



## Stooping to conquer

BJP exhibited its superior floor management in the Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman's election

It was never going to be easy for the Bharatiya Janata Party to get a candidate of its choice elected as the Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. The ruling party and its allies fell short of a majority in the House. But what it lacked in numbers, the party made up in tact and ploy. First, in choosing a member of the Janata Dal (United), a friend-turned-foe-turned-friend, as the candidate, the BJP sent out the signal that it was willing to be more accommodative to parties that support it. Second, in reaching out to the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, a party seeking to maintain equidistance between the Congress and the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi demonstrated a readiness to make peace without standing on prestige. Indeed, by proposing a JD(U) MP, Hariwansh, for the post, the BJP found it easier to seek the support of other parties. Once the deal with the BJD was sealed, Congress candidate B.K. Hariprasad stood no chance. Mr. Hariprasad failed to win the support of MPs from parties such as the Peoples Democratic Party, which, though estranged from the BJP, is not keen on supporting the Congress. Whether the deal with the BJD will have significance beyond the election of the Deputy Chairman is not clear yet. With the BJP making rapid strides in Odisha, a BJP-BJD alliance is unlikely. However, it remains to be seen whether this influences floor coordination among Opposition parties during voting or while debating on policy issues. Until recently, the Opposition enjoyed the majority in the House and was able to stall legislation. This may change if the BJD sees a longer term interest in coordinating with the BJP on specific issues. In retrospect, the Congress might have missed a trick in not making the effort to win over the BJD and the Aam Aadmi Party.

Read together with the numbers from the recent no-confidence vote in the Lok Sabha, the one thing that this election confirms is that Opposition unity is still very much a work in progress. The BJP and the Congress may be the principal players at the national level, but they are nowhere close to being the two poles of the next Lok Sabha election. A few regional players such as the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, the Telugu Desam Party, and the BJD could well find themselves pitched against both the Congress and the BJP then. And if the Lok Sabha election results push the BJP's National Democratic Alliance well ahead of a Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, there is no saying which formation these parties will support. Therefore, the Congress will need to beat back the BJP in States where the two parties are locked in a head-to-head contest; otherwise, it will be difficult for it to stitch together an effective and successful pre-poll or post-poll alliance.

## Endless war

The global community fails Yemen by not pressuring Saudi Arabia to cease the attacks

The attack on a bus in a crowded market in southern Yemen that killed at least 45 people, most of them children, is the latest atrocity in the military intervention led by Saudi Arabia that began over three years ago. During this period, Riyadh has paid little attention to growing international criticism of its use of excessive force in Yemen, which plunged the country, among the poorest in West Asia, into what the United Nations calls the world's most severe humanitarian crisis. The bus attack comes a week after Saudi war planes targeted the port city Hodeida, which is already under siege, killing at least 28 people and wounding dozens more. Since Saudi Arabia launched air strikes on Yemen's Shia Houthi rebels, who captured huge swathes of territory, including the capital Sanaa, the civilian toll has been particularly high. The Saudi-led coalition, backed by the U.S., targeted public infrastructure, killed thousands of civilians, displaced hundreds of thousands more and even laid siege to major cities, blocking food and aid supplies. With no functional government in place and the rebels fighting the Saudi invasion, Yemen's 28 million people have been practically abandoned by the world. In recent years, the country has had an unprecedented cholera outbreak that killed over 2,000 people. The health-care system has collapsed, millions of people have been cut off from regular access to clean water, and more than eight million people threatened by acute hunger.

Saudi Arabia has not been deterred by any of this. Nor has it come under any serious international pressure to halt its catastrophic campaign. Its response to the bus bombing has been callous: it said the attack was "a legitimate military action", and accused the rebels of using children as human shields. The Saudis say the Houthi rebels are backed by Iran, its regional rival; also that its campaign has been on behalf of the internationally recognised government of Yemen. Curiously, Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi is nowhere to be seen; he is reported to be under house arrest in Riyadh. The military campaign has been a failure from a strategic point of view as well. After more than three years of relentless bombing, the rebels are still entrenched in their areas of influence, including Sanaa. It is high time the international community paid serious attention to the voices of the battered Yemenis. The U.S. continues to support this disastrous aggression, with other leading global powers failing to do anything more than condemn rights violations. The plight of Yemenis will get progressively worse unless enough pressure is brought to bear upon Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia and the main architect of the Kingdom's aggressive foreign policy. He should stop the war and push for a negotiated settlement between the Yemeni government and the rebels.

# The rise and rise of Boris Johnson

His popularity shows that the Trump playbook of pandering to prejudice is working across Europe



VIDYA RAM

Last year, during a visit to Myanmar, Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, visited the Shwedagon Paya, one of Buddhism's most sacred sites, adopting the usual freestyle, somewhat awkward, bumbling tone he had become known for. As he rang ancient bells, he recited a fragment of Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Mandalay', including, "The temple bells they say/ Come you back you English soldier." The invocation of the colonial-era poem clearly caught the British Ambassador off guard: he was captured on camera firmly stopping Mr. Johnson from proceeding further with the recital, saying it was "not a good idea" and "not appropriate". While the remark did indeed provoke criticism at home and beyond, it was dismissed by many as yet another Boris "gaffe", one of many that he has clocked up over his political career.

### History of gaffes

Mr. Johnson's time as Foreign Secretary was peppered with controversial moments, including his remarks on boosting the whisky trade between India and the U.K. during a visit to a British gurdwara. There was a "joke" about boosting British investment into Libya. "They have got a brilliant vision to turn Sirte, with the help of the municipality of Sirte, into the next Dubai... the only thing they've got to do is clear the dead bodies," he said in 2017. And there

was a moment during a visit to New Zealand where he compared the traditional Maori greeting to a head butt that could be "misinterpreted in a pub in Glasgow".

It might be easy to dismiss some of these but there were others that had to be seen in a more serious light, such as his mis-characterisation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British charity worker imprisoned in Iran, as "teaching journalists". His comments provoked an outcry at the time, going against her insistence she had simply been on holiday, and were seen as worsening her already abysmal plight in the country. Mr. Johnson's typical response to these controversies has been to offer a non-apology.

His early blunders, during his time as Mayor of London served to strengthen his image, particularly beyond Britain's shores, as the flamboyant, floppy-haired, Etonian given to faux-pas that wouldn't be out of place in a P.G. Wodehouse novel. His later ones were the subject of more serious scrutiny, including questions around his appropriateness as the head of Britain's Foreign Office at a time when its relations with the world outside Europe matter more than ever, but they have been by and large treated as blunders. Even at the time this was a rather naïve assumption given Mr. Johnson's background: Oxford-educated, he once edited the conservative magazine, *The Spectator*, and savvily sensed the direction of British politics by finally leaping into the Brexit camp after he had drafted two columns, each taking a different position on Brexit.

### The latest outrage

Mr. Johnson's latest comments on the burka challenge suggest a much more methodological, delib-



REUTERS

erate approach. In the face of a public outcry - including criticism from Prime Minister Theresa May and calls for the party whip to be taken from him - he has stood firmly by his comments in *The Daily Telegraph* earlier this week. He described the burka as "oppressive and ridiculous" and compared women who wore them to "letter boxes". Subsequently, he has let it be known that he viewed the calls for an apology as "ridiculous", citing it as part of his effort to speak up for "liberal values". It is not the only time he has caused such offence: before he became London Mayor, he once used a racist slur to refer to the people the Queen would meet on her trips across the Commonwealth.

The latest comments come at a particularly difficult time for the ruling Conservative Party, already suffering from great ideological differences within its ranks particularly on Brexit and the immigration policy. While the Labour Party has faced criticism over its treatment of anti-Semitism within its ranks, the Conservatives have been accused of tolerating Islamophobia within theirs. Earlier this year, the Muslim Council of Britain used the instance of a meeting in Parliament attended by Tapan Ghosh, the leader of the Hindu Samhati, last year, to highlight a "wider problem" of Islamophobia

within party - the room had been booked through the office of a Conservative MP. Mr. Johnson's latest comments have provoked anger from both Muslim and non-Muslim members of the Conservative Party, with one senior MP, Dominic Grieve, suggesting he would leave the party should the former become its leader. For its part, the party said it had launched a disciplinary investigation into Mr. Johnson's comments on the burka.

However, he has had many defenders too - a recent poll for Sky News found that up to 60% of the public did not view his comments as racist, and conservatives in both Britain and the U.S. have defended him. One Breitbart commentator suggested he needed to go "full Donald Trump". In fact when Mr. Trump became U.S. President, Mr. Johnson's congratulatory message was among the most effusive of senior politicians globally. "I am increasingly admiring of Donald Trump," Mr. Johnson remarked earlier this year, while Mr. Trump in turn suggested that Mr. Johnson would make a "great Prime Minister".

Mr. Johnson's prime ministerial aspirations are of course no secret. During his time as Foreign Secretary until his resignation in early July in protest against the direction of the government's Brexit policy, many of his actions were seen as attempts to undermine Ms. May: such as publishing a 4,000 word essay on his vision of Brexit just before a major speech by her. He is seen as a front-runner to replace her: in early August just before his comments on the burka but after his resignation, he came in as the most popular person to replace Ms. May in a poll by Conservative Home, suggesting his in-

creasingly right-ward politics was striking a chord with the party membership. He is not the only one in his party to have benefited from its internalisation of increasingly right-wing policies, as has been seen with the rise of Jacob Rees-Mogg, the chair of the anti-Brexit European Research Group, whose particularly conservative vein of Conservatism (he opposes abortion under any circumstances as well as same sex marriage, and has boasted of never changing a diaper for any of his six children) has made him the unlikely figure-head of a young right-wing party movement dubbed "Mogg-mentum".

### The nationalist arc

It would hardly come as a surprise that Steve Bannon, the former chairman of the alt-right Breitbart News and former adviser to Mr. Trump, has admitted to being in regular communications with Mr. Johnson. Mr. Bannon has spoken of his eagerness to build an anti-European Union, nationalist movement across Europe, and has described the British politician as one of the "most important persons on the world stage". Mr. Johnson's latest comments - and the outcry against him - will only serve to strengthen his appeal to the right.

What will happen to Mr. Johnson within the Conservative Party remains to be seen: disciplinary action could very well follow, which would help build his image as a "martyr" of the alt-right. One thing is clear though: his political days are far from over, as the Trump playbook of pandering to prejudice and division gains admirers in Europe.

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# Best of friends, worthy rivals

Ambition could never completely destroy the friendship between Karunanidhi and MGR



R. KANNAN

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader M. Karunanidhi's touching eulogy, of December 24, 1987, to his "dear friend Dr. MGR" (M.G. Ramachandran) was both poignant and gracious. The two had been the best of friends and collaborators until they reached the pinnacle of fame, wealth and power. The high point of their cooperation came in 1969 when with his friend's support, Karunanidhi overtook the next in line, Era. Nedunchezian, to succeed party founder C.N. Annadurai (Anna) as Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister and head of the party. In return, Karunanidhi ensured that MGR was made the party treasurer. However, from that point on, there would be a sense of unease.

### Game of chess

They were no more the humble 23-year-old script writer who had discovered his hero in MGR, the handsome 30-year-old, or the struggling actor who had found his muse in Karunanidhi after 11 years of an uneventful film career. They were now the two major political forces in a party, the DMK, that was too small to accommodate both. The inevitable had to happen sooner or later.

### M. Karunanidhi

A reader ('Letters to the Editor', August 10) has hurriedly drawn the balance sheet of how parties in Tamil Nadu would fare, almost writing the epitaph of the ruling AIADMK. He seems to forget that the party belied all prophecies of doom after the passing of Jayalalitha. As for the DMK's cadre-base being cited to suggest its certain capture of power in the future, one should not ignore the cadre strength of the AIADMK either. If cadre base alone were to guarantee electoral successes, the CPI(M) and the Congress should have been now ruling West Bengal and the Centre, respectively. Voters are far more intelligent than all political soothsayers. M.K. Stalin is where he is now in the party only by

virtue of dynastic advantage. A bipolar polity has become a norm in almost all States and the Centre as well. Leaders of both Dravidian parties should also ask themselves whether they have really inherited leader Annadurai's most noble legacy - of being above board in matters of absolute public integrity.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN, Chennai

■ DMK patriarch M. Karunanidhi was well known not only for his political acumen but also for his exquisite skills in the fields of cinema, theatre, the media and literature. Equally criticised for nepotism, he has however left behind a long legacy. His die-hard attitude, perseverance, vision, political manoeuvring and

scenes. Just days prior to being sworn in, MGR had sought a merger; talks began though an emissary. Yet by the end of October, the MGR administration pressed murder and conspiracy charges against Karunanidhi for the DMK's demonstration against Indira Gandhi on her visit to Madurai in 1977. Karunanidhi was interned for 40 days. Agitations by the DMK and arrests and internments by the administration marked 10 years of MGR's rule.

The relationship between the two leaders was unfathomable after a point. Karunanidhi saw the MGR administration as capable of no good while MGR appeared intent on erasing all traces of Karunanidhi. On September 18, 1977, he said the court would decide on the issue of Karunanidhi's statue on Anna Salai in Chennai (whether it posed a problem for traffic) while counselling his audience: "Do not do anything in anger." It became a bit absurd when a government order said that no public space or building should be named after a living person. 'Karunanidhi Maligai' was renamed even as some other names escaped change.

### Sharp moves

Two no-confidence motions that were moved by the DMK in 1978-79 and a censure motion in 1979 tore into the MGR administration as being corrupt and inept. On April 14, a daily announced that MGR would star in the film, *Ummi Vidamatten* (You cannot get away from



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me). It was obvious who it was meant for. Yet on September 13, 1979, the two reached an agreement on a merger only for MGR to renege on it the next day. On November 3, 1979, Karunanidhi alleged in the Tamil Nadu Assembly that MGR was about to commit the "scandal of the century" by buying ships from Bulgaria. MGR replied that he would resign if there was proof that he had personally taken a bribe. Then in 1980, Karunanidhi, just to unseat MGR, did the unthinkable. He came to an electoral understanding with Indira Gandhi, whose Emergency had caused much pain to him (party and his family). MGR's government was dismissed just as Karunanidhi's had been on January 31, 1976. But in the elections that followed, MGR, like his on-screen persona did, bounced back.

Karunanidhi, taking full advantage of the luxury of being in the opposition, painted MGR as being indifferent to the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils. MGR, on the other hand, took a personal liking to LTTE leader Prabhakaran - also because he had spurned Karunanidhi's invite to meet him.

But there were moments of ten-

ness. In February 1982, when 58-year-old Karunanidhi went on a 200 km march in protest against the MGR administration, a thoughtful MGR arranged for an ambulance. Then, on October 30, 1982, the two men showed up at a wedding at 6 a.m., holding each other's hands and displaying warmth. The Chief Minister even advised the bride and groom to learn from this - "when to fight and when to put their arms around the other's shoulders and unite". In the Assembly, when an AIADMK MLA referred to Karunanidhi as just "Karunanidhi", MGR cut him short and said, "Address him as Kalaaignar. He was my leader."

J. Jayalalitha's induction into the party in June 1982 was a snub to Karunanidhi after his opposition to MGR's wish to bring her to the Madurai conference in 1972. Karunanidhi just ignored her.

When MGR took ill, on October 22, 1984, Karunanidhi penned the most moving of his over 4,000 missives, saying that prayer meant appeal and in that sense he, an atheist, would also pray for him to recover. Yet during the elections, the DMK wondered if MGR was alive. On MGR's return however, the political one-upmanship resumed. Ambition had helped a beautiful friendship blossom, flourish and wilt but could never destroy it completely.

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skills of negotiation are what the younger generation of politicians would do well to study carefully.

N. VIJAL, Coimbatore

■ Karunanidhi was without doubt an astute administrator and a prudent politician. His birthday celebrations, on June 3, were often occasions for him to give a patient hearing to those who came to wish him.

MANI NATARAJAN, Chennai

### Top batsman

Acclaim of the batting prowess of Virat Kohli cannot be questioned given his distinguished records (Editorial, August 10). However, one cannot gloss over the prime attribute of a leader - his skill in winning matches for his side. A team's victory matters much more than personal

milestones. Kohli's shift from spin to pace when Kevin Curran added a sizeable 40-odd runs with Rashid Ali for the ninth wicket was questionable and decided the outcome of the match. Also, preferring Dhawan to Pujara was not circumspect. Moreover, changing the batting order for the tailenders in the second innings was not well thought out.

What counts is his ability to win matches from now on, especially after the track record of his illustrious predecessor, M.S. Dhoni.

BELLUR S. DATTAI, Bengaluru

### On mosques

Subramanian Swamy's rejoinder (Editorial page, "Questions of faith at Ayodhya", August 10) to my article, "The essentiality of mosques" (OpEd page, August 7), discusses everything except the points

I made in my piece. I was not commenting on the Babri Masjid issue. My arguments were limited to the essentiality of mosques in Islam and I had given evidence from Islamic scriptures and Supreme Court judgments to support my case. Mr. Swamy does not have an answer to this except the claim that Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution do not

guarantee Muslims an unfettered fundamental right to pray in a mosque. This assertion does not merit discussion unless it can be proved that praying in mosques is prejudicial to public order, morality or health.

A. FAIZUR RAHMAN, Chennai

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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation was incorporated in 1978 - and not in the early 1960s as given in the Editorials "A welcome retreat: withdrawing the FRDI Bill" (Aug. 10, 2018) and "Bail-in doubts - on financial resolution legislation" (Dec. 6, 2017).

With reference to the report, "Kudankulam second reactor stopped for inspection" (Aug. 3, 2018), a communication from the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board clarified that the board did not mandate the shutdown of the second reactor at Kudankulam as reported. It was done for certain checks. Meanwhile, Unit I was shut down for refuelling and maintenance as mandated by it.

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