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Don't drag the discourse down

The president's office must be above narrow considerations

It is par for the course that most appointments to high office are needlessly politicised these days and it would seem that the presidential post is no exception. It is unfortunate that Union minister and Lok Janshakti Party leader Ram Vilas Paswan should have chosen to drag the discourse down by saying that anyone opposing the candidature of Ram Nath Kovind as president will be seen as anti-Dalit. He went on to say this choice was a 'tight slap' for those who branded the Modi government as anti-Dalit. The Opposition meanwhile is said to be trying to put up another Dalit candidate to counter this, further reducing the level of the debate.

The office of the president should be above all caste, religious or gender considerations. The candidate should not be part of a larger political agenda on the part of either the government or the Opposition. No one doubts the credentials of Ram Nath Kovind or the fact that him being chosen is a victory for equal opportunity. Similarly, when KR Narayanan became president much was made of his Dalit credentials, quite overlooking his distinguished diplomatic career. If the government and Opposition were serious about giving the Dalits a level playing field, they must go much beyond this move. Dalits need education, healthcare and jobs, something which politicians pay lip service to come elections. They are also often subject to caste violence and ostracisation in a casteist society. This should be addressed.

In recent times, we have seen attacks on Dalits in various parts of the country. This is what should exercise political parties. As of now, it would seem that the NDA has the numbers to carry the day. Even if the Opposition were to put up a candidate, and it seems likely that it will, all parties should resolve to keep the discussion from degenerating into a political fight. As of now, the NDA is being accused of playing the Dalit card. This is to do a disservice to Mr. Kovind who has come up on his own merit and has not played any card. The office of the first citizen should really float above the fray and if going forward, the debate can be kept as non-partisan as possible, this would set the right benchmark for the future.

The Syrian civil war takes a dangerous turn

The escalation of tensions between the US and Russia will have global implications

A United States fighter downed a Syrian military aircraft for the first time when it bombed a Syrian rebel faction backed by Washington. Russia, which backs the Syrian government, warned that US aircraft and drones could be targeted by Russia. Moscow, for good measure, cut off the hotline designed to avoid accidental run-ins between the US and Russia military in Syria. Meanwhile, Iran fired missiles on an Islamic State (IS) base in eastern Syria. All of these actions are unprecedented and represent an escalation of the military activity of almost all the major external players in the Syrian civil war.

In the larger geopolitical game they indicate that the defeat of IS in its present territorial form is now being seen as inevitable. With their enemies closing in on their capital Raqqa and their forces being pushed out of their largest city, Mosul, even the 'caliphate' leadership accepts the end is nigh. On the Iraqi front, the political map is largely clear. Baghdad will restore sovereignty over Iraq's accepted borders. That is not the case with Syria. The Bashar al-Assad government is backed by Iran and Russia but physically holds only a strip of western Syria. His military successes depend on his external backers. The regime remains opposed by the US, Turkey and various Sunni regimes. They support a pantheon of rebel groups. The postwar map of Syria, in other words, remains highly uncertain.

The various external players have begun jockeying for position as IS retreats in Syria. Damascus has spent more time attacking rebels who are not affiliated to IS. This is partly true even for Russia's airstrikes. The entry of the US into the equation is the most uncertain variable. It could easily become the most powerful player, irrespective of Russia's warnings. As one Syrian conflict is winding down another one, unfortunately, seems to be hotting up. And this one, in terms of its global implications, could be even more dangerous.

Children cannot reform the system

Child activism signifies policy failure. It indicates the welfare state mutating to a laissez-faire raj

KRISHNA KUMAR

In recent times, school girls have been making news in many parts of rural Haryana. They have been demanding the addition of two years to their schools which currently run up to Class X. This upgradation will make commuting to a neighbouring village unnecessary, thereby protecting girls from harassment. Authorities have been ready to accept the demand, which is hardly surprising. It is a lot easier to add two higher secondary classes than to control harassment on rural tracks. Whether the upgraded schools will get adequate number of qualified teachers for +2 level optionals is, of course, a different matter.

This kind of child activism makes good headlines and leaves everyone happy. Politicians acquire merit by responding to a public protest made by children, especially when these children happen to be girls in Haryana. By accepting their demand, the State improves its record and poor public image in gender equity. Attractive though this potential benefit is, it contributes little to the State's capacity to make sound policies and

implement them. Also, upgradation does not respond to the core issue, i.e. the insecurity that girls feel commuting to a senior school located in a nearby village. Precipitous upgrading of rural schools ignores and dents the prevailing policy. According to it, schools covering different stages should be networked physically and academically in order to maximize the utilization of scarce resources. Quick acceptance of a demand voiced by children also distracts attention from the deeper crisis the system is facing. It is sharply divided between fee-charging private and free government schools. This division has exacerbated caste, class and gender gaps. Families that cannot afford to place both sons and daughters in a private school leave the latter in government school.

This larger picture is not confined to Haryana. Last year, girls in a Rajasthan village had staged a hunger strike in order to draw attention to teacher vacancies in their school. Their action was resented by officials. Shortage of teachers—caused by chronic postponement of recruitment—is a common problem across northern India. State governments and the HRD ministry at the Centre are well aware of this problem. Nothing much has changed even at the elementary stage since the Right to Education was promulgated almost seven years ago. In secondary and higher secondary schools, the situation is worse, and there is no law to compel a government to fill up teacher



Quick acceptance of demands by children distracts from the deeper crisis

vacancies quickly. It is worth wondering about why governments now need laws to feel motivated to fulfil a routine responsibility. Children's civic awareness and activism can hardly compensate for the absence of a sense of responsibility among authorities.

Child abuse presents a similar case. Responding to frequent stories of small children being sexually abused while at school, many urban parents now train their children to recognise their vulnerability and to resist abuse. Children are taught to differentiate between 'good' touch and 'bad' touch. They are also told to report their everyday school experience when they come home. Thus,

children as young as three or four are now expected to protect themselves because the school and higher authorities cannot protect them. The consequences of early awareness of sexual vulnerability are both complex and open to debate. What is not debatable is the failure of society and State to accept their responsibility towards children.

When small boys and girls are told to practice wakeful vigilance for their own safety and security, something precious is subtracted from their experience of childhood. As a society, we probably don't recognise children's need for childhood perhaps because we ourselves feel insecure leaving children in institutions that we don't fully trust. The idea of a monster can't be a fantasy if a child is required to expect one at school. Turning children into perpetually alert, self-defending activists can hardly resolve this institutional crisis. State functionaries who say that they cannot resolve it without social support are evading the truth.

Problems like chronic scarcity of teachers or stodge recruitment and training procedures can't be laid at the door of society. If the State is unable to ensure the human quality of the adults who have access to children at school, parents can't compensate for this failure. Nor can their attempt to find a personal solution help improve the system. Though it may help to cope with a larger problem, child activism signifies policy failure. It also indicates India's mutation from a welfare state into a laissez-faire raj where children must fend for themselves.

Krishna Kumar is former director, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The views expressed are personal.

NUMBERS GAME



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit to the United States is expected to focus on Pakistan's proxy wars against India.

Big data will help India make a case on terrorism

Rather than getting tied down by bureaucratic red tape, New Delhi must back its case with numbers and analyses

TARA KARTHA

Part from plans to buy a fleet of commercial aircraft guaranteed to catch the attention of an anxious industry, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit to the United States is also expected to focus on Pakistan's proxy wars against India.

As always when negotiating with the US, it is not only White House aides, bureaucracy and members of the Congress who matter, but also the think tanks and media who aim to influence policy at the Hill.

This is where the difficulty starts. Major think tanks in Washington have a different view on terrorism in the region. A prestigious think tank while classifying conflicts, cites Afghanistan as a 'civil war' on its interactive map. This flies against facts, given that almost the entire top Taliban leadership lives, strategies and banks in Pakistan. The term 'Af-Pak' itself illustrates the cross border pall under which the war is being fought.

Another think tank with an impressive 'global' database had put India at the eighth position on the top 10 countries affected by terrorism — and this based on attacks by Maoists as well as those by Northeast insurgents. In relative proportion, terrorism in

Kashmir was only an 'also ran' position. There's also little awareness in India's main terrorism pliant — take action against Pakistan as a terror sponsor. There's little interest in its actions in Kashmir, apart from the fear that it occurs between nuclear rivals. The fact that Islamabad's operations in Kashmir empower the deep state to play the same game in Afghanistan is hardly appreciated.

India does not make its own task any easier. In a world where big data lies at the centre of policy, New Delhi has no data to offer. The ministry of home affairs' website 'updates' on Kashmir is more than a year old, and it requires an imaginative reading between the lines to understand its annual report.

Think tanks in India are hardly any better. Most offer opinion without hard data. Where is the data that can show that districts affected by terrorism are less than 10 and that the whole of 'Kashmir' is not affected by terrorism? Barring one, no one offers updated information on the JeM, at a time when India is working to get it notified as a terrorist group at the UN. Neither is there any precise coverage of the activities of the LeT in Afghanistan, as a direct threat to US troops.

In an information age, we are constantly bombarded by a 'world according to some' data that complicates the debate at home. It's too late, besides being unwise, to hide behind bureaucratic red tape. Accept that he who provides the data, lives to close the file.

Tara Kartha is former director, National Security Council Secretariat. The views expressed are personal.

Himika Chaudhuri

This is appraisal season. And most companies have strict HR policies that dictate that employees can't discuss the hike in their salaries among themselves. The exercise is perhaps aimed at ensuring that people do not feel disconcerted if they compare their hikes and learn that a colleague in the same rank has been given a better raise.

Maybe, this is a policy that we could adapt in life too - let's not compare. However, here's the catch. Unlike an appraisal

big picture

IAN BREMMER



After US, who's the next leader of the free world?

Trump does not believe that international leadership is in America's national interest. Who can replace it?

Donald Trump's decision last week to remove the US from the Paris Agreement on climate sent a crystal-clear signal that we're now living in a G-zero world, a world without consistent leadership. Who is leader of the free world today? Not Trump, the first US president since the 1930s who does not believe that international leadership is in the US national interest. For Trump, everything is a transaction. He sees the world not as a community but as an arena in which strong leaders fight for dominance. This view appeals to Trump personally, and he knows his loyal supporters like it too.

Are Europeans now leading the free world? Not exactly. The transatlantic alliance has been gradually following out for many years, and the election of Trump as veteran leaders like Germany's Angela Merkel and new ones like France's Emmanuel Macron scrambling for new strategies. The Americans are sceptical of Nato, the British are leaving the European Union, and anti-EU political parties continue to make gains, even if they aren't yet winning elections. Merkel and Macron don't appear to agree on Europe's best course forward, and if Europe's leaders fail to meet the demands of their people for change, the populist forces that have transformed European politics in recent years will continue to rise.

The ground is also shifting in West Asia. Trump may have better relations with Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan, and Israel's Netanyahu than Barack Obama did, but that brings no new order to a still-volatile region. On Syria's battlefields, the US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel have distinctly different interests—and none of them is strong enough to impose its will. The Islamic State will lose the little ground it has left, but it will continue to use new media tools to inspire followers, imitators, and the emotionally disturbed. The principal G-zero terrorism problem is that mutual suspicion,

THE PRINCIPAL G-ZERO TERRORISM PROBLEM IS THAT MUTUAL SUSPICION, NOT THE NEED TO SHARE INFORMATION AMONG INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES, IS NOW THE DEFINING FEATURE OF CYBERSPACE

not the acknowledged need to share information among the world's intelligence agencies, is now cyberspace's defining feature. Nowhere is the G-zero more obvious.

Who now carries the standard for free trade? The United States, long its champion, has pulled out of the Transpacific Partnership, an agreement of historic scale that would have aligned large economies on both sides of the Pacific. Despite the best efforts of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the US looks likely to remain outside the deal for at least as long as Trump as president. Trump has also made clear that he wants to rewrite the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico. A mega-deal with Europe, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, now lies buried beneath the weight of opposition in multiple countries. There are still genuinely ambitious multilateral trade deals taking shape, notably Canada's new agreement with the EU. But this is an exception.

Is China the new leader on trade? Not quite. President Xi Jinping made headlines earlier this year at the World Economic Forum in Davos with a rousing defence of global commerce. "Pursuing protectionism," he warned, "is like locking oneself in a dark room. Wind and rain may be kept outside, but so is light and air." But the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a deal composed of the 10 ASEAN countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, involves much less genuine market integration than the more ambitious TPP. It says little, for example, about investment, intellectual property, and competition policy.

Then there is China's 'One Belt One Road' project, an enormously ambitious plan to direct massive investment toward south and central Asia to create new paths for commerce between Asia and Europe. If wisely executed, this project could provide an historic economic boost for China, the EU, and many poor countries between them. Unfortunately, there's no guarantee that money will be invested for economic rather than political reasons.

In short, the number of global flashpoints and "problems without borders" continues to grow, and there are no credible cooperative plans to manage them, much less to solve the problems that have created them. For now, the G-zero order looks here to stay.

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innervoice
DON'T COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS. INSTEAD FOCUS ON WHAT YOU HAVE



letter, which is privately delivered to the person it is intended for; in life, the laurels that those around us win are visible to us. Hence we end up comparing and feeling unhappy: "Why should she get so much, when I deserve it too." "I work so much harder, and he has all the luck." The questions are endless, as is the feeling of dejection that often manifests itself in the form of jealousy, or even hatred.

But where will comparing lead us? It definitely cannot get us a share in the higher salary of the colleague or the bigger house that

a neighbour may have bought. It can at best give us some anxious, unsettled thoughts. Think of it like this: Achievements, material or otherwise, are a matter of perspective. What your neighbour has may be a matter of envy for you, but what you have, many may never be able to achieve or dream of. So, let's focus on bettering what we have, not comparing what others do.

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