



Secrets and agents

The arrest of Julian Assange raises fears about suppression of the right to information

The arrest of Julian Assange, the head of the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks, has renewed a global debate on balancing freedom of expression (or the right to information) with considerations towards the national security of a country. After nearly seven years of eluding authorities in the U.S. and the U.K., facing charges related to theft of classified information from government computers, he was dragged out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London on April 11 following Ecuador President Lenin Moreno's withdrawal of his country's grant of asylum to Mr. Assange, for "repeated violations to international conventions and daily-life protocols". Ecuador had earlier limited Mr. Assange's Internet access. As he sits in jail for up to a year on bail-jumping charges from 2012 in a now-closed case relating to sexual assault allegations by a complainant from Sweden, he will find out whether he will ultimately face the prospect of extradition to the U.S. There, Mr. Assange is looking at a single count of conspiring, with former U.S. Army intelligence officer Chelsea Manning, to break into a secret government computer network. Conspiracy charges, rather than those under the Espionage Act, are what he will likely face, given concerns in the U.K. that he should not be extradited to any country where the death penalty is applicable in his case.

At the heart of the drama is the question whether Mr. Assange is a "journalist" in the traditional sense of the word and whether, following that line of reasoning, freedom of expression is endangered or constrained by the action taken in this case. There is some irony in this debate given that the voices of liberal America are clamouring the loudest for his interrogation for the alleged crime of conspiracy, not so much in the case of the U.S. diplomatic cables or the dissemination of related top-secret U.S. government information – but owing to WikiLeaks being linked to rogue actors in Russia who allegedly purloined Democratic Party documents and handed them over to Mr. Assange for use on his website, thereby tipping the scales in Donald Trump's favour in the 2016 election. Nevertheless, can WikiLeaks be considered a mainstream media organisation? Perhaps not. However, the arrest highlights troubling facts, including that the indictment against Mr. Assange, revealed only this month, appears to be flimsy, for it relates to a conversation he is alleged to have had nine years ago with Ms. Manning on a computer break-in attempt that ultimately failed. At a time when strongmen-led governments and resurgent nationalism are at the forefront of domestic politics in many countries, the arrest of a prominent anti-secrecy advocate is likely to have a chilling effect on whistle-blowers everywhere. That could ultimately weaken democracy itself.

Highway hurdle

The verdict on the Chennai-Salem corridor reveals the perils of fast-tracking projects

The Madras High Court verdict quashing land acquisition proceedings for the proposed Chennai-Salem greenfield expressway is an indictment of the arbitrary decision-making process behind the project. This is a political setback to its leading proponent, Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami, given the extent to which he went to aggressively stifle all criticism and protests against it. The court has referred to how "peaceful protests were stifled, unwritten gag orders were promulgated, [and] police force was used to handle the peaceful protesters who were making a request to spare them and their lands". It was only after the court intervened that "these high-handed actions subsided". It invalidated the notification for intent to acquire land for the project on the ground that the National Highways Authority of India cannot acquire land without complying with the requirement of preparing an environment impact assessment report. The decision is important for affirming the principle that environmental clearance ought to be obtained before any project is allowed to advance to a stage where measures become irreversible. It underscores that sufficient data on the possible harm to the environment is needed before resources are committed to a project. In this case, not only would land titles be transferred to the state; heavy compensation amounts would also have been paid by the time the environmental impact is known.

The project was pushed by the Centre and the State even though it was set to pass through wetlands, fertile farmlands, reserve forests and waterbodies. Farmers who stood to lose their land and environmentalists had questioned the claim that by reducing the transit time, there would be saving of fuel, thereby cutting the carbon footprint. What has been exposed in the verdict is that the eight-lane corridor was never really cleared as a project under the Centre's Bharatmala Pariyojana. It did not figure in the list of road projects approved under Bharatmala-I. The NHAI did not explain in its counter-affidavit how the Chennai-Madurai highway, an approved project, was dropped and the Chennai-Salem project included in its place. The court examined the record and found that there was nothing to show that it was approved by either the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs or the Public-Private Partnership Appraisal Committee; the Chennai-Tiruchi-Madurai corridor had much higher vehicular traffic to justify its inclusion in Bharatmala. The court's conclusion that labelling its replacement by the Salem project as a 'policy decision' was not a sufficient explanation is unexceptionable. Having failed to convince the court that the procedures it followed were above board, the least that the Centre can now do is to make a comprehensive study of its impact on the environment and on farming and rural livelihoods before moving ahead.

Necessary steps to ending poverty

The provision of health, education and public services matters more than income support schemes



PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN

It is by now close to 50 years since Indira Gandhi brought the idea of eradicating poverty into the electoral arena in India. 'Garibi Hatao' had been her slogan. She actually took the country some distance in the promised direction. Though it had not come close to being eradicated in her time, it was under her leadership that the reduction in poverty commenced, in the late 1960s. And it was under her leadership again that the reduction accelerated, in the early 1980s. This is not surprising for she was a pragmatic politician and took pride in being Indian. While the last attribute motivated her to improve the condition of her people, the first left her aware of the centrality of income generation in poverty eradication.

The role that income generation actually played in lowering poverty in India may be gauged from the facts that economic growth had surged in the 1980s, and the late 1960s was when agricultural production quickened as the Green Revolution progressed.

Words matter

So, if there had been a focus on poverty even 50 years ago, why have we not seen it end? This is because the approach of public policy to the problem has been to initiate schemes which could serve as no more than a palliative, as suggested by the very term 'poverty alleviation' commonly used in the discourse of this time. These schemes failed to go to the root of poverty,

which is capability deprivation that leaves an individual unable to earn sufficient income through work or entrepreneurship. Income poverty is a manifestation of the deprivation, and focussing exclusively on the income shortfall can address only the symptom.

Parties and schemes

In the run-up to the elections now, schemes guaranteeing income to the poor through budgetary transfers have been announced by both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress. Actually, the BJP's Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan), paying farm households below a threshold ₹6,000 a year, is already in place. An income-support scheme for any one section of the population is grossly inequitable. We can think of agricultural labourers and urban pavement dwellers as equally deserving of support as poor farmers. While it is the case that at present agricultural subsidies go to farmers alone, these are intended as production subsidies and so channelled due to the criticality of food production to all.

On the other hand, a welfare programme cannot, ethically speaking, exclude those equally placed. The BJP's hurried introduction of its scheme also came with an overshooting of the fiscal deficit target, suggesting that it involves borrowing to consume, a fiscally imprudent practice. The PM-Kisan has, however, been dwarfed by the promise of the Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) of the Congress, which envisages an annual transfer 12 times greater to the poorest 20% households. While this scheme is not discriminatory, it is severely challenged by the issue of beneficiary identification in real time.

Both the schemes on display,



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but NYAY in particular, have been criticised as running into the absence of fiscal space. This is really neither the case nor of the essence, the latter being the role of income transfers in eradicating as opposed to alleviating poverty in India.

Consider NYAY. It is estimated to cost ₹3.6 lakh crore per annum at current prices. This comes to approximately 13% of the central budgetary outlay for 2019-20. This expenditure can be incurred without any consequence for the fiscal deficit if all Centrally Sponsored Schemes are taken off and subsidies trimmed just a bit. But the point is that at 13% of outlay, NYAY would amount to more than twice the combined expenditure on health and education and more than capital expenditure in the same budget, they being the items of public expenditure that most impact poverty in the long run. There is an opportunity cost to be acknowledged of an income-support scheme of this magnitude being implemented while there exists a severe deficit of social and physical infrastructure in the country.

We have already spoken of poverty as capability deprivation. Health, education and physical infrastructure are central to the capabilities of individuals, and the extent of their presence in a society determine whether the poor will

A tale of two manifestos

The Congress has a deeper understanding of India's security challenges than the BJP does



RADHA KUMAR

National security has rarely been a poll issue. But, thanks to Masood Azhar, it has become one in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has made the Pulwama attack and Balakot retaliation central to its campaign. The BJP manifesto opens with national security, under the title 'Nation First', and many of the points made there overlap with those in the Congress manifesto. For example, speeding up defence acquisitions, modernising the forces, streamlining border and coastal security, rehabilitating veterans and combating left-wing extremism (a term used by the Manmohan Singh administration).

Points of difference

Yet the two documents have a markedly different approach towards security. The Congress's does not open with national security, but deals with it in more detail and has an additional focus on the protection and welfare of security forces, an issue the BJP manifesto does not touch upon. The Congress commitment to ensure shorter stints of duty in high altitude areas is especially welcome. Short-

tening postings in insurgency-affected areas to conform with best practice would be even more welcome. That would reduce the frustrations that often lead to human rights abuse and high rates of suicide among paramilitary troops.

The most significant markers of difference lie in the two manifestos' approach towards terrorism and civil conflict. The BJP manifesto proclaims zero tolerance for terrorism, which, it says, means giving the security forces a free hand to counter it. This claim appears overstated. Ordinarily, giving the security forces a free hand would entail the Army preparing a blueprint for the government to approve. No such blueprint has been prepared, to my knowledge, though many from the past exist.

Indeed, most indications are that the Army is following government instructions rather than formulating the government's counter-insurgency or national security strategies. The Army knows that setting a population against security forces can only hinder their counter-insurgency tasks, not facilitate them, and has for decades favoured a combined political and military approach that distinguishes between local and foreign militants and incorporates a 'hearts and minds' strategy.

These elements are missing from the policy that the Modi administration has followed over the past five years in our most severely insurgency-affected State, Jammu and Kashmir. In fact, repeated



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statements by BJP leaders make amply evident that the tactics deployed in the Kashmir Valley are the BJP's own, not the Army's. Yet it is the Army that is tarnished with the label 'military rule', not the BJP.

Like the BJP, the Congress manifesto also talks of countering terrorism, but appears to have a far more professional approach, to streamline intelligence-operational coordination through a range of mechanisms, many of which had been set in place during the Singh administration but later discarded by the Modi administration. The failure to take intelligence warnings sufficiently on board when planning the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy's movement was one factor that allowed the Pulwama attack to be successful, though this in no way detracts from the Jaish-e-Mohammad's culpability.

The BJP's efforts to use Pulwama and Balakot for electoral gain has already attracted protest by former military officials. Shameful as the exploitation of the Pulwama heroes is, abandoning the Air Force to deal with media scepti-

cism over Balakot was equally shameful. Since when does the Air Chief respond to a U.S. Journal article? If a response was so important, why was it not made by quietly sharing critical evidence with the media, or by the Ministers who claim Balakot's debatable successes as their own?

What is needed

In light of a pitch that has been made for the implementation in India of a publicly-funded universal basic income (UBI) scheme, we can say that from the perspective of eliminating poverty, universal basic services (UBS) from public sources are needed, though not necessarily financed through the budget. The original case for a UBI came from European economists. This is not entirely surprising. Europe is perhaps saturated with publicly provided UBS. Also the state in some of its countries is immensely wealthy. So if a part of the public revenues is paid out as basic income, the project of providing public services there will not be affected. This is not the case in India, where the task of creating the wherewithal for providing public services has not even been seriously initiated.

There is indirect evidence that the provision of health, education and public services matters more for poverty than the Central government's poverty alleviation schemes in place for almost half a century. Per capita income levels and poverty vary across India's States. A discernible pattern is that the southern and western regions of India have lower poverty than the northern, central and eastern ones. This, very likely, is related to higher human development attainment in the former. This indicator is based on the health and education status of a population apart from per capita income, bringing us back to the relevance

of income generation to poverty. As the Central government is common across regions, differences in the human development index must arise from policies implemented at the State level. This further implies that a nationwide income support scheme that channels funds from a common pool to households in the poorer States would be tantamount to rewarding lower effort by their governments.

There is a crucial role for services, of both producer and consumer variety, in eliminating the capability deprivation that is poverty. As these services cannot always be purchased in the market, income support alone cannot be sufficient to eliminate poverty. It is in recognition of the role of services in enabling people to lead a productive and dignified life that the idea of multi-dimensionality has taken hold in the thinking on poverty globally. At a minimum these services would involve the supply of water, sanitation and housing apart from health and education. It has been estimated that if the absence of such services is accounted for, poverty in India would be found to be far higher than recorded at present. The budgetary implication of the scale at which public services would have to be provided if we are to eliminate multi-dimensional poverty may now be imagined. This allows us to appraise the challenge of ending effective poverty and to assess the potential of the income-support schemes proposed by the main political parties. There are no short cuts to ending poverty, but ending it soon is not insurmountable either.

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and Kashmir on a par with other States, whose governments have to concur with the deployment of security forces for internal security duties. In effect, it codifies the Instrument of Accession that was signed by Kashmir's Maharaja, and its revocation could open the Union to all sorts of undesirable legal challenges. That apart, the mere threat of revocation has added to conflict in the State and any attempt to follow through on the threat will certainly provoke greater conflict.

Tackling AFSPA

The Congress manifesto deals with the troubled States of both the North-West and North-East as issues of conflict resolution, not national security. Its promise to review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act – again – may be unpopular with the security forces, but that is partly because the Singh administration did not work with them to identify amendments that would prevent human rights abuses while safeguarding operational requirements. That is a mistake one hopes the Congress has learned from.

The popular belief may be that the BJP prioritises security while the Congress does not. But the two manifestos reveal that it is the Congress which has a more serious understanding of India's security challenges, not the BJP.

Radha Kumar is a writer and policy analyst

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.

Veiled threat?

It is a sad reality that some in the ruling party are using unacceptable means which border on blackmail when it comes to approaching voters and seeking votes (Page 1, "Things will go sour, Maneka warns Muslims", April 13). Is the message one of great hostility? Also repealing Article 370 has the potential to unleash unrest and communal violence. Special provisions are essential for the stability of Jammu and Kashmir. I fear the results of the general election. The idea of another term for this government sends a shiver down my spine.

SHARON SOLOMON,
Ernakulam, Kerala

neither be forgotten nor be forgiven. But one has to move on. Today, retaliation as a method to settle scores is neither desirable nor possible. The Indian response has to be dignified. Repeatedly asking the British government to tender an apology is also not appropriate. It should not appear as if we are 'begging' for an apology. The English language is heavily nuanced and with a bit of deliberation, we can construe British Prime Minister Theresa May's 'deep regret' as an apology. It could help heal and bring peace to all (Editorial page, "Deep regret' is simply not good enough", April 12).

ANCHIT MATHUR,
New Delhi

A scar and healing

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was indeed a horrific act which can

■ It is evident that the more strident we are in our demand for an apology from

the British, the less amenable they seem to be to the idea. In his new book, *Jallianwala Bagh: An Empire of Fear and the Making of the Amritsar Massacre*, historian Kim Wagner has questioned the wisdom behind such demands, suggesting that such an apology would give the British state an opportunity to claim that such incidents were standalone atrocities inconsistent with the benevolent ethos that otherwise informed the British colonial project. A chunk of the British citizenry still believes the empire was a thing to be proud of, improving the lives of those colonised. Thus, an apology will allow Britain the chance to elide the history of systemic violence and exploitation that underpinned British colonialism and thereby

absolve the British state of any culpability. This would be counterproductive. As Indian-origin British MP Preet Kaur Gill has said, it is far more important for Britain to reckon with its unsavoury past and to bring about a change in the way the history of empire is taught to British students.

S. DUTTA,
Kolkata

No decorum

As an octogenarian, I find the report, "Chowkidar is 100% chor, says Rahul" (April 14), to be distressing. Further, the Congress president's poser, on "why all thieves have Modi as their surnames", was in very bad taste. How can a leader of a national party even make such distasteful remarks? He does not have to indulge in gutter-level politics in expressing his evident hatred

for the ruling party and its leader. The Election Commission of India and the Supreme Court need to pass strictures banning such undignified statements.

V. HARIHARAN,
Chennai

Maritime stories

The dhow under sail may be a thing of the past, but one can still encounter motorised dhows plying in the Arabian Sea. Many of them still follow the ancient trade routes from the west coast of India to the Arabian Gulf and the Oman coast. They also undertake voyages to ports along Iran. It is said that they carry

vegetables and timber and bring back electronic items that probably cater to the grey market on both ends. Most of these dhows sail without proper navigational aids and often hug the coast all the way to their distant destinations. Life on them could still be as miserable as described in the article ('Magazine', Pages 6-8, "The dhow men of Malabar", April 14). Most of the dhows start from around the Darukhana harbour off Reay Road, Mumbai.

PRASAD GOVINDAPURAM,
Kochi

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A sentence in a report "F-16, claims and proof" (FAQ page, April 14, 2019) said: "On February 27, PAF fighter jets, comprising of F-16s, JF-11s and Mirage-2000s and Mirage III/Vs..." It should have been, "...PAF fighter jets, comprising, F-16s, JF-17s and Mirage III/V jets..."

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