



The heat moves north

The BJP has more to lose than gain in the fourth phase of the Lok Sabha polls

In the fourth phase of the 17th Lok Sabha election, 72 constituencies across nine States and including parts of Anantnag in Jammu and Kashmir went to the polls on Monday. The BJP had won 45 of these 71 seats in the 16th Lok Sabha and its allies held another 11, indicating how critical this phase was for the incumbent dispensation. In the remaining phases too this pattern will continue. With the fourth phase, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, two States in which the BJP and the Congress are in straight contests, started voting. In 2014 the BJP had won all 25 seats in Rajasthan, and in Madhya Pradesh, 27 out of 29 seats. Violence in parts of West Bengal cast a shadow on the process and pointed to a volatile situation in the State that could lead to more violence in the coming phases. The BJP's designs are to pick up a good number of seats in West Bengal to partly compensate for the losses that it is certain to face in the Hindi heartland where it had peaked in 2014. The Election Commission has ordered an FIR against the BJP's Asansol candidate Babul Supriyo for trespassing into a polling booth and intimidating an officer. The EC must remain alert to ensure that polling remains free of violence and intimidation. In Maharashtra and Odisha, voting has ended. Five constituencies in Bihar and 13 in Uttar Pradesh voted in the fourth phase. The BJP and its allies are being challenged by regional alliances in the two States. Three constituencies in Jharkhand, six in Madhya Pradesh, six in Odisha, eight in West Bengal, 17 in Maharashtra, and 13 in Rajasthan voted on Monday.

As the election moves to the last three phases, the BJP and its opponents appear to be fine-tuning their strategies. The minimum income guarantee scheme promised by the Congress in its manifesto has not become a defining topic, much to the party's disappointment. The Samajwadi Party, which is in alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party, has replaced its candidate against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Varanasi, in an effort to challenge him on the issue of national security, his key talking point. The new candidate, Tej Bahadur Yadav, was dismissed from the Border Security Force for circulating videos about poor quality food in the front lines. Mr. Modi claims to provide soldiers the best support, and Mr. Yadav's candidacy is the alliance's attempt to question that claim. In its heartfelt strongholds, the BJP is relying heavily on its core Hindutva agenda. Mr. Modi and BJP president Amit Shah have defended their decision to field terror-accused Pragya Singh Thakur in Bhopal, and in fact used her candidacy to push the idea of Hindu victimhood, a key driver of their kind of politics. The EC's inaction in the face of multiple complaints from the Congress and other parties against Mr. Modi remains a matter of concern, and the matter is now before the Supreme Court.

Biden's bid

Biden might be the strongest Democratic candidate, but he is not necessarily the best

Former Vice-President Joseph Biden has finally announced his candidacy for the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Though the 20th candidate to join the race for the Democratic ticket, he is among the most prominent – he comes with both administrative and legislative experience and has support among establishment Democrats. He has joined the race as a front-runner, with one poll seeing a six-point lead for him over his nearest rival, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont. Mr. Biden also brings into focus the legacy of President Barack Obama. Vice-President in the Obama White House for eight years, he has been a strong proponent of the Affordable Care Act and an advocate of free college. But compared to his main rivals in the Democratic primaries, such as Senators Sanders and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts – one is a self-declared Democratic Socialist and the other is a Social Democrat – Mr. Biden is more of a centrist than a leftist insurgent. His views on health care, besides his support for Obamacare, are not very well-known. He has neither endorsed nor disavowed “Medicare for All”, which has emerged as a major campaign slogan among the Democrats. He has not offered any radical economic proposal either, such as, say, Ms. Warren's \$1.25 trillion education proposal to tackle college costs and student debt traps, or Mr. Sanders's repeated vow to take Wall Street to task.

The ease with which Mr. Biden raised \$6.3 million in 24 hours since he announced his entry into the race suggests that he has the support of big money as well. But all this does not ensure that his path to a candidacy would be easy. Mr. Biden's most important challenge would be his own record as a legislator. He had led the efforts to pass the 1994 crime Bill, which many liberals and progressives attack for contributing to mass imprisonment, especially of African-American people. He co-sponsored the controversial Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, which led to mass arrests, and voted in favour of the Iraq invasion in 2003. His harsh questioning in 1991 of Anita Hill, who had accused Clarence Thomas, now a Supreme Court justice, of sexual harassment, has come into focus recently. Besides, several women have spoken against Mr. Biden in recent months, alleging that his physical conduct made them feel uncomfortable. He has tried to distance himself from this past. Earlier this year, he said he wasn't “always right” on criminal justice; he regretted his support for the anti-Drug Abuse Act; he has spoken to Ms. Hill in private and vowed to be “more mindful” with women. But the question is whether Mr. Biden, with the burden of this record and his centrist politics, will appeal to the base of the Democratic Party at a time when a wide variety of leaders, from Mr. Sanders to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, are pushing it to the left of centre.

No good options in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, ‘reconciliation’ means different things to different players and to different groups of Afghans



RAKESH SOOD

During the last 50 years, Afghanistan has been through different governance systems – monarchy till 1973; communist type rule, initially home-grown and then imposed by the U.S.S.R. with its 1979 intervention; jihadi warlordism in the early 1990s; shariat-based Taliban rule; and a democratic republic based on a presidential system since 2004. Wracked by a growing Taliban insurgency, peace today remains elusive. Reconciliation with the Taliban is increasingly projected as the way forward. But ‘reconciliation’ means different things to different players and to different groups of Afghans.

Negotiating a U.S. exit

The U.S. began its operations in Afghanistan, primarily against the al-Qaeda, 18 years ago. As it set about creating new institutional structures in Afghanistan, supported by the international community, U.S. troop presence began to grow. From a few thousand in 2002, the numbers increased and stabilised around 20,000 between 2004 and 2006 when they started climbing. By 2010, it had spiked to 1,00,000, dropping to 10,000 in 2016 and currently numbers around 15,000. The cumulative cost has been over \$800 billion on U.S. deployments and \$105 billion on rebuilding Afghanistan, with nearly 2,400 American soldiers dead.

U.S. President Donald Trump's policy announced in August 2017 was aimed at breaking the military stalemate by authorising a small increase in U.S. presence, removing operational constraints, putting Pakistan on notice, improving governance and strengthening the

capabilities of Afghan security forces. Within a year, the policy failure was apparent. Afghan government continued to lose territory and today controls less than half the country. Since 2015, Afghan security forces have suffered 45,000 casualties with over 3,000 civilians killed every year.

Last year, U.S. senior officials travelled to Doha to open talks with the Taliban, followed by the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation. Five rounds of talks have been held and a sixth is likely soon. Mr. Khalilzad is seeking guarantees that the Taliban will not provide safe haven to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Afghan territory will not be used to launch strikes against the U.S., while the Taliban have demanded a date for U.S. withdrawal along with the release of all Taliban detainees in Guantánamo and Afghanistan. Mr. Khalilzad has also sought a ceasefire in Afghanistan and engagement in an intra-Afghan dialogue in return. The Taliban have responded with their new spring offensive, al-Fath, and refuse to engage with the Afghan government. An intra-Afghan dialogue with political and civil society leaders planned for around the third week of this month in Doha was called off on account of the presence of Afghan officials.

It is clear that Mr. Khalilzad is not negotiating peace in Afghanistan; he is negotiating a managed U.S. exit. Given the blood and treasure expended, the optics of the exit is important. As former U.S. Defence Secretary J. Mattis said, “The U.S. doesn't lose wars, it loses interest”.

Increasing polarisation

There is growing polarisation in Afghanistan along ethnic and even sectarian divides. With three presidential elections (in 2004, 2009 and 2014) and three parliamentary elections (in 2005, 2010 and 2018),



faith in the electoral process and the election machinery has eroded.

The 2009 presidential election showed the growing mistrust between then President Hamid Karzai and Washington. The U.S. kept pushing Mr. Karzai to agree to a second round between him and his rival Abdullah Abdullah despite Mr. Karzai's insistence that he had won more than 50% votes in the first round. After months of wrangling when Mr. Karzai agreed, Dr. Abdullah backed out and Mr. Karzai felt that his second term had been tarnished.

The 2014 election yielded a disputed result with neither Ashraf Ghani nor Dr. Abdullah willing to concede. Despite an audit, results were never declared. Instead, the U.S.-backed political compromise produced a National Unity Government (NUG) with Ashraf Ghani as President and Dr. Abdullah as CEO, a position never legitimised by the promised constitutional amendment. The NUG has aggravated polarisation and has often found itself paralysed.

The 2019 presidential election, due in April has been postponed twice, to July and now to September 28. This may have been pushed by the U.S. to give time to Mr. Khalilzad for his talks, but any further postponement will not be accepted by the people in view of the eroding legitimacy of the NUG.

Parliamentary elections due in 2015 were finally held in October 2018 even though the promised electoral reforms remained unimplemented. Under the circum-

stances, the results have yet to be declared six months later, further delegitimising the process. Together with the deteriorating security situation, the prospects for a credible and legitimate election in September seem remote.

This is why there is growing support among certain Afghan sections for an interim government. Such an arrangement would prepare the ground for fresh elections after constitutional amendments and electoral reforms using the Loya Jirga process over the next two years. Expectedly, this is strongly opposed by the more secular and liberal Afghan groups, including women, which see any such move as a step back from the democratic principles of the 2004 constitution. The real risk is that as Western funding for salaries and equipment dries up and political legitimacy of Kabul erodes, the cohesiveness of the Afghan security forces will be impacted.

Elusive peace

Just as there is no domestic consensus on the terms of reconciliation with Taliban, there is a breakdown of regional consensus too. Mr. Khalilzad met with his Russian and Chinese counterparts in Moscow where the three reiterated support for “an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process”. However, there is no common understanding of what it means or which Afghans should own and lead the process. The NUG feels abandoned and has blamed Mr. Khalilzad of betraying the Afghan government; the U.S. has demanded an apology from the Afghan NSA, Hamdullah Mohib, for his outburst against the U.S.

Moscow has its own format for talks and is convinced that the U.S.-backed experiment of the NUG needs to end – the sooner the better. Chinese interest is primarily with securing its Xinjiang province and the Belt and Road Initiative projects in the region. Iran

maintains its own lines with the Taliban even as elements of the Syria returned, battle-hardened Fatiemyoun brigade have given it additional leverage.

The Pakistan factor

Pakistan is once again centre-stage as the country with maximum leverage. To demonstrate its support, Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a leader and founder of the Taliban, after keeping him in custody for nearly nine years. Ironically, he was picked up because he had opened direct talks with the Karzai government a decade ago and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was furious when it learnt about it. The ISI's investment in providing safe haven to the Taliban for 18 years is finally paying off as the U.S. negotiates its exit while the Taliban negotiate their return. A sense of triumphalism was visible in Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent statement suggesting the formation of an interim government in Kabul to overcome the hurdles in the Doha talks provoking a furious backlash from Afghanistan from the government and the opposition figures. Even Mr. Khalilzad dubbed the statement as ‘inappropriate’. Pakistan has since backtracked but it shows that old habits die hard.

Even without getting into details of why the post-Bonn order in Afghanistan is fraying, there is agreement that peace in Afghanistan cannot be restored by military action. It is also clear that a prolonged U.S. military presence is not an answer. The problem is that a U.S. withdrawal will end the U.S. war in Afghanistan but without a domestic and regional consensus, it will not bring peace to Afghanistan. Sadly, today there are no good options in Afghanistan.

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Line of confidence

Streamlining business across the Line of Control will require both infrastructural and policy-level interventions



AFAQ HUSSAIN & RIYA SINHA

In the last decade, the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir has often been re-interpreted as the line of commerce and co-operation. This paradigm shift was the result of initiation of two confidence-building measures (CBMs) between India and Pakistan – cross-LoC trade and cross-LoC travel. It was representative of a constructive bilateral engagement process in the midst of political upheavals. Stakeholders were hopeful that while cross-LoC travel would connect divided families, cross-LoC trade would foster economic ties between Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) that would eventually help reap the peace dividend. However, on April 18, the government of India announced the suspension from midnight of trade at the two designated points expressing concerns over ‘illegal inflows of weapons, narcotics and currency’ in the country. ‘A stricter regulatory regime’ is expected for re-initiation of trade.

Cross-LoC trade is an intra-Jammu and Kashmir trade, in the form of barter of goods on a reciprocal

basis. Started on October 21, 2008, the trade has been conducted through a standard operating procedure (SOP) mutually agreed by New Delhi and Islamabad. The SOP enlists the 21 categories of items to be traded on zero tariffs. LoC trade takes place four days a week, wherein traders are allowed to exchange 70 trucks per day. The trade-in (import) and trade-out (export) goods have to be balanced to zero for each trading firm within a period of three months.

What data show

The total number of traders registered at the Salamabad Trade Facilitation Centre (TFC), Uri, and Chakan-da-Bagh TFC, Poonch, is approximately 600. Since 2008, trade has shown an average year-on-year growth of about 19%, reaching a cumulative value of over ₹6,500 crore to date. Furthermore, it has generated more than 1.6 lakh job days. To date, more than 1 lakh trucks laden with goods have been exchanged, generating approximate freight revenue of ₹66.50 crore for transporters of Jammu and Kashmir. These figures are indicative of the potential that this trade holds for social and economic development within Jammu and Kashmir.

Despite its success in generating economic benefits, the operational and policy level deficiencies render the trade vulnerable to mis-



conceptions and malpractices. Lack of clarity in the SOP towards rules of origin, items list, goods and services tax (GST)/local taxation mechanisms are some of the limitations. To further exemplify, a practice of ‘trade number selling’ was prevalent at the TFCs wherein few trading firms sell their registration/token numbers to other trading firms to send the latter's goods across the LoC out of turn in the roster system. This practice has created a gap between the number of genuine traders and traders involved only in ‘trade number selling’. The issue is compounded by the presence of ‘seasonal traders’, that is, traders who are active only for few months, thereby leaving a negative balance overall in the barter trade.

These issues, coupled with a number of infrastructural issues such as a non-functional weighbridge, lack of CCTV cameras and truck scanners, and an absence of regular communication channels warrant reforms in the trade practices.

The unexpected suspension of the trade has affected locals. Traders have incurred significant losses as most of the goods were in transit while some goods were sold at a lower price in the local markets of Jammu and Kashmir. Traders who were awaiting the trade-in goods in exchange of the goods sent earlier have also incurred heavy losses and a negative trade balance against their firms.

What is the way out?

Streamlining LoC trade would require both infrastructural and policy level interventions. First, a revision in the SOP is required to highlight the trader re-registration process; we need clarity on the ‘rules of origin’ of goods; tradeable commodities need to be identified that will benefit the local economy of Jammu and Kashmir, and further eight-digit HS (harmonised system) codes must be assigned to ensure clarity on the items. The SOP must also specify the modality of movement of trucks across the LoC as well as clarity on filing of GST/other local taxes. A token system on a first-come-first-serve basis should be explored. This will check the misuse of trade registration number in the roster system.

Second, digitisation of the TFCs must take place to make the process of record keeping easy, transparent and accessible to various regulatory agencies. Third, the digitised TFCs should be enabled

with a ‘trader notification system’ for timely reminders to achieve zero barter balance for continuation of trade.

Fourth, in case of non-compliance, a strict ‘trader de-listing policy’ needs to be put in place wherein any trader with a negative balance in barter for more than the designated time period can be suspended from conducting trade. Fifth, regular meetings must also be held between the trade facilitation officers of both sides of the LoC to ensure co-ordination of such activities and exchange of the list of suspended/banned traders.

Finally, infrastructure upgradation such as installation of truck scanners, functional CCTV cameras for security, and calibration of weighbridges, are essential to check the inflow of banned items, narcotics and weapons.

The gains made by India and Pakistan through initiation of cross-LoC trade and travel have manifested themselves in the form of recent talks of opening the Sharda Peeth corridor in PoK as another CBM. An important lesson is to be learnt here, optics and rhetoric aside, is that the sustenance of a CBM requires regular policy and operational-level interventions.

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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.

Cleaner fuels

The government must acknowledge and understand that infrastructure development is a prerequisite and the very first step if we need to think of an all-electric vehicle future. Once the infrastructure for e-vehicles is developed it is bound to be a cakewalk for automobile companies to place and promote such vehicles which would eventually boost the economy, lower dependency on conventional fuels and, save the environment (Editorial, “Downbeat diesel”, April 29).

AVIK SETH,
Zirakpur, Mohali, Punjab

cause for alarm. Apart from cutting down on diesel use, keeping the environment in mind, there needs to be a restrictive policy on the use of multiple vehicles per family, a cap on travel over a period, compulsory travel using mass transportation systems, and an accounting of the carbon footprint with an annual reward system in the taxation system.

N. VIJAI,
Coimbatore

■ The need to switch to cleaner fuels is gaining importance and the government needs to be pragmatic. One of the steps that could be implemented on a large scale is a switching over to ‘gashol’ (a combination of gasoline and ethanol). As India is an agriculture-based country, a

number of crops and their residues can be used to enable bioethanol production. The use of biodiesel can also be promoted by transesterification of algal biomass.

These are just a few examples of moving towards greener fuel options.

PRERNA SUHAG,
Bahadurgarh, Haryana

■ Policymakers need to think even beyond the Bharat Stage VI emission standard. There must be a push towards alternate fuel vehicles especially those that use electric mobility. This requires affordable production of reliable and sturdy hybrid vehicles. Therefore, huge money infusion in the form of a subsidy and research and

development in such technology is a necessity.

VYSHALI KARTHIKEYAN,
Bengaluru

■ Upgrading to BS VI norms can be only a respite. Tackling increasing pollution needs to deal with in a more holistic approach. Policymakers also need to realise that Euro emission standards will get more stringent in the future and India will still be way behind. This will have a negative impact on vehicle manufacturers as they will have to comply with different emission norms.

PRAVEER VERMA,
Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

Fresh treatment

Where relevant, curricula must reflect changing trends and developments.

Therefore, making the necessary changes in medical education cannot be an exception. But any such changes should be discussed and debated by experts of the field before taken up for implementation. Since medical education is an

important aspect in society, any change should be applied with more care and better consensus (“New MBBS syllabus to roll out in August”, April 29).

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the Editorial page article, “An ineffectual angel” (April 29, 2019), a sentence in a paragraph on public faith in the electoral process read: “However, with three phases of the election having come and gone, the Court is yet to even decide upon the petition.” It should have said: “However, the Court only increased the verification from one EVM per constituency to five, without any detailed reasons.”

In the report headlined “Fire on INS Vikramaditya claims officer's life” (April 27, 2019), the reference to a board of inquiry to investigate the circumstances that led to the fire should be changed to a Court of Inquiry.

A national page headline (April 26, 2019) erroneously said “Khasi ‘kingdoms’ to revisit 1947 agreements.” It should be called 1948 agreements as the approval from the Governor-General came in 1948 though the signing process began in 1947.

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