising secular content from textbooks, and has made madrasa degrees at par with university degrees for government jobs.

Spontaneous combustion

With the political opposition weakened, the people's release is through outbursts that tend to snowball. This happened with the Shahbag movement which sought to rekindle the spirit of Liberation, an agitation against excessive quotas (56%) in public sector employment, and this summer's uprising of youngsters demanding road safety.

Ms. Hasina deftly rode out these agitations, but in the absence of a democratic release through free and fair elections, a spontaneous combustion in the future may go outside her capacity to manage, engulfing all Bangladesh.

A faint hint of compromise appeared in the first week of November, when Ms. Hasina readily agreed to a meeting request from the Jatiya Oikya Front, an alliance formed on October 13 which includes the BNP and four other parties. Kamal Hossain, elder statesman and framer of the 1972 Constitution, leads the Front.

The Front's seven-point demand included a neutral government to run elections and release of all political prisoners including Ms. Zia. The Prime Minister has turned a deaf ear to the demands, and instead elections were announced for December 23, denying the opposition alliance time to organise.

The intolerance and crony capitalism exhibited by the Hasina regime today colours the entire state structure of Bangladesh and jeopardises its journey towards middle-income country status. The very person who has worked to usher socio-economic advance seems ready to sacrifice it all. Ms. Hasina must try to get off the tiger, and others must help her do so.

Kanak Mani Dixit, a writer and journalist based in Kathmandu, is the founding editor of the magazine, *Himal Southasian*

'We should be free'

Long-lost interviews reveal the true feelings of India's veterans of the First World War



GEORGE MORTON-JACK

A total of 1.5 million Indian troops served in the Indian Army during the First World War. Sailing away from the great seaports of India from 1914 under the British, for four years they fought for the Allies in Europe, Africa and Asia against the Germans and Turks.

As cavalrymen they charged through French fields of corn with lances lowered; as marines they sailed the oceans; as engineers they built bridges across rivers in the jungles of Tanzania; as infantrymen they dug trenches in China; as secret agents they stole over the Himalayas into Central Asia; as prisoners of war they lost years of their lives to captivity in Germany, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

The Indian Army in fact served in what are now some 50 countries, more than any other army of 1914-18. The war was truly global,

and no body of men knew it more than the Indian troops.

After the Allies' Armistice with Germany 100 years ago to end the war, the white soldiers of the Western nations often put down their guns to pick up their pens. Winston Churchill, Siegfried Sassoon and many others wrote best-selling war memoirs, novels, histories and plays. But the Indians barely did the same.

Letters home

A tiny minority of the Indian soldiers did write diaries and memoirs of their war. They were well-educated and tended to come from the big cities or rich aristocratic families, such as Thakur Amar Singh, a Rajput officer who wrote possibly the longest diary in the English language, covering his war experiences in Europe and elsewhere.

The vast majority of the Indian troops, however, were illiterate: they came from the poverty-stricken rural districts of colonial Punjab and other northern areas. When they served abroad in 1914-18, their major means of committing their thoughts to paper was letters home, which they dictated



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to army scribes. Yet their letters were censored by the British; they knew it; they habitually kept back much of what was on their minds. Today, the letters survive mainly at the British Library in London in censors' translations of those sent by a small minority of Indian troops in France and England.

Oral histories

For decades it has generally been thought that the translated letters in London are the main source for the illiterate Indian troops' thoughts. But a fresh discovery challenges this: long lost Indian veteran interviews which offer revelatory insights into the Indian troops' feelings as never revealed to the censors.

In the 1970s, a team led by the American historian, DeWitt Ellinwood, interviewed a number of

the last surviving Indian veterans of the First World War. Ellinwood wrote down the veterans' words in transcripts of a thousand pages which he stored for decades at his home in the U.S. A few years ago, I learned of the transcripts from a footnote in one of Ellinwood's academic articles. I contacted him and found out that while he still had the transcripts, he was in his 80s and would not work on them further. He bestowed them on me, suggesting that I might make them publicly available to be read alongside the Indians' translated letters. He died shortly afterwards, in 2012, but on reading the transcripts I could see why he made the suggestion.

The transcripts fill in the blanks of what the Indian soldiers did not dare say in their letters under the prying British eyes. "We were slaves," one Sikh veteran said of his war experiences of 1914-18, while another described a "curtain of fear" separating the Indian troops from the white soldiers – they were flogged by the British, paid less than their white counterparts, segregated in camps and on trains and ships, and barred from senior command.

The veterans also talked of how their war service opened their minds to new ideas about casting off colonial rule. "I felt that Indians were deprived of their rights. The people in Europe were free. I felt that Indians must get freedom," said a Punjabi veteran, Harnam Singh.

"We got new ideas. Our hearts had changed," agreed another Punjabi who had also served in Europe. "We were impressed by the sympathy and regard which the French people had shown to us. We thought that when others can regard us as their brothers and equals, why can't the British give us the same status? We thought that the English had no regard for us. We lived in poverty under foreign rule. We should be free."

I hope the transcripts showing the veterans' true feelings can finally be made publicly accessible in India, available to all, including families of Indian servicemen remembering their part in the world war of 100 years ago.

George Morton-Jack is the author of *'The Indian Empire at War: From Jihad to Victory, the Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War'*

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.

Crisis in Sri Lanka

The injudicious act by the Sri Lankan President, of dissolving Parliament, has only deepened the political crisis in the country ("Sri Lankan Oppn. to challenge dissolution of Parliament", November 11). He has let his ego cause havoc to the democratic structure of his nation. His hasty act is likely to adversely impact U.S. assistance, including a planned aid package from the Millennium Challenge Corporation worth millions of dollars. The reaction by major world powers towards the present political turmoil in the island nation is surprisingly not pronounced in this hour of crisis. Restoring political order in Sri Lanka at the earliest is the critical need of the hour.

N. VISVESWARAN,
Chennai

■ President Maithripala Sirisena's hasty act has not only set an unhealthy precedent but also goes against the tenets of the Constitution of Sri Lanka. There is no doubt that the island nation is facing a deep political crisis. As Mr. Sirisena appears to be adamant in sticking to the unlawful moves, the decision by deposed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to mount a legal challenge is justified.

K.R. SRINIVASAN,
Secunderabad

Place names

Under the British, place names were changed to something easy to pronounce. But the present renaming spree, by the BJP government, is aimed at provoking a particular community and is not with any other logic or rationale

in mind (Editorial, "In whose name?" November 10). But the question in the minds of the people is when there are so many basic things to be done such as improving the livelihood of the poor, ensuring that they have better access to health care and creating employment opportunities for the youth and so on, why are some of the State governments engaged in an unproductive renaming spree? How far is this justified? This also shows the least concern for governance and that it is about misplaced priorities.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

■ It is baffling that the Yogi Adityanath government's sudden desire and priority is to rename cities, taking precedence over core issues – and ones which the highly populated State is struggling

to address – such as poor literacy, poverty, unemployment, a lack of infrastructure, bad health care and deteriorating law and order ("More U.P. cities on renaming list", November 11). It is a pity that the BJP is now raking up Ayodhya, Sabarimala, Tipu Sultan and other controversial issues to derive political mileage. What about taking the initiative in resolving issues of national importance such as farmer suicides, unemployment, corruption and the bad loans crisis? A large section of the population still does not have its basic needs met. I am sure that the history of the town is not such a burning issue for them.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO,
Hyderabad

■ Right-thinking citizens and history aspirants warned

against the move even when it started with the end of colonial rule. But vote-bank politics now rules the scene. How history can help a nation move forward is altogether ignored. Renaming is not limited to just cities but is being extended to other entities such as educational institutions, railway stations, roads and parks. At no stage have precautions been taken to keep history intact for generations to come.

P.R.V. RAJA,
Pandalam, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The last paragraph of a report, "India to export sugar to China" (November 10, 2018) erroneously said that India is the world's largest sugar producer. Actually, Brazil is the world's largest sugar producer, while India is the second largest.

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