



Holding the rate

The RBI has rightly opined that premature action risks 'disruptive policy reversals later'

The Reserve Bank of India's decision to keep the policy interest rate unchanged, and reaffirm its "neutral" policy stance, clearly indicates that policymakers at the central bank are singularly focussed on their primary remit of ensuring price stability while supporting economic growth. That the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee has chosen to do so in the face of clamour for a rate cut, and Consumer Price Index data and the bank's own survey of households' inflation expectations appearing benign, points to the MPC's determination to reassert the central bank's independence, especially in the rate-setting realm. Laying out its reasoning for opting to remain "watchful", the RBI has raised pertinent questions relating to the outlook for price stability, the foremost being whether the "unusually low momentum in the reading for April will endure". It posits that the easing trend in inflation, excluding food and fuel, may be transient given its vulnerability to rising rural wage growth and strong consumption demand. And the elephant in the room, in the MPC's opinion, is the real prospect of inflationary spillovers from the rising risk of fiscal slippages caused by farm loan waivers – Uttar Pradesh has set the stage, and Maharashtra's government has vowed to come up with the State's largest-ever. Observing that inflation has fallen below 4% only since November 2016, the RBI has reiterated its commitment to keeping the headline reading close to that figure on a "durable basis".

The MPC acknowledges that the latest monsoon forecast augurs well for the agriculture sector, and when viewed in conjunction with continuing robust government spending, it ought to help undergird overall momentum in the economy. The RBI's business expectations index based on its industrial outlook survey of April points to upbeat prospects for the manufacturing sector in the second quarter of the current fiscal year, spurred by rising rural and overseas demand. However, on the growth front too the RBI's policy panel has opted for caution given that the Central Statistics Office's GDP and GVA (gross value added) data released last month suggest that the effects of demonetisation have lingered on. The RBI has accordingly cut its GVA growth forecast for the year ending in March 2018 by 10 basis points to 7.3% and flagged the risks that global political uncertainties, rising input costs and wage pressures and the twin balance sheet problem (an over-leveraged corporate sector and stressed lenders) pose to a revival in private investment demand and a more durable economic expansion. Spelling out the priorities, the MPC has said monetary policy can be effective only when private investment has revived, the banking sector's health is restored and infrastructure bottlenecks are removed. To do otherwise "risks disruptive policy reversals later and the loss of credibility" of the RBI.

The PM-in-waiting

Ireland's new leader Leo Varadkar will have to oversee issues of Brexit and social reform

Leo Varadkar, the son of an Indian immigrant, is set to be Ireland's Prime Minister after he won an internal contest to lead the centre-right Fine Gael, the senior coalition partner in the Republic's minority government. The outspoken Mr. Varadkar, the incumbent Social Protection Minister, is to take over the reins of the party and country from Enda Kenny, who is stepping down after heading the party for 15 years and the country for six. Mr. Varadkar will be Ireland's first-ever openly gay Prime Minister with minority and immigrant roots. He is just 38 years old, and thus in a club of young world leaders with France's Emmanuel Macron and Canada's Justin Trudeau. While it is indeed remarkable that a person of Mr. Varadkar's background has been elected to lead Ireland, what is even more striking is that during the ruling party's elections voters focussed not on his background but on his policies. This speaks volumes for how far the country has come on its social attitudes. Ireland is deeply religious. Catholicism, the state religion, has a far-reaching influence on many aspects of Irish life, including birth, death and marriage. Abortions, except to save the mother's life, are illegal; divorce, legalised in the 1990s, requires a four-year separation; and gay marriage was legalised just recently.

As Prime Minister, Mr. Kenny steered Ireland out of the financial collapse of 2008-2010 and campaigned, successfully, for the European Union (EU) to recognise Ireland's unique position during the forthcoming Brexit negotiations between Brussels and London. The Republic of Ireland is contiguous with Northern Ireland, and therefore the only EU country that shares a land border with the U.K. Mr. Kenny leaves office having convinced the EU to address the fallout for Ireland during Brexit negotiations. He also leaves Mr. Varadkar a vastly improved economy, with an unemployment rate close to 7%, about half of what it was in 2012. Mr. Varadkar will now have to build on his predecessor's success and address his failures, including a severe housing shortage and a police service that has demonstrated an ability to collude with other public agencies to punish whistle-blowers and cover up corruption. As regards Brexit, Mr. Varadkar will have to ensure that the Common Travel Area, a mechanism by which British and Irish citizens can live and work in the two countries, is maintained, and that the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is not reinstated. He will also have to manage the economic impact of Brexit on trade and jobs in the event that the negotiations diminish Britain's access to the European single market. Finally, as Prime Minister, he will be expected to shepherd further reforms in laws relating to divorce and abortion if he wishes to further align the Republic's values with those of the EU and other liberal democracies.

Retrieving ground in Afghanistan

The legitimacy of its institutions, including the unity government and the security forces, must be enhanced



RAKESH SOOD

Last week provided a grim reminder of the worsening security situation in Afghanistan. A suicide attack on May 31 in the heart of Kabul, with a truck bomb containing 1,500 kg of explosives, has left more than 150 persons dead and hundreds injured. No one has claimed responsibility and the Taliban issued a statement denying any involvement. Afghan intelligence have blamed the Haqqani network working together with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, a charge vehemently rejected by the Pakistani government.

Two days later when over a thousand people collected near the site, the mood of the demonstrators was anti-government. Banners and slogans were raised calling on the government to resign. As the demonstrators moved towards the presidential palace, police used water cannons and tear gas to break up the crowd. According to the police, some protesters were armed and began shooting, forcing the police to retaliate. Half a dozen protesters were killed. Among them was Salim Izadyar, son of Mohammed Alam Izadyar, a prominent Tajik and the Deputy Speaker of the Meshrano Jirga (Upper House).

Fault lines exposed

The following day, on June 3, at Izadyar's funeral, three suicide attackers blew themselves up killing more than 20 and injuring over a hundred mourners. Among those present were Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani and former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, who escaped any injuries. A fourth attacker was nabbed and has admitted to having been recruited and trained by the Taliban in Quetta.



Coming in quick succession, these events have exposed the weaknesses of the National Unity Government (NUG), emboldening the opposition. Dr. Abdullah has appealed for calm and said that if it helps, he is ready to step down. It is clear that his support base has eroded. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Rabbani hinted at conspiracies. Protesters have pitched a tent outside the hospital in the area, which has become a focal point for speeches by Tajik leaders, including former Vice-President Ahmad Zia Massoud, who hold the Pashtun-dominated government of President Ashraf Ghani responsible. The Tajik-led Jamiat is now reaching out to other ethnic groups, Uzbeks and the Hazaras. Meanwhile, Uzbek leader and Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum left for Turkey last month for 'medical treatment' following growing public criticism after his security guards sexually assaulted a political rival.

The NUG agreement, concluded in September 2014, with strong backing of the U.S., was more than just a means of resolving the electoral dispute between the two candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. It was a power-sharing arrangement between the Pashtuns who have traditionally ruled Afghanistan and the non-Pashtuns (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras). The creation of the post of the Chief Executive, to be converted into the position of a Prime Minister within two years, was an attempt at moving away

from the highly centralised presidential system introduced in 2003 towards a more federal arrangement. In 2003 too, the Northern Alliance had demanded the position of a PM but had to be content with the compromise of a President and two Vice-Presidents on the tacit understanding that the two Vice-Presidents would come from the smaller ethnic groups. The U.S. had strongly backed the idea of a strong American-style presidency, overlooking the fact that the institutional checks and balances of the U.S. system were missing in the war-ravaged country.

The constitutional amendment for converting the position of the CEO into that of PM is still pending as parliamentary elections which were due in 2015 have not taken place; these elections were to be preceded by changes in the electoral procedures which were to be worked out by a special commission that would, in turn, be approved by a newly constituted Independent Election Commission. With this process having come to a halt and a change of administration in Washington, differences between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah today can no longer be patched up. They keep erupting, reflecting a governance structure that is both under internal strain and external attack by the Taliban. The visible anti-government sentiment is a worrying sign.

Deteriorating security

There is talk about pushing through a parliamentary election

next year and advancing the presidential election by a year (it is due in 2019) to save costs. However, the deteriorating situation raises questions about the feasibility of elections. Today, less than 60% of Afghanistan's territory is under government control; the rest is either contested by or under the Taliban. While putting its weight behind the NUG in 2014, the Obama administration also backed the idea of 'a lasting political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban'. To this end, he announced that 8,400 U.S. troops would stay on in Afghanistan (together with another 5,000 from NATO partners) in an 'assist, advise and train' mission.

The Trump administration has yet to announce its policy though indications are it might authorise an increase of 3,000-5,000 in U.S. troop levels. This is the figure mentioned by General John Nicholson in his testimony to the U.S. Congress in February and has been supported by both Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster. Gen. Nicholson described the current situation as a 'stalemate' which needed to be tilted in favour of the Afghan security forces. Like his predecessors, he too held Pakistan responsible for the Taliban's successes, pointing out that eliminating external sanctuary and support is essential to the success of the mission. Yet, other than calling for a 'holistic response', he failed to specify what this would entail.

Since the U.S. has been unable to change Pakistan's behaviour despite having provided nearly \$34 billion in economic and military assistance since 2002 accompanied by occasional threats to suspend or withhold the funds, enhancing capability of the Afghan security forces remains the only option. This means strengthening the Special Forces in both the Army and the Police as these are most effective in fighting the insurgency and providing air power and artillery. The U.S. provides \$3.4 billion out of the NATO's annual support of \$4 billion for the Afghan National Security Forces. In addition, it

spends nearly \$18 billion on maintaining its troop presence (it costs slightly more than \$2 million a year to deploy a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan). In comparison, raising and equipping a brigade of Special Forces would cost a billion dollars a year. Therefore Gen. Nicholson's idea of a slight increase in international troop presence can only work only if it is coupled with practical ways of enhancing Afghan capabilities.

Mirage of reconciliation

In recent years, numerous initiatives to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table have been attempted. A Taliban office in Doha was intended to get the Taliban negotiators away from the ISI's control but turned out to be a non-starter. The four-country quadrilateral group involving China along with Pakistan, the U.S. and Afghanistan came to an abrupt end when it was revealed that Mullah Omar was no longer alive and had died, possibly two years earlier. Russia is now promoting the idea of talks by playing up the idea of the larger threat of the Islamic State that has emerged in eastern Afghanistan in Nangarhar province though this has failed to carry much traction with the Afghan authorities. President Ghani is putting his faith in a new regional initiative, similar in composition to the Heart of Asia process. If the past is any guide, none of these will yield any concrete benefits because unless the ground situation is materially altered, any talk of reconciliation with the Taliban remains premature and ends up conveying mixed signals, to the Afghans, the Taliban and Pakistan.

If the gains of the last fifteen years are to be preserved, the only option is to enhance legitimacy of the Afghan institutions: the NUG, the election process and the Afghan National Security Forces.

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The neutrino opportunity

Setbacks to the Neutrino Observatory show the need to garner public support for scientific research



JAIBY JOSEPH & M.P. RAM MOHAN

India's wait to join the elite club of countries undertaking neutrino research suffered a procedural delay in March this year when the National Green Tribunal (NGT) suspended the environmental clearance (EC) granted to the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), and ordered it to file a fresh application for clearance.

The proposed INO project primarily aims to study atmospheric neutrinos in a 1,300-m deep cavern in the Bodi West Hills in Theni district, Tamil Nadu. If completed, the INO would house the largest magnet in the world, four times more massive than the European Organization for Nuclear Research, CERN's Compact Muon Solenoid (CMS) detector's magnet. Neutrinos are tiny particles, almost massless, that travel at near light speeds. Born from violent astrophysical events such as exploding stars and gamma ray bursts, they are abundant in the universe, and can move as easily through matter as we move

through air. They are notoriously difficult to track down. If you hold your hand towards the sunlight for one second, about a billion neutrinos from the sun will pass through it; this is because they are the by-products of nuclear fusion in the sun. These little wisps hold the blueprint of nature, which the INO project aims to use to understand some of the unsolved mysteries of the universe.

While the suspension of INO's environmental clearance is a setback, the scientific community hopes these procedural lapses will be addressed in an earnest and time-bound manner. The NGT's March 2017 order further delays the start of the project. Now the earliest conceivable completion date is projected as 2022. The INO will fall further behind other facilities including China's Jiangmen Underground Neutrino Observatory (JUNO), expected to open in 2019.

What it involves

The INO project also has its critics. Many argue, among other things, that the explosives used in construction are a threat to the highly sensitive ecology of the Western Ghats, and that the relevant radiation safety studies for carrying out the long baseline neutrino experiment in the second phase of INO have not been done. The pro-



posed excavation is planned to be carried out by a controlled blast, limiting the impact of vibrations with the help of computer simulations. Additionally, building the INO involves constructing an underground lab accessed by a 2 km-long horizontal access tunnel, resembling a road tunnel. Such tunnels have been built extensively in India and the relevant studies show that the environmental impact (mainly dust and noise in the initial phase) have been managed. In the second phase, the INO project initially had planned to be set up as a far detector for the Neutrino Factory, which is a proposed particle accelerator. This may not be necessary because of the discoveries already being made in the field. Even if you build it, the radiation from the neutrino beam alone on an average would be one

in 100 millionth of the natural radiation, which is negligible.

The procedural lapses and assumptions about the project's agenda have made a project of this scale hard to bear fruit in India. Further, allegations such as neutrinos being radioactive particles and that the INO will double up the storage of nuclear waste have damaged the collaboration's many years of outreach efforts. Any further delays could defeat the purpose of the project because similar projects elsewhere could undermine India's efforts. For those who argue that ₹1,500 crore is a waste of money, it might be instructive to look back at the enormous achievements 20th century has brought in on the pillars of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Long history of research

Neutrino research has a long history in India. In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of scientists led by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research detected some unusual experimental observations, the so-called Kolar events in the Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) in Karnataka. Half a century later, however, these events remain as science fiction, yet to be explained and unravelled. From the 1980s, neutrino enthusiasts discussed the possibility of a neutrino observatory located in In-

dia. In 2002, a document was presented to the Department of Atomic Energy which laid out an ambitious plan to establish the INO. Since then, fast-paced developments have taken place in neutrino physics. Consider this: more than half the Nobel Prizes in physics in the past 50 years have been awarded to basic research in particle physics; this includes the 2015 Prize for the discovery of neutrino oscillations. On January 5, 2015, the Union cabinet gave its approval to establish the INO at an estimated cost of ₹1,500 crore, the most expensive basic science project in India.

While public apprehensions in such projects are understandable, they also demonstrate that communication between the scientific community and the public needs to be more basic and democratic. For a country of young minds, we should generate sufficient public support for such high technology and science projects.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The farmer in distress

Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy but the sad part is that it is still in a rudimentary stage, which ultimately affects the overall economy. The most egregious and heartbreaking instance of the agricultural crisis is the ongoing strike by farmers in Maharashtra since June 1. Their basic demands, which range from a full waiver of farm loans, hikes in the minimum support price for agricultural produce to writing-off pending electricity bills, underscore their desolate condition. At the heart of the crisis is the unjustified fall in the prices of agricultural goods despite a bumper crop ascribed to a good monsoon this year, which has made farmers disillusioned. There have to be steps to reform the agricultural produce market committee system such as

ascribing each crop with genuine price signals, increasing crop insurance and introducing a model contract farming law. These will go a long way in freeing farmers from MSP-driven crop planning.

ANISHA, Rohtak, Haryana

■ In his 32-minute-long speech delivered extempore in the Central Hall of Parliament in May 2014, Narendra Modi said that his "government is one which thinks about the poor, listens to the poor and which exists for the poor.... This government is for the villagers, farmers, Dalits and the oppressed...." Now after reports of firing at and killing of farmers, is this what Mr. Modi meant when he said that "this government is for their aspirations"? Nothing can justify police firing on

agitating farmers and the government should have given utmost priority to redress their genuine grievances ("5 killed as police fire on M.P. farmers", June 7). The nation lives not because of its bureaucrats, politicians, rulers, engineers, doctors and the corporate world but because of our farmers. When they protest, this is not the way to counter them.

SUKUMARAN C.V., Palakkad, Kerala

Catching the rain

The IMD's prediction that the country is likely to receive more rains this monsoon than estimated is encouraging but the question is how far we are prepared to conserve all this rainwater ("IMD predicts more rain this monsoon", June 7). Storing rainwater during the monsoon season

is all the more important than saving it during summer and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that not a single drop is wasted. While governments should ensure desilting of tanks and other waterbodies periodically, households and individuals should practise water harvesting in their little ways which will vastly improve the water table.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

A hasty rollout?

As July 1, the day of reckoning, is fast approaching, news that the GST interface is not fully geared to make the implementation process simple and easier is shocking (June 7). It is unbelievable that a country which is home to some of the best software professionals is lagging

behind in building a foolproof system for its own needs. Rolling out the GST without getting the basics right will spell disaster for the economy in general and the common man in particular. The common man has yet to understand fully the implications and the extent of the GST. The attitude of the government seems to be that of crossing the bridge when it gets to it. Instead of taking everyone by surprise, the endeavour of the government should be to make the GST discernible. A panel comprising economists, bureaucrats, lawmakers and representatives from the chambers of commerce must iron out all issues. Perhaps the GST can be deferred by a few months, say to January 1, and aligned with the new financial year.

SUBRAMANIAN VENKATRAMAN, Chennai

Tall leader

In the demise of Era Sezhiyan, the nation has lost an affable, unassuming and knowledgeable parliamentarian who stood tall among political leaders and was loved by all irrespective of party affiliation ("Veteran parliamentarian Era Sezhiyan breathes his last at 95", June 7). On more than one occasion he refused to accept positions of power. He was an authority on parliamentary procedures and Speakers often looked up to him for clarifications and advice from time to time in exigencies. Leaders like Sezhiyan who maintained unquestionable probity in public life are difficult to come by in the present political scenario.

S. VAITHIANATHAN, Madurai

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