

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

A dangerous political vacuum

Volatility in Pakistan's politics is bad news for ties with India

The disqualification of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif immediately opens up a succession issue within his own party but, more importantly, potentially signals a period of sustained political uncertainty among democratic forces in that country. The Pakistan Supreme Court ruling against Sharif over his involvement in the Panama-gate financial scandal, which followed on an earlier court judgment and a special investigation team's report, seems to

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have brought the curtain down on Sharif's long political innings. The same ruling has also affected his two sons, son-in-law and daughter — the latter who was seen as a potential heir to the leadership of his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) — and left a gaping hole in Pakistan's polity. National elections are due by the middle of next year so the party must decide on a replacement in a relatively short period of time. So overwhelming is the political strength of the PMLN in Pakistan's largest province of Punjab and so weak is the opposition it faces, it's likely that the PMLN will still go into the elections as overwhelming favourites. It is not clear that Imran Khan, who led the charge against Sharif, will necessarily benefit electorally.

The real shift will be the power equation between the PMLN and the Pakistani military. There is strong evidence to indicate that the sheer depth of Sharif's electoral support had alarmed the Pakistani military and many of the protests against him have been fomented by Rawalpindi. The court ruling helps the military in that it has sharply reduced Sharif's influence — and, over the long term, serves to shift the balance of power back towards the generals. The India-Pakistan relationship has been at an impasse for a number of years. The trajectory has been largely downward, as clear from the renewed skirmishing along the Line of Control and the present problems in Kashmir. However, they have been within certain manageable limits. Reports say that the complaints by Pakistani-based jihadi groups about a shortage of arms and funds have been because of interference by Sharif's government. The Pakistani leader has long been a votary of stronger economic relations between the two countries and has quietly believed that the resolution of bilateral problems through violence is a political dead-end.

His departure from the political scene is almost certain to herald a period of volatility within Pakistan and, therefore, greater risk in relations between India and Pakistan.

bigdeal

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anotherday

NAMITA BHANDARE

Why a tank in JNU and not a farmer's plough?

Im trying figure out which one of the two is more outrageous: that a university should be considered an appropriate location for an Army tank, or that the suggestion should have come from its own vice chancellor.

If Jawaharlal Nehru University's vice chancellor, M Jagadesh Kumar gets his wish, we might soon have a weapon of war on its grounds. This presumably will remind 'thousands of students about the

great sacrifices and valour of our Indian army' as they goose-step their way to class.

Why an army tank and not a plough? Farmers who feed us don't make a lesser sacrifice. And what symbol represents those who die keeping our sewage lines clean?

The VC's suggestion comes straight from the rightwing playbook of JNU as the site of anti-national behaviour (not to mention excessive condom use). After all, it's only anti-nationals who need a dose of

thirdeye

BARKHA DUTT



The Congress needs a new slogan and India needs a new opposition

As Nitish's exit from the coalition shows, politics is a determined, often brazen, pursuit of power

It took less than 15 hours for Nitish Kumar to resign and return as Chief Minister of Bihar with his old partners as his new allies. It took less than two hours for the BJP — which slotted a parliamentary board meeting timed to the exact moment of Nitish Kumar's resignation — to welcome him back to the home team. That both sides were playing to a script that had been written well in advance is obvious. But when Rahul Gandhi declares that he knew about this "three-four months ago", you've got to hold your head and ask: So, what did you do about it? Was it denial, defeatism or complacency that kept the Congress from creating an incentive for Nitish Kumar to stay? And what stopped you from taking a more public position, as a coalition partner, against the continuation of Tejashwi Yadav amid pretty serious charges of financial corruption?

Yes, no one really thinks that Nitish Kumar's exit was driven by principled opposition to corruption — after all, when he joined hands with Lalu Yadav in 2015, he was already convicted of corruption. It wasn't about secularism back then, as the Congress claimed and it isn't about graft now; it is quite simply politics — and yes, politics is the singular, often brazen, pursuit of power.

As the Modi juggernaut storms its ways across the finishing line to almost reach its destination of a 'Congress Mukta Bharat', the challenger, left straggling, now seems to be asleep at the wheel.

The truth — as India enters a phase of BJP hegemony — is this: Not only is the Congress, with its present set of weapons and ammunition, not battle-ready to take on the BJP; it isn't even equipped any longer to lead the opposition.

The exit of Nitish Kumar proves that the Gandhi family is no longer the pivot around which the non-BJP, non-Congress parties will organise themselves.

Even confronted with an existential crisis the Congress has been laggard; instead of fighting for its life it has betrayed a peculiar and elite smugness. Letting Goa slip when it could have formed the government there; letting Shankar Singh Vaghela walk when he was the only candidate with some fight in him in Gujarat, waiting too long to announce Meira Kumar as the Presidential nominee instead of beating the BJP to it, vacationing abroad during key moments of political turmoil and of course the refusal to cede a leadership role to other political leaders — Sharad Pawar, Mamata Banerjee, Nitish Kumar or Naveen Patnaik — all of whom the Congress today needs more than they need it.

It's possible that Nitish would have left them anyway; there were tell-tale signs that he was hedging his bets — qualified support for demonetisation, endorsing the BJP's choice for President — but did the Congress pay any attention to the JD (U) statement, when Pavan Verma was authorised to demand a cogent "opposition narrative", warning that Modi's domination could not be fought in an "ad hoc, confused and reactive" manner? Yes, people close to Nitish Kumar say what really swung his decision was not so much a calculation that he would never be able to beat Modi and become Prime Minister; but that there was a real danger of losing Bihar in the next election. Apparently, the BJP's win in Uttar Pradesh where the opposition banked on Muslim-Yadav consolidation, but saw forward castes, other backward castes and Dalits join hands to defeat it, was a scenario Nitish feared in

comment



■ Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, left, and deputy chief minister Sushil Kumar Modi after the oath-taking ceremony at Raj Bhawan, Patna, July 27. That both sides were playing to a script that had been written well in advance is obvious

Bihar as well if he remained with Lalu Yadav. But whatever were the arithmetical calculations of the Chief Minister, what deftness or quick thinking did the Congress or Lalu Yadav display? For instance, Rahul Gandhi could have made a public statement demanding the sacking of Tejashwi Yadav or his father could have asked him to step down. That would have at least forced Nitish Kumar to construct an alternative reason for his exit, instead of allowing him to claim the higher moral ground and handing over the state — and the general election of 2019 — on a platter to Narendra Modi. Then they could have more effectively taken on Nitish's glaring flip-flops and U-turns on the

BJP. The Congress needs to wake up from its slumber: falling back on the jaded tropes of secularism and betrayal is no longer going to work as a political idea. Taking shield on corruption allegations behind the cloak of inauthentic secularism is cynical politics and its time is up. Especially because that secularism is bent at will and abandoned when necessary. The Congress needs a new slogan and India needs a new opposition.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

TIGERDAY

Communities must work together to save the big cat

The most important item on a wishlist for India's tigers is a change in the mindset of conservation authorities



VALMIK THAPAR

The global tiger day was created to think of the needs of a wild tiger. Sadly we have forgotten this primary objective. What I am going to do is to spell out the Indian tiger's wishlist in the hope that those that engage with tigers will rethink and review their strategies.

The most important item on the wishlist is to see a mindset change in the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) where this specially created institution starts to imbibe field wisdom about wild tigers through innovative strategies on both protection and tourism. Tigers love well-managed visitors. They keep the forest staff on alert and can provide vital information on illegal grazing, wood felling and poaching. After all, there are hundreds of more eyes and ears looking and hearing. In places

where tourism is low, tigers have suffered hugely. The NTCA must learn to respect site-specific initiatives of state governments that can through tourism revenue make our tiger reserves self sufficient. This in turn provides field directors to undertake vital protection work without bureaucratic delays. The NTCA in the last decade has discouraged tourism and endlessly interfered with state government policy seriously impacting the health of tigers. Managing tigers is a state subject and the NTCA must be in the role of facilitator and not policeman.

The chief wildlife wardens of the states are vital to the tigers' wishlist. They need to take bold and innovative decisions that inspire the field staff. They need to engage with local communities in the effort to protect tigers. They need to ensure that all vacant positions are filled and chief ministers engaged with all the issues that confront wild tigers. State-of-the-art training is an essential element in the quality of governance that is needed to protect tigers. Retired army officers can instruct on field craft, retired intelligence officials on gathering intelligence on poachers and their syndicates. Our country can offer the best



■ A young tiger and tigress at the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan

talent to secure the future of wild tigers. Inter-state cooperation is vital to good governance and even more important than linking up with the central government. Rajasthan has held such a meeting with Maharashtra so that both can imbibe best practices from each other. Choose forest staff with care. Good decisions are made by those who spend time understanding tigers. Ignorant decisions damage the future of tigers.

The four or five big NGOs must revitalise their thinking and prevent duplication. Focus on specific trouble spots and solve problems with tactical help to the forest staff. Do not beat your own drum. Partner with local communities. The future of tigers will lie in how communities engage in protection. The time for sweet talking them is

over. Gather the young and train them into tiger protectors.

All this requires strong political will. Tigers need chief ministers at their side. Their instructions are vital to innovative initiatives and this is where strong partnerships between the government and non-governmental sector can trigger the necessary political will. Frequent meetings of the state board of wildlife that chief ministers chair are vital to resolving the tigers' problems.

The Prime Minister of the country must play his role for the sake of our national animal. The Prime Minister chairs the national board for wildlife and frequent meetings are a must. The full board has not met for four years. This is the moment to meet and the best experts must apprise the Prime Minister of the tigers' needs.

These are the five points on the wish list of India's wild tigers. And who says it is not possible? Rajasthan has shown the way. Under the supervision of the chief minister, the Ranthambore tiger reserve has shown the highest amount of tigers ever now touching 65 with the highest tourist revenue now touching 4 million dollars just on entry ticket revenue.

It has some of the best local community monitoring and protection and a genuine partnership with field forest staff. It has the best tourism practices and regular monthly meetings of an empowered committee that reports back to the chief minister. For the first time ever, extra tourism revenue is going to new tiger habitats that suffered tremendously due to limited funds.

Where there is a will there is a way. It is up to all of us to make it the day of the tiger.

Valmik Thapar has worked for 42 years with wild tigers. He has also written 30 books on India's tigers and wildlife. The views expressed are personal

patriotism.

Nobody will dispute the idea that college campuses should breed productive citizens. The question is: how best do you do it? Certainly not by being lectured to by a minister who laments that since we are a democracy, people 'dare' to question the army. I'm sure minister Dharmendra Pradhan is not implying that we junk democracy and become a military dictatorship but his lament does sound dangerously close.

Any mother will tell you that enforced disciplining is doomed to backfire. Compulsory singing of the national anthem or Vande Mataram, as the Madras High Court recently ruled, will raise a generation of parrots not patriots.

How do campuses raise good citizens? First, teach students to question. Go against the grain of rote learning and blind respect for authority. Question everything — professors, received learning, assumptions and the fake news received daily on phones. You cannot have national progress without inquiring minds.

Next, teach them to hold power to

accountability. Citizens who question elected representatives keep democracy alive. No institution is above critique, not even the judiciary and especially not the media.

Armies are and must be questioned. How does a military court justify suspending the life sentences of five army personnel that was handed down by a court martial for the crime of staging the killing of innocent citizens? It is incumbent on us as vigilant citizens to ask these questions.

A country without engaged and informed citizens is just territory. Colleges must be incubators for such citizens.

My love for my country might lead me to question its caste system or its treatment of minorities and women. This does not deplete my love for India but in fact makes me a citizen who is vested in my country's future and in preserving its identity as a multi-cultural democracy.

Meanwhile, my suggestion to JNU's patriotic VC: Ditch the tank. Read the Constitution instead.

Namita Bhandare writes on social issues and gender. The views expressed are personal.

Positive thoughts are the key to leading a successful life



Suman Dayal

Since childhood a thought that kept troubling me was: Why do we pray? Later I learned that god listens to those who pray with a pure heart.

If our intentions are pure, god will solve our problems and keep us on the right track. I have always listened to my inner voice. However, over the years the intensity with which I used to pray has diminished, and now, my faith on the fact that work is worship has strengthened. Meditating in the early hours of the

morning has helped me channel my thoughts towards positivity. Early morning is a good time for communication. This is because the thoughts are clear and the brain thrives on this clarity. If the right words are used at the right time, we will be successful in creating a wonderful society. I always feel that a wrong emotion is a tool that can cause destruction.

It is important to keep positive thoughts in one's mind. But often fears build up in our minds. At such times, we should turn to god and focus on his message. It's also important to focus on our failures, because it will help us from not repeating it. This in turn will help us to work hard and achieve positive results.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal) innervoice@hindustantimes.com