



Wait, gain

The BJP stands to gain by not rushing in to fill the space vacated by a fractious coalition

The fall of the Congress-JD(S) coalition government in Karnataka, at the culmination of weeks of political skulduggery, hardly marks the end of uncertainty and the beginning of stability for the State. The crisis in the ruling coalition had crippled governance, even as allegations of bribing and kidnapping of legislators by the Opposition BJP emerged. The coalition tried every trick to hold its flock together, but to no avail. Howsoever delayed, the inevitable happened on Tuesday as the government led by H. D. Kumaraswamy lost a trust vote in the Assembly. In a House shrunken by the resignation of several coalition MLAs, the BJP, which had won 105 seats in the 2018 election, had a majority. Its protestations notwithstanding, the BJP has been instrumental in engineering the rebellion. Regardless of the claims of both sides, it would be difficult to concede that their slugfest had to do with any principles. The legislators who resigned from the Assembly have demonstrated a remarkable disregard for the people's mandate, and their excuses for doing so are shallow and dishonest. This drama must end, at least now.

Though it had not won a majority, the BJP, as the single largest party was invited to form a government after the 2018 election. The Supreme Court intervened to enforce an early trust vote that the BJP failed to win, paving the way for the government that has now collapsed. The BJP never ceased its machinations to drive a wedge in the coalition, and now wants to form a government. Seventeen coalition MLAs abstained from the voting, and most of them had resigned already. The status of their resignations and questions regarding their disqualification are now subjects of scrutiny by the Speaker and the Supreme Court. Many of the questions are without precedent and complicated, but they need to be settled urgently. Until then, it would be undesirable to form a new government. It would be facetious for the BJP to claim a majority in the House with its strength reduced by schemed absenteeism of members or vacant seats. Nothing in the statute prevents the BJP from staking claim, but it should not pursue that path. Instead, it should wait until fresh elections are held for all vacant seats. It is possible that the BJP could repeat its performance in the Lok Sabha election and win most of these seats. It needs at least eight more MLAs to cross the half-way mark in the House that has a strength of 224 elected members. No government with the support of fewer than half the total strength could be deemed to have a mandate. Waiting might be in the BJP's best interests. The party has an opportunity to demonstrate that it wants to form an alternative government not because of any desperation to wield power, but because it wants to ensure political stability and restore good governance.

Undermining RTI

Amendments should not downgrade the status of information panels

Any amendment to a law is bound to be viewed with suspicion if no fundamental need is seen for the changes it proposes. Amendments passed by the Lok Sabha to the Right to Information Act are so obviously unnecessary that naturally many see an ulterior motive. It is difficult not to concur with activists who contend that the amendments pose a threat to the freedom and autonomy of Information Commissions at the Central and State levels. The Central Information Commissioner, the corresponding authorities in the States (State Information Commissioners) and other Information Commissioners at both levels are statutory functionaries vested with the power to review the decisions of public information officers in government departments, institutions and bodies. The amendments propose to modify the status, tenure and conditions of appointment of these Commissioners and empower the Union government to set their tenure and remuneration. While the original law assured incumbents of a fixed five-year term, with 65 as the retirement age, the amendments say the Centre would decide their tenure. In one stroke, the security of tenure of an adjudicating authority, whose mandate is to intervene in favour of information-seekers against powerful regimes and bureaucrats, has been undermined. The original legislation says the salary and terms and conditions of service of the CIC are the same as those of the Chief Election Commissioner, equal in status to a Supreme Court judge. Similarly, the other Information Commissioners at the Central level have the same conditions of service as Election Commissioners. At the State level, the SIC has the same terms and conditions of service as Election Commissioners, while other Information Commissioners are equated with the Chief Secretary of a State.

The government claims its aim is to 'rationalise' the status of the authorities. It argues that while the Chief Election Commissioner is a constitutional functionary, the CIC is only a statutory authority. And while the CEC is equal in status to a Supreme Court judge, it would be incongruous for the CIC to enjoy the same status as the CIC's orders are subject to judicial review by the high courts. This is a fallacious argument as even the Election Commission's decisions can be reviewed by high courts. Protecting citizens' right to information is a cause important enough for adjudicating authorities to be vested with high status and security of tenure. Given the extent to which the RTI Act has empowered citizens and helped break the hold of vested interests over the administration, the law has always faced a threat from many in power. The RTI Act was a consensus law and a product of public consultation. The present amendments have not been put to any debate. The government would do well to drop the Bill or at least send it to a parliamentary select committee for deeper scrutiny.

Having the last word on 'population control'

There should be a clear understanding that offering choices and services rather than outright state control works best



JAGDISH RATTANANI

On July 11, World Population Day, a Union Minister expressed alarm, in a Tweet, over what he called the "population explosion" in the country, wanting all political parties to enact population control laws and annulling the voting rights of those having more than two children. Just a month earlier, a prominent businessman-yoga guru wanted the government to enact a law where "the third child should not be allowed to vote and enjoy facilities provided by the government". This, according to him, would ensure that people would not give birth to more children.

Both these demands are wayward and represent a warped thinking which has been rebutted rather well in the Economic Survey 2018-19. The Survey notes that India is set to witness a "sharp slowdown in population growth in the next two decades". The fact is that by the 2030s, some States will start transitioning to an ageing society as part of a well-studied process of "demographic transition" which sees nations slowly move toward a stable population as fertility rates fall with an improvement in social and economic development indices over time.

Dangerous imagery

The demand for state controls on the number of children a couple can have is not a new one. It feeds on the perception that a large and growing population is at the root of a nation's problems as more and

more people chase fewer and fewer resources. This image is so ingrained in the minds of people that it does not take much to whip up public sentiment which in turn can quickly degenerate into a deep class or religious conflict that pits the poor, the weak, the downtrodden and the minorities against the more privileged sections. From this point to naming, targeting and attacking is a dangerous and short slide. The implications of such an approach are deep and wide but not easily understood because the argument is couched in sterile numbers and a rule that, it would seem, applies to all sections equally. On the contrary, what is suggested is the ugliest kind of discrimination, worse than physical attacks or social prejudice because it breaks the poor and the weak bit by bit, and in a very insidious way.

Policy of choice

The fig leaf of population control allows for the outrageous argument to be made that a family will be virtually ostracised and a citizen will be denied his or her basic rights if he or she is born as the third child. This has of course never been public policy in India.

In fact, a far-sighted and forward-looking National Population Policy (NPP) was introduced in 2000 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. The essence of the policy was the government's commitment to "voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens while availing of reproductive health care services" along with a "target free approach in administering family planning services". This is a position reiterated by various governments, including the present government on the floor of both Houses of Parliament. For example, in March 2017, the then Minister of State



(Health and Family Welfare), Anupriya Patel, in a written reply in the Lok Sabha noted that the "family Planning programme in India is target free and voluntary in nature and it is the prerogative of the clients to choose a family planning method best suited to them as per their reproductive right".

The then Health Minister, J.P. Nadda, has said pretty much the same thing. About a year ago, he articulated the "lifecycle framework" which looks to the health and nutrition needs of mother and child not merely during pregnancy and child birth but "right from the time of conception till the child grows... carrying on till the adolescent stage and further". This argument is not about denying services but about offering choices and a range of services to mother and child on the clear understanding that the demographic dividend can work to support growth and drive opportunity for ordinary people only when the population is healthy.

Crucial connections

Thus, family health, child survival and the number of children a woman has are closely tied to the levels of health and education of the parents, and in particular the woman; so the poorer the couple, the more the children they tend to

Shifting strategic concerns

What India needs to do as the U.S. and China get busier in the subcontinent



ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

The U.S. President Donald Trump's latest gaffe has introduced another thorn in what is now clearly an unsettled India-U.S. relationship. His claim, on Monday, that India sought U.S. mediation in Kashmir will pinch the Narendra Modi government more because it strikes at a vital interest: India's territorial integrity. But if we had been more attuned to international shifts, we would have noticed that structural trends in South Asia have been changing over the past several years. While India's hand is not as strong as we sometimes believe it to be, there might be opportunities to leverage the international situation further down the road.

Perceived advantage

If we step back and evaluate the India-Pakistan equation over the past five years, what stands out is that both sides proceeded from a perception that each holds an advantageous position. India's confidence emanated from Mr. Modi's electoral victory in 2014 that yielded a strong Central government and expectations of stable ties with all the major powers. Mostly overlooked in India, Pakistani leaders too have displayed confi-

dence that the international environment was moving in a direction that opened options for Pakistan that were unavailable in the previous decade. This included the renewed patterns of Pakistan's ties with the U.S. and China, with the latter reassuring Pakistan and, most importantly, the Army on their respective strategic commitments and bilateral partnerships. In the U.S.'s case, this appears to have been undertaken discreetly to avoid ruffling India's feathers, with the result that the enduring aspects of U.S.-Pakistan ties remained obscure, but still very real. In the past few days, the resilience of that relationship has come out into the open. Let us not ever forget that this is a military alliance forged in the 1950s. Historically, U.S. policymakers have always sought to restore the alliance with Pakistan whenever Islamabad's ties with China became stronger. India has borne the brunt of this recurring geopolitical dynamic.

Much of Pakistan's contemporary leverage can of course also be traced to the ongoing phase of the Afghan conflict. It fended off the most dangerous phase when U.S. policy might have shifted in an adversarial direction, or instability in the tribal frontier areas might have completely exploded. Thus, the Pakistan Army perceives itself in a position of strength where Washington, Beijing, and even Moscow have recognised Pakistan's role in a future settlement on the conflict in Afghanistan. So, both India and



Pakistan perceive themselves to be in a comfortable strategic position. At any rate, the evolving roles and interests of third parties are becoming significant again, and how Delhi leverages the international environment will determine the success of its overall policy.

Pakistan's benefactors

Both the U.S. and China have overlapping interests in regional stability and avoidance of a major sub-continental conflict. While each maintains deep ties with Pakistan for different reasons, it is unclear to what extent their longer term interests coincide with India, which seeks a structural transformation in Pakistan's domestic politics and external behaviour. The U.S. and China appear content with, or probably prefer, a Pakistan with a strong Rawalpindi, along with competent civilian governance structures and an elite with a wider world view. A Pakistan that looks beyond South Asia could be a useful potential partner in burden sharing, ironically for both the U.S. and China. For Washington, the Pakistan Army is an in-

have. This is a relation that has little to do with religion and everything to do with opportunities, choices and services that are available to the people. The poor tend to have more children because child survival is low, son preference remains high, children lend a helping hand in economic activity for poorer households and so support the economic as well as emotional needs of the family. This is well known, well understood and well established.

As the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) notes, women in the lowest wealth quintile have an average of 1.6 more children than women in the highest wealth quintile, translating to a total fertility rate of 3.2 children versus 1.5 children moving from the wealthiest to the poorest. Similarly, the number of children per woman declines with a woman's level of schooling. Women with no schooling have an average 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling. This reveals the depth of the connections between health, education and inequality, with those having little access to health and education being caught in a cycle of poverty, leading to more and more children, and the burden that state control on number of children could impose on the weakest. As the latest Economic Survey points out, States with high population growth are also the ones with the lowest per capita availability of hospital beds.

In fact, demographers are careful not to use the word "population control" or "excess population". The NPP 2000 uses the world "control" just thrice; in references to the National AIDS Control Organisation; to prevent and control communicable diseases, and control of childhood diar-

rhoea. This is the spirit in which India has looked at population so that it truly becomes a thriving resource; the life blood of a growing economy. Turning this into a problem that needs to be controlled is exactly the kind of phraseology, mindset and possibly action that will spell doom for the nation. It will undo all the good work that has been done and set the stage for a weaker and poorer health delivery system – exactly the opposite of what a scheme such as Ayushman Bharat seeks to achieve. Today, as many as 23 States and Union Territories, including all the States in the south region, already have fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. So, support rather than control works.

Scars of the past

The damage done when mishandling issues of population growth is long lasting. Let us not forget that the scars of the Emergency are still with us. Men used to be part of the family planning initiatives then but after the excesses of forced sterilisations, they continue to remain completely out of family planning programmes even today. The government now mostly works with woman and child health programmes. Mistakes of the Emergency-kind are not what a new government with a robust electoral mandate might like to repeat. So it is time to ask some of the prejudiced voices within the government and ruling party not to venture into terrain they may not fully understand.

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surance card for persisting security challenges such as regime survival for U.S. client states in West Asia as well as for the containment of Iran. For China, a stable Pakistan can be a partner in the Belt and Road initiative and future continental industrial and energy corridors. As the writer Andrew Small underlines, Beijing's large economic investments "come with some clear expectations about the choices that Pakistan's political and military leadership make about their country's future".

In sum, both the U.S. and China seek a strong, stable and secure Pakistan that controls its destabilising behaviour because that undermines their wider regional interests. For the U.S., a revisionist Pakistan pulls India inward and away from potential India-U.S. cooperation on Asian geopolitics. For China, it undermines its industrial and connectivity projects in Pakistan, while negatively impacting India-China ties. Hence, evolving interests of the great powers in South Asia might not necessarily portend an adverse geopolitical setting for India in the medium term. This is even more plausible if the widening comprehensive national power gap between a rising India and an unstable Pakistan make the latter's traditional role as a balancer or spoiler unattractive in the eyes of the great powers. As Pakistani scholar Hussain Haqqani predicts, "You can try to leverage your strategic location as much as you like, but there will come a

time... when strategic concerns change."

So, while it is reasonable to forecast that both the U.S. and China benefit from a more normalised Pakistan, India's policymakers should also remain clear-eyed that neither country would be willing to expend much strategic capital in an ambitious policy to reorder the domestic scene or civil-military relations in Pakistan. In any case, Indian statecraft is essential to reorient perceptions of the great powers. Maintaining that India has the right and the capacity to adopt an active defence posture – that is, blocking the flow of cross-border terror by proactive operations on the Line of Control (LoC) along with reserving the option for more ambitious punitive strikes in response to major terrorist attacks on Indian military targets – would play an important part in shaping how third parties view Indian interests and thereby assume constructive roles in managing Pakistani behaviour.

If India ever asks third parties to assist in the region, it should be for a cessation of Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir, and, once an atmosphere of peace has been established, to persuade Pakistan to accept the LoC as part of a final territorial settlement similar to the offer by Indira Gandhi in the 1972 Shimla negotiations.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Karnataka politics

The Congress-JD(S) coalition government in Karnataka fell under the weight of its contradictions (Page 1, "Kumaraswamy govt. loses trust vote", July 24). Nobody expected it to complete a full term of five years because a lack of trust and mutual understanding between the Congress and the JD(S) was palpably evident in its functioning. The BJP-'engineered' defections were only a catalyst. It appears naive to look for sinners and saints in an 'all is fair' no-holds-barred game of chasing political power. The Congress party needs to be reminded that it sowed the seeds of a political culture of political desertions by fence-sitters and other opportunists who sold their loyalty to the highest

bidder in the 1970s. It is pointless to catastrophise the political churn in Karnataka as the demise of democracy. We should be more worried about the real threats such as the criminalisation and plutocratisation of politics.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram

■ Elections will make no sense if a person who is elected on a party ticket resigns, joins another party and in the process topples the very party on whose ticket he was elected. This is a clear example of money power having its say. Instead, the seat should be declared vacant and fresh elections held within a month. Otherwise, the menace of floor-crossing will remain. Also, the law relating to anti-defection has not served

its purpose. In fact, it legitimises group defections. One would have thought that the BJP, with its massive electoral majority, will focus on governance. On the contrary, the ugly feature one is witnessing is other political parties that are in power in States not being allowed to govern. We are heading towards a totalitarian State. It is for the people to decide.

N.G.R. PRASAD, K.K. RAM SIDDHARTHA, Chennai

■ The felling of the coalition government in Karnataka through orchestrated resignations is nothing short of a murder of democracy. One wonders how much money might have been spent on these kinds of defections and from where such money comes from

even after demonetisation. It is time the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution is amended to make all kinds of defections illegal, including 'two-thirds mergers'. Elected members should understand that the people's mandate is not saleable property. After Karnataka, we could be in for more drama – in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

K. MUHAMMED ISMAYIL, Koduvally, Kerala

India-Pakistan ties

It is fine to be trying out a religion-based solution ("Editorial page, "A bridge across the India-Pakistan abyss", July 24). But nothing can move forward unless there is trust. Trust is the basic foundation which is completely absent in India-Pakistan ties.

VAISHALI MISHRA, Mumbai

Six runs to England

Expert opinion that the second run, in the ICC World Cup final, should have been disallowed because the fielder, Martin Guptill, had released (thrown) the ball even before the batsman had crossed each other in the process of taking that second run gains credence because of the deflection of the ball from the bat which resulted in a boundary for England ('Sport' page, "An error of judgment", July 22). The second run, even according to the rules of the game, would have been perfectly legal if the batsman was neither run out nor if there

was a bonus boundary because of the deflection. It was, admittedly, too much to expect the on-field umpire to check so many aspects in his decision-making process. But that did not prevent the third umpire from intervening after television replays and informing the on-field umpires about the 'mistake'. It is sad that technological aids were not used when it mattered most which makes it even more baffling to read that the umpire does not regret the error of judgment.

V. LAKSHMANAN, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The opening paragraph of the report headlined "Perfect launch for Chandrayaan-2" (July 23, 2019) had termed the launch as India's first-ever *interplanetary mission* to be spearheaded by two women. It should have been *moon mission*.

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