**[Tricks to make rivals vanish](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771487/tricks-to-make-rivals-vanish)**

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MAGICIAN-ILLUSIONIST P.C. Sorcar should have been a South Asian politician. He would have made his rivals disappear with more finesse than is evident in the chronic jostling to win elections at any cost. Legend has it that on Nov 8, 2000, Sorcar ‘vanished’ the Taj Mahal for two minutes in Kachhpura in Agra. He also made the Victoria Memorial disappear on the 300th anniversary of Calcutta, according to Wikipedia. And, thanks to his ability to hypnotise a multitude, a train full of passengers disappeared before a large crowd at Bardhaman Junction, in West Bengal in 1992.

There are two commodities that most insecure governments would want to disappear — a strong political rival and upright journalists. Had Sorcar been an admirer of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina he would have precluded the need to send rival politician Khaleda Zia to prison for 10 years and seven years in two controversial corruption cases.

According to the Bangladesh constitution, a person convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for two years or more for any moral turpitude, cannot participate in any election within five years after serving the jail sentence. That Khaleda was granted reprieve from prison by Sheikh Hasina on health grounds, means her conviction stays as does the bar on her running for parliament. By a quirk of law, she can campaign for her party, however.

The two-year conviction trick surfaced recently in the case of Rahul Gandhi when a Gujarat judge handed the Congress MP a measured term in prison for alleged defamation as was precisely needed to divest him of his membership of the Lok Sabha. A day less than two years would have allowed Gandhi to remain an MP unimpeded. Luckily for him, the supreme court stayed the conviction and enabled Gandhi to retrieve his seat in parliament and also become eligible to contest the next election.

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His father and grandmother were not so lucky. They were made to disappear from the political firmament in a less orderly way, by assassination. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was stripped of her rights to be in politics by Junius Jayewardene. The rights were restored after his death.

Sadly for Z.A. Bhutto, Ziaul Haq had little faith in impermanently stolen rights by legal subterfuge. He feared leaving a quarry alive even in prison or out. Mohammed Nasheed in the Maldives was ousted as president by mob violence (akin to Ukraine in 2014) triggered when he sought to remove the chief judge. He survived an assassination attempt with a lengthy surgery in Germany and publicly forsook any future attempt to even try to be president.

Given South Asia’s weakness for disappearances and close calls for political rivals, Narendra Modi’s vision of an India without a main political bête noire would seem to be of a piece with the pattern. He growled against an opposition party at a public meeting recently, threatening it with corruption cases. The party split and joined the BJP in forming a state government. The coercive threat disappeared for that party but looms for others. Imran Khan’s case is cut from the same cloth though its plank of corruption is a tad difficult to digest.

A bumper sticker in the 1992 US presidential campaign was an eye-catcher. “Vote Ross Perot. He is too rich to steal,” it said for Perot though he came third in the election that Bill Clinton won. One would have thought that Imran Khan who has collected enormous sums to build cancer hospitals in his mother’s memory was similarly unimpeachable, too rich to steal. What he could be accused of is excessive self-love.

The proposition that the former prime minister, and a cricket hero for Pakistan to boot, indulged in personal corruption by selling gifts received from foreign leaders sounds as good or bad an argument as the high court verdict against Indira Gandhi that aimed to topple her in 1975. The court found her guilty of using government funds to erect a stage to address an election rally! Before his assassination, Rajiv was slapped with an unproven corruption charge of pilfering $8 million in the Bofors guns deal. Journalists who went after him all guns blazing, are helpless in exposing a far bigger French warplanes deal. The Modi government presented its case in a sealed envelope which the supreme court accepted.

Something strange happened in the Imran saga that hasn’t left his detractors smelling of roses. A cricket promo while celebrating Pakistan’s triumph at the 1992 World Cup omitted showing him as the captain of the winning team. Only when eminent teammates like Wasim Akram expressed outrage at the fishy oversight was an amendment put on offer. How different is that anyway from the Indian cricket clip doing the rounds without the Pakistani batting sensation Babar Azam appearing in it?

A perfidious disappearance of the entire opposition is seldom complete without reining in a free press, which has proved to be a trickier proposition. Two factors account for the uphill nature of the task. Journalists of a certain kind are less amendable, if ever they are, to heed the state’s diktat. This alone accounts for the heavy toll they take physically and emotionally as a tribe.

The other element is the expanded scope of online portals that are relatively more intractable and difficult to suppress. In fact, in the absence of due diligence from most mainstream outfits in India, online news portals have mushroomed and stepped up to shoulder the responsibility shirked by the so-called ‘courtier media’. This is inevitably bound to draw fire from the deep state, more so in an election year.

India’s NewsClick is known for its thorough investigations into the state’s omissions and commissions. The state-backed media calls it a Chinese mouthpiece, which it clearly isn’t. The NewsClick, its accounts frozen, and other portals are carrying on with fulfilling their assignments, unrelenting, undaunted. The fight is on, the objective clearer than P.C. Sorcar’s magical illusions.

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