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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Dear friend, speak up

An open letter
to BJP members of Parliament



YASHWANT SINHA

JUDGES IN CONTEMPT

Pakistan Supreme Court verdict on Nawaz Sharif undermines gains made in institutionalising democracy

PAKISTAN SUPREME COURT’S ruling disqualifying Nawaz Sharif from contesting for any elected office for life smacks of judicial overreach and is a blow against that country’s democracy. It was hoped that after its trial by fire in 2007 as it faced down a military ruler, Pakistan’s higher judiciary knew better. Indeed, it was the former Chief Justice, Ifthikar Chaudhary, who was the star of the 2007 Judiciary vs Musharraf battle, who first laid down that a disqualification under the controversial Article 62 (1) (f) was for life. The present judgment was delivered on petitions seeking the court’s opinion on this question again, and was confirmed by a larger bench. Sharif was disqualified last year under this article, which holds that no person shall hold office unless s/he is “sagacious, righteous, non-profligate, honest and ameen, there being no declaration to the contrary by a court of law”. The subsection — none would meet its exacting demands — was inserted during Zia’s dictatorship. It was always clear that the ruling would hold consequences for Sharif, but the court’s reading of the article now makes every politician vulnerable, including Imran Khan, who may believe that he is months away from the prime ministership.

Lawyers for Sharif had argued for limiting subsection (f) with the same provisions available under subsection (g) of the same article, to a person convicted of “moral turpitude” — a term that could be held to cover all the alleged failings for which Sharif was ousted — and sentenced to a minimum of two years’ imprisonment, enabling such a person to contest elections five years after the sentence has ended. But the court rejected this, along with another argument that perpetual disqualification was against the fundamental right of association. Even without this ruling, it was unclear if Sharif could have participated in the elections in Pakistan due by July. The ruling takes away, too, the one Pakistani politician who is at the moment viewed as the best hope for India-Pakistan normalisation — unless, that is, his party wins the election with an overwhelming majority, changes the constitution, and brings about changes in the top judiciary with the aim of overturning last week’s ruling. It’s a tall order.

However, it is also clear that the former prime minister, who continues to face a trial in the National Accountability Court for alleged corruption charges arising from the revelations in the Panama Papers, is not about to walk away into the sunset. His party remains a formidable fighting force. Like leaders of all dynastic parties in South Asia, Sharif’s concern right now would be to ensure that his daughter, Maryam Nawaz, viewed as his political heir but who is also facing trial for the same charges, escapes with lighter or no punishment. His brother, Shehbaz Sharif, presently the chief minister of Punjab province, is also a candidate in the succession stakes, though with the judiciary holding the keys to political office, no one is safe. The message that goes out from the verdict is of a judicial-political imbalance in Pakistan as dangerous as its military-civilian one.

WATCH THEIR SPACE

Commonwealth Games has given India many new champions to follow

AN ADVANTAGE OF winning big in your teens in sport is that you give yourself enough time to succeed, fail, injure, heal, win again, defend reputation and end up a champion in the process. There’s no dearth of young champions in sport — it teems with the teen spirit. But the just concluded Commonwealth Games has given India the first chapters of many inspirational stories. There’s Manu Bhaker, Anish Bhanwala, Mehuli Ghosh, Deepak Lather, Divya Kakran, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy beyond the two biggest bonafide successes of Manika Batra and Neeraj Chopra, who are entering their heady early 20s and have shown the guts to shrug off the pressure and deliver. India would do well to not harp on their age, and point them towards the cut-throat fields of competition, easing them into sporting adulthood.

The CWG had some stellar comebacks — Vinesh Phogat whose snapped bone reverberated tragically at the Rio hall, Vikas Krishan who after the pounding he got at the last Olympics has found his footing in 75 kg, Mirabai Chanu who is rebuilding her shattered confidence block by block after a disappointing Rio and Saina Nehwal who had cracked her knee at the last Olympics but has hung in there to bring home India’s last gold, just like in Delhi a full eight years ago. Jitu Rai seemed to have found his range again in an event that matters at the Olympics — the 10m air pistol, while Mary Kom ticked the only untouched box — a gold at the Commonwealth, showing the discipline to return to the ring, and claim a division that’s been rightly hers for a decade and more.

Thankfully, the CWG isn’t the pinnacle of any of these careers. Luckily for India, now there are new champions to follow, CWG 18 has added variety to the sporting view. In days to come, look for the javelin event at the Diamond League of Athletics and take pains to follow Batra on the world TT circuit. Gold Coast has been the prologue to many a racy page-turner in sporting careers.

FORM OF THE FORMLESS

Ram Kumar’s abstract art symbolised the journey of an artist who pursued silence

RAM KUMAR’S MUTED colours and abstract forms reflected his quiet persona. Unlike many of his flamboyant contemporaries, he was a reticent artist who refused to have a public profile and wanted to speak entirely through his work. This was unusual for a man who in his twenties had quit the safe option of a white collar job in Delhi to travel to postwar Paris to learn painting, where he joined the Pacifist movement and the Communist Party. On his return to India, he engaged with the Bombay-based Progressive Arts Group, but embarked on a journey that took him farther from the figurative works of his early period to a world of abstractions. Like the modernists, he had a secular, cosmopolitan language of modernism that also reflected the dominant political ethos of Nehruvian India.

It has been said that a visit to Varanasi in the company of M F Husain in the 1960s led to a rupture in his art. He started to abstract the landscape of the timeless city in numerous forms and shades. It was the essence of the city, its ghats and alleys, the skyline of decaying buildings, frozen against the interplay of different shades of light. These canvases, bereft of human figures, ruminated over the silence that lies buried under the noise and chaos of Varanasi. It is interesting that when many of his contemporaries experimented with religious iconography as they embarked on their spiritual quests, Ram Kumar journeyed to the ancient urban space of Kashi. Of course, Varanasi, where eclectic spiritual traditions have co-existed for centuries, had enough and more to offer yet another seeker in search of a distinctive language and vision. The landscapes became more and more minimalist, a few lines and arresting shades, suggesting an artist at peace with himself.

The art market discovered Ram Kumar late, in the 1990s and after, when the artist was already in his seventies. That, of course, didn’t matter to him as he continued his meditations on line, colour and forms, on his own terms. As he told this newspaper once, “I always painted for myself, trying to find new forms”.

WE ALL WORKED very hard for the victory of the party in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Some of us had been struggling against the rule of the UPA government, in Parliament and outside, ever since it assumed office in 2004 while some others were enjoying the fruits of office in their respective states. We were delighted with the results of the 2014 elections and expected that the unprecedented victory would mark the beginning of a new and glorious chapter in our country’s history. We backed the prime minister and his team to the hilt, and in full faith. The government has now completed nearly four years in office, presented five budgets and used up all the opportunity available to it to show results. At the end of it, however, we seem to have lost our way and the confidence of the voters.

The economic situation is grim, despite tall claims to the contrary by the government that we are the world’s fastest growing economy. A fast growing economy does not accumulate the kind of non-performing assets in its banks, as we have done over the last four years. In a fast growing economy the farmers are not in distress, the youth are not without jobs, small businesses do not stand destroyed and savings and investment do not fall as drastically as they have done over the last four years. What is worse, corruption has raised its ugly head again and banking scams are tumbling out of the closet one after another. The scammers also manage to run away from the country somehow, as the government watches helplessly.

Women are more unsafe today than ever before. Rapes have become the order of the day and instead of acting strictly against the rapists we have become their apologists. In many cases, our own people are involved in these heinous crimes. The minorities are alienated. The worst is that the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the weaker sections of our society, have been exposed to atrocities and inequities as never before and the guarantees given to them in the Constitution stand threatened.

The sum total of our foreign policy seems

The most important threat that has emerged over the last four years, however, is to our democracy. Institutions of democracy have been demeaned and denigrated. Parliament has been reduced to the level of a joke. The prime minister did not even once sit down with senior leaders of the Opposition parties in Parliament when the just-concluded Budget Session was being disrupted in order to find a way out. Then he fasted to shift the blame to others. The first part of the most important Budget Session was the shortest ever.



C UDAY BHASKAR

THE US-LED MISSILE attack on Syria on April 14 for the alleged use of chemical weapons (CW) has been described by President Donald Trump as “Mission Accomplished”. Trump thanked allies, France and the UK, for their contribution. However, if the post-strike data is objectively reviewed, the unilateral military action would be more aptly described as “Mission Orchestrated”.

It has been reported that, between them, the US, the UK and France launched more than 100 missiles against suspected Syrian CW facilities and that the targets were “flattened” thereby denuding the Bashar-al-Assad regime of this internationally prohibited category of weapons.

It is instructive to note that despite the “surprise” element introduced by Trump before the attack (“could be very soon or not so soon at all”) and the scale of the attack, the loss to life has been almost minimal. The Syrian General Staff confirmed that only three people were injured and that there were no deaths. Furthermore, despite the significant Russian military presence in the region and the credible missile defence systems in place, none appear to have been activated, thereby preventing any kind of direct US-Russia military engagement. Post-attack, there were reports from Paris suggesting that France had used certain discrete channels of communication to reassure Russia that the missile strike had a limited objective, targeting the CWs, and that there was no plan to embark upon any kind of regime change in Syria. Orchestration appears to be the more visible

A POST-FACT CONFLICT

How truth has been obscured in the narratives on chemical weapons in Syria

ible leitmotif of the attack on Syria. Moscow has alleged that a British NGO, White Helmets, had staged a fake chemical weapon attack in the Syrian town of Douma on April 7 and that this was used as a pretext for the coordinated US-UK-France action. It is believed, in many quarters, that the intervention in Syria is a diversionary tactic by the leaders of these three nations to divert attention from domestic political discord and citizen dissatisfaction and a loyal TV campaign would shape national sentiment accordingly. The script has been followed, by and large. For a brief period, Russian TV warned of an impending third World War and provided a quick tutorial on how to access bomb shelters, in the event of the military escalation that was being hinted at — but not explicitly stated by Moscow.

The immediate global challenge is the trampling of international law and convention. This attack was not authorised by the UN Security Council. This is compounded by the fact that there has been no credible, independent investigation and confirmation about the use of CWs by the Syrian regime against its own people in the April 7 incident. The OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) is currently in Damascus and is expected to pursue the matter but its brief is very narrow and excludes identifying the source and user of the purported CW attack.

Thus what is at play is the battle for the more compelling and persuasive narrative about April 7 and Douma, even while the

actual facts have been buried. Mass media has played a major role in the dissemination of the preferred dominant discourse — there is a striking contrast between the Western/English and Russian narratives of the same event.

Syria marks one eruption of an exceedingly uncertain phase in global geopolitics. This includes the US-Russia tension on the one hand and the simmering US-China disputes on the other. It does not help that the president of the US — the world’s oldest and most powerful democracy — is being described by his former intelligence chief as being “unethical and untethered to truth and institutional values”. Global concern will mount, for this is the finger on the US nuclear button.

Syria and the opaque geopolitical contestation of the last few years point to an ontological dilemma of the current times. What is the truth and what is fact? It appears that the 21st century has uneasily and perhaps unwittingly transmuted from the certitudes of the previous century (Cold War, bi-polarity) into post-fact world disorder. And even more bewildering is the dissolution of institutional integrity, values and normative principles.

The liberal democratic order may be precariously poised on the end of its own brief history. Douma in Syria could well be the unlikely bellwether even as the OPCW report is awaited.

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APRIL 17, 1978, FORTY YEARS AGO

TORNADO KILLS 100

AT LEAST ONE hundred people were killed and more than 500 injured as a tornado battered Ramachandrapur in the mining district of Keonjhar, Orissa. About 500 injured had been brought to Anandapur hospital in trucks. The Keonjhar district magistrate said that five villages have been seriously affected. A team of six doctors has left Keonjhar district general hospital for the calamity-torn area. Ramchandrapur police station reported headquarters that the gust of wind has swept away almost all the houses.

NANDA DEVI DEVICE
IMPORTANT DETAILS REVEALED so far about

the nuclear surveillance systems planted in the Nanda Devi region indicate that the powerpacks incorporated in the devices might be SNAP (System for nuclear auxiliary power) type generators using a radioactive isotope, Plutonium 238. SNAP systems have been used to provide power for satellite instruments and for communication sets planted in inaccessible environments. Environmentalists have been concerned about their potential radiation hazards.

EXPERTS IN GARHWAL

TWO ATOMIC ENERGY experts returned to New Delhi after reconnoitering Garhwal Himalayas, official sources said. The visit was

in connection with the reported planting of spy devices on Nanda Devi and Nanda Kot by CIA. “The first thing we intend to do is go over the range and assess its terrain,” one of them said. “Once we have an idea of the terrain, we should be able to make out how to look for the gadgets, if they are there,” he said.

INDIAN AID TO NEPAL

INDIA HAS UNDERTAKEN to finance the construction of the Rs 30-crore Devighat hydroelectric project to meet the power needs of the Kathmandu valley. The 104 MW Devighat project is a tail-race development of the Trishul hydro-electric project constructed under the India aid programme.

