



Unwise proposal

The Election Commission's proposal seeking contempt powers for itself is alarming

Permanent laws cannot be made in response to transient trends, especially to create a power that is open to abuse. The Election Commission of India's proposal to the Law Ministry that it be armed with the power to punish for contempt is an unwarranted and poorly thought-out response to some strident accusations of partisan functioning, mainly from political parties that had lost in the electoral arena. With democratic practices evolving over time, even the power to punish for contempt vested in the judiciary has come under question, with many wondering whether this relic of a bygone age should be retained. Even superior courts, empowered to act under the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, are often advised to use it only sparingly. Against this backdrop, for a multi-member Election Commission, which enjoys a high degree of public confidence and a reputation for impartiality, to ask that it be clothed with the powers of a high court to punish both civil and criminal contempt is a travesty of our open and democratic system. Civil contempt pertains to wilful disobedience of court orders, and giving the ECI the power to enforce its orders may be an idea worth debating. However, it will be very harmful to free speech and fair criticism if the ECI is given the power to punish for criminal contempt on grounds that something had "scandalised" it or tended to lower its authority – a vague and subjective provision that should have no place in contempt law. It is a matter of concern that the ECI appears to be preparing the ground to use its power to curtail free speech; its letter refers to some parties "taking advantage of the right to freedom of expression" to question the conduct of elections.

There is a marked difference between the judiciary and the Election Commission. Judges have a tradition of not responding publicly to criticism. As Lord Denning observed in 1968, they "cannot enter into public controversy". The ECI, on the other hand, responds robustly as and when allegations about the conduct of elections surface. There is no reason to believe that public confidence in the ECI will be shaken or its superintendence, direction and control over the election process undermined by criticism, however tendentious or calumnious it may be. It is true that parties have made unfair accusations about the conduct of elections, or more accurately, about the outcome of elections that went against them. The Aam Aadmi Party has made it a sort of mission to run down the electronic voting system. Not stopping with scepticism of the claim that the electronic voting machines are invulnerable, it has alleged ECI members are politically aligned to the ruling party at the Centre. However, it cannot be forgotten that reforms such as the introduction of a verifiable paper trail came about only because somebody voiced criticism and suspicion. Throttling criticism in the name of punishing contempt will only cut off feedback.

The Quetta murders

The killing of two Chinese nationals exposes fault lines, but won't affect China-Pakistan ties

The killing of two Chinese nationals, abducted at gunpoint in the Balochistan capital Quetta in May, appears to have exposed fault lines between China and Pakistan, with Beijing issuing statements calling for Islamabad to do more to protect its citizens. To begin with, there have been reports of unhappiness over the \$55-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – some Pakistani economists mention the debt burden Pakistan will face, and there have been protests by Gilgit, Baloch and Sindhi activists against the environmental impact of major infrastructure projects. There are also religious issues: Pakistan accused the two Chinese nationals, who had obtained business visas to teach Mandarin and learn Urdu, of being involved in Christian "missionary work", which is unlawful in the country. The abduction and murder, first announced in the Islamic State site *Amaq*, also indicates the inroads the group has made in Pakistan. The Pakistan government, which has faced criticism in the Chinese media for not doing more to save the two Chinese nationals, will clearly have to speed up its plans for a Special Security Division to protect CPEC, raising nine army battalions and hiring about 14,000 personnel. It would, however, be a mistake to read too much into reports that the killings have caused strains between China and Pakistan, or Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

The two countries have had decades of close cooperation, led by defence co-production and nuclear technology transfers; if anything, CPEC binds them in an even closer embrace. In a recent statement, Beijing sought to dismiss reports suggesting that President Xi Jinping had refused to meet Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kazakhstan because of the kidnappings. It said the two leaders had already held substantive discussions during the Belt and Road Forum in mid-May. The killing of the Chinese nationals represents a lapse in security, but is part of what the Chinese Foreign Ministry calls the risks of "going global", indicating that as its footprint grows in developing nations and conflict zones, its citizens will face higher risks. For both China and Pakistan, CPEC and other cooperation is not ideological but driven by mutual strategic interests. China has, for example, refused to consider India's concerns on terror emanating from Pakistan, although groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba have attacked Chinese citizens. Similarly, Pakistan raises concerns over the alleged treatment of Kashmiris and minorities in India, but ignores the Chinese government's strict anti-terror laws in Xinjiang province. While it is important to observe the progress of CPEC closely, and continue to raise India's concerns on sovereignty with China and Pakistan, it is premature to attach too much lasting significance to the kidnappings in Balochistan.

Musings on London Bridge

Combating the new range of threats posed by the IS will also require political settlements in Syria and Iraq



MOHAMAD BAZZI

On the evening of June 3, three men unleashed terror in the heart of London, killing eight people and wounding dozens, in the third major terrorist attack in Britain in three months.

The assailants sped across London Bridge in a white van, ramming into pedestrians. They later emerged from the van with hunting knives and began stabbing people in Borough Market, a nearby night-spot. The attackers were quickly chased down and killed by British police.

On May 22, a suicide bomber attacked a concert arena in the city of Manchester, killing 22 people. Two months earlier, a driver mowed down pedestrians on Westminster Bridge in London, and tried to break into Parliament before being shot and killed by security forces.

The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for all of these attacks, and it now seems that the terrorist group will be quick to adopt nearly every attack on civilians, especially in the West. These claims of responsibility tend to be somewhat generic – they don't show the IS's involvement in the planning or execution of attacks – but they do help the group in its propaganda efforts.

A decentralised jihadism

These self-directed and "lone wolf" attacks are not an accident. They are the result of an organised, decade-old movement within Islamic jihadism to decentralise attacks and make them more diffuse. This trend predated the emergence of the IS – it can be traced back to al-Qaeda after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

While al-Qaeda was a hierarchical organisation, its leader Osama bin Laden and his deputy and even-



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tual successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, realised that maintaining training camps and central control was not going to work after the group was forced out of its base in Afghanistan under U.S. bombing. Before the September 11 attacks, bin Laden had relied on recruits trained at Afghan camps, and many had personally pledged allegiance to him.

But even while in hiding, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri frequently addressed their supporters through dozens of videos, audiotapes and Internet statements. They encouraged new recruits to act autonomously under al-Qaeda's banner, and they helped inspire hundreds of young men to carry out suicide or conventional bombings in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Spain, Britain and elsewhere.

After a large number of al-Qaeda's leaders were killed, captured or forced to flee, one of bin Laden's former bodyguards in Afghanistan described the group's revamped operations to an Arabic newspaper. "Every element of al-Qaeda is self-activated," he said. "Whoever finds a chance to attack simply goes ahead. The decision is theirs alone."

The rapid rise of the IS

Today, the IS has expanded and perfected this concept of the "leaderless jihad." And it is now wreaking havoc and spreading fear, both in the West and in West Asia.

The latest wave of attacks fits into a series of appeals by IS leaders for their supporters to carry out self-directed assaults that use any means necessary to kill civilians, especially in the West. As the group continues to face a U.S.-led bombing campaign against its strongholds in Syria and Iraq, it is losing the territory and fighters that make up the backbone of its self-declared caliphate. As a result, the IS is turning towards both centrally organised plots and individual attacks carried out by sympathisers to reassert its claim as the world's leading jihadist movement.

One of the major inspirations for this strategy is Abu Musab al-Suri, a veteran jihadist ideologue and an al-Qaeda leader who worked with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri in the 1990s. After he became disillusioned with al-Qaeda's leaders and direction following the September 11 attacks, Suri published a 1,600-page manifesto titled, "A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance", on the Internet in 2005.

In the document, which is still widely shared in jihadist circles, Suri calls for a wave of "individual jihad" in which independent operatives – sometimes self-radicalised and other times assisted by recruiters on the Internet – would target Western civilians in an effort to sow chaos and terror. Suri described his jihadist philosophy as "no organizations, just principles".

With a \$5 million U.S. bounty on

Big data, big dangers

India needs to negotiate the world of big data technology with adequate safeguards



HEMANT KANAKIA

With the Supreme Court turning its gaze on privacy issues associated with Aadhaar, can we take a moment to look to the myriad ways in which our privacy is being assaulted in the digital world? When my neighbour across the street got too curious about my life, I installed curtains to block his gaze. But what about when the invisible drones at Facebook send him a message that one of my colleagues has tagged me enjoying a music festival in Goa and he might want to "like" this picture? How do we draw a curtain around our digital lives?

Think beyond the nosy neighbour to the corporations that want to utilise minutia of your life to sell products that you may or may not need. Corporations have always been interested in understanding consumer behaviour and been collecting data about users using their products or service. What is unique about Big Data Technology (BDT) is the scale at which this data collection can take place. For instance, Google has stored petabytes of information about billions of people and their online brows-

ing habits. Similarly, Facebook and Amazon have collected information about social networks. In addition to using this data to improve products or services that these corporations offer, the stored data is available also to highest bidders and governments of nations where these companies are based.

Looming dangers

One major problem with collecting and storing such vast amounts of data overseas is the ability of owners of such data stores to violate the privacy of people. Even if the primary collectors of data may not engage in this behaviour, foreign governments or rogue multinationals could clandestinely access these vast pools of personal data in order to affect policies of a nation. Such knowledge could prove toxic and detrimental in the hands of unscrupulous elements or hostile foreign governments. The alleged Russian interference in the U.S. election tells us that these possibilities are not simply science fiction fantasies.

The other major problem is the potential drain of economic wealth of a nation. Currently, the corporations collecting such vast amounts of data are all based in developed countries, mostly in the U.S. Most emerging economies, including India, have neither the knowledge nor the favourable environment for businesses that collect data on such a vast scale. The advertising



revenue that is currently earned by local newspapers or other media companies would eventually start to flow outside the country to overseas multinationals. A measure of this effect can already be seen in a way that consumer dollars are being redistributed across the spectrum of U.S. businesses touching them. For instance, communication carriers such as AT&T, Verizon and cable networks find that their revenue has remained flat to slightly falling in the last five years whereas the revenues of Google, which depend on these carriers to provide connectivity to consumers, are increasing exponentially. Unless we employ some countermeasures, we should expect the same phenomenon repeat itself for corporations based in India.

Sadly, BDT is a tiger the world is destined to ride. It is no longer possible to safely disembark, but stay-

ing on is not without its perils. The only way to negotiate this brave new world is to make sure that India does it on her own terms and finds a way to protect both financial rewards and ensure individual privacy and national security through appropriate safeguards.

What India can do

China has apparently understood this dynamic and taken measures to counter this threat. It has encouraged the formation of large Internet companies such as Baidu and Alibaba and deterred Google and others from having major market share in China by using informal trade restraints and anti-monopoly rules against them. India may not be able to emulate China in this way, but we could take other countermeasures to preserve our digital economy independence. The heart of building companies using BDT is their ability to build sophisticated super-large data centres. By providing appropriate subsidies such as cheap power and real estate, and cheap network bandwidth to those data centres, one would encourage our industries to be able to build and retain data within our boundaries. In the short term, we should also create a policy framework that encourages overseas multinationals such as Google and Amazon to build large data centres in India and to retain the bulk of raw data collected in India within our na-

getting Muslims. But IS leaders endorse the wholesale slaughter of civilians, including many Muslims that they regard as infidels, as epitomised by the spate of attacks on Muslim countries during Ramazan in recent years.

By mid-2014, the IS seized large chunks of Syria and Iraq. The group then proclaimed a caliphate in the territory under its control, and named its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as caliph and "leader of Muslims everywhere".

Looking for real solutions

Over the past three years, the IS displaced al-Qaeda as the dominant force in international jihadism. Baghdadi's group had been more successful in its strategy, which relies on capturing and holding territory. But after its recent losses in Iraq and Syria, the group has reverted to its roots as a jihadist insurgency, bent on large-scale attacks that instil fear but achieve few tangible gains.

In doing so, IS leaders realise that they are on the verge of losing their self-declared capitals in Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq. That means the group would squander the caliphate that has distinguished it from other jihadist movements, and helped it attract new recruits.

To combat this new and more complex range of threats posed by the IS and its sympathisers, governments in the West and throughout the world will need to do more than simply continue military strikes against targets in Iraq and Syria. Detering new attacks against civilians will require working towards political settlements in Syria and Iraq. It will also mean greater vigilance in monitoring clandestine networks set up by IS operatives – and adjusting to a new enemy that knows no limits.

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tional geographical boundaries.

Moreover, we should also build research and development activities in Big Data Science and data centre technology at our academic and research institutions that allow for better understanding of the way in which BDT can be limited to reduce the risk of deductive disclosure at an individual level. This will require developing software and training for individuals on how to protect their privacy and for organisations and government officials to put in place strict firewalls, data backup and secure erasure procedures. In the West, we already are seeing a number of start-ups developing technology that enables users to control who gets access to the data about their behaviour patterns in the digital world.

The government has approved the "Digital India" Plan that aims to connect 2.5 lakh villages to the Internet by 2019 and to bring Wi-Fi access to 2.5 lakh schools, all universities and public places in major cities and major tourist centres. This is indeed a very desirable policy step. But unless we evolve appropriate policies to counter the side effects of the Digital Plan, this could also lead to the unforeseen eColonisation of India.

Hemant Kanakia is a computer scientist and investor in high technology companies. The views expressed are personal

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.

Roots of a crisis

The report of two debt-ridden farmers committing suicide in Madhya Pradesh evokes much sorrow and resentment. It is lamentable that the State government continues to turn a Nelson's eye to the growing crisis (June 10). Farmers have no guaranteed income and there is widespread perception that the agrarian crisis is an outcome of natural calamities which no one can fight. Governments over the years have used this to hide their inefficiencies in problem-solving. One should understand that an agrarian crisis not only affects the life of the farmer and his family but the rural economy as well. The time has come to scrutinise the impact of 'LPG' – liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation – reforms on Indian agriculture. Therefore, an agrarian crisis is a much broader

phenomenon than it is understood by many.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

Advice for the Congress

Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh's call to like-minded parties and secular forces to find common ground is timely ('The Wednesday interview: Amarinder Singh', June 14). The Congress party in particular should pay heed to his advice if it is to revive its fortunes. The political situation is now vastly different from when the Congress was numero uno and the party must be willing to reconsider the coalition formula. Despite doomsday predictions by one and all, the Indian National Congress is capable of bouncing back. It needs to keep a level head and follow good advice.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN,
Tiruchi

Unrest in the hills

In being non-negotiable conformists of cultural identities and rejecting the prerequisites to cope with the challenges of a globalised era, the hill community in Darjeeling is only doing a great disservice to itself in its response to the language issue (Editorial - "A shattered peace", June 14). A working knowledge of the State's principal language plays an important role in the process of integration with economic opportunities and avenues created across the State. Those in Darjeeling spearheading the agitation must realise that they are the chief architects of the future of the next generation who also have dreams and ambitions. This phenomenon of a concrete cultural fencing can be seen in Assam as well. A majority of the Bengali-speaking people face obstacles when

engaging with their Assamese-speaking counterparts in areas of professional or personal outreach. While insecurity over cultural imperialism is valid, this must be tempered first by reposing a strong faith in constitutional safeguards of minority cultural rights and also by sustained engagement between various cultural communities so as to build an edifice of trust.

BIBHUTI DAS,
New Delhi

■ The demand for a separate administrative region of Gorkhaland has existed since 1907 when the Hillmen's Association of Darjeeling submitted a memorandum to the Morley-Minto Reforms Committee. The movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland gained serious momentum during the 1980s. The perception now

is that the fire has been relit over the issue of "language imposition". If the West Bengal Chief Minister has made the assurance that Bengali is optional in the hills, why is the agitation still escalating? The answer perhaps lies in the BJP, the arch-rival of the TMC in West Bengal, fanning the flames of unrest. The peace in Darjeeling should not be shattered and the BJP should not try to fish in troubled waters; this is not an ordinary political issue. If West Bengal fails to quell this unrest and the BJP plays foul for the sake of politics, it could eventually ignite a whole set of demands for smaller territorial units.

H.M. RIJAJUL HOQUE,
Baranadaha, Nadia, West Bengal

Amenities can wait

As a senior citizen and a frequent train traveller, I am not in a position to share the enthusiasm of our Railway

Minister over the decision to retrofit train coaches with "modern amenities" ("40,000 train coaches to be retrofitted", June 14). One should travel by reserved, ordinary, second class coaches to experience the travails of the average passenger. Ticketless travellers lay siege to the passageways and the approach to the toilets which are always soiled. The less said the better about the TTEs, who seem as helpless as the passengers and go about their job of ticket checking mechanically. Let the funds earmarked for refurbishing coaches be spent on ensuring a hassle-free journey. Train travellers would be only too willing to pay extra for a safe and comfortable journey.

S. VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

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