



## Dangerous vacuum

If mainstream politicians are discredited in J&K, the space will be filled by secessionists

The detention of National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah under the Public Safety Act on Monday marks a new, dangerous low in the over-reach of state power to curtail liberty in Kashmir. The 81-year-old leader has been thrice Chief Minister, Union Minister and five times Member of Parliament. He is currently MP from Srinagar. His father and National Conference founder, Sheikh Abdullah, led Kashmir's Muslim population in rejecting the two-nation theory that led to Partition and the formation of Pakistan in 1947. And his son, Omar Abdullah, former Chief Minister and Union Minister, is also under detention since August 5, when the Centre abrogated Article 370 through a controversial process, ended J&K's relative autonomy and is reorganising it into two Union Territories. While the BJP and the Centre have claimed massive public support for these moves, the Kashmir Valley has been in shutdown since then. Despite his declining popularity in the Valley, Farooq Abdullah continued to argue that Kashmir's destiny was with secular, pluralist India. To treat him as a threat to public safety is a travesty of justice and an assault on democratic principles.

The manner in which he was detained smacks of complete disregard for the rule of law and accountability. His detention, for 12 days, was announced hours before the Supreme Court was to consider MDMK chief Vaiko's plea seeking a directive that Mr. Abdullah be produced before it. In Parliament last month, Home Minister Amit Shah had said the NC leader was not in detention but was staying at home on his own volition. The detention has now been legalised under a stringent law that allows limited remedies and could be extended to as long as two years. The moves to silence and humiliate Kashmir's senior-most politician betrays a dangerous tactic of marginalising the moderate, mainstream politicians. Almost all Kashmir's political leaders are in jail, including former Chief Minister and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti and the IAS officer-turned-politician Shah Faesal. They have kept the political process alive in Kashmir against all odds, and despite threats even as some sections of the population remained aloof or hostile to India. The argument that Kashmiri politicians used the State's special status to shield their corruption and nepotism is disingenuous, as these problems are endemic to Indian politics. The amorality of the government's treatment of pro-India forces is certainly dispiriting, but dangerous is the vacuum this is creating. The void will be filled only by forces inimical to India, if the government removes politicians from public spaces by wrongly labelling them anti-India.

## The Taliban problem

Terrorists will not be keen on talks, but finding a solution to the Afghan crisis must continue

When the U.S.-Taliban talks collapsed last week, the insurgent group threatened to step up attacks in Afghanistan. It made good on its pledge on Tuesday using two suicide bombers who killed at least 48 people by targeting a rally being addressed by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani north of Kabul, and also the capital. These attacks are yet another warning of the security challenges Afghanistan faces, especially when it is gearing up to the September 28 presidential poll. Both the 2014 presidential election and last year's parliamentary poll were violently disturbed by the Taliban. This time, the group has asked civilians to stay away from political gatherings, making all those who participate in the political process potential targets. Rising attacks against Afghan civilians make the Taliban's claim that it is fighting on behalf of them against the foreign invaders hollow. The Taliban did not suspend its terror campaign even while holding talks with the U.S. in Qatar. In July, when the talks were under way, Amrullah Saleh, Mr. Ghani's running mate and the former intelligence chief, escaped a serious assassination attempt. Now that the talks have collapsed, a vengeful Taliban is unleashing itself on the Afghans.

The Afghan government seems determined to go ahead with the election. It has deployed some 70,000 troops to protect over 5,000 polling stations. But the threat from the Taliban is so grave that the President is largely addressing campaign rallies through Skype. Even if the elections are over without further attacks, the Taliban problem will remain. Afghanistan needs a solution to this crisis and regional and international players should help the new government. The fundamental problem with the U.S.-Taliban peace process was that it excluded the Kabul government at the insistence of the insurgents, which itself was a major compromise by the U.S. On the other side, the Taliban was not even ready to cease hostilities. A peace agreement dictated by the Taliban won't sustain. The Taliban can't be allowed to have a free terror run either. A permanently unstable Afghanistan and an insurgent group growing further in strength is not good news for any nation, including Afghanistan's neighbours. Afghanistan needs a comprehensive peace push in which all stakeholders, including the government, the U.S., the Taliban and regional players will have a say. The U.S. should continue to back the Kabul government, put pressure on Pakistan to crack down on the Afghan Taliban, double down its counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and invite regional players such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India and China to take part in the diplomatic efforts. In other words, the Taliban should be forced to return to talks. The U.S.-Taliban peace talks may have collapsed. But it need not be the end of the road for finding a settlement for the Afghan crisis.

# Obama was right about Iran

Unlike his carrot-and-stick policy with Tehran, his successor Donald Trump's unilateralism has felled the regional order



STANLEY JOHNY

"President Trump cannot expect to be unpredictable and expect others to be predictable," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a speech at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute last month. He added, "Unpredictability will lead to mutual unpredictability, and unpredictability is chaotic." He was perhaps summing up Iran's response to the U.S. President's "maximum pressure" policy.

When Mr. Trump unilaterally pulled the U.S. out of the Iran nuclear deal in May last year and subsequently reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic, his expectation was that the renewed pressure tactics would force Tehran to return to talks so that he could bargain for a tougher deal. But Iran was so unpredictable in its response that tensions have rocketed in West Asia over the past year. In the latest flare-up, two critical Saudi Arabian oil installations near the Gulf coast were attacked on September 14, which forced Riyadh to cut its oil production by 5.7 million barrels a day, almost half of its daily output. Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen have claimed responsibility for the attack, but the U.S. has blamed and threatened to strike Iran.

Whether Tehran was directly involved in it or not, the attack on Saturday is a demonstration of Iran's capability and influence. Perhaps the most sophisticated and daunting of its kind in the Gulf

in years, it proved Saudi Arabia's air defence to be worthless even in protecting its most critical economic assets. If the attacks had originated from Iran, as the U.S. has claimed, it is a serious act of aggression. And if it had originated from Yemen, Iran's continued support for the Houthis, which enables them to carry out a high-precision, cross-border attack such as this, would come under renewed focus. Either way, Iran cannot escape blame. Mr. Trump failed to foresee the magnitude of Iran's resistance when he started putting "maximum pressure" on the country. He may have thought that since Iran had once caved in to American pressure and signed an agreement, it could do that again if the pressure was multiplied. But Iran acted exactly in the opposite way.

### Maximum resistance

After Mr. Trump withdrew from the P5+1+European Union (EU) and Iran nuclear deal despite international certification that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement, Tehran waited for a year, perhaps hoping that the remaining signatories, including the EU, Russia and China, would fix the deal. But they remained more or less spectators when the U.S. continued to squeeze Iran's economy with sanctions. By May this year, the U.S. had effectively cut off Iran's oil industry, critical for its economy, from the global economy. Faced with a precarious economic situation and mounting U.S. pressure, Iran adopted a two-pronged strategy – start violating the nuclear deal step by step and target oil supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, a choke-point between the Gulf and the Arabian Sea and through which a third of crude oil exports transported on



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tankers pass.

Since May, a number of oil tankers, owned by Norway, Saudi Arabia and Japan, have come under attack near the Strait of Hormuz. In June, Iran shot down an American drone alleging that it had violated Iranian air space, taking tensions to the brink of a direct conflict with the U.S. In July, when an Iranian oil vessel was seized by British troops off Gibraltar, Iran captured a British oil vessel.

Iran did all these without inviting any major military response either from its regional rivals or from the U.S. On the other side, it got its vessel released by Gibraltar despite U.S. opposition. With Saturday's attack on the Saudi oil installations, Iran has upped the ante further, sending a message across the world that no oil facility or tanker is safe in the Gulf as long as Iran is not allowed to trade its oil.

It's a high-risk game. When Iran shot down the U.S. drone, Mr. Trump ordered a strike and called it off with only 10 minutes to spare. What Iran wants is sanctions relief. But it will not surrender totally to American demands for that as it thinks it was Washington that killed a hard-bargained, functioning nuclear deal. Also the U.S. pullout from the deal appears to have tilted the balance of power within

the Iranian regime in favour of the hardliners. During the nuclear talks, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei backed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif. But now, the security establishment appears to be calling the shots. They may be betting on Mr. Trump's reluctance to launch an open-ended war in the region. Or they are ready to risk even a direct conflict to break the stranglehold of status quo. Egypt had done that *vis-à-vis* Israel in 1973 by launching the Yom Kippur War because Egypt wanted the Sinai Peninsula back from Israel. Iran is either playing a lose-win game (where it is ready to bear with some setbacks for eventual gains) or a calamitous lose-lose game (where everyone could end up as losers in the event of a conflict).

### The order in Gotham

U.S. President Obama's approach was different. Unlike Mr. Trump, he had a strategic goal – to deny Iran a nuclear bomb. He did not act unilaterally on sanctions. He consolidated international opinion, got both allies and partners on his side, imposed UN-recognised sanctions and then offered the olive branch of talks. It was a classic carrot-and-stick policy that works for rational actors. And Iran accepted the offer despite all the bad blood between the U.S. ("the great Satan") and the Islamic Republic, joined the talks and agreed to scuttle its nuclear programme in return for the removal of the international sanctions.

Mr. Obama could have acted unilaterally. He could have made greater demands from Iran such as ending its support for regional proxies. Or he could have threatened Tehran with military action. He did not do any of these primari-

ly because he was aware of the risks involved in a direct conflict with Iran, a country that has always lived in insecurity and cultivated proxies across the region as part of its forward defence doctrine. He carefully avoided anything that could have strengthened the hands of the hardliners within the complex Iranian regime. He also believed that for peace in West Asia, Saudi Arabia and Iran should dial down tensions between themselves.

He told *The Atlantic*, in 2016: "The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace." The nuclear deal had set the state for a détente between the U.S. and Iran. Mr. Obama's successor should have followed that policy up – force Iran to restrain itself through engagement and promote a new equilibrium in the region. It is like Gotham in "The Dark Knight", to use a metaphor used by Mr. Obama in a different context, where the gang leaders have established some sort of order. But then comes the Joker and the city is on fire.

Mr. Trump may be reluctant to launch a new war. But he lacks a strategy to put this reluctance into a policy framework. He has surrounded himself within the administration with warmongers and neocons. He has failed to foresee how far Iran would go if it is pushed to a corner. His unilateral actions have destroyed even the fragile order that existed in the region before May 8, 2018, the day he killed the nuclear deal. If the Gulf is in flames today, Donald Trump is its arsonist.

stanley.johny@thehindu.co.in

# A self-inflicted economic slowdown

The government has failed to heed recommendations made by economists and bureaucrats on turnaround measures



PUJA MEHRA

One of the visitors to pay a courtesy call on Prime Minister Narendra Modi after his re-election this summer was a former Secretary to the Government of India holding a high-profile constitutional office. During the conversation, the Prime Minister asked: "Arthvyavastha ka kya karna chahiye? (What should be done about the economy?)"

The former bureaucrat, who had studied economics at college, replied: "All of that listed in the presentation I made to you in 2015," referring to the marathon brainstorming sessions the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) had held nearly four years ago to set the policy agenda for Mr. Modi's first term. It was a sharp remark to make. For it implied that Mr. Modi's government had made little progress on translating agenda into action.

### Ending the paralysis

Back then, the economy was still in recovery phase. In the final 18 months of its 10 years, the Manmo-

han Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government had moved the economy into repair phase.

For all its faulty handling of the economy, the Manmohan Singh-led government did manage to end the parliamentary paralysis and pass its land and food Bills in 2013, the choice of legislative action dictated by ideological inputs, rather than the wisdom of the then Prime Minister expressed by his key economic aides. A mechanism for handling projects which had been stalling for both economic and administrative reasons was set up in the Cabinet Secretariat and the PMO. The economy that had been named as one of the so-called 'Fragile Five' was no longer counted so and had exited the ignoble clubbing.

The policy paralysis – an administrative and political bottleneck – had ended. The fiscal and current account deficits had been compressed, and GDP growth was slowly picking up momentum year after year, a recovery that continued till 2016-17, the year of demonetisation. Inflation remained out of control, also, in part, due to the sharp uptrend in global crude prices. In May 2014, after Mr. Modi's Cabinet was sworn in, it was made clear to the new government that purposeful steps would strengthen this recovery. Without



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reforms, though, the recovery would be difficult to sustain.

Among officers that made precise recommendations on action needed was the Prime Minister's close aide and IAS officer, Hasmukh Adhia, who, as the Financial Services Secretary, made a presentation that detailed in the strongest possible terms the crying need for corrective action in public sector banks: the quicker the banking sector recovered its health, the speedier a pullback in the overall economy could be expected. A recovering economy would have meant, borrowers would be less likely to default on loans and bank NPAs (non-performing assets) would rise at a slower pace if at all.

### Ignoring advice

But advice on action needed and decisions that should be avoided were ignored. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) cautioned the government against demonetisation in

writing; the former RBI Governor, Raghuram Rajan, did so orally.

Ahead of the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), on invitation from the government, well-regarded economist and former Finance Secretary Vijay Kelkar briefed the Prime Minister and key Cabinet ministers on the criticality of avoiding the business-unfriendly rate structure and compliance system that had been worked out for introduction. He was invited to the midnight launch in Parliament's Central Hall of the GST, but his advice went unheeded.

As late as in the run-up to the July 5 Budget, economists openly sympathetic to the ruling party called for bold steps aimed at reversing the slowdown. After the Budget was tabled, economist Surjit Bhalla drew attention to the need for changing the status quo in agriculture and the impossibility of doubling farmer incomes. Economist Subramanian Swamy has consistently drawn attention to the dire consequences to be expected as a result of the Modi government's approach to the economy. Members of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council have been a measured voice of wisdom. Arvind Panagariya is writing with concern over the lack of appetite for growth-accelerating reforms.

The consequences of five years of ignoring advice are, well, hard to ignore now: the weak recovery inherited in 2014 has indeed petered out. A growth slowdown has been on for three years. The loss of growth momentum in the three years from 2016-17 to 2018-19 is significant: 8.2%, 7.2% and 6.8%. GDP growth hit a 25-quarter low of 5% in the April-June 2019 quarter. Scores of private sector jobs are getting axed. Growth in car sales, retail loans and property has plummeted to multi-year lows, as the impact of the slowdown spreads across the economy.

Several policy pronouncements have been made since the day the courtesy call was paid. These include the July 5 Budget and the weekly press conferences of the Finance Ministry aimed at announcing measures for accelerating GDP growth. That the measures fall woefully short of the recommendations made by economists and bureaucrats over the last five years is an understatement. The government has also failed to take the steps required urgently at this stage of the slowdown.

When there is a mine of advice sitting in government files, gathering dust for five years, who should be blamed for the unfolding economic slowdown?

Puja Mehra is a Delhi-based journalist

## 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.

### Politics and language

Every language in India has its own charm and identity. Being confined to a particular region should not be reason for them to be sidelined and Hindi given priority to be proclaimed as a unifying force in India as it is spoken by the majority. How did the administration function so far in non-Hindi speaking States for the last many decades? All languages listed in the Constitution are equally important and the Home Minister should be reminded that India's strength lies only in its unity among diversity. Instead of employing what is an attention diverting strategy in the midst of an economic slowdown, the Home Minister should value the sentiments of the people. He must not forget that the massive mandate his party has won is to boost employment opportunities, reduce

inflation and ensure poverty alleviation.

P. PARAMASIVAN, Chennai

India has done a remarkable job as a nation in resolving the diversity of languages. It is difficult to think of any other country with so many ancient languages complete with their own rich literature and history as India's. Despite such linguistic diversity, there is no discord in the country. At a time when our leaders should be focusing on grave economic concerns of the nation, the attempt to polarise people using language is unfortunate. The focal point of 'language dominance' has created enough strife in many countries: Sinhala versus Tamil in the case of Sri Lanka, Urdu versus Bengali in the case of West and East Pakistan, Dutch versus French in the case of Belgium and English versus

French in the Quebec province of Canada. India is a fine example to the rest of the world on how to figure out a consensus and have total harmony.

PRAVEEN NALLURI, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

### Kashmir policy

All is not well internally in Kashmir despite the Central government's claims of everything being "normal" (Editorial page, "In Kashmir, shaking the apple tree", September 18). However, steps need to be taken to focus on youth as they are a stabilising factor – they need quality jobs. There is a need to start as many industries as we can in the State to give fillip to the local job market. There is also a need for extended tax concessions in order to encourage industrialists. Improving the economic conditions of the State's residents will also help a great deal.

JITENDRA G. KOTHARI, Mumbai

The Prime Minister's statement that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's vision had inspired the government's move in Jammu and Kashmir was unconvincing (Inside pages, September 18). Patel's action cannot be compared with the government's move in Jammu and Kashmir. The States that moved to the Indian Union were princely states, and even in integration, Patel convinced and educated them about the importance of joining the mainstream of the Republic. The threat of force was a step of last resort. Incidentally, the use of strong methods may be applicable only in the case of Hyderabad, and after repeated pleadings to join the rest of India. In Jammu and Kashmir, an elected government was dismissed. Local leaders were not consulted or convinced about the action proposed to be taken. And suddenly, the voices of local leaders and people were silenced

through arbitrary action. Even Patel would never have adopted such inhuman measures in the name of integration.

D. SETHURAMAN, Chennai

Despite many statements by some politicians about the immense troubles the people in Jammu and Kashmir are being put through after the dilution of Article 370, it is unfortunate that the media has been practically gagged in J&K ("Government using Kashmir to divide India,"

September 18). If the government has nothing to hide in Kashmir one fails to understand why the media is still unwelcome to do objective reporting of the state of affairs. There are signs of sycophancy in some sections of the media singing paeans to the ruling establishment without actually doing field reports. How long will the curbs continue? ANUSREE RAMESH, Mangaluru

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The second deck headline in a Business page story headlined "Federal Bank gets into expansion mode" (Sept. 18, 2019) erroneously said doorstep gold loans yielded ₹100-cr revenue in 4 months. It should have been ₹100-cr credit growth.

A quote in the penultimate paragraph of "Amazon India expects 'bigger and better' festive sales this year" (Business page, Sept. 17, 2019), had been wrongly attributed to Mr. Jain. It was Mr. Mayank Shivam, Director, Category Management, Amazon Fashion India, who said it.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com