

Azim Premji University

From the Selected Works of Vikas Kumar

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Centre's Mediation in J&K: Dialogue within state vital

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Low crude prices, no time to rejoice

International crude prices hit an 11-year low at \$36.05 a barrel last week, and the average for the financial year is likely to be around \$50, a steep fall from \$85 the previous year. The decline has been steady and the prices are predicted to fall as low as \$20, going forward, which was unimaginable a few months ago. The steady rise till a year ago was partly the result of some speculation, but the fall is because of more substantial factors. Global economic growth has slackened and will further slow down in the coming months, reducing the demand for oil. Oil producing countries have decided not to cut production, Iran is preparing to enter the market in a big way after the lifting of sanctions and the US has lifted its 40-year ban on oil exports. There is too much oil sloshing around the world.

The price drop has done much good to India which is a major importer of oil. The import bill has come down and the current account deficit is under control, despite a persistent fall in exports. The fiscal deficit target is likely to be met this year. Over Rs 2 lakh

crore has been saved, and the hike in taxes and duties on oil products will boost tax revenues. All this may help the government to meet its higher financial obligations in the coming year. But the price fall is not all a blessing. Lower oil prices will hit the oil producers' economies and India's exports too. Exports are already on a sliding path. The export of oil products, which is not inconsiderable, will certainly suffer. The annual remittances from the Gulf countries will be affected. Oil exploration plans are bound to suffer a setback. Low crude prices will make exploration uneconomical and some of ONGC's expansion plans may have to be shelved. That can be counter-productive in the long term. Even in the medium term, prices can go up again, as oil prices have historically been volatile.

But the low prices and the possibility of their remaining low in the near future give the country an opportunity to address the domestic subsidy issue without much pain. Direct transfer of subsidy to consumers on all petroleum products can be effected and it will prevent mistargetting of subsidy money. India has no strategic oil reserves worth the name. This is the best time to build up such reserves. Since many oil assets abroad will go cheap, acquisitions can also be considered.

Save forests to avoid man-animal conflict

Man-animal conflicts are assuming worrying proportions across India. In Karnataka, for instance, their consequences were bloodier in 2015 than in previous years. Around 21 people lost their lives in attacks by wild animals; most of them were crushed to death by elephants. Several wild animals were killed too. Two leopards and a tiger — all suspected man-eaters — were shot dead by forest officials. Official figures reveal a higher number of deaths in some other states. In 2014, Maharashtra topped the list of number of human lives lost in such conflicts; 106 people were killed in attacks by wild animals. Odisha and Assam followed with 92 and 74 deaths, respectively. However, the number of human deaths in man-animal face-offs doesn't capture the full picture. Many more are injured in these attacks. Take Jammu and Kashmir, for instance. Fourteen people were killed and 211 injured in man-animal conflicts last year. Besides, the large number of animals that are mowed down by speeding trains and vehicles, electrocuted or quietly beaten to death in remote villages are not usually recorded.

Man-animal conflicts have surged because of shrinking forest cover. Deforestation and extension of human habitation into forests is forcing animals to stray into human settlements. The wanton destruction of forests must end if we are keen to prevent man-animal conflict. It is heartening that shooting down of man-eaters is not the first option for forest officials anymore. They are tranquilizing them and sending them to zoos, although sometimes they compelled to kill man-eaters as villagers bay for their blood. Increasingly, forest officials are trans-locating troublesome big cats. But experts point out that this strategy simply shifts the conflict to another area.

Just as fear and ignorance prompt human beings to kill wild animals in their vicinity, most wild animals attack people in self-defence. Wild cats prowl in villages not because they relish human blood but because injury or age has reduced their capacity to hunt. Man-animal conflict can be reduced by educating people about animal behaviour and providing them with protocols on how to react to an approaching wild animal. For instance, the mere sight of a snake is enough to evoke terror, although most snakes are harmless. Teaching people to identify a snake species will go a long way in preventing the senseless slaughter of snakes. Studies show that most leopard attacks in the Garhwal region happen early morning or evening when people go into the forest to relieve themselves. Building toilets inside the home will reduce the vulnerability of people to leopard attacks.

“Oil exploration plans are bound to suffer a major setback.”



Comment

CENTRE'S MEDIATION IN J&K

Dialogue within state vital

Unlike insurgency, many crucial political problems in the vexed state require a dialogue between the regions of the state.

By Vikas Kumar

With the resumption of the Indo-Pakistan dialogue, the Centre is expected to reveal its political initiative for Jammu and Kashmir. The Union government should refrain from reducing the J&K “problem” to the issue of insurgency/freedom struggle in Kashmir and managing things from New Delhi. Unlike insurgency, which needs direct Central involvement, many of the other crucial political problems in the vexed state require a dialogue between the regions of the state.

Discussions about J&K in the mainland often fail to appreciate the differences between the regions of the state — Kashmir, Jammu, and Ladakh. Kashmir consists of the Jhelum Valley and the adjoining hills. Kashmiri-speaking Sunnis constitute majority in Kashmir, with the rest being Kashmiri-speaking Shias and pastoral tribes that speak languages closer to Hindi than Kashmiri. The pastoral tribes relocate to Jammu during winters. Kashmir accounts for about 55 and 16 per cent of the population (as per the 2011 Census) and area of the state, respectively. Kashmir's area will increase marginally if we include the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Jammu consists of Dogri-speaking plains adjoining Punjab and Pahari/Kishtwari/Bhadarwahi/Gujari speaking hills adjoining Kashmir and Ladakh. Muslim population increases in Jammu as we move away from the plains. Jammu contains about 43 per cent of the population and 26 per cent of the area of the state.

Ladakh consists of Ladakhi-speaking Buddhist-majority Leh and Balti-speaking Shia-majority Kargil. Ladakh that contains about 58 per cent of the area of the state has been marginal to the state's politics as it accounts for merely two per cent of the population.

The prolonged political impasse in Kashmir has accentuated intra-state divisions as Jammu and Ladakh do not share the former's vision for autonomy/independence. However, given the internal diversity of the regions, it would be inappropriate to view their mutual differences over power-sharing — the delimitation of assembly constituencies

and the creation of new districts, for instance — solely through the lens of religious demography.

Jammu complains that despite having a population “comparable” to Kashmir and an area much larger than that of Kashmir, it has fewer constituencies and districts than it deserves. In 1961, there were three districts in Kashmir and five in Jammu, while the entire Ladakh region was administered as one district. In 1968, Rajouri was carved out of Poonch district of Jammu.

In 1979, three new districts were created in Kashmir and one in Ladakh, but none in Jammu. Thus, Kashmir was brought on par with Jammu in terms of the number of districts. Three decades later, when new districts were created in 2006-07, the state government maintained parity between Kashmir and Jammu by creating four new districts in both of these regions.



However, Kashmir's advantage vis-à-vis Jammu in terms of the number of electoral constituencies reduced only marginally. In the 1962 election, there were two Assembly constituencies in Ladakh, 42 in Kashmir, and 31 in Jammu. An additional constituency was allotted to Jammu in the 1977 election that raised the strength of the assembly to 76. The next round of delimitation, which has governed elections since 1996, raised the strength of the assembly from 76 to 87. Of the 11 new constituencies, two were given to Ladakh, five to Jammu, and four to Kashmir.

Electorate size

Ladakh's constituencies were commensurate with the size of its electorate (registered voters) and population until the late 1980s and later it had more constituencies than warranted by the size

of its electorate. This disproportion is justified on account of Ladakh's remote and difficult terrain and large territory.

The constituencies allotted to Jammu in the state assembly have always been less than its share of electorate and population, except in 1977 when its constituencies were comparable to its share of electorate and in 2011 when its constituencies were comparable to its population share (even in 2011, Jammu's share of constituencies was less than its share of above 18 years population).

The average size of constituencies is larger in Jammu than in Kashmir. The presence of internally displaced/migrant Kashmiris, who continue to be registered as voters in Kashmir, migrants from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and migrants from West Pakistan, who have been denied full voting rights, in Jammu accentuates the disproportion between the actual and desirable allocation of constituencies.

Jammu, therefore, believes that it faces structural discrimination as Kashmir enjoys a contrived and permanent electoral majority shielded by Article 370 that exempts the state from regular delimitation of constituencies. As a result, for instance, the chief minister has always been a Kashmiri, with the exception of Ghulam Nabi Azad (if and how Kashmir's advantage has benefited the common Kashmiri is a debate for another day).

The anxiety in Kashmir over the emergence of the BJP as the largest party of the state by vote share is essentially a concern about the consequences of the potential political consolidation of Jammu and Ladakh under a party that does not depend on Kashmiri vote. Kashmir can possibly maintain status quo by exploiting the religious divisions within Ladakh and Jammu, but that will accentuate and communalise the regional divisions.

The Centre's mediation, assuming it can communicate with the people by-passing the Abdullah and Mufti dynasties, the intelligence agencies and the armed forces, cannot substitute for a direct dialogue among the regions. The absence of organisations, including political parties, which can credibly appeal to people in all three regions has meant the lack of a platform for inter-regional dialogue. Under these circumstances, the responsibility for building such a platform lies with Kashmir which both enjoys a disproportionate share of power and has successfully used Article 370 to foreclose the possibility of a federally-mediated redistribution of power.

(The writer teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The last laugh

Hari Saadu, our new boss, had turned Rama Rajya in the office into Raavana Rajya.

By Sandhya Vasudev

My amygdala — the memory bank of the brain — gets activated whenever I watch the ‘Hari Saadu’ commercial.

It had been a medium sized bank branch of a mighty organisation. We were a jolly potpourri of 25 people with an equally jovial boss, who would get the work done through active participation. The business grew and the branch was upgraded. Ergo, and alas, the manager was transferred. A classic case of the saviour becoming the scapegoat.

Enter ‘Hari Saadu’; our new boss, with narrow suspicious eyes, viewing everybody as potential offenders. He kept customers at arm's length considering them to be a nuisance. His sole duty seemed to be to warm the seat and filter phone calls. Official calls were quickly put through to the concerned officer as his ignorance could not afford

any reply. But personal calls received a brusque reply that the concerned employee was busy. Those were the days when the cell phone was less ubiquitous.

Our ‘HS’ had risen in position solely due to connections in the right places. As such, he did not know the difference between a CPU and a UPS and couldn't care less. He considered the computer as a mere appendage lacking in intuitive skills, which he boasted he had in plenty. But, we wondered how his intuition would help with facts and figures.

If an employee got up from his seat, the watch guard that he was would jump, too, to follow the employee and see what he or she was up to. It did not concern him that his action invited sniggers all around, for mostly the employee would have risen only to answer nature's call. Laughter was an anathema to him and even a smile would struggle to break through his stony face and lose the battle.

Once he hollered at an efficient lady officer for having misplaced a copy of a trivial circular, which was finally located in his drawer! The dignified lady quietly applied for voluntary retirement unable to cope with recurring similar situations and equally incapable of matching the

man's high connections.

The ‘character’ as he was referred to, would take delight in snubbing his staff, and woe betide anyone asking for leave! Some called him a ‘leech’ as he would extract work not caring that the person was sick. Needless to say, one of those officers applied for voluntary retirement too. A joke made the rounds that the ‘character’ was a catalyst of VR decisions.

Rama Rajya had turned into Raavana Rajya. The staff were hapless in his grip as his ‘reach’ was immense. So even as they spat venom behind his back, they spewed honey on his face. The branch witnessed phony sycophancy at its worst. It was a win-win situation for him in every way. Then, it happened.

Nemesis struck him! One day a customer unexpectedly entered his cabin and was greeted with the usual glare and highhandedness. As it turned out, the customer, who rarely visited the branch, happened to be one of the prime patrons. He came out in disgust and made a phone call to the director of the bank threatening to close his business account worth crores. A return call, and the character turned into a whimpering jelly. It was our turn to have the last laugh.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Modi's pragmatism charming and perplexing

Sir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's abrupt visit to Lahore only confirms his style of functioning as a lead actor writing his own script. This would set his foreign affairs team following it up on untrodden paths. It has nonplussed even the Sangh Parivar to expound on Akand Bharat of India-Pakistan-Bangladesh. If anything, disconnect has been the leit motif of the current era. The PM's stoic presence does not address the concerns of opposition inside the House. He prefers, instead, to cover much of it in ‘Mann ki Baat’.

Rein in loudmouths

Sir, One is surprised to hear the recent statement of Ram Madhav that “the RSS still believes that one day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh would reunite through popular goodwill and ‘Akhand Bharat’ will be created”. Surely this doesn't seem to be an off-the-cuff statement of the general secretary of the BJP unless prompted by someone in the higher echelon of the party. Nowadays many political leaders of various parties are giving statements which give rise to more problems. The supremo's of these parties should rein in the loud mouthed members and maintain the party's decorum. **M S ANANDA RAO**, Bengaluru

Political vendetta

Sir, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and other AAP leaders have been attacking Finance Minister Arun Jaitley for alleged corrupt practices during his tenure in the DDCA and demanding his resignation as minister, while accusing the PM of protecting a corrupt minister. But, in the Delhi government's inquiry report on DDCA there is no mention of Jaitley anywhere! Now, Kejriwal must apologise to Jaitley as well as the PM. **A SRIKANTIAIAH**, Bengaluru

Strive for equality

Sir, The editorial “Changes in SC/ST bill timely” (DH, Dec 28) is timely and eye-

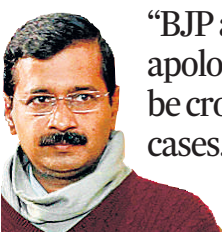
Modi abandons the election hard line for pragmatic softer tones to suit an occasion. This leaves others perplexed. The abundant camaraderie of his foreign visits gives disjointed signals to his ministers who sit down to bargain in multilateral fora. The year 2015 has been Mod's year whose politics is on a streak of super hits. One must spare a kind thought to his cabinet and partymen who would keep wondering every night what the dawn has in store for them! **R NARAYANAN**, Ghaziabad

opener. The political parties, particularly those representing the SC/ST communities themselves, should not treat the members of these communities as mere vote-banks. They must ensure that socio-economic standards of the latter improves and their dignity is upheld. Modern India needs to rise above narrow and draconian caste, creed and colour labels and strive for equality. **M T KUMAR**, Via e-mail

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SPEAK OUT



“BJP almost begging me for an apology. I won't oblige. Let Jaitley be cross-examined in defamation cases. Let truth prevail.”

Arvind Kejriwal
Delhi Chief Minister

Leadership is not a popularity contest; it's about leaving your ego at the door. **Robin Sharma**

IN PERSPECTIVE

Taliban surge: No refuge for Afghans

Control over Helmand province would give militants a sanctuary from which to fight the central government.

By Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah

Fleeing the encroaching front line in the embattled southern Helmand province, Hajji Abdul Qudus has moved his family many times this year, ending up at a rented home in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital.

But his family of nine, and the thousands of others from across the province who have been displaced to the small bastion, fear for the worst: What if Lashkar Gah also falls?

“We don't feel secure here,” Abdul Qudus said. “The Taliban are not far from the city.” For months, a resurgent Taliban, which is making gains across several districts in Helmand, has been holed up in Lashkar Gah's suburb of Babaji.

The embarrassing prospect of another urban centre falling to the insurgents, after the northern city of Kunduz this year, has drawn Afghan reinforcements as well as NATO troops back to Helmand to assist in the operations. The coalition forces also cannot afford the loss of Lashkar Gah for its symbolic value: Helmand was at the heart of President Barack Obama's surge of troops and resources, and it had more coalition casualties than any other Afghan province.

Helmand, the country's largest province, is a hub of opium production and offers a strategic advantage because of its location on the border with Pakistan, where the Taliban leadership council is based. Control of the area would give the militants supremacy in the drug business and a sanctuary from which to fight the central government.

The insurgents kept their pressure on Helmand for most of the fighting season this year. When NATO troops declared combat over and made the transition to a smaller training and advising mission, the Afghan government was sidetracked by the surprise intensity of fighting in the north of the country. As Kunduz fell and several other urban centres in the north came under fire, resources had to be transferred to meet insurgency's shift in geographical focus.

But in recent months, the Taliban have once again mounted a bold offensive across Helmand, overrunning or contesting several districts that had been cleared of their presence, though only after many casualties.

The Taliban control the districts of Musa Qala, Nawzad, Baghran and Dicho, according to Mohammad Karim Attal, chief of the Helmand Provincial Council. The districts of Sangin, Marjah, Khanishin, Nad Ali and Kajaki have also experienced sustained fighting.

“Overall, two districts of Helmand remain safe with no on-

going fighting, which are the districts of Garmsir and Nawa,” Attal said. “The rest of the districts have either fallen or under threat.” The fighting has displaced more than 7,000 families this year, according to Ghulam Farooq Noorzai, an official who works with refugees.

In the past two months alone, the fighting in the Lashkar Gah suburb of Babaji and the districts of Nad Ali and Marjah has forced 1,879 families to resettle in Lashkar Gah. More than 5,000 other families, many from northern districts that have seen heavy fighting, settled largely in Gereshk district. Now the uptick in violence there is forcing them on the move again.

Battle drawing closer

“There is no work opportunity in Lashkar Gah, and people are living with their relatives and they are becoming a burden,” Noorzai said. “And people are worried and not feeling safe even in Lashkar Gah because the battle is getting closer. We have problems in Babaji, which is a suburb that has turned into a frontline for one-and-a-half months, and the situation is not changing for the better.”

Much of the government's focus in recent weeks has been Abdul Qudus' home district of Sangin, which has largely been overrun by the Taliban. After days of Taliban control over the district, Afghan commandos finally seem to be making progress, officials and residents said.

“The Sangin situation is a little bit improved,” Attal said. “The commandos are now fighting with the Taliban and have pushed them out of district compounds.”

After months of surrounding the Sangin district, the Taliban last week overwhelmed it as the police forces and the civilian government retreated to an army base. British forces, and US Special Operations forces already in Helmand, rushed in to give support. The United States also conducted airstrikes.

Bahauddin Khan, a wounded local police commander who was airlifted from the siege by Afghan commandos, said the noose around the district had tightened over the last three months. The commandos struggled to land at the base because of Taliban fire, succeeding only on their third attempt.

“We were fighting with lack of ammunition and on empty stomachs,” said Khan, who lost 18 men. “Our police were really committed to their jobs and were defending the district, but one post fell after another because of a lack of attention and finally Taliban got the courage to attack the bazaar.”

At first, the Taliban pushed the police from their posts to the police headquarters, but the insurgents also managed to climb the security towers at the headquarters. From there they inflicted heavy casualties.

“We did not even have first-aid medication — just bandage to wrap the wounds,” Khan said, “I saw six police die before us due to bleeding.”

INVT

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 Years ago: December 29, 1965

LIC gives bigger bonus

Calcutta, Dec. 28.

The LIC was conducting an investigation into the position of mortality among policy holders from 1961 to 1964, B D Pande, Chairman of the LIC, said.

Final results would be com-

pleted by next year but from the results so far available, it was apparent that the mortality experience continues to be favourable, he said. The LIC was declaring higher rates of bonus to holders of whole life and endowment policies for the year ended March 31, 1965.

25 Years ago: December 29, 1990

Foster national unity, KS Na tells writers

Mysore, Dec. 28.

Writers and artists should help preserve the country's unity and integrity, renowned poet K S Narasimhaswamy said here. Delivering the presidential

address at the 60th All-India Kannada Sahitya Sammelana organised by the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, the septuagenarian writer said the nation was passing through difficult times. “There are large-scale acts of violence for some reason or the other,” he said.

