



Alliance divided

In Sri Lanka's interest, President Sirisena and PM Wickremesinghe should work together

Sri Lanka is in the throes of a political crisis after the two main parties in the ruling coalition suffered a dramatic defeat in the recent local government elections. Fissures between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, led by President Maithripala Sirisena, and the United National Party, led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, have deepened. The fragile 'national unity' government they run together is beset by instability and uncertainty. The local council polls, won resoundingly by the Sri Lanka People's Front, which has the backing of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, have brought to the fore popular disenchantment with the ruling parties, particularly over unemployment and rural distress caused by drought. Even prior to the elections, Mr. Sirisena disagreed often with his Prime Minister over policy measures. In his campaign, he highlighted an inquiry report that indicted some associates of Mr. Wickremesinghe in a mammoth scandal in the sale of government bonds by Sri Lanka's central bank. It was no surprise when the parties contested separately, but neither of them foresaw the outcome, which could mark the return of Mr. Rajapaksa as a major political force. After the results were out the alliance came under stress as Mr. Sirisena wanted the Prime Minister to resign, but the latter has made it clear he will stay on. Amidst efforts by each camp to form an alternative regime that would exclude the other, Mr. Wickremesinghe has said the coalition stands. There is talk of a Cabinet reshuffle as a means of settling their differences, but the durability of the alliance remains in doubt.

The coalition rides on the moral strength of the twin mandate of 2015: Mr. Sirisena's victory in the presidential election over Mr. Rajapaksa, and the alliance's decisive win in the parliamentary elections held later. It is imperative to Sri Lanka's interest that the President and Prime Minister remain faithful to the original mandate, which was for good governance and institutional reform. Mr. Wickremesinghe says he is committed to it, and that he will take "corrective measures" on the economic front. The fact that economic disillusionment had in the past led to social unrest, conflict and extreme nationalism should not be forgotten. The alliance had obtained public support for its reform agenda and for showing a path away from authoritarian trends and institutional decay. It would be unfortunate if partisan interests are placed above the people's aspirations. The two leaders should seek to sink their differences and win back popular confidence. The coalition should continue to pursue the process of framing a new and inclusive constitution. It should fulfil its promises on reconciliation to the war-affected Tamils, whose backing proved crucial in their march to power. One electoral setback should not result in the project of national reconciliation falling victim to narrow political interests.

Directing reforms

It is only logical that the sources of income of candidates be disclosed

Adding to the growing body of judicially inspired electoral reforms, the Supreme Court has imposed an additional disclosure norm for candidates contesting elections. It has asked the Centre to amend the rules as well as the disclosure form filed by candidates along with their nomination papers, to include the sources of their income, and those of their spouses and dependants. The court has also asked for the establishment of a permanent mechanism to investigate any unexplained or disproportionate increase in the assets of legislators during their tenure. The verdict of the two-judge Bench on a petition from the NGO, Lok Prahari, is one more in a long line of significant verdicts aimed at preserving the purity of the electoral process. These include the direction to provide the 'NOTA' option in voting machines, and another striking down a clause that saved sitting legislators from immediate disqualification upon conviction. It has ruled that the act of voting is an expression of free speech, and that it is part of this fundamental right that voters are required to be informed of all relevant details about a contestant. This led to the rule that candidates should furnish details of any criminal antecedents, educational qualifications and assets. If disclosure of assets is mandatory, it is only logical that the sources of income are also revealed. And as it is often seen that there is a dramatic increase in the assets of candidates at every election over what was disclosed in previous affidavits, it stands to reason that any rise should be explained or probed.

Few will dispute that lawmakers amassing wealth or gaining unusual access to public funds and loans are concerns that need to be addressed through new norms. To give teeth to its order, the court has made it clear that non-disclosure of assets and their sources would amount to a "corrupt practice" under Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Lest a question be raised whether the court's order to amend the relevant rules amounted to legislation, the Bench has said it sees no "legal or normative impediment", as the Centre is empowered by the Act to frame rules in consultation with the Election Commission. The idea of a permanent mechanism to collect data about the assets of legislators and periodically examine them is laudable, but it is not clear which authority will run it. The court envisions a body that would make recommendations for prosecution or disqualification based on its own findings. The Centre and the Election Commission will have to jointly address the issue. The larger message from the verdict is that a fully informed electorate and transparent candidature will be key components of future elections in India.

For India, it should be neighbourhood first

While other geopolitical issues are important, New Delhi must give South Asia its fullest attention



M.K. NARAYANAN

As India's salience in global matters grows – amply demonstrated recently by the presence of 10 leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at India's Republic Day celebrations, the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest forays to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Palestine – its leaders also need to contemplate and reflect deeply on what is happening in India's immediate neighbourhood.

In the vicinity

Far more than East, South-east Asia, or West Asia, it is India's immediate neighbourhood that directly impacts it geopolitically, geo-strategically and geoeconomically. Whatever be the ambit of India's reach elsewhere, India's principal focus, hence, will need to be on this neighbourhood.

India can afford to live with demands such as the one made at the recently concluded ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, where it was urged to play a pro-active role in the Asia-Pacific region, without needing to take hard decisions. It possibly also does not have to answer questions as to whether ASEAN nations fully back India's membership of the Quadrilateral (Australia, Japan, the United States and India), even as most of them back China's Belt and Road Initiative. India can even afford to skirt the issue as to whether ASEAN-India relations are all embracing in nature or limited only to specific aspects.

In West Asia, India still possesses enough leeway to engage in skilful manoeuvre around contentious issues without having to take a stand. India could, thus, successfully handle an Israeli Prime Minister's visit to India just prior to Mr. Modi's visit to Palestine, and yet avoid a negative fallout. It could al-

so separate the technological "blush" of Mr. Netanyahu's visit without having to take a clear stand on the issue of Jerusalem. Likewise, Mr. Modi, during his Palestine visit could conclude as many as six agreements and express the hope that Palestine would soon emerge as a sovereign independent country in a peaceful manner without having to specifically refer to a "united" and "viable" Palestine.

With the UAE and Oman, things have been easier. With the former, trade and economic ties as also counter-terror aspects have been on a growth curve. With the latter, an established friend, the option of closer naval co-operation and of reaching an agreement to give the Indian Navy access to Duqm port did not prove difficult.

It is in South Asia where troubles are mounting, where India cannot succeed without looking at some hard options. For instance, how to deal with a new government in Nepal (comprising the Left Alliance of the CPN-UML led by Oli and the CPN-Maoist Centre led by Prachanda) with few pretensions as to where its sympathies lie. India also needs to now contemplate the prospect of prolonged unrest and possibly violence, both communal and terror-related, in neighbouring Bangladesh, prior to scheduled elections in 2019. This follows the conviction by a special court in Dhaka of Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader and three-time Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges. Dealing with both Nepal and Bangladesh will need more than fine gestures; they will need far more closer monitoring.

Troubled hotspot

Another and a more imminent challenge for India is to sort out the imbroglio in the Maldives which is threatening to spill out of control. No amount of dissimulation will help. India cannot afford not to be directly engaged in finding a proper solution.

Relations between India and the Maldives have undergone significant changes since the days of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. After the Maldivian De-



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mocratic Party, headed by former President Mohamed Nasheed, came to power, for the first time anti-Indian forces within the Maldives (including radical Islamist groups sponsored by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) could muster some support. It was also Mr. Nasheed's initial overtures to China that set the stage for Maldivian-China relations. Under the current President, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, anti-Indian tendencies have steadily increased and there has been a pronounced tilt in favour of China. The free trade agreement that the Maldives signed recently with China has been the proverbial thin end of the wedge, providing China with an excellent opportunity to enhance its influence and retain de facto possession of the Southern Atolls in the Maldivian archipelago.

Straddling a strategic part of the Western Indian Ocean, the Maldives today occupies a crucial position along the main shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. The Southern Maldives has long remained an object of interest to the major powers. With the U.S. taking a step back, China has begun to display a great deal of interest in the area; this coincides with its current outreach into the Indian Ocean Region as also its ongoing plans to take control of Gwadar port (Pakistan) and establish a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

India cannot, hence, afford to remain idle and must come up with an answer soon enough that is consistent with its strategic interests. A muscular reaction would be ill-advised, despite the entreaties of Mr. Nasheed, as the international community is likely to react adversely to any military adventure. China is, meanwhile, playing

its cards carefully, calling for "home-grown solutions" and "warning against any military intervention". The critical need is to find a solution early – one that takes into account India's geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the region. Else, it would have far-reaching consequences as far as India's quest for regional power status is concerned.

Across the border

Two other issues, viz., Pakistan and Afghanistan, similarly demand our focussed attention, and that India acts with a sense of responsibility expected of a regional superpower.

The virtual collapse of a Pakistan policy seems to affect Pakistan less and India more. The latter is facing a daily haemorrhaging of human lives due to cross border firing and terrorist violence from Pakistan. In spite of its internal political crisis, and U.S. President Donald Trump's fusillade threatening Pakistan with dire consequences if it failed to amend its ways, Pakistan shows no sign of altering its anti-India trajectory. Democratic India can hardly afford to remain as blasé and let things slide, without effectively trying to find ways and means to change a situation which is certainly not to our advantage.

Equally vital for India is to try and find a way out of the Afghan morass. The daily massacre of innocents, men, women and children, civilian officials and military personnel, experts from several countries and diplomats, marks the start of the complete collapse of a system of governance.

Despite periodic optimistic forecasts of the Taliban being in retreat, terrorists under check, and that the Afghan government is still in charge, Afghanistan's position today is the worst ever since the 1970s. This January, the capital city of Kabul witnessed one of the worst ever incidents of violence anywhere, in which over 100 civilians were killed following a series of terror strikes. This happened despite the presence of foreign troops, elements of the Afghan military and also of the Afghan police. Notwithstanding the omni-

present Pakistan hand in the violence in Afghanistan, this kind of "engineered chaos" over a prolonged period of time effectively demonstrates that the Afghan state has virtually disintegrated.

The collapse of the Afghan state does have severe consequences for India and nations in the vicinity. As a regional power, India has significant stakes in Afghanistan. Apart from the human cost and the fact that New Delhi has spent over \$2 billion in providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, India's true stake lies in sustaining the future of the Afghan state. Its "shrivelling" or "demise" and any premature end to the attempt to restore peace in Afghanistan will only revive memories of the worst days of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and 1990s, and India has every reason to feel concerned about the fallout. Of no less consequence is the fact that if Afghanistan were to cease to exist, its civilisational links with India would also evaporate. For a variety of reasons, therefore, India cannot allow Afghanistan to collapse or cease to exist as a state in the modern sense. This is something that demands India's critical attention, and specially for a display of its leadership skills.

For all these reasons, and apart from those currently at the helm of affairs in India, the leaderships of parties and States across the spectrum must try and achieve a unanimity of purpose in regard to our foreign policy priorities. Today, the focus needs to be on our immediate neighbourhood. The outcome of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the turmoil in the East and South China Seas, or other big-ticket issues across the world are important, but it is South Asia and the neighbourhood that demands our concentrated attention. If India is not seen to be actively involved in ensuring that the region is at peace and functions in conformity with its world view, any claims to leadership would amount to little more than treading water.

M.K. Narayanan is a former National Security Adviser and a former Governor of West Bengal

Doctors for rural India

Inducting Licentiate Medical Practitioners may be the solution to the chronic shortage of doctors in rural areas



SOHAM D. BHADURI

Nearly 600 million people in India, mostly in the rural areas, have little or no access to health care. A widespread disregard for norms, a perpetual failure to reach targets, and an air of utter helplessness are what mark the state of rural health care today. One can add to this another fact: the country is short of nearly five lakh doctors.

Among the range of measures that have been suggested in the past decade is a rather promising proposal which has been sidelined. If properly implemented, it may provide rural India with a lasting pool of primary care physicians.

The contours

A few years ago, the Union Health Ministry drew flak when it put forth a proposal to train a new cadre of health professionals. Under this plan, these professionals, after undergoing a short term, 3-3.5 year course in modern medicine, were to serve the health

needs of the rural population, with a focus on primary care.

Such short-term courses aren't new in the Indian health-care scenario. In the 1940s, primary care physicians – who were trained under short-term courses, and broadly termed Licentiate Medical Practitioners (LMPs) – would deliver quality services in the rural sector until the Bhore Committee (1946) recommended abolishing them in the idea that India would produce enough MBBS doctors.

The committee made certain laudable recommendations in connection with the public health system. Back then, however, nobody could have anticipated the country's miserable failure in achieving most of the targets prescribed by the committee, even years after Independence. While a profit-driven, private health-care sector continued to denude the public health system of its qualified physicians, its medical education system kept losing touch with the actual health needs of the country.

Starting a short-term course in modern medicine can provide an opportunity to design a medical curriculum that is much more relevant to the nation's needs. Its entry requirements could be based less on sheer merit and more on an aptitude for medical service



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and preference should be given to applicants from within the community. Further, a provision for learning in the vernacular languages can be made.

Not quacks

Short-term courses in modern medicine have been consistently equated with producing "cheaply made, poor quality doctors". However, one begs to differ with this. LMPs cannot be called quacks if they are adequately trained in their field (primary care) and have a well-defined role in health care. The present MBBS curriculum includes a good amount of superfluous detail, including subjects such as forensic medicine, that is of little relevance to primary care physicians. Here, we should also note that even though nurse practitioners and pharmacist medical practitioners may be capable of serving the same functions as LMPs, they cannot be expected to make up a

lasting pool of dedicated grassroots-level physicians.

Another concern is that the rural population would be made to feel like second class citizens by appointing a lower tier doctor to treat them. This can be put to rest by not letting LMPs replace MBBS doctors but instead work in a subordinate capacity.

A few changes in the public health system can be envisioned here: LMPs be employed in sub-centres where they perform both clinical and administrative functions at the sub-centre level. This would also allow easier access to primary and emergency care and keep the post of medical officer for MBBS doctors, thereby deterring any competition between the two cadres of physicians.

Medical officers (MBBS) could be employed in primary health centres (PHC), and new recruits imparted mandatory further training of a sufficient duration in basic clinical specialties. Also, inpatient facilities at PHCs can be scaled up. PHCs should deal with cases referred to them by sub-centre LMPs and also supervise their work.

Some spin-offs

This has many advantages. With LMPs working at the grass-root level, a single PHC would be able to handle a bigger population, allow-

ing for more resources to be concentrated on individual PHCs for manpower and infrastructure development and also for increasing the remuneration of medical officers.

Ancillary responsibilities can be taken off an MBBS doctor and their skills put to better use. Quality emergency and inpatient attention can be made available at the PHC-level. Today, less than a handful of PHCs provide inpatient care of significance. Concerns about the clinical and administrative incompetence of fresh MBBS graduates appointed as bonded medical officers can be put to rest.

LMPs could be allowed to take up a postgraduate course in primary care as an option to study further. Those with a postgraduate qualification could choose to move higher up in the public health system, establish their own practice, find positions in hospitals, or serve as faculty in medical colleges training LMPs.

Therefore, reviving LMPs can help address the dearth of trained primary care physicians in rural India. The logistical entailments of implementing this idea would require separate deliberation.

Soham D. Bhaduri, a medical doctor based in Mumbai, is the Editor-in-Chief of "The Indian Practitioner"

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.

Bank scam

Whatever happened to the much heralded investiture of an autonomous Banks Board Bureau (BBB) back on April 1, 2016 "with a view to improve the governance of public sector banks"? Its chairman, Vinod Rai, was also someone who is high profile, a former Comptroller and Auditor General who is said to have a "high reputation" and was to put in place systems and checks.

The scam that has engulfed Punjab National Bank would appear to stem from lacunae in ground-level audit and internal alert mechanisms in public

banks. Clearly, an audit at the secondary/tertiary levels seems to be inadequate as we seem to have netted not a few fish but a whale of a scam. The litany of non-performing assets should itself have made institutions such as the BBB and others burn the midnight oil. Pedantics may run politics for a while but economics is a hard task master, and retribution instant.

R. NARAYANAN, *Navli Mumbai*

■ If the BJP government now in power got wind of the fraud, by all accounts quite early on in its rule, it should have halted the fraud,

punished the guilty and even exposed the Congress if it had implicating material. Nothing of the kind happened and the fraud continued to build up until last week. The public did not even have a whiff of the 'bomb that was to explode'. It now emerges that substantial wrongdoing took place in the last two years. Under these circumstances, not having done anything is in itself tantamount to complicity. While the government is no doubt keen to unravel the possible role of the Congress, it too must be open to scrutiny between 2014-18.

M. BALAKRISHNAN, *Bengaluru*

Cauvery verdict

Though the Cauvery verdict is a slight dent in Tamil Nadu's claim of its share of water, it is evident that the Supreme Court's judgment is final. Farmers in Tamil Nadu should now look at this as a new beginning and concentrate on cultivation of paddy by, henceforth, adopting the techniques of their Israeli counterparts who use less water in agriculture. Frugal and intelligent use of water is the need of the hour. Again one can ask for help from Israel. Agriculture experts and scientists have a new role to play. All is not lost.

BHAVANI RAMAN IYER, *Coimbatore*

The 'Huddle'

Though 'The Hindu's' "Huddle" in Bengaluru had a very interesting line-up of eminent speakers, it is disappointing that experts in the fields of education, environment and science and technology were not listed. These fields have a tremendous impact and cannot be regarded as of only academic interest. The very poor quality of school education has been highlighted by various

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The highlights panel that accompanied "The tour is not yet over; insists India skipper" (Sports page, Feb. 18, 2018) erroneously said the fixtures were in March. It should have been February.

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