

A thought for today



It is said that the present is pregnant with the future

VOLTAIRE

Macron Marches On

His newbie party wins parliamentary majority, sets stage for a new French revolution

In what has truly been a grand slam of electoral success, French President Emmanuel Macron's party En Marche! has won a commanding majority in parliamentary polls. Just a month after Macron won the French presidency on a centrist, pro-reform and business-friendly platform, En Marche! and its allies have picked up around 350 out of 577 seats in the National Assembly. True, that En Marche! was only formed 15 months ago and Macron himself fought his first election at the presidential polls means that the French political leadership today is dominated by upstarts. But it also means that Macron has the requisite mandate to push through reforms to overhaul the burdensome French welfare state - to actually revamp the ancien régime.

The only thing that somewhat dims the En Marche! victory is a record low voter turnout. But this can also be put down to the disillusionment with traditional parties, both on the right and left. In fact, the parliamentary polls dealt a heavy blow to Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front - even though her party was seen to be dominant only a few months ago.

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party that dominated the outgoing assembly has been hammered down to less than 50 seats. Overall France is charting a positive political path even as the Anglo-Saxon world looks for comfort in nostalgia-driven populist politics. All of this really sets the stage for a transformative Macron presidency. He has promised to overhaul labour rules, ease hiring and firing, cut public-sector overhang, and invest heavily in jobs training. These measures are meant to impart fresh energy to the French economy and rein in the unemployment rate which hovers just below 10%.

An open, economically stronger France will be a huge asset for EU, especially now when Brexit talks have begun. In fact, if German Chancellor Angela Merkel is successful in securing another term later this year, she and Macron can partner to make Germany and France the load pillars of a new Europe. But for that to happen, Macron and En Marche! need to move fast. They have successfully navigated the anti-establishment wave in France and offered a message of hope. They must now capitalise on the opportunities and execute their vision of a dynamic, strong and liberal France. That would truly be akin to a new French revolution.

More Dalit Politics

BJP announces the politically correct candidacy of Ram Nath Kovind for president

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah sprang a big surprise, again, by announcing Bihar governor Ram Nath Kovind as NDA nominee for president. Perhaps this surprise is not as high-octane as Modi-Shah's decision to anoint a relatively inexperienced Yogi Adityanath as UP chief minister in March. But, born in UP's Kanpur, Kovind's name hadn't found mention in the various lists of possible candidates. He is likely to file his nomination on July 23 as President Pranab Mukherjee's term ends on July 24.

A Supreme Court lawyer, Kovind has served BJP as national spokesperson, two-time Rajya Sabha MP and most importantly as former president of its SC/ST morchha - it's his Dalit credentials that appear to have tilted the scales decisively. He is expected to win the presidential poll comfortably after getting the backing of AIADMK and TRS within hours of the announcement. Shah has aimed to break opposition unity, putting in a bid not just SP and BSP in UP but also JDU and RJD in Bihar. Congress finds itself in a catch-22 situation: it would be accused of being anti-Dalit if it opposes Kovind while supporting him would effectively mean giving a walkover to BJP.

Modi has clearly set his eyes on 2019 in describing Kovind's nomination as empowering a Dalit farmer's son who will be a voice for the poor and downtrodden. Though BJP had managed to break BSP's stranglehold over the Dalit vote in UP assembly elections, the increasing friction between upper and lower castes in states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and UP has led to the rise of a young and oppositional Dalit leadership. Modi-Shah have sought to regain advantage in this equation with a Dalit presidential candidate.

Pregnancy is confusing

Its relationship to sex seems to have confused the Ayush ministry in particular

Radhika Vaz



As a comedian life is almost too easy. Just as I think I am running out of material our politicians, bureaucrats and high court judges leap to my rescue. Of course it would be a lot funnier if this display of mediocrity were not being bought and paid for with taxpayer money but for a good joke I suppose I can let that go.

This week I give thanks for and to the Ministry of Ayush. I had absolutely no idea that such a thing even existed and so I went on their website to better understand what it is they do. The landing page states that the Ministry's focus is on "development of Education and Research in Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy". And if the Ministry stuck to this mandate I would have nothing to laugh about.

Luckily someone in there seems to have attended a hippy-dippy workshop where they tell you to step outside your comfort zone and do something new. Which is how I assume a group of people who know as much as I do about pregnancies came to design and distribute an entire booklet instructing expectant mothers how to think, act and feel during gestation. There was some confusion on whether or not these ladies can engage in sexual activity but Minister of the Ministry, Mr Shripad Naik, made it very clear that nowhere in the booklet does it say pregnant women should abstain from sex.

Great! The problem however is that the Ministry has clearly endorsed that "pregnant women should detach themselves from desire ... and lust". Now I have no details on the sex lives of the men and women of the Ministry but with most human beings lust and/or desire need to make an appearance before sexy time can even commence. Instructing women to feel no desire but to still have sex is the very definition of non-consensual sex - which, put another way, is what we people outside this Ministry of Ayush would call rape.

In closing I respectfully ask pregnant ladies everywhere to ignore the Ministry of Ayush completely and instead read 'What to expect when you are expecting', a bestseller based on facts, anecdotal data and experience. I haven't read it obviously because I haven't ever needed to but hey! If the Ministry of Ayush can tell you what to do why not the Ministry of Vaz?

The writer is a comedian

Look Beyond Waivers For Kisan 2.0

Agri policy must set market mechanisms free to work effectively

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When Lal Bahadur Shastri first shouted 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan' at Delhi's Ram Lila Maidan in 1965, he fleshed out a cardinal truth about India's political imaginary: the idea of the brave soldier and the hard-working farmer as bulwarks of the nation. BJP, in the past three years, has adroitly managed to hook its political messaging to the martial constituency with its uncompromising nationalist rhetoric and chest-thumping machismo. The question is whether growing kisan unrest from Madhya Pradesh to Rajasthan will prove to be an unexpected political googy as we head towards 2019.

After all, the imagery of the hard-pressed exploited farmer running the engines of the nation - deified from the beginning of the republic in films like Mother India and Do Bigha Zamin - remains an unshakeable shibboleth of the Indian political imagination. So, will the kisan agitations prove to be an effective political lever for a desperate opposition looking for evocative handles to block BJP's electoral juggernaut or will this crisis taper off?

At the political level, BJP has, of course, been acutely focussed on the power of the farmer vote. Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly declared his government's intent to double farmers' income by 2022 and BJP's 2014 manifesto promised to 'ensure a minimum of 50% profits over the costs of production' in agriculture. Yet, at the policy level, it has been confounded by the fact that the toolkit that our governments have traditionally used for managing agriculture is outdated and faulty. It is essentially trying to fix the wrong questions with the wrong answers.

The irony of MP's predicament is instructive. Chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan farcically went on a fast after his own police fired at farmers but agriculture is the one thing he has focussed consistently on since taking power in 2005. As the agricultural econ-



estimated that over 90% of India's farmers do not get the MSP price and are dependent on markets, which are circumscribed by arbitrary government over-regulation and the shortage of godowns and mandis.

A good example of policy as a problem is the case of pulses farmers. After a bumper harvest, in February 2017, the India Pulses and Grain Association petitioned the Union commerce secretary to remove an old 2006 export ban since market prices in India had slipped below MSP. Tur dal was being sold at the time between Rs 35,000 and Rs 47,000 per tonne in MP, Karnataka and Maharashtra, against the MSP of Rs 50,500. Yet, inexplicably, the ban remains in place, along with limits on stocks, making it impossible for farmers to even recover their costs. Artificially choking the market and not letting it play out is a recipe for disaster.

Second, farmer loan waivers only push the can further down the road. They don't solve the problem. After BJP came good on its UP loan waiver poll promise, Maharashtra caved in to a similar demand and Haryana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are all facing the same music. In Punjab, Congress came to power promising exactly this.

States simply don't have the money for such largesse. The combined debt-to-state GDP ratio of all states taken together hit an alarming 3.6% in 2015-16, breaching the mandated 3% ceiling under fiscal prudence rules. It will go through the roof with new waivers. A similar waiver by UPA in 2008 had no discernible long-term impact on improving agriculture.

As TV pictures of the kisan agitations show, the blue jeans and T-shirt clad farmers of 2017 are very different from the downtrodden peasants of our collective national imagination. They ask why only big corporates should get loan waivers. It is a fair question.

Yet, instead of temporary sops each year, government must do a fundamental rethink and address this Kisan 2.0 with a new deal on market pricing and a comprehensive deregulation of policy instead of old mai-baap sarkar type solutions that are past their use-by date.

mist Ashok Gulati and his colleagues point out, the state's agricultural GDP grew at a staggering 14.2% over the past five years and over thrice the national average over the last decade. "This is unprecedented in the annals of India's agricultural history. Even Punjab did not grow at this rate during the green revolution period."

Yet, despite this, average earnings of agricultural households in MP continue to lag far behind the national average. This is basically because while farmers have been producing more, their input costs - water, diesel, fertilisers, etc - have increased substantially while prices for their products went down. A TOI analysis shows that between 2004-05 and 2014-15 in MP, the cost per hectare of fertilisers and seeds for wheat doubled while irrigation costs also increased substantially.

This is of piece with the national agriculture story where after two years of drought, Indian farmers finally delivered a good crop for most commodities but saw their net margins going down - in many cases into the red. That greater

After a bumper harvest, tur dal was being sold at much below MSP while an export ban remained in place, inexplicably. Markets are circumscribed by arbitrary government over-regulation, plus shortage of godowns and mandis

farm production in 2016-17 would lead to a glut in the market, prices would collapse and farmer incomes would consequently go down is Economics 101. Yet, the problem is that most of our policies have been fixated on giving farmers a minimum support price (MSP) and not enough on creating conditions for market mechanisms to play out effectively.

Government fixes MSP for 23 commodities but official procurement is limited to only two - wheat and rice - and that too in only a few states. It is

Hope over anger: Emmanuel Macron has won a mandate to overhaul Eurozone's second largest economy

Andrew Hammond



French President Emmanuel Macron's upstart party En Marche! (Forward!) won a stunning victory in Sunday's legislative elections. With this latest big boost, the youngest president in the six decade-long Fifth Republic has transformed the country's political landscape in a matter of weeks and has potential to become one of the country's most successful ever political leaders.

Yet, his ultimate success in coming years is still by no means guaranteed. This is not least because new legislators representing En Marche! are drawn from a broad spectrum of political views and the cohesiveness of the bloc is uncertain.

France's political mood remains volatile and one indicator of remaining voter unease is the exceptionally low turnout in the legislative elections estimated at 43%. Although the electorate has decided to favour hope over anger in this ballot, the tide could still turn against Macron if he fails to address widespread anti-establishment discontent fuelled by economic pain which

has seen the country suffer years of double digit unemployment but also low growth.

Given the very high expectations now surrounding his presidency, Macron will be acutely aware that, despite early optimism over the election of the last two incumbents - Nicholas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande - both ultimately became unpopular one-term heads of state, despite also enjoying legislative majorities. Indeed, Hollande - who became the least popular

His opponents remain, at least temporarily, disorientated by his remarkable accomplishments

president since records began - decided last year not to even seek re-election, the first incumbent not to try for a second term in the Fifth Republic.

The new president knows only too well that, if he fails with his programme, the primary beneficiaries of any discontent may well be other anti-establishment figures such as National Front leader Marine Le Pen and/or hard left veteran Jean-Luc



Melenchon, who finished second and fourth respectively in last month's presidential elections. Le Pen is young enough to run potentially in several more French presidential elections.

In this context, Macron is now likely to try to push as fast as possible with his reformist agenda to overhaul the country's politics and economy. This includes proposed labour laws to try to reduce the unemployment rate of around 10% and also reindustrialise France through innovation-led policies. Collectively, this could provide a major fillip to the Eurozone's second largest economy.

Macron wants to try to push

his agenda as hard as he can in his first 100 days not just so he can secure as many successes as possible during his extended political honeymoon. In addition, he knows his opponents remain, at least temporarily, disorientated by his remarkable accomplishments over the last few weeks which have upended the traditional two party-politics status quo of centre-left Socialists and centre-right Republicans.

Not only did last month's final round presidential election put the country into uncharted territory by being the first in the country's modern history that neither the Republicans nor Socialists managed to qualify.

Now En Marche! has handsomely beaten both parties in the legislative ballots in a way that many people thought most unlikely even a few weeks ago given that the party was only founded in April 2016 and only had a relatively small number of candidates in place before Macron's presidential victory last month.

Previously, many had thought the most likely outcome on Sunday would be En Marche! emerging as the largest single party, but without a majority, which could have left much of Macron's agenda stymied. He has instead won one a sizeable majority. This could now help realign French politics, especially given that key figures from both the Socialists and Republicans have now rallied behind En Marche!

Taken overall, Sunday's elections have significantly increased the prospects of Macron's agenda being enacted and he will now press ahead as fast as he can with his reforms. Yet, given sky high expectations and the volatile public mood, there remains a danger that he will be unable to realise the hopes that are held about his new presidency.

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dilbert



Preliminaries On The Path Of Yoga

Anandmurti Gurumaa

Much before the human mind learnt language skills, or started writing, sages understood knowledge about the deeper recesses of the mind. Body, mind, senses, intellect, the essence of being, and Supreme Consciousness - these were all concepts that were thoroughly understood by them. Scientifically, they meticulously explored and precisely understood profound intricacies of the inner world.

Let's say that there is this consciousness in us and then, there is this consciousness in every cell, every atom and every molecule of the universe. Conjoining of this micro-consciousness with the macro-consciousness is yoga. And attaining to this state of awareness and consciousness is the higher goal of the path of yoga.

Yoga is not just the pinnacle of inner evolution; it is also the path of discipline to holistic progress. The opening sutra of the most celebrated yoga text delineating

the precepts, the 'Patanjali Yoga Sutras', compiled almost 2,500 years ago, emphasises this when it says: 'Attha yoga amushantram' - indicating yoga as a set of disciplined practices.

And when it comes to following the path of yoga, it is not about how much you know, but how much you practice, and how much you are in discipline. Aiming to integrate body, mind, intellect and breath, the discipline of yoga entails eight steps in progression, that is, maturity of each leading to the next: yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dhara-na, dhyana and culminating in the highest point of samadhi.

Yoga is not a panacea for diseases, as is being interpreted by some and touted by practitioners at large, although it is a fact that a healthy body and mind are byproducts of its dedicated practice. But confining its practice to merely gaining

good health would be like using an airplane to go shopping.

Yama and niyama are the basic guidelines for aspirants. Yama entails five moral codes of conduct for interacting with others. The foremost is satya, truthfulness, not only at the level of thought, speech and action but also in being committed on the journey to truth.

Next comes ahimsa, non-violence, towards others and also towards oneself. Then comes asteya, non-stealing - not coveting that which does not belong to oneself. Next is aparigraha, non-hoarding, and the fifth is brahmacharya that, at the physical level, refers to celibacy and for householders, it implies fidelity.

Niyama, the second limb of Ashtanga Yoga, lays down the five restraints for self-discipline. The first is shauch, cleanliness; not only outer cleanliness but also purity of mind. Then comes santosha, content-

ment, the choiceless acceptance of all that is happening in one's life. Not hankering for anything or being a grudge-box. Third is tapah, austerity, to bear anything and everything on the spiritual path and with complete dedication to spiritual practices.

Next comes swadhyaya, self-learning and also learning about one's Self. Reading books about yoga and contemplation on what is read is also swadhyaya. The fifth is Ishwara pranidhana, surrendering completely to the will of the Almighty with great devotion. Not being egotistical but being humble, always remembering the Lord.

In this way, yama and niyama are the foundations of the yogic path. When these are faithfully and diligently practised under the guidance of the master, only then will the five rungs on the ladder sequentially unfold and bear fruit, culminating in the transcendental experience of samadhi.

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Sacred space

The Witness

Look at the events come, pass and go. According to their own law of karma, both pleasant and unpleasant events come and pass through you. When you see events as just 'happenings', rather than as 'doings', you are liberated right away.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar



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