



A global slowdown?

Policymakers will have to bust recessionary fears with more than just monetary policy

Stock markets across the world had very little reason to celebrate in 2018. They witnessed the return of extreme volatility after many years, and most of them recorded their worst performance in a decade. Much of this gloom has to do with the rise in fears that global economic growth could come to a grinding halt in the near future. The economic expansion in the United States, which began after the 2008 recession, is now the second-longest in history. Many believe that a recession is overdue now. China is another major concern as the People's Bank of China's earlier moves to rein in a massive credit-fuelled bubble have been dampening momentum with a lagged effect. The country's private manufacturing sector contracted in December for the first time in 19 months and the official manufacturing PMI (purchasing managers' index) number dropped below 50 for the first time since mid-2016. Other major economies such as Europe and Japan have also shown signs of a potential slowdown in growth. Global stocks have been pricing in these very real risks, particularly with major central banks such as the U.S. Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank remaining on the path to normalise interest rates from near-historic lows. The steep fall in the price of oil is another indicator of faltering demand for commodities as the global economy cools down. The tightening of monetary policy has often been followed by a slowdown in economic growth, and this time may be no different.

Going forward, a major worry for policymakers globally will be the lack of sufficient central bank firepower should the global economy move into a full-fledged recession in 2019. After years of adopting a monetary policy regime marked by near-zero interest rates, central banks like the Fed now have very little room to lower rates if they want to fight a recession. This is despite the gradual tightening of rates and unwinding of asset purchases in the last few years. The next recession may thus witness central banks adopting even more unconventional methods to stimulate their economies. Some hope that governments will ramp up spending to compensate for the lack of monetary policy leeway. But it is unlikely that any fiscal stimulus will fully compensate for the absence of an accommodative monetary policy, particularly when most governments are already deeply mired in debt. Further, the overuse of monetary policy will eventually lead to diminishing returns. A further escalation in the trade war between the U.S. and China is another imminent risk to global growth as additional tariffs could increase the overall tax burden on the economy. In order to tackle the next recession, policymakers will have to come up with reforms to boost economic productivity, instead of just relying on an ultra-easy monetary policy to boost their economies.

Left out, abused

The shocking neglect of child care institutions must be urgently reversed

Child care institutions in India have been trapped in an administrative blind spot, as revelations of the sexual abuse of inmates in a *balika grih* at Muzaffarpur in Bihar showed last year. A home meant to protect girls rescued from exploitation itself turned into a den of predation. The shocking rot in the management of such shelters has now been reported by a Central government committee. It studied 9,589 Child Care Institutions and Homes, mostly run by NGOs, that come under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. Only an emergency measure to address the serious lacunae can bring some semblance of order to these faceless shelters. Most of the inmates are orphaned, abandoned, sexually abused, trafficked or victims of disasters and conflict. Among them are 7,422 children in conflict with the law, and 3,70,227 in need of care and protection, including 1,70,375 girls. That they often have to live in facilities without proper toilets, secure compounds or the opportunity to vent their grievances as provided for under law underscores the painful reality that they remain virtually invisible. Reform of this depressing system, as the Ministry of Women and Child Development seeks, can be achieved only through systematic scrutiny by State governments. This could be done by appointing special officers whose task it would be to ensure that all institutions register under the JJ Act, account for funds received by each, and enforce mandatory child protection policies during adoption.

As per the recently disclosed study, only 32% of Child Care Institutions or Homes were registered under the JJ Act as of 2016, while an equal number were unregistered, and the rest were either empanelled under other schemes or awaiting registration. The priority should be to bring about uniformity of standards and procedures, evolving common norms for infrastructure, human resources, financial practices and external audits. The panel found child care standards were poor in many institutions, sans proper bedding, food and nutrition and sanitation. Some States obviously have too few homes, giving authorities little incentive to take up cases of children in distress. Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Kerala together account for 43.5% of all shelters. A few States do not have even one home of every category, such as child care, observation and adoption. The Ministry's study lays bare the disconnect between civil society and the welfare system for children, and the poor engagement elected representatives have with such a vital function. The imperative now is to turn the findings of the Ministry's committee into a blueprint for action. Credentialed NGOs should take a greater interest in this effort, holding the authorities to account.



SUHASINI HAIDAR

Despite the White House's spirited denial of reports that it has issued no orders for the pullout of U.S. troops, the course seems set for a thinning of American presence in Afghanistan. U.S. President Donald Trump had promised this during his campaign, and several advisers have said since then that he is keen to bring back most, if not all, troops before his re-election bid in 2020. If anything, Mr. Trump's ill-judged remarks this week only underline his desire to leave: he suggested that regional players like Russia, India and Pakistan should be more involved in stabilising the situation, and mocked India for not doing enough.

As a result, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, that began as revenge for the 9/11 attacks, evolved into a mission for ensuring democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan. In recent years, challenged by the resurgence of the Taliban, it has now become a mission mainly to ensure an honourable exit. This isn't the first time the U.S. has sought to do this: President Barack Obama had faced similar challenges in 2010, just before he announced the big drawdown. As Mr. Trump now moves to cutting American presence to a few well-guarded military bases, India must consider the consequences closely.

Shift in policy

To begin with, it is time to recognise that the U.S.'s South Asia Strategy for Afghanistan, as an-

nounced by Mr. Trump in August 2017, has been discarded. Mr. Trump had defined the strategy with three features: that U.S. troops would remain involved in the country until "conditions", not a timeline, mandated their return; that the U.S. would put Pakistan on notice for its support to the Taliban and a political settlement with the Taliban would only follow "after an effective military effort"; and that the policy would hinge on further developing the strategic partnership with India

Sixteen months later, it is easy to see that each element of the U.S.'s policy on the ground has shifted, if not been entirely reversed. The appointment of special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in September to lead talks with the Taliban after a particularly brutal year shows that the U.S. is no longer waiting for military operations to take effect. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report to the U.S. Congress, casualties of Afghan National and Defence Security Forces in May-September 2018 were the "greatest it has ever been" compared to corresponding periods since 2001, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "documented more civilian deaths in the first nine months of 2018 than they had during the same nine-month reporting period since 2014".

Mr. Khalilzad's direct talks with the Taliban that cut out the National Unity government (NUG) in Kabul reportedly didn't even have President Ashraf Ghani in the loop until after the first talks were held in Qatar – this reversed the previous U.S. position not to engage the Taliban until it engages the NUG. Far from the tough talk on Pakistan for support to the Taliban, Mr. Trump wrote a letter to



Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan thanking him for his efforts. Afghanistan's High Peace Council members also disclosed that Mr. Khalilzad was on a deadline: Mr. Trump has reportedly given him six months to show results with the talks process, failing which the pullout may be speeded up.

The departure from the avowed U.S. position on an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" process has clearly ruffled feathers in Kabul. In December, Mr. Ghani appointed two aides of former President Hamid Karzai known for their hardline position on the Taliban and Pakistan as his Defence and Interior Ministers. Putting the seal on the clear drift in the U.S. Afghanistan and South Asia policy from the past was the exit of Defence Secretary James Mattis, author of the South Asia policy. Mr. Mattis had pushed most strenuously to keep India in the Afghan game by swinging a waiver for India on Chabahar and Iran oil purchases. It remains to be seen whether Mr. Trump will continue those waivers past May this year.

The internal situation in Afghanistan is aggravated now by the uncertainty of the democratic process. Parliamentary elections were held in October after being delayed by more than two years,

but even their preliminary results haven't yet been declared, casting doubt on the government's ability to conduct elections. Presidential elections have been postponed till July, despite the constitutional clause that they were to be completed by April 22, 2019. Meanwhile, Mr. Ghani has been unable to keep his commitment to hold a Loya Jirga (grand council of representatives) to turn Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's post in the NUG into an executive Prime Ministership.

A pragmatic view

For India, these developments may appear discouraging, but a more pragmatic view is necessary to deal with all possible outcomes. The U.S.'s eventual pullout as Afghanistan's peacekeeper is inevitable, and it would make more sense to prepare for it than to deny it will happen. New Delhi was caught off guard in 2010 when Mr. Obama planned the drawdown and discouraged India from a stake in projects there in an effort to placate Pakistan.

Mr. Trump's administration has no doubt been much more welcoming of Indian investment in Afghanistan, but that itself is symptomatic of his desire to pare down "Pax Americana" in every part of the world. The removal or reduction of the U.S. presence from most theatres of action has created space for regional players: leaving Syria to Iran and its allies; Yemen to Saudi Arabia; Afghanistan to players like Russia, Pakistan and Iran; and Pakistan to China.

Some other hard truths must be faced: India cannot replace Pakistan's position geographically, nor can it ever offer the U.S. or any other force what Pakistan has offered in the past, including bases and permission for U.S. forces to

bomb its own territory. The decision to abandon the SAARC in favour of groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) may have provided some short-lived returns in "isolating Pakistan", but it has had the effect of cutting Afghanistan loose from Indian leadership of South Asia as well. India's best course with Afghanistan remains its own regional strategy, not becoming a part of any other country's strategy. Close bilateral consultations like this week's visit to Delhi of National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib may not always yield dramatic headlines, but are the basis of India's ability to help Afghanistan according to its needs, not India's ambitions, and the reason for the immense popularity and goodwill India continues to enjoy in Afghanistan.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise the cyclical nature of interventions in Afghanistan, which has been called the "graveyard of empires" for forcing all world powers to retreat at some point or the other. The words of Rev. George Gleig, a soldier who survived the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), are worth remembering: "A war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it." Greig's description of the British retreat could ring true for Soviet forces in the 1980s, and American forces post-9/11 as well.

— suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

The Hindutva overhang

The BJP's loss in the recent Assembly elections is not enough to merit cheer about India's secularism



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

Despite the loss of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three Hindi heartland States – Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh – there is little to cheer for India's secularism. Looking at the campaign and manifestos of the two national parties, it is apparent that the campaign framework was generally defined more by competitive Hindutva. Let there be no illusion: the mere electoral defeat of the BJP does not mark the end of Hindutva as such, not even its retreat. Given the hegemonic position that the BJP has established at present, even a defeat in 2019 could be only a transitory retreat. Given that the difference in vote share between the BJP and the Congress was so small in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the BJP could easily return to power after the next Assembly elections with even mild anti-incumbency.

In the early 1980s, economist Pranab Bardhan described the Indian state as a patronage dispensing one, a formulation that remains valid even during India's liberalisation post-1991. With the dimming of the Modi wave on the electoral landscape, though it took longer than expected, the 2019 parliamentary election will likely be party-driven and, more specifically, candidate-centric. Thus, a candidate of any party with a profile to offer better patronage could have a higher chance of succeeding at the hustings, implying greater decentralised use of money and muscle power.

Some of the buzzwords of the 2014 campaign – such as the Gujarat model, 56-inch chest, or even Congress-mukt Bharat – will not dominate 2019. Indeed, talk of the Gujarat model has receded from the campaign vocabulary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for quite some time now.

Meaning of 'Congress-mukt'

Unfortunately, serious academic research on the Congress party is rather limited and has been far less compared to what we have on the BJP or the Left parties, or even the Aam Aadmi Party. The deeply



intertwined narrative of the Congress party with modern India has many complex layers. The fact that the Congress sometimes deviated sharply from its founding values was often felt by many of its stalwarts, both before and after the Gandhi family monopolised its leadership. Without trivialising heroic contributions made by non-Congress leaders, it would be fair to say that many of the dissenting Congress leaders often played stellar roles in leading movements against the Congress governments, so much so that they literally helped set up almost all the non-Congress governments till 2014.

Consider the role of former Congress leaders such as Chandra Shekhar and Morarji Desai in 1977;

V.P. Singh in 1989; I.K. Gujral and even P. Chidambaram from 1996 to 98; or Mamata Banerjee as part of the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance in 1999. Regardless of our view on the Congress party, any dispassionate and objective study calls for critical scrutiny of the centrality of the Congress party's role in the making and un-making of modern India. But Mr. Modi's clarion call to make India Congress-mukt, without doubt, has been ideologically inspired and can be traced to the Hindu Right's ambition in the 1920s to build a Hindu Rashtra. To say that such a call by Mr. Modi is mainly inspired by the Gandhi family's misrule would be a gross misreading of the ideological evolution of India's political history.

Targeting minorities

On Muslim representation, the story is not particularly inspiring either. The BJP fielded only one Muslim candidate each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and both lost. The Congress fielded 15 in Rajasthan, out of whom seven won. In the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, there are only two Muslim MLAs.

Mob lynching is perhaps the most pernicious consequence of

the growing aggression of Hindutva politics since 2014, and the pattern it has set poses the most mortal threat to India's secular fabric. Yet, lynching barely figured as an issue of secularism during the campaign in the recent Assembly elections – although India's first 'Cow Minister' in Rajasthan, Otar Dewasi of the BJP, lost to an independent candidate.

The secular test

From Dadri in 2015 to Bulandshahr in 2018, a new trend has appeared, representing the changing face of violence against Muslims, in which victims are presented as perpetrators and the latter often enjoy the active state patronage. The end of state complicity in perpetuating violence and harassment against Muslims is the least that could be expected from the newly installed Congress regimes in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Those who wish to play the secular card in 2019 must recognise that they need to promise a lynch-free India to begin with.

— Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and has edited the recent book 'Rise of Saffron Power'

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.

Women in Sabarimala

The entry of three women into the Sabarimala temple is as far-reaching a change as the Channar revolt that won Nadar women the right to wear upper-body clothes and the consecration of a Shiva temple at Aruvippuram by Sri Narayana Guru ("Breaking barriers", Jan. 4). It is clear from the protests that it is not the male Ayyappa devotees who are against the judgment; it is those who are trying to foment unrest in a bid to gain some relevance in Kerala politics. What is shameful is that the Congress in Kerala has become the mirror image of the BJP and is making common cause with the latter to perpetuate a discriminatory custom.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode

are seen as polluting and impure. It is shameful that menstruation is seen as impure when it is a natural occurrence. Archaic practices and beliefs cannot continue in the name of tradition.

SANGEETA KAMPANI,
New Delhi

By entering the temple, the women have hurt the faith of millions of devotees. If they were true devotees, they would not have done something against a long-standing tradition and in such a furtive manner. Their act shows not devotion but a dogged determination to simply break tradition.

M. PRADYU,
Kannur

If the verdict of the court does not appeal to a group of people, they should take the legal route to question it, not resort to violence. And priests cannot take political decisions and

confuse the public; they are not outside of the law.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur

I wonder what would have happened if Muslims had protested against a court order in the manner that is happening in Kerala. They would have probably been branded as 'lawless' and 'enemies of the state'. The Prime Minister says Sabarimala is about tradition and triple talaq is about gender equality. The government and the courts should either look into the question of gender equality in all religions (in which case laws and judgments should be respected by all) or wait for social reform to unfold on its own.

Z. RAHMANI,
Delhi

It is not the temple that needed to be "purified" through rituals; it is our mindset. What a pity that despite having a great

Constitution and a Supreme Court, priests decide what is the correct thing to do. This is a country where goddesses are venerated; yet, when women enter a temple, people want to rid it of "impurities".

SHUBHAM YADAV,
Lucknow

What was the need for the government to implement the court order in such an emotionally charged atmosphere? It could have asked for time. Given that Kerala is recovering from the terrible floods of last year, there was anyway little time to make security arrangements.

VISWANATHAN P.K.,
Palaikad

Judicial overreach is what has led to the distressing situation in Sabarimala. The matter is one of faith, not of a constitutional right. The court should not have taken up this case. There have been many instances of

judicial overreach recently, notable among them being the ban on fireworks last Deepavali. Instead of taking up cases like Sabarimala and the cracker ban, the court should concentrate on resolving the cases already at hand.

S. KAMAT,
Santa Cruz

Trump mocks India

It is typical of U.S. President Donald Trump, an anti-intellectual preoccupied with military might as a means of shaping a better world, to mock the building of a library ("Trump's

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A sentence in the Business page story headlined "Object of IBC paramount, says NCLT" (Jan. 4, 2019) read: "The original promoters of the beleaguered steel firm [Essar] had put in a higher bid after the last date was over. A day later, the CoC decided in ArcelorMittal's favour." Actually, in the evening of the same day on which the Essar bid was received, the CoC decided in ArcelorMittal's favour.

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