

# INSIGHTS

SYNERGIA FOUNDATION

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## FINDING THE ONE AS ABLE AS ABE

### EXPERT INSIGHTS



**KUNI MIYAKE,**  
PRESIDENT OF THE  
FOREIGN POLICY  
INSTITUTE, TOKYO

### Must Read

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EXPERT INSIGHTS  
**B.S.PATIL**  
Former Karnataka Chief Secretary



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Former Kerala Chief Secretary

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# PASSING THE BATON OF ABE'S LEGACY

The new prime minister stands to inherit a hard-won battle of rebranding Japan, but with it comes the baggage of a sluggish economy, the pandemic and geopolitical worries

BY SYNERGIA FOUNDATION  
RESEARCH TEAM

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has announced that he would be resigning due to health issues and his long-time aide and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga seems set to take the baton. Abe's resignation announcement shocked even the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, and a vote is due on September 14 to select his successor for the remaining year and a half of the present term. An inspirational leader, Mr. Abe brought in never-seen-before political stability to Japan. He did it through free trade deals with the European Union (EU) and by pushing for stronger relations within the QUAD. His fight with chronic ulcerative colitis has been a long one — it led to his resignation during his first term in 2007, and has now resurfaced. He will, however, continue as a lawmaker.

Described as a conservative nationalist, he attempted to rebrand Japan, moving away from the "history issues" of its imperialist past, yet not as a revisionist, but as a believer that post-1945, Japan has a wholly new approach to constitutional democracy, pacifism, and internationalist purpose. His concept for revamping the economy, dubbed 'Abenomics', boasted of fine principles to get it back on track.

He is, however, leaving in the midst of a pandemic, an escalating trade war between the U.S. and China, simmering conflict in the South China Sea, and with the economy in a recession. His successor has his work cut out for himself.

## DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC LEGACY

The Japanese economy has shrunk for three consecutive quarters, with inflation remaining well below the 2 percent target set in 2013 by Mr. Abe himself. Government debt is at a record high of more than 250 percent of the GDP. The Prime Minister and his cabinet also drew people's ire for a late and insufficient response to the COVID-19.

His three-pronged Abenomics was that of loose monetary policy, fiscal stimulus, and structural reforms. This scored initial successes — boosting growth, stocks and employment, propped up by a \$2.2 trillion stimulus and monetary largesse from the Bank of Japan. However, regulations still need to be slashed, and the stimulus has failed to trickle down to the people. Growth suffered in 2019 due to the trade war between China and the U.S., and



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took a further hit this year with the pandemic. His biggest shortcoming was seen in his inability to usher in necessary structural reforms to boost productivity and coping with Japan's ageing and shrinking population.

Mr. Abe was also a strong proponent of revising the pacifist Article 9 of the Constitution, which outlawed war as a means to settle international disputes involving the state. He was eventually unable to deliver on this. Japan has, however, reinterpreted Article 9, and passed new laws to assume a larger security role alongside the U.S., and also increased defence spending to develop Japan's military capabilities. The first-ever National Security Secretariat was established in 2013 in the prime minister's office, which stands for Japan's "proactive contribution to peace", looking at increasing the Japan-U.S. partnership and working with partner states, especially Australia, India, and the ASEAN states.

In diplomacy, Mr. Abe has seen more success, with both the initiation (2007) and the revival (2017) of the QUAD for security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific. He has also scored international free trade deals — one with the EU and one with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement with the U.S. and 11 other Pacific Rim countries. Mr. Abe subsequently signed a bilateral trade deal with U.S. President Trump, albeit a truncated one.

## SUCCESSOR'S ROLE

The new prime minister will have to deal with the recession and stifling the pandemic. Mr. Abe's successor might not have the option of postponing necessary economic reforms. An increasingly aggressive

China would concern Japan. Balancing a strategy with QUAD and agreeing to join China to fund BRI projects if conditions are met, could be tricky. China is now Japan's largest export market. Though Japan's exports to China fell 25.3 per cent during the first half of 2019, due to a steeper drop in shipments to the U.S., China became Japan's largest trade destination for the first time. China is also Japan's largest source of imports. While Japan is also looking to limit Huawei's influence following the U.S. move, it would be interesting to see how it navigates these murky waters.

There are also the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games that were postponed. Mr. Abe played a large role in bidding for the Games, and organisers hope he will remain involved despite his resignation. The Games was expected to run up a bill of \$12.6 billion.

## WHO NEXT?

While there are three names out as successors to Mr. Abe — Yoshihide Suga, Japan's top government spokesman and Mr. Abe's long-time right-hand man; Fumio Kishida, foreign minister from 2012-17, who has been less supportive of the prime minister's push to rewrite Japan's war-renouncing Constitution; and Shigeru Ishiba, former defence minister seen as Mr. Abe's archrival, who is known to be a "defence hawk" and wants Japan to have stronger military capabilities - it is Suga who is poised to take charge.

However, according to a survey conducted by Kyodo News, Mr. Ishiba has roughly 34 percent of the public's support, and Mr. Suga has 14 percent, the second-most popular choice. A Nikkei/TV Tokyo poll showed Mr. Ishiba with 28 percent support, followed by current defence minister Taro Kono with 15 percent. Mr. Suga was in fourth place with 11 percent.

## ASSESSMENT

Whoever steps up to be the successor has a lot on his plate. A forward-looking policy, with a focus on economic reforms and preventive measures for COVID-19 is top priority.

Japan also needs a strong leader at a time when a neighbour as big as China is creating waves. While Japan is strongly aligned with the U.S., a careful balance needs to be struck between the two superpowers.

## 'Suga must call a snap election and reassert himself'



**Kuni Miyake** is a former Japanese diplomat and a former Executive Assistant to the office of Prime Minister. He is Director (Research), Canon Institute of Global Affairs and shared his thoughts with the Synergia Foundation

**What are the key challenges, domestic and international, for Prime Minister Abe's successor?**

**KM:** Suga must empower himself by calling and winning a snap election as soon as possible, maybe as early as late October. As for foreign policy, Suga should just follow up on Abe's diplomacy and wait for the US presidential election results.

**Prime Minister Abe has had a personal bond with several heads of state, at this most difficult time would that be dearly missed?**

Yes, it will be missed but he is not PM anymore and Suga must do without him. Abe can be Suga's special envoy for Trump, for example, if he wins on Nov 3.

**What should the successor do to build on that legacy and not lose the sense of trust from heads of State?**

Their trust in Abe is their trust in Japan. As long as Suga delivers things as Abe did it will not change. I am not worried. Suga has enough domestic political skill and power to deliver them.

**How does this impact the domestic politics of Japan and the prospects of the Liberal Democrats?**

After Abe's announcement, LDP's approval rating sored by an unbelievable nearly 20%. If a snap election is called today, they can win. The question is whether you call a general elec-



tion during a pandemic. But if I were Suga, I would do it ASAP regardless.

**How do you think the transition will take place, will it be a smooth one or will it be one where the competition to succeed Abe could turn into a rivalry?**

Transition is more smooth than rough. Everyone knows the result before the game starts. Suga will win landslide! He is endorsed by five out of seven factions inside the LDP. It is game over already before it begins.



**BY T.M. VEERARAGHAV**

Consulting Editor,  
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It was the legislation that ensured a 14 per cent growth rate in revenues for States, on a 2015-16 base for five years till 2022, under the new Goods and Service Tax regime that clinched the GST deal for the Narendra Modi Government in 2017. The guarantee of expanded tax revenue, irrespective of the GDP numbers, under the GST (Compensation to States) Act 2017 lured even States that were fiercely opposed to it, to sign on.

But in 2020, as tax revenues hit rock bottom, the Centre chose to renege, despite the legislation, on the promise of compensating States for a shortfall in tax revenues. This is alarming for the States as the shortfall is of a whopping Rs. 3 lakh crore between projected revenues and collections for 2020-21 and could debilitate the ability of several States to pay for welfare schemes, in some cases even salaries in the coming months.

After a meeting of the GST Council, the Centre suggested the States could borrow from the Reserve Bank of India, based on future compensation from the Centre, to offset the shortfall. It made a distinction and claimed that only Rs 97,000 crore was the shortfall due to shifting from the earlier tax structure to GST and it was the COVID-19 crisis — “an act of God” according to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman — that led to the rest of the 2.35 lakh crore shortfall!

India's Opposition-ruled States, like Kerala and West Bengal, have led the charge in questioning the Centre. But even Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States face a precarious financial situation and are worried about the Centre's refusal to pay up. Bihar, which is ruled by a BJP-Janata Dal (United) coalition, has publicly stated that the Centre is “morally bound” to compensate, and others like Karnataka, ruled by the BJP, have grudgingly agreed to borrow from the RBI.

GST is a model entirely focussed on taxing at the consumption point and leaves manufacturing States at an inherent disadvantage, and it is the assurance of the Centre, with legislation, that protects their interests.

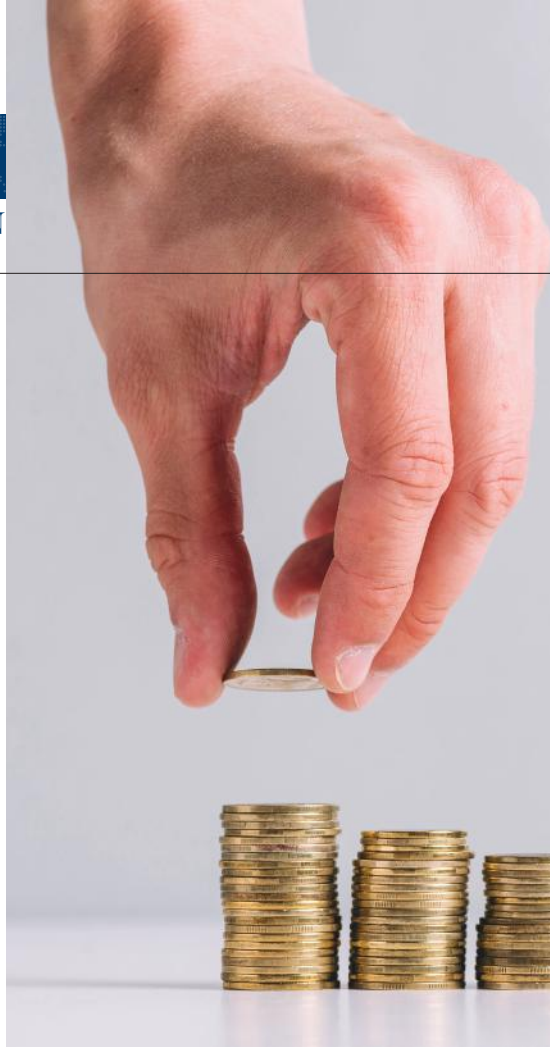
### STATES SET FOR LEGAL RECOURSE?

The GST (compensation) Act does not make any distinction based on the reason for shortfalls, and the Centre's refusal could be challenged by the States in court. However, a Centre versus States battle will be a protracted one. While some Opposition States may follow this path, there needs to be an arrangement for finances in the short term.

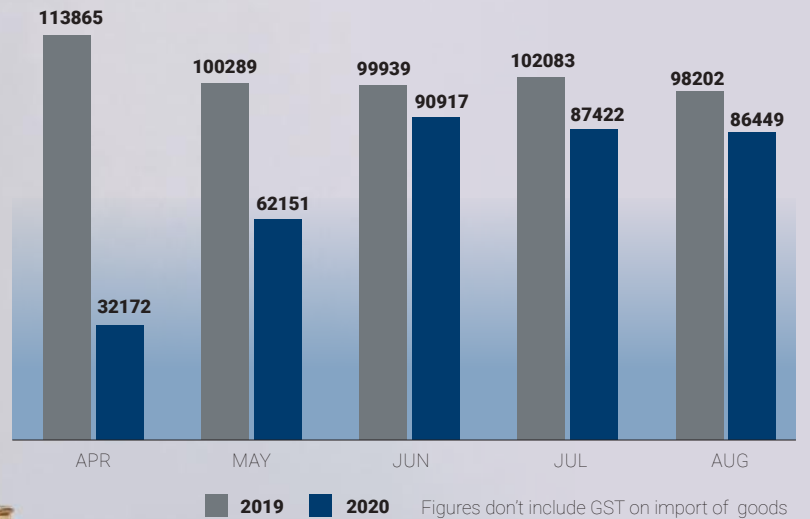
In fact, during the pre-2017 GST negotiations with the States, the Centre had guaranteed that compensation for shortfalls would be paid within the five-year period, and States had taken that assurance on face value.

The Attorney General of India himself has been widely reported to have told the Union Government that it has to pay full compensation “irrespective of any shortfall” and that the payments cannot be deferred unless States “agreed” to it. This puts the Centre in an even more difficult position.

The Centre had sought his opinion on the legality of the GST Council



## GST Collection (in crore rupees)



# STATES IN DIRE STRAITS AS GST PROMISES TURN SOUR

With the Centre unable to abide by its commitment and legislation to compensate States for a shortfall in GST revenues, the stage is set for a battle between Governments



tee on finance in August 2019 that the Centre could not pay the State's share in the current formula. Arguably, this was a crisis in the making that was expedited by the pandemic.

### FUTURE OF GST

The opposition-ruled States such as Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Puducherry have already proposed reverting to the earlier tax system and abandoning the GST mechanism itself. The other States, primarily the manufacturing and more developed ones that had originally opposed the idea could join the chorus, and those that are poorer, and originally supported the idea, may agree to play along with the Centre. While a reversal of the GST system seems unimaginable now, the pressure is mounting on the Centre to pay up.

borrowing from the market to make up for the deficit in the compensation fund, which is created by levying a cess on luxury and “sin” goods such as cigarettes and cars.

While suggesting that there is no bar to such borrowing, the Attorney General also suggested that the Centre cannot go ahead and extend such a cess beyond five years if it did not have the concurrence of a majority of the States in the council.

### WHO SHOULD BORROW?

States can use future compensation as a basis to borrow from the RBI, but they do not want to underwrite such an endeavour. Instead, Kerala's Finance Minister T. Issac suggested that the GST Council borrow from the RBI directly and compensate the States.

The moot point is that the Centre cannot be absolved of its promise and could underwrite a loan taken by the GST Council to compensate the States.

But the government's precarious fiscal situation — with a deficit as high as 8 per cent for this year — makes it difficult for it to fund the shortfall, and underwriting a GST Council borrowing from the market would be a huge burden on it.

While the pandemic and lockdown did worsen the situation, the Centre was staring at difficulties in compensating as early as the second quarter of last year. The Finance Ministry had told a parliamentary standing commit-

## ASSESSMENT

The compensation law itself does not put the Centre on a strong wicket, and it may find it difficult to pay the price for the “one nation one tax” system. It stands to lose trust if it reneges completely on its promise and risk embarrassment from a legal challenge by the States.

Given that the economic situation threatens to be protracted, the compensation burden on the Centre will only increase, and it must find a way out to settle the issue amicably.

The issue will further polarise the divide between the Centre and the Opposition-ruled States, and that may be a strain on the federal system itself. In fact, even the BJP States could put pressure on the Centre to pay up, albeit discreetly.

### 'States would have been worse had earlier tax regime continued'



(B.S. Patil, Former Chief Secretary of Karnataka shared his insights with Synergia Foundation)

The GST Legislation was a requirement for India. In a federal system, a legislation ensuring one tax structure is best suited for business. In terms of compensation to states, it was not expected to be difficult, but, unfortunately, the Pandemic has hit the entire world economy and no country is spared.

States must bring in fiscal discipline and utilise funds extremely judiciously. Borrowing from the RBI will bring immediate relief and they would have been in a worse situation if the earlier tax regime were still in place.

The need of the hour is for States and the Centre to work in close co-operation. I do not think GST is flawed, but it takes time to find solutions for special concerns of a few states.

### Flaws in GST mechanism have been exposed



(Jiji Thomson, Former Kerala Chief Secretary shared insights with Synergia Foundation)

**Is the GST compensation act difficult for the centre to sustain, especially in this economic condition?**

**JT:** Yes. GST compensation did not foresee this kind of a situation. This necessitates a consensus between the Centre and the States. The States have a hidden agenda in not going for an intensive collection drive (as in the case of Kerala). Compensation was an enticement. The compensation should have been 14% in the first year, 13% in the second year and so on.

**Karnataka has agreed to borrow on the basis of future compensations, as suggested by the centre. Can other States afford to do so?**

Karnataka can afford it. In 2017-18 Karnataka's committed

expenditure as a percentage of total revenue was only 32.97% whereas it was 81.19% for Kerala!

**Should the onus be on the Centre in this situation or should States share the burden?**

It is a mutual liability. GST is the major source revenue. There are other sources like property tax, electricity duty, user charges on health and education which are not exploited by the states.

In Kerala's case, there is a huge potential for property tax. Property tax rates have remained more or less dormant in the last two decades. Local Bodies have no incentive to tap this potential. In 1972-73, revenue receipts from social sectors as a percentage of revenue expenditure was 5.55%. In 2017-18 it is mere 1.35%

**Has this exposed the GST mechanism and raised question over the survival of a 'one nation one tax system'?**

Yes, I think so.

# NOT-SO-WHITE HOUSE IS AMERICA READY FOR KAMALA HARRIS?

Identity politics may be the game-changer for the vice-presidential Democrat candidate for the 2020 U.S. election, but her political experience and stance on cardinal issues also count

BY SYNERGIA FOUNDATION RESEARCH TEAM

August 11 marked an important date in the history of the U.S. presidential elections. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden chose California senator and former San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris as his vice-presidential running mate. Ms. Harris is the first Black woman and Indian American to be nominated for this position by a major party. She is also the third woman in U.S. history to be on a major party ticket, following Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and Sarah Palin in 2008 apart from Hillary Clinton's abortive attempt at the Whitehouse.

While her nomination has gained ecstatic support, especially amongst minorities, it has also been met with racism, scepticism, and misogyny. Additionally, prominent presidential contenders from last year, such as Tulsi Gabbard, have criticised Ms. Harris's tough sentences for petty crimes committed by marginalised groups. The broad range of responses among voters – both within and outside the Democratic Party – call for an assessment of the candidate beyond the politics of race and gender. While Ms. Harris's identity proves to be an important factor in her selection, there is a need for a closer examination of her political stance.

## THE SELECTION

The buzz around her selection dates

back to as early as March when Mr. Biden stated that he would pick a woman running mate. This echoed other presidential candidates such as Bernie Sanders, who had also vouched for a progressive woman VP. After the first wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in May, Mr. Biden faced further pressure to solidify his stance on racial inequality at home by picking a woman of colour. He vowed to counter President Donald Trump by ensuring a more representative leadership – especially in the light of doubts around his ability to remain in office for a second term since he would be the oldest president in U.S. history. If Mr. Biden chooses to step down in 2024, the VP will take the hot seat, thus underlining the need for a strong candidate.

Amongst experienced women contenders such as former National Security Advisor Susan Rice and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, Ms. Harris gained prominence due to her incisive questioning during the Senate confirmation hearings. While Democrats supported her fierce exchange with Republicans such as Jeff Sessions, she also faced negative comments from Mr. Trump, who called her “extraordinarily nasty”. This highlights the many challenges faced by Black women in politics, as they are often subjected to comments that enforce racist tropes dismissing them as “too loud” and “angry”.

It is a sad commentary on gender equality that only 57 women have served as senators since it was established in 1789. In this context, Ms. Harris's selection becomes inex-

tricably linked with identity politics.

## WAY FORWARD

But that is only part of the narrative. Ms. Harris remained a strong contender during her stint with the Democratic primaries when she spoke out against issues of racism and reproductive rights. Although she eventually dropped out of the presidential race, she continued joining protests against police brutality and called for progressive reforms to support marginalised communities. Her announcement as Mr. Biden's pick added to her track record of bringing in large donations, as the duo reported over \$300 million funds collected in August. Finally, she has a close connection with Mr. Biden and his late son, Beau, making her a trustworthy companion to the presidential candidate.

However, her critics reveal her wavering stance on issues such as “Medicare for All,” and its potential toll on her ability to serve as a decisive leader. She is not unanimously favoured among progressive Democrats, who question her ability to take bold actions being perceived as relatively moderate. Her campaign does not guarantee an in-

flux of Black votes, as many Blacks favoured candidates such as Mr. Biden, Mr. Sanders, and Ms. Warren over her in polls. This is due to her tough take on crimes committed by Black and Brown communities, earning her the title “the cop”, while she was the district attorney. Ironically, while Ms. Harris supports legalising marijuana, she contributed to the mass incarceration of poor communities with nonviolent drug-related crimes.

Ms. Harris's past is likely to draw more attacks from Mr. Trump over the coming weeks. But she also has the potential to garner votes due to her combination of vigour and practicality to resolve issues. Her immigrant roots definitely influence her compassion towards underprivileged groups, evident through her ‘Back-on-Track’ programme to aid upward social mobility for first-time drug offenders. Unlike her more progressive counterparts like Ms. Warren, she is also likely to remain in sync with the relatively moderate Mr. Biden. Thus, while her nomination is a historic move for the representa-

tion of marginalised communities in the U.S., it is also paving the path to a promising leadership that can address systemic racism, wealth gap, reproductive rights, and gun control, amongst other issues.

## ASSESSMENT

In order to address polarisation within her party, Kamala Harris might have to make bolder, relatively progressive moves to maintain support from Black voters. She will face further scrutiny as the first woman of colour VP but could set the tone for more women of colour to enter leadership positions.

Although Mr. Biden and Ms. Harris have clashed in past Democratic debates regarding issues of busing and desegregation, they have found common ground with their moderate views. But Ms. Harris's shifting positions on issues such as Medicare for All raises questions regarding her ideological clarity.

Ultimately, both candidates would face vitriol from Trump supporters and swing voters, evident by Mr. Trump's debilitating comments and scepticism on Ms. Harris's eligibility to get nominated due to her citizenship status.

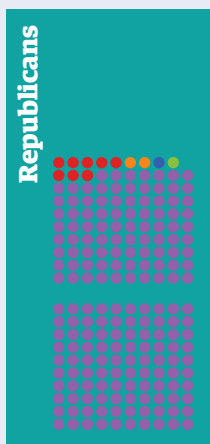
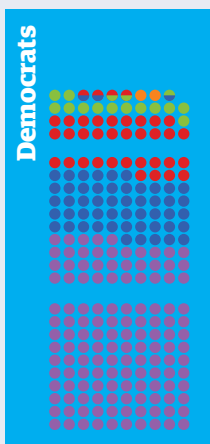


## How Diverse is Congress?

MEMBERS OF THE 116TH U.S. CONGRESS  
BY RACE/ETHNICITY

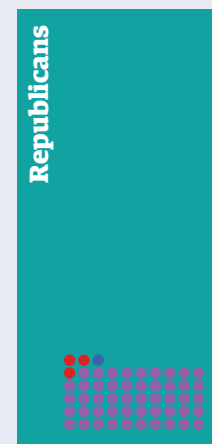
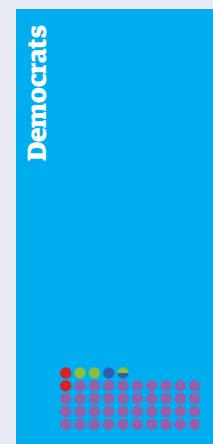
HOUSE-439\*

SENATE-100



● African-American    ● Hispanic    ● White  
● Asian/Pacific Islander    ● American Indian

\*Republican house members include one delegate and the commissioner of Puerto Rico. Democratic house members include 4 delegates as of Aug 2, 2019 Sources: Congressional Research Service, House.gov





The attempted assassination of Russian activist and political opponent of President Putin, Alexei Navalny, has shocked the world. But, going by the history of Russian politics, it is not out of the ordinary

**BY MAJ GENERAL AJAY SAH**  
Chief Information Officer,  
Synergia Foundation

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, a 44-year-old Kremlin opponent of President Putin, who runs the Anti-Corruption Foundation investigating high-level graft, was mysteriously poisoned in a cup of tea he partook at the Tomsk airport. As he went into a coma onboard, the aircraft made an unscheduled landing at Omsk to rush him to the local hospital.

According to the chief toxicologist at the hospital, he was tested for a wide range of likely poisons — narcotics, synthetic psychodetic, and medicinal substances including cholinesterase inhibitors — but all the results were negative. It was concluded that it was a metabolic disorder that caused the coma.

According to his family, for two days, Russian doctors refused to let him be sent abroad for treatment. Finally, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, had to intervene. A German NGO airlifted Mr. Navalny to Charite Hospital in Berlin, where tests “indicated poisoning” from a substance belonging to “the group of cholinesterase inhibitors”. Cholinesterase is essential for the functioning of the body’s central nervous system. Its inhibitors come from insecticides as also nerve agents such as sarin, a popular chemical warfare agent in most arsenals.

Mr. Navalny remains in intensive care under a medically induced coma. While serious, doctors say his

condition is “not life-threatening”. His spokesperson, Kira Yarmysh, tweeted that the poisoning was “no longer a hypothesis but a fact”.

His supporters blame Mr. Putin for the attempt on his life, claiming that this is not the first time such a thing has been done under his watch. This incident has sent ripples through the ranks of the opposition in Russia, which is one amongst many attacks on critics and opponents to the current regime.

Mr. Navalny has been under the spotlight since he began a campaign of ‘Clever Voting’, urging supporters to take resort to “tactical voting” to make ruling party candidates lose. He uses a website ‘Clever Voting’ to advise potential voters on which candidates have the best chance to defeat a United Russia candidate. It is claimed that he was able to achieve a measure of success in the 2019 elections for Moscow city parliament. In fact, when the poison struck him down, he was on his way to Siberia to promote ‘Clever Voting’ where regional and local elections are scheduled in September.

His anti-corruption campaign targeted many powerful personalities in Russia, apart from the ruling party, thus making him many enemies.

Not surprisingly, the incident has drawn worldwide criticism, with the EU diplomatic chief calling for an “independent and transparent investigation”. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement that the U.S. supported EU calls for an investigation “if the reports prove accurate”. U.S. President Trump, busy on the election trail, has not made any comments.

## HISTORY OF POLITICAL MURDERS

Politics in Russia has been marred by political murders targeting opponents, activists, and journalists. Since July, Khabarovsk in the far east of Russia has been rocked by incessant protests against the arrest of a popular governor, Sergia Furgal, accused of a murder. Incidentally, Mr. Furgal had come to power after defeating a United Russia Governor.

The Soviet KGB, in particular, was renowned for its use of poison in ingenious ways. In 1959, it carried out a successful hit on the Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera with a cyanide spray pistol hidden in a newspaper. In 1978, London Waterloo Bridge bus station was witness to the infamous “umbrella murder” of Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident writer. Years later, a KGB defector claimed that the hit was ordered by the Soviet spy agency, with a specially modified umbrella that fired a deadly ricin pellet.

In 2018, a former Russian spy and double agent for the UK, Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned in Salisbury England with nerve agent Novichok, a cholinesterase inhibitor. Both survived the attempt, but an unrelated woman died. This lady had been given a bottle of perfume found by a friend lying near a bush in Salisbury, which she sprayed on her wrist. The police



were able to link the poisoning to Russia.

Vladimir Kara-Murza, an activist and writer, has survived two attempts at poisoning.

The list is long and deadly. In 2004, Ukrainian presidential candidate Victor Yushchenko, known for his anti-Russian stance, almost died after eating a meal poisoned with TCCD, 1,70,000 times more toxic than cyanide. Journalist Anna Politkovskaya, a strong critic of Mr. Putin, survived a poisoned tea on an Aeroflot flight but was later shot to death in Moscow in 2006. The same year, another critic, Alexander Litvinenko, succumbed to tea generously laced with polonium 210. In 2012, Alexander Perepilichny, a Russian living in the UK died under mysterious circumstances. Police investigations revealed that he had consumed soup containing gelsemium, a rare plant found in China, with a heavy dose of toxin strychnine.

Russia, like many other countries with a violent past, has a history of use of poison as a weapon of choice for political assassinations — from the 1453 poisoning of Dmitry Shemyaka, the Grand Duke of Moscow whose chef was bribed to put arsenic in his meals, to the more popular killing of the mystic Rasputin by Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich, and Prince Felix Yusupov in 1916 by lacing his wine and cakes with cyanide. Rasputin, blessed with iron-cast digestion, refused to die and then had to be shot multiple times.

Poisoning has been losing out to guns in modern times, and while it affords the assassin an easy get-

away, modern science can save the victim and also detect the toxin in a relatively short time.

“If you’re a regime that is willing to kill enemies at home and abroad, you have to decide on your priorities: ease, subtlety or theatricality,” says Mark Galeotti, director of the London-based firm Mayak Intelligence in an article in The Washington Post. “For the second and third, poison is often a good bet.”

Kremlin spokespersons had dismissed the allegations, viewing with scepticism the authenticity of the “poisoning” when their own toxicologists had ruled it out. Dmitri Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, termed the accusations against Mr. Putin as “empty noise” and “idle talk”.

## ASSESSMENT

Political murders are not unique to Russia alone. In fact, most democracies have seen killings of political rivals and those proving “inconvenient” to the people in power. Tabloids are full of such stories around the world.

However, the apparent brashness of such acts in an advanced nation in these modern times, when diagnostic processes can detect the faintest traces of poisonous substances, is truly disconcerting. It can only be hoped that transparent and fair investigations get to the bottom of this sordid incident.

# CHARGE OF THE YOUTH BRIGADE

Inspired by popular protest movements around the world, Thai youth are spearheading demands for democratic reforms and curbing the all-powerful monarchy

BY SYNERGIA FOUNDATION  
RESEARCH TEAM

Thailand's protests, the largest since the 2014 coup, made up of a largely young demographic is shaking up a stultifying political order, much like other citizens' movements demanding reform, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and further on in Lebanon and Chile.

On August 16, more than 10,000 Thais came out on the streets demanding a change in government and even attacked the hitherto forbidden and taboo subject — the monarchy. Such public demands for change are unprecedented in the country's history.

A widely supported anti-government movement first emerged in the last months of 2019, after courts banned Future Forward, the most vocal party opposing the government of incumbent Prime Minister General Prayut-Chan-o-cha. An online protest simmering during the lockdown has now spilled over into the streets with almost daily demonstrations.

Though the Thai government has been effective in containing the coronavirus outbreak, with one of the lowest cases and death toll in Asia, citizen activists have decried the stringent emergency and quarantine measures that were in place for citizens, while the armed forces were allowed to disregard them.

The protests lack central leadership, and different interest groups have been coordinating marches through social media. They share a common grudge against the powerful military and its proxies in the government.

## WHAT THEY DEMAND

Three key demands have invigorated the Thai push for democratic reforms-dissolution of the parliament, end to harassment of opposition activists and constitutional reforms.

The military is a powerful institution and Thailand has dubious distinction of seeing the largest number of military coups in SE Asia. After the military coup of 2014, General Prayut scrapped the constitution the same year and had the military write a new charter that increased the king's powers and established the power of the pro-military royalists. This deeply embedded alliance between the monarchy and the military (which has also served to increase the wealth gap in Thailand) is now being denounced by the protesters as "an enemy to the principles of democracy", threatening to push the country closer towards an absolute monarchy.



The protesters have also pressed for reforms in the powerful Thai monarchical institution. These include curbs on King Maha Vajiralongkorn's constitutional powers and his authority over the armed forces and domestic politics. Yet, protesters have also strongly emphasised that they do not want to abolish the institution. The monarchy is generally a taboo subject in Thailand because of the harsh and repressive 'lese-majeste' laws which criminalise criticism of the king and other senior royals and have been wielded extensively to silence and jail citizens. In this context, the protests are astounding for there has not been such a direct and public challenge to the Thai monarchy in decades.

Economic variables largely compound the demand for political change. The Thai economy has been in free fall in recent months with the crucial Thai tourism sector largely dormant. The economy is estimated to have contracted by about 12.2 per cent in the second quarter of the year, its worst downturn since the time of the Asian financial crisis. "The severe economic downturn, combined with Thailand's persistently high inequality and still rigid economic and social hierarchies — it is one of the most unequal countries in the world — animates opposition, especially younger people graduating from university, struggling to find work, and rebelling against

traditional hierarchies," said Pavin Chachavalpongpun of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Other factors include allegations of government corruption and the concentration of state power by wealthy elites. The disappearance of an anti-government activist in Cambodia and the crackdown on political opponents like the citizen-backed Future Party has also fuelled disaffection.

## GOVERNMENT'S BALANCING ACT

The government — comprised mostly of conservative, military and royalist figures — is walking a tight rope. It is afraid to mobilise repressive and harsh measures against protesters for fear of further backlash by encouraging both local and international support for the protests, and invoking international criticism. On the other hand, not taking strong action also serves to embolden protesters and prolong the movement, as well as serving to undermine the monarchy.

According to Thai newspapers like the Bangkok Post and The Nation, the government has announced that citizens are allowed to voice their dissent, and General Prayut has said he seeks dialogue with the protesters. But, the kingdom's long history of brutal crackdowns leaves cause for concern

about an eventual violent response if demonstrations continue to grow in size and forcefulness. Even though the king has apparently requested no prosecutions, for now, under the country's strict 'lese-majeste' laws, at least ten pro-democracy protesters have been arrested on other charges, including sedition, which carries a sentence of up to seven years.

## ASSESSMENT

It remains to be seen whether sustained protests will bring about concrete changes to the Thai monarchy and government under Prime Minister Prayut. Unless economic reforms are instituted, protests demanding political change will continue.

- As part of the 'Look East Policy', India has maintained strong strategic bilateral relations with Thailand, including in the areas of maritime policy and security cooperation. However, the current upheaval might bring in proxies, like China, into the country, making it imperative to track political developments in Thailand closely.



Majority agree with youth demonstrations

### POLL

**26.56%**

said the demonstrators had the right and liberty to hold protests as long as they are unarmed and non-violent

Majority fear demonstrations could lead to violence: Nida Poll March on Peaceful anti-govt demonstration ended at midnight

**26.16%**

said they had the right to do so as long as it is not illegal

**18.24%**

thought the students were showing their true belief in democracy

**17.12%**

thought the rallies were to benefit the country's future;

**13.44%**

said they were intended to support democracy and oppose dictatorship

**9.76%**

said they might sow the seeds of division and chaos in the future

**8.88%**

believed the rallies were to oppose injustice in society

**7.04%**

said they were fed up with street demonstrations

**6.48%**

believed the rallies were intended to topple the government of Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha

**6.08%**

believed political groups/parties were behind the demonstrations

**5.68%**

thought the rallies had a hidden purpose

**4.64%**

said the demonstrators were only following a trend in social media

**BY MAJ GENERAL AJAY SAH**

Chief Information Officer,  
Synergia Foundation

In the last week of August, Chinese President Xi Jinping publicly proclaimed his concern for Tibet and the ongoing border standoff with India. He was presiding over the Communist Party's Central Symposium on Tibet Work, which is the highest forum for discussing Tibet. The first such symposium was organised by the Communist Party in 1980, and this was the seventh edition, held after a hiatus of almost five years.

The official mouthpiece of the Communist Party, 'People's Daily', quoted President Xi calling for the nation to make Tibet an "impregnable fortress" to "ensure peace and stability" in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and "encourage Tibetans to fight separatism." Linking internal security with prosperity, he called on the party leadership to work towards building a "united, prosperous, culturally advanced and modern socialist" Tibet. He also called for "planting the seeds of loving China in the depths of the hearts of every youth" by incorporating patriotism in their school curriculum. President Xi had a message for the influential Buddhist monks calling upon them to adapt their religion to socialism and the Chinese way of life.

As an obvious reference to the ongoing standoff with India, he also demanded from the party to "solidify border defences and ensure frontier security" and an "ironclad shield".

**PACIFICATION OF TIBET**

Mr Xi's words are indicative of the restive nature of China's outlying provinces that even after over 70 years of communist rule over Tibet, the president has to talk about bridging the gap between the Tibetans and their Han rulers. Tibetans are quite distinct from the Han majority, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously, and have never really conceded to the Chinese takeover. They continue to practise their brand of Tibetan Buddhism. Their children are taught in Tibetan, and despite Beijing's efforts to impose Han culture and Mandarin, the Tibetans have kept their unique culture alive. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, despite an ongoing smear campaign labelling him a puppet and a pretender, is deeply revered as their spiritual leader.

China has always maintained that the PLA had "peacefully liberated Tibet" in 1951, correcting a historical wrong as Tibet was part of the Chinese Kingdom since the 13th century.



# THAT 'IMPREGNABLE WALL' AROUND TIBET

President Xi Jinping's recipe for making Tibet more closely integrated to mainland China comes at a time when its southern flank is disrupted by the ongoing face-off with India

However, the fact remains that the peaceful and remote religious kingdom, bracketed between China and India, was brutally occupied, forcing its leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, to flee to India along with thousands of supporters and bodyguards. The Dalai Lama formed the government in exile at Dharamshala in India and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

**WHY THE CONCERN NOW?**

Despite the superficial normalcy visible to any outsider visiting Lhasa, Beijing exercises iron control over the deep undercurrents of tension which refuse to die. Bitter protests by monks are often reported, and

are quickly and brutally repressed. Also, China has changed the demography of the Tibetan plateau by settling a large number of Han Chinese.

Geographically, Tibet has been the Gateway to South Asia as traditional trade routes used to run between the 'roof of the world' and the Indian landmass. It has been a perennial source of political sensitivity for China as Tibet has a huge support base in the western world. For a long time after its occupation in 1951, the CIA had funded many covert and overt operations to destabilise the Chinese grip on Tibet. In fact, around the core of the fierce Khampa warriors, Dalai Lama created a secret military force, code-

named the Special Frontier Force, which has recently been in the news for securing heights in Eastern Ladakh, dominating Chinese held areas.

With the rapprochement between China and the Nixon administration in the 1970s, U.S. toned down its activities towards Tibet, restricting itself to periodic calls for individual and religious rights of the Tibetan people. In fact, the Xinjiang region was more the subject of acrimony between the U.S. and China than Tibet.

China's growing international power, and its economic heft, ensured that slowly but surely, Tibet was erased from the institutional memory of the global watchdogs,

dampening the support for the 'Free Tibet' movement.

Things have been changing between the U.S. and China, and it is reflected in the efforts of the U.S. to bring the Tibetan issue into the equation to pressurise China. In May 2019, U.S. Ambassador Branstad had made a rare visit to Tibet. Since then, China has denied permission to American diplomats, journalists and even tourists to visit TAR. In retaliation, the U.S. imposed visa bans on Chinese officials.

Beijing's increasing muscle-flexing with its neighbours, both along its land borders and on international waters, has prompted the U.S. to consider the Tibetan region as being increasingly vital to regional stability. The U.S. is concerned with the challenge to geopolitical status quo in Asia by China, and Tibet provides as good a cause to call out China as Hong Kong and Taiwan.

U.S. criticism has increasingly grown more strident, highlighting China's violation of internationally recognised human rights in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan. In a recent statement, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the U.S. remained "committed to supporting meaningful autonomy for Tibetans, respect for their fundamental and inalienable human rights, and the preservation of their unique religious, cultural and linguistic identity".

Tibet remains a core issue in the Indo - Sino relationship. China did not have a common boundary with India, or with Bhutan or Nepal, till it forcibly annexed Tibet and came in direct contact with these countries, giving rise to a host of territorial disputes, most of which remain unresolved.

India, for the last two decades, had kept the 'Free Tibet' issue on the back burner and given tacit approval to Chinese occupation, hoping in return for better relations and peaceful borders. India does not want to confront military threats on both its western and eastern borders simultaneously. But the evolving crisis in Eastern Ladakh has changed the dynamics. India should, and most probably this is what the Chinese leadership also expects to happen, reopen Tibet as an outstanding issue, without having to formally repudiate any of its previous assertions. It should not shy away from demanding reconciliation and healing in Tibet and highlight the oppressive measures in force to change the demography and erase the unique culture of Tibet. The use of the Special Frontier Force in active combat for the first time against China is perhaps an indication of changing Indo-China dynamics, something which will definitely be worrying Beijing.

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