



Sealed disclosure

The Supreme Court order will not alter the influence of electoral bonds on polls

The Supreme Court's interim order asking political parties to disclose, to the Election Commission in sealed covers, details of the donations they have received through anonymous electoral bonds is an inadequate and belated response to the serious concerns raised about the opaque scheme. The scheme, under which one can purchase bonds of various denominations from a designated bank and deposit them in the accounts of any political party, had been challenged in the apex court a year ago. When the matter was taken up last week, it was considered that the time available was too limited for an in-depth hearing. The order, unfortunately, preserves the *status quo*, and any effect that the possible asymmetry in political funding would have on the election process will stay as it is. The only concession given to those concerned about the dangers of anonymous political funding is that the names would be available with the EC, albeit in sealed envelopes, until the court decides if they can be made public. There is some concern that a disproportionately large segment of the bonds purchased by corporate donors has gone to the Bharatiya Janata Party. This donor anonymity may end if the court decides that the EC should disclose the names at the end of the litigation, but the influence such donations would have had on the electoral outcome would remain undisturbed.

The court notes in its order that the case gives rise to "weighty issues which have a tremendous bearing on the sanctity of the electoral process in the country". Given this premise, it could be asked whether the judicial intervention could not have come earlier. However, all it has done now is to ensure that its interim arrangement does not 'tilt the balance' in favour of either side. The petitioners, the Association for Democratic Reforms, questioned the anonymity-based funding scheme on the grounds that it promotes opacity, opens up the possibility of black money being donated to parties through shell companies and empowers the ruling party, which alone is in a position to identify the donors and, therefore, well placed to discourage donations to other parties. The government, on the other hand, argued that electoral bonds would prevent unaccounted money from entering the system through funding of parties. For the last two decades, the Supreme Court has been proactive in empowering voters and in infusing transparency in the system. It has developed a body of jurisprudence that says the electoral process involves the voter being given information about candidates, their qualifications, assets and crime records, if any. Therefore, it is disappointing to hear the Attorney General arguing that voters do not have a right to know who funds parties. Now that there is no stay on the operation of the scheme, the court must render an early verdict on the legality of the electoral bond scheme.

At a crossroads

With Omar al-Bashir gone, Sudan needs a quick transition to civilian rule

When protests broke out in Atbara in northeastern Sudan over rising prices of bread in mid-December, not many thought it would snowball into a nationwide agitation, shaking the foundations of the junta. President Omar al-Bashir, who captured power through a bloodless coup in 1989, first called the protesters "rats" and then declared a state of emergency. Dozens were killed. When none of these measures quelled public anger, Mr. Bashir sacked the Health Minister and the Prime Minister, and promised reforms. But the protests, led by the Sudanese Professionals Association, a new group, grew in strength. As protests reached the army headquarters, the military high command stepped in, deposing Mr. Bashir on April 11 and announcing a transitional government led by the military council. But even the fall of Mr. Bashir failed to calm the streets as protesters wanted "a revolution". Over three decades, Mr. Bashir and his military clique had used several tactics, from aligning with Islamists and banning political parties to suppressing dissent and unleashing paramilitaries against defiant regions, to stay in power. But the recent economic crisis, especially after South Sudan split away with three-fourths of the oilfields, broke the regime's back.

The army seems to have realised it is facing the greatest challenge to its power in three decades. It has already made several concessions. Soon after Mr. Bashir was deposed, Awad Ibn Ouf, the chosen head of the military council, also stepped down. The much-feared intelligence chief, Salah Gosh, was fired. The new military ruler, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, has ordered lifting of the curfew and freeing of political prisoners. But the problem is that the army is not ready to give up control. Its plan to be in charge for at least two years has made the protesters wary. They are afraid that the army, given its track record, will try to retain its grip on power through some means or the other. This is the current stalemate - the protesters want a break with the past while the army doesn't want to give up its privileges. This conflict was visible in neighbouring countries where dictators fell amid public protests. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak resigned as President in 2011, but the military never gave up its privileges. In two years it was back in power through a coup. In Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down as President this month, but the army has retained power; protests still continue in the country. The Sudanese protesters say they want an orderly transition under a civilian government. The army should respect their demand and resolve the impasse. Mr. Bashir has quit. It's time to replace the oppressive regime he built, with a much more inclusive, responsive and democratic civilian government.

Indian elections, South Asian concerns

South Asia wants the very best of democracy for India, plus to share in the peace dividend, growth and camaraderie



KANAK MANI DIXIT

The staggering scale of the election that is under way in India with just under a billion voters is hard for the mind to grapple with, even in this densely populated neighbourhood that includes Bangladesh and Pakistan. The level of worry is also at a pitch, for India should be the bulwark against weakening democracy in a world of Bolsonaro (Brazil), Duterte (the Philippines), Erdogan (Turkey), Putin (Russia) and Trump (the U.S.) not to mention the People's Republic of China.

Redefining India

Modern India, created by M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and their cohort, should be raising the standard for social justice and grass-roots democracy, and against destructive right-wing populism. This has not quite been Prime Minister Narendra Modi's record, and hence the concern that another five years would redefine the very idea of India.

Already, the term 'world's largest democracy' is achieving banality as India gains majoritarian momentum. Centralised control of society would never be possible in such a vast and variegated society of sub-nationalities, we were told, but look at what is happening.

The high principle and probity of India's political class, bureaucracy, academia and civil society are now exceptions rather than the rule. India's Ambassadors are no longer the self-confident professionals we knew for decades, they act today like timid note-takers. Higher education is directed by those who insist that the achievements of Vedic era science included flying machines and organ transplants. Meanwhile, the adventurism that marked econom-

ic management, including immiseration through demonetisation, has been 'managed' through loyal social and corporate media.

Intellectual toadyism and crony capitalism have overtaken New Delhi on a subcontinental scale, but sooner than later this drift towards regimented society and whispered dissent must be reversed. Too much is at stake for too many citizens - India must revert to the true, messy and contested democracy we have known and appreciated.

Soft power

Parliamentary democracy is the governance procedure adopted by each and every country of South Asia, and the Indian practice has always been held up as the example. The precedents set by India's courts are studied elsewhere, the professionalism of the civil service is regarded as the benchmark, and everyone else seeks the aspirational welfare state set in motion in India in the middle of the 20th century. This is why we watch worried as Indian democracy weakens in step with its economy, as inter-community relationships within India descend to one-sided animus, and as New Delhi's global clout decreases in inverse proportion to Beijing's.

To cover weaknesses in governance and promises undelivered, Mr. Modi as the solo electoral face of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has whipped up a tornado of militarised nationalism that projects Pakistan as the exclusive enemy. No one dares remind the Indian voters that Pakistan is the far weaker power; its people are battling fanatical demons more than are Indian citizens; Pakistan is a large potential market for India's goods and services; and the future of Kashmir must be based on Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.

Meanwhile, Lahore intellectuals watch with apprehension as India copies the excesses of Pakistan's theocratic state. Dhaka observers are numbed into silence with New Delhi's vigorous backing of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina



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Waged as she constructs an intolant one-party regime. Colombo rides a geopolitical see-saw as New Delhi shadow-boxes Beijing. And Kathmandu wonders whether New Delhi has it in itself to concede that the amplified Chinese involvement in Nepal is the result of the Great Blockade of 2015-16.

Coy on Beijing

India has been reduced to a giant nervously finger-counting friends made or lost to China. The media triumphalism that greets even modest shifts in India's favour - be it in Male or Thimphu - marks unnecessarily low self-esteem. New Delhi seems preoccupied with 'managing' South Asian countries when it should be commanding the global platforms on climate alteration, protection of pluralism and correcting imbalances in global wealth.

Few note the incongruity of a New Delhi loudly daring Islamabad while acting coy on Beijing, which one would have thought was the real adversary or competitor. Meanwhile India's celebrated soft power wilts even as the Chinese work to wipe out their English deficit, and Beijing places Confucius Institutes in far corners. Chinese goods flood the Indian market, Chinese research and development gallops ahead of India's, and Beijing convincingly moves to tackle environmental degradation.

India seems drowsy and lethargic in contrast. South Asia as a whole - much of it the historical 'India' - roots for Indian democracy even while welcoming Chinese investment, infrastructure loans and tourists. Also because it has the largest population in the Sub-

Implications of the Indonesian vote

The contenders for President may be very different, but either way ties with India are set to deepen



GURJIT SINGH

Indonesia's single-day and complex elections are today. The rematch, after 2014, between incumbent President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and his challenger, Prabowo Subianto of the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) will decide what trajectory the country will take over the next five years.

The result will have an impact on the domestic economy and polity, with both candidates having fine-tuned their positions since 2014. Indonesian foreign engagements will also see a change depending on whether it pursues its own Indo-Pacific strategy and an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-plus foreign policy. Given its large population, mainly Muslim, its growing middle class and market and its strategic location, the election is of interest to the region.

Political highlights

In 2019, the Election Commission approved 16 parties to run for par-

liament. Mr. Jokowi's coalition has 338 out of 560 current MPs to Mr. Subianto's 222 MPs. Indonesian law requires that political parties have at least 20% of the seats in Parliament, or 25% share of the popular vote, before they can nominate a presidential candidate in 2019. If the Democratic Party of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had not supported Mr. Subianto's bid, his candidacy would have failed and Mr. Jokowi may have been the only candidate. The churning in parties like the Golkar and National Mandate Party (PAN) which were firmly with Mr. Subianto in 2014 has made a change in Indonesian politics.

Indonesia has a GDP of over \$1 trillion (2017 figures) and a growth rate of about 5%. Its population is nearly 270 million. Its diverse natural resources include abundant coal and palm oil. Changing trade rules are having an effect on the Indonesian rupiah. In the run-up to these elections and after, the dominant themes are the growing debt, social and economic inequalities, the role of Islam in politics as well as fake news.

Mr. Jokowi remains the man to beat, as he is still popular and seen to be sincere and honest even though he has not fulfilled all his campaign promises of 2014. An election in 2017 for Jakarta Governor, seen as a barometer to the



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2019 election, threw up a surprise result when 'Ahok' Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, backed by Mr. Jokowi's party, lost to Anies Baswedan, supported by Mr. Subianto. In 2017, Mr. Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison on a charge of blasphemy. For 2019, Mr. Jokowi's running mate is Indonesian Ulama Council Chairman Ma'ruf Amin, The choice of Ma'ruf Amin, 76, is seen as a response to the Muslim backlash faced in the Jakarta election. That Mr. Amin had a hand in toppling Mr. Ahok on charges of blasphemy is now just a footnote in these elections.

What they stand for

Mr. Jokowi is also seen to be pro-Chinese, having pledged support for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and being a vocal supporter of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Some analysts feel that Mr. Jokowi could face problems for

continent, India is expected to lead South Asia on myriad issues including the death-dealing Indo-Gangetic smog, fertilizer and pesticide use, cross-border vectors, arsenic poisoning, regional commerce and economic rationalisation, social inclusion and the Human Development Index and so on. But leadership requires humility, to study, for example, how adjacent societies have successfully tackled great challenges - look at Bangladesh surging towards middle income country status.

Nepal has long been regarded by exasperated New Delhi policymakers as the South Asian basket case sending out migrant labour to India. This much is true, but it also emerges that the Nepal economy is the seventh largest sender of remittance to India after the UAE, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the U.K., Bangladesh and Canada. Unlike these others, Nepal's remittances go to India's poorest parts, in Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

We switch on India's news channels and find an abysmal common denominator in terms of civility and rationality. The national intelligentsia seems intimidated, unable to challenge the rigid, dangerously populist narrative of the BJP/Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). We watch as the National Register of Citizens propels statelessness, as the refolement of Rohingya refugees points to a reckless disregard for fundamental humanitarian principles, and as majoritarianism weakens the pillar of representative democracy that is the protection of minorities.

Regionalism's import

India is indeed large and important, but the chest size of a country does not translate into equity, social justice or international standing. Because nearly 20% of humanity lives within its boundaries, when India falters, the pit of despair and the potential for violence open up wide and deep.

The South Asia that New Delhi's policy and opinion-makers should

consider is not the centralised Jambudvipa mega-state of the RSS imagination. Instead, the ideal South Asian regionalism is all about limiting the power of the national capitals, devolving power to federal units and strengthening local democracy.

Mr. Modi's own idea of regionalism is one where he calls the shots. The start of his current term was marked by an attempt to dictate to the neighbours, after which the pendulum swung to the other extreme. The freeze put by India on the inter-governmental South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is only a cynical means to keep Pakistan out of the club.

The sabotaging of SAARC can hardly be considered a victory, for that feather-light geopolitical stratagem fails to consider that regionalism is a potent means to bring economic growth and social justice to India's own poverty-stricken 'peripheral regions' from Assam to Purvanchal to Rajasthan. For its own security and prosperity as well as that of the rest of us, India must re-connect with South Asia.

Subcontinental regionalism is also important to achieve New Delhi's ambitions on the world stage, including that coveted seat at the UN Security Council. India's global comeback will start the day New Delhi think tanks begin questioning South and North Block rather than serving as purveyors of spin. On South Asian matters, they should pull out a copy of the Gajral Doctrine from the archives, to be dusted and re-examined.

We seek an India that is prosperous and advancing at double digit growth, not only because what this would mean for its 1.35 billion citizens, but to the other 500 million South Asians. For its own selfish interests, the rest of South Asia wants India to succeed in the world.

Kanak Mani Dixit, a writer and journalist based in Kathmandu, is the founding editor of the Colombo-based magazine, 'Himal Southasian'

the largesse he shows to China. He has even handed over to China a prestigious high-speed railway that was proposed by the Japanese in 2015, but which has still not taken off. His support to Chinese overtures to build infrastructure for Indonesia has often seen others shut out, at Chinese behest, or by a tweaking of rules. Most Chinese engagement is through public sector entities, which are now in heavy debt since the sovereign guarantee route was not applied to keep up with constitutional norms of debt and deficits. Due to the slow pace of the BRI projects, many public sector units have serious debt issues. But these are not the ideas which win elections and Mr. Jokowi's finger on the popular pulse through welfare measures, including the 'Indonesia Health Card', has won him support.

Mr. Subianto presents a more nationalistic image with an emphasis on security, balanced foreign policy, more local manufacturing, and a just social order. He is seen to be more open to partnerships with countries besides China, having said so at an Indonesian economic summit in 2018. His support to business is seen through his choice of running mate for 2019, 'Sandi' Sandiaguno, 49, a wealthy former fund manager who was Jakarta Deputy Governor (2017-18). The latter is seen as pro-

business, particularly the private sector. Being young and social media savvy, he could get the support of millennials, who form about 30% of the electorate.

India and Indonesia have shared friendly relations. Mr. Jokowi paid a bilateral visit in 2016 and again in 2018 for an ASEAN commemorative summit in New Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a visit to Jakarta last year as part of a three-nation tour. The two leaders have given shape to several ideas on infrastructure, strategic partnership, naval and army cooperation and trade and commerce. The dialogue among faiths is on, and there is closer cooperation on counter-terrorism and other non-traditional threats. They have different views on China, but it is not seen as a hindrance to the bilateral relationship. If Mr. Jokowi wins, as polls predict, the relationship will be on firmer footing than it is now.

However, India need not worry too if Mr. Subianto wins. He sees many models in India's development that are worth emulating. He could, in fact, open more strategic space and markets for India, but he would need time to settle down as he has little prior experience in administration.

Gurjit Singh is a former Indian Ambassador to Indonesia

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.

EC and model code

While it is ironic that the Supreme Court has had to step in and advise the Election Commission of India to exercise its powers (Page 1, "SC irked after poll panel's counsel says it is 'powerless'"; April 16), what is heartening is that the EC has finally made some attempt to act (Page 1, "EC curbs campaigning by Yogi, Mayawati, Maneka and Azam"; April 16). All four politicians have shocked us with their statements, but more so Maneka Gandhi. Despite its admission before the top court that it is largely a toothless tiger, the Election Commission deserves some credit for its action.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

I grew up reading Ms. Gandhi's columns, especially those concerning animal welfare. There was a lack of awareness about these issues and her staunch activism inspired me. Her gentle and logical way of writing appealed to my better reason. To now see her engage in partisan politics is disheartening. I hope that she realises her fall.

ANANYA MISHRA,
Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

The Left

Social fragmentation has set in, governance has pale and job creation has been lost in catchy slogans. The Congress has not been able to re-establish its relevance yet. Add to this the helplessness of regional parties, most of which were founded by men

with pan-national credentials who circumscribed regional aspirations within national themes. It is sad that in Election 2019, the Left this time round is cool towards the Third Front - an idea that was able to provide a shared platform and political glue to disparate outfits. The weakening of the intellectual Left has taken away a vital third balancing force that had both ideological and political relevance. It is sad to see our political canvas now reduced to dull shades. The Opposition is unable to gather critical mass or etch any theme or pattern. We may see the worst of the political potpourri in 2019 (Editorial page, "An India without the Left?") April 16).

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

Business failures

In the past few years one has seen the spectacular failure of industrial groups and businesses, the latest being Jet Airways. Of course, they are privately run and have their sets of practices, but when it comes to the stage of ending up in a debt trap and being unable to pay creditors and financiers, it becomes a different ballgame especially when it involves public money. Why did bankers finance these units without proper checks and balances? The government seems helpless too in taking action.

DEEPAK SARAF,
Bathinda, Punjab

The final pick

With the mercurial M.S. Dhoni available for the World Cup, no other name comes

to mind readily for the slot of wicketkeeper ('Sport' page, "Vijay Shankar, Karthik, Rahul make the cut"; April 16). One may argue that Dinesh Karthik and K.L. Rahul - the first a regular wicketkeeper while the latter dons the gloves occasionally - can be standbys in case of an emergency. But, one aspect that had been largely ignored is that the ageing Dhoni would have to remain fit for all the matches. From this angle, the non-selection of Rishabh Pant is quite perplexing. Also, with Dhoni retiring by the end of the World Cup, we need someone who can take up the mantle. Karthik has not been a success with the bat while Rahul's batting may suffer should he focus on wicketkeeping too. Thus the

need for grooming Pant for the future arises.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Le désastre

The centuries old Gothic marvel has long been the pride of Paris ('World' page, "Fire devastates Paris' iconic Notre-Dame cathedral"; April 16). One is instantly reminded of Victor Hugo's novel, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, which also created an awareness about the architectural significance of this structure. As the main part appears to be still intact, one hopes that France will restore the cathedral to its former glory.

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN,
Chennai

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