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The defection of four TDP Rajya Sabha MPs to the BJP raises troubling questions

The recent defection of four Rajya Sabha MPs from the Telugu Desam Party to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, merely a month after simultaneous Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Andhra Pradesh, can only be termed as political opportunism. The fact that these MPs merged with the BJP as a group helped them stay clear of the anti-defection law, which stipulates that a breakaway group constitute at least two-thirds of a legislative party’s strength and that it merge with another party. The TDP had been reduced to just 23 and two seats in the newly elected Andhra Pradesh and Telangana Assemblies, respectively. It now commands a much lower legislative profile with just two members in the Rajya Sabha and three in the Lok Sabha. There is a tendency among legislators to seek greener pastures at a time of crisis for their parties, but the nature of these defections suggests that this was not a simple case of leaving a party whose political strength had considerably diminished. The BJP is even more of a non-player in Andhra Pradesh as it does not hold a single seat in the current Assembly and its vote share dipped in comparison to the previous Assembly elections. The reasons for the defections appear to have little to do with the political equations in the parent State.

Some of the defecting legislators have a cloud of suspicion over them as they were subjected to probes by Central Bureau of Investigation, Enforcement Directorate and Income Tax officials over financial transactions. It would be in order to ask whether the defections are aimed at currying favour with the government at the Centre in regard to the investigations. The NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised zero tolerance on corruption, and it is to be hoped that the investigations against two of the defecting MPs continue unhindered. At the same time, the fact that the BJP has chosen to accommodate legislators the party had only months ago castigated for being corrupt, and against whom one of its own MPs had sought action from the Rajya Sabha ethics committee, suggests that the benefits of accrual to its numbers outweighed even the pretence of principle. The BJP has managed to increase its strength in the Rajya Sabha to 75 with the addition of the defectors from the TDP. Fresh elections to the Rajya Sabha are due for a substantive number of seats by 2020, and defections such as these will help the ruling combine get closer to the majority mark in the 245-member Upper House. Even if it is justified as an exercise to increase numbers, it does not reflect well on the BJP, which claims to be a party with a difference. Defections that are not based on ideology or principle undermine parliamentary democracy; a vibrant opposition is equally vital to ensure an efficient government.
Down to two

The leadership battle of the U.K. Conservatives is now between contrasting candidates

The leadership race in the U.K.’s ruling Conservative party has been whittled down to two candidates with contrasting personal styles and political stances. The current Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is a moderate and will face off against his predecessor, the flamboyant and controversial Boris Johnson. Over 100,000 overwhelmingly pro-Brexit party members will, in mid-July, choose Prime Minister Theresa May’s successor via a postal ballot. One option to see through their project of a life-time is to elect Mr. Hunt, a one-time advocate of remaining in the European Union (like Ms. May), and risk not realising the end goal. The other alternative is to choose the hardliner Mr. Johnson, who famously, and erroneously, claimed during the 2016 referendum that London was sending £350 million a week to Brussels. His xenophobic remark about Turkish immigrants flooding the U.K. was said to be among the factors that tilted the 2016 outcome. The principal architect of the leave campaign assured partymen before the current contest that Britain will exit by the October 31 deadline, deal or no deal. Mr. Johnson, a two-time London Mayor, has emerged a clear favourite, polling the highest in all the elimination rounds among Conservative MPs over the past days. Mr. Hunt, on the other hand, is seen as a heavyweight whose vast experience in promoting business ventures could refresh the party’s market-friendly image. As Health Secretary he had secured additional funding for the NHS. Mr. Hunt has warned of the dangers of leaving the EU without an agreement, including another general election that could damage the Conservatives’ prospects.

The contest is above all else really about picking a leader who can steer the party through Britain’s next general election and ensure its future relevance. That means somebody who can stop Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader, from entering 10 Downing Street. After a dismal showing in the May polls to the EU Parliament, the Conservatives also fear support among the rank and file haemorrhaging to Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party. Delivering on the 2016 referendum result, in whatever form and at any price, is seen in Conservative strongholds as the ultimate route to resurrection. Meanwhile, there are not many who seriously believe that Britain can realistically renegotiate before the end of October the withdrawal agreement Ms. May signed with the EU last year. Brussels has repeatedly stressed its unwillingness to reopen the deal, still less the contentious Irish backstop. The Prime Minister’s election in July would be followed by Parliament’s summer recess, allowing MPs little time for legislative business. Short of a spectacular turnaround, the outcome of the Conservative contest looks fairly predictable. Conversely, the course of Brexit is anything but certain, irrespective of whether Mr. Johnson or Mr. Hunt wins the battle of the ballot.
Basic needs, basic rights

India must recognise the right to a minimally decent life, so that no person falls below a certain level of existence.

Three thoughts occur to me in the aftermath of the horrific tragedy in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, where the systemic failure of health care has killed over a hundred children. First, like the constitutional principle of a basic structure, it is time to articulate an equally robust doctrine of basic rights. Second, these basic rights must be viewed primarily as positive, rights not against interference from the state (negative rights) but to the provision of something by it. Third, just as individuals are punished for legal violations, the government of the day must also be punished for the violation of these basic rights. This punishment need not await the next round of elections but must be meted out immediately, by the law itself. In short, defaulting governments must be held legally accountable. The systematic violation of basic rights must be treated on a par with the breakdown of constitutional machinery.

A solid necessity

But what are basic rights? How are they different from other fundamental rights? Basic rights flow from basic needs such as physical security or subsistence. Needs are different from wants. You may want a chocolate every morning but don’t need it. Heavens won’t fall if you don’t get it. But basic needs are different: their non-fulfilment can cause great harm, even kill. The failure to get an antibiotic if you have a bacterial infection can hurt you very badly. Heavens will fall if you don’t get it! Moreover, wants are subjective; you cannot be mistaken that you desire that chocolate. But you may be misguided, even unaware of what you need. You may not be able to tell if you need an antibiotic because your mind can’t tell the difference between bacterial and viral infections. This determination is done by a more objective criterion. Needs depend on the way human bodies are constituted. They are a solid necessity; one cannot get on without them. Nor can they be fulfilled by substitutes. For us, nothing can take the place of water, food and air.

It is true, of course, that though terribly important, basic needs are not what we live for. They don’t make our life worth living. But anything really worth pursuing depends on the satisfaction of basic needs. If we are continuously thirsty, cold, hungry, ill or homeless, we will be incapable of even framing a conception of worthwhile life, let alone pursue it. Imagine the plight of those who queue up for long hours to get a bucket of water or a place to bathe, dress or defecate. People suffer if basic needs are met inadequately or with delay. They are then denied a minimally decent life.

When basic needs are not fully met, we feel vulnerable and helpless. We grieve, cry for help, seek assistance. We complain and demand elementary justice from our community, especially from the state. Elementary justice requires that before anything else, the state does everything at its disposal to satisfy all basic needs of its citizens, particularly of those who cannot fend for themselves. We feel aggrieved when the state abdicates this responsibility.
Security and subsistence

But what does the language of rights add to the idea of basic needs? First, a right is something that is owed to us; it is not a favour. So, rights help the recognition of anything that satisfies basic needs as an entitlement. Basic rights are claims on the state to provide us with goods and services that satisfy our basic needs. Second, when something is identified as a basic right, it puts the state under a duty to enable its exercise. The state becomes its guarantor. For example, the right to physical security, the first basic right, is socially guaranteed when the state provides its people a well-trained, professional police force. When society and its government reneges on its commitment to do so, we hold them accountable. It follows that basic rights are a shield for the defenceless against the most damaging threats to their life which include starvation, pestilence and disease. As the philosopher Henry Shue, puts it, it is ‘an attempt to give to the powerless a veto over some economic, social and political forces that harm them’.

These rights are basic also because many intrinsically valuable rights can be enjoyed only once these rights are secured. Imagine that we have a right to assemble freely in public but that just as one begins to exercise this right, one is threatened with assault, rape or murder. Most people will simply retreat. Is not a threat to physical security or bodily integrity the commonest weapon wielded by goons, political thugs and oppressive governments?

The second is the right to minimum economic security and subsistence, that includes clean air, uncontaminated water, nutritious food, clothing and shelter. By showing the devastation caused by its absence, the Muzaffarpur tragedy amply proves that the right to primary health care is also an integral part of the right to subsistence. A straightforward link exists between malnutrition and disease. As Dr. T. Jacob John explained in an article in The Hindu on June 19, 2019 (OpEd page, “Averting deaths in Muzaffarpur”), encephalopathy, the biochemical disease that results from eating litchi fruit pulp, occurs only in malnourished children. It is common knowledge that malnourishment lowers resistance to disease. A similar link exists between disease, malnourishment and poverty.

Credible threats to these rights can be reduced by the government by establishing institutions and practices that assist the vulnerable; for example, by setting up hospitals with adequate number of doctors, nurses, beds, medical equipment, intensive care units, essential drugs and emergency treatments. For this, proper budgetary allocation is required that depends in turn on getting one’s political priority and commitment right. When a government fails to provide primary health care to those who can’t afford it, it violates their basic rights.

Vulnerability, accountability

To these two basic rights, I add a third — the right to free public expression of helplessness and frustration, if deprived of other basic rights. The scope of freedom of expression is large and I don’t think all of it can be deemed basic. But the relevant part of it is. The right to make one’s vulnerability public, be informed about the acts of commission and omission of the government regarding anything that adversely affects the
satisfaction of basic needs, to critically examine them and to hold state officials publicly accountable is a basic right on a par with right to physical security and subsistence and inseparably linked to them.

It follows that governments must make arrangements for people to demand that their basic rights be satisfied, to complain when these demands are not met, to report lapses and omissions on the part of governments, point fingers at apathetic government officials, criticise the government for its failures and to do so without fear.

These three basic rights can be summed up in a single phrase, the right to a minimally decent life. This is a threshold right. A society may soar, strive for great collective achievement. There are no limits to the longing for a better life. But the point of having a threshold of minimal decency is that our life must not fall below a certain level of existence. Anything short of a minimally decent life is simply not acceptable. It is this precisely that horrifies us about the callousness of the Bihar government in Muzaffarpur and governments in India more generally. They routinely abdicate responsibility for the suffering they directly or indirectly cause. This is why we must ask why governments are not immediately and severely penalised when they undermine the exercise of these basic rights.

A war of masks between Iran and the U.S.

Both governments are trying to avoid a war and yet win a game of appearances

On June 20, Iran and the United States came dangerously close to a direct armed conflict, with U.S. President Donald Trump reportedly ordering and then cancelling air strikes against Iran, after it shot down a high-tech U.S. drone over the Strait of Hormuz. A closer look at tensions between the two countries would make it seem as if the Iranian authorities were the ones attempting to escalate a regional crisis while avoiding a full-blown war with the U.S. For the Trump administration, it has been about being careful not to be drawn into a West Asian conflict and having the loss of any U.S. service personnel on its conscience.

Many layers

Yet things are more complicated than what is appearing on news channels. On one side, the Ayatollahs and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) want to save their necks by convincing the U.S.’s allies in Europe, West Asia and Asia to pressure Washington into easing the devastating economic and financial sanctions that have affected the Iranian economy. On the other side, the hawks in Washington, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, have an ardent desire to
restore U.S. deterrence by striking Iranian military infrastructure and nuclear installations. In the middle of this there are a number of state and non-state actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which would be the prime targets for Iranian attacks, or which would get militarily engaged on the side of Iran and go after U.S. targets.

Once in war with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the U.S. would have to contend with proxies backed by Tehran spreading across the region, armed with missiles, drones and as suicide bombers. There is virtually no way for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to protect themselves from Iranian proxy attacks. Let us take the example of Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who have fought a coalition led by Saudi Arabia to a stalemate on the battlefield since 2015 and have succeeded in launching missiles and rockets into Saudi territory. In Lebanon and Iraq, the Iranian regime’s proxies have killed hundreds of American soldiers since the early 1980s. In 1983, a group linked to the Iranian-backed Shiite militia, Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for lethal bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and a U.S. Marine barracks.

Nearly a month ago, in a meeting with Iran-linked Iraqi militias in Baghdad, Major General Qassim Suleimani, the chief of Iran’s Quds Force, which is a unit of the IRGC, asked them to prepare for a proxy war with the U.S. Strangely, Iran’s campaign of proxy war and sabotage will be designed to inflict some suffering on regional and international actors that have chosen to be with America in this conflict, while dissuading Mr. Trump and his advisers from taking military action against Iranian interests.

**Giving peace a chance**

Given that “maximum pressure” sanctions have achieved their goal and the Iranian authorities are desperate to find a way out of this crisis, the role of potential mediators will be crucial. The government of President Hassan Rouhani is quietly trying out all possibilities to find a diplomatic pathway out of the crisis. But a dialogue between Arab leaders and the Iran could begin with more concrete help from Oman and Kuwait in order to de-escalate the war in Yemen and ensure maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz.

Therefore, while Iran and the U.S. are on the edge of the abyss, global diplomacy behind closed doors has been working to find a way out. The removal of Russian missiles from Cuba was former U.S. President J.F. Kennedy grandest success. However, during the Cuban missile crisis, he had two dangerous situations to deal with simultaneously — missile emplacements and impeachment. In the same way, Mr. Trump is trying to find a way out of the tensions while trying not to damage his chances of a second term in the White House. America’s military and technological resources to break down the Islamic regime of Iran are limitless. The only matter to decide is whether it is intellectually wise and politically pragmatic to use all that might.

Both Iran and the U.S. are trying to avoid this war while winning a game of appearances. This game reminds us of the theatrical concept of persona, which gives both Iran and the U.S. a source of political agency and a stable public role to present themselves as being intransigent, inflexible and uncompromising. Consequently, both countries are trying to keep their masks on in order to inscribe themselves on the hearts of humanity. But as
Nathaniel Hawthorne writes in The Scarlet Letter: “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.”

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