



Two States

The vote against an alliance with the Congress exposes divisions within the CPI(M) on tactics

By adopting a draft resolution against any electoral alliance or understanding with the Congress, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) privileged a long-term political/ideological view over compelling short-term electoral calculations. The CC voted 55-31 for the resolution, backed by former general secretary Prakash Karat but opposed by current general secretary Sitaram Yechury. Those opposed to the resolution and in favour of an understanding with the Congress may well believe that there is no success in the long term without survival in the short term. In West Bengal, they would argue, the CPI(M) needs the Congress more than the Congress needs the CPI(M). However, despite the resolution finding Mr. Karat and Mr. Yechury on opposite sides, this was essentially a difference over tactics. It was not so much the result of any ideological confusion about goals as it was of practical differences on how to achieve them. Crucial to the differences over the tactical line are the political complexities in two States where the CPI(M) is strong, Kerala and West Bengal. As the Congress remains the CPI(M)'s principal rival in Kerala, the State unit is opposed to any understanding with it in an environment where the BJP is not a contender. In Bengal, where the Trinamool Congress is the main rival and where the BJP is gathering strength through communal mobilisation, the CPI(M) unit views the Congress less as a foe. In the 2016 Assembly election, large sections of the Bengal unit successfully pushed for an alliance with the Congress. Although the CPI(M) fared worse than in 2011, it is difficult to determine whether the alliance won the Left Front more seats than it might otherwise have got.

Those supporting a broad-based understanding with the Congress will hope that the decision is reversed at the Party Congress, a body with a larger and more diverse composition. But such an outcome could actually sharpen divisions within the CPI(M), given the overwhelming support the draft resolution received in both the CC and the Polit Bureau. The West Bengal election is a whole three years away and there will be opportunities for the party to review political tactics in accordance with the political situation, in the event it chooses to. There has been a lot said about what the CPI(M)'s decision means for opposition unity in the 2019 general election, but the fact is that Kerala can be won only by a Congress-led or a CPI(M)-led front and it is not clear what impact a Congress-CPI(M) electoral understanding will have in West Bengal. At the same time, the party is not constrained, post election, by the resolution in engaging with an opposition grouping if the situation so demands.

Locked down

The government shutdown in the U.S. could hurt both Republicans and Democrats

Last week, the 19th federal government shutdown in U.S. history went into force. If previous occasions are any indication, this shutdown will also lead to the furlough of many hundreds of thousands of government workers, closure of national parks with a potential loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, and a possible overall macroeconomic cost of several billions of dollars in terms of productivity loss associated with the cessation of multiple public services. This encore is entirely preventable and the seismic payment default can be traced back to one inescapable reality in Washington: congressional dysfunction stemming from bitterly partisan politicking. A federal shutdown occurs when lawmakers fail to agree on a spending bill, and cannot even sign off on a stopgap funding measure that might keep the government machinery humming for a few more months. In this case, the bill in question would have helped tide over a looming fiscal gap at least until the middle of February. Yet that did not happen, because Republicans refused to compromise on a headline approach on immigration policy, specifically on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the Obama-era clemency policy for foreign-born children of U.S.-based undocumented workers. That policy was ended in September 2017 when President Donald Trump revoked his predecessor's executive order to protect these children, the so-called DREAMers, from deportation. This apparently rattled Democratic lawmakers to the point where they were willing to make a stopgap budget deal, contingent on Congress agreeing to legislation to shield nearly 700,000 of these law-abiding youngsters from removal.

With dark clouds on Capitol Hill overshadowing the first anniversary of Mr. Trump's presidency, he has reiterated his call for strong border security and a crackdown on "illegal immigrants". Interestingly, a recent CNN poll suggested 84% of Americans want DACA extended. But a government shutdown is likely to cut both ways, hurting the prospects of those on both sides of the aisle seeking re-election in the November 2018 mid-term election. Voters may well consider Democrats to be obstructionist, or as putting undocumented workers ahead of national security. And Republicans may lose votes for failing to keep the government working despite controlling the Senate, House of Representatives and the White House. Regardless of who wins in that election, the debate on immigration reform will continue. Too much is at stake for not only the nearly 11.3 million undocumented workers but also the nearly 1.5 million temporary foreign workers, among whom are 500,000 to 700,000 H-1B visa holders, the majority of them from India. For, when Congress finally transcends its partisan biases and legislates a comprehensive immigration reform package, it will likely introduce a revised policy for each of the visa categories.

Getting back on the democratic path

India gave itself a great system but now does not seem to know how to keep it up to standard



K.S. BAJPAI

Howsoever anniversary stock-takings assess pluses and minuses, one conclusion is surely inescapable: India remains woefully short of its potential. Whatever our excuses, one cause is equally fundamental: the decisions shaping our destiny are themselves shaped by considerations increasingly unworthy of a serious nation. Yes, we are a difficult country to govern, none ever coped with so many competing diversities, rights and claims, in such huge proportions – and through democracy. This makes it all the more necessary to employ common sense, vision and judgment, balance and largeness, and above all reason. The less these matter to us, the farther back must we fall.

Mutual conflict

"The whole essence of... Parliamentary Government lies in the intention to make the thing work... [its] strength... is exactly measured by the unity of political parties upon its fundamental objects." Lord Balfour's perception pinpoints why we have mangled our system out of recognition: far from seeking congruence of fundamental objectives, leave alone unity, our parties compete to prevent things working. Our needs, long incompatible with the forces working amongst us, have moved into mutual conflict.

Our social tensions need sensitive healing, but suffer ever harsher divisiveness; our political institutions and processes need to address rising challenges but sink ever deeper in backwardness; our administrative machinery desperately needs efficiency but corrodes into dysfunctionality; we live in a turbulent, dangerous world but have neither time nor expertise to attend to it. Our security challenges become more complex while both our conceptual and procedu-



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ral drawbacks retard our response-capabilities.

India is not alone in such difficulties. Countries worldwide find existing governmental systems unable to cope with contemporary challenges or people's expectations, some even with basic needs. Particularly alarming is the condition in democracies, where the ideals and concepts, the very essence of their being, are threatened. Widely idolised till now, with even those trampling it claiming to uphold it, democracy has never had many practitioners. A few North Atlantic states apart, most even in Europe, claiming to be exemplars, actually became democracies after India. Almost all colonised states started as democracies, almost all turned rapidly into autocracies. We Indians could long claim shining exception, but the ease with which the Emergency could be imposed is warning enough how fragile our version is.

Time for concern

Democracy depends on the Enlightenment's ideals – the ceaseless expansion of liberty and equality, the impartial functioning of impersonal law and institutions, the reconciliation of society's differences by accommodative compromise, above all the primacy of reason. India's democracy, howsoever imperfect, worked awhile because those who led us into Independence had imbued these ideas. Always hugely disproportionate to their tiny size, their influence is finished; Enlightenment teachings no longer resonate with electorates in which group obsessions stultify basic national interest. Most stunningly is this manifest today in the U.S.; ugly forces prevail there periodically, somehow the humanist Enlightenment

principles come back. The world needs that to happen there again, but our active concern must be at home.

That our democracy is seriously ailing is so obvious, one wonders why our political parties are so oblivious. The party claiming, not unjustifiably, to have led us to freedom seems devoid of ideas – offering no vision, no version of our future, which could possibly inspire anybody. And others are worse. The greatest success story of our times, the astonishing speed and extent of China's rise, surely shows that the decisive cause is that a directing mind chose specific objectives and worked for them with determination. Authoritarianism doubtless made possible advances open societies cannot match, but dictatorships about which keep their countries backward, whereas there are serious democracies seriously striving for betterment. Originally denoting differences in economic levels and ideologies, 'Third World' also represents backward, if not chaotic, ways of governance – selfish, often barbaric despotisms ruling by whim over peoples depressed and oppressed. The key difference that separates properly run states lies in seriousness of decent purpose. We Indians lose our way in tangents: Third World conditions beckon.

China's record over the last century is hardly edifying – revolutions, civil war, famines, warlords, etc. Corruption is rampant, sloth and incompetence hardly unknown, but things get done because there is a directing force which devises and executes forward-looking plans for national greatness. How many shaping our destinies have any real sense of national, as distinct from personal or sectional, purpose, leave alone

greatness? China is both a yardstick and a warning: fall behind and we fall under. We have no option but to make our system functional and to the right purposes. We gave ourselves a great system but have not known how to keep it up to standard. Currently resurrected, Alexander Hamilton is appropriate: "A government must be fitted to a nation as much as a coat to the Individual... what may be good at Philadelphia may be bad at Paris and ridiculous at Petersburg." People end up with governments functioning like themselves, and we have transmogrified our original system through our own weaknesses.

Regain the checks

The dispersion of power between executive, legislature and judiciary is undermined by both our traditional acceptance of personal rule and the appalling incompetence of each branch. Our political executives are self-seeking while the permanent branches are dysfunctional; our legislatures hardly meet and when they do there is bedlam; our judiciary, the last remaining estate to retain some public respect, has discarded it along with the decorum of self-respect; and the Fourth Estate, so essential a safeguard, competes in descent. That we blithely carry on as though it will all come out in the wash is as incredible as it is fatal. We must realise what we have done to our system and repair it urgently.

Diagnoses upon diagnoses, what is the cure? It is hard not to conclude there is none: some problems have no solutions, one can only manage things as best one can. In 150 years of modernising influences we never grew out of our old ways. Enormous reforms we need we reject: how can any society advance when saddling itself with khap panchayats, disgraceful dowry systems, blatant practice of untouchability, acceptance of castration and other primitivisms? Ways of thinking and behaving are universally intractable. Claiming Europeanism, and with generations of modernising after Kemal Ataturk, Turkey

clings to old tendencies. For all its astonishing progress, China practices female infanticide. One Western humanist state after another is rocked by tribalism. But civilisation evolves through efforts to change, even if change itself keeps resisting, but the effort must be forward-looking, not regressive.

The road map ahead

We need a planned, determined push to make our system work and modernise. Only an organised body with such a purpose can do anything. Despite the obstructionism we have made our norm, this government is positioned to get things done – if only will; no other force seems at all likely. This Prime Minister, particularly, has built a personal position of great possibilities, and his international approaches show the imagination and dexterity needed for national greatness. His party's electoral calculations present our greatest obstacle: of course, elections need winning ways, but at what cost? The furtherance and exploitation of obscurantism and regression will only help our enemies, denying us the progress essential for handling modern challenges. Can (re)building legendary temples help us handle a China already reaching the forefront of technological innovation?

"Forget the excuse that politics is the art of the possible, remember leadership is the art of making even the impossible possible." My father Girija Shankar Bajpai's observation points to the prime necessity: the will to succeed, a carefully thought out plan, a commitment to fulfilment, obviously not to reviving a past irrelevant to today, if indeed it ever existed, but to a state and society adapted to our times. We the people are ultimately responsible but political leaders have to lead. We can only appeal to them to do so – or meander into the anarchy we seem most at home in, or authoritarianism – or both.

K.S. Bajpai is a former diplomat who was Ambassador to Pakistan, China and the U.S., and Secretary, External Affairs Ministry

Towards an endgame?

Turkey makes a decisive move against Kurdish fighters on the border with Syria



VIJAY PRASHAD

On January 20, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkish forces alongside the Free Syrian Army had begun armed operations in the Syrian town of Afrin, to be followed by a push in Manbij. Turkish aircraft are bombing the city as Turkish and allied forces have moved across the border.

Turkey has long threatened to enter Syria and clear out the forces of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF was created in 2015 by the various Syrian Kurdish political forces and their military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). The Syrian Kurds made a political decision that they would not have the ability to properly confront the Islamic State (IS) in northern Syria without an alliance with other minority groups (Assyrians, for instance) – and with the major Sun-

ni tribes in the region (the Shammar, for instance). The SDF was created as a platform for the Syrian Kurds to join with these other groups into an anti-IS military alliance. But, to the Turks, it has always been clear that the SDF is dominated by Syrian Kurds, and is therefore essentially a Kurdish project.

Heart of the conflict

The war to defeat the IS at Raqqa, the major city in northern Syria, could not have been conducted by the U.S. and Russia and their various allies entirely from the air. It required a partner on the ground. The Turkish army was not willing to enter Syria to battle the IS. The Syrian Arab Army was then engaged in operations towards the west and the south of the country. It did not have troops to move towards Raqqa. For that reason, the U.S. government made an arrangement with the SDF to provide it close air support as SDF forces moved across the Syria-Turkish border. The SDF, with air support from the U.S., routed the IS from Raqqa in mid-October 2017. The Syrian-Kurdish leadership suggested that Raqqa's people could join the Kurdish-run Democratic



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Federation of Northern Syria, commonly known as Rojava.

The term "Rojava" reveals what is at the heart of the conflict. It means "Western Kurdistan" and asserts the ambitions of the Kurdish population towards the region as well as for a future independent Kurdish state that would encompass land in Iraq (Eastern Kurdistan) and Turkey (Northern Kurdistan). The attempt by Iraqi Kurds in 2017 to declare independence was curtailed for now by the armed intervention of the Iraqi army into the Kurdish autonomous region. The attempt by Syrian Kurds to produce a similar autonomous region on the Syria-Turkish border raised hackles in Ankara.

Turkey sees all Kurdish ambitions for self-determination as an abomination. It has declared the instrument for these ambitions within Turkey, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), as a terrorist or-

ganisation. The war against Turkish Kurds continues in south-eastern Turkey, with curfews in Kurdish towns and with Kurdish political parties effectively banned. The war against the PKK has spilled over into Iraq and Syria, where the Turkish air force has routinely bombed PKK- and PKK-affiliated camps.

To confuse matters, it was the PKK that helped Syrian Kurds develop the YPG, which was the basis for the SDF. The U.S., following its NATO partner Turkey, had declared the PKK as a terrorist organisation. But, confounded by a lack of a ground army in Syria, the U.S. allied with the SDF in the war against the IS. Turkey, at that time, grumbled but did not act to stop the alliance. The U.S. had few choices. But now, with the IS largely defeated and with the U.S. a fickle ally to Syrian Kurds, the Turkish armed forces have made their move.

Abandonment

Turkey has not acted alone as Mr. Erdogan sought assurances from all the major players in northern Syria before he sent in his troops. The U.S. betrayed its Syrian Kurdish allies when U.S. Secretary of

State Rex Tillerson said that the U.S. does not propose to form a permanent border force in the north manned by the SDF. The Russians withdrew their forces from the region as the Syrian Arab Army, dependent on the Russians, gave assurances that it would not contest the Turkish invasion. There is no one to stop the Turkish entry into Syria and no one to provide Syrian Kurds with assistance. The Turkish air force continues to bomb SDF positions without challenge. The Syrian Kurds do not have a chance.

Turkish tanks have moved swiftly through Afrin's Shera and Shera-wa districts, with YPG and YPJ fighters trying their best to hold off the ground assault. Turkey's total domination of the air over these border towns will give its ground troops a decisive advantage against Syrian Kurds. Protests inside Turkey against this intervention will have little impact. Nor will there be anyone willing to go to the United Nations to ask Turkey to call off its war.

Vijay Prashad is the Executive Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

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.

Minister on evolution

The comments made by Union Minister of State for Human Resource Development Satyapal Singh on Darwin's theory of evolution are over the top. He clearly does not have any idea about what the "Theory of Evolution" is. Science is always open to correction if there is authentic evidence, but there appears to be a sad trend nowadays of people who are grossly unaware of the basics making loose statements.

SRUTHI M.S.,
Kollam, Kerala

■ The Minister's statement is amusing. Science is not absolute and scientific theories are always open to being challenged and proven

wrong. But the process of approving or disapproving some theory should follow the principles of research, and in a methodical way. The Minister cannot come up with half-baked statements against a scientific theory especially as he has a constitutional duty to spread a scientific temper among people. After the discovery of DNA, the theory of evolution has received more endorsements than contestations.

Dr. D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

■ The Minister's statement is only the culmination of the dangerous tendency, demonstrated of late, of living under the past glory of the Indian civilisation. Almost all scriptures were

written not more than a couple of thousands of years ago. Evolution, on the other hand, is a process that operates over millions of years and is difficult to perceive.

It is deeply problematic for a Minister to expect textbooks to be rewritten according to his personal beliefs. Governance must be constitutional and in the interest of the public, and not according to the ideological codes of any political party ("Scientists 'deeply pained' by Minister's claim", January 22).

SANCHARY G.,
Bengaluru

Integrated medicine

It is a fact that government doctors who complete their basic medical degree are

uninterested in practising in rural and isolated pockets. The protest against the National Medical Commission Bill and resistance against the 'deployment' of alternate practitioners snacks of selfishness.

Capacity-building of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy practitioners and other non-MBBS staff will fill the void at public health centres and enable better dissemination of services in rural India apart from improving the doctor-patient ratio.

The government is fully within its constitutional obligations to secure a welfare state for all its citizens ("Capacity building

for primary health care", January 22).

NISHANT CHOUDHARY,
Ajmer, Rajasthan

Inspiring

Compliments to the "less favoured" heroes, the Indian visually handicapped cricket team, for its victory against Pakistan in the Blind World Cup ("Sport" page – "Dominant India does it again", January 21).

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) considered and voted only in favour of the Polit Bureau's resolution rather than the general secretary Sitaram Yechury's proposition on the tactical line that the party must adopt for the 2019 general elections against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And it was not the draft of the general secretary as mentioned in the Single File, "Left without consensus" (January 22, 2018).

The U.S. President, Donald Trump was sworn in on January 20, 2017 and not 2016 as mentioned in a report, "U.S. govt. shuts after impasse" (January 21, 2018).

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