



A credible probe

The Centre must fully cooperate with the inquiry instituted by the SC on spyware use

The Supreme Court order instituting an independent probe into the possible use of Israeli spyware Pegasus is an effective intervention to protect citizens from unlawful surveillance, as well as a stern rebuff to the Government's attempt to cover up the issue by using the bogey of 'national security'. It was clear from day one, following the revelations that nearly 300 of some 50,000 phone numbers allegedly identified for surveillance belonged to Indians, that the Government would choose to brazen it out rather than hold or facilitate a credible inquiry. Ultimately, its tactic of sticking to a blanket denial of any wrongdoing, without acknowledging whether or not the spyware was available to government agencies, failed. The 46-page order by a Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, stands out for the enunciation of two clear principles: that surveillance, or even the knowledge that one could be spied upon, affects the way individuals exercise their rights, warranting the Court's intervention; and that there is no omnibus prohibition on judicial review merely because the spectre of national security is being raised. The Court deemed unacceptable the Government's refusal to shed any light on a controversy that involves possible violation of citizens' rights and made it clear that national security considerations cannot be used by the state "to get a free pass". The Court has approached the issue as one that raises an "Orwellian concern", recognising that intrusive surveillance not only violates the right to privacy but also has a chilling effect on the freedom of the press.

When damning revelations emerged that many phones of journalists, activists and even doctors and court staff were targets of military-grade spyware designed not only to grab data but also take control of devices, the Government ought to have responded, as some nations did, with alarm and alacrity. Instead, it resorted to a bald claim that illegal surveillance is not possible in India, and that the disclosure of whether or not a particular software suite was used by its agencies would compromise national security. The Court is right in making it plain that any such concern or claim of immunity ought to have been substantiated on affidavit. What is quite appalling is that the Government was unwilling even to disclose what action had been taken after it admitted in Parliament in 2019 that it was aware of some WhatsApp users being targeted by Pegasus. Its offer of ordering an inquiry on its own has been rightly rejected by the Court — it would command little credibility. The Court-supervised panel appears to have the required expertise and independence, but its success in unravelling the truth may depend on how much information it can extract from the Government and its surveillance agencies. For its part, the Government would do well to depart from its record of obfuscation and stonewalling and cooperate with the inquiry.

A world minus ads

Social media outrage against brand campaigns is fuelled by intolerance to progressive values

In a land of matchless diversity, where 138 crore people live, it is perhaps not surprising that social conflicts run along several lines including caste, class, gender, language and religion. Deepening fault lines touch every part of life, and advertising, which at a basic level nudges a consumer to make a purchasing decision but also does social messaging, is learning it the hard way. With the start of the festival season, at least two companies, Fabindia and Dabur, have had to pull out ads days after the launch for "offending sentiments" and huge social media outrage. In the case of Fabindia, people protested against the use of the words "Jashn-e-riwaaz" for a new collection of clothes ahead of Deepavali. The brand later clarified that all its products in "Jashn-e-riwaaz" are "a celebration of Indian traditions" and that its Deepavali collection was yet to be launched. Yet it chose to withdraw the ad. BJP MP Tejasvi Surya led the campaign against Fabindia calling for an economic boycott; a hashtag #NoBindiNoBusiness also did the rounds, in protest against the models in the ad without bindis. Dabur's Fem brand had to pull out a *Karwa Chauth* ad which showed a same-sex couple observing the rituals. A Ceat ad featuring Aamir Khan asking people not to burst crackers on the roads too upset the right wing which said it should have also addressed the "problem of blocking roads" for *namaz*.

While advertisements which do not stick to the script can be a breath of fresh air, there are some which miss the mark completely with the messaging. So, if Shah Rukh Khan's latest Cadbury ad urging people to buy from small *kirana* shops this Deepavali is making the right noises, Kent RO's *atta* and bread maker ad last year and its tone-deaf portrayal of house-helpers was decried. Tanishq, a jewellery brand co-owned by the Tatas, had to withdraw an ad last year that showed a Muslim family organising Hindu baby shower rituals for their Hindu daughter-in-law. It got vitriolic comments with some accusing the Tatas of promoting "Love Jihad". Congress MP Shashi Tharoor and others were aghast that a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity could irk a section of people. They cried foul that nuance was getting lost in the cacophony of perceived hurt sentiments. If advertising is about selling a product, no company will willingly put out a campaign that may hurt its brand. The messaging must be sensitive, and that comes when a marketing team has its ear to the ground. It is nothing unusual for some ad campaigns to fail. But, worryingly, many brands have had to withdraw their campaign material after manufactured social media outrage that was fed by intolerance of progressive values and religious bigotry of the worst order.

The ground beneath the President's feet

Continuing failures and confusion in policy making and implementation are at the heart of Sri Lanka's governance crisis



JAYADEVA UYANGODA

What has Gotabaya Rajapaksa achieved when he enters his third year in office as Sri Lanka's President on November 18? A not-so-attractive record of failures in governance.

President Rajapaksa (picture) has also been losing much of the public support, popularity and trust that brought him into power in November 2019.

The present crisis which President Rajapaksa and his regime are facing has four interconnected dimensions — economic, social, governance, and legitimacy.

Sri Lanka's worsening economic crisis is not Mr. Rajapaksa's creation. Yet, he and his team of policy advisers seem to be at a loss even to comprehend its gravity and its disastrous consequences which the people are forced to bear.

While the impact of the protracted public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on Sri Lanka's economy may take a few years to manage, its social impact has been devastating. The absence of any effective government interventions to alleviate economic hardships faced by the poor, the new poor produced by the pandemic, the working people and all strata of the middle class, both urban and rural, have a fresh social crisis too.

A strong leader

Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa began his tenure as President in November 2019 by promising the Sri Lankan people a fresh beginning for a future of stability, security, development, and prosperity. He was also open about his ideological project that gave primacy to the aspirations of Sri Lanka's majority ethnic

community, the Sinhalese Buddhists. He did not have any democratic pretensions either. Mr. Rajapaksa's promise was for a 'strong government' under a 'strong leader' to ensure national security, law and order, political stability, and victor's peace with the ethnic minorities.

Soon after assuming office, he launched a programme of restoring Sri Lanka's personalised model of executive authoritarianism, that had been suspended by the previous government under the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. For this objective, Mr. Rajapaksa made use of the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Bypassing the then Opposition-dominated Parliament, Mr. Rajapaksa concentrated a great deal of financial and administrative power into his hands, thereby re-establishing the presidential executive as the central institution of state power. In October 2020, Mr. Rajapaksa used the newly gained two-thirds parliamentary majority to abolish the 19th Amendment. Under the 20th Amendment, Sri Lanka was thus brought back to executive presidentialism, which has been the mainstay of Sri Lanka's democratic decay for decades.

Civil-military ties

Mr. Rajapaksa also initiated a new trend in civil-military relations in Sri Lanka's structures of governance. Appointing the army commander to head a new presidential task force to manage the public health crisis and placing the military over the politicians as well as medical and civilian professionals were its first signs. In the new political and administrative order, serving and retired senior military officers are given key roles.

As critics insist, militarisation of public administration is a key component of Mr. Rajapaksa's project of de-democratisation.

Continuing failures and confusion in policy making and imple-



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mentation are at the heart of an on-going governance crisis since the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, mid last year. Having been persuaded by nativist ideologues and local conspiracy theorists, President Rajapaksa initially de-emphasised the urgency of launching a rapid vaccination programme throughout the country. His encouragement of magic and sorcery to combat the pandemic put the public health policy into disarray. It is only after the pandemic had reached crisis proportions by middle of this year that President Rajapaksa turned to science, expert advice and vaccination.

Meanwhile, the current controversy caused by the President's ideologically-inspired decision to ban chemical fertilizers and inputs in all spheres of agriculture epitomises the Rajapaksa regime's record of inept and autocratic approach to initiating economic and social transformation.

This inexplicably rash and inappropriate policy intervention has already caused much social unrest and discontent among very wide sections of the peasantry.

Similarly, the recent mishandling of Sri Lanka's chronic foreign exchange crisis, leading to further destabilisation of the country's currency and economy, has caused a fear among citizens that continuing economic policy failures might even trigger an economic collapse.

Energy cooperation as the backbone of India-Russia ties

Russian companies have the potential to be long-term partners with India in aiding its energy transformation



DMITRIY FROLOVSKIY

India has been at the forefront of the transformation of global energy and striving to diversify its trade relations. With its abundant energy sources and appetite for trade diversification, Russia could be an ultimate long-term partner. But the bilateral ties require more support from both government and corporate leaders to grasp its potential in this field.

In September, at the 6th Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Russia's Vladivostok, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a virtual address said, "India-Russia energy partnership can help bring stability to the global energy market."

Indian and Russian Energy Ministers announced that the countries' companies have been pushing for greater cooperation in the oil and gas sector beyond the U.S.\$32 billion already invested in joint projects. India's Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Hardeep Singh Puri referred to Russia as the largest investor in India's energy sector.

Going green too

The novel coronavirus pandemic is still far from over but an economic recovery has been underway. India, Asia's third-largest economy, has expanded by more than 20% in the June quarter on a year-to-year basis and is expected to grow by around 9% by the end of 2021. The rate is expected to be higher than China's 8.5%, assuming the effective suppression of COVID-19.

The distinctive feature of this recovery is that it is advanced by

the quest for energy transformation and environmental concerns. India has been increasingly leaning toward green transition since the recovery started, and its appetite has been growing.

One of the examples of cooperation between the two countries in energy transformation is the joint venture between India's Reliance Industries Ltd. and Russia's Sibur, the country's largest petrochemicals producer. Set up in Jamnagar, Gujarat, the venture now leads the first butyl and halogenated butyl rubber production facility in South Asia. The facility became operational in 2019 and achieved a total throughput within the first year, establishing itself as a significant supplier of butyl rubber in the Indian market previously wholly dependent on imports. A joint venture will produce up to 120 ktpa of butyl rubber, 60 ktpa of which could be further converted to halogenated butyl rubber to meet the growing demand from domestic tyre manufacturers.

Overcoming supply chain risk

In an interview, Alexander Petrov, Sibur member of management board heading the Plastics, Elastomers and Organic Synthesis Division, said in an interview, "Reliance Sibur Elastomers is not only supplying most of the butyl rubber consumed in the country but is also exporting its products." He added, "Sibur is bringing to India unique technology, which is not commercially available in the market and the most advanced in terms of [an] ecological footprint. The project will tremendously support the growth of India's auto industry by securing uninterrupted critical raw material supply. This is of particular importance in the current pandemic, multiplying the risks of global supply chains disturbance."

Apart from accounting for most



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of the Indian butyl rubber market, Reliance Sibur Elastomers exports its products to Asia, Europe, the United States, Brazil and other countries. The venture is also promoting halogenated butyl rubber, which is a more premium product.

The project is a clear manifestation of the "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" initiatives, representing a practical example of technology transfer from Russia to India.

Key factors

India is one of the fastest-growing markets for butyl rubber and halogenated butyl rubber due to its rapidly expanding car manufacturing industry pushing for electric vehicles. Further to this, India is emerging as a critical refining hub in Asia to boost its petrochemical capacity. Currently, the country has an installed capacity of more than 249.36 mtpa, with local companies planning to significantly expand the capacity by investing more than U.S.\$27 billion by 2021.

Over the past years, India's refineries have been expanding towards petrochemicals to capture additional value, the International Energy Agency wrote in the *India Energy Outlook 2021* report in February. The agency estimates that the country's ethylene production is set to grow by two-thirds over the period to 2030.

Russia's Gazprom and India's ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) and the Indian Oil Corporation signed sep-

arate memorandums of understanding at Vladivostok. Mr. Puri also met with Sibur's Management Board Chairman Dmitry Konov at the event.

Renewable, nuclear energy

In efforts to transition to green energy, India has recently achieved a significant milestone of completing the countrywide installation of 100 gigawatts of total installed renewable energy capacity, excluding large hydro. It now aims to hit 175 GW of renewable energy target by December 2022. If achieved, that would be close to half of India's current total installed power capacity. Furthermore, according to the survey of the government in New Delhi, "additional investments in renewables up to the year 2022 would be about \$80 billion".

Commitment to net zero emissions could positively impact the country's growth trajectory. A recent Deloitte report has forecasted that India could gain U.S.\$11 trillion in economic value over the next 50 years by limiting rising global temperatures and realising its potential to 'export decarbonization'.

However, unknowns of climate change and threats of a new pandemic suggest that the country should accelerate its energy transition. Russia, one of the key global players across the energy market, could emerge as an indispensable partner for such a transition. Notably, both countries have an extensive record of bilateral cooperation in the energy domain.

Russian companies have been involved in the construction of six nuclear reactors in the Kudankulam nuclear power project at Tamil Nadu. Of these, unit 1 and unit 2 have been operating at total capacity. Unit 3 is still under construction. Previously, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that

producers engaged in export agriculture, and public sector school-teachers. As many of them are reported to have been saying at their protest rallies, defying police threats and the ridicule by ruling party politicians, they now regret that they have voted such a band of rulers into power.

It is this open expression of a generalised feeling of loss of political trust and public disillusionment with President Rajapaksa's leadership that symbolises the acuteness of the legitimacy crisis he has to deal with in the weeks and months to come.

International relations

One area where the President has managed to secure some success is foreign relations. He seems to have taken note of the bad press he got locally, regionally and internationally for his regime's close proximity to China at the expense of Sri Lanka's traditional allies and friends. Mending relations with India, Europe and America appears to be a recent policy shift he has engineered.

However, the President seems to be quite determined to stay in power till the end of his current term and beyond. If Charles de Gaulle and Lee Kuan Yew were the role models of former Sri Lankan leader J.R. Jayewardene, Lee Kuan Yew and Chinese President Xi Jinping are Mr. Rajapaksa's idols. One crucial lesson that he seems to have learnt from all those leaders is that one term of office is hardly adequate for a ruler who thinks of himself as personifying the nation's destiny.

Meanwhile, a weakened and politically unassertive parliamentary Opposition seems to be President Rajapaksa's only credible political asset at the moment.

The Rajapaksa administration is now facing open defiance and protests by three large segments of citizens who may have overwhelmingly voted for him in November 2019: rural farmers, small

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Vaccination drive

In a heterogeneous population as in India, with diverse religious practices, illiteracy, superstitions and beliefs, it is indeed a phenomenal achievement to get the vaccination drive going strong, that too in a short span of time. It speaks of the discipline of the common man to fall in line. But if one looks closely, the

drive is still half done. There has to be focus to inoculate all Indians.

A.V. NARAYANAN,
Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

Disrespectful?

The report, "Welcoming hooves and tank threads" (Inside pages, October 27), was interesting. However, some of the references made by Bimal Patel —

whose design firm is the Centre's consultant for the entire Central Vista redevelopment project — were jarring, an example being, "These guys who bring their horses during the Republic Day parade." It is rather sad that Mr. Patel has addressed Indian Army soldiers as "these guys". Also "these guys" do not bring "their" horses just

like that. The horses are from the famed cavalry of the Indian Army. Being a part of the Republic parade is service to the nation and fosters national pride.

SHANMATHY,
Dharampuram, Tamil Nadu

Getting monsoon ready
That Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has chaired a meeting to review

the precautionary measures being taken in the State in view of the onset of the northeast monsoon is welcome (Tamil Nadu, October 27). However, this is certainly not enough. After Mr. Stalin's government took over from the AIADMK, the focus is on the main roads; many interior roads are in very bad shape. In many

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stretches, there are open manholes and the attention being given by the civic authorities is not encouraging. The Chief Minister must take note as people do not want an action replay of the year 2015.

A.P. THIRUVADI,
Chennai