

## STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

# Police: Victims of operational inadequacy?



Brig Gen  
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**I**T seems that the police are quickly becoming an endangered species. The latest attacks on them were carried out by the student wing of a party that suffixes "Islam" after its name. If this is their idea and practice of Islam then I think we are all in grave danger.

What happened in Rajshahi on Sunday when a police constable's hands were blown off while fending off a homemade explosive device, and on Monday with the bestial attack on a lone policeman, by Jamaat-Shibir goons, were meant to provoke a backlash. Jamaat has embarked on sinister tactic, more of which later; but first on the vulnerability of the police.

Of late the police have been subjected to various forms of assault. I do not ever recall instances where police contingents have been attacked in a preplanned manner with the intention to kill. All these have happened in the last one month in several parts of the country, all in the name of politics, all on the grounds that the opposition's back has been pushed to the wall, all in the name of exercising one's political rights, and in the last two days the attacks were carried out to protest the arrest of Shibir general secretary.

Why have the police been made to look so helpless? I suspect there is flaw in the oper-

ational procedures of the police, because nothing can justify police actions which in the last several weeks have left more than hundred people dead all over the country and scores of policemen killed and injured. And the police have been accused of discarding the principle of use of minimum force.

However, there have been instances where police have shot people at point blank range without rhyme or reason. The matter has not been helped by ordering the police

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to shoot at sight. "Shoot at sight" cannot be the normal procedure that is adopted by the police on crowd control duty. There are clearly defined circumstances when the police can resort to that extreme measure, but that is never resorted to without first adequately warning the crowd. And, surprisingly, not a single inquiry has been conducted into these killings and deaths.

That notwithstanding, I do not think that these are all revenge attacks on the police. Targeting the police serves the strategic aim of the opposition, but these have come about also due to several of the inherent deficiencies in the operational procedures, resources, and protective measures of the police.

Regrettably, protests by the opposition have become more violent than anytime in the past, and these have more widespread, resulting in the depletion of the force. And the strength of the police force in a particular situation is sometimes so pitifully small that they are no longer able to project themselves as deterrence, which a police force should normally do. And in many cases they have been isolated and picked on individually, as had hap-

pened in Rajshahi. And with the type of weapon and the protective gear they have, and with the strength they command on the spot, opening fire at the very sight of the mob becomes the only option.

It speaks poorly of police operation procedures when an SI gets separated from his group; it was a sorry sight that none of his compatriots came to his aid when he was being savaged by the Shibir activists. And none of the many "brave men" around that place, including so many TV camera crew, felt any moral obligation to come to his aid either, till one brave lady passing by in a three-wheeler took the wounded policeman to the hospital.

Shouldn't there have been a standby contingent to rush to the spot the moment the SI was attacked? I am inclined to think that there was, but it is most likely that the standby force was without any transport they could use to move quickly to the spot.

As for the Jamaat-Shibir tactics, obviously the aim is to make people lose faith in the law enforcing agencies, and certainly no force that appears unable to protect itself, can engender confidence in the public mind. And what we are seeing being done, pre-hartal and on hartal days, fits more the definition of terrorism and subversion than political violence.

It is sheer luck that the derailment of a train near Comilla on Tuesday did not cause any deaths but I am sure that the Jamaat-Shibir activists are not unaware of the fact that they had put the lives of more than a thousand people at risk by removing fishplates from the railway tracks. If this is not subversion than what is. By ratcheting up the level of violence and exposing the inadequacy of the police they are precipitating a situation hoping that it would force the involvement of the army.

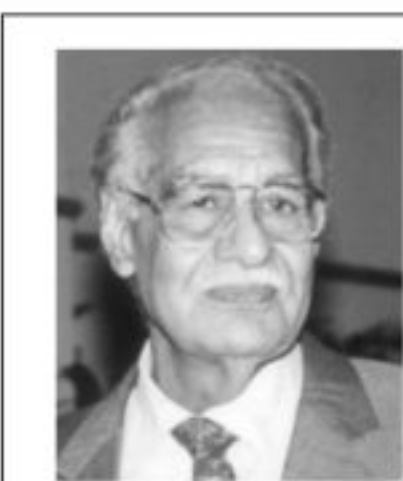
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## BETWEEN THE LINES

# Government on the brink



**KULDEEP NAYAR**

**W**HEN Sama jwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav said last month that elections for parliament were possible

in September, he was not indulging in sensationalism. He had been sounded out by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) president M. Karunanidhi that he was withdrawing support to the Manmohan Singh government from the ensuing parliament session. The DMK patriarch has lived up to his utterance, putting the future of the United Progress Alliance (UPA) government in the realm of conjecture. Even when the government has agreed to support the resolution against Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council, Karunanidhi has stuck to his word conveyed to Mulayam Singh.

Mulayam Singh is in a spot because the government, which has been reduced to 277 members, is just more than the half-way figure of 273 for a majority. He can pull down the government, but what does he do afterwards? In fact, no political party is yet ready to face the next elections and even contradictions within some parties are so strong that it would be difficult for them to go through the requirements for the polls. However, with an eye on the future Mulayam Singh has praised BJP leader L.K. Advani, describing him as the tallest. Does it mean that the post-election alliance between the BJP and the Samajwadi Party is a possibility? It is too early to say that but one thing is sure that the Samajwadi Party may compromise with the forces which it once said were "communist and anti-national."

The overall scenario is dismal.

The government, which is already known for non-performance, has become more halting in taking steps. It does not know how long it will be in office and therefore it is reluctant to take any long-term measures. The UPA, over which Congress President Sonia Gandhi presides, supports the Manmohan Singh government and is trying its best to placate its allies which number more than 20. Now even tiny parties, with two or three members each, matter because they hold the balance.

The UPA has already done the rope trick to keep the Manmohan Singh government in office for nine years. One cannot blame it for mismanaging the coalition because the

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BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), with 24 parties, lasted for eight years. In fact, the UPA did very well in its first term and then went about methodically. It had constituted a coordination committee to keep in touch with all its allies and take them into confidence. This time, however, the Congress government has hardly consulted any constituent, not even big parties which were giving support from outside. Had it kept them in the loop, probably the government would not been in such a sorry plight today. But it is still not too late to cobble together the alliance and give the allies a feeling of confidence, even if not governance.

The situation has affected the economy, which is now down to 4.5%, and it has told upon our prestige abroad. That nobody is looking

at India economically is a sad spectacle. Worse, it is the impression that India has no worthwhile policy on foreign affairs because it is too engrossed in its domestic problems.

There was a chance when a resolution against Sri Lanka was discussed at the UN Human Rights Council. India was impaled on the horns of dilemma because it would not annoy a neighbour, Sri Lanka, and also could not let down the DMK which wanted a strong resolution of condemnation because the party was being pressured by the Tamils.

Indeed, Sri Lanka had indulged in unprovoked killings, especially in the last phase of the war against the LTTE. New Delhi preferred to pla-

cate the DMK but it turned out to be a bit too late because by then Karunanidhi had made up his mind to withdraw support from the government. New Delhi could have acted earlier. The question has been pending for discussion between the DMK and New Delhi for some years. How one wishes they had found some common way out.

Where do we go from here? New permutations and combinations are possible, but the room for manoeuvrability with the Manmohan Singh government is very limited. Probably, the sick state of India will remain like this for some more time until somebody pulls out the plug and forces early polls. Both Mulayam Singh and Bahujan Samajwadi Party's Mayawati are trying to have their pound of flesh, but the Manmohan

Singh government can concede only up to a point, not beyond. They are confident that the cases against them, probed by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), can be managed because the agency is a government department.

Mulayam Singh's tiff with central minister Beni Prasad may be justified but the Manmohan Singh cannot afford to drop him from the cabinet, at least not yet, when he has a few seats in parliament. Even those seats are crucial for the sustenance of the government. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is a help in the sense that he has joined issues with the BJP. Nitish Kumar's no to Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate has put a spanner in the wheels of the BJP. It wants him but at the same time does not like to jolt the alliance. One BJP leader has said that if the choice is between the NDA government without Modi and no government with Modi, the BJP would prefer the former.

Probably, the best way out for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is to declare fresh elections. He should go to Rashtrapati Bhavan, submit his resignation and recommend new elections. At present, there is not a single party which can claim to form the government in place of Manmohan Singh's. Therefore, elections become inevitable.

Whether elections will give India a strong government is yet to be seen. It is often said that the same hotch-potch alliance will come back. Maybe, some party wins 200 seats and stakes its claim to form the government. Much will depend on the mood of the electorate and it is the best part of democracy that nobody can take them for granted.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.

## Derailing railway by hartal activists

### These acts of sabotage must stop

**I**N a hartal-related violence, six compartments of Chittagong-bound train from Dhaka were torn off the main body as it derailed near Comilla on Tuesday. Removal of fishplates of the railway track was the cause of the accident.

Apart from 30 people sustaining injuries, the accident disrupted communication of the capital city with Chittagong, Sylhet and Mymensingh for some 15 hours.

Thankfully, human casualties from the accident were not severe, but it could be worse. According to a report, just half an hour before the accident another train had passed along the same railway track without incident.

This is yet another act of sabotage on the train lines in a series of some 96 cases over the last six months during hartals. Injuries to persons and threats to the passengers' lives apart, these accidents caused a loss of around Tk.90 million to the railway.

To the hartal callers these might have been instances of successful operations, but to the victim passengers, those were nothing but cruel political game played on them by putting their lives in jeopardy to serve the opposition's narrow political end.

But who do the hartal enforcers think they are punishing in this manner? Are the victims of the Comilla incident, for example, their enemies?

This kind of disruptive activities endangering the lives of unsuspecting travellers and causing damage to public property in the name of hartal cannot be accepted anymore.

Those behind the hartal-related violent accidents on the communications arteries of the country are carrying designs subversive to the nation. What they are doing is purely criminal and should be treated as a culpable offence. The police should ferret out the offenders involved in this criminal act and make them face justice according to the law of the land.

Hopefully, the probe committee formed by the railway authority will be able to recommend safeguards for the railways at this juncture.

## Piracy against fishing trawlers

### Authorities must be more vigilant and proactive

**O**F the 34 fishermen who went to sea in three trawlers on March 24 and 25, three have returned ashore; 21 have been found dead. The search for those missing will be on for another day or two.

This is not the first time such an incident has taken place. Pirates are commonly on the lookout for fishing trawlers, with crew and valuables in them. The rewards of such piracy are manifold -- trawlers and parts, as well as valuables worth lakhs such as high-end fishing nets and machinery, are looted and sold off, while crew members are held for ransom.

While killing on such a large scale is not common, sea robbery is. Yet the authorities have shown little concern thus far. In fact, the first bodies were recovered by relatives of the crew members who set out to sea themselves after receiving news of bodies floating on to the shores, as, according to them, the police did not help them. Such reluctance on the part of the local authorities is problematic.

On a larger scale, too, greater precautions must be taken, especially in places which have been identified as dangerous to fishers. The government should not only investigate this particular incident but also be vigilant in future in order to avoid similar tragedies. The larger illegal trade of pirated goods must also be unearthed and dismantled and the pirates brought to book.

Fishermen encounter enough dangers as it is, out on the rough seas for weeks, sometimes months, away from the comforts of home and family, simply to earn a living. Threats from pirates not only to their livelihoods but to their lives as well is not something they should also have to fear. We hope the government will take up the matter urgently and provide relief not only to the families affected in this instance but also reassurance of safety to

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 4

**1818**  
The United States Congress adopts the flag of the United States with 13 red and white stripes and one star for each state (then 20).

**1939**  
Faisal II becomes King of Iraq.

**1949**  
Twelve nations sign the North Atlantic Treaty creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

**1968**  
Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated by James Earl Ray at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

**1976**  
Prince Norodom Sihanouk resigns as leader of Cambodia and is placed under house arrest.

**1979**  
President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan is executed.

**2002**  
The Angolan government and UNITA rebels sign a peace treaty ending the Angolan Civil War.