



Aid and advice

LG's nominations without government nod could affect J&K's electoral process

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs' assertion to the J&K High Court that the Lieutenant Governor (LG) can nominate five Assembly members without the "aid and advice" of the elected government overrides democratic accountability. Consequential decisions such as nominating members who have voting rights in an elected assembly must flow from democratic mandate, not administrative discretion. The High Court's constitutional question could not be more direct: do the 2023 amendments to the J&K Reorganisation Act, allowing the LG to nominate five Assembly members "which have the potential of converting the minority government into a majority government and vice-versa," violate the Constitution's basic structure? Rather than addressing this, the Ministry delves into legal technicalities. Its submission argues that nominations fall outside the elected government's remit, seemingly invoking the *K. Lakshminarayanan vs The Union of India* precedent from Puducherry while claiming the "sanctioned strength" includes elected and nominated members. It even references Section 12 of the 1963 Union Territories Act (voting procedures) as justification for bypassing democratic consultation. When five nominated members could determine government stability in a 119-member Assembly, the issue transcends statutory definitions of "sanctioned strength". The real question is whether any legal framework allowing appointed officials to potentially overturn the people's electoral verdict violates the democratic essence of the Constitution.

The amendments inserted Sections 15A and 15B into the 2019 Act, allowing the LG to nominate two Kashmiri migrants (including one woman) and one from the Pakistan-occupied J&K community, besides the existing power to nominate two women, if inadequately represented in the elected Assembly. This effectively creates five nominated seats. The High Court's framing of this issue acknowledges the stakes involved: this could "convert minority government into majority government and vice-versa", potentially subverting the electoral process. This concern is not unsubstantiated – in 2021, three years after *Lakshminarayanan*, Puducherry saw nominated members and defecting elected MLAs contributing to the collapse of the Congress-led government. Also, J&K's trajectory to Union Territory, without consultation with elected representatives, makes democratic accountability even more crucial. The unfulfilled promise of Statehood restoration, acknowledged by the Supreme Court and despite overwhelming support in J&K, reinforces that current arrangements should strengthen democratic governance. The Ministry's argument that nominations exist "outside the realm of the business of the elected government" also contradicts evolving Supreme Court jurisprudence. In the Delhi services cases of 2018 and 2023, it ruled that the LG should act on elected governments' aid and advice, with discretionary powers treated as exceptions. Seen in this light, the Ministry's arguments do not hold water.

Limited gains

A temporary blip in inflation will help, but not by much

From having to deal with an inflation level higher than the RBI's comfort band of 2%-6% just two years ago, the government is now in the relatively more comfortable space of inflation coming in lower than that band. July's retail inflation of 1.55%, the lowest since June 2017, was made possible almost entirely by the contraction in food prices. This is particularly significant because the statistical base effect was low in July. That is, food inflation in July 2024 was itself at a 13-month low. A contraction in prices this July over that figure implies a real reduction in prices rather than a statistical anomaly. The consensus among economists is that this will continue due to improved sowing, a good monsoon, and a favourable base effect as inflation had surged again in the latter half of last year. The other positive was that core inflation, which removes the effect of fuel and food, fell to 4.1%, which is the RBI's target. On balance, the outlook for inflation looks good, especially due to the monsoon's progress. There is some risk, especially if India decides to switch away from Russian oil and opts for the somewhat more expensive Gulf oil. But this is unlikely given the government's assertions that it will prioritise India's interests. In any case, the Trump-Putin meet could potentially render the latest tariff obstacles inconsequential.

The RBI expects inflation to pick up only from January 2026. But there is no time for complacency. While India is far from being in a persistent low-inflation, low-growth stagnation, it is staring at a growth slowdown. The latest growth in the Index of Industrial Production was at a 10-month low, with capital and consumer goods activity anaemic. Growth in GST revenue slowed to single-digits in June and July. The contraction in gross direct tax collections this financial year is also concerning. Car sales to dealers dropped to an 18-month low in June. UPI transactions, touted in the past as a sign of buoyant economic activity, fell as compared to the previous month thrice so far in 2025. The RBI has retained its forecast of 6.5% growth this financial year, which looks optimistic. Even if the U.S.'s additional 25% tariffs are removed, the initial 25% will themselves likely reduce India's growth by 0.2 percentage points. India's growth is not robust enough for it to be blasé about such a loss. Structural problems remain, demand is still weak, and a temporary dip in inflation is in itself not going to help much.

Everyone engaged in higher education recognises that academic freedom is primary because universities are the places for raising doubts and asking questions about everything. Exploring ideas, debating issues and thinking independently are essential in the quest for excellence.

After all, knowledge develops only if we question existing knowledge. This means that students must have the freedom to ask questions just as faculty must have the freedom to question received wisdom in their respective disciplines. Indeed, universities, as institutions, must have the freedom to raise questions, express opinions or articulate criticisms in the wider context of economic, social and political spheres.

In fact, the development of knowledge is central to university education. Students enter the world of higher education to learn. Understanding existing knowledge is a first step. The ability to ask relevant questions, a capacity to critique conventional wisdoms, and the confidence to resist the authority of the spoken – even printed – word are the next successive steps. Of course, learning is a continuous process that never stops. Thus, it is for universities to decide what is taught to students, which must not be controlled from elsewhere.

There should be no restrictions on who is invited to address a student audience. Circumscribing this space, in any way, can only stifle learning, which, in turn, can hurt economic and social progress.

The world of research needs similar freedoms. It is for universities to decide their research priorities. It is for faculty members to decide their research agenda. Of course, financial support for research must be based on peer review without preference or prejudice. Dissenting opinions or unorthodox thinking, irrespective of disciplines, should be encouraged for that is how knowledge develops. In fact, fundamental research needs far more in terms of not only freedoms but also resources and time. Such an environment is essential for brilliant scholars or thinkers to surface, blossom and flourish.

The disturbing reality in India

The unfolding reality in India is disturbing. Curricula are regulated and straitjacketed. Readings are prescribed. Indeed, what is excluded or what is included in prescribed reading lists is decided elsewhere, not necessarily by the teachers. Some readings are explicitly excluded. Promising research, which departs from the mainstream, particularly in social sciences or humanities, is stifled. Research funding is controlled, directly or indirectly, by the central government through its research councils and departments. In this milieu, fundamental research in universities in India is rare if not impossible. It is no accident that our universities have not produced any Nobel laureates.

Even the freedom for students and teachers to organise discussions or debates on campus, which are perceived as critical of the Bharatiya



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Janata Party or its governments at the Centre and in States where it rules, is circumscribed everywhere, often by administrative fiat or penal action. Freedoms are curbed further, as social media posts sometimes lead to disciplinary action by universities or legal action by governments.

At many central Universities, if a faculty member applies for duty leave to participate in a conference abroad, he/she has to provide a written undertaking which says: "I will not participate in any anti-Government activities...while I am abroad whether on official duty or a personal visit, I shall be subject to all the provisions of Government Servants Conduct Rules including those relating to connection with the press and criticism of Government...Further I understand that... any breach of these provisions whether committed in India or abroad shall render me equally liable to disciplinary action."

Such intrusion, in different forms, is now being extended to private universities. Dissenting or critical voices of students or faculty members are silenced with disciplinary action. In some cases, it goes much further, essentially because risk averse promoters fall in line, since they do not wish to displease or antagonise the central government, or the State governments where their universities are located.

Autonomy and accountability

Just as important, the autonomy of university spaces is also sacrosanct in the wider context of political democracy, where universities perform an important role in addition to imparting higher education. In the economy, they are a source of ideas for science, technology, research and development, innovation, and economic or social policies. In society, they are the conscience-keepers as public intellectuals, from among the faculty, who engage with the public domain, informing citizens in their columns or lectures. In the polity, their evaluation or assessment of the performance of governments fosters accountability.

Of course, this autonomy must have a corresponding accountability. But it is essential for governments to recognise that the provision of resources to universities does not endow them with a right to exercise control.

The resources are public money for public universities, which are accountable to students and society through institutional mechanisms that exist or can be created. For this purpose, it is imperative that structures of governance in universities are appropriate for, and conducive to, accountability. Good governance is necessary but not sufficient. There must also be checks and balances in the public domain.

Rankings of universities perform an important role in this context. Such rankings, despite their limitations, provide students, their parents and society at large, such an institutional mechanism for accountability.

It is absolutely essential that regulatory structures provide complete autonomy – administrative, financial and academic – to universities. Liberation from the shackles of the

It is harming the teaching-learning process while stifling thinking and creativity in research; in the long run, the economy, society and polity will be the losers

A war game-changer in a battle for influence in Asia



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The world first noticed a massive shift in how wars are fought during the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020): the increasingly integral role that drones play. For India and Pakistan, Operation Sindoor (May 7-10) cemented this shift, as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) moved from serving purely reconnaissance needs to becoming instrumental for precision strikes.

An exercise of modernisation

In the aftermath of the clashes, India is trying to upgrade and modernise its military. In 2024, India finalised an order for 31 MQ-9B Reapers from the United States, including SkyGuardian and SeaGuardian models. These aircraft will supplement India's need for maritime domain awareness and reinforce the strategic partnership between the countries. Still, this partially addresses just one of the needs of a country with its varied terrains and multiple contested borders. Given its vast border territories with Pakistan and China in high-altitude regions, India requires systems that are capable of high-altitude surveillance – larger fixed-wing long-range systems that can deliver significant payloads during precision strikes, and smaller, cost-effective systems for precision strikes.

Currently, the unmanned platforms that India has in operation address only some of these requirements. Israeli systems such as the relatively older Harop loitering munition and the medium-altitude long-range Heron are useful for aerial strikes and surveillance, respectively. But they are not the most advanced systems on the market. Apart from these, India largely operated legacy systems that were imported prior to the last decade and some indigenous models.

Despite the long defence relationship between the two countries, as India seeks to procure state-of-the-art drones, it no longer makes sense for it to look largely to the U.S. for outright

With unmanned aerial vehicles becoming crucial for precision strikes, India can benefit from filling the space in the Indo-Pacific drone market

purchases. There is likely to be a shift where the U.S. becomes more important for components such as power plants and electronic payloads. Conversations about leading unmanned aerial systems invariably come back to the U.S., China, Türkiye, and Israel. However, recent reports question whether American drones are good enough even to meet their domestic demands, let alone dominate the export market.

A New York Times article, written by an observer of exercises with U.S. drone companies, revealed the growing gap between American systems and those made by Russia and China. Congruent with these concerns, the 'US Drone Dominance' executive order was rolled out with massive plans for American drone production. A CNAS report finds that the U.S.'s adherence to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) has resulted in it falling far behind China and Türkiye in the UAV export market, making up only 8% of the market as of the end of 2023. Although recent and upcoming reforms to the MTCR will allow the U.S. to tap into the export market more, it already lags behind.

Today, India finds itself trying to fill these gaps in its arsenal through imports, joint ventures and domestic production, largely relying on Israel and European countries. Given the state of its ties with both China and Türkiye at the moment, India is unlikely to rely on either country for critical defence technologies. As it attempts to further its own interests, India should also leverage its technological advancements to become a supplier of fixed-wing UAVs for the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The China factor

A number of countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan have relations with China that can only be described as strained at best. Maritime Domain Awareness is essential for these countries to monitor and counter China's use of 'gray-zone' warfare, using

University Grants Commission is a necessary condition.

The existing parliamentary or legislative acts that created our universities also have many constraints and fetters. Thus, as an approach, it would be far better to reform regulatory structures, provide autonomy to universities and ensure accountability through systems – rather than interventions or controls – to create an environment that encourages freedom of thought and is conducive to learning.

The quest for uniformity is the worst enemy of thinking, creativity, understanding and knowledge, which can thrive only in open societies. One-size-fits-all is a flawed presumption. Indeed, diversity and differentiation are an integral part of the quest for excellence in higher education.

Governments and their quest to control

Academic freedom in universities is circumscribed not only in India but also in countries such as Argentina, Hungary and Türkiye which have democratically elected governments.

Of course, academic freedom is highly restricted in countries that are ruled by dictators in Africa and Asia. It is also curbed in countries that have one-party rule, for example, China, Russia and Vietnam. China is somewhat different. Even if the freedom for academics – especially in the social sciences and humanities – to write or to speak in the public domain is highly restricted, there is no compromise, driven by preference or prejudice, in the quality of academic appointments at leading universities and research institutions.

The real surprise is the United States, where academic freedom in universities has been sacrosanct for more than a century. The federal government of U.S. President Donald Trump is slashing research grants and imposing curbs on its leading public universities. If this continues, the leading edge of American universities in education, research, science, technology and innovation is bound to erode.

Governments seek to control universities essentially because they are worried about criticism or dissent. Just as important, there is a sense of discomfiture, if not insecurity, since universities, empowered by academic freedom, ask questions that are perceived as difficult. Of course, in some countries, governments just want ideological conformity. Most universities cede their autonomous space because they are largely dependent on government grants to support their teaching and research. The reasons why academics, as individuals, are often silenced are because of fear or compromise, while a few are willing to trade their beliefs for rewards.

The moral of the story is simple. The absence of academic freedom in universities will inevitably harm the teaching-learning process just as it will stifle thinking and creativity in research. Students and teachers will obviously be the worse-off. Ultimately, however, the economy, society and polity will be the losers.

agents such as their coast guard and maritime militia, to enforce disputed territorial claims. This also enables them to protect their sovereignty and safeguard vital economic interests, such as fisheries and energy exploration, from constant encroachment.

Israel finds itself otherwise preoccupied with its long and drawn-out conflict in West Asia, and is unlikely to be a reliable supplier to the region. With the U.S. struggling to remain in the race, Türkiye is the primary option for procuring high-performance and cost-effective systems. Given that India and Türkiye find themselves in a fairly adversarial relationship, it is in India's interest to prevent Türkiye from expanding its sphere of influence through drone diplomacy.

Many countries in the Indo-Pacific also share similar geographies with India, and, consequently, a pressing need for systems tailored to maritime domain awareness and high-altitude border patrol. If India were to develop systems to suit its own needs, they would also suit the strategic requirements of its not-so-distant neighbours.

A contested space

The U.S.-shaped vacuum in the drone market within the Indo-Pacific, is becoming a highly contested space that India would benefit from filling. Not only would it boost trade and influence with a host of countries but it would also fulfil the country's own strategic needs. Despite being held back by bureaucratic red tape and a public sector dominated defence sector, it would benefit India to capitalise on its existing ties with Israel and utilise its learnings from joint production ventures to better its domestic UAV ecosystem. Beyond just producing everything domestically, technology-sharing regimes with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific would further mutual interests and foster trust-based relationships in a region that is becoming increasingly polarised.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stray dog control

The stray dog population is evolving in the country. If this is not acted upon with concrete plans, the number of dogs may overwhelm the human population as there is no reliable head count as

yet of stray dogs. The argument that animal welfare activists put forth, that curtailing the stray dog population will lead to an increase in the rat population, is illogical. Cats are the major predators of

rats. As birth control methods on dogs have not made much of an impact on the canine population, it is our bounden duty to protect human lives. **Dr. V. Purushothaman,** Chennai

I would like to pose this question to animal activists and those who have stray dog welfare as their primary concern. Have they seen a person who has contracted rabies pass away? It is one of the most heart-rending

moments in life. To watch a person be in great pain, be in an agitated state, have great difficulty in swallowing, have excessive salivation and a fear of fluids, hallucinate, have partial paralysis and then

fade away is distressing. My appeal to them is to be objective and think good. **Sumitra Gopal,** Hyderabad

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