



Coup de Grace

The contours of a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe are still not clear

Zimbabwe's prolonged political crisis reached the boiling point earlier this month when President Robert Mugabe dismissed the Vice-President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. A battle to succeed the 93-year-old liberation hero-turned President had already been brewing within the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), with the old guard backing Mr. Mnangagwa, himself a freedom fighter, and 'Generation 40', a grouping of younger leaders supporting Mr. Mugabe's 52-year-old wife, Grace. Ms. Mugabe, known for her extravagant lifestyle and interfering ways, has been vocal in recent months about her political ambitions. Mr. Mugabe was seen to have endorsed her when on November 6 he dismissed Mr. Mnangagwa. But Mr. Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since its independence in 1980, erred on two counts: he underestimated the deep connections Mr. Mnangagwa has within the establishment and overestimated his own power in a system he has helped shape. In the good old days, Mr. Mugabe was able to rule with an iron grip. But those days are gone. Age and health problems have weakened his hold on power, while there is a groundswell of anger among the public over economic mismanagement. So when he turned against a man long seen by the establishment as his successor, Mr. Mugabe left little doubt that he was acting from a position of political weakness. This gave the security forces the confidence to turn against him and make it clear they didn't want a Mugabe dynasty.

The military doesn't want to call its action a coup d'etat, for obvious reasons. A coup would attract international condemnation, even sanctions. But it is certain that the army chief, Gen. Constantino Chiwenga, is in charge. His plan, as it emerges, is to force Mr. Mugabe to resign and install a transitional government, perhaps under Mr. Mnangagwa, until elections are held. If Mr. Mugabe doesn't resign, it will complicate the process. He has not been seen since the army took over the capital, Harare. Any attempt to hurt him could backfire. Even if he agrees to resign, the transition may not be smooth. However inept and dictatorial Mr. Mugabe's regime had been, a coup will remain a coup irrespective of what the plotters call it, raising questions of legitimacy about the new government. Also, Mr. Mugabe can still tap into his support base among the black working class, which has provided him a buffer against public anger towards his government. Across Africa, he continues to be seen by many as an anti-colonial hero. His successor, who will be picked by the generals, will inherit huge challenges - a dysfunctional economy, massive unemployment, a broken ruling party and a united opposition. Besides, the military has shaken up the civilian supremacy over the armed forces by staging this coup. The biggest challenge for the new leader will be to make sure that the military stays in the barracks.

Overreach

Tamil Nadu Governor's meetings with officials have no place in a parliamentary democracy

It is an act of constitutional impropriety for the Governor of a State to review the work of government officials when an elected regime is in place. By holding meetings in Coimbatore to review programmes, the Tamil Nadu Governor, Banwarilal Purohit, has left himself open to charges that he has breached the constitutional limits of his office. Mr. Purohit met the District Collector, the Commissioner of Police and the Corporation Commissioner without any Minister present. The Governor has attempted to explain his interactions, saying he was seeking to familiarise himself with the administration and that he could appreciate its work in implementing schemes only if he got to know all details first hand. But this is hard to accept as a justification and his plan to visit all districts for a similar review does not augur well for parliamentary democracy. Article 167 of the Constitution says it is the Chief Minister's duty to communicate to the Governor all decisions of the Council of Ministers relating to the administration and proposals for legislation. It enjoins the Chief Minister to furnish such information relating to the administration as the Governor may call for. If Mr. Purohit wants to understand how schemes are being implemented, he can seek details from the Chief Minister, Edappadi K. Palaniswami, instead of holding meetings in the districts. There may be occasions when the Governor may need to ask a top bureaucrat or the head of the police force for a report on a major incident or development, but even that should be for the limited purpose of getting an accurate picture before sending a report to the Centre.

The political context in which Mr. Purohit is exhibiting his zeal to familiarise himself with the administration is significant. There is a sense of drift in governance in Tamil Nadu, and it is widely believed that it is running on 'autopilot'. The Chief Minister's majority in the Assembly is in doubt, given that the Speaker had to disqualify 18 dissident legislators to shore up his support within the legislature party. An impression has gained ground that the Bharatiya Janata Party is seeking to fill the perceived political vacuum, but is caught in a bind on how to go about it because of its lack of a political base in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, the Centre is seen as leaning on the State government and the ruling AIADMK to help the BJP gain a political foothold. The prospect of the State coming under a spell of President's Rule if the present regime formally loses its majority in the House is on everyone's mind. Therefore, Mr. Purohit's familiarisation exercise is bound to be read for signs of what the future has in store. Mr. Purohit will do well not to fuel such speculation. None of this, of course, implies that the Governor should refrain from taking an independent view of any matter or legislative proposal. But his functioning should be within the bounds of established norms and conventions.

The many Padmavatis

There is no historical record that she existed - and her story has been reshaped in diverse ways over time



DIVYA CHERIAN

As the release of the Bollywood film *Padmavati* draws near, protests against it are reaching a fever pitch. Claiming to speak on behalf of all Rajputs, several political figures have objected to the portrayal of the title character of the film for two reasons - that it is a distortion of history and that it is disrespectful towards Queen Padmini (appearing in some texts as Padmavati), who is deeply revered by the Rajput community. Recent scholarly work on the *Padmavati*, such as that of Thomas de Bruijn, Shantanu Phukan and especially Ramya Sreenivasan, makes possible an informed engagement with these claims.

The earliest tale

The earliest known composition of the Padmini tale is Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi's *Padmavat*, dating to 1540. This tale is part of a new genre, the Sufi *premkhyān* ('love story'), that flourished from the 14th to 16th centuries in north India. Most of these tales feature a hero-king's quest for union with supreme truth and transcendent beauty - embodied in the texts by a woman of unparalleled physical beauty - and the difficulty of navigating the contradictory pulls of the spiritual and worldly domains. The *Padmavat* is perhaps the only one of these texts to be grafted upon a historical event, Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khilji's siege of Chittor in 1303. Writing more than 200 years after the event, Jayasi's tale bears little resemblance to surviving historical accounts of the siege and instead appears to draw in details from contemporaneous events and places.

In Jayasi's composition, a parrot, Hiranam, tells the king of Chittor, Ratansen, of the unequalled beauty of the princess of Sinhal, Padmavati. Hiranam's description is enough to trigger in Ratansen the

desire to attain Padmavati. He leaves behind his wife, Nagmati, becomes a yogi, and heads out, along with his men who also become yogis, on the arduous quest to the faraway Sinhal. With great difficulty, and only after he is ready to give up his life for the quest, Ratansen is united with Padmavati and marries her. Due to the pulls of his natal home and the suffering of his first wife, he returns to Chittor, bringing Padmavati along with him. While Ratansen works on building peace between Padmavati and Nagmati, a deceitful brahman, expelled from Ratansen's court, seeks revenge by going to Delhi and informing Khilji of Padmavati's stunning beauty. Piqued, Khilji decides to march upon Chittor to demand Padmavati. Ratansen refuses to part with her. With the Sultan's forces closing in, Ratansen dies of injuries sustained in a fight with a Rajput rival. Padmavati and Nagmati commit sati on Ratansen's funeral pyre while the remaining Rajput men go into the battlefield to be martyred. When Khilji manages to finally conquer the fortress, all that remains of Padmavati are her ashes. His victory is thus rendered hollow.

Some manuscript copies explain the Sufi import of the tale by referring to Chittor as the body, Ratansen the spirit, Padmini the mind, Hiranam the spiritual guide, and Khilji as illusion ('maya'). Literary representations of Khilji in a polyvalent text such as the *Padmavat* and in future iterations of the tale then should not be taken as historical. The historical Sultan Alauddin Khilji, as we know him from accounts of his time, was a gifted statesman who strengthened the fisc of the Delhi Sultanate, expanded the frontiers of his kingdom, and capably protected north India from the expanding Mongol domain, a feat that many of his contemporaries could not accomplish.

As for Padmavati, there is no historical evidence that there was such a figure in Chittor when it was besieged, or that desire for a woman played any role in Khilji's interest in conquering the fortress. Padmavati/Padmini, then, is a literary artefact, as is the entire story of



A STILL FROM THE MOVIE 'PADMAVATI'

love and sacrifice at whose heart she is placed. Any depiction of Padmavati thus cannot be a distortion of history since, in our current state of knowledge, she never existed. Born as a figment of poetic imagination, she is free to be reshaped in the hands of a different creator.

Padmini, recast

And indeed, the *Padmavat* was told and retold over the centuries and across the land. As the historian Ramya Sreenivasan has carefully shown in her book, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, in each retelling, the contours of the story and the key characters within it, including Padmini, changed. Starting a few decades after the original composition, the *Padmavat* was adapted into Persian forms in north India and Gujarat, and Jain literati and bardic groups composed versions of it for Rajasthani courtly elites. In the 17th century, professional genealogists wove the Guhila house of Ratansen into the genealogy of their patrons, the Sisodia rulers of Mewar. By the 18th century, after the decline of the Mughal empire but before colonial conquest, the tale of Padmini was refashioned in Mewar to demonise Alauddin Khilji, also emphasising his Muslim identity and presenting the clash between the Rajputs of Chittor and the Sultan of Delhi as the resistance of Hindus against an encroaching, 'impure' Islam.

In the 19th century, Colonel James Tod, Political Agent in Rajputana of the English East India

Company, was guided in his attempt to write the first authoritative history (by contemporary European standards) of the region by the philological, historiographical, and intellectual frameworks of his age, as well as by the political goal of stabilising the region by strengthening the hands of kings against rebellious chiefs. He selectively chose information from the range of pre-colonial sources at his disposal. He incorporated the courtly Rajasthani Padmini narrative into his early 19th century history of Rajasthan, using it, along with other material, to cast Rajputs as a valiant, pure fighting race of Hindus that resisted Islamic conquest, just as Christians had done in the West. Bengali intellectuals of the nascent bhadrakol were deeply impressed with the figure of the Rajput as presented in his account, not just for his selfless bravery but also for his resistance against a Muslim conqueror. As the earliest imaginings of an Indian nation - and a Hindu nation - began to take shape, Padmini became a token of the self-sacrificing, virtuous, and chaste Hindu woman that was to be at its heart. In this idealised form, her decision to annihilate her own body was celebrated for the preservation of her 'honour' (read 'chastity') through which was indexed the honour of her husband, her family, her community, and now, her nation.

In her journey from the 16th to the 21st century, Padmavati appears to have become increasingly shackled in the confines of patri-

archy. In Rajasthani versions, Padmavati lost her autonomous voice, reduced to a prop on the edges of a scene largely occupied by the king and his courtiers. It was this Rajasthani Padmavati who was celebrated in 19th century bhadrakol plays beginning to imagine a Hindu nation and who is today deified as the apotheosis of Rajput, and even Hindu, valour, purity, and sovereignty. Padmavati has been recast as adhering strictly to codes of conduct applied to elite Rajput women. Allegations of disrespect and inaccuracy being levelled against the film are thus rooted in the expectation, by those familiar only with the Rajput or early Hindu nationalist adaptations, of a silver-screen Padmavati who observes the purdah and does not display any trace of sexuality. The current row over Padmini's portrayal only underscores that in the long arc of its history, the imagined Hindu nation holds in its heart the dutiful, chaste Hindu woman, who acquiesces to patriarchal controls and only exercises her agency within their bounds.

No exclusive legacy

It is important to bear in mind, as Ms. Sreenivasan has shown, that at the same time that the Rajputs were articulating a new claim upon the *Padmavat* in the 17th century, other Padmini tales continued to be composed. A Sufi migrant from Bengal to the Arakan court (in today's Myanmar) composed his own version of the text in Bengali. In the 19th century, there were multiple Urdu adaptations of the tale printed in north India and an opera performed in 1923 in Paris. There have then been many Padmavatis, just as there were many Ramayanans. The tale, and its heroine, are then not the exclusive legacy of any single community. The effort of spokespersons of a single community, one that continues to exercise tremendous sociopolitical power, to freeze the text into a single, authorised version, will rob it of the vitality that has allowed it to thrive over the ages.

Divya Cherian is an assistant professor at the Department of History, Princeton University, U.S.

The ASEAN outreach

As the region is reorganised by U.S. retreat and Chinese ambition, India must chart its own path



HARSH V. PANT

The Philippines has been the centre of attraction for the last few days with Manila hosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-India and East Asia summits as well as special celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of ASEAN, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) leaders' meeting and the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined these meetings, underscoring India's commitment to deepening ties with the ASEAN member states and the wider Indo-Pacific region as part of the 'Act East' policy.

Centre of global politics

The Indo-Pacific region is now central to global politics and economics and recent days have merely reinforced the trends that

have been emerging for some time. China is the most important player in the region, and as Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear in his speech at the recent Communist Party Congress, Beijing is now more confident than ever of projecting regional and global power. In this, China has had the good fortune of having an administration in the U.S. that lacks seriousness of purpose and is unable to communicate effectively its priorities for the region. This makes this period of transition very significant for countries like India that have a stake in the long-term stability of the region.

Addressing the 15th ASEAN-India Summit, Mr. Modi said India's relationship with ASEAN is a key pillar of its foreign policy. Referring to India's Act East Policy, he underlined that "its centrality in the regional security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region is evident." He focused on terrorism as well, suggesting, "It is time that we jointly address this challenge by intensifying cooperation in this crucial area." In a symbolic move, all 10 ASEAN heads of state have been invited to be guests of honour for



next year's Republic Day function. Targeting China, Mr. Modi also assured ASEAN of "steady support towards achieving a rules-based regional security architecture that best attests to the region's interests and its peaceful development."

The East Asia Summit, which includes India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. and Russia apart from the 10 ASEAN member states, also gave Mr. Modi another opportunity to underline ASEAN's credentials: "ASEAN began in times of a great global divide, but today as it celebrates its golden jubilee, it shines as a beacon of hope; a symbol of peace and prosperity."

As China's profile grows, and the U.S. continues to be unsure of its security commitments, there is a new opportunity for India in the region. U.S. President Donald Trump gave mixed signals during his Asia trip where his 'America First' policy was on full display.

For a balance of power

Meanwhile, China has actually managed to emerge as a beacon of open and free global trade order. This has resulted in the regional powers taking it upon themselves to shape the regional economic and security order. On the one hand, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is being resurrected without the U.S., and on the other, the idea of an Indo-Pacific quadrilateral involving Japan, Australia, India and the U.S. is back. Unlike in the past, New Delhi is no longer diffident about engaging with other regional players if it helps to further Indian interests in maintaining a stable balance of power in the region.

The ASEAN members and India together consist one of the largest economic regions with a total population of about 1.8 billion. ASEAN

is currently India's fourth largest trading partner, accounting for 10.2% of India's total trade. India is ASEAN's seventh largest trading partner. India's service-oriented economy perfectly complements the manufacturing-based economies of ASEAN countries. There is, however, considerable scope for further growth. Formidable security challenges remain, and the two sides must think strategically to increase cooperation for a favourable balance of power that would ensure regional stability.

India needs to do a more convincing job as a beneficial strategic partner of ASEAN by boosting its domestic economic reforms agenda, enhancing connectivity within the region, and increasing its presence in regional institutions. The ASEAN nations should be clearer and more specific in their expectations from New Delhi and nudge India for a deeper, more broad-based engagement. There is much at stake for both sides.

Harsh V. Pant is a Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and Professor of International Relations at King's College London

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.

Kerala imbroglio

Kerala Transport Minister Thomas Chandy's belated resignation has severely dented the image of the ruling Left Democratic Front government ("Chandy resigns as crisis deepens", Nov. 16). The forbearance with which the government treated Mr. Chandy, despite mounting criticism of his real estate transgressions, makes a mockery of its professed anti-corruption credentials especially when it has been going at former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy hammer and tongs over the solar scam. One wonders whether the LDF should be so desperate to win elections as to dilute its proletarian credentials by roping in the support of capitalist politicians. For the Chief Minister, Mr. Chandy's resignation will not be the end of the matter

because it could create a catch-22 situation. Mr. Chandy's substitute, who is waiting in the wings to replace him, had to exit the government some months back over allegations of sexual misconduct. The task is cut out for the LDF to review its policy of accommodating smaller parties that have no ideological affinities with the Left movement just for the sake of winning a few Assembly seats. The performance of the previous corruption-tainted United Progressive Alliance government in Delhi is a telling example of how a coalition of disparate parties professing conflicting goals is an invitation to misrule.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

By allowing Mr. Chandy to

continue in office during the inquiry and letting him air his invective against the Collector and the Revenue Minister, it is clear that probity was not heeded. Even when there was a strong reprimand from the court and the CPI upped the ante, the Chief Minister acted in a most unbecoming way by leaving the decision to Mr. Chandy and his party. Political expediency can be ruled out in this case as the NCP with its two MLAs is in no position to threaten the stability of the government. The Chief Minister, who had been silent during the entire episode except for the initial dismissal of the allegations as baseless when it was levelled in the Assembly, has failed to uphold the integrity of the government.

ARJUN K.V.,
Hertfordshire, U.K.

Dirty air

We've been hearing about the pollution problem in Delhi and other parts of north India, but this has still not become national conversation ("Kejriwal, Khattar agree to curb Delhi pollution", Nov. 16). Those not living in Delhi don't seem too bothered by it. In some years, many cities are going to be facing the same problems as Delhi. And it's not just human beings who suffer but plants and animals too. We have not only destroyed our lives, we've also taken away their right to life.

ABHIJITH UTHAMAN,
Kottayam

History unknown

Refusal to declassify documents like the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report has prevented historians and research

scholars from properly assessing the incidents that led to the 1962 debacle. Most people still go by the official version of 'Chinese aggression' propagated by the government ("Strangely forgotten", Nov. 16). It is a normal practice everywhere in the world to declassify documents after a certain period and transfer them to the archives, so that research scholars have access to them. This is not being followed with respect to the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report. While

Congress leaders may be nervous in declassifying these documents, it is surprising that the BJP government is also following the same policy. Introduction and self-criticism are an integral part of the policies of an advancing nation. Only a nation in decay would like to live in an imagined glorious past.

M.B. NAIR,
Kannur, Kerala

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: -> In the Business page story headlined "New Boeing twin-engine jet flies places" (Nov. 15, 2017), the title of Dinesh Keskar was erroneously given as *president*, Boeing India. Mr. Keskar is actually the *Senior Vice-President of Asia Pacific & India Sales, Boeing Commercial Airplanes.*

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