



## Transition tests

The appointment of a caretaker PM in Pakistan signals it's in election mode

The appointment of a caretaker Prime Minister in Pakistan, under whom the country will face general elections on July 25, sets the stage for the second consecutive transfer of power from one civilian government to another. This in itself is a landmark for democracy in Pakistan, where no civilian Prime Minister has completed a full term in office; only in 2013 did a government complete its full tenure for the first time. The choice of Nasirul Mulk, a former Chief Justice, as caretaker Prime Minister has been welcomed across the spectrum, with leaders of the main political parties, including the Pakistan Peoples Party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and the Jamaat-e-Islami, issuing statements commending outgoing Pakistan Muslim League (N) Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's decision. During his time in the Supreme Court, Justice Mulk heard several contentious constitutional matters, including one in which a sitting Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, was summoned on contempt charges in 2012. He was also on the seven-judge bench that issued a restraining order against the then all-powerful President, Pervez Musharraf, in 2007. In 2013-14 he served as the acting Chief Election Commissioner, which will hold him in good stead in his task of taking Pakistan through free and fair polls, and conducting necessary government business in the interim in an impartial manner.

However, Justice Mulk and his caretaker Cabinet will have crises to deal with over the next two months. To begin with, Pakistan is set to be placed on the grey list by the international terror financing watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force, at its plenary session in June. The second issue is internal, but stems from the same problem: Pakistan faces the danger of terrorists and extremists being 'mainstreamed' into the electoral arena and marginalising the political centre, which is already missing former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif after his disqualification from public office by the Supreme Court. Hafiz Saeed's Milli Muslim League has already gone to court to demand recognition. Security during the campaign will also be a challenge. Earlier this month, an attack on the PML(N) office in Karachi and an assassination attempt on Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal underlined just how serious the threat is to politicians. As caretaker Prime Minister, Justice Mulk will be also required to steady the economy. A balance of payments crisis, for which the outgoing government has reportedly asked Beijing for a loan of \$1 billion to \$2 billion, will add to Pakistan's burgeoning debt on account of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The caretaker regime has its task cut out, and it will need internal support and that of its neighbours and the world community. The successful completion of the exercise will be a positive signal for all of South Asia as well, with Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh, India and Afghanistan (in that order) all due for elections over the next year.

## Green push?

The new biofuels policy is high on ambition, but success will depend on the details

At a time when rising oil prices are putting increasing pressure on the economy, even small steps to encourage the use of biofuels are welcome. The Cabinet this month approved a National Policy on Biofuels, which encourages the generation and use of biofuels such as ethanol. It primarily tries to address supply-side issues that have discouraged the production of biofuels within the country. For one, it allows for a wider variety of raw materials to be used as inputs to produce ethanol that is blended with petrol. Until now, only ethanol produced from sugarcane was approved for this purpose. Under the new policy, feedstock for biofuels includes sugar beet, corn, damaged foodgrain, potatoes, even municipal solid waste. This will likely reduce the cost of producing biofuels and improve affordability for consumers, particularly during times when oil prices reach discomfoting levels. In India, industrial-scale availability of ethanol so far has been only from sugar factories, which were free to divert it to other users such as alcohol producers, who would pay more. The oil companies have been floating tenders for ethanol supply, but availability lags behind their needs, because the price is often not attractive enough for the sugar industry. The Centre hopes the new policy will also benefit farmers, who will be able to sell various types of agricultural waste to industry at remunerative prices. But given the technology available, a large chunk of the biofuel will have to come from the sugar sector for now. Therefore, pricing is the key. The government estimates that ethanol supply of around 150 crore litres in 2017-18 could save foreign exchange worth over ₹4,000 crore. The production of biofuels from agricultural waste, it is hoped, will also help curb atmospheric pollution by giving farmers an incentive not to burn it, as is happening in large parts of northern India.

But policy should not get ahead of technological and financial feasibility – and options should be realistically laid out for farmers. There is also a need for caution in using surplus foodgrain to produce ethanol. And while removing the shackles on raw material supply can have definite benefits, it cannot make a significant difference to biofuel production as long as the supply-chain infrastructure that is required to deliver biofuels to the final consumer remains inadequate. To address this issue, the new policy envisages investment to the tune of ₹5,000 crore in building bio-refineries and offering other incentives over the next few years. The government should also take steps to remove policy barriers that have discouraged private investment in building supply chains. Until that happens, India's huge biofuel potential will continue to remain largely untapped.

# Data in a post-truth age

Trust in official statistics is vital for democracy – the new policy must avoid centralisation



SONALDE DESAI

David Spiegelhalter, president of Royal Statistical Society in the U.K., gave a most unusual presidential address in 2017. Instead of talking about esoteric statistical techniques, he talked about declining trust in numbers in a post-truth society bombarded by fake news and alternative facts. He recommended to the statistical community that the best way of inspiring trust was to be trustworthy by demonstrating competence, reliability and honesty.

India has been fortunate in inheriting a statistical system from stalwarts like P.C. Mahalanobis and C.R. Rao that has historically demonstrated all three. However, with the growing demand for statistics and increasingly challenging data collection environment, the move by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) towards developing a National Policy on Official Statistics is most welcome.

There is much to like in this policy. It notes increasing data needs, lays down the groundwork for ethical data collection, highlights the importance of data quality and addresses the need for documentation and durable data storage. However, it also remains rooted within the confines of governmental administrative structures and does not directly address the criteria identified by Mr. Spiegelhalter. In the Indian context, each of these presents great challenge.

### Competence

Sample surveys, the bedrock of Indian statistical systems, must make explicit choices about who to ask various questions as well as

what to ask and how to ask. In a statistical system developed by renowned statisticians and econometricians, it is not surprising that much attention has been directed towards identifying the universe of respondents and sample selection. However, this is only a small part of the challenge. Given the increasing need for statistics in diverse areas, it is important that scholars from many different disciplines be involved.

The National Sample Survey (NSS) collects data on occupations and industries of workers. In 2009, it suddenly switched from older codes designed in 1968 to new series of codes developed in 2004. This change makes it difficult to differentiate between farmers and farm managers and shopkeepers and sales managers via occupational codes alone. This leaves out such a large portion of the Indian workforce that it is mind-boggling. Why? We decided to adopt international standards developed for industrial societies where self-employed farmers and shopkeepers have been swallowed up by large corporations. I suspect that if a sociologist interested in occupations was involved in overseeing this change, it might not have passed the scrutiny.

### Reliability

How surveys are designed and questions are developed has evolved into a science that transcends the skill set usually employed by our statistical systems. The Reserve Bank of India has adopted an inflation-targeting approach that relies on data on inflation expectations of individuals. In a country where ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) surveys repeatedly document extremely low mathematical skills, how reliable are the data when individuals are asked to compare their expectations of inflation rates over the coming year with that in the future? We have little understanding of reliability and



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validity of these data, and yet they form the bedrock of our policy. Experiments designed by cognitive anthropologists, educational assessment experts and survey design specialists are needed to arrive at the correct questions. And even then, we will need some way of estimating uncertainty surrounding these results.

### Honesty

The draft policy as well as many other reports have paid great attention to the fact that data collection is increasingly being done by contractual employees and for-profit organisations. Supervising them and ensuring their honesty remains challenging. While improved technology for monitoring fieldwork such as random segment audio recording of interviews and real-time checks for detecting frauds and errors may help increase honesty, there is no substitute for empathy and experience. Whenever I talk about interviewer errors and fraud, I recall doing a health-related interview in a mosquito-infested locality. I was bravely suffering through mosquito bites until my respondent told me her husband was recovering from malaria and I simply wanted to flee her home. We expect interviewers to work under challenging circumstances and often send them out to collect data with little training and support. A nimble survey management structure that understands the difficulties of on-the-ground data collectors and responds appropriately to find

ways of ensuring quality and honesty must form the cornerstone of good data collection.

The draft policy on official statistics engages with these challenges only tangentially. Instead, it chooses to follow the report of the C. Rangarajan-led National Statistical Commission (NSC) submitted in 2001 and focusses largely on coordination within different ministries at the Centre and between State governments and the Centre. A tendency to centralise authority and decision-making within well-defined structures such as the NSC forms the core of the policy statement. It also recommends that a registered society under the oversight of MOSPI be set up with ₹2,000 crore endowment that will be tasked with all government data collection and statistical analysis.

Instead of creating a statistical data ecosystem that harnesses the energy of diverse institutions and disciplines in which innovative thinking on data collection and analysis could be undertaken, this tendency towards centralisation may well isolate official statistical systems. This is quite a departure from India's illustrious history. Mahalanobis was instrumental in setting up both the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) and what was to become the National Sample Survey Organisation. Most of the early innovations implemented in the NSS emerged from work by academics at the ISI. However, as former member of the NSS Governing Council, T.J. Rao, notes, the collaboration between academics and the NSS has weakened substantially in recent years. The proposed move would lead to even further alienation of official statistical systems from the academic and research infrastructure of the nation.

### Harness diverse energies

If we are to revitalise India's statistical infrastructure, it is vitally important to harness diverse ener-

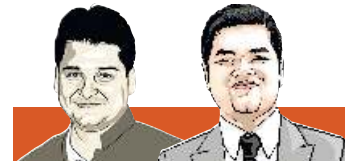
gies from academic and research institutions such as the ISI, the Indian Agricultural Statistics Research Institute, National Council of Applied Economic Research, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the International Institute for Population Sciences, the Delhi School of Economics, the Madras Institute of Development Studies and the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj. Smaller, technology-savvy private sector organisations may also make important contributions in technology-driven data collection. Around the world, in diverse countries such as China, South Africa, Brazil, the U.K. and the U.S., statistical ecosystems consist of universities, research institutions and government agencies working synergistically. The proposed policy on official statistics is timely and thoughtful but it is also isolationist. Creative thinking about building synergies with diverse communities such as academic and research institutions would strengthen it and reduce the burden on the NSC, leaving it free to devote greater attention to developing quality control parameters and to play an oversight and coordination role.

The phrase 'figures don't lie, but liars figure' seems to sum up the motif of a post-statistics society. A report in *The Guardian* in 2017 noted declining trust in official statistics around the world and argued that it damages democracy by jeopardising public knowledge and public argument. The draft National Policy on Official Statistics offers a great start for fostering trust in statistics but enhancing its inclusiveness will go a long way towards encouraging competence, reliability and honesty in public statistics.

Sonalde Desai is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and Senior Fellow and Centre Director, NCAER-National Data Innovation Centre. The views expressed are personal

# A maritime stretch

A more concerted and intensive engagement will serve both India and Indonesia well



HARSH V. PANT & TUNEER MUKHERJEE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Southeast Asia this week has the potential to spark a new period of maritime cooperation between India and Indonesia. An uptick in India-Indonesia relations will be a welcome development for both President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Mr. Modi, who through their respective 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' and 'Act East' policies have envisaged sharper maritime collaboration in the region.

### China, the common concern

The visit comes against the backdrop of an offer from the Indonesian government to grant India access to its Sabang port for the development of the port and an economic zone. Located at the mouth of the strategically important Strait of Malacca, Sabang is only 100 nautical miles from the southern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India and Indonesia share multiple common concerns, one of which is China's growing maritime footprint in the eastern Indian Ocean. Sabang, with its naval base, naval air station, and maintenance and repair facilities, has the potential to serve

as the focal point of a budding strategic partnership between the two countries.

Both countries value the key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and therefore the foundation of any strategic partnership will rest on how they both seek to manage the region's strategically important chokepoints. The strategically important Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda fall under the Indian Navy's primary area of interest, and access to Indonesian naval bases such as Sabang will significantly enhance the Indian Navy's ability to maintain a forward presence and monitor movements in the Straits of Malacca.

Indonesia too has started recognising the benefits of a closer strategic partnership with India. Like many other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Jakarta remains apprehensive of Chinese intentions in the wider maritime theatre. The territorial dispute between China and Indonesia in the Natuna Sea is an issue that is close to Mr. Jokowi, and a strategic alignment with India will help Jakarta balance some of the security concerns emanating from Beijing's aggressive stance in the South China Sea.

The comprehensive defence cooperation agreement that is expected to be signed between the countries can possibly be a multi-faceted logistical agreement – on the lines of the deal which India signed with France earlier in the



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year. Mutual logistical support and reciprocal berthing rights will facilitate a more intimate maritime security partnership. This will allow India to gain access to naval bases in Lampung on the Sunda Strait, and Denpasar and Banyuwangi on the Lombok Strait, augmenting the Indian Navy's operational breadth in the eastern Indian Ocean.

### Areas of engagement

Indonesia, on its end, will also seek to negotiate the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone shared by the two nations in the Andaman Sea. Additional facets of this partnership can involve information sharing on white shipping, and enabling India to partner Indonesia in tracking commercial cargo ships at choke points such as Malacca which are getting increasingly congested.

In the past, cooperation between India and Indonesia has been limited to anti-piracy patrols, search and rescue exercises and joint hydrographic exploration. It is important for the two countries

to move to a more concerted and intensive engagement. India should leverage this opportunity and seek its inclusion in the Malacca Strait Patrols programme. India's inclusion in the programme would augment India's existing maritime domain awareness in the region, while the eyes-in-the-sky component will allow India to jointly patrol the region with its maritime surveillance aircraft. Chinese presence in these SLOCs is well known, and India's ability to monitor Chinese naval movements in the locale will be a great boost to the Indian Navy's security missions. Moreover, access to the Jayapura naval base in West Papua will expand the Indian Navy's operating capacity in the Western Pacific, and complement Indian access to French naval bases in French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the Southern Pacific.

A strategic confluence between New Delhi and Jakarta needs an economic direction. The development of the port and economic zone in Sabang can serve as blueprint for a connectivity partnership between the two nations, and more importantly, provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The proposed cruise tourism circuit between the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Sabang would further enhance such economic linkages. Additionally, a partnership that includes collaboration in defence industries and maritime training and education can ensure a dynamic maritime collaboration.

At a time when countries are realigning themselves to accommodate the growing consensus around an Indo-Pacific strategic framework, India and Indonesia, as members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, need to complement each other's vision of a regional order.

### An opportunity

Mr. Modi is due to deliver the keynote at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore after his Jakarta visit, and he needs to use this opportunity to make public the strategic framework of his 'Act East' policy. India needs to supplement efforts in Jakarta and leverage its existing strategic relations with Singapore and other like-minded regional states if it is to cement its position as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean. A closer logistical partnership with countries such as Singapore, Australia and Indonesia can be the starting point of an extensive strategic linkage that will help establish India as a regional provider of maritime security.

The time has come for India to realise the potential of a strategic alignment with the archipelagic state that is geo-politically positioned at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, and an upgrade in maritime relations is the logical way forward.

Harsh V. Pant is Professor of International Relations at King's College London and Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi. Tuneer Mukherjee is a junior fellow at the ORF

## 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.

### Shut down

It is easy to see the Sterlite Copper issue in the following ways: a case of failed managerial handling; a politically motivated agitation in a State where overall governance is in doubt; or, as a case of poor CSR by a profit-making company ("Sterlite Copper told to shut shop in T.N.", May 29). The fact is that the agitation and its aftermath reflect the ease with which it is possible to circumvent our regulatory procedures and the time it takes for the attendant problems to surface, fester and boil over. It is assumed that the environment comprises only the physical attributes of water, air and land. What

is lost sight of is the fact that it is people who are fundamental to any discourse on the environment. It must be recalled that the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 was conceived after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (and in which India participated and pledged to take appropriate steps for the protection and improvement of the human environment). Perhaps the way to stop flashpoints like Tuticorin from recurring is to insist that the subject of environmental clearance comes up in the first stage – not by looking at just the

physical parameters and processes to be deployed but also at how the project will affect the health of the people nearby and across a 10-year timeframe. Most importantly, the consent of the people whose land is being taken or who are going to be affected should be obtained through the sanction of the gram panchayat or the gram sabha before any *jan sunwai* or public hearing is carried out.

RAGHAV CHANDRA, New Delhi

It is unfortunate that a large industrial unit has had to be closed. As the company claims that it has been compliant as far as

environmental laws are concerned, the State Pollution Control Board should publish the monitoring results. The economic consequences to the State are bound to be enormous. Perhaps a lesson can be drawn from the Gujarat experience. Three industrial estates that were declared to be highly polluting were practically read the riot act, asked to comply with pollution standards and given a timeframe. What followed were strict monitoring and good results.

D.M. MOHUNTA, Chennai

The health of the environment cannot be

sacrificed for momentary gains. The developed countries realised this a long time ago and have stringent rules in place while the developing world has still to play catch up. India cannot forget the consequences of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

JAMES EDWIN THOMSON, Chennai

### Heat stroke

The Election Commission (EC) needlessly courted controversy when it staggered elections in Gujarat last year. Now, the

large-scale malfunction of EVM/VVPAT machines has again shown it in a bad light, made worse by a facile explanation of extreme heat affliction of the devices ("EC plays down VVPAT malfunction", May 29). Given the overt impatience of the BJP to wrest power, the Opposition is expectedly apprehensive of the conduct of the EC. The EC needs to ensure that there is no dirt.

R. NARAYANAN, Pune

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

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

Logo mismatch: In the Sports page feature, "Time to deliver" (May 29, 2018), the logo of the Football Federation Australia was erroneously carried along with the details of the Croatian team.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in