[**Crunch time for Indian politics**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1756796/crunch-time-for-indian-politics)

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IT’S crunch time for Indian politics. It became inevitable after the Karnataka verdict hit the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in the solar plexus. The BJP’s rout in the crucial southern state has opened the door to a possible defeat of the hitherto invincible-looking Prime Minister Modi in the general elections in May next year. There will be tantrums, therefore. There will be communally provocative moves.

Above all, there could be desperate measures of the kind listed by Mr Modi’s former handpicked governor of Jammu and Kashmir, a real or contrived incident perhaps to ignite the best hopes for right-wing extremism. The opposition needs to withstand the barrage, as it did in Karnataka, and pit the people’s core interests against the power-drunk rulers.

There are issues to take to the people and there are issues to act on without demur. The Karnataka model was about economic welfare for the poor and unequivocal political support for the browbeaten underclass, primarily the religious minorities and the Dalits.

Other than the Adani affair, an immediate issue for the opposition to tackle concerns women wrestlers staging a 35-day-old protest in Delhi. The BJP is resisting their demand to sack the man heading the wrestling federation who they accuse of sexual abusing them. Another person would be in prison over the charges, but this person is a sitting BJP MP from a politically vital region of eastern Uttar Pradesh.

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To crown the brazenness, police whisked away the women wrestlers overnight on Saturday. The act was of a piece with the releasing of pro-Hindutva rape and murder convicts on India’s Independence Day last year. If the opposition can’t get its act together on the women wrestlers’ issue, it stands to lose face even before the race has begun.

Among the BJP’s measures to engage the opposition in a communal shadowboxing contest is the proposed removal of Allama Iqbal from a political science course at the Delhi University. It’s a cynical move to undermine widely lauded Indian scholarship with provocations that have worked well for the BJP. A few years ago, Hindutva’s lum­pen lot raided Delhi University’s history classro­­om and tore up an invaluable book by A.K. Rama­n­ujan. The assaulted treatise, Three Hundred Ramayanas, reveals the rich tapestry that runs across India and beyond, with oral and written lore celebrating Lord Ram in diverse ways.

Another classic research on the Hindus by Wendy Doniger, honoured on world-class campuses, was forcibly pulped. Any course correction here can only come with state power the opposition must covet and not through public brawl, which the BJP wins.

Spare a thought, though, for the fate of a Muslim school teacher fired in the BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh for teaching a moving children’s poem penned by Iqbal — “Lab pe aati hai dua ban ke tamanna meri, zindagi shamma ki surat ho khudaya meri”. (I pray that my life becomes the candle that illuminates the world, though I may lose myself in the bargain.)

The student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is exulting over the proposed exclusion of Iqbal, accusing him disingenuously of being the proponent of the communal partition of India. The fact is that the RSS and its offshoots harbour a visceral animus towards Urdu and have cited no evidence otherwise. Iqbal, who wrote a long paean to Lord Ram as Imam-i-Hind, is not easy to overlook. His love song for Hindustan remains a well-rehearsed composition used by Indian military bands, and it stirs an emotional connection for millions across the country.

Also, at least Faiz Ahmed Faiz was seen on both sides of the border as a close friend of India. The poet’s children in Lahore were regular visitors to India, but not under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s watch, not since one of the daughters was told to go home when she arrived as an invited participant at a literary function in Delhi. Whoever reminds the current rulers of their bigotry, worse when placed against the religious oppression Pakistanis are fighting on their turf, they would be promptly declared anti-Hindu or anti-national.

To keep the pot simmering, an ornate staff has been discovered, and is claimed to have been used as a sceptre for the transfer of power from Mountbatten to Nehru. Veteran historian Madhavan Palat has pooh-poohed the claim, saying there is neither photographic evidence, nor any official account of the purported event. The sceptre, possibly a gift from a Hindu seer to Nehru, is likely an invention to adorn the vision of Hindu rashtra. Having subverted parliamentary democracy, Mr Modi is seen using the inauguration of the new parliament building on May 28 to ordain himself, staff in hand, as a sovereign, critics say.

The BJP doesn’t usually act without political calculation. Sunday’s inauguration of parliament is timed to coincide with the birthday of V.D. Savarkar, the fountainhead of Hindutva. A suspect in the plot to kill Gandhiji, Savarkar was let off on technical grounds. The effort on Sunday was to keep the proceedings photogenic, despite most opposition parties boycotting the event. They told Mr Modi to invite President Draupadi Murmu to lead the inauguration as head of state, a difficult expectation from someone who didn’t forget to put his beaming picture on Covid certificates.

A stark possibility regarding the Iqbal controversy is that it’s timed to mask Savarkar’s advocacy of the two-nation theory years before the Muslim League embraced it. Never mind that his Hindu Mahasabha cohabited with the Muslim League in the interim ministries before independence. One doubts, however, whether Savarkar or Iqbal can become election issues today, not least because of India’s peculiar complexities that the parties face. For example, the Congress criticises Savarkar but is in bed with his admirers in Maharashtra. The task ahead is thus as complex as the country is, which may require more tact than is readily available.

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