

PICKING, KICKING AND WRECKING: SUBJUGATION OF THE BUREAUCRACY IN THE MODI REGIME

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There is nothing really amiss if a singer insists on bringing his own musicians, as they understand him rather well. But then, when he has pole-vaulted himself to the most critical position of deciding the fate of 130 crore souls, there is cause for alarm at such an infantile insistence. The administration of this vast, complex country requires real professional skills and not just agreeability or the carrying out of commands.

The system offers the prime minister about a hundred senior officers who finally make it to the highest responsibility at the Centre, selected out of thousands usually on their record of performance and crisis management competence. No system can be perfect, but this is the nearest one can get to a rigorous selection process.

Most of these bureaucrats are placed as secretaries in charge of different ministries, while a select and seasoned few former secretaries are hand-picked for greater responsibilities. They head the two-dozen crucial constitutional and statutory posts that were set up to safeguard democracy and fair play.

The problem is that the prime minister insists on the complete subjugation of the bureaucracy.

The obsessive insistence on only yes-men and on listening to their parroting of what he wants to hear means that professional advice is neither required nor safe to offer. This neurosis has already led to disasters like demonetisation, the premature and faulty introduction of GST and even the infliction of unprecedented misery on migrant labourers.

Ashok Lavasa's departure

To appreciate how it is all done, let us glance at the Ashok Lavasa episode. He was, until recently, next in line for the post of chief election commissioner.

However, the regime appeared extremely keen to move him elsewhere and had him kicked upstairs/overseas to a sinecure at the Asian Development Bank in Manila. This was because he had disappointed the party in power by raising a few mild but pointed dissents during the 2019 elections.

This was when the CEC, Sunil Arora, and the other election commissioner, Sushil Chandra, had shocked the nation by what appeared as sheer genuflecting to the government in power. The hard-earned reputation of the ECI was immaterial to those who prefer crawling. Retribution on Lavasa was, however, quick, harsh and crude. Investigative agencies pounced on him and accused his son's company of violating foreign exchange regulations and his wife of tax evasion, and made sure that both of them were out of work. This was meant to send an unequivocally chilling message to constitutional heads and other senior serving officers to desist from any dissent whatsoever.

Like others appointed to the Election Commission of India, his record as an administrator was not uncontroversial. Even if the much-touted '360 degree scan' of integrity was introduced before Lavasa was empaneled as secretary in 2014, it is hard to imagine this regime did not look closely at his record before appointing him as election commissioner in January 2018. The inference that emerges then is that either big brother's intelligence squads were tardy in their due diligence or that the minions deliberately kept certain valuable information in their pockets, for future use. Though other governments have also displayed meanness and malice at times in the past as well, this sort of an institutionalised vindictiveness with mafia-like ruthless precision has never been witnessed in post-Independence India's governance.

Another unique contribution of this regime to governance is the 'lollipop option' that Lavasa was offered – after clearly laying out before him what might be in store should he stay on in the ECI. His 'voluntary exit' may have been accompanied by undisguised 'or else' threats, as blackmail is always a prime weapon in the arsenal of spiteful governments. Nothing else can satisfactorily explain why so many of the highest guardians of propriety are collapsing before the regime or colluding with it.

With Lavasa out, government handlers must be more than confident that the person who succeeds the present, terribly-controversial but quite unembarrassed CEC would be what they want. Most observers were indeed surprised when the current user-friendly chief was appointed to this once-hallowed commission, even after the income tax department's sensational Niira Radia tapes had

revealed his disturbing proximity to the notorious high-profile lobbyist and fixer.

An alarming degree of indulgence

The overpowering of the bureaucracy that had begun in 1969 with Indira Gandhi has now reached frightening proportions under Narendra Modi. More disturbing is the fact that the hitherto-independent constitutional and statutory institutions that served for decades as defensive fortresses of democratic governance, have been systematically wrecked or hijacked.

Here, we do not mean the Central Bureau of Investigation or the Enforcement Directorate or even the Income Tax department that are part of the executive and have served as cat's paws even earlier. The difference, of course, is that they have now sharpened their claws and fangs and are let loose on whoever stands up to the government — with lightning speed and fury. These organisations are currently packed with loyalists just waiting for orders, and many officers are simply following brutal directions without any choice.

After the atrocious conduct of the Election Commission, the two other irreplaceable watchdogs of our constitution that are disappointing India in its very dark hour are the judiciary and the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). There is little point in elaborating how the highest levels of the judiciary appear to be in thrall of this government, but the surge forward to break its 'spell' is finally visible.

The judiciary's congenital suspicion of the executive that had spurred its earlier activism and ensured justice through 'public interest litigations' is hardly seen any more. Tragically, it appears to have been replaced by an alarming degree of indulgence.

The two CAGs who have worked under this regime had hardly revealed even an iota of the aggressive scam-busting spirit that their predecessor, Vinod Rai, had been dishing out — almost like a sensational serial. Those charges helped dislodge the earlier government and Rai has, of course, been quite amply rewarded by the beneficiaries. The Modi government's two major financial involvements of considerable significance have certainly not been explained satisfactorily by the two CAGs who followed Rai, under the new dispensation.

We refer to the controversial high-cost purchase of Rafale aircraft, as well as the Anil Ambani link if any, and the economic costs of the disastrous

demonetisation. These have certainly not received the body-scan they warranted. In fact, the last CAG was directly and publicly charged by his retired seniors in the bureaucracy of deliberately delaying these two crucial reports so that the prime minister was not embarrassed before the 2019 elections.

Modi's trusted aide

But what has dismayed keen observers is that the next CAG, G.C. Murmu, has uncomfortably deep connections with Narendra Modi whose government he is supposed to audit. After the 2002 riots in Gujarat, Modi entrusted him with 'handling' the Justice Nanavati Commission and he was accused by R.B. Sreekumar, a senior police officer, of influencing officials summoned to depose on the riots. He served as principal secretary to Narendra Modi in Gujarat, and the controversial evidence that was said to have been captured on tape has remained unresolved.

Murmu's role in investigations into the Ishrat Jahan fake encounter case had also raised eyebrows. Once he landed in Delhi, the current dispensation entrusted him with key jobs in the PMO and finance ministry. After the surgical strike over Article 370 was effected in Kashmir and the state hacked into two Union territories, it was Murmu again, who was Modi's choice as the lieutenant governor of a very disturbed Kashmir. His proximity to Modi is part of the record and many are naturally apprehensive of the neutrality of the CAG.

In addition to this government's accounts of moneys spent, the CAG has also the sensitive task of auditing the expenditure of all states. Opposition-ruled states have been devastated in the past by adverse CAG reports that were released before elections and turned into deadly political volcanoes.

One can mention other instances as well where such vital 'arm's length' institutions have been brazenly taken over and how they actually buttress the regime instead of keeping an eye on it. The relative ease with which such a blitzkrieg was carried out has demonstrated the inherent weaknesses of a republic in which one had assumed liberal democracy was here to stay.

Montesquieuan mechanisms of checks and balances are not just ornamental and their planned destruction drastically reduces the immunity of the body polity. Woe befalls the democracy that converts its referees into centre forwards and attacking positions. Without feedback systems and 'second opinions', regimes celebrate an illusory immortality. Sadly, history has repeatedly proved that even

when dark regimes invariably and ultimately collapse, the cost that their nations have to bear is too enormous. The entire landscape is just too bleak to behold.