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SC TO HEAR UDDHAV'S PLEA AGAINST EC ORDER TODAY

Former Maharashtra CM accuses the poll body of being 'biased' after it allotted the Shiv Sena name, symbol to the Shinde faction. He says rival faction is taking over bank accounts, properties

 The order of the EC allows Mr. Shinde to take over the leadership of the party without duly contesting intra-party elections in accordance with the Party Constitution...



UDDHAV THACKERAY'S petition

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL

The Supreme Court on Tuesday listed for hearing on Wednesday former Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's petition challenging the decision of the Election Commission (EC) to allot party name 'Shiv Sena' and symbol 'bow and arrow' to the Eknath Shinde faction.

In an oral mentioning before a Bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud, senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for Mr. Thackeray, sought a stay of the EC order of February 17. Mr. Sibal said the rival faction was taking over the "bank accounts and properties".

Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi said the turn of events following the EC order was leading to a "piquant" situation.

Mr. Shinde's counsel, senior advocate Neeraj Kishan Kaul, appearing on caveat, said Mr. Thackeray had already raised these issues twice in the High Court.

Chief Justice Chandrachud said the case would be listed on Wednesday after the Constitution Bench hearing in the Shinde-Thackeray dispute concerning disqualification of the then "rebel" legislators who took over the government in Maharashtra with support from the BJP after Mr. Thackeray resigned as Chief Minister just ahead of a floor test.

"We will post for tomorrow evening at 3.30 p.m. after the Constitution Bench hearing. We need some time to read the petition," Chief Justice Chandrachud said. In his appeal, Mr. Thackeray, also represented by advocate Amit Anand Tiwari, said the EC was "unfair", "biased". It had failed in its duties as a "neutral arbiter of disputes" under the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order of 1968.

The EC order was based on proceedings under Paragraph 15 of the Order, which empowered it to identify the "recognised political party" from among rival factions or splinter groups. But Mr. Thackeray said the EC's decision amounted to an interference with the party's 2018 Constitution.

It also ignored the results of the intra-party polls, following which Mr. Thackeray was made leader, he added. The election commission had refused to recognise the Party Constitution as "sacrosanct", even termed it an instrument of "fiefdom" and allowed Mr. Shinde to take over the leadership of the party. Thus, a constitutional authority has undermined the very principles of inner-party democracy, Mr. Thackeray argued.

It said the EC ignored the fact that Mr. Thackeray "enjoyed the overwhelming support in the rank and file of the party". He had the support of 160 members out of approximately 200-odd members in the Pratinidhi Sabha, which is the apex representative body representing the wishes of the stakeholders of the party.

More damaging, Mr. Thackeray said, was the effect of the EC order in validating a "split" in a political party. This would only encourage legislators in the future to split from the original party without the fear of having to face disqualification proceedings under the Tenth Schedule.

PRICE FOR CARBON PERMITS HITS A RECORD IN THE EUROPE UNION

100 In euros per tonne, the price of permits in the European Union's carbon market for the first time, a milestone that reflects the increased costs that factories and power plants must pay when they pollute. The price hike follows an increase in power sector demand for CO2 permits in 2022. REUTERS

HOME MINISTRY ASKS STATES TO RELIEVE IPS OFFICERS FOR CENTRAL DEPUTATION

VIJAITA SINGH

The Union Home Ministry has written to the States to nominate an adequate number of Indian Police Service (IPS) officers for Central deputation.

The Ministry expressed concern that the State governments were either withdrawing the names of selected officers or not relieving them for taking up an assignment with the Central government that resulted in considerable delay in the placement of the officers at the Centre and adversely impacted the entire process of “selection, deputation and cadre management”.

The Ministry cautioned that the officers selected who fail to join within a month would be debarred from Central deputation for five years. “If any officer, on being selected, does not join within one month of issue of his/her appointment order, either on account of personal disinclination or on refusal by the State Government concerned to relieve the officer”, he or she would be debarred for five years, the Ministry said. The debar policy is in existence for decades.

220 vacancies

As on February 6, there were 220 vacancies for IPS officers from the rank of Superintendent of Police (SP) to Director-General of Police in 17 Central organisations such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Central

Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB).

IPS officers are recruited by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) on behalf of the Centre and their services are placed under various State cadres. As per norms, at least 40% of senior duty posts in each State cadre are earmarked as Central Deputation Reserve (CDR) posts. The concurrence of officers is also required for Central deputation.

“The CDR of each IPS cadre determines the extent to which the number of officers could be sent on deputation to the Government of India. However, it has been the experience that the offer list of some States do not contain sufficient number of names vis-a-vis CDR utilisation,” the Ministry said.

The Home Ministry said it was observed that even though a few IPS officers had submitted their applications/nominations on the online portal for approval of the competent authority, the same were not being processed or forwarded by the cadre controlling authority or the State governments. It said a conscious attempt should be made by the State governments to forward the names of officers for deputation under the Government of India so that “every eligible officer gets an opportunity to serve at the Centre at least once”.

WILL INDIA WITNESS AN EL NIÑO FORECAST THIS YEAR?

How does an El Niño and a La Niña affect global climate patterns, particularly cyclogenesis and monsoons?

RAGHU MURTUGUDDE

The story so far:

India is experiencing a colder than normal winter thanks to the north-south winter flow set up by the climate phenomenon known as La Niña. The La Niña itself is going on for a record-breaking third consecutive year. Now, forecasts for the 2023 fall and winter are predicting that there is a 50% possibility for its companion phenomenon, the El Niño to occur.

What are El Niño and La Niña?

El Niño refers to a band of warm water spreading from west to east in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. The years in which an El Niño occur are called ‘El Niño years’, and global weather patterns in that year tend to be anomalous in certain ways. Similarly, a La Niña occurs when the band of water spreads east-west and is cooler. Both phenomena can have drastic effects on economies that depend on rainfall.

The first thing to note is that El Niño forecasts before

spring tend to be notoriously unreliable because the climate system is quite noisy in spring — the Sun transitions across the equator, from one hemisphere to the other, creating noise in predictions. However, in a La Niña year, the tropical Pacific Ocean soaks up heat and accumulates warm water. During the El Niño, this warm water spills from the western part of the Pacific Ocean to the eastern part. Earth has had three straight La Niña years, which means the Pacific’s warm-water volume is fully loaded and likely to birth an El Niño soon. An El Niño year creates a miniature global-warming crisis, since the warm water spreading across the tropical Pacific releases a large amount of heat into the atmosphere.

What will happen to cyclone formation and monsoons?

A transition from a La Niña winter to an El Niño summer historically tends to produce a large monsoon deficit, on the order of 15%. This means pre-monsoon and mon

soon circulations tend to be weaker in an El Niño year. The vertical shear (change in the intensity of winds from the surface to the upper atmosphere) tends to be weaker as well. This in turn can favour enhanced cyclone formation. But, of course, the global climate system is not so simple. Intraseasonal or subseasonal timescale variability in sea-surface temperature and winds is also very important for cyclogenesis over the northern Indian Ocean. These timescales denote the durations for which certain temperature and wind characteristics persist in the pre- and post-monsoon periods. That said, the net effect is for cyclogenesis to be subdued in an El Niño year.

As for monsoons — if an El Niño state does emerge by summer — we will likely have a deficit in 2023. Some research has indicated that the Indian Ocean dipole — a seesawing of sea-surface temperature over the tropical Indian Ocean — could compensate for the negative effects

of an El Niño. But we don't yet know whether there is a robust relation between the dipole and the summer monsoon, nor whether the dipole will evolve the 'right' way this year.

Additionally, there are the monsoon's vagaries themselves. For example, pre-monsoon cyclones are susceptible to warming in the Arctic region, and could in turn affect the onset of the summer monsoon. For another, the Bay of Bengal has of late been receiving freshwater from heavy rains and anomalously high river-runoffs. These waters tend to sneak into the Arabian Sea, produce surface warming, and build up subsurface heat. These changes together may create favourable conditions for the formation of bigger and badder cyclones, especially if the circulation and the vertical shear are weak.

All things considered, India will have to wait for the El Niño forecast to be updated in the coming weeks.

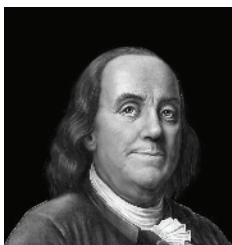
WAITING TO RUSH

EPFO should expedite issuing guidelines with clarity on higher PF pension

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has not acquitted itself well by issuing a circular on higher PF pension at the fag end of the four-month period the Supreme Court had allowed in its November 2022 judgment. This time period was given to members of the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS) of 1995 who were in service as on September 1, 2014 and whose employers had made PF contributions in excess of the statutory ceiling, which was ₹5,000 (up to May 31, 2001) and ₹6,500 (up to August 31, 2014). But, the EPFO took its own time. The Court, using 'discretionary powers', under Article 142 of the Constitution, had granted these members the four months, which it called a "further chance," as two opportunities had been provided in the 2014 amendment of the EPS. The Court's rationale was that it found uncertainty as regards the validity of the amendment (quashed by three High Courts), and that the authorities' interpretation of the cut-off date had come in the way of eligible employees exercising the option within a maximum period of one year (as stipulated in the amended scheme). Unfortunately, the latest circular is not comprehensive. Eligible employees would need additional circulars to be issued before they can make their decision. And, all this needs to be done on or before March 3 — the Court's deadline. A member's expression of consent involves their willingness to

allow the transfer of money in the member's individual PF account, to the Pension Fund, which is a pooled fund. Such a decision cannot be taken in a hurry as such a transfer would mean hiving off a substantial portion of lifetime savings.

Besides, the number of prospective applicants is likely to be high, as the Court's judgment made it clear that the amended pension scheme would apply to employees of exempted establishments too — as in the case of regular establishments. Under such circumstances, a flood of submissions, online or offline, is inevitable, disrupting the normal workload of the PF authorities. The circular has also not taken into account factors in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some employers, having suffered a severe fund crunch, have restricted their contributions to the statutory ceiling even though, till the outbreak of the pandemic, they had, like many others, been making their contributions in excess of the statutory ceiling. The EPFO has to shed light on how it will compute pension for such employees. It would not be out of place to suggest that the time period be extended. Nevertheless, with the EPFO having to comply with the Court order, it should expedite issuing all its guidelines with clear illustrations on higher PF pension.



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I just found Hundred ways to do it wrong.*

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

'HPCL FACES HURDLES PAYING FOR RUSSIAN OIL AS BANKS BALK'

Banks are refraining from processing payments following the price cap imposed by Western nations, says official; HPCL said to be eyeing alternative channels to facilitate transactions

Hindustan Petroleum Corp. is facing difficulties in paying for Russian oil imports following a December 5 price cap imposed by Western nations as banks shy away from processing payments, a company official said on Tuesday.

While Western sanctions against Moscow are not recognised by India — and purchases of Russian oil may not violate them — banks and financial institutions are cautious about clearing payments so as not to unwittingly fall foul of the measures. HPCL is looking for alternative channels after some Indian banks with huge exposure to the U.S. and western economies stopped facilitating payments, the source, who did not wish to be identified, told reporters on a trip with the energy minister.

"Some banks are U.S. affiliated," he said, and foreign banks won't "entertain" transactions for Russian oil. HPCL declined to comment.

Sticky situation

Refiner has found it tough to pay for purchases of Russian oil following the Dec. 5 imposition of a price cap by Western nations



- Indian banks with huge exposure to U.S., western economies have stopped facilitating payments for Russian oil

- Indian refiners are buying Russian oil at prices below the \$60/barrel price cap

- HPCL continues to buy the oil despite challenges, has imported 40,000 bpd this fiscal year

Indian refiners are buying Russian oil at below the \$60 per barrel price cap, which is necessary to access Western insurance cover and shipping.

HPCL continues to buy Russian oil and has imported 40,000 barrels per day in the current fiscal year, the source added.

VOSTRO ACCOUNTS AND HOW THEY FACILITATE TRADE

What are Special Rupee Vostro Accounts? What are the three important components of the framework? What has the Economic Survey said about this arrangement? Can this arrangement speed up rupee's status as an international currency?

SAPTAPARNO GHOSH
EXPLAINER

The story so far:

Last week, government officials informed that 20 Russian banks, including Rosbank, Tinkoff Bank, Centro Credit Bank and Credit Bank of Moscow have opened Special Rupee Vostro Accounts (SRVA) with partner banks in India. All major domestic banks have listed their nodal officers to sort out issues faced by exporters under the arrangement.

What is the SRVA arrangement?

A vostro account is an account that domestic banks hold for foreign banks in the former's domestic currency, in this case, the rupee. Domestic banks use it to provide international banking services to their clients who have global banking needs. It is an integral offshoot of correspondent banking that entails a bank (or an intermediary) to facilitate wire transfer, conduct business transactions, accept deposits and gather documents on behalf of the other bank. It helps domestic banks gain wider access to foreign financial mar-



kets and serve international clients without having to be physically present abroad.

The SRVA is an additional arrangement to the existing system that uses freely convertible currencies and works as a complimentary system. For perspective, freely convertible currencies refer to currencies permitted by rules and regulations of the concerned country to be converted to major reserve currencies (like U.S. dollar or pound sterling) and for which a fairly active market exists for dealings against major currencies. The existing systems thus require maintaining balances and position in such currencies.

How does it function?

The framework entails three important components, namely, invoicing, exchange rate and settlement. Invoicing entails that all exports and imports must be denominated and invoiced in INR. The exchange rate between the currencies of the trading partner countries would be market-determined. To conclude, the final settlement also takes place in Indian National Rupee (INR). The authorised domestic dealer banks (those authorised to deal in foreign currencies) are required to open SRVA accounts for correspondent banks of the partner trading country. Domestic importers are required to make payment (in INR) into the SRVA account of the correspondent bank against the invoices for supply of goods or services from the overseas seller/supplier. Similarly, domestic exporters are to be paid the export proceeds (in INR) from the balances in the designated account of the correspondent bank of the partner country.

As for availing an advance against exports, it would be the responsibility of the domestic bank to accord foremost priority to ensuring that the available funds are used to meet existing payment obligations, that is, from the already executed export orders or export payments in the pipeline. All reporting of cross-border transactions are to be done in accordance with the extant guidelines under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999.

What is the eligibility criteria of banks?

Banks from partner countries are required to approach an authorised domestic dealer bank for opening the SRVA. The domestic bank would then seek approval from the apex banking

regulator providing details of the arrangement.

It would be the responsibility of the domestic banks to ensure that the correspondent bank is not from a country mentioned in the updated Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Public Statement on High Risk & Non-Co-operative jurisdictions. Domestic banks must also put forth for perusal, financial parameters pertaining to the corresponding bank.

Authorised banks can open multiple SRV accounts for different banks from the same country. Further, balances in the account can be repatriated in freely convertible currency and/or currency of the beneficiary partner country depending on the underlying transaction, that is, for which the account was credited.

What is its purpose?

The Economic Survey (2022-23) had argued that the framework could largely reduce the “net demand for foreign exchange, the U.S. dollar in particular, for the settlement of current account related trade flows”. It added that the framework would also reduce the need for holding foreign exchange reserves and dependence on foreign currencies, making the country less vulnerable to external shocks. Indian exporters could get advance payments in INR from overseas clients and in the long-term promote INR as an international currency once the rupee settlement mechanism gains traction, the survey argued.

As per the Bureau for International (BIS) Settlements’ Triennial Central Bank Survey 2022, the U.S. dollar was the most dominant vehicle currency accounting for 88% of all trades. The INR accounted for 1.6%.

CENTRE TO SELL 20 LAKH TONNES OF WHEAT IN OPEN MARKET TO COOL PRICES

The Centre on Tuesday announced the sale of an additional 20 lakh tonnes of wheat in the open market to further bring down the retail prices of wheat and wheat flour (atta) and asked flour millers to cut rates with softening in wholesale price of grain.

On January 25, the Centre had announced the sale of 30 lakh tonnes of wheat in the open market to check rise in prices. According to an official statement, the government has decided that state-owned Food Corporation of India (FCI) will offload an additional quantity of 20 lakh tonnes of wheat in open market under the Open Market Sale Scheme.

Ban on exports

To control prices, the Centre had banned wheat exports in May last year. India’s wheat output fell to 107.74 million tonnes (mt) in the 2021-22 crop year from 109.59 mt in the year-earlier period due to heat waves in a few growing States. Procurement fell to 19 million tonnes this year from about 43 million tonnes last year.

Wheat output is estimated to rise to 112.18 million tonnes in the current 2022-23 crop year. However, the rise in temperature during this month in key producing States has become a concern for farm scientists and policymakers.

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BIDEN SWEARS BY NATO SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE, SAYS RUSSIA WILL NEVER WIN



Joe Biden set to deliver a speech in Warsaw on Tuesday marking the one-year anniversary of Russia's Ukraine invasion. AP

U.S. President Joe Biden on Tuesday said Ukraine would “never be a victory for Russia” as he delivered a speech in Poland ahead of the first anniversary of Moscow’s invasion. “A dictator bent on rebuilding an empire will never be able to ease the people’s love of liberty, brutality will never grind down the will of the free,” he said in Warsaw. “Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia — never,” Mr. Biden said. Mr. Biden also responded to an anti-West speech made by Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier Tuesday. “The West is not plotting to attack Russia as Putin said today,” Mr. Biden said. “Millions of Russian citizens who only want to live in peace with their neighbours are not the enemy.” Mr. Biden stressed the West’s continued support for Ukraine. “There should be no doubt: our support for Ukraine will not waver, NATO will not be divided and we will not tire.”

RUSSIA SUSPENDS THE LAST REMAINING MAJOR NUCLEAR TREATY WITH THE U.S.

Vladimir Putin says Russia should stand ready to resume nuclear weapons tests if the U.S. does so; hours after the announcement, Foreign Ministry says Moscow will continue to respect the cap on nuclear weapons in the agreement

Russian President Vladimir Putin declared on Tuesday that Moscow was suspending its participation in the New START treaty — the last remaining nuclear arms control pact with the U.S. — sharply upping the ante amid tensions with Washington over the fighting in Ukraine.

Speaking in his state-of-the-nation address, Mr. Putin also said that Russia should stand ready to resume nuclear weapons tests if the U.S. does so.

Explaining his decision to suspend Russia’s obligations under the 2010 New START treaty, Mr. Putin accused the U.S. and its NATO allies of openly declaring the goal of Russia’s defeat in Ukraine.

“They want to inflict a ‘strategic defeat’ on us and try to get to our nuclear facilities at the same time,” he said, declaring his decision to suspend Russia’s participation in the treaty.

New START’s official name is The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.

Caps to stay

Hours after Mr. Putin’s address, the Russian Foreign Ministry said it would respect the caps on nuclear weapons under the nuclear arms control treaty with the U.S. even though Putin suspended the country’s participation in the pact. Russia also will



Walking away: Vladimir Putin suspended a treaty that limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads. REUTERS

continue to exchange information about test launches of ballistic missiles per earlier agreements with the U.S., the Foreign Ministry said.

The treaty envisages caps on the number of nuclear weapons and broad inspections of nuclear sites. Mr. Putin said such inspections don’t make sense after the U.S. and its allies declared the goal of dealing Russia a military defeat in Ukraine.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken deplored Putin’s move as “deeply unfortunate and irresponsible,” noting that “we’ll be watching carefully to see what Russia actually does.” He said that “we’ll, of course, make sure that in any event we are postured appropriately for the security of our own country and that of our allies,” but emphasised that “we remain ready to talk about strategic arms limitations at any time.”

AHEAD OF UNGA RESOLUTION ON RUSSIAN WAR, FRANCE LOBBIES NEW DELHI FOR VOTE



The UN logo outside its headquarters in New York.

SUHASINI HAIDAR

France is in talks to convince India to shift its position on the Russian war in Ukraine a year into the conflict, urging the Narendra Modi-led government to vote for a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution due to be tabled this week that will call for a cessation of hostilities, according to diplomatic sources.

Thus far, New Delhi has refused to vote for any resolution that

is critical of the war, either at the UNGA or at the UN Security Council when India was a member last year.

At an emergency session beginning on Wednesday, all eyes will be on how each of the 193 countries in the UNGA vote on the resolution that calls for talks to be held between Russia and Ukraine, and for a “lasting peace”. In October 2022, 143 UNGA members had voted to condemn Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territories. Five countries, including Russia, voted against the resolution. India was among the 35 countries that abstained from the vote.

“We know that India is not very likely to join one side or another. It’s always a question of balance,” the sources said in response to a question from The Hindu. However, the sources conceded that India’s stand is “most likely” to be another abstention.

The sources said that France and the European Union continue to hope that India will “use its links” with the Russian government to convince Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine. In the last few weeks, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval visited Washington, London and Moscow in quick succession, meeting the top leaders in each capital, including Mr. Putin. However, the government has not divulged details of their conversations on the conflict, with an official statement saying only that Mr. Doval and Mr. Putin held “wide-ranging discussions on bilateral and regional issues”.

Third country sanctions

Meanwhile, the sources said that the European Union’s 10th round of sanctions, which were announced last week and are being put into place on the one-year anniversary of the war on Friday, will be the most far-reaching sanctions yet. According to the EU’s announcement, “third country entities” will be added for the first time, starting with sanctions on Iran for providing Russia with drones. They said that EU officials are also studying whether to impose restrictions on those countries who “illegally” seek to defy the EU’s sanctions.

On Tuesday, Mr. Putin accused the U.S. and European countries of trying to involve other countries in the war, and turn it into a confrontation against Russia.

AUSTRALIA TO HOST ITS FIRST MALABAR NAVAL DRILL THIS AUGUST

DINAKAR PERI

Australia will host the Malabar multilateral naval exercise, consisting of India, Australia, Japan and the U.S., for the first time this year.

The high tempo of bilateral engagement between the two countries will continue with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong scheduled to visit India early March during which officials said some major defence initiatives could be announced.

“Malabar 2023 is scheduled to be held in August and Australia will host this edition,” an official source confirmed. “The exercise is likely to be held in Perth. However, a final decision is yet to be

taken as the modalities are still being finalised,” two officials independently stated.

Ms. Wong is scheduled to attend the G-20 Foreign Ministers meeting on March 1 and 2 and Mr. Albanese is scheduled to visit India on March 8 on a bilateral visit. The visit comes months after the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement came into force. The visit comes months after the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement came into force.

The Quad Foreign Ministers are scheduled to hold a meeting a day after the G-20 meeting. Australia is scheduled to host the Quad summit later this year.

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INDIA, SINGAPORE LINK PAYMENT SERVICES

India's Unified Payments Interface and Singapore's PayNow were officially connected on Tuesday, allowing for a "real-time payment linkage". The launch was led by a phone call between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong.

"Today is a special day for India-Singapore friendship and for our efforts to deepen collaboration in FinTech and innovation. The participation of my friend PM Lee Sien Loong made this... even more special," Mr. Modi said.

The linkage is set to ease financial transactions for the Indian diaspora.

Singapore is the first country with which cross-border Person to Person (P2P) payment facilities have been launched.

"This will help the Indian diaspora in Singapore, especially migrant workers/students, and bring the benefits of digitalisation

and FINTECH to the common man through instantaneous and low-cost transfer of money from Singapore to India and vice-versa," the Ministry of External Affairs said.

UPI payments through QR codes are already taking place in Singapore, though at a limited number of outlets.

"Delighted to launch the linkage between PayNow and India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) with PM Narendra Modi today. Congratulations to the Monetary Authority of Singapore, the Reserve Bank of India and all the stakeholders in Singapore and India who have helped make the linkage a reality," Lee Hsien Loong said at the event.

Demonstrating the link, the Reserve Bank of India's Governor Shaktikanta Das and the Monetary Authority of Singapore's Managing Director Ravi Menon made live "cross-border transactions" to each other using their mobile handsets.

ISRAEL MPs APPROVE FIRST OF THE 3 STAGES OF JUDICIAL REFORMS

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESS

Israel's parliament took a step towards approving a controversial judicial reform on Tuesday despite weeks of mass protests against the legislation critics see as a threat to democracy.

President Isaac Herzog — who has been attempting to broker dialogue on the divisive issue, which would boost the powers of politicians over the courts — said there was widespread "fear for the nation's unity".

Lawmakers in the early hours voted by 63 to 47 to support a key Bill in the reform at first reading. It will now return to the law committee for more debate, ahead of its second and third readings in the Knesset.

The legislation would give more weight to the government in the committee that selects judges, and deny courts the right to

strike down any amendments to so-called Basic Laws, Israel's quasi-constitution.

Netanyahu's victory

The reform is a cornerstone of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's administration, an alliance with ultra-Orthodox and extreme-right parties which took office in late December.

"This is a difficult morning," said the President, whose powers are largely ceremonial. "Many people fear for the nation's unity," Mr. Herzog said at a conference organised by the Ynet news website. The Tuesday vote passed despite weeks of protests in Israel's main cities.

DISCIPLINE, DISCUSSION

Parliament is the forum where the government is answerable to the people

On Monday, Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar directed the Privileges Committee, headed by Deputy Chairman and JD(U) MP Harivansh, to investigate the "disorderly conduct" by 12 Opposition MPs that had led to multiple adjournments during the first leg of the Budget session. All through Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 85-minute address, the Opposition kept raising slogans, which Sansad TV that does the live telecast of the proceedings blacked out — the camera did not pan towards the Opposition benches. Earlier, acting on a complaint filed by a BJP MP, Mr. Dhankhar suspended Congress MP Rajani Patil for allegedly recording the proceedings on her mobile phone. The Congress cried foul that due procedure had not been followed and that she had not been served a notice giving her a chance to explain her position. Mr. Dhankhar interjected the speech of Congress presi-

dent and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge's 88-minute speech during the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address several times. The Opposition has protested the Chair's repeated direction to "authenticate" remarks made during speeches. Mr. Kharge has pointed out that "it would be [an] inversion of the system of government if the opposition members are expected to carry out complete investigation, gather evidence and then raise the matter on the floor of the House". Six portions of Mr. Kharge's speech were expunged from the Rajya Sabha records, while Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Lok Sabha speech got 18 cuts. Parliament is the platform where the Opposition has the responsibility to ask questions of the government, which the Council of Ministers has the responsibility to answer. There are parliamentary rules and norms that have evolved over time to achieve this objective. It will be a travesty of parliamentary democracy if the Opposition is penalised for seek-

ing accountability from the government, which in turn is allowed to hide behind rules and obfuscate the issue. It is the government that is in custody of all the information, over which queries are raised in Parliament. The authenticity, or the lack of it, of any assumption that an MP may express in the House must be clarified by the government, which is its duty. It is a strange situation that the government

has not responded to the serious allegations that it faces of protecting private business interests at the cost of public interest, while those who are raising the questions face suspension in the name of discipline. Parliamentary discipline must ensure that discussions take place, and the government provides the answers.



The advertisement features a smartphone on the left side, displaying a red book cover with the text "BOOK ONLINE" and a white spiral logo. The phone's screen shows the time "9:30" and the day "Thursday". A Wi-Fi signal icon is visible above the phone. To the right of the phone, the text "MASTER THE NEW LEARNING MANTRA" is written in large, bold, red letters. Below this text, there are two stacked books. The Vedhik IAS Academy logo, a red spiral, is positioned above the text "VEDHIK IAS ACADEMY" and "The New Learning Mantra". At the bottom of the advertisement, the website address "www.vedhikiasacademy.org" is displayed.

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