Sharing, and not caring

The SP-BSP tie-up poses a challenge to the BJP, but does little for pre-poll opposition unity

Sometimes, it is impossible to make new friends without making new enemies. In reaching an early agreement on seat-sharing in Uttar Pradesh for this year’s Lok Sabha election, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party have thrown a serious challenge to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in a State that could well determine which political formation forms the next Central government. In the process, however, they may have alienated the Congress, which, given its pan-Indian footprint, can be the only national-level force in an emerging anti-BJP coalition. The two biggest parties in U.P.’s opposition space have equally carved out 76 of the 80 seats between themselves, leaving four to the Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal, which has a support base in the western region of the State. Whether the seat sharing is final or just a bargaining tactic is difficult to say. But for now, the Congress has been pushed into a forlorn corner in India’s most populous State. The party may have to strike out on its own in sheer desperation at being denied a reasonable number of seats. It is doubtful, or at least by no means certain, whether it will be content with contesting in only a few seats to prevent a split in the anti-BJP vote in the others. It will be difficult for a party in revival mode in other parts of the Hindi heartland to give up U.P. without putting up a serious fight. As for the SP and BSP, it will be odd for them to be locked in a fight with the Congress in the State, while pushing for a Congress-led alternative at the national level.

The Congress does enjoy additional support in a Lok Sabha election; it demonstrated this in 2009, winning a surprise 21 seats in U.P. However, the SP and the BSP have probably calculated they are in a good space following the BJP’s poor showing in three Lok Sabha by-polls, one of them in Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s political backyard, Gorakhpur. They may well also be banking on the history of strategic voting in the State, which leaves little room for a third player. For all the talk of beating back the challenge of the BJP, regional parties know it is easier to do business with a weakened Congress than with a resurgent one. If the Congress is kept out of the alliance, then any alternative to the BJP will have to emerge from a post-poll coalition of disparate parties. This will hand a campaign point for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is already projecting the choice in 2019 as that between a strong government and a motley post-poll coalition united by no more than a shared aversion for the BJP. The strategy of the SP and the BSP and some other regional players to defeat
the BJP without making the Congress win is high-risk, and tactically difficult to implement on the ground.

Change in Congo

A contentious election may lead to the country’s first transfer of power via the ballot

After last month’s general election, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is anxiously awaiting the first ever transfer of power via the ballot since gaining independence in 1960. President Joseph Kabila, who had already deferred the polls by two years, postponed them again by a week days before it was scheduled in December. He cited the Ebola outbreak in some provinces and the destruction of electronic voting machines in a fire in the capital Kinshasa as reasons for the latest delay. But Mr. Kabila’s critics dismissed these excuses as coming from a President in denial of his impending defeat after 17 years in power. Their suspicions appeared to be justified, as prominent opposition leaders were barred from the contest by partisan courts and the election commission. Meanwhile, the UN has voiced concerns over the quality of voting machines and the deployment of the state machinery to obstruct opposition campaigns, adding to the sense of uncertainty. Soon after polling closed on December 30, rival camps began to pronounce victory for their own sides. When the election commission last week announced Felix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress as the winner, it predictably created a controversy. Mr. Kabila’s candidate, former Interior Minister Emmanuel Shadary, was expected to romp home. In the event, Mr. Shadary, who faces accusations of human rights abuses, was ranked third. The outcome triggered intense speculation that Mr. Kabila had cut a deal to back Mr. Tshisekedi, son of a deceased opposition leader. The candidate who came in second, Martin Fayulu, a political outsider, has challenged the results.

DR Congo’s Catholic church, which runs an independent poll observation mission, has questioned the official result and has even threatened to legally challenge it. It is but natural that DR Congo’s vibrant civil society groups should expect the judiciary to assert its independence, as did the court in Kenya following that country’s disputed 2017 elections. There are real fears that without genuine attempts to uphold the rule of law, the central African nation could slip into protracted political uncertainty and social unrest. The U.S. has cautioned Mr. Kabila against attempting to doctor the popular mandate. But with an eye on the country’s lucrative mineral wealth, which is needed to power electric cars and the robotics revolution, there are limits to the pressure Western nations will want to exert on Kinshasa in the months ahead. The role of Mr. Kabila, who is just 47 years old, in the coming days will be important to watch. He has emphasised that by stepping down, he is merely respecting the constitutional mandate. The intent behind that assertion will be tested in the ensuing months.
A way out of the morass

The U.S.’s plan to pull out of Afghanistan is an appropriate time to re-examine the idea of enabling its neutrality

In an article published in The Hindu (Editorial page, “Another approach to Afghanistan”, December 24, 2003), we had suggested that the only way out of the morass in Afghanistan would be to re-place Afghanistan in its traditional mode of neutrality. For that, two things were essential. The Afghans themselves must declare unequivocally that they would follow strict neutrality in their relations with external powers, and the outside powers must commit themselves to respect Afghanistan’s neutrality. In other words, external powers must subscribe to a multilateral declaration not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan together with an obligation on Afghanistan not to seek outside intervention in its internal situation.

We further put forward the idea that the agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, concluded in 1962, could provide a model for the neutralisation of Afghanistan. The present might be an appropriate time to revisit that proposal.

U.S. President Donald Trump has announced his decision to reduce American troop strength in Afghanistan, 14,000 at present, by half. Though Mr. Trump has not laid down a deadline for this reduction, it is safe to assume that he will make this happen well in time before the next U.S. presidential election in 2020.

This development has energised the principal stakeholders in Afghanistan to make calculated efforts to place themselves in as favourable a position as possible in an Afghanistan post-American withdrawal. India should also be thinking of what steps it should take to protect its interests in that situation.

Engage with the Taliban

One thing that should already have been done and must be done is to engage in dialogue with the Taliban. There is no doubt that the Taliban will be a major player in the politics of Afghanistan in the coming months and years. They already control more than 50% of the country and are getting stronger and bolder by the day. They are also engaged in direct talks with China, Russia, the Central Asian states and others. The Americans, represented by former diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, have begun sustained dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban have refused to talk to the Kabul government so far, but as and when the Americans pull out, as they are justified in doing for reasons of their own national interest, they might agree to engage with the Ashraf Ghani government. In any future
scenario, the Taliban are guaranteed to play an important, perhaps even a decisive role in the governing structures of the country.

New Delhi has so far refrained from establishing formal contacts with the Taliban out of sensitivity for the Kabul government not wanting to talk directly to the Taliban as long as the Taliban refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy. However, India must look after its own interests. Will a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul necessarily pose a serious security threat to us? While we are in no position to prevent such an eventuality, we would have alienated the Taliban by refusing to talk to them during the present phase. Even Iran, a Shia regime, has established official dialogue with the Taliban, a staunchly Sunni movement. It would not be difficult for our agencies to establish contacts that would facilitate initiating an official dialogue with Taliban; if needed, Iran could help in this even if it might displease the Americans. After all, the Americans have not always been sensitive to our concerns, in Afghanistan or elsewhere and Mr. Trump has publicly shown unawareness of our substantial development assistance to it.

A regional compact

The international community ought to, at the same time, think of how to establish a mechanism which might offer a reasonable opportunity to the Afghan people to live in peace, free from external interference. And perhaps the only way in which this could be done is to promote a regional compact among all the neighbouring countries as well as relevant external powers, and with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, to commit themselves not to interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. The most important country in this regard is Pakistan. Pakistan is highly suspicious, perhaps without any basis, of India’s role in Afghanistan. A multilateral pact, with India subscribing to it, ought to allay, to some extent at least, Pakistan’s apprehensions. India will need to talk to China about cooperating in Afghanistan; Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi already agreed in Wuhan, in April 2018, on working on joint projects there.

Pakistan should have no objection to formally agreeing to Afghanistan’s neutrality. There is the most relevant precedent of the Bilateral Agreement on the Principles of Mutual Relations, in particular on Non-interference and Non-intervention, signed in Geneva in 1988 between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In that agreement, the parties undertook, inter alia, to respect the right of the other side to determine its political, social and culture system without interference in any form; to refrain from over throwing or changing the political system of the other side; to ensure that its territory was not used to violate the sovereignty, etc of the other side, to prevent within its territory the training, etc of mercenaries from whatever origin for the purpose of hostile activities against the other side.

As a document on non-interference, it could hardly be improved upon. Pakistan probably would agree to a document with Afghanistan in whose governance its protégé, the Taliban, will play an important role, which would broadly be similar to the one it had concluded with an Afghan regime which it did not approve of.

The Bonn Agreement of 2001, which made Hamid Karzai the interim chief of Afghan government, contains a request to the United Nations and the international community to ‘guarantee’ non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, a request not acted upon so far.

Some concerns

A regional pact on non-interference and non-intervention ought to be welcomed by all the regional states. Russia has reason to worry about a lack of stability in Afghanistan because of its concerns regarding a spread of radicalism as well as the drug menace. China has even stronger concerns, given the situation in its western-most region. The U.S. might have apprehensions about China
entrenching itself in strategically important Afghanistan, but there is little it can do about it; a regional agreement on non-interference might give the U.S. at least some comfort.

It is early days to conclude whether the situation in Afghanistan has entered its end game. In any case, it would be prudent to assume that the U.S. will definitely leave Afghanistan in the next two years, likely to be followed by other western countries. No other country will offer to put boots on the ground, nor should they; certainly not India. The only alternative is to think of some arrangement along the lines we have suggested. May be, there are other ideas; we would welcome them.

Basic income works and works well

India has the technological capacity, the financial resources, and the need for a simple, transparent basic income scheme

In 2010-2013, I was principal designer of three basic income pilots in West Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, in which over 6,000 men, women and children were provided with modest basic incomes, paid in cash, monthly, without conditions. The money was not much, coming to about a third of subsistence. But it was paid individually, with men and women receiving equal amounts and with children receiving half as much, paid to the mother or surrogate mother. The pilots involved the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and financial assistance from UNICEF and the UNDP.

The outcomes exceeded expectations, partly because everybody in the community, and not just select people, received their own individual transfer. Nutrition improved, sanitation improved, health and health care improved, school attendance and performance improved, women’s status and well-being improved, the position of the disabled and vulnerable groups improved by more than others. And the amount and quality of work improved.

Critics said it would be a waste of money, but they were proved wrong. Above all, the basic incomes improved the community spirit and were emancipatory. Those who do not trust people wish to retain paternalistic policies despite decades of evidence that they are woefully inefficient, ineffective, inequitable and open to ridiculously extensive corruption. The tendency of elites to want to have common people grateful to their discretionary benevolence has blocked sensible economic reform.

As commentators know, in the 2017 Economic Report tabled by the government there is a chapter on how a basic income could be rolled out across India, and is affordable. Its main author, former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, and others such as Professor Pranab Bardhan have
proposed ways of paying for it — primarily by rolling back existing wasteful, distortionary, and mostly regressive subsidies. This should not be an issue to divide the left and right in politics, and it would be wonderful if the main political parties and personalities could come together on it. That is too much to hope. But in this wonderful country, now is a moment of transformative potential.

A ripe idea

The international debate on basic income has advanced considerably in the past five years. Experiments have been launched in countries of different levels of per capita income, which include Canada, Finland, Kenya, Namibia, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.S., with plans being drawn up in England, Scotland, South Korea and elsewhere. India could take the lead. It has the technological capacity, the financial resources and, above all, the need for a simple, transparent scheme to liberate the energies of the masses now mired in economic insecurity, deprivation and degradation.

However, as I wrote after the pilots in Madhya Pradesh were completed, planning the phased implementation of basic income will be a serious but manageable challenge. It will require goodwill, integrity, knowledge and humility about what will be inevitable mistakes. As we found, if properly planned, it is possible to introduce a comprehensive scheme even in rural or urban low-income communities, without too much cost. But it is essential to obtain local cooperation and awareness at the outset, and the backing of key local institutions. It is strongly recommended that if the government is to go ahead, it should phase in the scheme gradually, rolling it out from low-income to higher-income communities, after local officials have been trained and prepared.

It is also recommended that the authorities should not select particular types of individuals and give it only to them. It is tempting to say it should go only to women, low-income farmers, or vulnerable social groups. That would be wrong. It would involve expensive and corruptible procedures, and risk evoking resentment in those arbitrarily excluded, who would probably be equally in need, perhaps more so. The same applies to means-testing targeting. That would be a terrible mistake, for the many reasons reiterated in a recent book on basic income.

What administrators often do not appreciate enough is that money is fungible. If money is given only to women, men will demand a share; some women will give in, some will resist; it will be divisive. We found in the pilots that if men and women all have an equal individual amount, it promotes better and more equal gender relations. Moreover, giving to all in the community fosters solidarity within households and the wider community, apart from enabling multiplier effects in the local economy.

Farm loan waivers

The contrast is bound to be made with the Congress's promise of farm loan waivers. No doubt this policy would lessen the burden on a hard-pressed social group, and lessen rural poverty, but it is a populist measure. It will be popular, but will not alter structures and is bad economics. Suppose the principle were generalised. If one type of loan could be declared non-repayable, why not others? Unless one can show that a debt is odious or illegal per se, it would be a dangerous precedent to declare that one type of debt and not others need not be repaid.

In the long term, financial institutions would be less likely to extend loans to small-scale farmers. Is that the aim? If the loans were made on fair rules, it would be better to enable the debtors to pay them back less onerously. That is why a basic income would be a more equitable and economically rational way of addressing what is undoubtedly an unfolding rural tragedy.

The beauty of moving towards a modest basic income would be that all groups would gain. That would not preclude special additional support for those with special needs, nor be any threat to a
progressive welfare state in the longterm. It would merely be an anchor of a 21st century income distribution system. Will the politicians show the will to implement it? We need to see.