

# A royal mess

Only pragmatism and prudence can lift the telecom industry from its current troubles

Tt cannot possibly get messier than this. The telecom industry is in turmoil unable to pay up its dues as per the Supreme Court verdict on adjusted gross revenues delivered in October last; the Court is aghast that its order is not being complied with; and then there is the government torn between revenue considerations, the need to uphold sanctity of contracts, and ensuring that one of the players does not go under in the process of honouring the verdict. Faced with the wrath of the Court, Bharti Airtel paid ₹10,000 crore on Monday with the promise of paying the rest before mid-March when the court will hear the case next. Vodafone Idea, the one hit the most by the judgment, on Monday sought more time to pay up but the Court was in no mood to humour the company and refused to hear the plea. The company eventually paid ₹2,500 crore by the evening. The two companies, as indeed the others in the industry, have only themselves to blame for the predicament that they find themselves in now. They could have paid up their annual dues over the years which were not material in relation to their respective turnovers - under protest even as they litigated the case in the top court. That would have obviated the need to pay interest and penalties now which are higher than the actual dues. At the very least, they ought to have provided for the liability in their balance sheets as a contingency, which they failed to do.

While they have to pay the price for this now, what can be done to ensure that the blow is not fatal? If Vodafone shuts shop, not only will the industry be reduced to a duopoly, with all the attendant consequences for customers but it will also lead to loss of about 15,000 direct jobs and several thousand more indirect ones. Worse, the cascading effect will be felt across the economy as lenders face the consequences of the company going bankrupt - non performing assets will rise. Telecom equipment suppliers may also go down as their dues will not be paid. And what happens to the 212 million Vodafone subscribers? It is doubtful whether the other two players can absorb them all. The industry is critical to the government's plans for a digital economy not to mention its revenues, including from the upcoming 5G spectrum auctions. The government has to, therefore, examine what it can do to save the situation without disrespecting the Court's verdict. Legislation to offer a staggered payment schedule that ensures that the net present value of future payments is equal to the dues is one option experts are suggesting. There could be other options that can be considered in conjunction with the industry, including reducing the adjusted gross revenue-based licence fees and spectrum usage charges. Whatever route it chooses to soften the blow, the government will have to get the Court on its side at the next hearing on March 17. The need of the hour is pragmatism laced with prudence on all sides to clean up this

# Women-at-arms

In allowing women permanent commission,

the court has demolished gender stereotypes The Supreme Court has delivered a sharp rebuke to the government by asking it to adhere to its own stated policy, articulated on February 25, 2019, on granting permanent commission to women in the Short Service Commission (SSC). Though women are absorbed into the SSC, they are now denied permanent commission in most branches of the Indian Army. More importantly, in furthering the principle of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Constitution, the Court has at the same time come down heavily on the stereotypes of women and their physiological features that were consistently put across in the government's submissions to deny equal opportunity to women who fulfil the same criteria their male counterparts do. As long as society holds strong beliefs about gender roles there will not be change of mindsets, the top court observed. Indeed, the Court has torn into a number of contradictions inherent in the government's arguments that gravely weaken its case and expose inherent prejudices. For instance, it was submitted that deployment of women officers was not advisable in conflict zones where there was "minimal facility for habitat and hygiene". Yet, the government admitted to the Court that 30% of the total number of women officers are in fact deputed to conflict areas. In directing the government to grant permanent commission to those women who opt for it, in 10 branches of the SSC, and by ordering the government to level the playing field, the Court has forced acknowledgement of the sterling role women have played and continue to play, shoulder to shoulder, with their male counterparts, for the security of the nation. It has also made recommendations to correct the anomalies including in the matter of pensions

It is a telling state of affairs that though Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on August 15, 2018 that permanent commission would be granted to serving women officers of the armed forces, it needed the Supreme Court to prod the government into doing it. The efforts of the litigants, who have waged an uphill battle since 2003, fighting their way up from the Delhi High Court, which ruled in their favour 10 years ago – and the government wilfully ignoring it – all the way up to the Supreme Court, deserve applause. That this discrimination should happen even while the Indian Army experiences a shortfall of officers by about 10,000 in the ranks is all the more galling. It is not as if there is surfeit of women officers: a mere 1,653 out of 40,825. Given the inherent flaws in the structure, implementation and change are not likely to happen soon, even given the Court's deadline of three months.

# India's disturbing trauma narrative

In the silence over violence being perpetrated against children, the country appears to have lost its moral compass



VIKRAM PATEL

f the seizure of a pair of slippers of an 11-year-old as evidence in Lan investigation in a sedition case in Bidar, Karnataka, was not ludicrous enough, the imprisonment of a mother of a student in the same case for having contributed to the script of an apparently seditious primary school play, the arrest of the principal for allowing it to be performed in her school, and the interrogation of the children by uniformed police officers in the absence of any child welfare workers, would make a perfect script for an Orwellian nightmare.

#### **Violation of rights**

For those puzzled readers who may be wondering what the pair of slippers might have to do with this surreal theatre, it was the very object referred to in the play, according to media reports, when a child says "the boy who was selling tea till the other day is asking us for documents. I'll ask him where he was born and where his papers are. If he does not provide them, I will beat him with my slippers". Even if some patriots might argue that a child's slippers could indeed be used to wage war on our great nation and the remand report for the two women "found grounds for suspicion that the two influenced the children", the students themselves insisted, even after repeated interrogation, that they wrote the play themselves.

On the other hand, one child told HuffPost India, "We were scared. The policemen raised their voice every time they questioned

us." Not surprisingly, many students have stopped going to school since then.

I imagine most people would think that this story must be fake news not only because it is so utterly absurd but also because our police who cannot find a moment to stop the lawless mayhem on our roads which have made India one of the world's largest traffic-death countries must surely be doing more important things. But the soul-crushing truth is that these events did happen. Leaving aside the numbing irony that a law designed by the British to suppress the freedom of speech of our avowedly non-violent independence activists should now be used by the police to suppress the freedom of expression of schoolchildren, my anguish is because of the terror that these children must have experienced as a result of this ordeal.

Not only did the arrest of the mother, a single parent, leave the child in the care of a neighbour but the arrest of the principal of their school left all the children without their trusted headmistress. Simultaneously, the police, threatening as they must have seemed to the children in their full regalia and having carted away the mother and principal to jail, were trying to get them to squeal incriminating evidence which could be used against these very trusted

#### On 'toxic stress'

These traumatic experiences are not only a violation of the fundamental rights of the child but are severely damaging to their mental health. As the media reported, one child said when her mother was finally released, "I felt lonely and sad because all I have is my mother. I have never lived without her for a single day. So I was

The most damaging kind of trauma is that which results in 'toxic stress", a term used to describe a child's experience of persistent adversity or abuse. Persistence, with no hope of escaping the threatening situation, is the hallmark of toxic stress. Perhaps the most vicious example is unfolding in Kashmir where, after two decades of living in a context suffused with the fear of violence from one side or the other, children have been subjected to six months of a lockdown, losing their fundamental rights of freedom to learn, play and be carefree. Worse, they must witness, silently, the mounting rage and helplessness that dominates the emotional landscape of their parents and their community, compounding their own feelings of insecurity, hopelessness and alienation. There are now many reports of the mental health crisis engulfing

young people in the Valley. The events in Kashmir and Karnataka are not an aberration. Consider the harrowing accounts of the experiences of children in a shelter home in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, where young girls were kept locked up for most of the day and where they were raped, after being sedated, at night. Investigators observed many signs of mental health problems, for example remarking on how "strangely they behaved", laughing and crying in rapid sequence, remaining silent

for long periods, and appearing to be severely depressed. Many girls had self-inflicted injuries, a behaviour associated with trauma in children. Conditions in other shelter homes were not much better, with appalling stories of cruelty and torture, and several instances of suicidal behaviour and mental breakdown.

Yet another example of unspeakable violence has unfolded in the past week with dozens of young women being insulted, paraded and forced to remove their innerwear to prove they were not on their period by their principal and school staff after a used personal hygiene product was found in a garden of their school, in Bhuj, Gujarat. "There are no words to describe the humiliation that we faced," said one of the students, as the media reported. No doubt, the overall atmosphere in such a school must have been atrociously oppressive.

#### **Breach of trust**

Among the most primal emotions which humans experience in their earliest years of life is fear. Fear is key to survival for, in leading to behaviours such as crying, it prompts a trusted adult to respond with affection, food or, most importantly, safety. But there are times when the fear can have catastrophic consequences and this is when the threat is persistent and unpredictable and, especially when, it is perpetrated by an adult who the child has been taught to trust and rely on for their protection – such as the police or the school principal or the child welfare worker or the army. It is this breach of the bulwark of trust which is the most poisonous toxin for the mind, and it is this feature which binds all these forms of trauma together.

When the Donald Trump administration in the United States im-

plemented its policy to reduce illegal immigration by separating children from their parents at the U.S. border with Mexico, there were harrowing consequences on the mental health of the children. A report, published by the U.S. government's own inspectors, confirmed that separation of children from their parents had caused grievous psychological harm and laid the foundations for lasting and profound mental health problems in later life. Virtually every major American professional society concerned with mental health, public health or children's health condemned the government's actions as an assault on children's rights and well-being. While there has been a deathly silence from most professional groups in India in response to the gratuitous levels of violence being perpetrated against our children by the state, a few courageous institutions stand out for doing their job. In the past week, a panel of the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights concluded that "it is clear that the police violated the rights of the children at the [Bidar] school".

Let me emphasise that my concerns about traumatising children have nothing to do with taking sides with a particular brand of politics or ideology, but simply about upholding the foundations of science, the law, ethics and, ultimately, our humanity. I have little doubt that the children of Shaheen Urdu Medium Primary School, the Muzaffarpur shelter home, the Shri Sahjanand Girls' Institute and all over Kashmir, cry to see their beloved country descend into such madness that it has lost its moral compass. To be sure, I weep with them too.

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# The long and the short of Trump versus the rest

With the weight of the Republican Party now behind him, the U.S. President is going all out to bag the November poll



KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN

The American Congress predictably acquitted U.S. President Donald Trump from charges of obstruction of Congress the Democrats, their supportive bureaucrats and the media detesting him while the Republicans and their followers embrace him, or back him sufficiently, to want him to continue in office.

The liberal media never accepted Mr. Trump as legitimate, depicting him as racist, chauvinist and a liar; they are unable objectively to assess the President's policies. Democrat-supporting liberals in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency and the bureaucracy showed their discontent in a quasi-rebellion against the President, and when the Russia collusion probe led nowhere, they turned to the impeachment route. Citing the sixth U.S. President, John Quincy Adams (1825-1829), "America... goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the wellwisher to the freedom and independence of all," the liberal guardians of the presumed benevolent empire consider Mr. Trump a reckless isolationist - although he injected billions of dollars into the military - for questioning the financial burdens of alliances with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Japan and South Korea. A shift in Republican stance

Republican establishment figures

and ultra-conservatives, originally resentful of Mr. Trump, now coalesce behind him because he favours economic protectionism, chauvinism and foreign policy isolationism, has reduced corporate and wealth taxes, imposed limits on immigration and refugees, appointed conservatives to Supreme the economy and supported evangelical agendas including support for Israel's settlements and recognition of Jerusalem as its capital. If President Barack Obama's tenure saw the elimination of Osama bin Laden and stimulated the economy, Mr. Trump has killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Iran's General Qasem Soleimani, slashed unemployment and

as Obamacare and the Green New Deal. His approval among Republicans is around 90% despite his hostile takeover of the Party while branding himself as a warrior against élites, fake news and a corrupt establishment. Driven by the urge for publicity, Mr. Trump uses provocation, confrontation and bombast to dominate the news agenda and exploit the vulnerabilities of his adversaries. His boasts of successes, which bend facts to breaking point, infuriate his opponents and distort their judgement. Populism is distasteful to the educated, but has

certain merits in encouraging ne-

glected constituencies to partici-

pate in the democratic process,

grown the economy while oppos-

ing government programmes such

though it is illiberal in nature and assaults institutions tasked with oversight over majority rule. Mr. Trump's opponents attack his sons why many voters supported him, namely because working and middle-class Americans, losing faith in state institutions and polit-

ical parties, are responsive to

# right-wing extremists.

A resonating slogan After the Gulf War fiasco and the financial crisis, Mr. Trump understood that the U.S.-led liberal order, free trade and globalisation no longer had popular traction; that is why his slogan "Make America Great Again" resonates. Americans know Mr. Trump held no public office, was a shady real-estate operator, draft dodger, evader of taxes, denigrator of Muslims, Latin Americans and women, but they elected him nevertheless, and he has continued along the same path, focusing on power irrespective of principle. With the weight of the Republican Party now behind him, he has, in effect, been campaigning from the day of his inauguration, while building a sophisticated data-gathering and voter mobilisation operation with an eye to winning the November 2020 election. Basic to this approach is bilateral leverage or *quid* 

pro quo. Mr. Trump saw nothing wrong in asking the Ukrainian President to advance his political interests, or in acting against a Congress instruction. He claims the Democrats in Congress are obstructing him, and that only those who elected him could hold him accountable. It will be the American people who will finally express judgement on the Trump presidency, next November.

In the previous presidential election of 2016, Republicans and independents who voted for Mr. Trump were driven mainly by dislike of Hillary Clinton and the élites who backed her. This time the Democrats and many independents will be motivated by hatred for Mr. Trump and his record. Independents, who will determine the outcome, will vote with consideration to their conscience and bank balances. Those who benefit from Mr. Trump's economic policies will vote for him, short of an economic recession or financial crisis, which although widely predicted, have yet to materialise. Those worried about democracy, liberal values and civic rights will vote against him for fear of author-

itarianism, racism and inequality. How could one of the most divisive Presidents in American history, impeached for high crimes and misdemeanours, reeling from one self-inflicted crisis to another, win high office again? The election debate will focus largely on Mr. Trump, which is what he wants. Republicans will emphasise his accomplishments and Democrats his transgressions, though the election ought to be about the economy, American traditional values and democracy. To win, the Democrats must appeal to the working and middle class, the automaker and steel worker. Mr. Trump will claim that millions of unworthy immigrants entered the U.S while jobs went to China and Mexico and the establishment stood idly by. His 2016 strategy was to win key States such as Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and hat will be his objective again. Trump could, therefore, suffer a heavy defeat in the popular vote while winning the handful of States that decide the electoral college. Accordingly, while the impeachment process against Mr. Trump failed, its effect on voters in a few crucial States will prove critical.

Much will also depend on the Democrats' choice of nominee. Mr. Joe Biden would be portrayed by Mr. Trump as a corrupt re-run of the Obama regime. Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren will be painted as radical leftists who endanger American prosperity. No sitting President incumbent has lost since George H.W. Bush's defeat to Bill Clinton in 1992 during tax increases and a recession. The 2020 presidential election will represent a decision between liberal and illiberal democracy. Whatever the outcome, the Trump presidency has laid down new yardsticks to preoccupy his successors and political leaders in all other countries for many decades to come.

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## Right to dissent

Dissent is a vital ingredient of a vibrant democracy, as indicated by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud ("Blanket labelling of dissent as antinational hurts ethos of democracy: Justice Chandrachud," Feb. 15). Dissent and democracy are often considered synonymous in a liberaldemocratic social order. It is through open debate and discussion that the diversity of perceptions in a democracy gets exposed. Only through continuous interactions on critical issues does the real truth emerge. We owe our independence to Mahatma Gandhi, who had the

courage and fortitude to express his dissent in a peaceful manner. In a progressive society, contrary views should be entertained. Further, the legislature should pass laws to protect dissidents, activists and whistleblowers; it takes courage to take a stand and speak up, while the easiest thing is to 'go with the flow'. Dissent must be welcomed not just on the political front but in religious and professional spheres as well. T.S. PATHAK,

In national interest? Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion on Sunday

by its decision to dilute Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and to introduce the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) is a product of highhandedness, prompted by the brutal majority enjoyed by his party in Parliament (Front page, "Will stand by decision on Art. 370, CAA: Modi," Feb. 17). His iustification, that these decisions were "in national interest and necessary", does not hold water, given that there are umpteen number of matters of national interest to be addressed on priority, like improving the economy;

job creation; resurrecting

that his government stands

ailing PSUs, etc. Also, why should a government that can invite Members of European Parliament to visit J&K, in order to get a 'normalcy' certificate, refuse to heed to the resolutions passed in international bodies? A. JAINULABDEEN Theni, Tamil Nadu

# **Vulnerable electorate**

The phenomenal outreach of social media networks in our country has raised the susceptibility of the electorate to microtargeting. Through social media networks – coupled with sophisticated data mining and analytical tools companies have acquired profile individuals. One can visualise the potential of these tools being used by political parties as a force multiplier to increase vote share, considering the vulnerabilities already existing in India. (Editorial page, "In political microtargeting, the vulnerable Indian voter," Feb. 17). A.VENKATASUBRAMANIAN, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

enormous capabilities to

#### **PSA** against Dr. Faesal By slapping the draconian

Public Safety Act on bureaucrat-turnedpolitician Dr. Shah Faesal, the Centre has proved that democracy in Kashmir has a connotation different

from that in the rest of the

country. The UPSC topper had become a poster boy and an icon for youngsters in the Kashmir Valley wishing to join the mainstream. Any criticism of its narrative is now being considered sedition by New Delhi. The need of the hour is to reverse all such tyrannical orders that violate the human rights of people. Also, the conversion of the paradise into a military garrison needs an immediate relook if everything is to be considered normal in J&K. AHMED YASEEN,

Baramulla, J&K



# Protecting children's right to protest

A child has as much right to be present at a protest site as any adult



CEEMA MICDA

There are many legal and social difficulties involved in the Supreme Court's move to take suo motu cognisance of children taking part in demonstrations in Shaheen Bagh in Delhi. This has a direct impact on children's right to protest as well as on their mothers' right to protest, specifically since the enforcement of the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act could render both mother and child stateless.

#### Two unrelated issues

It is indeed a tragedy that an infant died in the cold during the protests earlier this month. But criminalising the mother and putting the onus of the child's death on her negligence rather than questioning and examining the economic and political reasons for poverty is a travesty of justice. Why is it that Indian mothers, especially from migrant labouring families, have to carry their children where ever they go? By saying that women should not be allowed to take their children to protests, we are effectively rendering impossible their own mobility and pushing them back into their homes. How can women then voice their dissent against a law which is going to affect them directly? And if they do voice their dissent by going to a protest, where are they supposed to leave their children? What infrastructure does the state provide by way of crèches or day care centres? What kind of housing does the state provide for migrant workers? In Bengaluru, a migrant colony was recently demolished after videos claiming that illegal Bangladeshi immigrants were sheltered in the settlement went viral. A wall is being built in Ahmedabad to apparently hide slums from the U.S. President during his visit this month. In such a context, isn't the idea of a safe home also mediated by class?

There is an erroneous notion that the infant died on account of the protest rather than due to other systemic issues. And the Supreme Court



"Why is it acceptable for children to participate in an anti-pollution protest during peak winter in Delhi, but not in the protests at Shaheen Bagh?" A child protests against the CAA and NRC in Bengaluru in January. •AP

is assuming causality without even examining the matter. In the suo motu action, the Court has conflated two unrelated issues. The first is a child's right to participate in or witness a protest. The second is the death of the infant. There is no obvious relationship between the first and second issue. The death of the child due to natural causes should have no bearing on children's right to be present at a protest or a mother's right to take her children to a protest.

#### A child's right to protest

Implicit in the freedom of speech and the freedom to assemble peaceably and without arms under Article 19 of the Constitution is the right to protest. This right is guaranteed to all citizens of India regardless of age. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which India has ratified, expressly recognises in Article 13 that freedom of expression of the child includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice."

Both the Indian Constitution and the CRC state that no restriction may be placed on these freedoms except those that are necessary and imposed by statute for the "purposes of safeguarding the sovereignty, integrity and security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence". Even these restrictions must pass the test of reasonableness as understood by the constitutional courts. As such, neither the Constitution nor the CRC contemplate a blanket restriction being imposed on children's right to

protest by a court directive.

Even with respect to individual cases, there must first be a serious examination of the specific circumstances of the case since overarching directions regarding a child's participation are also a restriction on the mother's mobility and on parenting rights generally.

Further, the CRC, in Article 5, recognises the "evolving capacities" of children. This means that as children acquire enhanced competencies, there is a diminishing need for them to be protected. They have a greater capacity to take responsibility for decisions affecting their lives. The law recognises that children do not magically acquire agency when they turn 18 years, but are capable of exercising their rights and that the law must facilitate the same.

Article 12 of the CRC provides that member states should assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely. For this purpose, the child should be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative. Therefore, there can be no restriction on a child's right to protest without hearing the child.

#### A place for learning

While many schools encourage children to read newspapers and watch news channels, attending a protest is also a way for children to receive information and ideas. At a protest they get to witness expressions of discontent against acts or omissions of the government that have prejudicial and even violent impacts on people's lives. A protest is also a space where children get to experience and assert citizenship. It's a space for them to comprehend what 'We The People of India' encompasses; it is where they get to see people from all walks of life. It could also be a space for children to celebrate their unity as Indians.

As far as the CAA-NRC are concerned, women, especially poor women, will find it hardest to prove ancestry due to lack of documentation. Further the CAA and NRC directly affect children as well: if one parent is held to be an illegal migrant, it means the child will also be considered an illegal migrant. A child has as much right to be present as a stakeholder at such a protest as any adult.

While news reports say that the infant who died was exposed to the chilly Delhi air, they don't mention the circumstances of the parents who are daily wage migrant workers living in an adjoining *jhuggi* in a plastic tent home.

Also, why is it perfectly acceptable for children to participate in an antipollution protest in peak winter, but not in the protests at Shaheen Bagh? Why don't those protests constitute parental negligence worthy of court intervention? The petitioner in this case is herself a child. What is the basis on which it is decided that one is a valid exercise of the child's agency and the other is not? When we debate the participation of children in protests, these are questions we must ask ourselves.

Seema Misra is a lawyer practising in the trial courts in Delhi

# May the Force be strengthened

The functioning of the CRPF needs to be revisited



K.V. MADHUSUDHANAN

In the wake of Independence, a contentious administrative issue was over the retention of CRP (Crown Representative Police). As the Constitution designated 'law and order' as a State subject, the relevance of having a Central police force was questioned by everyone, except Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who argued vehemently and boldly in favour of it

From having just two battalions as the CRP, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has now expanded to being a three-and-a-half lakh-strong force consisting of specialist wings like the Rapid Action Force, the CO-BRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), and the Special Duty Group. It is the largest paramilitary force in the world and no other security force of the country has seen expansion at such a rapid rate.

Providing integrated security to a diverse country of continental size is not an easy task. Resolving certain conflicts requires immediate solutions for which regular armed forces cannot be deployed. Hence, we require paramilitary forces, and the CRPF is the most sought-after one because of its flexibility and versatility. The force has earned its place as the 'peacekeeper of the nation'.

April 9 is observed as 'Valour Day' by the CRPF because it was on this day in 1965 that an ordinary battalion of the CRPF repulsed an attack by a Pakistani brigade. Similarly, October 21 is observed as 'Commemoration Day' by all police forces, as a mark of respect to the CRPF soldiers who, in their fight against the Chinese Army in 1959, at Hot Springs, Leh, made the supreme sacrifice.

However, this glowing track record pales into insignificance when we consider the mass casualties the Force has had to suffer. In April 2010, at least 75 of its soldiers were killed by Maoists, numbering about 300, in Dantewada early morning when they were returning after a night-long patrol. And last year, the Pulwama attack happened.

#### Pressure on soldiers

What made Pulwama different from the earlier episodes of mass casualties was the unparalleled response from the political leadership, civil society and all other stakeholders to the attack. A year after the attack, it is time for the nation to take a relook at the main agency dealing with conflicts in different ter-

ritorial zones. The frequent movements lock, stock and barrel are taking its toll. There are increasing cases of suicides and fratricides. The anguish caused because of prolonged periods of duty away from one's family members adds to the pressure experienced the soldiers having their fingers constantly on the trigger guard, where a delay in response by even seconds can cost them their lives. Though the Home Minister recently stated that CRPF jawans would get to spend 100 days with their families every year, considering the present levels of commitment, 100 days of leave is an impossible dream for a soldier.

An easier way out here would be to revisit the government's decision on tasking specific Central Paramilitary Forces exclusively with certain operations. It should be compulsory for recruits to all Central Police Forces to be deployed to anti-insurgency roles during their first 15 years of service, when they are newly trained and fighting fit. They can be shifted, in the next 10 years, to border duties. The last phase of their career should be in static duties. That way, the present system of a soldier ending up performing a high-risk job till the last day of his service, just because he happened to be allotted to CRPF after a common selection process, can be avoided and he can look forward to easier duties during the later phase of his career.

#### Rehabilitation of retired personnel

Also, as the Force is deployed to the last man, the welfare and morale of the soldiers needs to be taken care of. A large number of personnel are taking voluntary retirement, but there is no rehabilitation policy. The creation of a Welfare and Rehabilitation Board has not made any impact. Provision of canteen facilities, without tax exemption, hardly gives the soldiers any relief. Another demand that needs to be considered is that of a One Rank, One Pension scheme.

And finally, it is high time the Force develops home-grown leadership. Elements like a healthy work culture, ethos and regimentation are very crucial for any armed force and they are best guarded by officers born on the cadre. The long overdue Non-Functional Financial Upgradation (NFU) materialised only after judicial intervention. However, the top leadership - made up of IPS officers on deputation – is reluctant to implement it. The first anniversary of the Pulwama attacks should enable all stakeholders to device ways and means to plug the loopholes and address the system failures in a Force that still remains the most formidable in internal security matters.

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# Germany's AfD conundrum

The grand coalition's supposed neutrality may not be a credible strategy in a fragmented polity

GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM

Cracks are widening in the German establishment's defences against the far-right. The resignation of Chancellor Angela Merkel's heir, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, on February 10 as leader of the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is the most profound convulsion to rock the party since the 2015 migrant crisis.

## Crossing the line

Days earlier, the Christian Democrats' local unit drew wide condemnation for seeking the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)'s votes in electing Thuringia state's premier. The move, intended to block the return of the left-wing Die Linke after the inconclusive October regional election, was unprecedented in postwar German history. Soon after the polls, sections of the CDU pushed for the opposite outcome. The aim this time was to back Die Linke to return to office. That move too was rebuffed by the leadership. Earlier, in December, the governing coalition in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt came under strain when a CDU official's links with neo-Nazis became apparent, forcing him to finally quit.

Allowing the AfD to play kingmaker in Thuringia caused outrage across the political spectrum. The CDU could not countenance an affront to its founding principle of propagating a social market economy to counter nationalism, even though the beneficiary was the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), its long-time ally. Chancellor Merkel described the election of FDP leader Thomas Kemmerich in Thuringia with AfD votes as "a bad day for democracy". She said the outcome "has to be reversed" and criticised her party's role as "unforgivable". Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer, whose ratings have plummeted after her narrow victory as party chief in 2018, took the cue and bowed out.

The AfD is no less a taboo for the FDP. Mr. Kemmerich has since called for fresh elections. FDP national leader Christian Lindner, who initially justified the machinations, eventually promised a vote of confidence in his own leadership. The Social Democratic Party (SPD), the junior partner in Ms. Merkel's grand coali-

tion, and the Greens, another potential CDU ally, would view even a slight swerve towards the far-right the ultimate red line.

The episodes in Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt have only exposed deepening divisions within the centreright party. At the heart of the issue is the long-standing stance of maintaining equidistance from the extreme left and hard right. But such supposed neutrality may not commend itself as a credible strategy in Germany's current fragmented polity, especially not after the steady erosion of the CDU and SPD base. Their vote share in the 2017 federal elections plunged to the lowest since 1949. Meanwhile, the stridently anti-Islam and anti-immigrant AfD emerged the largest opposition in the German parliament with 89 seats. The party is well represented in all the regions. The Bundestag's March 2017 move to redefine the honorary title of "father of the house" to mean the longestserving member rather than its oldest, only to block an AfD member, seems like another era.

## A silver lining

One silver lining for the CDU-SPD is the finding that in western Germany, the AfD tends to win half the votes it takes in the eastern states. Eastern Germany still suffers from high unemployment, inequality, and poor public services. Greater investment to boost growth would be the antidote to the AfD's anti-immigrant onslaught, not a rightward slant by centrists. If Germany's ideological firewall needs a recast, the relevant direction seems obvious.

Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer's resignation has reopened the question of vesting the party leadership and the country's chancellorship in the same person. Should the logic behind this argument be pursued, a snap election and a premature end to Ms. Merkel's unbroken tenure from 2005 cannot be ruled out. The current uncertainty comes at an awkward moment, as Germany assumes in July the six-monthly rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. It is hoped that Germany will tide over this crisis.

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## DATA POINT

# Bird watching

Over three-fourths of the 146 bird species whose populations were tracked over the last five years declined in numbers, according to The State of India's Birds 2020 report. Interestingly, seven of the top 10 such species were labelled as being of "least concern" (not a focus of species conservation) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Over half of the 261 bird species whose populations were tracked over the last 25 years declined in numbers. By **The Hindu Data Team** 

Long-term decrease | The table lists the top five species whose populations have declined the most in the last 25 years. For instance, for every 100 White-rumped Vultures spotted 25 years ago, only three could be spotted in 2020

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Common name	Currently spotted
White-rumped Vulture	3 for every 100
Richard's Pipit	7
Indian Vulture	10
Large-billed Leaf Warbler	11
Pacific Golden Plover	12

Long-term increase | The table lists the five species whose populations have increased the most in the last 25 years. For instance, for every 100 Rosy Starlings that could be spotted 25 year ago, 271 could be spotted in 2020

Common Name	Currently spotted
Rosy Starling	271 for every 100
Rock Pigeon	244
Glossy Ibis	240
Plain Prinia	221
Ashy Prinia	205

Short-term decrease | The table lists the five species whose populations have declined the most in the last five years. For instance, for every 100 Singing Bushlarks that could be spotted five years ago, only 76 could be spotted in 2020

Common Name	Current	IUCN status
Singing Bushlark	76	Least concern
Nilgiri Pipit	77	Vulnerable
White-tailed Robin	80	Least concern
Lesser Cuckoo	82	Least concern
Red-headed Vulture	82	Critically endangered

Short-term increase | The table lists the five species that have seen the maximum increase in their populations in the last five years. For instance, for every 100 Rain Quails that could be spotted five years ago, 133 could be spotted in 2020

Common Name	Currently spotted
Rain Quail	133 for every 100
Ferruginous Duck	133
Greater Crested Tern	124
Hume's Leaf Warbler	117
White-spotted Fantail	116
	Pictures, Wikimedia commons

The Man Hindu.
FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 18, 1970

## New citizens cannot vote in polls

It is now almost certain that the new citizens, who were admitted to Cevlon citizenship under the provisions of the Sirimavo-Shastri Agreement, will not be permitted to vote in the forthcoming general elections, since the latest list of voters that could be used for the elections taking place this year is that of 1968. Every year the list is renewed and the 1969 list will not be complete before the later part of this year and therefore could not be used for the mid-year elections. According to an official estimate, teenage voters will be the highest-ever in the next elections numbering about 10 lakhs out of a total of 55 lakhs of eligible voters. Putting down a strong foot on certain mischievous and communal elements who have been agitating for preferential treatment for Ceylonese by descent as against Ceylonese of Indian origin by registration, the Prime Minister, Mr. Dudley Senanayake, today [February 17, Colombo] said there should be absolutely no discrimination between these two categories of citizens in the matter of allocation of import licences for food items.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEB. 18, 1920.

## A Mesopotamian Letter.

The Basra-Baghdad Railway.

Basra, February 15. - This new line was opened on the 13th instant by Major General McMunn the General Officer Commandingin-chief. The first train started from Makina (Basra) on the night of 13th January. The line runs across country and passes through the rich grain producing parts of lower Mesopotamia viz., Ur Dlwaniyah, Hillah, etc. As laid and worked from Basra to Nasiriyeh and later from Basra to Amara. The cross-country route having been decided to be the best and the most profitable, the line from Basra to Amara was pulled down and the continuation of the line to Baghdad was undertaken in September last year. With more rollingstock and new engines it is expected the Basra-Baghdad run will take only 12 hours.

Prospects of cotton cultivation

Prospects of cotton cultivation

The British Cotton Growing Association has been interesting itself with the prospects of a successful cotton-growing industry in this country. Previous experiments by the Agricultural Department with the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force are said to have demonstrated the possibility of cotton growing and it is expected that cotton grown here would compare favourably with that of the United States and Egypt.