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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

SC RULES ELECTORAL BONDS SCHEME UNCONSTITUTIONAL

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court on Thursday struck down as “unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary” the electoral bonds scheme, which provides blanket anonymity to political donors, as well as critical legal amendments allowing rich corporations to make unlimited political donations.

Pulling the plug

Major takeaways from the Supreme Court verdict striking down the electoral bonds scheme:

- Issuance of electoral bonds to be stopped
- SBI to submit full details of bonds purchased by donors and subsequently encashed by political parties since April 12, 2019 to the Election Commission of India by March 6
- ECI to publish the entire information given by SBI on its website by March 13



A five-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud held that the scheme, and preceding amendments made to the Representation of the People Act, the Companies Act, and the Income Tax Act, violated the voters’ right to information about political funding under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Clause 7(4) of the scheme completely exempts information on the purchasers of electoral bonds. The lead opinion authored by Chief Justice Chandrachud said that the absolute non-disclosure of the source of political funding through electoral bonds promoted corruption, and a culture of quid pro quo with the ruling party to introduce a policy change or for bagging a license.

The scheme and the amendments promoted “economic inequality” by giving corporations with financial power an unsurpassable advantage over ordinary citizens in the electoral process and political engagement. This is violative of the principle of free and fair elections and political equality captured in a value of ‘one person, one vote’.

The court agreed that the fundamental right to privacy covers a person’s political affiliation. However, it said, there should be a balance between informational privacy and the voters’ right to information. The court dismissed the Union government’s argument that the anonymity of political donors afforded by electoral bonds incentivised financial contributions through banking channels.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MODI VISITS QATAR DAYS AFTER RELEASE OF EX-NAVY OFFICERS

CONTEXT: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invited the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, to visit India.



His visit came days after Qatar’s legal authorities freed eight Indian Navy veterans, who were accused in an alleged espionage case and given death sentence by a lower court in October 2023.

‘Emir’s support’

Mr. Modi flew to Qatar on February 14 after his two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates. Qatar is an important energy supplier to India and despite the crisis over the issue of the Navy veterans, the two sides sealed a \$78-billion deal on the supply of liquefied natural gas to India.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIA REJECTED FTA DEMANDS FOR DATA EXCLUSIVITY, SAYS OFFICIAL

CONTEXT: India has rejected the demand for 'data exclusivity', as part of ongoing discussions with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) towards a Free Trade Agreement.



Data exclusivity refers to a clause in the draft agreement that puts a minimum six-year embargo on clinical trial data generated during the testing and development of a drug. Thus, manufacturers interested in making a copy-cat product would have to generate such data on their own, which is an expensive proposition, or wait out that period before applying to register and sell their version in India. Crucially, this could also apply to drugs that are not patented in India.

India's generic drug industry has over the years made affordable versions of expensive drugs and become a large, global supplier itself, and such a clause could hamper the industry.

Persistent demand

Demands for data exclusivity have consistently cropped up since 2008 from the European Union and the EFTA — Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein — as part of trade negotiations with India, but these have been consistently rejected. Switzerland is home to several prominent pharmaceutical companies, some of whom have been involved in litigation in India over generic drugs.

A leaked draft of the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA), available on the website bilaterals.org, an organisation that tracks international free trade agreements, suggested that this clause was present in the negotiating text even as India and the EFTA indicated that negotiations were at an "advanced stage".

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INSAT-3DS MISSION TO BE LAUNCHED FROM SRIHARIKOTA TOMORROW

CONTEXT: The GSLV-F14 carrying INSAT-3DS is scheduled for a launch at 5.35 p.m. on Saturday from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

The GSLV-F14 is the 16th flight of the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV), and the 10th flight with the indigenous cryo stage. This is the seventh operational flight of the GSLV with an indigenous cryogenic stage. The GSLV-F14, with indigenous cryogenic stage, will place INSAT-3DS satellite in a geosynchronous transfer orbit.

The satellite is an exclusive mission designed for enhanced meteorological observations, monitoring of land and ocean surfaces for weather forecasting and disaster warning. The primary objectives of the mission are to monitor Earth's surface, carry out oceanic observations, provide the vertical profile of various meteorological parameters of the atmosphere and provide satellite aided search and rescue services.

INTERNAL SECURITY

INDIAN MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING FOR ARMY POST GALWAN CLASH

CONTEXT: Various Indian martial arts are now part of the routine training of regiments of the Army. Post the Galwan violent clash between India and China, the Army has added martial arts to the regular training of troops in addition to the usual physical exercise.



For instance, the Punjab regiment has incorporated Gatka in the training regime, the Gorkha Regiment the Khukri dance and the Kalaripayattu by the Madras regiment. A unit of the Punjab regiment deployed close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Kibithu in eastern Arunachal Pradesh displayed the martial arts training to a group of visiting presspersons.

Major Kartikey Jaiswal of the unit said the terrain here had its own peculiarities and added to the challenges faced during patrolling. These are in the form of fast flowing rivers, continuously changing weather conditions. To face these challenges, we continuously undertake training and the martial arts is one of them.



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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

WHAT IS BEHIND LADAKH'S UNREST?

CONTEXT: The 'Leh Chalo' protest led by Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) demanding full Statehood for Ladakh and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule to safeguard land, culture, language, and environment.



Why has Ladakh turned to protests?

Ladakh has experienced multiple shutdowns, marked by frequent street protests and demonstrations over the past four years after the region was carved out of Jammu and Kashmir as a separate UT, leading to concerns among locals about the loss of identity, resources and bureaucratic overreach.

The growing resentment can be traced to August 2019 when the dilution of Article 370 abrogated the special status of the erstwhile State of J&K. Ladakh, which was then one of three divisions of J&K, was established as a UT without a legislature, unlike J&K. Ladakh had been represented by four members in the J&K Assembly and two in the Legislative Council before the abrogation. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils of Leh and Kargil, formed to administer the region, also have limited powers.

Initially, there was optimism as religious minorities in the region had for long supported the demand for UT status, alleging discrimination at the hands of Kashmir-centric parties. These apprehensions led to a string of protests in the Muslim-majority Kargil which wanted to remain a part of the erstwhile State and not join the Buddhist-majority Leh. Civil society and religious outfits in Leh also felt vulnerable with the reorganisation taking away the protection enshrined under Article 35A. Hundreds joined Mr. Wangchuk in his five-day hunger strike in January and a week-long 'climatic fast' in June last year. Mr. Wangchuk said Ladakh was better off with Article 370 which prevented industries from exploiting their resources.

Who is behind the agitation and what do they want?

The Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance — an alliance of civil society, religious, political and student organisations — reached a consensus and finalised a four-point agenda in 2021. The umbrella organisations have since spearheaded the campaign, organising protests not only in Ladakh but also in J&K and Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, calling for shutdowns on multiple occasions. Their main demands include having a full-fledged legislature, constitutional safeguards under the

Sixth Schedule, separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil districts, and job reservations for locals. Activists and leaders of the socio-political bodies are demanding an increase in the number of Lok Sabha seats from one to two (one each for Kargil and Leh) to ensure representation of Ladakhis in Parliament and a full-fledged elected legislature.

The LAB and KDA have demanded the government to extend Ladakh's territorial control up to Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and demanded reservation of seats for the area. The alliance reiterated that Statehood will ensure stability in the region and highlighted the geopolitical importance of Ladakh to counter the twin threat of China and Pakistan.

The Schedule protects tribal populations and provides autonomy to the communities through autonomous development councils. This assumes significance considering nearly 80% of Ladakh's total population of 2.74 lakh are tribals. The Schedule will ensure that the local population is consulted on decisions that impact them.

The separation from J&K shrunk the region's share in the State pool, and the Centre has also failed to create new avenues for the locals in the past four years. "Ever since Ladakh became a UT, there have been no gazetted job openings in the region while two batches have already been commissioned in J&K and the third batch is going to get commissioned soon.

How has the Centre responded?

The Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, is scheduled to meet representatives from the region on February 19 in New Delhi. All eyes will be on the meeting which will determine the tone of protests in the coming days as the country goes to the polls.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

U.K. ECONOMY SLIPPED INTO 'TECHNICAL' RECESSION IN 2023; SUNAK FACES FLAK

CONTEXT: The U.K. economy slipped into a "technical" recession in 2023, with the final quarter for last year showing a decline in GDP of 0.3 %, on the back of a 0.1 % decline in growth in the third quarter, as per data released by the country's Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Construction, production and services were all down in the final quarter of 2023. The U.K. grew at 0.1% over 2023 — the weakest growth registered since the 2009 financial crisis, barring 2020, when the pandemic began.

Tax cuts

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt is expected to cut taxes in the Budget, which is due on March 6. The tax cuts are reportedly being financed by billions of pounds in funding cuts for public services, are already in disarray. Despite being faced with the latest GDP figures, Mr. Hunt insisted that the economy was "more resilient" than most people had predicted, as he pointed to falling inflation and growing real wages.

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ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

JAPAN SLIPS INTO RECESSION, RAISES BOJ POLICY DOUBTS

CONTEXT: Japan's economy slipped into a recession as it unexpectedly shrank for two straight quarters on weak domestic demand, data showed, raising uncertainty about the central bank's plans to exit its ultra-easy policy sometime this year.

Japan loses its title as the world's third-largest economy, replaced by Germany. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell an annualised 0.4 % in the October-December period after a 3.3 % slump in the previous quarter.

The weak data may cast doubt on the Bank of Japan's forecast that rising wages will underpin consumption, and justify phasing out its massive monetary stimulus. The yen, which changed little following the release of the data and last stood at 150.42 per dollar, pinned near a three-month low hit earlier in the week.

The Nikkei rose 1 %, reversing some losses made from the previous session, possibly on expectations the BOJ may continue with its massive easing programme for longer than expected. On a quarterly basis, GDP slid 0.1 %. Private consumption, which makes up more than half of economic activity, fell 0.2 % while capital expenditure, another key private-sector growth engine, fell 0.1 %. External demand, or exports minus imports, contributed 0.2 percentage point to the GDP.

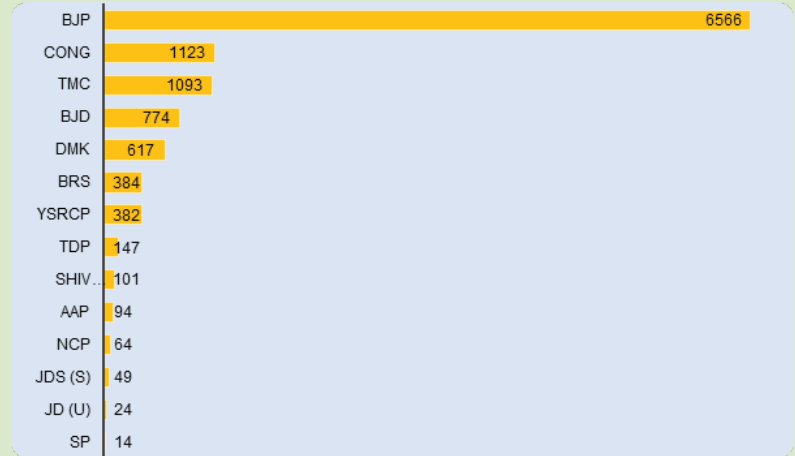


FIGURE: Bar chart representation of the funds received by parties by the Electoral Bond Scheme.

BJP got lion's share

An analysis of the electoral bonds scheme shows that the ruling BJP garnered the lion's share of nearly 55% of the funds till March 2023, while the Congress got a mere 9.3%. The highest sale of bonds was during the last Lok Sabha election in 2019 from April 1 to 20 when bonds worth ₹2,256.37 crore were sold.

The BJP, till March 2023, received ₹6,566.11 crore through electoral bonds, while the Congress got ₹1,123.29 crore, according to annual audit reports submitted by parties and made public by the Election Commission.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

'MATCHING BUYERS OF POLL BONDS WITH RECIPIENTS COULD BE TRICKY'

CONTEXT: As the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as unconstitutional, the big question is whether the public can know which individual or corporate entity contributed how much through the bonds to which political party. Some petitioners and activists feel this is a tricky area.

According to data by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), which was the chief petitioner in the case in the court, the collective amount of funds generated through the sale of electoral bonds between March 2018 and January 2024 is ₹16,518.11 crore.

On Thursday, the top court asked the State Bank of India (SBI) to submit details of the electoral bonds purchased since the interim order of the court dated April 12, 2019, till date to the Election Commission. The SBI shall also submit the details of political parties that received contributions through the bonds.

The bank has to submit the above information to the EC within three weeks from the date of Thursday's judgment, i.e., by March 6, 2024. The EC in turn has to publish the information shared by the SBI on its official website within one week of the receipt of the information, that is, by March 13, 2024.

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