



The South Asian



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# Nikki Haley-Vivek Ramaswamy Fight In Focus At 4th Republican Debate

(Sai Bureau)- Indian-American Vivek Ramaswamy sought to halt former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley's gaining momentum in the fourth Republican Presidential Debate today. Four candidates were up against each other to secure a spot as the party's presidential candidate through a stringent selection process.

Indian-American entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie were on stage for the face-off.



Indian-American Vivek Ramaswamy took an early lead in the fourth Presidential Debate regarding speaking time. Nikki Haley relatively remained silent in the debate but remained in focus and centre of attacks from her opponents in the debate. A close contest took place between Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy, with almost similar speaking times. Speaking time is not the

sole metric to judge a candidate's ability. More speaking time and convincing arguments can help sway public opinion in the candidate's favour during the voting process.

Nikki Haley defended her decision to accept corporate money and is emerging as the top target of her rivals during the fourth Republican presidential debate.

The Republican debate started with a pile-up of allegations against Nikki Haley, with Ron DeSantis attacking her, saying, "She caves anytime the left comes after her," CNN reported and said he is the only candidate who has delivered against the Democrats. Nikki Haley responded to the allegations and said, "He is lying about her track record". Vivek Ramaswamy attacked Ms Haley too for acting on the will of the donors and said she had joined the board of Boeing after stepping down as US ambassador to the United Nations and gave paid speeches "like Hillary Clinton".

## United States starts prep to turn your visa paperless; will this make

(Sai Bureau)-In a significant move towards modernizing the visa process, the Biden administration has successfully completed a pilot project for issuing "paperless visas," potentially eliminating the need for physical visa stamps or pasting on passport pages. The initial phase took place at the diplomatic mission in Dublin, with plans to gradually implement this innovative approach.

Julie Stuftt, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Visa Services, shared insights during a media round table organized by the Foreign Press Centre, saying, "We did our first small scope pilot of a paperless visa, which means that the visa process is the same but there's no physical visa in someone's passport." She emphasized that while the process remains the same, the absence of a physical paper in the passport is a notable shift. The pilot project has showcased promising results, with visitors successfully navigating the process, particularly for immigrant visas. However, Stuftt clarified that widespread adoption of paperless visas will take time, estimating around 18 months or longer. The eventual goal is to have an application or similar

solution that allows individuals to showcase their visa status without a physical paper in their passport. When asked about the inclusion of Indian nationals in this initiative, Stuftt expressed optimism, stating, "I hope as soon as possible." However, she emphasized that this is a long-term project



and widespread use may not be expected for another year or more.

Differentiating it from India's e-visas, Stuftt clarified that the U.S. process maintains the same visa application steps up to the point of the physical paper. An interview is still required by law, and the application process remains consistent. The key distinction lies in the absence of a physical paper in the case of a paperless visa.

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## Indonesia eyes visa waivers for 20 countries, including India

(Sai Bureau)- Indonesia is considering granting visa-free entry to nationals of 20 countries, including the United States, China, Australia, India, South Korea, Germany, Britain and France, to boost its tourism and economy, its tourism minister said on Thursday.

16 million foreign arrivals in Indonesia in pre-pandemic 2019, according to official data.

From January to October this year, Indonesia received 9.49 million foreign visitors, an increase of 124.3% from the same period in 2022.



Thailand and recently Malaysia have also waived visas for visitors from China and India.

In September, Indonesia also announced golden visa to woo foreign individuals and corporate investors.

"The golden visa is granting a residence permit for an extended period of five to 10 years," director general of immigration, Silmy Karim said in a statement.

The list will be finalised within a month, statement released by the tourism minister said.

Sandiaga Uno, tourism minister of Indonesia said that they have received instructions from the government to consider visa waiver. The aim of this move is to boost economy, increase tourism and foreign investment. There were more than

To be eligible for the five-year visa, an individual needs to set up a company worth \$2.5 million. If you want a 10-year visa, an investment of \$5 million would be required. Corporate investors are required to invest \$25 million to get five-year visas for directors and commissioners. They need to invest double, or \$50 million, to gain a 10 year visa.

## New Zealand to now accept IELTS One Skill Retake for immigration

(Sai Bureau)-In a move to streamline the visa and migration application process, the Immigration New Zealand has announced the acceptance of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) One Skill Retake option, officials said on Thursday. IELTS One Skill Retake allows test-takers to retake any one of the four skills (listening, reading, writing or speaking) if they did not achieve their desired score in that skill the first time.

It has been recognised by the Immigration New Zealand as a valid and reliable means of assessing English language proficiency, meeting the stringent requirements for international migration to New Zealand, the officials said. This innovation empowers individuals to enhance specific language skills, tailoring their language proficiency to better align with their unique strengths and needs. By enabling test-takers to focus on refining individual skills, the IELTS One Skill Retake facilitates a more personalised approach to language assessment. "At IELTS, we continuously strive to evolve our offerings to meet the dynamic needs of our test-takers and the institutions that rely on our assessments. The acceptance of

IELTS One Skill Retake by Immigration New Zealand is a testament to the quality and adaptability of our testing system.

"This progressive step allows applicants to refine specific language skills, providing a more tailored approach to demonstrating English language proficiency," said Warwick Freeland, Managing Director - IELTS, IDP Education. IELTS One Skill



Retake (OSR) is accepted by more than 900 organisations including UK Visas & Immigration, the Australian Department of Home Affairs, Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency and National Boards, Engineers Australia and Chartered Accountants ANZ for registration in their respective sectors and an increasing number of universities and institutions each month.

## UK's Family Visa crackdown to impact many Indian family plans

The UK government's latest set of visa crackdowns to cut immigration figures includes a major hike in the minimum salary threshold for British nationals and permanent residents applying to bring family members to join them in the UK, a move expected to impact several Indian families. The Family Visa category, under which long-term UK residents are able to bring their spouses and partners to join them, until now required the applicant to be earning at least GBP 18,600 annually.

From March/April next year, this threshold will jump to GBP 38,700, inevitably set to have a significant impact on applicants from the Indian subcontinent - with Indians making up the second-highest cohort under the Family Visa in the past year (5,870) after Pakistanis (15,038), as per official Home Office statistics. "We will ensure that people bring only dependants whom they can support financially, by raising the minimum income for Family Visas to the same threshold as the minimum salary threshold for skilled workers, which is GBP 38,700," UK Home Secretary James Cleverly told Parliament earlier this week. "The minimum income requirement is currently GBP 18,600 and has not been increased since


2012. This package of measures will take effect from next spring," he said.

Analysts have flagged that this steep hike will have a wide-ranging impact on the family plans of those on lower incomes. Dr Madeleine Sumption, Director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, said the decision to raise the family income threshold was the "biggest



surprise of the day" and one of the parts of the latest visa package that could have the "most significant impacts on individuals". Sumption notes: "This threshold determines whether British citizens can bring a foreign partner to live with them in the UK, and the level has been more than doubled. Family migration makes up a small share of the total, but those who are affected by it can be affected very significantly.

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# 10-day Hornbill Festival kick starts in Nagaland with traditional ceremony

Kohima (News Agency)- Showcasing traditional and diverse culture and vibrant life of the region, the 10-day-long 24th edition of Hornbill Festival began at the picturesque Naga heritage village Kisama on Friday. With the beating of Naga gongs, sounding of log drums, traditional war cry and gunshots, the annual Hornbill Festival, named after the colourful forest bird, commenced coinciding with the 61st Nagaland Statehood Day celebrations. President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP President J.P. Nadda and many other leaders greeted the people of Nagaland on the occasion.

The US, Germany and Columbia are the country partners while Assam is the partner state for this year's edition of the festival. Organised by the state Tourism and Art and Culture department, the Hornbill Festival displays the northeastern state's deep-rooted traditions and its rich cultural heritage in all its ethnicity, diversity and grandeur.



The festival is also a tribute to the great people for its alertness and grandeur. Hornbill, a bird revered by the Naga For the tourists and guests, it is an

opportunity to get a comprehensive understanding of the Naga people, their land and their rich culture.

According to the officials of the Tourism and Art and Culture department, thousands of tourists from various parts of the country and abroad visit Nagaland to witness the festival.

US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, British High Commissioner to India, Alex Ellis, Colombia Ambassador to India, Victor Echeverri Jaramillo, and German Consul General, Kolkata, Barbara Voss, attended the inaugural function as guests.

Nagaland Governor La Ganesan and Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio were the chief host and host, respectively. The Chief Minister said that German rock band 'ELM Tree' will perform at the Hornbill Music Festival, while the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata, will screen well-known German films at the Film Festival. "Nagaland will also host a German business delegation for a round-table with the Investment and Development Authority of Nagaland (IDAN).

## *Bills to replace criminal laws among many others listed for Winter Session of Parliament*

New Delhi (News Agency)- The Centre has listed 18 Bills, including three to replace the criminal laws and two to extend the provisions of the Women's Reservation Act to Jammu and Kashmir and Puducherry, during the Winter Session of the Parliament starting Monday. The Winter Session of the Parliament will be held from December 4 to December 22. According to a bulletin issued by the Lok Sabha Secretariat, the government has listed to introduce a Bill to increase the strength of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly from 107 to 114 in a bid to provide representation to Kashmiri migrants, displaced persons from Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and Scheduled Tribes. The government has also listed the first batch of supplementary demands for grants for 2023-24 for presentation, discussion and voting during the session.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Bills that seek to replace the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Indian Evidence Act, respectively, have



also been listed for consideration and passage in the Lok Sabha.

The three Bills were examined by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, which submitted its reports with dissent notes by opposition members.

The new Bills listed for introduction in the Lok Sabha are -- The Boilers Bill, The Provisional Collection of Taxes Bill, The Central Goods and Services Tax (Second Amendment) Bill and The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill.

Among the new Bills listed are the Government of Union Territories (Amendment) Bill, The National Capital Territory of Delhi Laws (Special Provisions) Second (Amendment) Bill, and The Central University (Amendment) Bill.

The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill proposes to set up a three-member committee led by the Prime Minister for appointing future Chief Election Commissioners and Election Commissioners, and The Post Office Bill, which has been introduced in the Rajya Sabha, have also been listed for the Winter Session.

The Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, which seeks to simplify the registration process for periodicals and newspapers and do away with several penal provisions that led to the prosecution and imprisonment of publishers, and the Advocates (Amendment) Bill, which were approved by the Rajya Sabha, have also been listed for consideration and passage by the Lok Sabha.



# 'Maximum global talk, minimum local walk' is principle followed by PM Modi: Congress



(News Agency)- The Congress on Friday hit out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who told the COP 28 meeting in Dubai that India has "struck a great balance between ecology and economy", saying this was "yet another of his trademark falsehoods". In a statement, Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh said: "Maximum global talk, minimum local walk is the principle followed by the Prime Minister. He has claimed in Dubai that India has 'struck a great balance between ecology and economy'. This is yet another of his trademark falsehoods." The former Union Environment Minister said that Forest Conservation Act, 1980 has been made completely hollow with a 2023 amendment which axes provisions for consent of forest communities and removes protections for 25 per cent of India's forest cover, in violation of the 1996 TN Godavarman Supreme Court order. "It is paving the

way for the Modi government to exploit forests and hand them over to a select few chosen corporates," he alleged. He also said that the Forest Rights Act of 2006, protecting the traditional rights of Adivasis and forest-dwelling communities, has been weakened with a 2022 notification, and the National Biodiversity Act, 2002 massively diluted to allow private companies easier access to forests without benefit-sharing with communities. He also said that when the entire world was dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Modi government passed 39 amendments to rules under the Environment Protection Act. "Illegal and regressive changes were made to relax environmental protections -- pollution control measures were removed, penalties for violations were lowered, criminal prosecutions were stripped, and public notice requirements were waived," he said. The Congress leader said that

the Environmental Impact Assessment norms have been continuously weakened since 2020.

".. In eco-sensitive areas like the Himalayan region, the Modi government has illegally bypassed the need for Environmental Impact Assessment by splitting large projects into small segments," he said, citing the Silkyara tunnel collapse as a symptom of the larger malaise. He also alleged that the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has been consistently weakened since 2014 as vacancies have been left open for years, reaching 70 per cent

overall in 2018 and leading to the shutdown of its Chennai bench. "Lastly, and most importantly, air pollution has turned into a grave public health crisis under the Modi government, becoming a major threat to life expectancy. From 2015 to 2020 alone, the share of Indians exposed to PM2.5 above 100 has doubled, reversing improvements over the previous years," he said.

"How can anyone take what the Prime Minister says globally on environment seriously in light of his disastrous track record in India?" Ramesh asked.

## AAP kick-starts 'Mai Bhi Kejriwal' campaign to seek opinion in case of CM's arrest

(News Agency)- The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Friday kick-started its 'Main Bhi Kejriwal' signature campaign in the national capital to seek people's opinion on should Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal resign or run the government from jail in case he is arrested. The signature campaign was launched by Delhi minister Gopal Rai, who conducted a door-to-door campaign in the Laxmi Nagar area in East Delhi.



Rai said that the BJP is plotting the arrest of Kejriwal out of fear of losing in the Lok Sabha elections. "We conducted a door-to-door campaign and asked people in case Kejriwal is arrested, should he resign or run the government from jail. The people have

firmly said that Kejriwal has done a lot of work for the public, and therefore he should not resign but run the government from jail," Rai said. "If such

a situation arises, Kejriwal should not resign," Rai said. He also said that from December 1 to 20, the party will conduct door-to-door campaign in all the 2,600 polling stations, and from December 21 to 24, AAP will hold public meetings in all the 250 wards.

## Congress seeking legal opinion to challenge ED's action to attach AJL's properties

New Delhi- The Congress is seeking legal opinion to challenge the Enforcement Directorate (ED)'s action of provisionally attaching the properties worth over Rs 751 crore of the Associated Journals Limited (AJL) in connection with a money laundering probe. A Congress source said that the party will soon challenge the ED's action with the concerned authorities.

The ED on November 21 said that it attached properties worth Rs 751.9 crore in a money-laundering case against AJL, which owns various publications including National Herald. The investigation agency claimed that Congress-linked AJL and Young Indian Ltd (YI) were 'beneficiaries' of proceeds of crime and the assets included immovable properties.

The ED said that its probe under the



Prevention of Money Laundering Act revealed that "AJL is in possession of

proceeds of crime in the form of immovable properties spread across many cities of India such as Delhi, Mumbai and Lucknow to the tune of Rs 661.69 crore and YI is in possession of proceeds of crime to the tune of Rs 90.21 crore in the form of investment in equity shares of AJL".

The ED registered a case of money-laundering on the basis of process issued by a Delhi Court after taking cognisance of a private complaint vide order dated June 26, 2014. The court held that seven accused, including YI, prima facie committed offences of criminal breach of trust, cheating and dishonestly inducing delivery of property, dishonest misappropriation of property and criminal conspiracy of the IPC.



## Delhi HC grants anticipatory bail to Unnao gang-rape victim, mother in forgery case

New Delhi- The Delhi High Court on Friday granted anticipatory bail to the Unnao gang-rape case victim and her mother in connection with a forgery case, wherein it was alleged that the two forged the petitioner's birth date to allege offences under the POCSO Act. The matter was transferred to the court of

of Rs 25 lakh. Justice Sudhir Kumar Jain granted anticipatory bail after the additional public prosecutor informed the court that a charge-sheet has been filed in the case and assured that the petitioners will not be arrested unless directed by the trial court. The high court had earlier granted protection to the victim,



the Sessions Judge of Saket Courts by the Supreme Court in a transfer petition, and an FIR was lodged at the Makhi police station based on a complaint lodged by Haripal Singh, the husband of a woman accused who was acquitted in the gang-rape case.

The high court had on November 17 directed Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) to provide within four weeks separate accommodation to the rape survivor in view of her marriage and the birth of a child. Rape convict and former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar was handed life imprisonment in the case by a trial court under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code, along with a fine

prohibiting any coercive action against her. In disposing of the petitions, Justice Jain directed that if arrested, the petitioners would be released on bail upon furnishing a personal bond of Rs 20,000 with a local surety of the same amount. Justice Anup Jairam Bhambhani had in December 2022 issued notice to the state and had granted time to file a status report, with a condition that no precipitate action affecting the petitioner's liberty should be taken until the next hearing, provided the petitioner appeared before the trial court as required. The plea for anticipatory bail was moved by the petitioner through advocates Mehmood Pracha and Jatinder Bhatt.

## ED arrests aide of Shine City owner in Rs 800-crore money laundering case

New Delhi- The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has arrested an aide of absconding owner of tainted real estate company Shine City in a money laundering probe linked to the fraud committed by the company, officials said on Friday.

The ED in a statement said that it arrested Abhishek Kumar Singh, who was actively assisting absconding accused Rasheed Naseem to collect, conceal and launder the proceeds of crime, in connection with its probe into the money laundering case involving the Uttar Pradesh-based real estate company.



The ED said that Singh was arrested on Thursday under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The ED case is based on approximately 250 FIRs registered by Uttar Pradesh Police against Naseem and Shine City Group of Companies, wherein they promised huge returns on investment and collected Rs 800-1,000 crore, and finally cheated the public by way of committing fraud. The agency said that its investigation revealed that there were many agents who have been working for the company to lure the investors and helped Naseem and Shine City in generation of the proceeds of crime. "ED

probe found that the proceeds of crime were transferred to various other companies and individuals. Singh, who is one of the main agents, has acquired the Proceeds of Crime and was actively assisting Naseem, to collect, conceal and launder the proceeds of crime," the ED

said. The ED said that Singh was a confidant of Naseem and was in constant touch with him and customers even till the time of search and arrest. Singh was placed under arrest on Thursday and produced before the Special Judge Lucknow on Friday which sent him to ED custody for 6 days till December 6. This is the second arrest in this case, the agency added. Earlier, the ED arrested one Shashi Bala on November 25. The ED has till date attached properties worth Rs 128 crore and collection of incriminating documents during the search action. The main accused Naseem is absconding.

## Cocaine worth Rs 220 cr seized from Denmark-bound ship at Paradip port

Bhubaneswar- Customs officials have seized a large quantity of cocaine from a Denmark-bound ship berthed at the Paradip International Cargo Terminal at Paradip port during a raid, an

official said Friday. The officials have recovered cocaine weighing 22 kg valued at around Rs 220 crore in the international market during the search of the ship that continued on Friday.

The Customs officials received an intelligence input that some suspected packets reportedly carrying drugs have been concealed in a Panama registered ship, 'MV Debi', which has been berthed at the Paradip port. The ship had arrived from Gresik port, Indonesia, without any import cargo. Following the tip-off, officers from the Customs (preventive) packets (wrapped and affixed with Commissionerate, Bhubaneswar zone, magnet) from the cranes of the ship. The carried out searches on the ship on packets were containing a hardened but Thursday and Friday. During the search, brittle white substance which was later the Customs officials found 22



confirmed as cocaine.

"A total of 22 kg cocaine valued at around Rs 220 crore was recovered," a press note issued by the Commissioner of Customs, Bhubaneswar Zone, revealed.

The Customs sources also stated that all the crew members working on board the ship were from Vietnam. The ship, owned by Asia Pacific Shipping Co. Ltd, was destined for Denmark.



## Gains from covert killing come with a big price tag. India can learn from Chile

“Like a broken doll,” an eyewitness would recall. The orange fireball that rose from the powder-blue Chevelle sedan had torn apart Orlando Letelier’s body, severing his legs below the hips and hurling one foot, still cased in its sock, five metres from the car. The shrapnel had severed the carotid artery of his colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffitt, slowly drowning her in her blood. The explosion was heard across the city, at the State Department’s buildings in Washington DC. The long-forgotten 1976 bombing—the largest terrorist attack in Washington before 9/11 that was carried out by an intimate ally—echoed in the United States capital again last week. Prosecutors alleged that an Indian intelligence officer sponsored an assassination campaign targeting ‘Khalistani’ terrorists. Even though the US and India have committed to insulating their relationship from the coming prosecution, strains will inevitably mount as criminal proceedings unfold. The lessons learned during the Letelier case provide a useful map to avoid the pitfalls ahead.

Threats and sanctions, American policymakers learned, couldn’t compel Chile’s government and courts to extradite or prosecute the intelligence officials alleged to be responsible for the assassination. The regime understood that protecting its security institutions was key to its survival. As historian Vanessa Walker notes, there are limits to a superpower’s influence—even with its clients, let alone significant powers like India. The military in Chile also learned lessons. The Generals could reach beyond borders to silence their enemies—but doing so came with a big price tag. Friends and enemies little is similar between Cold War-era Chile and democratic India. Yet, the intelligence services of both countries found themselves trapped in similar dilemmas. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped birth General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte’s military regime in 1973. The US, however, also provided asylum to Pinochet’s opponents—just the way it has done for ‘Khalistan’ supporters and other anti-India secessionists.

As journalist John Dinges has written, Letelier posed a real threat to the Pinochet regime. The exiled former diplomat, with deep ties to both Democrats and Republicans, had successfully lobbied for military sanctions against his homeland. The Generals feared a Democratic victory in the looming 1976 elections would intensify this pressure. Late in August 1976, declassified documents have revealed, the US became aware of plans to assassinate opposition figures overseas. Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Harry

Schlaudeman, noted in a secret memorandum the urgent need to try “to head off a series of international murders that could do serious damage to the international status and reputation of the countries involved”.

The Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, asked ambassadors in the regions to warn their host governments against proceeding with the assassination plots. For reasons that have never become clear, though, Kissinger rescinded his instructions just days before the Letelier murder.

Kissinger’s vacillation, the work of scholar Alan MacPherson suggests, was likely linked to the need to push back against the influence of the Soviet Union in South America. The US could not raise the curtain on murderous secret warfare across borders—but did not want to alienate trusted allies either.

The Pinochet regime had killed thousands of its opponents under the benign gaze of the US. It is conceivable Kissinger and the CIA thought one more would not significantly magnify the sin. The logic of covert action

Although popular historians sometimes attribute a venerable lineage to this kind of covert action, the organised use of clandestine killing was a product of the Second World War. Facing defeat in 1939-40, the United Kingdom Prime Minister Winston Churchill set up the Special Operations Executive (SOE)—an organisation the writer Damien Lewis has memorably described as “the Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare.”

For all the colour and courage of the SOE’s operatives, historians have been divided on its actual achievements. The eminent historian John Keegan saw the SOE as an expensive failure, which needlessly cost the lives of thousands of courageous individuals. In Poland, one study by EDR Harrison shows, the SOE never achieved its military ends and eventually abandoned its cadre to the advancing Soviet Union. The US, though, embraced Churchill’s ideas with enthusiasm. This was in part, historian Bradley Smith writes, because spymaster William Donovan harboured the mistaken belief that the Nazis were especially adept at subversive operations. This led Donovan to underestimate the significance of conventional military power, and the sheer economic might of the US, in securing the defeat of Germany. Following the end of the war, the US sponsored anti-communist covert action programmes not just against the Soviet Union but also in China, South America, the Middle East, and Africa. As an investigation led by Senator Frank Church would document in 1975, these operations often failed and brought opprobrium to the US.

By PRAVEEN SWAMI

## Only Modi can defeat Modi in 2024. Squabbling INDIA coalition leaders are just a sideshow

One predictable consequence of the Congress’s electoral defeats in the Hindi heartland has been the emergence of new fissures in the INDIA coalition. You could argue, as many in the Congress do, that these fissures are not as massive as the media has made them out to be. But then the Congressmen would say that, wouldn’t they?

What is beyond dispute is that many leaders in the coalition comprising 28 political parties did try to excuse themselves from attending the alliance meeting scheduled this week. Some, like the DMK’s Stalin, the Tamil Nadu CM who had to deal with the aftermath of a cyclone, probably had more important matters to take care of. But most of them simply came up with excuses. Why didn’t they want to come? Well, basically they wanted to send a message to the Congress. Off the record, most of them have always complained that they resent the Congress’s ‘big boy’ attitude in the alliance. Now that the Congress is down, they are using this opportunity to show their resentment.

But there is another reason. Even if the Congress had been sweet and reasonable, there would still have been problems. Most opposition leaders loathe the Congress. Partly because some of them are its former members. In fact, the Indian political scene is littered with opposition leaders who were once part of the Congress—from YS Jagan Mohan Reddy to K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) to Mamata Banerjee. (And that’s not counting BJP stars like Jyotiraditya Scindia or Himanta Biswa Sarma.) Mamata Banerjee was pushed out of the Congress by PV

Narasimha Rao and Pranab Mukherjee. Jagan Reddy became the target of a pointless UPA witch-hunt. KCR would have remained in the UPA had Sonia Gandhi granted his Telangana statehood request (it wasn’t even a demand at that stage). As it turned out, the UPA let him storm out before creating the state of Telangana in a manner that let KCR take credit for it.

All these people (to say nothing of those who joined the BJP) associate the Congress with dadagiri, unreasonable behaviour, and arrogance. Rare is the non-Congress politician—in any political party—who feels warmly toward the Congress. Indian politics is anyway divided between disillusioned former Congress members and diehards who have spent their lives opposing the Congress. So, while the Congress has no natural allies in Indian politics today, it does have a lot of enemies. This makes forming any kind of alliance a challenge. For an opposition alliance to work, you need either an independent deal-maker like the late Harkishan Singh Surjeet or a leader like Sonia Gandhi, who was willing to approach other political parties with humility and request them to join the UPA in 2004. Nevertheless, my guess is that once this week’s temporary muscle-flexing is over, the opposition parties will eventually reunite under the INDIA coalition. But all of them will make it a point to emphasise that in states where it falls on the Congress to take on the BJP (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, etc.), the party has made a mess of it. A united opposition can do little.

By Vir Sanghvi



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# Congress Invoking North-South Divide is Old Aryan-Dravidian Wine in New Bottle, Will Only Script its Demise

**Written By: Utpal Kumar**

What does a person with no appetite for improvement do after a dismal performance? If he fails in a game, he blames the pitch, the weather, the umpire, or even the spectator. (Yes, Pakistan's Director of Cricket Mickey Arthur did exactly that when he blamed Indian spectators for his team's loss against India in Ahmedabad during the 2023 World Cup.) One sees a similar trend in Indian politics — of blaming everyone except oneself, of looking the other way when it is found faltering.

It happened on Sunday, soon after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) defeated the Congress in the three Hindi heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. To the grand old party's solace, it secured a resounding victory in Telangana. While savouring the victory in the South, the Congress should have analysed the reasons why it is getting vanquished in the North, especially in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh where the GOP looked all set to gain power. Instead, the party and its



loyalists indulged in a "Progressive South vs Communal North" debate. Others talked about how "South is aware and North is lagging far behind". Still, a few focused on how the "South-North boundary line is getting thicker and clearer". At the very outset, it must be said that this North Vs South narrative is just the repackaging of a long-discredited Aryan invasion/migration theory that detailed how the "fair-skinned" Aryans pushed the "dark-skinned" Dravidians down South and culturally colonised the land called Bharatvarsha. The Congress

narrative is problematic on both political as well as ideological fronts. Politically, it is a classic case of the Congress committing another hara-kiri where a political party questions the motive, ideology, orientation or even the educational qualification of the voter. It fails to realise that these very people had five years ago voted for the party.

The North vs South debate also falters given the fact that the BJP is a rising force in the South. In the just-held Assembly elections, it has doubled its vote share in Telangana. Given the popularity of

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the saffron party will be well placed to get more seats in the state in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. As has been the case, especially in recent times, a national party tends to do well in the Lok Sabha in comparison to its regional counterpart, more so if it is a ruling party with an unassailable election machinery like that of the BJP. Likewise, the BJP remains a powerful party force in Karnataka. Congress sycophants seem to forget that the saffron party had won 25 out of 28 Lok Sabha seats in 2019. And despite the Assembly poll drubbing in Karnataka early this year, the BJP is likely to bounce back in the general elections next year. It may not get 25 seats, but one won't be surprised to see the party topping the electoral chart next year. Even in Tamil Nadu, the party seems to be getting enough eyeballs thanks to state party chief K Annamalai's proactive politics.

The North vs South debate initiated soon after the Assembly poll results on Sunday also ignores the fact that this is not a post-

2014 phenomenon. The most glaring example was the 1977 Lok Sabha elections when the Indira Gandhi-led Congress was decimated in the North, but it performed remarkably well in the South. The idea of Bharat is too complex and complicated a phenomenon for a unidimensional Leftist ideology to comprehend. As for the ideological aspect of the North vs South narrative, it's unfortunate to see the Congress that had played a seminal role in the country's Independence putting a big question mark on the idea of Bharat by manufacturing such a fake divide. But this transformation from being a nation-maker to a potentially nation divider didn't happen in a day.

First the party, under Harrow-return Nehru, chose to ride over the Leftist ideology to set the narrative of Bharat. It was more on the line of what scholar-poet AK Ramanujan would say: "One way of defining diversity for India is to say what the Irishman is said to have said about trousers.

## The Resilience Of Congress And Of INDIA Is Being Tested

**Rajmohan Gandhi**

The remarkable Telangana exception to what (for a section) were hugely disappointing election results brings one more renowned city to an important list. Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Patna, all five hosting an INDIA bloc government, are now joined by Hyderabad.

We have heard Ramachandra Guha make this point, but it would have occurred to others too, as it did to me. Yet it is not a trivial piece of data. If (as was always possible) Mumbai had been added to the list, that would have given the INDIA bloc command over almost every metropolis in the land. Delhi of course is obliged to cede much of its power to the union government, but that cannot alter the fact that in the most recent state-level election the people of Delhi voted overwhelmingly for AAP.

Even without Mumbai, the six



great cities now being governed by the INDIA bloc, along with the major states they administer, comprise a vast, and vastly influential, launching pad for ideas and policies. Many eyes (including the eye of history) will now naturally focus on Maharashtra and on what its astute veteran leader, Sharad Pawar, chooses to do. The election results have added to his importance. These results, and especially the fact that Telangana swung decisively in the Congress's favour, have also

provoked the conclusion of a supposed North-South divide in the country. Yet Kolkata and Patna are not exactly part of South India. Nor are Delhi and Punjab. Nor is Rajasthan, where Ashok Gehlot came close to achieving a miracle. Not to mention Himachal Pradesh with its Congress government. And not to mention Hyderabad's innumerable Hindustani speakers. The really significant political divide is between the BJP and its allies on the one hand and the INDIA bloc on the

other. And the significant political questions are two. What will the Congress's loss in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh do to the INDIA bloc's future? What will it do to the Congress?

The INDIA bloc was a wonderful idea. When the leaders of the bloc's constituents, aware of their history of fighting one another, came together and expressed a joint resolve to protect the nation's democratic institutions and the rule of law, it appeared to be a landmark event.

Coming fairly soon after the formation of the INDIA bloc, November's elections presented an excellent opportunity to showcase unity. Yet there is no evidence that leaders or representatives of INDIA's constituent parties got together to figure out a common approach to the elections. The Congress's failure in North India therefore means that not just the

grand old party but the bloc as a whole has taken a hit.

INDIA bachao - I am speaking of the bloc - is now a pressing task. What about the Congress? The INDIA bloc's non-Congress constituents, the bloc's sympathisers - irrespective of party - and, above all perhaps, the Congress party's booth-level workers have the right to expect a candid analysis of the party's failure in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, including the failure to gauge the voters' mood. If the analysis is truthful and unsparing, then something worthwhile may replace the disappointment that hit so many on December 3. Meanwhile, a couple of things are worth recognising.

One, the INDIA Alliance and the Bharat Jodo Yatra were both inspired moves in a nation that appeared almost helpless in its confrontation with an anti-democratic tide.





## Litmus test for unity among Opposition parties

campaigning. Fissures had surfaced when the Samajwadi Party accused the Congress of betrayal after the latter failed to agree on seat-sharing for the Madhya Pradesh elections. Now, the Opposition faces the challenge of finalising the seat-sharing arrangement for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The absence of a unifying, credible leader who can take on PM Modi is impeding INDIA's efforts to project itself as a potent alternative to the BJP. Presenting a united front won't be easy as various parties will inevitably prioritise their own interests. Irresponsible remarks by leaders such as DMK MP Senthilkumar are also not helping INDIA's cause, notwithstanding his apology. A ragtag bunch of opportunists stands no chance against a rampaging BJP. Time is running out for the Opposition to get its act together in the run-up to the make-or-break parliamentary polls.

# INDIA under strain

LESS than five months after its formation, the Opposition bloc INDIA finds itself at a crossroads. The Congress had to put off a high-level meeting of INDIA leaders because key stakeholders such as Chief Ministers Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee and MK Stalin and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh

Yadav expressed their inability to attend it. Ruling out discord among the Opposition parties, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray faction) leader Sanjay Raut has said: 'We are together and you will see its result in 2024.' The ground reality, however, suggests that all is not well.

The results of the recent Assembly elections in the Hindi heartland have not only been a huge setback for the Congress but also a disappointment for the 28-party grouping. The grand old party's rout in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh has undermined its pre-eminent

position in INDIA. The Trinamool Congress has described the debacle as 'more of a Congress failure than a BJP success story'. Questions are also being raised about the Congress' apparent overconfidence and its cold-shouldering of INDIA constituents during

## Why Congress' Telangana Win Complicates INDIA Strategy

By Amitabh Tiwari

The Congress has lost to the BJP 3-0 in Hindi heartland states with a consolation win in Telangana. The party failed to save its governments in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh or exploit the anti-incumbency against the almost 20-year-old BJP government in Madhya Pradesh.

While its win against the BRS in Telangana does bode well for its revival in southern India, the state sends only 17 MPs to parliament. The three states that the Congress lost send a combined 65 MPs to parliament.

The losses have seriously weakened the Congress's position in the opposition INDIA bloc. The party hoped that a good performance in these state elections would establish its dominance over the grouping. Instead, it has lost the moral authority to even lead such an alliance. Regional parties like the Samajwadi Party, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Trinamool Congress (TMC) and even DMK - a Congress ally - will now

demand the lion's share of seats in their states and will strongly resist a Congress leader being projected as the prime ministerial face of the alliance.

Ties between the Congress

bargaining power.

Regional parties like Janata Dal United (JDU) and Nitish Kumar have expressed their displeasure over the delay in seat sharing talks, the common minimum program, and the



and the Samajwadi Party, an important constituent of the INDIA bloc, have soured over seat adjustments in Madhya Pradesh. Both parties have hinted they could go it alone in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous and politically crucial state. The Congress has lost its

2024 campaign because of the Congress's preoccupation with the state polls.

The Congress party is celebrating its victory in Telangana and its spokespersons are highlighting how they have trounced a regional party. Yet, the party is, in many ways, dependent on

regional parties to defeat the BJP.

The Congress didn't have the wherewithal to beat the BJP on its own as its presence was limited to 261 seats (less than 50% of house strength) in 2019. Here is where the issue gets complicated.

The Congress won Karnataka earlier this year gaining largely at the expense of regional party Janata Dal Secular (JDS). It squeezed out HD Deve Gowda's party, making the contest bipolar as the BJP maintained its vote share. The Congress ate into the minority and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes vote bank of the JDS, which suffered its second worst performance in history.

It is a similar story in Telangana, where the Congress gained 8% ST, 13% SC and 5% Muslim support at the cost of the BRS, denting almost 10% of the vote share of the KCR-led party. The BJP too gained 7% vote share in the state. Again,

the Congress gained at the expense of a regional party without touching the support base of the BJP.

The Congress has lost significant support of OBCs, SC-ST, and Muslims to regional parties in the north and south, like SP, RJD, TMC, AAP, BRS, YSR Congress Party, BJD, and NCP. The core voters of many regional parties are complementary to the Congress. The JDS formed an alliance for the first time with the Congress in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, and transferred its vote base to the grand old party in seats it did not contest, including its key Vokkaliga base. These voters, including members of the minority community, did not return to the JDS in the 2023 Karnataka election, leaving it with half its previous tally. This is what regional parties are apprehensive of, and this fear could grow stronger after the Congress's Telangana victory.



# 'Animal' To 'Anatomy' - Misogyny And Morality In Cinema And Society

By Nishtha Gautam

In one of the most poignant scenes of celebrated Hindi dramatist Mohan Rakesh's iconic play, Aadhe Adhure, Savitri recalls being brutalised by her husband Mahinder. Her fault-being the breadwinner of their family of four while Mahinder allowed himself to be consumed by self-pity, perceived emasculation and jealousy.

Anatomy of a Fall, this year's Palme d'Or winning film (Best Picture) at the Cannes Film Festival, is a successor to Mohan Rakesh's sensibility. More than half a century later, a French film invokes similar tensions around men's eternal struggle with emasculating women. Women who kill them, slowly or at once. Ostensibly, a courtroom whodunnit, the film raises pertinent questions about gender relations without being didactic.

Those who have spared a breath or more on the rank misogyny of Ranbir Kapoor's Animal - which is predictably a blockbuster - must watch Anatomy. The film opens with Sandra Voyter (Sandra Hüller), a novelist, being interviewed by a young literature student in a secluded French chalet. Mid-interview, pop music starts blasting upstairs and Sandra tells the befuddled interviewer that it's her



husband (Samuel Theis) and that the interview is over. A few minutes later, Samuel Maleski, Voyter's academic husband, is found dead by their blind son and the family dog. This is the first in a series of uneasy discoveries in the course of the film.

It is revealed that Sandra and Samuel move to Grenoble from London to be able to deal better with their financial distress. Samuel also wants to treat this move away from the city as an opportunity to resume work on his long-pending book. He, instead, we are told, busies himself with renovating the chalet. When Sandra was interviewed, Samuel

worked in the loft while listening to loud music.

Why do men find it almost insurmountably difficult to deal with a situation when the spotlight is not on them? Why do we still see women through the problematic lens of traditional gendered roles? Samuel evokes sympathy, post-mortem, just by virtue of being the male version of a domestically inclined woman. Someone who takes a career a bit easy to be able to care for a child with special needs. He continues with his academic job, makes the decision to move to his hometown, and repairs the newly bought chalet. But all of these choices make him

deeply unhappy and dissatisfied especially when he sees himself pitted against an immensely successful spouse.

During the courtroom scenes, the inherent misogyny of "systems" comes to the fore as Sandra is deemed guilty of murdering her husband by almost everyone. In an era where intimate partner violence against women is a glaring reality, the ease with which her guilt is presumed drives home the prejudices that women must operate within for survival. Sample this latest finding from the US Department of Justice:

"Of the estimated 4,970 female victims of murder and nonnegligent

manslaughter in 2021, data reported by law enforcement agencies indicates that 34% were killed by an intimate partner. By comparison, about 6% of the 17,970 males murdered that year were victims of intimate partner homicide."

When the 11-year-old son of Sandra and Samuel, Daniel (Milo Machado Graner) becomes the key witness in the case, there is a sense of foreboding around his testimony. Has this child, too, internalised patriarchal attitudes? Or is he poised to be a different man, home-schooled as he is by his father and not so close to his mother? Will he defy the gendered rubrics that still operate in most households? The presence of Sandra's former admirer (Swann Arlaud) as an attorney in the case complicates the issue even further. Does anyone trust Sandra? Will she be able to pull her innocence off, just like her success as a novelist? Sandra has to defend not just herself but her creative production, too. Her characters are also on trial. The film also raises the question of artistic morality. Do artists get away with operating in the grey zones of amorality? How much of themselves do they distil in their works? Can their art be called to the witness box? During the trial, a lot is revealed about not just the victim and the suspect but also the people involved in the proceedings. Are legal processes still stuck in the virgin-witch double-barrelled gun? Sandra moved to a chalet in the French Alps at the instance of her French husband, mimicking most women upending their own lives for a life together with their partners. But is it enough for Samuel? They speak in English, a middle language for both of them. Is that enough for Samuel? Sandra keeps cajoling Samuel to resume his writing and gives feedback. Is that enough for Samuel? Or, is it all a trap for Samuel? The prosecution feels Samuel's blood incriminates Sandra. At a metaphorical level, his whole being incriminates her. Can Sandra wipe these blood stains off? Justine Triet's film works equally well at both levels. And at both these levels, the family dog plays a key role. It's always the dog that saves your soul. And that's the animal we need around us.

## The Modi Factor Overrides All Campaign Issues

By Saibal Dasgupta

My neighbour, a senior engineer, said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has the special blessings of Lord Shiva, and he would not stop until he has destroyed the Opposition. This sort of wholehearted applause was heard over and over as millions watched the BJP go beyond the fondest expectations of its supporters in elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. Despite the euphoria, the BJP will definitely examine the election results with a cool head. The election results may be seen as an endorsement of the style of governance adopted by the BJP in Delhi and in the states ruled by the party. It will be tempted to do more of the same thing instead of tweaking its style ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2024. We need to delve into whether the BJP scored a stupendous victory in three

states because of its style of governance or the perception that the Prime Minister is a strong and trustworthy leader. The Modi factor and overall governance are different, though they may seem like two sides of the same coin. The distinction is important.

The fact is, Modi dominated the state election like a colossus. Efforts by the Congress to puncture the goodwill towards the Prime Minister did not yield results. Modi is more than a leader. He is a factor competing with other election-related issues like the influence of caste and the people's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with local governments. The BJP won in Rajasthan as the incumbency factor restricted the Congress, while it gained ground in Madhya Pradesh despite anti-incumbency. Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi won elections for nearly two

decades until her assassination in 1984 due to something described as the "Indira factor". Ardent believers even called it the "Durga syndrome". Congressmen under her were corrupt and arrogant. This did not affect her popularity or diminish her magnetism. Congress leaders fawned over her as Gandhi rose to become the primary vote-getter, rendering many leading politicians useless at the hustings. The BJP is in a similar position today with Modi as the primary vote-getter. Though Yogi Adityanath has built some kind of mini-cult among a section of people in Uttar Pradesh and Shivraj Singh Chouhan has a strong following of his own in Madhya Pradesh, they are satellites of planet Modi. Yogi and Chouhan would be powerless without the Modi factor backing them. After the latest elections, the BJP does not need props like the

Ram temple issue or the Sanatan Dharma debate, as long as Modi is available to make whirlwind campaign tours in 2024. This one factor is enough. The election results are a confirmation that this factor continues to hold sway.

This is the time when the Prime Minister and his government should raise their attention on governance and improve the delivery of welfare schemes. Many issues are crying for attention. The lack of sufficient doctors and medical equipment in rural areas is one such. The recent crisis when 41 workers were trapped in a highway construction tunnel for 17 days is an example. The episode raised serious questions, not just about the design and construction work but also about how the government and supervisory agencies had allowed such lopsided construction without an escape route for the workers.



# Dent in Congress forts, tribal outreach, OBC support - How BJP took Chhattisgarh

**The BJP pulled off a surprise victory in Chhattisgarh, not anticipated by any exit poll.**

The Bharatiya Janata Party unexpectedly wrested Chhattisgarh from the Congress party, winning 54 seats (+39) with a 46.3 per cent vote share (+12.7 per cent). The Congress, which swept the state in 2018, bagging 68 seats, has been reduced to 35 seats (-33) with a 42.2 per cent vote share (-1.7 per cent).

The BJP gained largely at the expense of parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (J), squeezing out marginal players in increasingly bipolar elections across states. The BSP and Ajit Jogi's JCC(J), who fought separately this time, had bagged an 11.7 per cent vote share in 2018, mellowing down to 3.3 per cent in 2023 (-8.4 per cent). In 2018, the Congress swept the Ambikapur (north) and Bastar (south) divisions of the state, bagging 25 of the 26 seats on offer. This time, the BJP turned the tables, winning 22 of these, reducing Congress to just four (-21). These two divisions accounted for a majority of the lead (18/19) the BJP enjoyed against the Congress.

Even in 2013, when the Congress lost the elections, it led in Bastar and shared honours (7-7) with the BJP in Ambikapur. This time, TS Singh Deo, the Deputy Chief Minister who hails from the Ambikapur division, couldn't save his seat. While some conspiracy theories point to sabotage, a more likely reason, perhaps, is that supporters of Deo may have been disillusioned after he was denied the CM's



chair.

## 2. Tribal outreach

Chhattisgarh has 39 Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reserved seats, 10 and 29 respectively. The bulk or two-thirds of the ST-reserved seats are in the Bastar and Ambikapur divisions. The Congress won 33 of these seats in 2018. This was reduced to half (17) in 2023.

A massive tribal outreach by the BJP, including free ration distribution, a Rs 24,000 crore scheme for vulnerable groups on the birth anniversary of tribal icon Birsu Munda just two days before the second phase of polling in the state, MSP for tendu leaves, and issues of religious conversion seem to have queered the pitch for the BJP.

## 3. Musical chairs

Chhattisgarh witnesses significant churning in seats. In the last three polls, on average,

60 per cent of seats have changed hands. This shows that there is a 60 per cent chance of the winning party (of the previous election) losing the seat (in the current elections).

In 2013, the Congress lost 68 per cent of its seats, while in 2018, the BJP lost 84 per cent of its tally. In 2023, the Congress party once again lost 65 per cent of its seats. This, despite replacing 22 of its MLAs (30 per cent of its strength) to negate anti-incumbency. Fifteen of these new candidates lost the polls.

There were 21 swing seats following the pattern of Congress-BJP-Congress, which were held by the grand old party. Of these, the Congress lost 12 seats, in line with the trend. In non-industrial states, local-level corruption is high, which builds a negative environment against MLAs, irrespective of

party.

## 4. Regaining OBC support

The BJP lost significant OBC support in the state in 2018, to the tune of 10-15 per cent, resulting in a vote share loss of around 4-6 per cent as the Congress was able to dent into the Kurmi (4-5 per cent) and Sahu (11-12 per cent) vote banks by projecting a combined leadership of Bhupesh Baghel and Tamradwaj Sahu. However, Sahus, much higher in number, seem to be unhappy at their community members being ignored for the top post.

The BJP, to tap into this sentiment, appointed and fielded 11 Sahu candidates against the Congress party's 11. Of the 30 OBC candidates fielded by the BJP, 17 won (60 per cent), while of the 31 fielded by the Congress, only 12 won (40 per cent).

Adjusting exit poll projections for errors in vote shares, it seems that the BJP recouped the majority of the loss of support suffered in this community in 2023.

## 5. Mahila factor

The BJP campaign, like other states, has been powered by the women factor in 2023. Its promise of Rs 1,000 per month under the Mahtari Vandana Yojana seems to have clicked with women, as 47 per cent of women backed the BJP against 45 per cent for the Congress. The implementation of the Laadli Behna Yojana in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh lent credibility to this promise. So much so that Baghel countered this by announcing Rs 1,250 per month on the day of Diwali after the first round of voting for 20 seats.

## After state results dampener, can Kharge wield stick as Rahul set to fly abroad?

**Rahul Gandhi is all set to travel to Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam from December 8 onwards.**

After Congress's rout in the Hindi heartland of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Rahul, who is Lok Sabha MP from Wayanad, is all set to travel to Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam from December 8 onwards.

In muted voices, Congress insiders and INDIA alliance partners are questioning the timing of Rahul's visit. They noted that at such a time when the Parliament session is on, Rahul should be seen assisting Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge to act decisively against three powerful chieftains - Ashok Gehlot, Kamal Nath and Bhupesh Baghel - who have let down the leadership and the party in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in a big way. The Gehlot-Nath-Baghel trio is accused of keeping the Congress leadership in the dark, presenting such a rosy picture of the party prospects in the state assembly polls, that it ordered quintals of laddoos from Bengali Market, New Delhi for December 3 festivities that were nowhere to be celebrated.

While Kharge is the elected president of the AICC, it is common knowledge that the 81-year-old party chief



leans on Rahul for every important decision. Rahul's absence from December 8-14 could imply inaction, inertia and status quo when the party leadership is required to send a strong message. There is a sentiment in the party that Kharge and Rahul should not waste any time in seeking the resignation of Congress legislative party leaders and state chiefs of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh instead of waiting for them to make an 'offer.' The CLP leaders and PCC chiefs would want to bide time on the pretext of preparing reports, introspecting and interacting with the winners and losers. Politically speaking, it implies not only short

term survival (when the heat is on) but managing some space for themselves of proxies in the states where they lost in spite of making tall claims and empty promises.

Among various remedial and drastic actions, Kharge and Rahul need to put an end to the 'sab chalta hai' approach in the grand old party. For instance, in the past, when Gehlot lost the polls in 2003 and 2013, he managed to become the senior AICC general secretary. Following the 2003 defeat, Digvijaya Singh had also managed to grab the AICC general secretary's post. Charanjit Singh Channi found himself on the newly constituted CWC list, notwithstanding his poor performance in the Punjab assembly polls. The 'reward the loser' policy in the CWC and AICC secretariat has many takers - Harish Rawat, Ajay Maken, Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa, Gaurav Gogoi, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury - who were key figures in the assembly polls of Uttarakhand, Delhi, Punjab, Bengal and Assam. It is not a coincidence that many party leaders, who were vanquished in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, are vying for the AICC post.





# Hamas-Israel Conflict:

## Does Sanatana Dharma Have the Answer?

By: Makarand R Paranjape

The tenuous truce between Hamas and Israel is shattered. Without either party clearly recognising the right of the other not only to exist but also to occupy part of the disputed holy land. Are we back in a situation of the never-ending war? I alluded to it in my previous column referring to Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* and to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Huxley, the author of *Brave New World*, passed away sixty years back on November 22. Despite its evocative and timely title, *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley's ponderous tome tells us little about the fundamental problems that plague our present times. Although Huxley's most ambitious novel, it seems somewhat disconnected, some might even say incoherent, if not too self-indulgent. Himself going blind like Milton and the Biblical hero Samson, was Huxley also reflecting, like his protagonist, Anthony Beavis, on the futility of human endeavour in an age of great turbulence and uncertainty? With his most celebrated, futuristic dystopian exploration *Brave New World* (1932) already behind him, Huxley moved to California in 1937 to escape the impending war in Europe. Having lived through and witnessed the colossal destruction wreaked by the Great War, Huxley had become a conscious pacifist.

He veered to the view that the only way the world could be saved is if enough people became enlightened by the practice of self-transformation. How to achieve this? By following what he termed the "perennial philosophy," already outlined in the wisdom of the ancient Hindus and Buddhists. Perennial philosophy, we might surmise, is actually Huxley's

myself had the privilege of giving a talk there on "Swami Vivekananda and Universal Religion." Huxley was also a lifelong friend to Jiddu Krishnamurti, who also spent the World War II years in the Ojai mountains near Los Angeles. To return to Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*, there is not a single reference to being eyeless, let alone to Gaza. Obviously, the title



adaptation of the Hindu idea of Sanatana Dharma.

Huxley, along with many of his friends and fellow intellectuals like Gerald Heard and Christopher Isherwood, became a close associate, if not disciple, of the charismatic Ramakrishna Mission monk, Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976). Prabhavananda, who moved to the US in 1923, went on to found the Vedanta Society of Southern California, better known as the Hollywood Temple. I have

was meant to be symbolic and evocative, rather than accurate or descriptive. Instead, it is to Huxley's later novel, *Devils in Loudun* (1952), more specifically to its Epilogue, that we must turn. Huxley argues that it is "man's deep-seated urge to self-transcendence" that explains much of our endeavours. Without understanding or acknowledging this drive, "we cannot hope to make sense of our own particular period of history or indeed of

history in general, of life as it was lived in the past and as it is lived today."

But, for most part, we humans are unable to "take the hard, ascending way," but seek, instead, "bogus liberation" and "grace-substitutes." These include not only alcohol and other intoxicants, but also "elementary sexuality." Sadly, these methods of downward self-transcendence are disastrous: "what seems a god is actually a devil, what seems a liberation is in fact an enslavement." But possibly even more dangerous than these is the cult of violence that accompanies "crowd-delirium" and "herd-intoxication." These can easily descend into "maniacal violence" directed against a targeted group, such as "to liquidate an unpopular minority." We have seen this blood lust throughout history, in the repeated genocides against those branded as "pagans," "heretics," "unbelievers," "kafirs" for whatever reason, groups deemed fit and identified for slaughter. The tragic story of the worldwide persecution of Jews, to which India is a notable exception, reached its frightening and horrifying finale in last century's Holocaust, which claimed some six million lives.

After the end of World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany, European anti-Semitism, it would

seem, did not end. It was only exported to the Middle East. With the formation of Israel, it was the turn of Arabs and, by extension, of other Muslims, to become the world's leading Jew haters. Seeking their total extirpation and annihilation, several Arab states fought numerous bloody battles against the fledgling state of Israel. However, Israel has not only survived, but emerged victorious from all these conflicts. Huxley shows how dangerous "herd-poison" and "crowd-intoxication" can be. No wonder, both church and state are hesitant to encourage it lest the monster thus unleashed slips out of control as we have seen in so-called revolutionary movements, whether Marxist or Islamist, all over the world. Crowd frenzy seems an essential component to induce, exploit, and manipulate masses to commit heinous acts that they would otherwise hesitate to embark upon. Why? Because chaos and violence are the stock in trade of these manipulators, with ideology and theology serving the fuel the fires of hatred and violence. As Huxley observes. "No such scruples restrain the revolutionary leader, who hates the status quo and has only one wish — to create a chaos on which, when he comes to power, he may impose a new kind of order... he exploits it to the frantic and demoniac limit."

"In order to escape from the horrors of insulated selfhood most men and women choose, most of the time, to go neither up nor down, but sideways." Horizontal self-transcendence is the normal "bourgeois" way of romantic love, marriage, procreation, family, career, money-making, hobbies, social service, philanthropy, and so on. Nothing to be laughed or mocked at because human society and well-being depend on it. Given that only a few will choose the steep and lonely mountain path to self-realisation, it is our compulsive, even fatal attraction, to the downward paths of self-expansion and transgression that are most dangerous. Of these, the cult of violence and fanatical hatred for the Other, whether in the Hamas-Israel fight or elsewhere, is perhaps the most dangerous and destabilising in our times. All the more reason that Sanatana Dharma, as Huxley believed, is the way to go for humankind. For it is only the pluralism of Sanatana Dharma which not only offers space to the Other but even goes as far as to assert that, ultimately, there are no Others.



# Consistent Decline in FDI Worrying, Deeper Assessment of India's Prospects Needed

By: AS Mittal

India's GDP grew by 7.6 per cent in the second quarter (July-September) of the year, a positive sign of economic growth. However, the steepest declines in foreign direct investment (FDI) are a matter of concern, especially considering India's recent emergence as a promising investment destination and a viable alternative to China. This decline is particularly worrying as it is happening despite positive projections of India's growth by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

According to the latest report by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), FDI inflows have slowed down drastically. The decline in FDI inflows has been steep, and the situation has only worsened, with a further decline of -24 per cent in April-September 2023. The current FDI inflows stand at \$20.48 billion, down from \$26.91 billion over the same period last year. Even the overall FDI inflows in 2022-23 witnessed a 16 per cent decline, standing at \$71.3 billion from \$84.8 billion in 2021-22. The steepest declines in FDI have been in crucial sectors such as computer software and hardware, automobile,



During January-September of this year, FDI in Vietnam increased by approximately 8 per cent compared to the same period last year, reaching about \$18 billion. In the case of Indonesia, FDI flows stood at around \$10 billion during January-September of this year, similar to the levels seen last year. The factors that influence capital flows into countries include the global and domestic

India is genuinely the alternative to China for companies looking to diversify if it is the "one" in China plus one strategy if the government's PLI scheme is a powerful enough incentive to draw in investments, and if the solid foundations of India's growth forecasts are taken into account, then MNC investor should be long on India. Any concerns regarding an uncertain business environment, an uneven playing field, or the fear of arbitrary changes to the rules of the game must not deter investors from investing in India. MORE STATES SHOULD BE IN THE AMBIT OF FDI

The scope of FDI must be expanded to more Indian states. FDI has been concentrated in only a few states due to their location and favourable business environment. Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Gujarat have together attracted a staggering 69 per cent of the FDI inflows into the country, with Maharashtra being the top recipient. However, it is disappointing to note that Punjab ranks a lowly 12th in attracting FDI, with a cumulative investment of a meagre Rs 7,693 crore in the past four years, which is a paltry 0.49 per cent of the total inflows of Rs. 15.08 lakh crore from October 2019 to September 2023. In contrast, the neighbouring state of Haryana has been more successful, ranking sixth with FDI equity inflows of Rs 67,502 crore, accounting for a substantial 4.17 per cent of the total inflows during the same period. Punjab's successive governments have been striving to attract investments, particularly from foreign investors, but they have been facing major hurdles such as location disadvantage, poor connectivity, and frequent protests. The existing industry in Punjab has also been complaining about disruptions in their operations and movements due to the aforementioned issues. Haryana is way

ahead in this regard with a significant advantage due to its proximity to Delhi-NCR and superior connectivity. It is high time that Punjab takes firm steps to improve its position in attracting FDI, as its highest ranking was only ninth in 2020-21, when it attracted FDI equity investment of Rs 4,719.45 crore, primarily in food processing, auto components, engineering goods, and textiles. The declining trend in FDI inflows to Punjab since then is a cause for concern. Therefore, the state must create a more conducive environment for businesses and investors, and promote its potential in various sectors, to attract more FDI and boost its economy.

## DISADVANTAGE

Despite signing and negotiating bilateral free trade agreements, India has failed to secure a trade agreement with the European Union or become part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) countries including China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea for free trade agreements. The trade agreement between the 10 member states of ASEAN and their free trade agreement partners — Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and Korea — has deepened economic integration between these countries, which are at the heart of manufacturing supply chains. As a result, India's exclusion from such agreements and the supply chains that run through these regions puts it at a significant disadvantage in this manufacturing ecosystem.

## WAY FORWARD

FDIs have a far greater potential to facilitate the growth of the Indian economy than Foreign Portfolio Investment (FPI). However, India needs to take swift and assertive action to speed up structural reforms, root out corruption, and reduce red tape in bureaucracy to strengthen its position as the most attractive investment destination for FDI. India has adopted a negative list approach in its FDI policy, which outlines only those sectors and activities where foreign investment is regulated. Sectors not mentioned in the document are open to obtaining 100 per cent FDI under the automatic method. The liberal and attractive policy regime for investors, combined with a favourable business climate and reduced regulatory framework, have resulted in higher FDI inflows. But this alone is not enough. India needs to complement this with a sound trade policy that boosts exports, encourages inclusive development, and incentivises R&D to make our manufacturing ecosystem globally competitive, thereby fetching FDI at a large scale.



infrastructure construction activities, and metallurgical industries. For instance, inflows in computer software and hardware fell from \$14.4 billion in 2021-22 to \$9.3 billion in 2022-23, in the automobile industry from \$6.9 billion to \$1.9 billion, in infrastructure construction activities from \$3.2 billion to \$1.7 billion, and in metallurgical industries from \$2.2 billion to \$219 million.

The slowdown in foreign direct investment in India is a cause for concern, as multinational corporations (MNCs) are finding Vietnam, Indonesia, and other competitors more attractive. This is a clear indication that the 'China plus one' strategy of MNCs is not working for India.

macroeconomic environment, the domestic policy and regulatory environment, and political stability. Since India is expected to benefit greatly from the 'China plus one' strategy, policymakers must pay closer attention to these FDI trends.

It is well known that FDI flows are more likely to gravitate towards countries with broader and deeper trade agreements. Lower tariffs and other benefits negotiated through free trade agreements (FTAs) incentivise foreign investment. Therefore, the decline in FDI flows to India may reflect this. A deeper assessment of the country's prospects is needed to address this issue.



# 'Worst Form of Hegemony':

## How Pranab Mukherjee Described Gandhis' Congress Dominance

By: Rasheed Kidwai

A new book written by Pranab Mukherjee's daughter, Sharmishta, 'PRANAB, MY FATHER: A Daughter Remembers' (Rupa Publications India), based upon diary entries of the former president and a lifetime Congressman, makes scathing attacks on Rahul and Sonia Gandhi. Sample this entry in Mukherjee's personal notebook made on July 28, 2020, just a month before his passing, "By making Congress a preserved playground for Gandhi-Nehru family, Congress lost its democratic character which impacted the polity of the country. After independence, if 5 family members of the same family controlled the Congress presidency for 37 years, it speaks of the worst form of hegemony. The family today is no longer providing vitality to the organisation but eating away its strength. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul since 2004 have lost base acquired even partially by Sonia Ji in 2001-2003. They are just interested in somehow forming a government at the Centre under Congress with other regional parties." Meticulously recorded



and written objectively, Mukherjee's daughter Sharmishta painstakingly produces a tomb of sorts, lifting the veil and mystery over a series of significant events throughout the eventful UPA years. Mukherjee, since the early 1960s, had developed a habit of meticulously writing diaries. According to Sharmishta, who had a brief stint as a politician, the book is based on diary entries and her conversations with him on varied issues over the years. Mukherjee comes in particular, critical of Rahul, documenting his political immaturity and lack of application. Mukherjee had

moved to the Rashtrapati Bhawan by the time Rahul had trashed an ordinance in 2013 that had sought to protect convicted politicians. That night, Mukherjee wrote in his diary, "Rahul Gandhi gate-crashed a press conference by Ajay Maken and described the decision of Cabinet as 'nonsense'. This is totally uncalled for. He has all the arrogance of his Gandhi-Nehru lineage without their political acumen." Mukherjee went on to record how his office had received calls from Kapil Sibal and Ahmed Patel, requesting him not to take any action on the ordinance. Mukherjee, however, wondered how Rahul's actions would

impact the coalition partners. Sharmishta says she was the one who first broke the news to him. "After a long time, I saw my father getting so angry! His face became red and he shouted, 'Who does he [Rahul] think he is? He is not a member of the Cabinet. Who is he to publicly trash a Cabinet decision? The Prime Minister is abroad. Does he even realise the implication of his actions and the effect it will have on the Prime Minister and the government? What right does he have to humiliate the PM like this?'"

According to Sharmishta, Mukherjee viewed Rahul's outburst as the final nail in the coffin for the Congress. "The party's vice-president had shown such disdain for his own government publicly. Why should people vote for you again?" he had asked Sharmishta who was herself active in the Delhi Congress unit. She recalls telling Mukherjee how Rahul had tried his best within the party to not promulgate the ordinance, but no one had listened. "When I reported this to my father, he sharply remarked that despite his many years in politics and

his influential position within the party, if Rahul couldn't persuade his colleagues without resorting to theatrics, then maybe politics wasn't his calling."

Mukherjee's faith in Rahul was shaken after this incident. In Pranab Mukherjee's assessment, the Gandhis – Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi – do not trust anyone completely except each other. The 391-page-long book is not critical of Rahul. In several instances, Mukherjee praises Rahul describing him as "very courteous" and "full of questions", which he took as a sign of Rahul's desire to learn. But Mukherjee also could not help observing that Rahul was "yet to mature politically". Rahul continued to meet Mukherjee at Rashtrapati Bhawan when the senior Congress leader had become president. Mukherjee often advised him to join the Cabinet and gain some first-hand experience in governance but Rahul did not heed the advice. During one of these visits by Rahul, Mukherjee on March 25, 2013, noted, "He [Rahul] has interest in a diverse range of subjects but moves very quickly from one subject to another. I don't know how much he listened and absorbed." On July 15, 2013, Rahul had visited him over lunch. As per Mukherjee's diary, Rahul spelt out in detail his plans for revamping the Congress organisation.

# How Prime Minister Modi's 'Personal Guarantee' Guarantees Modi 3.0

By: Bindu Dalmia

As a prelude to this post, let us re-define the transactional relationship that exists between political parties/governments and voters in commercial parlance. Any political entity that is subsequently voted to form a government must be perceived as selling a service or a product with certain definitive features and set of guarantees, or perceived as service providers to their customers/electorate. When consumers opt for a product or service, it comes with certain legal guarantees. Extending this principle of commerce to perceiving the voter as being the consumer, a repeat purchase only happens if the customer/voter expectations have been fulfilled.

Going by the above analogy, would most voters 'buy into' or be potential 'repeat customers' of Brand Modi? My personal



answer is in the affirmative, as most of Brand Modi's past guarantees have been more than honoured over a decade of his tenure.

MODI TODAY HAS ETCHED A DEEP 'BOND' WITH HIS REPEAT VOTER

In my article on Firstpost, two days back, I wrote that "Modi's emotive connect with the voter remains intact." I stand corrected. Because, in hindsight, the prime minister doesn't just have a 'connect' with his repeat

consumer/voter base, but has established a deep and emotive 'bond', a bond that inspires trust in his brand, which he has built based on delivery with his domestic voter base, as equally with the goodwill with the Indian diaspora globally. TRANSFERENCE OF PERSONAL TRUST AUGMENTS BRAND INDIA

Today, that transference of Modi's personal trust has augmented Brand India, which is synonymous with predictable

policies, rationalised taxation, consistent reforms and a liberal democracy. India offers political stability 'which is a prized currency amongst democracies', especially in the current global scenario, where the choices for future investment destinations are limited to authoritarian regimes, theocratic states, or communist superpowers.

The incumbent prime minister's guarantees are schemes that he has already delivered in national size and scale, within a defined timeframe and not some futuristic promise. Modi's 'guarantees' are today perceived by his 'repeat voters' as also his foreign investors as a sovereign guarantee, promises made by the head of state that he never reneged or defaulted on.

With state elections behind us, it is time to look beyond, as the positive ramifications of the

recent wins will be felt on a greater magnitude on sentiments of the BJP's cadre, on Modi's committed voter base, on the multiplier effect Modi's deliverables will have on his own political and personal capital, and ultimately on Brand India.

Typically, four to six months prior to the run-up to national elections in any democracy, the ruling government enters a 'lame duck phase', even before the Model Code of Conduct kicks in. It is a phase of uncertainty, when bureaucrats, policymakers in the government, decision-makers in the corporate world, or foreign investors and MNCs are in a state of suspended abeyance, in a wait-and-watch mode. Even foreign powers and heads of state subtly and adeptly defer bilateral dialogues, so as not to be on the wrong side of the next government.



# Voter as Villain: The Unbearable Odium of The Ecosystem's 'Cowbelt' Slander

By: Rahul Shivshankar

So it has begun. The BJP's fantastic showing in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, it's growth in both Telangana and Mizoram has triggered a sore Congress and "liberal" pretenders in its ecosystem to heap scorn on the unsuspecting voter.

A close Rahul Gandhi aide and prominent Congress party member lit the spark by dog whistling against North Indian voters. His tweet implied that Southern voters were more sophisticated than their allegedly boorish northern counterparts.

As if on cue the "ecosystem" chimed in. Here's a sample: "I know correlation isn't causality, but the states that have lower literacy, lower female literacy, lower female labour force participation, higher use of Hindi, higher population, higher fertility and lower tolerance of meat-eating, seem to prefer voting for BJP." This bilge that masquerades as analysis oozed out of an author and journalist with a magazine with a known anti-Modi slant. Another cantankerous inverted pyramid of journalistic piffle who is accused of accepting Chinese patronage was not far behind in expressing his contempt for "Cow-belt's Hindutva



drunk voters". These are of course just two examples among hundreds of obnoxious labels heaped on "North Indians" over the last two days.

Sadly this isn't the first time that Hindi-belt voters have been villainised for voting the BJP.

A few months ago, senior Congress leader and trusted Gandhi acolyte Randeep Singh Surjewala broke a cardinal rule of democratic politics: never attack the voter. Randeep Singh Surjewala, bless him, did just this when he had a go at BJP voters for backing the Modi led NDA over these last 9 years. "The people of BJP and Jannayak Janata Party (JJP)", he said dismissively, "are 'raakshas' and those who vote for

the party and support them are 'raakshas' too." Rakshasas in Hindu mythology, even a child knows, are cast as deplorable creatures, unwilling to play by the rules of ethical and civilized behaviour.

But can that be summarily said about the NDA's voters? A shade under 45% of all eligible 650 million voters re-elected Narendra Modi in 2019. These included record numbers of marginalised tribals, Maha Dalits and the indigent. What's more they weren't confined to just the Hind-heartland. The BJP has 8 MLAs in Telangana. Almost as many votes in Andhra as the Congress. 25 MPs in Karnataka and scores of MLAs in

Tamil Nadu and similar vote shares as the Congress. In Puducherry it has built a base with almost 14% of the vote. In the Northeast too the BJP is a force. It has governments in Assam and Tripura and allies in other states with who it shares power. In Christian majority Mizoram it won two seats in the latest round of assembly polls. In Bengal, In Odissa and in the West the BJP has a rapidly growing footprint.

Millions of BJP voters believe the things that will make India progress are simple: Belief in Hindu dharmic values, patriotism, egalitarianism and an empowering welfarism, not to mention Constitutionality, and an atmanirbhar security apparatus. But if the Congress and its mouthpieces are to be believed, then subscribing to these wholesome values makes the BJP voters "demonic and bigoted". The wholesale character assassination, the shaming and labelling of voters of the other side by mainstream politicians is not just confined to India. In the United States of America for instance at least two presidential candidates have done it – Mitch Romney's "47%" dig and Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" jibe – only to be punished by voters.

But voter sledging is a recent trend in Indian politics. It breaks the consensus among Indian political parties who have till recently taken pride in edifying India's voters. Politicians could be Machiavellian or worse but not the voting public. The notion was immortalised on silver screen – in the ultimate tribute to them – when Rajesh Khanna proclaimed "Janta sab janti hai" or "the public knows everything".

That the Congress and its allies have allowed this tirade free reign is a serious omission. The hateful slander directed at voters exposes a disturbing undemocratic impulse. Is the Opposition that pitches itself as the "alternative" happy to renounce the maxim: that once elected, governance is about serving "all of the people, all of the time." Rather than insulting the BJP voter with offensive appellations like "Raakshas", "chotiwalah Raakshas", "andhbhakt", "Sanghi" and even the particularly odious "Musanghi" elements in the Opposition, especially, India's grand old party, could objectively ask themselves why voters across class and caste segments have gravitated towards the BJP in increasing numbers in 2019.

## Indictment on murder-for-hire charges to test India-US ties

By Luv Puri

THE US Department of Justice's recent announcement regarding an indictment in the case of a foiled plot to assassinate New York-based Gurpatwant Singh Pannun — who is wanted in India on terror charges — was followed by India's statement that a high-level inquiry committee was investigating the allegations about the involvement of an Indian government official. India's response indicated willingness to address US concerns. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken welcomed the investigation initiated by India, calling it a 'good and appropriate' decision.

In the context of national security and counter-terrorism, the India-US engagement has progressively expanded over the years, particularly after the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. Apart from sharing real-time intelligence

at the apex level, the two countries have shared counter-terrorism experiences and best practices even at the city level. This is exemplified by the institutional exchange between the New York City Police Department and the Mumbai police. The present indictment can impact bilateral ties. According to the US Department of Justice's press release, "an Indian government employee directed a plot from India to murder the US-based leader of the Sikh separatist movement." If the charges are proven, it can lead to complications on the diplomatic front. It may also put India on the defensive in the ongoing probe into the murder of designated terrorist and Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar, even as

Canada has been reluctant to share credible evidence.

Without going into the veracity of the claims made by the US department, the charges are an



opportunity for introspection by the Indian government on issues related to national security. The divergence on these issues between India and countries like the US or Canada is on account of some constitutional complexities. For instance, the

First Amendment to the US Constitution says that the US Congress cannot make any law that can impede the freedom of speech, among other rights. One

of the finest works to understand this point is Anthony Lewis' book *Make No Law*, which describes how the First Amendment is integral to the political DNA of the US. In a nutshell, the book, through *The New York Times* libel case, details a liberal interpretation of freedom of speech and limitations imposed on the state. The expectations from the Indian side can be unreasonable when groups or individuals advocate views that may be against the Indian law. There is no provision in the US Constitution that is close to Article 19(2), which puts

restrictions on the freedom of speech for Indian citizens. Such differences could potentially impact friendly relations between the two countries. In fact, a US citizen can even lobby for a foreign country by registering himself or herself under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Some statements made by certain groups or individuals, who are seen as secessionists or promoters of violent extremism in India, are cleverly worded to ensure that the US law is not violated.

The best way to counter criticism by some West-based actors or organisations about Jammu and Kashmir or Punjab is to respond in a calibrated manner by adhering to international norms and practices. In this context, a smart strategy is to delve into the institutional lessons and craft a response with greater transparency.



# Businessman Who Bought Dominica Passport and Funded U.K. Tories Now Under Investigation in India

Back in the early 2010s, Gursamarjit Singh was thriving. His start-up company, IndiaHomes, was promising to “revolutionize” India’s real estate market by offering tech-led, online-only property sales services. As the business prospered, Singh himself amassed a property portfolio in India and the U.K. worth millions of dollars.

But in April 2015, Singh stepped down as the firm’s operational managing director during a property market crash. The next year, IndiaHomes went out of business, leaving scores of customers out of pocket. Singh then resigned as the company’s registered director. By that point, Singh had given up his Indian citizenship and purchased a passport from Dominica, a Caribbean island nation that sells its citizenship around the world. With the global access offered by his new nationality, Singh left his former life behind, and moved to the U.K. He started using his nickname, “Sam” Singh, became a major Conservative party donor, and bought a mansion now on sale for about \$10 million.

OCCRP has obtained a cache of documents detailing Singh’s business affairs, including bank statements, company documents, and invoices. Together with newly available legal and corporate records, they show how transnational elites can use so-called “golden passports,” coupled with financial tools such as offshore trusts, to move money, travel, and build a new life abroad.

Last year, Indian police issued a so-called “Look Out Circular” against Singh, following a complaint alleging fraud filed by his sister-in-law in India. The circular requires authorities to watch for him at border crossings and arrest or detain him for questioning if he enters the country, according to two Indian lawyers. Police have not formally filed charges, but online records show the complaint is still open. In a response to a request for comment, a Delhi-based lawyer for Singh denied the allegations and told OCCRP that “the Look Out Circular relates to an unfortunate private familial dispute between our client and his sister-in-law who has personal enmity against him.”

Meanwhile, scores of IndiaHomes customers have banded together online for years to complain that the company short-changed them. No legal action has been taken against Singh or the company over the complaints, which Singh denies.

Singh has long since been set up in the U.K., where he has bought high-end property and established companies using his new nationality, and mingled among high society. Singh’s lawyer told OCCRP that IndiaHomes was “a successful venture” and “all the decisions were taken by the executives / board of the Company and not by our client.” The lawyer added that IndiaHomes was “a multi-investor and multi-director company and the [sic] all the decisions were taken by the executives / board of the Company and not by our client.”

The lawyer said “there is no doubt or lack of clarity” as to whether Singh had “the financial ability to buy properties or invest in any other businesses and there is no legal restriction on the same.” The lawyer said that Singh’s Dominica citizenship was acquired “with the purpose of easing business travel and avoiding lengthy delays for cumbersome visa restrictions.”

‘On Your Side’

Singh’s online real estate agency, IndiaHomes, framed itself as a tech-driven innovator in the country’s rapidly expanding property market. One TV advertisement opened with quickfire shots of unscrupulous real estate agents laughing menacingly into the camera while waving wads of cash. Unlike those crooks, the ad assured viewers, IndiaHomes was “on your side.” IndiaHomes worked by getting discounts from construction companies — usually between one and 2.5 percent of the property’s value — and promising to pass the savings on to customers. In one case, the company promised a discount of about \$2,500, one percent of the value of a roughly \$250,000 property sale. However, the buyer said he never received the discount. (Singh’s lawyer said that: “During his tenure (at the firm), IndiaHomes never issued any passback or discounting payments to anyone.”)

When customers bought their homes, they received “credit notes,” which IndiaHomes pledged to redeem. But, crucially, the customers needed to pay the full price upfront before claiming the discounts.

Scores of customers have said that, once the money was paid, they were not able to get their money from IndiaHomes. Extensive complaints against the company appeared on India’s National Consumer Complaint forum, while homebuyers banded together informally in WhatsApp groups and online forums to try to get their discounts.

One customer, Sumit Gautam, made a complaint to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, writing that “after more than five years and consistent follow up... we have still not received this brokerage discount.”

“My humble request [is] to please take appropriate action against IndiaHomes,” he wrote.

No legal action has been brought against IndiaHomes over the accusations, which Singh’s lawyers said he “categorically denies.” Singh’s India-based lawyers said that the accusations — which were reported extensively in openDemocracy in 2021 — were “baseless and denied in toto.”

Singh’s lawyers said openDemocracy was subject to an ongoing investigation by New Delhi police over the article. The publication said it had received no notice of the investigation.

OCCRP obtained nine credit notes dated between 2011 and 2015, which had either been posted online or provided to reporters by customers who said they had not been

paid the money they were owed. One note, dated Jan. 20, 2015, said that IndiaHomes’ parent company, India World Technologies Pvt. Ltd., “reserves the right in its absolute discretion to amend the terms and conditions any time without prior information.”

An archived screenshot of the IndiaHomes website, which is now offline.

By 2014, India’s property market had slowed down. As IndiaHomes started struggling, Singh was spending. A document outlining the company’s response to a due diligence report commissioned by shareholders showed that auditors flagged several of Singh’s expenditures that year. The document indicates the auditors had found “unsatisfactory supportings” for payments worth around \$160,000 to a life coach, the online retailer Amazon, as well as travel, hotel, and entertainment expenses.

The same report stated that IndiaHomes “uses Marketing Agencies to disburse and manage passbacks and discounting payments.” It added that around \$700,000 worth of discounts were “pending disbursement post collection” at the end of 2014, indicating IndiaHomes was in possession of funds that were due to be paid out. It is not clear how much of this money was ever paid out. In April 2015, Singh stepped down as managing director of the company but retained his shareholding. IndiaHomes announced in April 2016 that it had stopped business activities. The company was not closed down, however, but instead was placed under the ownership of successive offshore companies in Mauritius and the United Arab Emirates. Corporate registries do not say who owns these companies. Singh still held his shares in IndiaHomes as recently as 2019, according to Indian company filings. Legally Dominican While at IndiaHomes, Singh had been laying

the groundwork for a life beyond India.

On March 27, 2013, Singh paid \$104,765 to legally obtain a Dominican passport — which required him to give up his Indian nationality under Indian law prohibiting dual citizenship. The new Dominica passport allowed travel to 130 countries without a visa or with a visa on arrival, as well as the possibility of obtaining a 10-year U.S. visa.

Singh had also been buying properties in the U.K. In 2012, property records show, he bought a house in Buckinghamshire in the U.K. for about 3.1 million British pounds (around \$4 million) via a British Virgin Islands company, Linkfield Group Ltd, with part of the cost covered by a mortgage from ABN Amro bank in the Channel Islands.

The offshore company Linkfield also held an investment portfolio of stocks and bonds, through a Barclays Bank account in Singapore, worth nearly \$5 million, bank statements obtained by OCCRP show. (Reporters cross-referenced foreign exchange rates during the dates mentioned in the statements and checked the Buckinghamshire property investment against public records.) In 2015, using his Dominican citizenship, Singh added Hinwick House — an 18-bedroom home modeled on the original Buckingham Palace — to his property portfolio for another 4 million pounds (about \$6 million at the time).

As well as the U.K. property, Singh also began integrating himself into elevated British social circles. Between 2014 and 2019, he donated a little over 270,000 pounds to the ruling Conservative Party, financial disclosures show. He has not donated anything since then. In 2016, Singh was named a trustee of the Elephant Family, a wildlife charity that counts King Charles and Queen Camilla as its so-called Royal Presidents.

## US Shared Evidence On Pannun Case, Canada Did Not: Jaishankar In RS

Union Minister for External Affairs, S Jaishankar, on Thursday addressed the Parliament regarding the alleged plot to assassinate Khalistani terrorist Gurbatwant Singh Pannun on US soil. The minister revealed that the United States had shared crucial inputs with India as part of bilateral security cooperation.

“So, because it has a bearing on our own national security, it was decided to institute an inquiry into the matter and an inquiry committee has been constituted,” said Jaishankar while speaking in Rajya Sabha.

Jaishankar emphasised the significance of the matter to India’s national security, leading to the decision to institute a formal inquiry.

“Insofar as Canada is concerned, no

specific evidence or inputs were provided to us. So, the question of equitable treatment to two countries, one of whom has provided inputs and one of whom has not, does not arise,” the minister added. The Foreign Minister highlighted the lack of shared information from Canada, making ‘Equitable treatment’ of two allegations not possible.

These developments unfolded as prosecutors in Manhattan filed an indictment against an Indian national, Nikhil Gupta, and an unidentified Indian official in connection with the alleged plot to assassinate Gurbatwant Singh Pannun on US soil.

Canada, on the other hand, accused India of involvement in the killing of Canadian Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in September.



# Modi All the Way: What Does BJP's Hat-Trick in Hindi Heartland Mean For Opposition?

The BJP's hat-trick in the Hindi belt arguably cements its status as 'the system-defining party' in a One-Party Dominant (OPD) scenario. What does this mean for the parties pushed to the margins, and how much pressure can they exert on the saffron party in 2024? It's not just that the BJP won all three states. The sheer extent of victory is surprising. In Madhya Pradesh, it achieved a record 48.6 per cent vote share in the face of almost 20 years of anti-incumbency, exceeding the Congress' winning vote share in 2018 by 8 per cent. The Congress was not expected to face anti-incumbency in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. But in Chhattisgarh, the BJP cruised to an all-time high vote share of 46 per cent, inflicting a crushing defeat.

The fact that a Congress victory was seen as a foregone conclusion makes it even more impressive. In Rajasthan, the Congress vote share remained more or less static, but the BJP surged ahead with a healthy swing of 3.7 per cent. Even in Telangana, where the BJP is not a force, it doubled its vote share to win eight seats. Political analysts who had predicted that the BJP's dominance was fragile because its footprint and vote share were not large enough and the Opposition not fragmented enough, will have to think again. The BJP iteration of the OPD system in this, the fourth phase of India's party system, may be different from the old Congress one, but is no less valid. First, the Opposition is disunited, regardless of the INDIA optics, underscoring the unipolarity of Indian politics. The alliance partners, cold-

shouldered by the Congress in the assembly elections, lost no time in pointing fingers at the GOP (once grand



old party) after the results came in. The JD(U), which is the prime mover, is now pitching for the pole position in INDIA. Indeed, the jubilation of the BJP is matched only by that of some of the Congress' allies! The difference is that the Opposition today, unlike that during the Congress hegemony, has no counter-narrative to offer. Modi's development mantra, bundled with nationalism and Hindu pride, won the day against the Congress 'revdis' and promises of a caste census. Second, the assembly election results confirm the trends seen in 2019, which argue a march towards hegemony. The margins of victory are bigger. In MP, some 20 BJP candidates won with margins of more than 50,000, which is huge in an assembly election.

Also, while the number of small parties has increased, their effective vote share has declined. In MP, the combined vote

share of the BJP and Congress has increased by around 7 per cent, while that of the BSP and SP has decreased by 2.5 per cent. These results indicate less fragmentation in the political system than the number of parties (13 were in the fray) would argue. The Aam Aadmi Party, for instance, came a cropper in all three Hindi belt states, polling fewer votes than NOTA (none of the above).

Third, the depth of the BJP's influence in its strongholds appears to make up for its geographical limitations. Apart from caste and Hindu consolidation, it has added new voting groups like women, the youth and the poor (labharthi and would-be labharthis) who repose their faith in Modi's welfare schemes and development-oriented

governance. Conventional wisdom has it that the BJP's continuing dominance would be eroded by three factors: a strong secular pre-poll alliance, increased dependence on regional parties and finally, the absence of the Modi factor. The assembly elections indicate that the so-called secular alliance is a non-starter, at least so far. Nor is the BJP more dependent on its allies, as it consistently has a better strike rate, as was evident in the 2021 Assam polls and the 2020 Bihar elections. That brings us to the Modi factor, which played a crucial role in the recent assembly elections in the absence of a chief ministerial 'face'. Post-2019 surveys clearly indicated that a majority of those who voted for BJP did so because they wanted Modi as their PM. But the ideological shift in favour of the BJP – which now stands for development, welfare and Hindu nationalism – is too well-established to revert to a Mandal scenario. As political scientist Rahul Verma wrote, "It is unlikely that the departure of Modi would represent an abrupt end to the BJP-dominant system." The Congress system was challenged externally, by charismatic figures like Charan Singh, Chandrashekhar, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and so on. Currently, no such challenge exists. Rahul Gandhi's over-hyped 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', far from denting the BJP's deep support base in MP, could not prevent further expansion. Unless the Congress submits to an effective pre-poll coalition, with a credible figure at the helm, 2024 will be a repeat of the assembly elections: Modi all the way.

**Written By: Bhavdeep Kang**

## Hunter Biden indicted on tax charges in California in new criminal case

Hunter Biden has been indicted on nine tax charges in California, becoming the second indictment against the president's son, adding fuel to a scandal that Republicans have been seizing on in the lead-up to the 2024 election.

The state charges on Thursday follow federal firearms charges in Delaware alleging Biden unlawfully obtained a revolver in October 2018 after he falsely stated he was not using narcotic drugs. The new charges include three felonies and six misdemeanor offenses, and Biden faces a possible 17-year sentence if convicted.

"The Defendant engaged in a four-year scheme to not pay at least \$1.4 million in self-assessed federal taxes he owed for tax years 2016 through 2019," the 56-page indictment said, adding that Biden "spent millions of dollars on an extravagant lifestyle rather than paying

his tax bills". In 2018 alone, the indictment read, Biden "spent more than \$1.8 million, including approximately \$772,000 in cash withdrawals, approximately \$383,000 in payments to women, approximately \$151,000 in clothing and accessories" among other expenditures.

Biden's lawyers did not immediately respond to an inquiry and the White House declined to comment.

He had previously been on track to plead guilty to misdemeanor tax charges as part of a plea deal with prosecutors, which covered \$4m in personal income taxes that he allegedly failed to pay in 2017 and 2018. But the agreement imploded in July after a judge raised questions about it. The deal had been pilloried as a "sweetheart deal" by Republicans, who have been investigating nearly every aspect of Biden's business dealings as well as the justice department's handling of the

case. He eventually paid back taxes with a loan from a friend.

The state charges come as Republicans in Congress have pushed forward with a possible impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden in connection with his son's scandals. The House is on track to vote next week on authorizing a formal inquiry, although no evidence has emerged so far to prove that the president accepted bribes or engaged in an influence-peddling scheme, as some GOP representatives have suggested. Some Republicans have expressed doubt about a possible impeachment, questioning whether a case is merited. In September, witnesses brought in by Republicans on the House oversight committee said there was no evidence of crimes by Joe Biden, but also called for further investigation.

Hunter Biden pleaded not guilty to the gun charges in Delaware, which marked the

first time a sitting US president's child faced criminal prosecution. His lawyer said at the time that the special counsel David Weiss was "bending to political pressure" by filing the indictment.

Under the previous plea deal that fell apart, Hunter Biden would have been sentenced to two years of probation. In the draft agreement, prosecutors had noted that his struggles with addiction had worsened during the period after the death of his brother Beau Biden in 2015.

Weiss, the attorney in Delaware, was appointed special counsel by attorney general, Merrick Garland, in August.

The new case is set to add chaos to what will already be an extraordinary election year, in which the sitting president will be dealing with the fallout of his son's possible trials, while his likely opponent, Donald Trump, is facing four separate criminal cases and 91 charges.



# 'No one will remember us': India's hero 'rat hole miners' who helped rescue 41 men from the Himalayan tunnel

Just a few pieces of debris stood between Munna Qureshi and dozens of laborers who his team had been tasked with rescuing from deep inside a Himalayan tunnel after all previous attempts to free them had failed.

"I could hear the laborers gasping on the other side with excitement," the 29-year-old said. "My heart was racing as I removed the last rock between us."

Qureshi is among 12 specialized workers who were called by Indian authorities to help with last month's rescue of 41 construction workers trapped in the collapsed tunnel in northern Uttarakhand state. For nearly three weeks the construction workers were cut off from the world, some 60 meters inside the mountain, receiving food and air through a thin tube and frequent updates from rescuers outside. Engineers worked round the clock to drill a safe passage through the broken rock using a state of the art machine, while officials flew in experts to help with rescue efforts. But ultimately, after 17 days, it was Qureshi and his colleagues who succeeded in bringing the men to safety after the drill broke beyond repair just meters from the trapped workers.

Known locally as "rat hole miners", they belong to a niche group of highly skilled, but poorly paid excavators who typically crawl through narrow tunnels to extract coal from deep within the ground.

It is a profession so dangerous it has been banned in some parts of the country. But it has been thrust into the spotlight in recent weeks, and the men celebrated as heroes by many across the country.

"Rat hole mining may be illegal," Lt General Syed Ata Hasnain, a retired official from India's National Disaster Management Authority told reporters shortly after the rescue. "But a rat miner's talent and experience is not."

Bottom of the hierarchy

Workers employed in the dangerous profession are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in India, hence the unflattering local moniker. Mostly migrants from some of India's poorest states, they are paid about \$5 for a day's work, according to local reports.

Slimly built and nimble, they are expected to enter tiny crevices in mines, often deprived of oxygen and at risk of being buried under loose soil.

Most coal mining in India takes place in northeastern Meghalaya state, home to some of the country's largest coal deposits, amounting to more than 576 million metric tons.

Rat hole mining was banned in the state by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014 due to health and environmental risks, but it's still carried out illegally in secluded pockets of the region.

According to Hasina Kharbhih, the founder



of Impulse, a non-profit that advocates for the safety of these workers, an estimated 225 "rat hole miners" died between 2007 and 2014, before the practice was banned. In 2018, four years after the ban was implemented, another 15 died after becoming trapped in an illegal coal mine for two weeks. "This number however is the tip of the iceberg," Kharbhih said. "I am sure if other regions where this happened were thoroughly researched, these numbers would go up."

Most of the men called to rescue the laborers said they knew the risks when they joined the profession.

"I always thought this job would take my life someday," one of the workers, Nasir Khan, said. "I never thought it would earn me respect."

However, justice B.P. Katoki, a retired judge who was appointed by the tribunal to implement the ban on rat mining, said the

country shouldn't "normalize" such a dangerous profession.

"It was a last effort to rescue the lives of 41 people, so an argument can be made that it was necessary," he told CNN. "But that does not mean one celebrates the practice. That has dangerous implications."

Already forgotten  
Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami announced 50,000 rupees (\$600) will be handed out among the workers as a token of appreciation. But some of the "rat miners" said they are still waiting for details of the compensation.

And despite the media attention, they said they had not been thanked or rewarded by the authorities.

Just two hours after the men were rescued, a list of 90 men who took part in the effort was circulated by an Uttarakhand government official on a media WhatsApp group. Conspicuously

missing were the names of the 12 "rat miners" who put their lives on the line to complete that final breakthrough.

"This does not surprise me," said Mohammad Irshad Ansari, one of the "rat miner" workers. "A laborer is and will only be seen as a laborer. Whatever we may have done, it does not change that we are poor."

CNN has contacted the Uttarakhand government for comment about the compensation. One of the men, Monu Kumar, said he received a hero's welcome when he arrived home in northern Uttar Pradesh state. "There was music playing, we were garlanded, and my family and neighbours distributed 30 kilograms worth of sweets to everyone," he said.

"People (in the village) are saying that we did so much, put our life on the line, but we did not get anything in return."

'Unlike anything we have seen'

To get to the trapped workers, the "rat miners" had to crawl through an 80-centimeter (2.6 feet) diameter pipe inserted into the debris, crouch for hours in the small space and dig through the final 12 meters (about 40 feet) of rubble with their bare hands.

Khan said it was "unlike anything we have ever seen before."

"It was not just debris, stone, or a mountain; there were steel pipes, water, and ropes in there. We used many tools to slowly get them out," he added.

Two "rat miners" went in at a time on rotating four-hour shifts, with one cutting the stone and the other pulling the debris out of the pipe.

## Italy & Spain: 260,000L Fake Olive Oil Seized, 11 Arrested

Italian and Spanish authorities have seized more than 260,000 liters of counterfeit extra virgin olive oil and arrested 11 individuals suspected of mixing high-quality oil with low-quality "Lampante oil," previously used as fuel for oil lamps. The quality of olive oil is determined by its acidity, linked to preserving the inherent benefits and nutrients. The higher the acidity, the lower the quality, with the highest quality typically containing between 0.1% and 0.3% acidity. When acidity reaches 2% or higher, it is classified as "Lampante oil."

According to European Union marketing standards, Lampante oil has an unpleasant odor and is not intended for consumption. It is often made from overripe and rotten olives and used for industrial purposes.

Europol announced on Monday that the joint operation started on Nov. 23 when Spanish and Italian authorities executed searches across multiple locations in both countries.

In the Ciudad Real region, Spain,

authorities apprehended six suspects and seized 12 barrels containing the counterfeit oil, totaling 260,000 liters (approximately 68,708.84 gallons).

Officers also confiscated four vehicles, valued at approximately 91,000 euros (US\$98,208.11), and discovered evidence such as billing documents and emails. Additionally, searches were conducted in the Spanish provinces of Jaén and Córdoba, targeting oil bottling plants and warehouses.

Meanwhile, in the provinces of Sicily and Tuscany, Italy, investigators inspected three oil factories suspected of illegal practices. Investigators obtained fiscal documents, client lists, and oil samples. Additionally, one company has been accused of irregular labeling.

"Various factors, such as the general inflation of prices, reduced olive oil production, and increasing demand, have created the perfect breeding ground for fraudulent producers," said Europol in Monday's statement.

"This illegal practice can not only cause a

public health risk but also undermine consumer trust and thus have further economic repercussions," Europol explained.

Southern regions, including Bari in Italy, Chania in Greece, and Jaén in Spain, are key olive oil markets in the European Union, collectively accounting for over 60% of global olive oil production, according to the International Olive Oil, an intergovernmental organization.

The prices of olive oil in these three countries, especially in Spain, significantly influence other olive oil-producing nations and particularly the oils they plan to export. According to the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, June 2023 was the hottest month ever recorded worldwide. Extreme climate events have a huge impact on the agricultural sector and in this particular case on olive oil production. Consequently, the price of olive oil in the European Union has surged by 75% since January 2021, according to Eurostat, beating other food products such as potatoes, butter and eggs.



# Venezuela's president orders creation of new state and map including land from Guyana



Venezuela's president ordered the creation of a new state called "Guayana Esequiba" on Tuesday, following a controversial Sunday referendum which saw Venezuelan voters approving the annexation of land from neighboring Guyana.

The area in question, the densely forested and oil-rich Essequibo region, amounts to about two-thirds of Guyana's national territory. Venezuela has long claimed the land and dismisses an 1899 ruling by international arbitrators that set the current boundaries.

Guyana has called the move a step towards annexation and an "existential threat." Talking to legislators on Tuesday, President Nicolás Maduro showed a "new map" of Venezuela including the disputed territory and said all residents

from the area would be granted Venezuelan nationality. He said the map would be distributed throughout all schools and public buildings in the country.

Maduro also signed a "presidential decree" creating the "High Commission for the Defense of Guayana Esequiba."

The measures announced include the approval of oil, gas and mining exploration licences. Maduro ordered the state oil company PDVSA to create a special department, "PDVSA-Esequibo," to manage the activities in the region which are to start immediately.

The president also asked legislators to draw up a law banning the hiring of any companies that have worked with Guyana in areas of disputed water, and giving companies currently in the region three

months to leave the area.

The measures also include a census among residents of that territory in order to facilitate the attribution of the Venezuelan nationality.

In an interview Wednesday with CNN's Isa Soares, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali called the Venezuelan moves "an imminent threat" and a "desperate attempt."

Ali said that Guyana was engaging with international allies, including the US, in "defense cooperation," noting a "very elaborate cooperation pact" between the two countries.

"They're fully engaged on this matter. We are engaging the State Department, engaging the White House," he said.

Ali said he had also spoken with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who gave

"assurance that Brazil stands strongly with Guyana and that they would not seek any reckless behavior by Venezuela." Brazil in recent days moved troops along a border that it shares with the Essequibo region in a defensive measure, the country's defense ministry said. Brazil has also sent a team to meet with Maduro, Ali said Wednesday.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Washington continues to seek "a peaceful resolution of the border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana". "The 1899 award determined the land boundary between Venezuela and Guyana should be respected unless or until the parties come to a new agreement or a competent legal body decides otherwise. So we would urge Venezuela and Guyana to continue to seek a peaceful resolution of their dispute. This is not something that will be settled by a referendum," he said. Sparsely populated and with high rates of poverty, Guyana has seen rapid transformation since the 2015 discovery of oil off the coast of the Essequibo region by ExxonMobil, with over \$1 billion in annual government oil revenue fueling massive infrastructure projects. The country is set to surpass the oil pro-

duction of Venezuela, long dependent on its own oil reserves, and is on track to become the world's highest per capita oil producer. Maduro stands to gain politically from Sunday's referendum amid a challenging re-election campaign. In October, the Venezuelan opposition showed rare momentum after rallying around Maria Corina Machado, a center-right former legislator who has attacked Maduro for overseeing soaring inflation and food shortages, in the country's first primary in 11 years. "An authoritarian government facing a difficult political situation is always tempted to look around for a patriotic issue so it can wrap itself in the flag and rally support, and I think that's a large part of what Maduro is doing," said Phil Gunson, a Caracas-based analyst with the International Crisis Group. Writing for Foreign Policy last year, ahead of the announcement of the referendum, Paul J. Angelo of the Council on Foreign Relations and Wazim Mowla, the assistant director for the Caribbean Initiative at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, called the border dispute a "powder keg," arguing that Russian President Vladimir Putin's "defiance of international norms" with the invasion of Ukraine "could give new wings to Maduro's territorial ambitions."

## A Florida lottery winner has less than a week to claim a \$44 million prize before they lose it

This summer, someone walked into a Central Florida gas station and purchased a winning Quick Pick lottery ticket. That person now has less than a week to claim their prize before they forfeit a whopping \$44 million. The unclaimed ticket will expire Monday, December 11, unless the ticket holder comes forward, according to the Florida Lottery. The winning numbers from the June 14 drawing are 09-13-15-46-51-52. The ticket was purchased at a Sunoco Express gas station in Kissimmee, Florida. Prizes must be claimed within 180 days of the drawing or the ticket will expire, according to the lottery. A portion of every Florida Lottery ticket purchased goes to the Educational Enhancement Trust Fund, which funnels into the state's public education system. When a ticket expires, state law requires



80 percent of the unclaimed prize go to the education fund. The remaining 20 percent is returned to the prize pool for future prizes. This summer, someone walked into a Central Florida gas station and purchased a winning Quick Pick lottery ticket. That person now has less than a week to claim their prize before they forfeit a whopping \$44 million. The unclaimed ticket will expire Monday, December 11, unless the ticket holder comes forward, according to the Florida Lottery. The winning numbers from the June 14 drawing are 09-13-15-46-51-52. The ticket was purchased at a Sunoco Express gas station in Kissimmee, Florida. Prizes must be claimed within 180 days of the drawing or the ticket will expire, according to the lottery.



## Three people killed and one critically wounded in Las Vegas university shooting

Police confirm suspected shooter at campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 'has been located and is deceased'

Three people were killed in a shooting at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) campus on Wednesday, according to police officials, who confirmed that the suspect was also dead. A fourth victim was critically wounded in the attack, which took place at approximately 11.45am local time, the Las Vegas metro police department said. Students and professors were forced to barricade themselves in classrooms and dormitories across the 332-acre (135-hectare) campus after getting an alert about a shooter.

At approximately 12.30pm local time, the police department said the suspect had "been located and is deceased." Police said the shooting started on the fourth floor of the building that houses UNLV's Lee Business School, and the gunman went to several floors before he was killed in a shootout outside the building.

UNLV Police Chief Adam Garcia said at an evening news conference that two university detectives immediately got into a shootout with the killer. Officials said there was no ongoing threat and that police had set up a hotline for



people affected by the shooting.

"This is not a test," the university said in one early post on X, formerly known as Twitter, warning of the threats, noting that there were reports of a shooter near a business school building called Beam Hall. "RUN-HIDE-FIGHT". The Associated Press reported that a Swat team that appeared to be with the FBI was seen moving on to campus just before 1pm after the police reported that the suspect was dead.

Vincent Perez, a UNLV English pro-

fessor who was sheltering in place, told MSNBC that he heard a series of repeated shots and what "sounded like a high-powered weapon – just echoing, echoing in a way that ... makes you realize this is somebody out to kill people". Three students told NBC News they were giving a presentation when they learned of a shooter and had to be evacuated. They said they were in a building with many windows, with one student saying her first thought was "Get down, make sure you're safe, make sure everyone else

is safe."

After announcing that the suspect had died, the university said police were continuing to evacuate buildings, and that all UNLV and Nevada system of higher education facilities would remain closed for the rest of the day.

The public university, home to more than 30,000 students, is located about a mile and a half from the Las Vegas strip. The campus is not far from the site of the 2017 massacre at an outdoor musical festival which killed 58 people and injured hundreds more – the deadliest mass shooting in recent US history.

Wednesday's reports came a day after a series of shootings in Austin, Texas, left six people dead and three others injured. A reported former military member was charged in connection. Earlier this week, the US broke its own record for the most deadly mass shootings in a single year. A series of murders took the figure to 38 incidences in which four or more people, not including the shooter, were shot and killed. The previous high was 36, set last year.

## Four takeaways from the fourth Republican debate

Haley is the target, Vivek is a conspiracy theorist, and no-one wants to dunk on Trump except Christie

Donald Trump was the winner simply by staying away and the nation gave a collective yawn as the fourth Republican debate failed to trouble the upper reaches of the TV ratings. You could be forgiven for thinking that Wednesday's showdown in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was the same as the rest: Republican hopefuls slam each other without any of them doing enough to have a breakout moment.

But with the smallest debate field so far and coming 40 days before Iowa's pivotal caucuses, it was one of the last, best chances to showcase policy beliefs. Not because she had a good night (although she did) but because for stretches of the night the former governor of South Carolina was the main focus of attack, particularly from Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and tech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. 'I love all the attention, fellas, thank you for that,' she said.

DeSantis accused Haley of not supporting a ban on gender-affirming medical care for young people and opposing bathroom



laws when she was governor, both of which she denied. And he questioned whether she would act in the best interests of ordinary Americans or Wall Street donors. 'We know from her history Nikki will cave to those big donors when it counts and that is not acceptable,' DeSantis said. Ramaswamy hit her even harder, also bringing up her support from big donors and her time on the board of Boeing Co., and sug-

gesting that she was bankrupt when she left office. 'It adds up the fact that you are corrupt,' he said. Haley was ready for that line of attack. 'And in terms of these donors that are supporting me, they're just jealous,' she told the audience. 'They wish that they were supporting them.' The attacks and her responses made her the focal point of the night, and her name led Google searches for the candidates for

most of the night, according to the analytics service Google Trends. Democrat strategists have been hoping for a messy Republican primary, with rivals ganging up on each other to leave the eventual nominee weakened. Just one problem: The power of Donald Trump means that three of the four people on stage on Wednesday steered clear of a full-frontal assault on the frontrunner for fear of alienating his base.

Chris Christie was the exception, as he has been throughout the race. He called Trump a 'dictator and a bully.' He also pointed out the reluctance of his rivals. 'We're 17 minutes into this debate and ... we've had these three acting as if this race is between the four of us,' he said before going on to describe how he was treated like 'Voldemort' in the Harry Potter tales, with everyone reluctant to say his name.



# Rohingya Refugees Fleeing Bangladesh by Boat This Year Top 2022 Number

BANGKOK — The number of Rohingya taking risky boat trips across the Andaman Sea to flee mounting hunger and hopelessness in the refugee camps of Bangladesh this year has topped last year's numbers and could keep rising, rights groups and aid agencies told VOA. The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees said in a statement that a boat with 150 Rohingya on board landed in western Indonesia Saturday morning.

Amnesty International's Indonesia office told VOA it had confirmed the landing as well. That brings the total number of Rohingya fleeing across the Andaman by boat to 3,722 so far this year, according to the UNHCR. In its statement, the refugee agency said it had also received several reports of two more boats with a combined 400 or so passengers still adrift in the Andaman with broken engines; the agency issued an urgent search and rescue call to countries in the region.

The UNHCR counted 3,705 Rohingya who attempted the sea journey in all of 2022, at the time the most for any year since 2015. Ahead of the



latest landing in Indonesia, aid and advocacy groups told VOA that this year's numbers could, or likely would, keep rising. December falls in the middle of the annual sailing season, when waters are relatively calm and most Rohingya typically make the attempt. "We can't predict what is going to happen in December, but if we look at last year, 2022, the last three months were the ... busiest," UNHCR spokesman Babar Baloch said.

## More to come

Nearly 1 million ethnic Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim minority from Buddhist-

majority Myanmar, now live in the sprawling refugee camps of eastern Bangladesh. Most arrived in 2017, fleeing what the U.N. calls a campaign of "genocidal intent" by the Myanmar military.

Most of those fleeing the camps by boat try to make it across the Andaman to Malaysia or Indonesia, both Muslim-majority countries. Several hundred have died attempting the voyage on overcrowded vessels that often are old and rickety. Entire boats packed with refugees are believed to have been lost at sea.

"I believe there will be a lot

more people on the way, but to [give] a figure ... is impossible," Chris Lewa of the Arakan Project, a group that closely tracks the boats, told VOA. Given the trends, "I predict that there will be more coming," agreed Usman Hamid, Amnesty International's country director for Indonesia.

The aid and advocacy groups, and refugees themselves, ascribe the rising numbers most of all to conditions worsening in the camps and to hopes fading that the Rohingya will be able to return safely to Myanmar anytime soon.

Myanmar by and large denies

the Rohingya citizenship and was pitched into a nationwide civil war by a 2021 military coup. In the sealed camps of eastern Bangladesh, meanwhile, refugees complain of rising gang violence, a dearth of jobs and schools, and meager food rations. The U.N. World Food Program, the main source of food aid for the refugees, cut the value of its monthly vouchers in the camps in June, for the second time this year, to an average of \$8 per person. It blamed a shortfall in donor support.

## Like tossing a coin

"In this uncertainty of future and in this dangerous situation in the camps, where there is extortion and gang violence and insufficient rations and unemployment and no educational opportunity, all these things [are] driving the people to take the dangerous sea journeys," said Mohammed Rezuwan Khan, a Rohingya refugee and advocate living in the camps.

He said that his sister and niece fled the camps by boat last year, making it to Indonesia, and that they all knew the risks.

# Pakistan's Air Pollution Shortens Lives

## Improving Air Quality is Government's Human Rights Obligation

Air pollution in Pakistan is having a devastating impact on people's health. As global leaders meet at the United Nations Climate Conference, COP28, in Dubai, for the first time the formal proceedings have included a day focusing on health. This is an explicit recognition of the urgent need to address the health impact of climate change. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes air pollution as the "single biggest environmental threat to human health," and estimates that 99 percent of the world's population live in locations that are above WHO thresholds to protect health. Pregnant people, children, older people, people with disabilities, people with conditions such as asthma, and socially and economically marginalized populations are more likely to be exposed to or adversely affected by toxic air.

Fair Finance Pakistan, an organization working to address the impact of climate change, has

estimated that air pollution leads to at least 128,000 deaths in Pakistan every year; the real number is likely



higher. According to the Air Quality Life Index, air pollution in Pakistan shortens average life expectancy by 3.9 years. Of Pakistan's cities, Lahore, the capital of Punjab

province with a population of over 13 million, is worst affected, with air pollution cutting life expectancy by

7 years. Lahore consistently ranks among the worst cities in the world for the quality of its air.

Burning fossil fuels for transportation, heating fuel, waste

incineration, electricity generation, and other industrial activities are responsible for increasing levels of air pollution. The destruction of green spaces in Lahore, replacement of agricultural land with concrete structures, crop burning, and lack of a viable public transport system has contributed to worsening air pollution. Under international human rights law, Pakistani authorities have an obligation to protect their citizens' rights to health and life. With respect to air pollution, this means monitoring air quality and putting in place measures to protect those most at risk when pollutant levels are high. The government should introduce regulations to limit air pollution, enforce rigorous air quality standards, transition away from fossil fuels, and develop more green spaces for urban communities. At COP28, Pakistan should join with other countries in calling for a complete phaseout of fossil fuels.



# Pakistan Official: US Did Not Oppose Deportation of Afghans in Country Illegally



ISLAMABAD — Pakistani officials said Tuesday that the United States did not object to Islamabad's deportation of Afghan nationals who are illegally residing in the country but requested the process be slowed down during winter. The crack-down on undocumented foreigners, including 1.7 million Afghans, came under discussion at a meeting with a visiting U.S. delegation led by Julieta Valls Noyes, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. A Pakistani official privy to the talks said that the U.S. side sought to prevent the deportation of around 25,000 "vulnerable" in-

dividuals who fled the Taliban's August 2021 takeover in neighboring Afghanistan and could be eligible for relocation to or resettlement in the United States. "The government of Pakistan doesn't want to deport any vulnerable Afghan, irrespective of whether someone appears on the U.S. prospective resettlement list or any other country," the official told VOA on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to share details of the talks publicly.

"Pakistan is concerned over the lengthy resettlement process the U.S. has adopted," he said. "One thing is clear: The U.S. didn't oppose Pakistan's

deportation policy. It, however, pleaded for going slow during the harsh winters," the Pakistani official told VOA. VOA reached out to the State Department to seek a response to Pakistani assertions that Washington is not opposed to the deportations of Afghans but did not get a response immediately. Neither Pakistani nor U.S. officials formally released details of the meeting Noyes held with Asif Durrani, Pakistan's special representative on Afghanistan. "Good to visit Pakistani Foreign Ministry and see Special Representative for Afghanistan @AsifDurrani20 again today for discussion on Afghan refugees, protection,

and resettlement," Noyes said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Durrani also shared a few details about his talks with the U.S. delegation on his X social media platform. "We discussed issues concerning Afghan refugees and their resettlement," he said. A pre-visit U.S. State Department statement said that during her four-day visit, Noyes would meet with government officials and nongovernmental and international organization partners to "discuss shared efforts to protect vulnerable individuals and accelerate safe, efficient relocation and resettlement of Afghan refugees in the U.S. immigration pipelines." Official data shows that Pakistan's deportation drive has forced more than 400,000 people to return to Afghanistan since mid-September. The United Nations and global human rights groups have criticized the crackdown and urged Islamabad to urgently halt it, noting that Afghanistan suffers from a dire humanitarian crisis stemming from years of war and natural disasters.

Pakistani authorities defend the deportation drive, linking a recent surge in deadly, nationwide terrorist attacks to the undocumented Af-

ghan population. In a separate statement on X, Noyes said she held an "important conversation" with representatives of the U.N. refugee agency in Islamabad and discussed "our shared commitment to support vulnerable Afghans in Pakistan." American and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 when the then-insurgent Taliban seized power from a Washington-backed government in Kabul. They also evacuated tens of thousands of Afghans who worked with the international military mission during its two-decades-long presence in the country, fearing they would face Taliban reprisals. Pakistan's otherwise close relations with the Taliban government have come under severe strain over the deportation drive. De facto Afghan authorities have denounced the policy as unjust and inhumane, saying it has ended the goodwill the neighboring country earned for hosting millions of refugees from conflict-torn Afghanistan over the past four decades. The Pakistani government says the country still hosts more than 2.2 million documented Afghans, including 1.4 million legal refugees. They are not the subjects of the ongoing crack-down.

## Pakistan court rules against ex-PM Imran Khan's plea to shift case

**The rebuff from Islamabad High Court represents the latest legal setback to Khan's attempts to contest upcoming elections.**

Islamabad, Pakistan — A court in Islamabad on Wednesday dismissed the petition from former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan seeking to move a key appeal filed by him to Lahore, marking the latest setback for his attempts to contest upcoming national elections.

Khan has been behind bars since August 5. He was initially convicted for not disclosing assets earned from the sale of gifts from foreign dignitaries meant to be kept in a state depository, and later in a case about revealing state secrets.

The case involving gifts led to Pakistan's election commission disqualifying him from parliament. He had filed an appeal in the Islamabad High Court in October last year against that ban on his participation in electoral politics.

However, in January this year, Khan and his legal team sought to withdraw the appeal from the Islamabad High Court, contending that they have filed a subsequent plea in the Lahore High

Court.

In March, before his eventual imprisonment, the Lahore High Court had granted protective bail to Khan in multiple cases.

However, Amer Farooq, the chief justice of the Islamabad High Court, expressed his displeasure over the matter, saying the case should be heard where the appeal was first filed. On Wednesday, the court decided formally that it would not allow Khan to withdraw his petition — though it is yet to deliver its verdict on whether the election commission should lift its ban on Khan's participation in elections. Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party were in power from August 2018 to April 2022 before he was ousted through a parliamentary vote of

no confidence. In August 2022, Khan was accused of buying gifts given by foreign dignitaries from the state gift depository — called the Toshakhana — during his premiership, without disclosing the assets in declarations submitted to the election commission. Two



months later, he was found guilty by the election commission of "corrupt practices". The verdict meant he was not only disqualified from being a member of the parliament but also declared ineligible to participate in

elections. Subsequently, a trial court, set up for criminal investigation in the same case, declared Khan guilty on August 5 this year, sentencing him to three years in jail. The same day, Khan was arrested from his Lahore residence and shifted to a jail in Attock city in Punjab province. While the Islamabad High Court suspended the conviction and jail sentence on August 29 and granted him bail, the ex-premier was immediately detained for his involvement in a so-called cypher case, which is related to a diplomatic document that allegedly went missing when it was in the former leader's possession during his time as prime minister. Khan is currently imprisoned in Rawalpindi city's Adiala Jail. With Khan behind bars, the PTI has seen a raft of its leaders quitting the party following a state crackdown, and last week, Gohar Ali Khan, a lawyer, was elected as the new PTI chief after an intra-party election.





# Global Esports Awards 2023: India's S8UL bags Esports Content Creator of the Year award again

One True King, Judo Sloth, Last Free Nation, Loud, Tribo Gaules and other well-renowned names, the company claimed in a release on Friday. This victory marks a significant milestone for S8UL and elevates the stature of Indian Esports worldwide. Lokesh Jain aka Goldy, co-founder of S8UL and 8Bit Creatives shared his thoughts right after the coveted win. "Winning the 'Content Group of the Year' award last year was an incredible milestone for us, and to follow it up with another one this year is beyond words to express our gratitude. "This achievement is a testament to our dedication, the hard work of our creators, and the endless support from our fans. S8UL has changed the way gaming and content is perceived in India. We are not just creating content but we are shaping the future of Indian Esports & gaming creators economy on a global scale," he

added. Since its very inception, S8UL has been the frontrunner of gaming content in India. With a clear vision, they have brought together some of the best gaming content creators under one umbrella to create engaging and entertaining gaming content, which is enjoyed every day by millions of their loyal viewers. The high calibre of their Esports talent which includes Mortal, Scout, Payal, Mamba, Snax, Rega, Krutika, Sidd, Kaashvi, and many more is evident from the various Esports titles they have been winning over the years including the inaugural 'Global Impact on Mobile Gaming' award at the MOBIES earlier this year. "Winning in this difficult category twice, against some of the biggest names in the industry is a surreal feeling. These milestones let us know that we are on the right path with our vision and also give all of us something to celebrate at a time when the

industry is undergoing significant transformations," said Animesh Agarwal aka 8Bit Thug, co-founder of S8UL and 8Bit Creatives. "This victory rounds off yet another historic year for the community. Thank you to the incredible team, our fans, and everyone who believed in us! We are ready for even greater things in 2024! Onwards & Upwards, as always," he said. Besides S8UL, Naman 'Mortal' Mathur, the co-founder and widely regarded as the 'Face of Indian Gaming and Esports' has also been nominated for the 'Esports Personality of the Year' category at the awards. The award was claimed by Disguised Toast. Dedicated to showcasing top-class performance and innovation, the Esports Awards recognises excellence in Esports and ensures that the success and achievement of Indian Esports is celebrated globally.

S8UL, India's leading Esports organisation, has secured for the second consecutive year the prestigious 'Esports Content Creator of the Year' award at the Global Esports Awards 2023 in Las Vegas (USA). By winning this award for the second consecutive year, S8UL has established its position as a trailblazer not only in the Indian Esports community but on the international stage as well. The brainchild of Esports industry veterans Naman Mathur (Mortal), Animesh Agarwal (8Bit Thug), and Lokesh Jain (Goldy), S8UL made history by outshining global contenders such as Christian '1WDDominate' Rivera, Timothy 'ITZTIMMY' An, The Score Esports,

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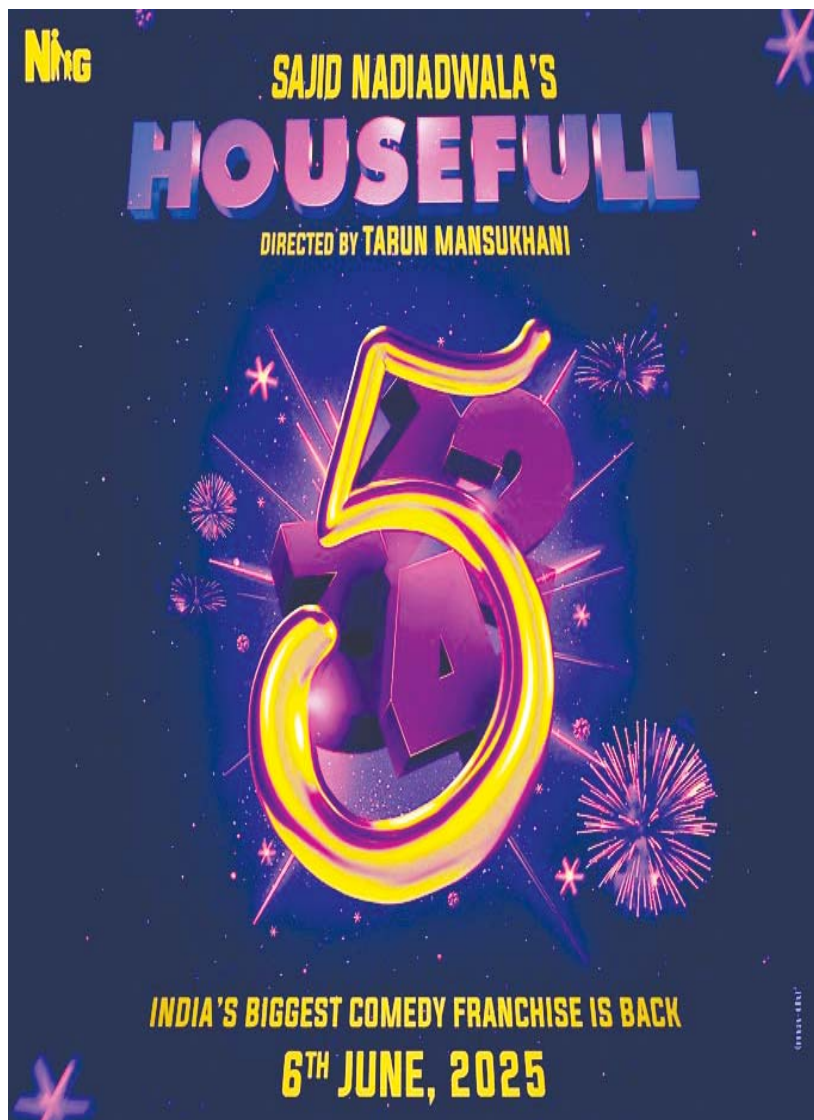
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# Akshay Kumar Announces Housefull 5 - Diwali 2024 Release Confirmed

The much-awaited announcement of the fifth instalment in the highly successful Housefull franchise has been made by megastar Akshay Kumar. "Housefull 5" will be released during Diwali in 2024, promising a roller-coaster ride of fun, entertainment, and comedy that is sure to leave audiences in stitches.

In a landmark moment for Indian cinema, "Housefull" becomes the first-ever franchise to have five instalments. The news was shared by Akshay Kumar, who officially launched the poster and release date of the film, igniting waves of anticipation among fans. The film, directed by Tarun Mansukhani and produced by Sajid Nadiadwala, will boast a star-studded cast with the addition of new members joining Akshay Kumar and Riteish



Deshmukh. The Housefull franchise, launched in 2010, has been widely received for its unique blend of comedy and entertainment. The first film had an ensemble cast including Akshay Kumar, Riteish Deshmukh, Lara Dutta, Deepika Padukone, Arjun Rampal, Mithun Chakraborty, and Boman Irani. The subsequent sequels released in 2012, 2016, and 2019, with each adding new elements and characters to the storyline, contributing to the franchise's continued success and popularity.

As fans eagerly await the release of "Housefull 5", the film is expected to deliver another unforgettable comedy experience and as Akshay Kumar says FIVE times the madness.

## Shivangi Verma: 'Natural to experience moments of doubt when it comes to heart'

Mumbai- Actress Shivangi Verma, who has been a part of TV shows like 'Choti Sarrdaarni', 'Reporters' and 'Bhootu', said when it comes to choosing your life partner, it's natural to be confused. The actress said at times one may need to meet and spend time with many people in order to choose. "It's not uncommon to meet and spend time with different individuals while figuring out what you truly want. We explore various connections to understand ourselves better. It's all part of the journey to finding genuine compatibility," she said. Shivangi said:

"Absolutely, confusion and uncertainty are universal emotions. In real life, it's natural to experience moments of doubt or confusion when it comes to matters of the heart. It's essential to give oneself the time and space to navigate through these feelings." Ask her what are her parameters to find the perfect partner, the actress said, adding: "Compatibility, shared values, and mutual respect are vital parameters. It requires self-awareness and understanding of what one truly desires in a relationship. It's about aligning with someone who

complements your journey, both personally and professionally."

Talking about dating within the industry, Shivangi added: "It can be beneficial as both partners understand the demands and challenges of the profession. However, it's crucial to strike a balance and maintain individual identities. Challenges may arise, but with effective communication and mutual support, a relationship between actors can thrive."



## Ananya Panday 'proud' to represent India at Red Sea International Film Festival

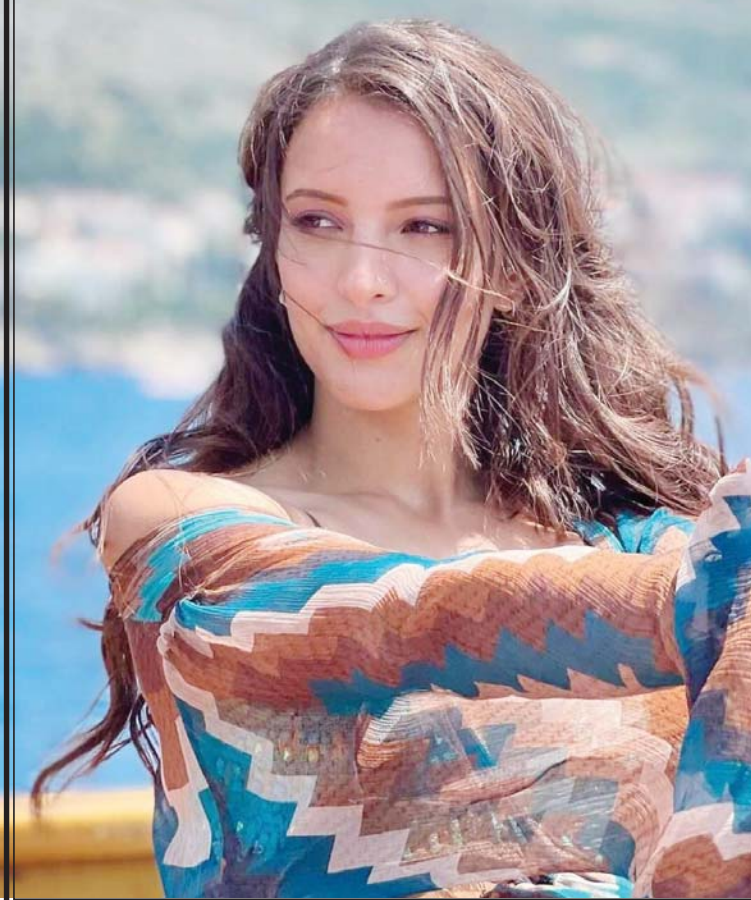
Mumbai- Bollywood diva Ananya Panday will be representing India at the prestigious Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah, and shared it is a proud moment for her. The festival is known for its celebration of diversity in cinema. She will also be attending Vanity Fair's Women in Cinema forum. Expressing her gratitude, Ananya shared: "It's an honor

to be part of an esteemed festival such as the Red Sea International Film Festival. Representing India on this platform is a proud moment for me." Her participation will surely highlight the growing global influence of Indian cinema and the talent within the industry. Meanwhile, on the work front Ananya has 'Kho Gaye Hum Kahan', 'Control', and 'The Untold Story of C Sankaran Nair'.





# Triptii Dimri calls 'Qala' a journey of self-discovery, resilience as film clocks a year



Mumbai- Actress Triptii Dimri, who is known for her work in 'Bulbbul', 'Laila Majnu', and the recently released 'Animal', is celebrating one year of her psychological drama

'Qala'. Looking back at the film, the actress said that it was a journey of self-discovery, resilience and love for art.

The film, written and directed by Anvita Dutt, saw Triptii essaying the character of Qala Manjushree, a renowned singer haunted by her past. Her character struggles with a strained relationship with her mother (played by Swastika Mukherjee), showcasing

sheltered innocence.

Looking back at the film, the actress said: " 'Qala' was more than just a film. It was a journey of self-discovery, resilience, emotions, passion and love for art. I'm grateful

storytelling and to everyone who embraced the film with open hearts.

Truly grateful for the journey this film has taken us on." Meanwhile, on the work front, Triptii has exciting projects in



the pipeline, including Raaj Shaandilyaa's 'Vicky Vidya Ka Woh Wala Video' and Anand Tiwari's 'Mere Mehboob Mere Sanam'.

Her recent film 'Animal', which stars Ranbir Kapoor in the titular

role, released on Friday and has been getting good response from the audience. 'Animal' has clashed with the Vicky Kaushal-starrer 'Sam Bahadur' in theatres.

## Deepika Padukone drops glimpse of her day out with BFFs in London



Mumbai,- Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone gave a sneak peek into her day out with her girlfriends in London, giving her fans best friend's goals. Taking to Instagram, Deepika, who enjoys a massive fan following of 77.6 million followers, shared some photos with her friends Sneha Ramchander and Divya

Narayan.

In the photos, we can see the 'Piku' actress flashing her bright smile for the selfie. The next picture shows the girls standing against a floral backdrop and posing for the lens. Deepika is wearing a white hoodie, matching joggers and layered the outfit with a long brown coat. Her hair is tied

in a neat bun. She captioned the photo with an infinity symbol. Her friend shared a picture of them together sitting in a fine dining restaurant. The geotag location is Jamavar London. Fans took to the comment section and dropped heart emojis for the actress. Meanwhile, on the work front, Deepika will be next seen in 'Kalki 2898 AD', 'Fighter', and 'Singham Again'.





# Expert panel approves Covaxin for emergency use, waives off clinical trial condition

**A subject expert committee has approved Bharat Biotech's Covaxin for emergency use authorisation in India and removed the clinical trial mode condition on its use..**

The subject expert committee (SEC) of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation has approved Bharat Biotech's Covaxin for emergency use authorisation in India.

Earlier the vaccine's emergency use was permitted only in the clinical trial mode. This condition has now been waived off.

The decision was taken after the expert panel studied the interim data of Covaxin's Phase-3 trial

that showed 81 per cent efficacy.

Covaxin is India's first indigenous vaccine against the Covid-19 and is being developed and manufactured by Bharat Biotech.

It is among the two Covid-19 vaccines that have secure emergency use authorisation in India. The other vaccine is Covishield, which is developed by Oxford University and

AstraZeneca and is being manufactured in India by the Pune-based Serum Institute of India.

On March 3, Bharat Biotech announced results of Phase 3 clinical trials of Covaxin, saying the vaccine demonstrates interim clinical efficacy of 81 per cent.

The Phase 3 clinical trials involved 25,800 volunteers, making it the "largest trials ever



conducted in India" in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Bharat Biotech said.

"Covaxin has demonstrated 81 per cent interim efficacy in preventing Covid-19 in those without prior infection after the sec-

ond dose," it said, adding that apart from demonstrating high clinical efficacy against Covid-19, the vaccine also provides "significant immunogenicity against the rapidly emerging variants" of the virus causing Covid-19.

## Biden announces plans to purchase 100 million more Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine doses



President Joe Biden announced Wednesday that he is directing the US Department of Health and Human Services to purchase an additional 100 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine. The administration

and the pharmaceutical giant still need to negotiate when these 100 million doses will be available but it will likely happen later this year as Johnson & Johnson works to ramp up production.

"There is light at the end of this dark tunnel of this past year, but we cannot let our guard down now or assume victory is inevitable. Together we're going to get through this pandemic and usher in a healthier and more hopeful future," Biden said alongside the CEOs of Johnson & Johnson and Merck, which is helping to manufacture the Johnson & Johnson's vaccine under a deal brokered by the White House.

The New York Times first reported the announcement was expected. The White House told governors Tuesday to expect fewer than 400,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine next week, far below what they initially expected would be avail-

able. Biden announced last week that the US would have enough Covid-19 vaccine doses for every adult American by the end of May, which was a two-month acceleration of the previous timeline his administration had laid out. This new purchase of Johnson & Johnson vaccines will not accelerate that timeline, but these doses would help build up US vaccine stock later in the year. The new goal was made possible by a rare partnership between competitors Merck and Johnson & Johnson. The White House says it is utilizing the Defense Production Act to help equip two Merck facilities to manufacture the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

When Biden first took office, his

team learned that Johnson & Johnson's one-shot coronavirus vaccine was highly effective but the company was millions of doses behind its production schedule. Jeff Zients, the White House's coronavirus czar, called Johnson & Johnson's CEO Alex Gorsky and was instrumental in brokering the deal. Having enough vaccine supply by the end of May does not mean all Americans will receive shots by the end of May. Issues with distribution and personnel mean it could take much longer for all the doses to be administered. More than 527,700 Americans have died from Covid-19 as of Wednesday morning, according to Johns Hopkins University.

## Why some people can deal with the cold



Plunging into ice baths post-workout might be how some professional athletes choose to recover, but anyone trying to keep fit in the winter will know that the cold can be as harsh as it is rejuvenating.

For Matilda Hay, a recreational swimmer, there's no choice be-

tween a heated pool or cold-water wild swimming. While the latter has been lauded for its health benefits, it's not for everyone. "When I've tried wild swimming, I can't stay in for long - I lasted maybe a few minutes before I came running out," says Hay. "My sister is able to

stay in much longer than me for some reason. I just think we handle the cold differently."

Evidence for some of the mental health benefits of cold-water swimming cited in the media is a little thin, too. It's largely based on the case study of one 24-year-old woman. So why has it proven so popular? And is Hay right; are some people just better at handling the cold than others?

The weather takes the cutting edge off our performance levels. In the cold our muscles slow, taking longer to tense and reducing our ability to both burst into action and the total amount of power generated (though this can be mitigated with a good

warm-up beforehand).

The reasons for this decrease in performance in cold weather are a little complex, not least because our tolerance of the cold depends on our genetics, subcutaneous fat levels - the fat just beneath our skin - and body size. One suggestion is that when our bodies cool the rate at which we release energy in our muscle cells decreases.

But exercising in the cold has also been linked to better cardiac health, a stronger immune system and converting white fat cells to brown, contributing to more weight loss. So, if done safely, it could bring serious health benefits.

Some of us might have an ad-

vantage when it comes to working out in cold weather. One in five people lack the muscle fibre protein  $\alpha$ -actinin-3. This mutation reveals a little bit about our evolutionary history and explains why some modern athletes succeed in the cold, while others remain frozen to the start line. Sometimes called the "gene for speed",  $\alpha$ -actinin-3 gives athletes a competitive advantage when it comes to powerful bursts of energy and muscle recovery, but it might be less useful in other situations.

All of our skeletal muscles are made up of a combination of two types of fibre: slow-twitch muscle fibres and fast-twitch muscle fibres.



## Why hydrogen water is the new health fad



Hydrogen water is the latest wellness trend to hit the US and UK. After vitamin-fortified water, health buffs are now buying hydrogen-enriched water with much-touted benefits such as reducing inflammation, wrinkles, bone loss and helping metabolise fat and glucose faster. These benefits can be achieved by chugging just about 500 ml (two glasses) of hydrogen-rich water a day, much less than the recommended 8 to 10 glasses a day of regular water, say studies.

Regular water which has two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen is neither alkaline nor acidic. But when it is infused with hydrogen — by either adding magnesium or through the process of electrolysis — it becomes rich in antioxidants. A 2013 review published in the journal Medical Gas Research found that when ingested hydrogen acts as an antioxidant, mopping up free radicals — inflammation-causing molecules linked to everything from accelerated skin ageing to cancer.

While the US and UK are new to this trend, the Japanese have long been advocating use of hydrogen-rich water, or the Shin'nooru solution, as they call it.

## Do you eat healthy?

**Beware, you may still develop deficiencies and fall sick**

Nowadays, people are becoming obsessive for losing weight and switching to healthy eating. But most people don't know what they actually are eating and this has become a common problem. A study has found that an obsession with eating vegetarian food may be endangering lives, reports The Independent.

Nutritionist Patrick Denoux believes that a purely vegetarian diet can lead to B12 deficiency which can cause various health problems. B12 is not made by the body and most people get the required nutrient from animal products like eggs, dairy products, meat or fish. If untreated, a vitamin B12 deficiency can lead to

vision loss, weakness, tiredness and light-headedness, heart palpitation, nerve problems, depression and memory loss. Earlier studies suggested that children who lacked this vitamin perform poorly in cognitive tests. The other issue with healthy eating is that it could be leading to orthorexia nervosa — a term first coined by physician Steven Bratman in the year 1990. Someone suffering from orthorexia is imprisoned by a range of rules which they impose on themselves. Orthorexia is not part of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, set down by mental health professionals in the United States that is also widely used as a benchmark



elsewhere.

Experts believe that orthorexia sufferers could be treated with cognitive behavioural therapy, which may involve learning how to deal with situations that can cause anxiety about eating, relaxation techniques and discussing excessive beliefs.

## Want that glowing, healthy skin this Diwali? Then stop stressing out

**You don't want a dull face, especially during festive season. Here's how to save your skin from side-effects of tension.**

You can buy designer clothes for

Diwali and wear the best of gems and baubles, but if your skin isn't healthy and glowing, you won't be able to look your best for festivities. We often blame bad diet and genetics for our skin problems, but stress equally harms it. In fact, with our increasingly hectic lifestyles, it has become a major culprit. Dermatologists Rajat Kandhari and Lokesh Kumar tell us how stress impacts our skin, and how to fix the

problem.

Cortisol disturbs the hormonal balance in the body. So, stress becomes one of the major reasons for acne breakout, as it causes inflammation of the skin. It can also upset the balance of good and bad bacteria in the gut, causing acne and pigmentation on the neck.

Fix: Avoid anxiety food such as sugar. Drink loads of water and consume a high-fibre diet. Your skin specialist will prescribe topical and



oral medicines, depending on the severity of your acne.

2) Dryness: When you are stressed, you drink less water, and consume more tea and coffee. This causes dehydration, leading to dry skin. Stress also increases the level of hormone cortisol, which reduces the skin's ability to retain water, again causing dryness.

Fix: First and foremost, consciously drink more water when you are stressed. You can opt for warm water to calm you down, besides it also helps your skin. Go for foods and drinks rich in antioxidants. Prunes, blackberries, amla juice, pomegranate, and green tea are all good choices.

3) Fine lines: When feeling stressed, we tend to frown or purse our lips. Facial muscle tension can cause wrinkles and fine lines. Cortisol also causes an increase in blood sugar, which through glycation (the bonding of a sugar molecule to a protein or lipid molecule without enzymatic regulation) harms collagen. Fix: Take a deep breath, and relax your facial muscles, especially those around the eyebrows and cheeks. Chewing gum can also help.

## Trying to lose weight ?

Here's how you can consume fewer calories in a day



**If you wish to shed those extra kilos, then skipping your breakfast and fasting until lunch may help you eat around 353 fewer calories every day, a recent study has found.**

and 375ml of orange juice, for three days. Their overall diets were assessed via food diaries, while their physical activity levels were determined by acceleration devices. The results revealed that skipping breakfast causes people to eat 353 fewer calories a day. Although people eat around 115 more calories a day when they have breakfast, that meal alone contains on average 468 calories. The researchers noted that they do not know why eating breakfast is associated with a lower likelihood of being overweight or obese, or whether eating breakfast can be used effectively as a weight-control strategy. The findings are published in the Journal of Nutrition.

While there are many local superfoods that help you get in shape, sometimes skipping a meal may also help you trim your waistline. A recent study discovered that skipping your breakfast and fasting until lunch may help you eat around 353 fewer calories every day. According to researchers, fasting until lunch causes people to eat around 353 fewer calories a day, a study found. Study author Dr Keith Tolfrey said, "There is a common belief that breakfast is the 'most important meal of

the day". However, around one third of children and adolescents in many countries skip breakfast regularly. The findings from the Universities of Loughborough and Bedfordshire support a growing body of evidence that restricting calories, via fasting, boosts weight loss by reducing people's calorie intake and regulating hormones involved in fat storage. The team analysed 40 girls aged between 11 and 15 years old. The participants ate no breakfast or 6.3g of Weetabix with 188ml of semi-skimmed milk



# George Santos: a creature of Congress, dark money and limitless Republican hypocrisy

**The New York fabulist faces expulsion but the fault for his rise lies with Trump, McCarthy, McConnell and the supreme court**

By Sidney Blumenthal

It seems churlish for any member of the party of Donald Trump to single out George Santos for punishment as a liar, fraudster and fabulist. The 23 federal charges against the first-term member of Congress pale beside the Republican frontrunner's 91 felony counts and civil suits over fraud and E Jean Carroll's defamation claim, based on her allegation of rape. Republicans' faux horror at the discovery of Santos's extravagant spending of campaign funds on Botox, casino chips and OnlyFans belies their previous blithe tolerance of the red-dressed, gay-pride, Brazilian drag queen in their midst. Santos thrived as the symbol of the cultural contradictions of Republicanism. Did his sophisticated taste for accessories from Hermès and Ferragamo finally do him in with his anti-globalist colleagues?

The facts of Santos's false identity were pried apart gradually, beginning before he was even sworn in. Slowly, his crimes were revealed. Exposé after exposé – yet nothing happened. So long as Santos voted as a reliable Republican (100% Heritage Action rating), he was shielded from ritual rounds of queer bashing, much less expulsion. The narrow Republican majority in the House of Representatives required every able-bodied member who could hold up an arm. Santos was straight as a party liner.

Only when the stories of Santos's lifetime of fraud became a rushing torrent did Kevin McCarthy, then speaker, refer the question to the ethics committee. There, it stayed bottled up. Republicans were always reluctant to excise Santos. His fate was entangled in the foul politics of the House.

Only after McCarthy was deposed by an ultra-right

cabal, and three prospective speakers chosen by a majority went down to defeat before Mike Johnson was elected, was an ethics report released and the expulsion of Santos brought up. It was a case of the first time as farce and the second, third and fourth times as farce, to be followed by the most comical farce of all. The day the Republican chair of the ethics committee introduced a motion to expel poor George, a leak from the forthcoming memoir of Liz Cheney – purged from her leadership post in the Republican conference in 2021, scoured for opposing Trump's attempted overthrow of the US government, defeated in a vicious primary in 2022 – revealed that Santos was hardly among the most risible prevaricators in the House. McCarthy had explained to Cheney that he went on his humiliating visit to Trump at Mar-a-Lago a mere three weeks after the January 6 insurrection out of pity, because he felt bad that Trump was "depressed".

"He's not eating," said McCarthy. This excuse from the supreme sycophant – "My Kevin," Trump called him – was as likely as Trump not violating the constitution's emoluments clause to enrich himself. The only plausible reason for Trump not eating would be because there was a double cheeseburger already lodged in his gullet.

Then the Washington Post reported that several weeks after McCarthy's fall, he had a troubling call with Trump, who informed him why he had been the not-so-hidden hand behind his ouster. McCarthy, Trump explained, had not expunged Trump's two impeachments and endorsed him for 2024. McCarthy's pilgrimage to Trump in early 2021, which made Trump's revenge tour possible, had gained him no credit. As speaker,



McCarthy had immense control over the spigot of Republican money and the influence that flows from it. If he had decided to ignore Trump's threats and cut him off, Trump would have been severely disabled. But McCarthy revived the monster, so the monster in turn could strangle him. At long last, too late, McCarthy said to Trump: "Fuck you."

The newly installed speaker, Mike Johnson, declares himself divinely anointed. (Does that make Matt Gaetz the hand of God?) "I believe that Scripture, the Bible, is very clear: that God is the one who raises up those in authority," he said, in his inaugural speech. Johnson extended his omniscience about the Lord's blessing to every other member of the House. "He raised up each of you. All of us." Presumably, the elect included Santos.

When it came to a vote to expel Santos, Johnson recoiled. He had "real reservations". He would not apply the whip. Members could "vote their conscience". As for himself, he said he was "concerned about a precedent that may be set for that". In 2022, Johnson sponsored the Stop the Sexualization of

Children Act, which would ban teaching "concepts like masturbation, pornography, sexual acts and gender transition", and prohibit "federal grants to host and promote sexually oriented events like drag queen story hours and burlesque shows". Now, he would allow members to consider forgiveness for the sinner's financial crimes, in "good faith".

Johnson might well cite Matthew 7:1: "Judge not, that ye not be judged." His own financial disclosure forms since he was a state legislator in Louisiana and as a member of the House are extraordinarily sketchy. He claimed he did not have a bank account. But as a legislator he had a contract to bill the state \$400,000 to defend a law he sponsored to restrict abortion clinic access. In 2015 his financial disclosure form showed he cleared tens of thousands from religious right organizations: Freedom Guard, a legal operation; Living Waters Publications, a Christian publishing house that offered "biblical evangelism training camps"; Louisiana Right to Life; and the Providence Classical Academy (\$5,000-\$24,999), "part-time".

The House ethics

committee report on Santos buried within it a document compiled by his own campaign before the election in 2022 that detailed many lies and frauds later exposed. He and his campaign, as well as the National Republican Congressional Committee, were apparently all cognizant of the fraud from the start. Exhibit six of the ethics committee report consists of the 141-page "George Santos Vulnerability Report", a point-by-point description of fake college degrees, Ponzi schemes, fraudster firms, scams, multiple civil judgments for cheating creditors, evictions and incident after incident of questionable behavior.

The "vulnerability report" also chronicled Santos's evolving story of his grandparents, from Belgian migrants who "fled the devastation of world war II Europe" into "Holocaust refugees". This was the first falsehood about his background disclosed by the media, by CNN a week after his election. His fabrication of his identity, down to hiding his real given name ("George Devolder") was an act of brazen and clumsy thievery he got away with to get into office with the aid of complicit campaign handlers.



# Abramovich's Kids, Lithuanian Citizens, Shield His Wealth from Sanctions

Two children of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich used Lithuanian passports to help take control of some of his wealth, which may have safeguarded it from sanctions imposed on their father just weeks later, leaked documents reveal. Abramovich transferred the partial or complete ownership of trusts holding at least US\$4 billion to his seven children in February 2022, shortly after the U.K. and the U.S. threatened to sanction Russian oligarchs if Russia invaded Ukraine, The Guardian reported in January. What was unreported at the time was that two of those children — Arkadiy, 30, and Anna, 31 — were Lithuanian citizens when they were declared as the new beneficiaries of Abramovich's Grano Trust Fund, which is based in the self governing U.K. dependency of Jersey. Siena, OCCRP's Lithuanian member center, discovered details of the transfer in documents leaked from a Cyprus-based corporate service provider. The documents included a scan of Arkadiy's passport, as well as passport information for Anna. A lawyer for Abramovich did not

respond to requests for comment. The transfer took place during February and March 2022 as Russia was invading Ukraine. The U.K. and European Union sanctioned Abramovich in March.

The leaked documents suggest that Abramovich's transfer of just over half of the Grano Trust gave Arkadiy and Anna enough money to put them on the list of the 500 richest Lithuanians released annually by the Naujienos Centras publishing group, provided the details about their citizenship had been known. There was nothing illegal about Abramovich transferring ownership of the trust to his children.

Nevertheless, Vytis Jurkonis, a political scientist based in Vilnius, said many Lithuanians may be angered at the suggestion that Abramovich's children used the passports to help shield their father's wealth from sanctions. "The citizenship of the children of such an oligarch should have been on the radar

of several institutions," Jurkonis told Siena. Lithuania is one of the E.U.'s staunchest allies of the Ukraine, and Abramovich is accused of having close ties with the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he pointed out. The government could withdraw their citizenship given the political context and the recent scandal involving Margarita Drobiazko, a former Lithuanian ice skating star in the winter Olympics, he said. After Drobiazko decided to continue performing in Russia with the war on Ukraine still ongoing, Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda decided to revoke her citizenship, granted exclusively for the athlete's achievements. "We have seen such decisions, with the sport stars, being taken based on political will. I would not exclude that the future of documents issued to these people [the Abramovich siblings] will also be under reconsideration," Jurkonis said.

The leaked documents show that Arkadiy's passport expired on Tuesday, and it is not known whether it has been renewed. Lithuania's Migration Department declined to disclose information on the citizenships of Anna and Arkadiy, citing the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which safeguards individual privacy. "The fact that Roman Abramovich is well known across the world both for his activities and for being under EU sanctions does not mean his family members become public figures," the department told Siena in an email. Lithuania allows citizenship to be granted to the descendants of people who held it before Russia occupied the country in 1940. Abramovich's grandparents on his father's side were living in Lithuania in the 1940's, and his grandfather was among thousands of Lithuanians deported to Siberia, where he died. In 2018, Roman Abramovich paid a surprise visit to Lithuania, and reportedly rented all of the rooms in Pacai, one of the most expensive hotels in the capital city of Vilnius. The visit sparked speculations about him likely attempting to obtain a Lithuanian passport himself.



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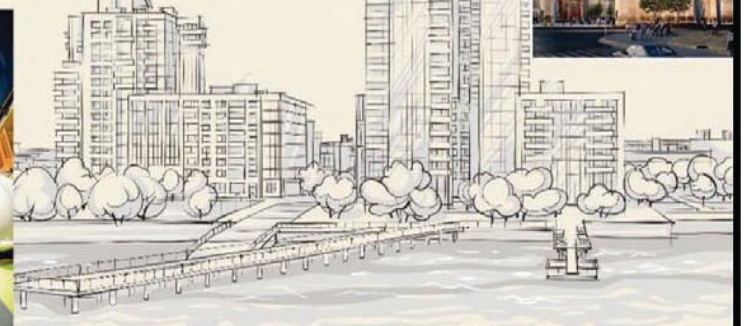
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# Why would Elon Musk want to deliberately destroy X?

After an outburst this week, theories resurfaced about why he bought the platform. Is Musk just a narcissist who let his ego get in the way of sensible decisions?

Look, I'll be the first to admit that I am not a billionaire, nor am I the CEO of multiple companies. Nevertheless, I think I've got a good grasp of some business fundamentals. For example: it's generally not a good idea to tell the people your company relies on for revenue to fuck off.

While that may seem like common sense to a normie like me, Elon Musk – a visionary and genius whose brain operates on a dimension a mere mortal can never hope to understand – has other ideas. During a interview this week at the New York Times' DealBook Summit, Musk took vocal and profane umbrage with the fact that advertisers are leaving X (formerly Twitter) in droves. The exodus comes after Musk seemed to endorse an antisemitic conspiracy theory on the platform and a Media Matters report found many ads on Twitter were being shown alongside pro-Nazi post.

What this advertising boycott is going to do is, it is going to kill the company," the billionaire seethed on Wednesday. "And the whole world will know that those advertisers killed the company." Well, yes, my friend, that is how capi-

talism (something I thought Musk was fond of) works. If it hurts a company's brand to advertise on a platform where users with names like Catturd are peddling conspiracy theories and hate speech, then they will not advertise on your platform. The advertisers didn't kill the company, your incompetent management did.

Again: all that seems like common sense. But Musk seems to think advertisers are out to get him. "If someone's going to try to blackmail me with advertising, blackmail me with money, go fuck yourself," he said defiantly onstage.

Musk's latest outburst comes at a dire time for X. The New York Times recently reported that, based on internal sales documents, the company could lose as much as \$75m in ad money by the end of 2023. Meanwhile X's value has dropped by almost two-thirds since Musk acquired the company for \$44bn in 22 October. Alienating advertisers even further right now seems suicidal, an extraordinary act of self-sabotage. Perhaps, one line of thinking goes, that's exactly what it is. Ever since Musk took over Twitter there have been

theories circulating that the billionaire's main interest in buying the platform was to kill it. Those theories resurfaced in full force after Musk's outburst on Wednesday.

Why would Musk want to destroy Twitter after paying \$44bn for it? Well, one idea some people have is that Musk isn't actually all that fond of free speech. Nor are the Saudis: Saudi Arabia's Kingdom Holding Company (KHC), along with the private office of Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, are the second largest investors in Twitter following Musk. According to this line of reasoning, Musk's plan all along was to stop free expression – mainly leftwing expression – on Twitter and, instead, turn it into a rightwing echo chamber. That would be extremely convenient for authoritarian regimes who want to police online expression and crackdown on dissent.

Another line of reasoning is that Musk wants to kill Twitter because his investment was in user accounts rather than a social network. There's a mysterious method to his madness and he wants to destroy the current business model so he can

transform it into something a lot more profitable.

Lou Paskalis, former head of global media at Bank of America, seems to be one of the proponents of this theory. "[Musk] is smart, he knows it's illegal – although usually hard to prove – to intentionally devalue an asset to manipulate creditors, and he knows how to make money so I have to believe he sees an entirely new revenue model that the rest of us don't yet recognize," Paskalis told Business Insider. In other words, everything that looks like self-sabotage to the common man is actually a genius business decision.

It's possible that there is some substance to these theories. But it's also possible that the simplest answer is the correct one: Musk is a narcissist who has let his enormous ego get in the way of making sensible business decisions. He's realized that he can't actually make X profitable so he's letting it all burn to the ground while casting himself as some sort of free speech martyr.

## Why Vivek Ramaswamy Is a Bully on the Debate Stage

The Republican debates have devolved into schoolyard taunting and outright bullying among the presidential candidates.

It's "a very primitive strategy" for those seeking the highest office in the land, according to Jaana Juvonen, a professor of developmental psychology at UCLA who studies bullying among youth. But that doesn't mean it doesn't work. The worst offender is Vivek Ramaswamy, who spent the last debate swiping at Nikki Haley by raising her daughter's presence on TikTok and calling her (and seemingly Ron DeSantis) a "Dick Cheney in 3-inch heels." Ramaswamy's bullying tactics may be outrageous, but they're not entirely original, Juvonen noted in an interview with POLITICO Magazine.

"He has a role model — Trump — who did it masterfully," she said. Like the former president, she added, "Ramaswamy is not trying to be a likable person. He is simply trying to appear powerful."

So, how should a 2024 candidate respond if they start to get bullied on the debate stage Wednesday night?

Juvonen has some ideas on what not to do, most of all: Don't have an emotionally charged reaction and don't simply express submissive behavior. "Those are the two most maladaptive strategies," she said. Instead, try to level with the person who was hostile to them. "If we think about Ramaswamy's behavior as being bullying, Nikki Haley's very calm response, 'You're scum' may have worked," she said. (In response, Ramaswamy senior adviser Tricia



McLaughlin said, "What an abject embarrassment to journalism. Of course, POLITICO won't mention that in every single one of the last debates Nikki has called Vivek 4-letter-words. But, sure, her two X chromosomes make her a real victim. ... If you can't take the heat stay out of the kitchen.")

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity. You study teenage behavior and bullying in particular. Do you think what Vivek Ramaswamy has done on the debate stage is an example of bullying? Definitely. In terms of him attacking his competitors and attacking them with personal information, like in Haley's case talking about her daughter. Bullies often strategize to hurt their victims in ways that really get to them. Finding their weak positions and obviously, in this case, family and children.

Research on youth shows that status and respect

can be gained not only by bullying but also by being a prosocial and charismatic leader. The question is why the candidates do not use such strategies. They do require more skill than bullying. Would you say he's acting like a teenager when he squares off this way with Nikki Haley and others?

He is definitely using these strategies, hostile strategies to gain power, and that's what bullying really is all about: to gain power and status.

And obviously, he has a role model — Trump — who did it masterfully, masterfully, in the sense that by doing that, he did not lose popularity but seemed to be gaining popularity. When I talk about popularity, that is not about likeability. That's a really important distinction. Popularity is status, and you can be a high status and popular, cool person without being liked. Ramaswamy is not trying to be a likable person. He is simply trying to appear powerful. It is probably no coincidence that Ramaswamy attacked Haley the most. Trump first attacked women also. Women are generally perceived to have less power and hence they make "safe" victims. I believe Haley may be proving otherwise.

You mentioned Donald Trump's bullying in previous years — you think we're seeing his influence today? I think both of them are trying to put other people down in order to gain power. So that's kind of a very primitive strategy that we see among politicians. That is, you're not competing with expertise. You're not competing against one another with knowledge. This is all about sort of huffing and puffing.



# Pannun Saga: In Spy Vs Spy, Unwritten Codes Need to be Harmonised

This seems to be the season for high drama. The US Justice Department's release of an indictment against an Indian national on the charge of being hired to murder a US citizen in New York City has caused waves in the media. The whole thing reads rather like a script from a cheap spy thriller, with the main actor – the alleged Indian agent – overplaying his part. It is serious, not so much of itself, but because of the publicity that has surrounded the whole bizarre series of incidents that began with the Canadian prime minister's wild accusations.

## THE STRANGE SPY STORY

The details in the indictment itself are rather bizarre to say the least. First, the alleged Indian agent, referred to as CC-1, is apparently a government employee, from a paramilitary force (not an officer), and is Delhi based. And here's another thing. Either he, as a government servant, had no idea that the prime minister was travelling to the US the next month, or he fully intended to sabotage the visit.

Consider that the plot started in early May, with him harrying his 'source' in the US, the now arrested Nikhil Gupta, a narcotics and weapons smuggler, to carry through the assassination of Gurbatwant Singh Pannun by the end of May.

True, he did say 'calm everything' for a while in early June (when he seems to have learned of the PM's visit) but was still willing to go ahead on June 11, when the surveillance of the target was done. In fact, on June 20, he said that it is a "priority", ie, a day before the PM arrived.

Other evidence of his ham-handedness? He gives Gupta a number that is linked directly to his email – which no self-respecting agent will ever do – he even sends him a video of Hardeep Singh Nijjar slumped dead in his car – within an alleged 'half an hour' of the assassination. He even boasts that this was done by another of his contacts and worse, says he has "so many targets".

At this point CC-1 seems to be acting more like a car salesman than anything else. Worse follows. During a conversation with Gupta, he switches on his camera and shows a bunch of other 'suits' in the room, all of whom are apparently relying on this highly unreliable criminal of the underworld.

If this is what Indian intel is about, it may as well pack up and save the taxpayers money. The cherry on top is that a case against Gupta is dropped in India, as a lure. And the location? Gujarat. It's grossly overplayed. The sum of it is, that first, no self-respecting intel agent will act in this way. It's incredible. Second, CC1 is leaving such a broad trail, that it looks like he's literally begging to be found out.

## INTEL GETS A RAW DEAL



## THE US MAKES THE GRADE

The process that the US has followed is as different from Canada as chalk from cheese. The US very properly said nothing publicly, even after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made his dramatic 'credible allegations' statement after returning from a rather humiliating trip to Delhi, where he was cold shouldered for his complete lack of action against Khalistani activity. The investigation began in May, and was not allowed

to upset the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington (June 21 to 23), with the bureaucracy only reacting to repeated public allegations from Canada and the UK among others, that the US was taking action. It must be noted that this indictment, as the Justice Department clearly says, consists only of the allegations until proven, and the Indian side is equally saying it will follow up with investigations.

Now comes the second half of the story. It is already known that the Canadian government publicly called out the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) officer in Ottawa for his alleged role in Nijjar's murder on June 18. Thereafter, two senior R&AW officers have reportedly been asked to leave Washington and San Francisco, and denied permission to send a new station chief to Washington after the earlier office holder finished his term.

As pointed out, R&AW chief Sumant Kumar Goel had earlier got after the Khalistani moles in London, who to-

gether with various other dissidents from countries including Pakistan, have long been part of London's stock in trade in the spy business. But it seems the agency has been quite active in recent times.

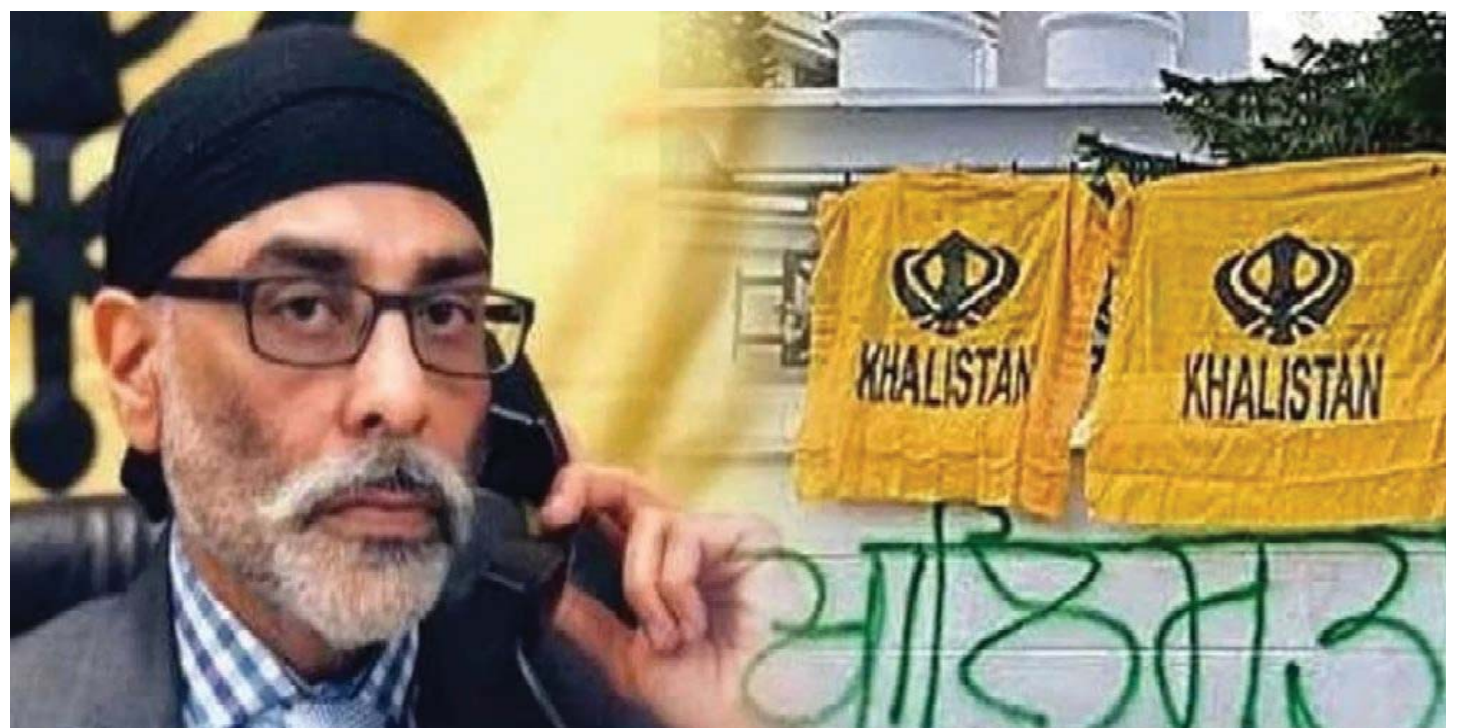
There's the detention of decorated naval officers in Qatar for the incredible charge of spying for Israel. Then are allegations of at least 13 terrorists being killed in Pakistan or on its borders, which has been kept carefully under wraps by their agencies. Some of these were gangsters like Sukhdool Singh, while Ripudaman Singh Malik was the

classic 'the one that got away' in terms of being the accused in the worst recorded terrorist attack on aviation, the Kanishka bombing.

The terrorists got what they deserved, and probably less. But that's not the point. Intel officers posted in countries are there to collect intel and liaise with their counterparts for the good of both. That applies only in friendly countries. In places like China or Pakistan, an intel officer of any country goes in fear of his life. There is certainly an unwritten code that you do not bump off people you don't like on the soil of friendly countries. But there also seems to be another unwritten code. That is, that the US and the UK in particular, are free to provide 'safe haven' to what they call dissidents and others call terrorists on their soil.

For instance, the UK has (12 individuals) against whom Interpol red corner notices have been issued, not to mention a great many others, whom many countries quite justifiably regard as terrorists, or even criminals. No, not just Nirav Modi or Vijay Mallya, but a number of lesser known ones. In the process, as The Guardian notes, the UK has some 5,000 criminal gangs and London is the money laundering capital of Europe.

Sheltering criminals and terrorists has its costs in real terms, regardless of what the spooks may think. In the US, the threats that Pannun has made are serious. If such threats were made against President Joe Biden in India, the US would demand action in 48 hours or less. In sum, 'unwritten codes' have to be harmonised – at least among friendly countries – so that hardly built relationships are not endangered. Alongside also, India needs to get its creaky judicial system in order, supported by sharp investigative and forensics capabilities so that cases against criminals are made water tight. Police and intel officers are hugely capable, but they deserve the best.





# Afghan Hazara refugees live in fear of being deported by Pakistan

In the shaky mobile phone footage, women's voices can be heard panicking. The camera moves in and out of focus, positioned through a crack in a door frame. Across the yard, Pakistani police are outside a property, looking for undocumented foreigners. The officers flip through papers as several men sit expectantly inside.

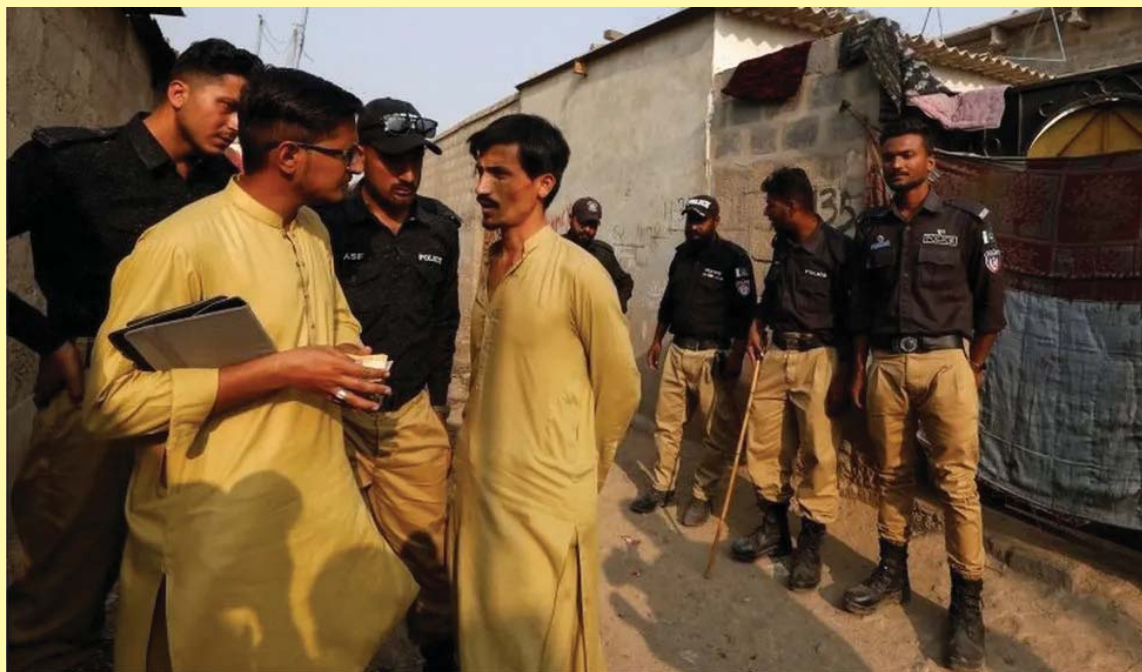
**Then the video cuts out.**

Across Pakistan, unannounced arrivals of police are becoming increasingly common in a crackdown on hundreds of thousands of foreigners who do not have the right documents to stay.

The vast majority affected are Afghans, who now face the threat of deportation. Many have reason to be fearful of returning to their country, after the Taliban seized power in 2021.

They include journalists and human rights activists, members of the LGBT community, contractors who worked for US-led forces or the Afghan military, and women and girls who can no longer receive an education in their country.

But the raid in the footage the BBC was sent by the family who filmed it, was targeting an



area in Pakistan known for a particular ethnic group - the Hazara. Predominantly Shia Muslims, they have long been persecuted by Sunni extremists.

Members of these two branches of Islam share many beliefs but differ on many other aspects of religion - and the sectarian divide has torn communities apart over the years. Out of fear of persecution in Afghanistan, many Hazaras decided to cross the border to Pakistan.

"Life under the Taliban felt like a prison, they didn't see us as

Muslim, they called us infidels. We never felt safe with them," Shakeba, a 17-year-old Hazara from Afghanistan, told the BBC. She arrived in Pakistan in early 2022. Shakeba has seen police raids on her neighbourhood but so far they haven't been to her house.

She's terrified that she or her family will be picked up if they leave its four walls - they've been in hiding for the last three weeks.

"Our faces look different. Even if we wear Pakistani clothes, we are easily identifiable. They

identify us and shout 'Afghani, Afghani!'"

Hazaras are of ethnically Mongolian and Central Asian descent; their features differentiate them from much of Pakistan and Afghanistan's populations. Like other Afghans in this article, Shakeba's name has been changed to protect her identity. Afghans make up almost all of the estimated 1.7 million foreigners that Pakistan says have no right to live in the country.

Its move to expel undocumented foreigners came after tensions

soared following a spike in cross-border attacks. Islamabad blames them on Afghanistan-based militants, a claim the Taliban government in Kabul denies.

In the last two months, more than 400,000 people have crossed from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

A highly uncertain future awaits them - some are staying in camps, others have set off across the country to start life again, often taking little with them as winter approaches. Many new arrivals from Afghanistan since 2021 have faced long delays securing any form of formal documentation in Pakistan, including those with refugee claims. This left them with two main options when the new policy was announced - leave and take their chances back home in Afghanistan or stay and risk the knock on the door from the police. "It wasn't a decision," she says. She and her family arrived in Pakistan after they received multiple threats to their lives, she says. "I said to my family, we will stay here until they force us to go back. It is not a place for Hazaras, it is better to be here and pray for our luck."

## The Too-Weird-to-Be-Fiction Story of Cuba's Spying Ambassador

By ERIC BAZAIL-EIMIL

It feels like a script you'd find on the over-piled desk of some harried Hollywood agent: MAGA-style Republican, while toiling for years as a U.S. diplomat and ambassador, secretly leads a double life, allegedly spying for the Cuban government for more than four decades — completely undetected. Except that if true, the allegations against Victor Manuel Rocha, a career foreign service officer accused of serving as an agent of the Cuban regime since 1981, have real-life — and dangerous — implications. After Rocha was indicted on Monday on espionage charges, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said, "This action exposes one of the highest-reaching and longest-lasting infiltrations of the U.S. government by a foreign agent."

Rocha, a Colombian-born U.S. official who grew up in New York and attended some of the nation's most elite schools, served as the head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, Deputy Chief of Mission in Argentina and later Ambassador to Bolivia. He also did stints at the National Security Council

and at the U.S. Southern Command, giving him access to highly sensitive information and the ability to shape U.S. policy towards Cuba and Latin America and the Caribbean writ large. His case demonstrates that Cuba remains a potent and far-reaching player in the world of espionage — and a security threat often overlooked by U.S. officials as other conflicts and antagonists consume oxygen in Washington, according to Jim Popkin, an expert on Cuban espionage, and the author of *Code Name Blue Wren: The True Story of America's Most Dangerous Female Spy* and the *Sister She Betrayed*.

"We have underestimated [Cuba] in terms of intelligence capabilities over the years, and also when it comes to things like patience, smarts, determination, we really have underestimated them," Popkin, an award-winning investigative journalist, told POLITICO Magazine.

"The Cubans are really good at espionage." Since the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba's government has utilized its proximity to the U.S. as a conduit to geopolitical relevance, cultivating a sophisticated spy network in Washington and other Western capitals and selling its intelligence findings to friendly regimes around the world, including China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.

Unlike other countries, which usually recruit spies through bribes and blackmail, Cuba appeals to ideology, sourcing its spies among academics and U.S. officials sympathetic to the liberationist aims and

ambitions of the Castro regime. In 2007, federal law enforcement arrested two professors at Florida International University, accusing them of spying on Cuban exile groups in Miami for the Castro regime. And in 2009, Kendall Myers, a Europe analyst in the State

Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and his wife were arrested on charges of passing along classified information to Havana. Until Rocha's arrest, the most damaging case of Cuban espionage was that of Ana Belen Montes, a senior analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency who was arrested in September 2001 and convicted of spying for Havana for over 17 years. At the time of her arrest, she was positioned to have extensive access to U.S. military plans during the war in Afghanistan.

Rocha's case, Popkin said, "is just yet another example of how incredibly skilled [Cubans] have been." What surprised you the most about this arrest? It's really an amplification of what I thought: the Cubans are really good at espionage. Their intelligence agency, which goes by the acronym DGI, is incredibly effective. And they take the long game. If you look at Rocha, in his case, you know, the allegation here is that he starts with the State Department in 1981. But he's already been recruited by the Cubans before he even applies to the State Department.

