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No surprises

The RBI has played conservative in announcing a rate cut of just 25 basis points

There were no surprises in the second bimonthly monetary policy announcement by the Reserve Bank of India. A 25 basis point (0.25 percentage point) cut was widely expected, and the RBI delivered that. Whether a deeper 50 basis point cut was necessary, given the sharp slowdown in the economy, is now a purely scholastic question. With inflation well under the benchmark figure of 4%, the stage was probably set for the RBI to spring a surprise but it chose to play conservative. Maybe the idea is to keep the powder dry for a further rate cut, if needed, in the next policy. If the economy fails to recover well enough from its slumber by August, the onus will, after all, shift back to the RBI. That said, there is enough in the latest policy to indicate that the RBI’s focus is now on growth. The change of stance to ‘accommodative’ from ‘neutral’, the statements by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das at the press conference that ensuring systemic liquidity will remain a priority for the central bank, and the setting up of an internal working group to review the existing liquidity management framework, all clearly point to a central bank that is not only listening to the demands of the key stakeholders in the economy, but also acting on them.

The one area where the RBI has some work to do is in the transmission of rates. By its own admission, only 21 of the cumulative 50 basis points rate cut effected by the RBI in the February and April policies has been passed on to borrowers by banks. The excuse from banks, at least in the last few months, was that liquidity was tight and so deposit rates could not be cut. However, liquidity has considerably improved in the last week, and more so with the new government loosening the purse strings. There cannot be any more excuses from banks to not pass on the cuts fully. The RBI’s decision to do away with its charges on RTGS/NEFT (Real Time Gross Settlement System/National Electronic Funds Transfer) transactions is welcome provided it can, again, ensure that banks pass on the benefit to customers. The central bank has also proposed measures such as a reduction in the leverage ratio under Basel norms for banks, which will increase their lendable resources. The projected growth rate for this fiscal has been lowered to 7% from the 7.2% projected in April, and the first-half growth is estimated at 6.4-6.7%, which by itself appears ambitious given the current trends in the economy. With the RBI having done its bit, the focus shifts to the Finance Ministry. There are tremendous expectations from the government over the next round of reforms, backed as it is by a strong mandate. The onus is now on the budget, to be presented on July 5, to unleash the animal spirits again in the economy.
Sudan on the brink

The military rulers must climb down and transfer power to a civilian government

When Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir was toppled on April 11 after a months-long popular uprising, the generals had two options before them. One was the Tunisian model in which the army allowed a smooth transition of power to a civilian government after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was removed from power in 2011. The other was the Egyptian model in which the army, after losing power to a civilian ruler following Hosni Mubarak’s ouster as President in 2011, staged a coup in 2013 and reinstalled itself at the helm. Unfortunately, the Sudanese generals chose the latter, setting the stage for a prolonged showdown. The protesters had demanded a transfer of power to a transitional civilian government, followed by free and fair elections. But the generals used the crisis to concentrate more powers in their own hands. They established a military council which took over governance, while angry protesters continued a sit-in in front of the Defence Ministry in Khartoum. As talks between pro-democracy activists and the military rulers collapsed, paramilitary groups unleashed deadly violence this week to break the sit-in, killing at least 100 people and injuring hundreds. The Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary troops notorious for atrocities committed in the impoverished western province of Darfur in the early 2000s, reportedly threw the dead into the Nile.

It is evident that the military will not easily give up power. After the crackdown, Lt. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military ruler, has offered to hold elections in nine months, upturning an earlier plan of a two-year transition. But there is no immediate plan to transfer power to a civilian transitional government, a key demand of the protesters. Unsurprisingly, they have rejected the military’s offer. At present, Sudan’s generals enjoy regional and international support. The UN Security Council couldn’t even condemn the violence as China, backed by Russia, blocked the move. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which offered financial aid to the junta as soon as Mr. Bashir was removed from power, also support the generals. This gives the military rulers a sense of impunity even when they unleash murderous paramilitaries on peaceful protesters. This has to change. Arab countries as well as the UN should put meaningful pressure on the military council to pay heed to popular demands and hold those responsible for the June 3 massacre accountable. There is no easy solution to the crisis. If the military wants to keep its grip on power, there could be more bloodshed as the protesters are defiant. It will have to necessarily build a more oppressive regime, as in Egypt after the 2013 coup. The other, wiser option is to compromise, resume talks with the protesters and facilitate a quick and orderly transition to civilian rule. The choice the generals make will determine the future of Sudan.
Language, the opening move

The ‘Hindi’ controversy foretells the larger political narrative for the coming years

Language makes us human. During the process of natural evolution, the human brain acquired the ability to engage with the world primarily through linguistic transactions. Language, therefore, has become the mode of knowing for Homo sapiens. Being the foundation of knowledge, language plays a pivotal role in formal institutions of knowledge. It is as necessary for thought and knowledge to exist as are air and water for the survival of life.

Scientific evidence shows that humans came to use language, a semiotic system made of verbal icons, some 70,000 years ago. The species continued to develop the brain’s linguistic ability as well as the semantic complexity of languages in use throughout these millennia. The intermittent prolonged spells of the ice ages did not deter the species in its language pursuit. We are now at a stage when a newborn manages to learn the entire language capability of the brain developed over the last 70,000 years.

By the time a child enters school, she already has the language competence that schools promise to give her. This is not to undermine the importance of formal education. Schooling can indeed bring a greater self-awareness of the language one uses. It can, under ideal conditions, help the learner in acquiring a greater ease in processing abstraction and judgment, the two highest cognitive abilities that the human brain has developed. It is now established beyond doubt that if a child receives formal instruction in the language of its home environ, the ease of doing cognitive transactions is enhanced.

The second language

As one tries to understand the nature of the language controversy that erupted last week, it should be instructive to ask how many languages children in most other countries are required to learn. The answer to this question can leave us ashamed and angry. In England, Germany and most European Union countries, children are required to study only one language in primary school and another language of their choice in middle school. In the U.S., it is English and Spanish or some other language as a ‘second language’. In Japan, it is Japanese and English from the primary level. In Hong Kong, it is primarily English, but also Mandarin and, if children wish, some Cantonese. In Egypt, Arabic is the primary language of instruction with a six-year stint in English as a ‘second language’. Almost all over the world, with the exception of some former colonies, children are required to study primarily one language and another one as a ‘second language’. In India they are asked to tackle three languages, and if their home language happens to have no formal status, they are faced with the daunting task of having to cope with four languages.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring had reported in 2016 that there were 47 million drop-outs by the 10th standard in India. Of course, gender
discrimination, absence of toilets for girls, economic marginalisation, poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher training and lack of employment at the end of high-school education contribute to the ‘expulsion’ of young learners from schools. But equally crucial a reason is the language challenge. If we have to bring this great injustice to an end, sooner or later India will have to accept the scientific premise that education in the mother tongue is the key to the life of the mind. ‘Mother tongue’ does not, however, mean the language determined by the state as a desirable ‘first’ language but a language that parents think will give the child the ease of learning.

A colonial legacy

The question of language education as well as that of the language for education has three important facets — linguistic (including neurological and pedagogical), political and administrative. Since Independence, we have laid a disproportionately high emphasis on the administrative side of this question. For purely administrative considerations we have kept oscillating between one position and another, bringing in its trail bitterly fought language battles. The colonial legacy of English as a language of modernity and knowledge has made it difficult for us to bring the vacillations to any rational conclusion. The nation appears to have forgotten the violent language movements in the past in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka; now the draft National Education Policy (NEP) has opened a festering wound once again.

The face of the controversy stoked through the draft is of a political nature. During the last two decades, NEPs have become an old habit with us, though none of them resulted in any genuinely fresh breakthrough in education. The new NEP draft comes at a time when the nation is sharply divided, thanks to the no-holds-barred abusive rhetoric during the recent election. It is not surprising that what was post-haste deleted came to be seen as imposition of Hindi in violation of the linguistic sovereignty of the States guaranteed by the Constitution.

The BJP's zeal

The zeal of the BJP to spread Hindi in non-Hindi States is based on deeply flawed premises. To begin with, the government does not have any authentic data on the linguistic composition of the country. The 2011 Census data on languages, published last year, was heavily doctored. It presents Hindi as the ‘mother tongue’ of over 52 crore people by subsuming more than 5 crore claimants of Bhojpuri and more than 9 crore speakers of nearly 61 other languages — claimed as ‘other’ by their speech communities — from Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. ‘The Hindi’ is probably spoken by not more than 30% of the population, but it is not the mother tongue for the remaining 70%. Knowingly causing risk to any indigenous language has been described by the UNESCO as ‘an act amounting to genocide’. I will use the term ‘phonocide’ to describe the expansionist aspirations in the name of nationalism. The aspirations are not to be attributed to the speakers of Hindi, but to the politics of the pseudo-nationalists who have no patience with the cultural diversity of India, so sensitively enshrined in the Constitution.
The sharp reaction that came up reflects democratic aspirations of the non-Hindi languages. The sparks that flew — before the controversy was hurriedly doused, probably temporarily so — foretell the larger political narrative for the coming years. In numerous ways, it is likely to be a conflict between the pseudo-nationalists and the constitutional democrats, a conflict over culture, language, knowledge, faith, history, world-views and approaches to modernity. One hopes it does not take the form of a north against south conflict. Language, being the foundation of both civilisation and knowledge, has naturally become the opening move in what is to come.

Pakistan’s blasphemy ordeal

Just the accusation of blasphemy can be punishment for the accused and their defenders

Barely two weeks after Pakistani Christian Asia Naureen (usually referred to as Asia Bibi), whose ordeal over false blasphemy charges attracted international attention, was allowed to leave the country, Pakistan’s blasphemy laws claimed new victims.

In Mirpurkhas

A Hindu veterinary doctor, Ramesh Kumar, was arrested in Sindh province on May 27 after a local cleric filed a police complaint accusing him of committing blasphemy. Mr. Kumar’s village Phulhadiyon, in Mirpurkhas district, has a population of about 7,000 people, the majority of whom are Hindus. As is often the case when blasphemy allegations are made in Pakistan, riots broke out in the area and an angry mob burnt down Mr. Kumar’s establishment as well as other property belonging to him and his family. The mob also tried to attack the police station and caused some damage in the process. Although six suspects were soon taken into custody for rioting and damaging the vet’s property, it is Mr. Kumar’s family that will now be living in fear while his prosecution meanders through Pakistan’s judicial system.

Ms. Bibi’s experience highlights the difficult path ahead for Mr. Kumar. Her relocation to Canada does not reflect substantive change in the persecuted state of Pakistan’s religious minorities. Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy laws remain in force, and there is no sign that the authorities plan to drop prosecution of hundreds of blasphemy cases.

Between 1987 and 2012, Pakistani authorities prosecuted 1,170 people for blasphemy. That number has only increased over the years. The Pakistani legal system offers little protection to someone charged with blasphemy and mere accusation is tantamount to
punishment. Judges and lawyers fear religious vigilantes who violently attack anyone they deem to be supporting a blasphemer.

Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Pakistan’s Punjab province, was killed by his own bodyguard in 2011 for supporting reconsideration of blasphemy laws; the judge who convicted his murderer had to flee the country; and a shrine was built for the assassin after his execution.

Ms. Bibi’s case attracted international attention. She was an unlettered berry-picker convicted by a Pakistani court of insulting Prophet Mohammed after being framed by neighbours who objected to her, as a Christian, drinking water from the same glass as them. She was sentenced to death for her comments in response to her neighbours' mistreatment. Support from church-goers and human rights defenders around the world meant that the U.S. government and the Pope paid attention to her case. Parallel efforts were initiated by the EU’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief to secure her release.

Last year Pakistan’s Supreme Court decided to hear her appeal after having ignored it for years. She had spent more than eight years in solitary confinement before being acquitted by the Supreme Court in October 2018. But Islamist groups took to the streets to protest that decision, and a review petition against her release was put in to block the Supreme Court’s decision. Even after the review petition was dismissed, Ms. Bibi remained under ‘protective custody’ at an unknown location. Eventually, pressure from Western governments and the Vatican, coupled with threats of EU sanctions at a time when Pakistan sought its thirteenth bailout from the International Monetary Fund in three decades, worked.

Pakistan’s all-powerful military and the civilian government installed last year are obsessed with improving Pakistan’s international image, without really changing its reality. They wanted Ms. Bibi’s flight to safety to be projected as reflecting a change in Pakistan’s treatment of its minorities. It is nothing of the sort, as the persecution of Mr. Kumar amply indicates.

**Lonely struggle?**

Unlike Ms. Bibi, Mr. Kumar is unlikely to have the support of Western governments and the Vatican. Any action by Hindu organisations in India or abroad on his behalf will only be misrepresented in Pakistan’s officially directed media as part of the ‘ongoing conspiracies’ against the country that are used as an excuse to maintain Pakistan’s semi-authoritarian power structure.

Ms. Bibi was eventually smuggled out of Pakistan. Those who fought for her freedom for over eight years rejoiced in a way usually reserved for a member of one’s own family. We all hope that she may know peace and happiness for her remaining life abroad. But we must not forget that, without major reform in its legal and political environment, Pakistan continues to have one of the worst track records in protecting its religious minorities.
Christians, Hindus, and Ahmadi Muslims continue to face persecution and the country’s blasphemy laws, under which Ms. Bibi was targeted, enable that repression. Blasphemy charges are filed routinely by Islamist extremists for political gain, by neighbours for revenge over a slight, and sometimes even by corrupt landlords for advantage in property disputes.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, which date back to the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, have only encouraged the unleashing of extremist religious frenzy. According to an Amnesty International report, the mere accusation of blasphemy is tantamount to punishment. Several cases illustrate that point.

Junaid Hafeez, a visiting lecturer of English at Bahauddin Zakaria University in Multan, has been in prison for the last six years after being accused of blasphemy by Islamist student activists. He was charged because he invited a speaker to a seminar who had allegedly “penned blasphemous passages in her book”.

His lawyer dropped him as a client after being mobbed by over 200 fellow lawyers; when human rights defender Rashid Rehman took up his case, he was shot dead in his office. The killer has never been apprehended and judges do not want to hear the case, which has been transferred from one court since 2013.

For Pakistan’s religious minorities to feel safe, Pakistan’s blasphemy laws must be tackled, amended or removed as a crucial first step. After that, or alongside, must begin the decades-long process of removing the seed of hatred sowed soon after the death of Pakistan’s founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah. That would involve an effort of mammoth proportions starting with the defanging of terrorist groups, changing school curriculum, and banning hate speech in all public venues. Political and religious leaders as well as the mass media must become a partner in confronting hate. So far, it seems that they would rather benefit from spreading the poison of communal hatred than confronting it.

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