**The Achilles heel of change**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2021-01-26

COME to think of it, if it was heroic of Daniel Ellsberg to publish the Pentagon Papers and reveal the perfidy of several American presidents in the Vietnam war, or for Julian Assange to expose Western war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, it can hardly be argued that an Indian TV anchor had done any wrong by being well informed about the Modi government`s plans to have a military showdown with Pakistan.

On the contrary, the narrative that Arnab Goswami was aware of the Balakot air strike on the eve of Indian elections well before the event took place is something journalists covet. Arnab, who heads his pro-Modi TV channel, however, is no Seymour Hersh, but this particular shortcoming no one is accusing him of. If he did not share the forewarning of an imminent cross-border air strike with the public he could be keeping his word to his sources, which journalists are trained to do. However, as he is believed to have used the insight to flaunt his ties with the government to impress an official who gave him exaggerated TRP ratings, the case belongs to the realm of a criminal probe. A dutiful editor would consider this a lapse but that journalistic malaise is widespread.

According to the WhatsApp transcript circulating in the media, Mr Goswami was privately pleased by the Pulwama attack in which 40 Indian paramilitary men were killed as he could go to town with a hard-line nationalist story, the kind Prime Minister Modi was in need of in the middle of the 2019 election season.

It sounds all too perverse, but then,is it not similar to journalistic overreach from the other side of the political divide? In one such episode.

journalists were caught fixing portfolios in Dr Manmohan Singh`s cabinet on behalf of their corporate minders. Perhaps the silliest response to the WhatsApp revelations is seeing it as a security lapse. In other words, the opposition will not let go of the nationalist narrative they are not equipped to tackle Modi with.

What the opposition parties are trying not to see in the bargain is that both stories have a common neoliberal origin. A journalist who lends his services to boost a party`s nationalist platform and the journalists who would not hesitate to plya day`s errand for big business have their origin in India`s three-decade-old economic trajectory.

Both stories flow from the sordid nexus between tycoons and politicians with journalists playing their assigned role as go-betweens.

Be that as it may, these are challenging times for Prime Minister Modi. On the one hand, his nationalist plank stands shaken by WhatsApp revelations. On the other side, two of his most powerful former allies have turned on him. The Shiv Sena which rules Mahar ashtra with the helpof two secular parties and the Akali Dal representing the Sikhs have ditched Modi, and both are fervent supporters of the farmers` struggle against recently introduced pro-corporate laws.

The protesters overwhelmingly comprise Sikh f armers from Punjab but include a growing number of peasants from distant regions. They are opposing three hurriedly passed farm laws seen as benefiting big business and harmful to the farmers. There`s a problem, however.

It`s no secret that political parties taking sides with the farmers are also indebted to big business that bankrolls them. In the prevailing conflict, everything seems to be working for the opposition but only because the farmers are resolute and determined to have the laws repealed.

For Mr Modi, rowing back from the promise he has evidently made to his corporate supporters would reveal a chink in his armour that others including rivals within his party could be waiting to exploit. What can go wrong for the opposition? Several things. Mr Modi has shown hisease with money power. He has torpedoed opposition governments and poached MLAs, most worryingly from the Congress. The Congress shores up the Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra, and there have been close calls whereby mistrust was sown in the ruling coalition through the media to destabilise Chief Minister Udhav Thackeray.

It is a scenario that need not be looming imminently but one that needs to be watched closely.

There is already a division within opposition ranks for the upcoming elections in West Bengal that should comfort Modi. It is mind-boggling that the opposition, which is standing together as a wall in the farmers` struggle, should fritter away the advantage in a vital state. Unbelievably, the largest communist party, the CPI-M, has concluded that the main enemy in the West Bengal polls is Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Even the Congress is targeting Banerjee. Who is coming to her rescue? Thackeray, the one who has taken on Modi frontally by tripping up Arnab Goswami while giving total support to the farmers.

Going by its history, the Shiv Sena makes a poor ally of democracy. It supported Indira Gandhi`s emergency and led the campaign to raze the Babri Masjid. Its anti-Muslim face is not a secret. But, equally importantly, it was Thackeray who told the assembly upon becoming chief minister that it was a mistake to mix religion with politics. Things can and do change for the better. Thackeray alone could warn Modi that he was prepared for a fight if the BJP was itching for one.

Repeal of the farm laws could pump up the opposition, but that alone will not deliver the goal if robust democracy is to return to India.

The opposition needs to harness the f armers` toil to wrest the initiative from the ruling party and ensure victory against the BJP in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala among the critical states facing elections soon. If a chink is showing in Modi`s armour, the opposition has its Achilles heel too.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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