

Our Opinion. Their Opinion

"There is nothing impossible to they who will try."
— Alexander the Great

Pak Facing Political Uncertainty After Poll

Despite Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) emerging as the single-largest party, Pakistan faces significant political uncertainty. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif conceded that his party lacked the capacity to form the next government. He tasked his brother, Shehbaz Sharif, also a former Prime Minister, with the responsibility of negotiating with other parties and Independents to establish what Nawaz Sharif termed a "unity government" with former coalition partners. Subsequently, an agreement was reached between PML (N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Bilawal Bhutto to form a coalition government. However, Nawaz Sharif's foremost challenge lies in garnering support from Independents allied with Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. With Imran Khan asserting victory, the political landscape appears convoluted. Many observers allege electoral malpractice, further complicating matters. Despite this, the Army's involvement is anticipated to ensure the formation of a coalition government, albeit one potentially subservient to General Asim Munir's influence. The aftermath of the elections underscores Pakistan's delicate political balance, with power dynamics shifting amidst allegations of impropriety. As negotiations unfold and alliances are forged, the nation braces for a period of uncertainty, where the interplay between political factions and military influence will shape its future trajectory. India must be watching the poll outcome with a sense of indifference as whichever party forms the government mending ties with New Delhi is unlikely to be a priority. Resolving political instability, setting its tattered economy in order and countering terrorism will top the new government's agenda. So long as the army calls the shots, India cannot have a neighbour with peaceful intentions.

Will Ukraine survive the Russian onslaught?

With congressional Republicans blocking further US military aid to Ukraine, even as Russia begins to make gains on the battlefield, there is reason to be concerned about what the war's third year will bring



Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is about to enter its third year. There is much to feel good about, but there are also grounds for worry. In short, it is time to take stock. What Ukraine and its Western backers have accomplished in the wake of Russia's February 2022 invasion is extraordinary. Russia, a nuclear-armed power with three and a half times the population of Ukraine, ten times the GDP, and a military with many times the personnel and equipment, has been fought to something close to a draw. Ukraine controls some 80% of its territory, much as it did two years ago. Russian President Vladimir Putin obviously calculated that his war of conquest would resemble his previous invasion of Ukraine in 2014, when Russian forces swept in and quickly seized Crimea and much of the eastern Donbas region. He saw Ukraine, Europe, and the United States as weak and divided. He also believed his generals when they promised that Russia's military was strong and would overwhelm whatever resistance Ukraine could muster. All these assumptions have been proved wrong. But there is reason to be concerned nonetheless. Ukraine's highly anticipated counter-offensive, designed to liberate territory and deliver a battlefield win or at least momentum that would set the stage for promising diplomacy, was largely rebuffed. Russia has learned to live with Western economic sanctions and has largely rerouted vital energy exports to China and India. Western military sanctions have likewise been evaded: Russia has continued to sell weapons to India and others and buy them from North Korea and Iran. It has also been able to purchase ostensibly civilian technology and products that can be repurposed for military use. It has expanded its defense industrial base and now has a sizeable advantage over Ukraine in the quantity of artillery and ammunition that it can deliver to the battlefield.

Russia shows few signs of exhaustion. Despite the extraordinary human toll of the war, estimated to be more than 300,000 Russian troops killed or injured, Putin's control of the media and public narrative has allowed the Kremlin to minimise dissent and persuade many Russians that their country is the victim rather than an aggressor. Meanwhile, Ukraine is showing signs of political division. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy just fired his top general. More important, Ukraine is struggling on the battlefield, largely owing to Republicans in the US Congress blocking a \$60 billion military assistance package. Republican opposition appears to reflect a mixture of resurgent isolationism, sympathy for the authoritarianism of Putin, and a partisan desire not to hand President Joe Biden a political victory before the presidential election in November. Ideally, Biden will be able to convince enough Republicans to work with him and fellow Democrats to approve a new tranche of assistance, which is in America's strategic interest. But this outcome cannot be counted on, despite growing evidence that Ukraine is running short of arms and ammunition and, as a result, experiencing mounting difficulty in standing up to Russian military pressure. This raises the question: How might Ukraine and its friends in Europe and elsewhere fill at least some of the void left by a US no longer prepared to offer significant levels of assistance? Europe has already agreed to provide Ukraine with more than \$50 billion in new economic aid; together with others (such as South Korea and possibly Japan), a coordinated plan is also needed to provide Ukraine with arms and ammunition so it can better defend itself and strike important Russian military targets. At the same time, Ukraine's friends must help it reconstitute and expand its arms industry, so that it becomes less dependent on the ability and will-

ingness of others to provide the resources the war effort requires. At the same time, Ukraine can reduce its resource needs and save lives by adopting a largely defensive military strategy. Protecting and preserving the 80% of the country Ukraine now controls is feasible and essential. Ukraine would not be giving up anything by embracing such a posture, given that military liberation of Crimea, Donbas, and other Russian-occupied areas is not in the cards, at least in the short term. And it can continue to seek full territorial restitution at the negotiating table if and when serious talks commence. If the provision of arms will determine how Ukraine fares this year, the US presidential and congressional elections in November will go a long way toward determining how it fares in 2025 and beyond. If Biden is re-elected, and if the US Senate flips to Republican control, as many expect, but the Democrats retake the House of Representatives, then the stage will be set for renewed US economic and military aid and possibly a tie between Ukraine and NATO. This would disabuse Putin of the view that time is on his side, in turn increasing the odds that diplomacy would come to the fore. If, however, former President Donald Trump wins and the Republicans maintain control of the House of Representatives, Ukraine will face a far more difficult future. The burden of Ukraine's security would fall even more on itself and its friends in Europe and Asia. If they prove willing and able to fill much of the gap left by a withdrawal of US support, one could envision a prolonged stalemate on the battlefield followed by constructive diplomacy. If not, Putin would be likely to press his advantage on the battlefield and come to the negotiating table only to impose the outcome he has sought from the beginning. The difference between these two futures is stark. The stakes for Ukraine, for Europe, and for the world are enormous. Chinese President Xi Jinping, with his own designs on Taiwan, is watching with keen interest how this plays out. So, too, is Iran. If the US proves unwilling to meet its obligations and uphold the rule of international law that territory may not be acquired by force, we are looking at a future far more violent and dangerous than the past.

BY-RICHARD HAASS

RG's regressive caste politics won't take off with youth

Is Rahul Gandhi cutting himself off from the youth with his caste politics? For some time, he has been consistently talking about caste and each of his public speeches is heavily loaded with references, often in a clear provocative style.

He may be believing that by talking about caste blatantly, which his party never exhibited so openly, he will jitter a sensitive nerve in the society and break the BJP's 'Hindu' spell. But he seems to be overlooking the fact that this period is different.

For a majority of the young population in India, the priorities are good education, a paying job, a sound social circle, a mobile phone, laptop and enough space to enjoy and explore. For them, the circle includes those with whom the 'vibe' gets matched and which often transcends caste and religion. More youths want and aspire for a cosmopolitan life and caste seems to be the least concern for many of them.

The political hawks may say that the population of such youths is not that big and caste continues to remain one of the top societal concerns. It may be true in certain pockets and regions, but the recent state elections have proven that caste is no longer the basis for voting a candidate. Had it been so, the electoral results in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan would have been different.

Even before these three, the electoral results would not have been so in 2014 and almost every election after that. Had elections in India only been caste-influenced, then Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) would not have been in such a bad state in Uttar Pradesh. So would not have been Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party.

The truth is that the Congress has been going down consistently and the BJP's vote share is ever on rise. The Congress party won 52 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, just eight seats more than its 2014 tally. Its vote share -- 19.5 per cent -- was almost the same as 2014. On the other hand, the BJP increased its seat tally and vote share in consecutive elections, since its defeat in 2009.

After winning a majority with 282 seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP further extended its lead by 21 seats to 303 in the 2019 polls. Even in the Assembly elections, the Congress performance has been dismal. Except Telangana and Karnataka, where the victory was more because of the efforts of the local leaders, the party is nowhere else to be seen.

The Congress has not only lost elections, big or small, it has also lost a number of its leaders, both young and veterans, and even those whose families for generations had been with the Congress. Most were disillusioned with the top leadership, including Rahul Gandhi, and directly or indirectly blamed him for a lot of ills that have crept within the party.

Rahul Gandhi's sudden interest in caste-based politics stems from the fact that it has been losing out heavily since 2014 in wooing the OBCs since the advent of Narendra Modi, who is himself from the backward caste, on the national scene.

With Modi's kind of politics, almost all castes are voting for him. And this is proven by the increasing vote share of the BJP. The saffron party's all-India vote share in the 2019 Lok Sabha election -- 37.6 per cent -- was almost double that of 2009 -- 18.6 per cent. This was largely due to the party's inroads in the OBCs, Adivasis and Dalits. While BJP seems to be growing beyond the caste-dynamics, Rahul Gandhi has pushed his party into regression.

Whether inside Parliament or outside, he has been systematically making pinpointed references to caste equations.

During discussion on the Women Reservation Bill in Lok Sabha last year, he pushed for a separate quota for OBCs in the bill and also pushed for the Caste Census data to be released. In 2023 also, he said in a conclave, "I was shocked that out of 90 people (Secretaries) who controlled the government of India, only three are from the OBC community."

Gandhi's caste references have become more aggressive of late as the elections to the Lok Sabha near. In the western Odisha town of Jharsuguda on February 8, Rahul Gandhi during his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra accused PM Modi of lying that he was born in the Other Backward Class. "Your Prime Minister was not born OBC and he was born in a general caste. He was born in Teli caste in Gujarat. The BJP government had included his caste in OBC category in 2000. He keeps lying everywhere that he was born OBC." However, this allegation was trashed by the BJP which came out with the facts that the status was granted to the community by the Congress supported government in Gujarat in late 1990s. Rahul Gandhi may be under immense pressure to prove himself, but that does not mean that he should resort to narrow politicking. And, this is something which is too obvious for anyone, including the youth of the country, to ignore. With 66 per cent of India's population below the age of 35, can anyone afford to be regressive? The leaders and more so Rahul Gandhi, need to understand this.

By-Deepika Bhan

Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh and Narasimha Rao Expose Congress' Disregard for Non-Gandhi Icons

In the pantheon of India's highest civilian honours, the Bharat Ratna shines as a luminary accolade, an emblematic tribute to those whose endeavours have profoundly sculpted the nation's destiny. The recent decision by the BJP government to bestow this exalted award upon PV Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh posthumously has stirred the cauldron of political discourse, illuminating the intricate interplay of intent, historical narrative, and the indelible imprint of the Gandhi family on the Indian political landscape. The conferment of the Bharat Ratna upon these two stalwarts is a poignant testament to the breadth of leadership that transcends the boundaries of any singular political lineage. Rao and Singh, despite their monumental roles in shaping India's socio-political fabric, have often been eclipsed by the colossal narrative associated with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. In recognising their legacies, the current administration has, perhaps inadvertently, highlighted past oversights in acknowledging the contributions of leaders beyond the Gandhis' inner circle.

OVERLOOKING CHAUDHARY CHARAN SINGH'S LEGACY The conspicuous absence of recognition for former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh's legacy by the Congress and the Gandhi family raises poignant questions about the intricacies of political narratives and the dynamics of power within Indian politics. Singh, a stalwart champion of agrarian reform and social justice, played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Indian politics, particularly through his unwavering commitment to the welfare of farmers and marginalised communities. Despite his significant contributions, his legacy has often been overshadowed by the dominant narrative surrounding the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. The reluctance of the Congress and the Gandhi family to acknowledge Singh's contributions reflects not only a failure to appreciate his visionary leadership but also underscores deeper political calculations and historical biases. By sidelining Singh's legacy, the Congress inadvertently perpetuates a narrow understanding of Indian history and reinforces the hegemony of a single political dynasty. In doing so, it not only does a disservice to Singh's memory but also undermines the rich tapestry of leadership that has shaped India's journey. As the nation grapples with the complexities of its past and charts a course for the future, we must recognise and celebrate leaders like Chaudhary Charan Singh, whose indelible imprint on Indian politics transcends partisan divides and endures as a testament to the spirit of democracy and social justice.

WHY CONGRESS SHUNS PV NARASIMHA RAO'S LEGACY PV Narasimha Rao, India's 9th Prime Minister, navigated a tumultuous period, ushering in economic reforms amidst social strife. Yet, his legacy remains curiously uncelebrated within the Congress party, the very platform that propelled him to power. Examining this paradox unveils a tangled web of personal rivalries, ideological dissent, and a party struggling to reconcile its past. Rao's ascent occurred in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, with him surprisingly chosen as leader despite not belonging to the Nehru-

Gandhi dynasty. His pragmatic approach stood in stark contrast to the socialist leanings of traditional Congress. He initiated crucial economic reforms, liberalising markets and opening India to the global stage. These bold steps, while laying the foundation for future growth, alienated sections within the party wedded to old ideologies. Adding fuel to the fire was the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, a dark stain on Rao's tenure. Though accused of inaction, he navigated a delicate situation, prioritising national unity even as it strained his relationship with Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv's widow and a rising figure within the party. Despite his achievements, Rao faced accusations of corruption and the party's electoral defeat in 1996 further cemented his marginalisation. He was sidelined, denied due recognition, and even his mortal remains were not allowed entry into the party headquarters. This treatment stemmed not just from policy differences but also from a power struggle within the party. Rao's independent leadership threatened the ascendancy of the Gandhi family, whose return the party saw as its political salvation. Today, amidst changing political landscapes, the Congress seems to be making cautious attempts to acknowledge Rao's contributions. However, a complete embrace of his legacy remains elusive. This reluctance reflects a party grappling with its evolving identity, balancing its socialist roots with the demands of a new India. Recognising Rao's achievements alongside his missteps would require not just historical objectivity but also confronting internal contradictions and acknowledging the contri-

butions of leaders beyond the dynastic fold. Only then can the Congress truly claim to be the custodian of India's diverse political narrative. A CALL FOR INCLUSIVE RECOGNITION IN INDIAN LEADERSHIP The BJP government's decision to honour Rao and Singh has been met with both acclaim and criticism, with some viewing it as a commendable step towards rectifying historical injustices, while others perceive it as a calculated political manoeuvre aimed at diluting the influence of the Gandhi family. However, regardless of the underlying motivations, the fact remains that the contributions of Rao and Singh to the nation are undeniable, and their legacies deserve to be celebrated and commemorated. Moreover, the conferment of the Bharat Ratna upon Rao and Singh underscores the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to recognising leadership in India. For too long, the dominant narrative of Indian politics has been shaped by the legacies of a few select individuals, while countless others who have made invaluable contributions to the nation have been relegated to the sidelines of history. By honouring Rao and Singh, the BJP government has taken a significant step towards broadening the scope of our collective memory and acknowledging the diverse tapestry of leadership that has shaped India's journey. REFLECTING ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RAO AND SINGH'S BHARAT RATNA However, it would be remiss to view the conferment of the Bharat Ratna upon Rao and Singh in isolation, divorced from the broader political context in which it occurs. The BJP's decision must be seen against the backdrop of its larg-

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