



Winning trust

The no-confidence vote is only the beginning of a pre-2019 political churn

Sometimes the effort is its own reward, no matter what the result. Neither the TDP, which moved the no-confidence motion, nor the Congress, the principal Opposition party, entertained the faintest hope of bringing down the Narendra Modi government a year before its term ends. But they reckoned the debating and voting exercise was still worth their while. For the Congress, and its still new president Rahul Gandhi, this was an opportunity to demonstrate that there is indeed a developing political chemistry behind the ragtag coalition of Opposition parties. But many of them had different reasons for voting against the government, and not all of them are keen on a Congress-led coalition. The TDP, for instance, wanted to use the vote to signal its clear break with the BJP as it prepares to fight the next election on the issue of the Centre's refusal to give special category status to Andhra Pradesh. Far from drawing the battle lines for 2019 clearly, the motion brought to light differences within both camps. While the Shiv Sena, a partner in government, abstained from voting, the BJD and the TRS did not join ranks with the other Opposition parties. How the BJP will deal with the Sena's defiance remains to be seen, but they need each other in Maharashtra: the BJP will probably need to renegotiate its terms of engagement with the Sena. Mr. Modi might have sailed through the vote comfortably, but this is no indication of how 2019 will play out.

If the BJP's alliance concerns are focussed on Maharashtra, the Congress's alliance-building will be hard work in most States. Even the TDP does not appear to be on the side of the Congress, its traditional rival that remains a contender for power in Andhra Pradesh despite being considerably weakened after the bifurcation. Although the Trinamool Congress voted with the Opposition, Mamata Banerjee still talks of a Federal Front of regional parties as the alternative to the BJP. What this means is that the Congress is not in a position to dictate the terms of alliance in many States. In Uttar Pradesh, the SP and the BSP are the key players; in Bihar, the RJD will take the lead position in any talks with other Opposition parties. In Karnataka, the JD(S) is in a position to drive a hard bargain; and in Tamil Nadu, the DMK is the leading partner. TRS chief and Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao speaks of a non-Congress, non-BJP coalition of regional parties, but the fact is that he will be more comfortable with the BJP than with the Congress, which is his main rival. The BJD counts both the Congress and the BJP as opponents, and Odisha is not likely to see any mega-alliance. Rather than setting the scene for 2019, the no-confidence motion may have merely marked the beginning of a political churn.

Sunlight and shadow

The government must roll back amendments that weaken the RTI Act

As a law that empowers the citizen, the Right to Information Act, 2005 quickly struck root in a country saddled with the colonial legacy of secretive government. The move by the NDA government to amend the far-sighted law aims at eroding the independence of the Information Commissions at the national level and in the States. The proposed amendments show that the Central government seeks control over the tenure, salary and allowances of the Chief Information Commissioner and Information Commissioners at the Centre, and the State Chief Information Commissioners. Such a change would eliminate the parity they currently have with the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners and, therefore, equivalence with a judge of the Supreme Court in matters of pay, allowances and conditions of service. The Centre will also fix the terms for State Information Commissioners. This is an ill-advised move and should be junked without standing on prestige. If at all, the law needs to be amended only to bring about full compliance by government departments and agencies that receive substantial funding from the exchequer, and to extend its scope to more institutions that have an influence on official policy. The Supreme Court has held the right to information as being integral to the right to free expression under Article 19(1)(a); weakening the transparency law would negate that guarantee.

In its rationale for the amendments, the Centre has maintained that unlike the EC, Information Commissions are not constitutional bodies but mere statutory creations under the law. This is a narrow view, betraying an anxiety to tighten the hold of the administration on the Commissions, which even now get little official support to fill vacancies and improve efficiency. A recent public interest petition filed in the Supreme Court by the National Campaign for People's Right to Information pointed out that the Central Information Commission has over 23,500 pending appeals and complaints, and sought the filling up of vacancies in the body. In many States, the Commissions are either moribund or working at low capacity owing to vacancies, resulting in a pile-up of appeals. The challenges to the working of the law are also increasing, with many State departments ignoring the requirement under Section 4 of the Act to publish information *suo motu*. The law envisaged that voluntary disclosure would reduce the need to file an application. Since fines are rarely imposed, officers give incomplete, vague or unconnected information to applicants with impunity. Proposals to make it easier to pay the application fee, and develop a reliable online system to apply for information, are missing. These are the serious lacunae. Attempts were made by the UPA government also to weaken the law, including to remove political parties from its purview. Any move to enfeeble the RTI Act will deal a blow to transparency.

Meddlesome and more

Moral outrage that Russia suborned the 2016 U.S. election ignores American involvement in elections across the world



RAVI ARVIND PALAT

U.S. President Donald Trump has been entangled in a quagmire of his own making when, in a joint press conference in Helsinki, Finland, last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he refused to accuse Russia of meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election (despite allegations by all intelligence agencies in the U.S.). Widespread condemnation of his refusal to endorse the findings of U.S. intelligence agencies has compelled him to walk back his statements at Helsinki. Yet, critics of the President conveniently forget that it was only 15 years ago that these same intelligence agencies fraudulently claimed that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Lost in interpretation

Two further points are lost in the firestorm of protests over the press conference. First, there is no instance that I can recall when journalists have accused one president – especially a President of a state as large and powerful as Russia – of interfering in the elections of another country in a joint press conference between the two Presidents. In joint press conferences, one head of government is not typically called on to label the other head of government a liar. Rather than discussing global issues, ranging from nuclear disarmament to conflicts in Syria and the Ukraine, journalists were focussed on a domestic issue in the U.S. Of course, whether Mr. Trump

should have gone to Helsinki to meet Mr. Putin at all amidst these allegations is another issue. Perhaps the closest parallel was the 1960 Paris summit between the leaders of France, the U.K., the U.S. and the USSR after the U.S. had lied that its spy plane that had been shot down over the USSR had been a weather plane. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's outburst there against U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower led to a collapse of the summit.

The U.S. hand

Second, and more importantly, setting aside Mr. Trump's remarks at Helsinki, the moral outrage that Russia had suborned the democratic process in the 2016 election breathtakingly ignores the very many times the U.S. has interfered in the elections of other countries – and even ousted democratically-elected governments.

In Russia itself when there was a fear that the Communist Party candidate, Gennady Zyuganov (who had received 32% of the vote in the first round of voting in 1996 to Boris Yeltsin's 35%), would win the presidency, U.S. President Bill Clinton pushed the International Monetary Fund to loan \$10.2 billion some months before the election and sent a team of political consultants to help the Russian incumbent. Yeltsin's popularity had plummeted as he had implemented the 'shock therapy' advocated by the U.S. and other western advisers and this had led to the evaporation of social protections as deindustrialisation swept across that vast land and the life expectancy of men and women fell from 64 and 74 years to 58 and 71 years between 1991 and 1994.

In an interview with Megyn Kelly earlier this year, Mr. Putin said that U.S. officials did not even deny that they meddled in Russian



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

elections because they said that they were "entitled" to do so as they were "spreading democracy" while the Russians were not.

Indeed, Don Levin of Carnegie Mellon University had found that beginning with the Italian elections of 1948, the U.S. interfered in elections in other countries 81 times between then and 2000. In Italy, Mark Wyatt, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative admitted that they "threw everything including the kitchen sink" to help the Christian Democrats come to power and prevent a Communist Party victory. This included consultants to run political campaigns, subsidising "pork" projects, and threatening to end U.S. aid if the Communists were to come to power. And that was not the only instance of U.S. meddling in Italian elections.

Similarly, earlier this year, *The New York Times* quoted Loch Johnson, another CIA agent, saying that the U.S. has been interfering in elections ever since the creation of the intelligence agency: "We've used posters, pamphlets, mailers, banners...We've planted false information in foreign newspapers. We've used what the British call 'King George's cavalry': suitcases of cash."

Some of the other more notable instances of U.S. meddling in foreign elections – to say nothing of the overthrow of democratically elected governments like that of

Dealing with the Taliban hand

In the U.S.'s battle against the Taliban, Pakistan holds the trump card



V. SUDARSHAN

Less than a year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, last August, it lies in tatters. It is fraught with implications for New Delhi, none of them heart-warming. Mr. Trump had made New Delhi happy when he had summed it up succinctly; he had studied the situation for eight months "from all angles" and had come up with the solution. His Afghan policy was going to be robust. As he put it, "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists." He blamed Pakistan for giving safe haven to "agents of chaos" and later cut off security assistance to Taliban's greatest benefactors and backers.

Reaching out

Even six months ago, at the end of January, Mr. Trump said, "We are going to finish what we have to finish in Afghanistan." The implication was that he was going to stay the course. He had declared: "We don't want to talk with the Taliban. There may be a time, but it's going to be a long time." Now the

next thing we know, about 17 years after invading Afghanistan to rid it of the Taliban, the white flags are out, and the U.S. is setting the stage for direct talks with the very enemy it vowed to vanquish. True, we have to weigh this against previous attempts at dialogue with the Taliban which ended in failure. The problem is that this time the U.S. may want the talks to succeed, which means handing Afghanistan over to the Taliban and their chief backers, the Pakistanis, beribboned and gift-wrapped.

Taliban on the rebound

Even so, the new American move comes at a time when the Taliban ranks have swelled since the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation pulled out in 2014 and they seem to be surging ahead in many parts of the country. It comes after the U.S. stopped releasing figures for the territories or populations under Taliban control, or the numbers of their fighters. It comes at a time where the data and assessments on the strength and the combat capabilities of the Afghan military and police are no longer readily available, amidst reports of severe erosion of their fighting capabilities. It comes when the UN grimly noted – late last year – rising opium production. Citing the latest Afghanistan Opium Survey figures (released by the Afghanistan's Ministry of Counter Narcotics



AFP

and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) it said that opium production in Afghanistan had increased by 87% to a record level of 9,000 metric tons in 2017 compared with 2016 levels. The area under opium poppy cultivation had also increased to a record 328,000 hectares in 2017, up 63% from 201,000 hectares in 2016. It comes at a time when a strategy that relies mostly on counter-terrorism operations – the vastly reduced number of troops (less than 15,000) are mainly on security assistance and training and other hand-holding assignments – is not paying sufficient dividends. It comes after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani literally sued for peace, saying that he was prepared to recognise the Taliban – previously referred to as terrorists – as a legitimate political group, offered to release Taliban prisoners. and proposed dialogue, a suggestion that was quickly and contemptu-

Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran, Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala or Salvador Allende in Chile – have been in the Chilean elections of 1964, the failed 1986 attempt to defeat Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti, in the Nicaraguan and Czechoslovak elections of 1990, the 2000 elections in Serbia, and the Afghan elections of 2009.

Election meddling is nothing new. Mr. Levine's study also shows that the USSR/Russia intervened at least 36 times in overseas elections between 1946 and 2000.

Indeed, the U.S. government today sponsors several agencies such as the National Endowment for Democracy to influence foreign elections. It granted \$23,000 in 2006 to a political adversary of Mr. Putin and two years ago \$6.8 million to anti-Putin organisations in Russia. Rather than allowing foreign populations to freely exercise their will, these interventions were designed to advance the foreign policy objectives of the U.S.

The current moral outrage in the U.S. of Russian meddling in elections stems also because since the end of the Cold War, mainstream broadcast media have largely balked at airing the viewpoints of foreign adversaries. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, Russians, Palestinians, even Iraqi officials in the run-up to the first Gulf War were regulars on U.S. television networks and news shows, now what passes for 'opposition' views is someone from the party not in the White House. If such foreign voices had been given airtime, the alleged election interference by the Russians would have been placed in a broader context.

Changing geo-politics

Recognising the long history of states meddling in elections does not of course mean that it should

ously spurned. The intervention in Afghanistan has never looked quite so ramshackle.

Pakistan's game and India

It has not resulted in many critical primary military and strategic objectives being realised, the denial of safe havens (mostly in Pakistan) to the Taliban, the reduction of their fighting capability, and to effectively disincentivise Pakistan's zeal and ability to nurture the Taliban. The opposite has happened. Rawalpindi correctly surmised that the longer it was able to play the game of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, the less stomach the endlessly gullible Americans would have to continue sinking troops, money and shrinking political capital into another quagmire. It has also helped Pakistan that the American President, no stranger to U-turns, has turned spectacularly fickle so far as Afghanistan is concerned. He has more than half his term left, which leaves plenty scope for him to change his mind again.

All the same, if the talks with the Taliban proceed apace, it does not matter so much where the talks will be held or how much control the Pakistanis are able to exert over their wards during the talks. What matters is this: what the Taliban, and thus more importantly, Pakistan, are able to wrest from the negotiating table. With-

be accepted much less condoned. But it is not the meddling in elections that states have long practised that is at issue here. The indignation over Mr. Trump's refusal to accept the assessments of U.S. intelligence agencies stems primarily because he is undermining a foreign policy consensus in Washington to muscle into the power vacuum in Central and West Asia created by the demise of the Soviet Union.

In early 2014, transcripts of a phone call between then Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland and the U.S. Ambassador to the Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt in which they discuss the makeup of the Ukrainian government after the impending ouster of President Viktor Yanukovych were released on YouTube, presumably by Russian intelligence. That Mr. Obama's Assistant Secretary had previously served as U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's chief foreign policy adviser and U.S. President George W. Bush's ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation underlines a consensus between Republicans and Democrats on foreign policy – and it is this consensus that Mr. Trump is now disrupting.

Mr. Trump's focus is on a trade war with China, the European Union, and with Canada and Mexico. This is what plays to his base supporters even though his argument that these states take away jobs from the U.S. is spurious. Nevertheless, the strategic counterpart of this policy is a détente with Russia. It is this fundamental policy difference that is being occluded by the outrage over Mr. Trump's apparent acceptance of Russian claims of innocence in Helsinki.

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drawal of the remaining international troops will be the main aim. At the end of it, the Taliban and other Pakistani proxies, who have orchestrated a string of deadly attacks on Indian interests with a view to deter New Delhi, will have the run of what passes for a country; a nation that has not yet been built. Where would that leave New Delhi?

The American move comes when there is pressure to limit any kind of engagement with Iran, which would have been a logistical pivot for further inroads into Afghanistan. Already, with the exit of Hamid Karzai, the strategic comfort that New Delhi had in Kabul stands diminished, and by extension, the kind of intelligence operations New Delhi may have had the option to conduct with deniability. Pakistan's aim will be to reverse all the gains India has made at great cost over the years in Afghanistan. With strategic depth in Afghanistan that Pakistan has dreamt of becoming a reality, Islamabad will have more room to incubate and move around the various anti-India groupings, including those active in Kashmir, as was the case earlier, especially in Lōya Paktiā. With the prospect of the Taliban slouching towards Kabul to be born again, most of New Delhi's bets may be off.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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No-confidence vote

Congress president Rahul Gandhi should apologise to the nation for misleading us and making a wrong claim in Parliament that the French President had told him that there is no secrecy clause in the Rafale fighter aircraft deal. With the French government refuting his claim, he has dented his political stature – if he ever had one in the first place. Credibility is a must in politics and Mr. Gandhi seems to have forgotten this.

S. PARTHASARATHY,
Chennai

■ The 'performance' of Mr. Gandhi stood out – for its flip flops. After making several serious, if not unsubstantiated, charges against the government, he concluded his speech by claiming he bore no anger or hatred to the BJP, then followed it up by theatrics. The freedom of speech and

expression are doubtless a privilege enjoyed by MPs, especially on the floor of Parliament. But this is also circumscribed by the need to maintain order and decorum, especially when a serious debate is on.

V. JAYARAMAN,
Chennai

■ The Speaker of the Lok Sabha deserves full praise for counselling Mr. Gandhi on the need to be serious. The strange happenings in the Lok Sabha when it was Mr. Gandhi's turn to debate gave one the impression that it was all frivolous. Where was the serious dialogue that should have reflected the concerns of Indians?

C.P. CHANDRA DAS,
Ramanatturkara, Kozhikode, Kerala

■ By resorting to a cocktail of combativeness, sarcasm and, at times, even self-deprecation, ending with an abrupt and perhaps avoidable hug and a wink,

Mr. Gandhi has no doubt made the BJP realise that the party needs to quickly reverse its opinion about him. The statement by the French government has not cleared the air. One does not have to be a security wizard to know that mere disclosure of prices of defence equipment per se neither compromises security considerations nor the commercial interest of the manufacturer. What is intriguing is the French firm's choice of Indian partner in this venture.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

■ Considering that the outcome of the trust vote was already known, what was more important on the day was the substance and style, the thrust and parry and the optics. Only inveterate critics of Mr. Gandhi will deny that he put up a credible show though it was marred to some extent

by the mischievous wink. He seemed to speak from the heart unlike the Prime Minister who spoke with the practised ease of a demagogue, sometimes unconvincingly and evading issues to which he had no answers. The hug exuded a certain freshness. Mr. Gandhi's reference to the debt of gratitude owed to the right wing for teaching him what it means to be an Indian would not have been lost on the discerning. To the common man, what concerns him most are the bread-and-butter issues. The Prime Minister hardly said anything worthwhile to allay our concerns on these counts.

G.G. MENON,
Tripunithura, Kerala

■ Mr. Gandhi came through with flying colours. He posed pertinent questions to the government. We expected the Prime Minister to respond to the issues raised

but were left disappointed after Mr. Modi chose to indulge in familiar rhetoric – the usual targeting of the Congress. Mr. Modi appears to be still in the Gujarat mode of campaigning where he cleverly appropriated all criticism of his policies as criticism of the state. In the pan-Indian context this will no longer sell as the Prime Minister is answerable to the masses on every parameter of governance.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN,
Tiruchi

Science to the rescue

It is heartening that technology might help end

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

Editing error: The first sentence of a report, "Waiting for the Chief Justice of India" (July 22, 2018), erroneously said that Diogenes was a Swiss publisher. He was a Greek philosopher. Diogenes was also referred to as the author of the play, 'Waiting for Godot'. It was written by Samuel Beckett.

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