



SOUTH ASIA

Annual Assessment



2015

Concerns over democracy and democratic concerns in South Asia

N Sathiya Moorthy

‘Modern democracy’, as the western colonial rulers had practised and left behind, is still an issue in South Asia – including nations like Bhutan and Nepal, which used to be ruled by the royalty, and also the Indian Ocean archipelago, Maldives. Afghanistan, ruled by tribal war-lords for long, has been getting a modicum of democracy, but not to levels required – it would seem. In the past years, these nations had taken to multi-party democracy as fish to water, but issues remains not just in these nations but also in others, where democracy had been around for a longer period.

There are democracy issues in other nations of the region, as well – some finding solutions of themselves, and others facing them, instead. Sri Lanka, where ‘democracy’ was considered as facing problems with the Rajapaksa regime, went to the polls in 2015. The elections saw Rajapaksa being replaced by his ministerial and political aide, Maithripala Sirisena, as the candidate of a ‘combined Opposition’ alliance. This was followed by the parliamentary polls eight months later, when the ‘National Unity Government’ swept back to power.

Present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan on South Asia’s north-western frontier since time immemorial have had their own taste of democracy, not all of it successful, or at times useful, too. Terrorism remained, so did the US-led troops in Afghanistan in particular. In Bangladesh, on South

Asia’s eastern sea-front, it was a celebration year after a smooth and successful conclusion of land-border transfer with India. It was marred however by unending political violence from the previous year, attributed to the parliament elections of 2014.

In neighbouring India, the region’s largest nation in every which way and the world’s largest democracy had proved its democratic electoral credentials a year earlier. The year 2015 was witness to some of the democratic fallouts, flowing from the ‘intolerance’ discourse, impacting on the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modil and his government. Whether it also impacted on the results of the assembly polls in Delhi and Bihar, where Modi’s BJP lost, is a moot question.

The greatest of democracy stories in the region was reserved for Myanmar, where the military junta ordered democratic elections, and stood by the commitment to the international community. The Opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) swept the polls, but issues remained for party leader and Nobel Peace laureate, Aung Saan Suu Kyi to assume the high office of President, owing to a constitutional bar. How the party overcomes the situation, or if it does at all, will be an object lesson in the infancy of the political processes in the country, in the New Year.

Against this, Maldives witnessed near-eternal democracy hiccups through the year. If former President Mohammed Nasheed was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to 13 years in prison in a pending abduction case, the nation also saw the arrest of one Vice-President and one Defence

Minister being arrested on separate charges of plotting to assassinate President Yameen. The nation saw three Defence Ministers and two Vice-Presidents in 12 months, and the vice-presidency was still vacant at the year drew to a close. Against this, the Opposition and the international community (read: West) continued to harp on anti-democracy acts by the Government, and called for more democracy, starting with freedom for Nasheed and other ‘political prisoners’.

India continued to remain at the centre of foreign and security policies of each of these nations. However, a South Asian security umbrella, with India at its head, remained a distant dream. Though India’s security relations with neighbours Sri Lanka improved, so did it with Maldives after a cooling-off during the year, there were unanticipated bickering between India and Nepal. This was after, Nepal and the rest of the world had showered praise on India for rushing aid and assistance to the Himalayan nation after the unprecedented earthquake that destroyed the nation as never before.

Where from here? The question begs an answer. It may be long before individual nations of South Asia revisited and reviewed their own forms of democracy – or, should they be rediscovering whatever they had imbibed and inherited from time immemorial, and add the missing local flavour. The question still would be would a local edition of democracy, even if formulated and formed, be better than the existing form? Better or worse still, could South Asia, if only over years and decades, have

greater commonalities than already, and sink more differences than at present.

The Year-2015 may not have the answers, but that is where it needed to begin.

(The writer is a Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Chennai)

Afghanistan: Never-ending war, precarious peace

Kriti M Shah

The year 2015 in Afghanistan was an extremely eventful one. With the US extending its military presence in the country, the Taliban peace negotiations getting stalled, the rise of the ‘Islamic State’ and the fractious coalition government in Kabul, Afghanistan’s future remains precarious at best. Despite the 2014 general election helping to prevent civil war and violence, the Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah power-sharing arrangement has been largely ineffective and unproductive with delays in choosing ministers, postponement of parliamentary elections and lack of concrete electoral reforms. In addition, the deteriorating security situation has put pressure on the nation’s security forces that find themselves hard pressed for resources and better military training.

Internal politics

The government experienced a tumultuous year as a result of political bickering between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. After the power-sharing agreement

between the arch political rivals that led to the formation of the National Unity Government in September 2014 there was subsequent struggle to choose members of the cabinet. Disagreements over key ministerial posts along with many candidates withdrawing their names from consideration, led to key positions such as defence minister, attorney-general and chief justice of the Supreme Court being vacant for months after government formation.

One aspect of the power-sharing deal was the agreement to initiate electoral reforms “to ensure that future elections are credible”, given allegations and accusations from Abdullah’s camp over fraudulent election practices during the general election in 2014. Although both agreed in principle to not hold elections until the system was overhauled, they was disagreement on how to proceed and who would oversee the electoral reform process. According to the agreement, Ghani was to establish a special commission that would look into the reforms.

However, the president demonstrated little urgency in carrying out that promise. This led Abdullah to take his own steps to speed up the process, including drafting possible amendments to electoral law and selecting his representatives for the special commission. The bickering between the Ghani and Abdullah camps continues till date, although in July 2015 Ghani issued a decree establishing a 16 member commission to look into electoral reform, a first step towards honouring the agreement between the two.

In the midst of the fractious coalition government’s squabbles, Parliament’s term expired in June 2015 with no elections scheduled and no agreement on how to hold the said elections. In a last-ditch measure, Ghani issued a decree extending the parliament’s term until elections are held, leading many to term his move as unconstitutional. The expansion of the President’s office by Ghani has led to a deeper level of policy and governance paralysis as his lack of ‘power sharing’ with Abdullah has led to a distressing government structure.

The September 2016 parliamentary elections therefore have large political implications for Ghani as since they will determine the Loya Jirga delegates, who will in turn influence the possible drafting of a new constitution and new government structure. By not providing space to Abdullah Abdullah in the government, Ghani is digging his own political grave that will have its ramifications, once Afghani citizens vote for a new government in 2016.



Security

The nation continues to face threats from the Taliban insurgency and other extremist networks including the Haqqani Network, al-Qaeda and more recently the Islamic State (IS). These groups have continuously tried to assert their authority and undermine the Afghan government and the Afghan National Defence and Security forces (ANDSF). In 2015, fighting between the Taliban-led insurgency and the Afghan troops has been the bloodiest on record since the US invasion in 2001.

This has resulted in overall security deterioration in 2015 with an increase in insurgent attacks and higher Afghan National Defence and Security forces (ANDSF) casualties. The Taliban and other insurgents have been able to find and exploit the ANDSF vulnerabilities leading to a fragile security situation in many parts of the country that are traditional Taliban strongholds. The presence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and the high number of defectors from other extremists groups to the IS is a cause of serious concern and worry for Kabul and its international allies.

The Taliban

The Taliban has remained active in their traditional strongholds, namely Helmand and Kandahar in the south, but have successfully orchestrated attacks across the country through the course of the year. In the second half of the year, the Taliban conducted attacks, including checkpoint overruns, in Helmand, Kandahar, Faryab, Uruzgan, Ghazni, and other

districts around Kabul. Such attacks forced the ANDSF into a more defensive rather than offensive



position, demonstrating the Taliban's growing power.

In June 2015, the Taliban attacked the Afghan parliament in Kabul as lawmakers were convening in an attempt to confirm a new defence minister. The attack was a major embarrassment for the Ghani government and was followed up by an attack on a NATO convoy a few days later. The Taliban also had success in capturing the northern city of Kunduz in September 2015, deemed to be one of their biggest victories over the last fifteen years. Although the ANDSF along with US forces were able to push the Taliban out and regain the city within a few days, the brief capture of Kunduz brought with it scepticism over the Kabul military's capabilities.

Such attacks aimed at garnering international media attention and undermining the Afghan government and the perception of improved security under the government. To this extent the Taliban have been largely successful, as the increase in attacks was reflected in the public's perception of security.

According to the Afghanistan Nationwide Quarterly Assessment Research (ANQAR) Survey in September 2015, only 28 percent of Afghans said that security in their local area was good compared to 35 percent during the same time period in 2014 and 45 percent in 2013. The attacks also brought to light the change in insurgency tactics, with the Taliban launching attacks directly against the ANDSF to test their and the coalition forces responsiveness.

An important development in 2015 has been the beginning of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In May 2015, the Afghan government held formal talks with the Taliban in Urumqi, China. The negotiators for the Taliban were believed to be closely linked to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan. However in July 2015, few days before the next round of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban were to take place, it emerged that Taliban leader Mullah Omar had died two years ago in Pakistan and Mullah Mansour was the new head of the insurgency.

This development has had lasting ramifications within the Taliban and has led to a widening of the trust deficit between the Taliban and Kabul and Islamabad. The hiding of Omar's death from all, including the foot soldiers of the Taliban has led to internal rivalry and conflict within the ranks of the Taliban with many swearing allegiance to Mullah Rasood Akhund instead. The depth and severity of these internal factions is yet to be

determined and the impact that they will have on the Taliban's operational capability remains to be seen.

'Islamic State', and Haqqani network

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is becoming more operationally active in Afghanistan to the point where they are fighting against the Taliban for territory and the establishment of a safe haven. In September, the group claimed an improvised explosive device or IED attack on a UN vehicle. Few days later in September and October attacked 10 checkpoints in Nangarhar province in the same day. According to some reports, three hundred ISIL fighters attacked the checkpoints.

The terrorist group has also successfully recruited many disaffected Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fighters adding to their strength in the country. In February 2015, over 30 male passengers on a bus travelling from Kabul to Kandahar were taken hostage. ISIL claimed responsibility for the situation and it was discovered that the hostages were members of the Hazara community, a minority Shia group that faces discrimination in Afghanistan.

The Haqqani Network, which operates along the border with Pakistan in the provinces of Khost and Paktika, still remains one of the biggest threats to US and international allies of Afghanistan. The group is known to be a strong ally of al-Qaeda and has also demonstrated its role strengthening the Taliban. In 2015, the Haqqani Network leader Siraj

Haqqani was elevated to the role of Mullah Mansour's deputy.

Foreign relations

Relations with Pakistan

The Afghan government's relationship with Pakistan is of vital importance- one that plays crucial role in determining the future stability of Afghanistan. Realising this, Ghani engaged in a full outreach to Pakistan upon assuming the presidency. His official visit to Pakistan in November 2014 was one of his first foreign trips where he sought to obtain support for negotiations with the Taliban.

Following the Pakistan Taliban attack at a school in Peshawar in December 2014, Islamabad claimed that the attack was orchestrated in Afghanistan and asked for Kabul's cooperation against the Pakistan Taliban. The US and Ghani responded positively to Pakistan's request with Ghani diverting troops fighting against the Afghan Taliban in the south to the border areas to take on the Pakistan Taliban. This has marked a strategic shift in Pakistan's approach to its western neighbour, stating its commitment to work with Kabul to target terrorist groups hiding along their shared border "without any distinction". It has also allowed Sharif and Ghani to maintain regular contact at high levels of government throughout the year, further strengthening their bilateral relationship.

Pakistan's importance in Afghanistan is indisputable. A fact that Pakistan cherishes, volunteering to broker talks between the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. Over the year, Pakistan has taken steps to encourage the Taliban to engage in negotiations. For example, in April 2015 Tasneem Aslam, Pakistan's foreign ministry spokeswoman condemned the Taliban's "spike in violence" in Afghanistan and added "Pakistan would like to see a national reconciliation process in Afghanistan".

However several events in 2015 have also caused a sense of distrust to prevail between the two countries. The fact that Mullah Omar's died at a Karachi hospital in 2013 and that Pakistani intelligence did not know about it has raised serious questions among political leaders in Afghanistan. A series of high profile attacks in Kabul in August 2015 and increased cross border firing between the ANDSF and the Pakistani military have also contributed to increased bilateral tensions.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to realise that both countries need to continue to work closely together in order to secure their borders and improve bilateral ties. With the Pakistani military stepping up their offensive against extremists in North Waziristan, several militants and terrorists have been able to move freely across the border into a safe haven in Afghanistan.

This was noted by Ghani during the Heart of Asia conference in Islamabad in December 2015 when he

said that Pakistan's laudable military operations against militants had "created unintended consequences bringing about the displacement of a significant number of militant groups onto our soil." However with increased military presence along the border and greater transparency and cooperation amongst intelligence agencies, much progress can be made in securing and stabilising both nations.

Relations with US

After the signing of the status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) between the Afghan government and the United States in October 2014, that allowed the US to station military forces in the country beyond 2014, the US began Operation Resolute Support in January 2015. Under the Operation, US and NATO missions moved away from active fighting and began providing a more limited advising and training support to the Afghan security forces.

However, within a few months, in March 2015 General John F. Campbell the commander of Operation Resolute Support and the US forces in Afghanistan stated that he was open to altering the plan to remove all US troops by the end of the year. While there were 9,800 US troops at the start of 2015, the plan was to steadily reduce the number to 5,500. Campbell added that if the US troop levels drop to 5,500 by the end of the year as planned, it could "potentially take our eyes off focussing on the mission when we really need it".

A few days later following a day-long meeting with Ashraf Ghani, the White House announced their intention to maintain 9,800 troops through the end of the year, rather than reducing the number as planned. In October 2015, President Obama reversed his decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan before the end of his presidency, by announcing that the US would still keep thousands of troops in the country through 2017 indefinitely prolonging the US' longest war.

There are two reasons for this shift in US policy. The first is President Ashraf Ghani's relationship with the US. Seen as starkly different from his predecessor Hamid Karzai, Ghani's insistence that US troops maintain their presence in Afghanistan as opposed to asking them to leave like Karzai, indicates his willingness to work the US as partners in combating extremism in the country. Ghani's readiness to hold peace talks with the Taliban and moves to make US operations more effective by reducing restrictions imposed by Karzai are all factors for the United States' change in policy towards Afghanistan.

Ghani has expressed his gratitude to the international community on a number of occasions; thanking them for their sacrifices and the help they have provided Afghanistan. This was in stark contrast to Karzai, whose often inflammatory comments worried the US of a backlash and attacks against their troops in the country.

Also contributing to this change in approach has been the emergence of the Islamic State and concern that the gains made the US in Afghanistan over fourteen years could disappear if the US forces left Afghanistan, like they did in Iraq in 2011. ISIL, which has spread its reign of terror from Iraq into Syria and Libya, poses an extreme threat to Afghanistan's stability. The US noted that the group's social media campaign had been attracting disaffected Taliban fighters who were disgruntled over the lack of progress made by the Taliban in overthrowing the Kabul government.

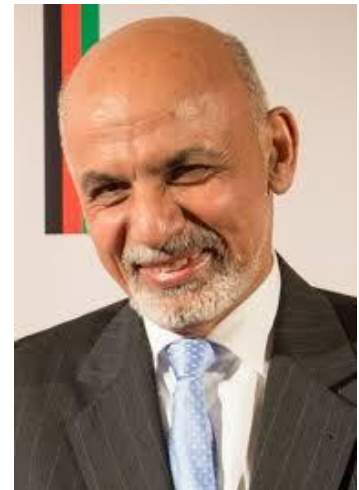
While Ghani has stated that ISIL has a presence in Afghanistan, its operational capability is still limited with the Taliban warning the group to stay out of the country. In July 2015 the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey visited Afghanistan to discuss strategies to confront ISIL with Ghani, demonstrating the US's concern.

The United States' also experienced serious international backlash in October 2015 when it conducted an airstrike on a Doctors Without Borders hospital during operations in Kunduz. The airstrike killed over 22 people, including children and staff members of the international organisation. President Obama said the incident was 'tragic' and called for an inquiry. Although 'Doctors Without Borders', and international NGO, strongly condemned the attack, calling it a war crime, the response to the strike in Afghanistan was relatively muted.

Lots need to be done

Although the 2014 National Unity Government formation averted political instability and violence in Afghanistan, much is left to be done to strengthen and build an effective governance structure. With all eyes on the September 2016 Loya Jirga, Ghani and Abdullah must make a serious effort to bury the hatchet and push along electoral reforms in the country. By consultation with various stakeholders including civilian population, the leaders should work together, putting up a united front to deliver Afghanistan from this trying time.

While Ghani has staked a lot of his political capital on negotiations with the Taliban, he has also initiated a political outreach to Pakistan that will have lasting domestic



consequences. Although he must be credited for taking such a bold political risk, keeping in mind the controversial role Pakistan plays in Afghanistan's security, it is important that Kabul and Islamabad maintain a close relationship. Ghani and Nawaz Sharif must work together to secure their border and avoid spilling over of militants on either side. Joint border patrolling and improved trade ties will help bridge the trust deficit and also contribute to an overall sense of security.

The Afghan government must also devise ways to address structural challenges to their instable economic infrastructure. Kabul continues to be increasingly dependent on foreign aid and support, including most of its budget and all of its military expenditures. Although the US will be in the country for the foreseeable future, the government must come up with a long term plan to revive the economy and make use of its vast mineral resources. Ghani and Abdullah must also find ways to counter opium production and selling that is a major funder of the Taliban and other extremist groups.

Afghanistan is also dealing with an unprecedented refugee crisis, with Afghans ranked as the second largest group (after Syrians) to have reached European shores last year. According to the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, more than 40,000 Afghans have sought asylum in Europe from January until August 2015. Thousands have also made their way into neighbouring countries of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. While the security situation has prompted many Afghans to flee their country, diminishing opportunities for employment and economic stagnation proves to be another reason for Afghan citizens to migrate.

Although Ashraf Ghani launched a national employment program in November 2015, the program promises labour and construction jobs for a mere 25,000 Afghans. More steps need to be taken in order to reverse the outflow of citizens, including improving educational institutions, private and

public sector jobs and creating incentives for the youth to continue to stay in the country.

Nonetheless, none of the above will be possible without adequate security, improvement of the ANDSF and tackling of corruption. The Afghan forces continue to suffer from financial problems and deficiencies in logistics and intelligence resources. Their dependence on US and foreign funding must be dealt with so that the Afghan government and economy is able to independently fund their requirements and weapon shortfalls.

The United States must also continue their advisory and training support to the Afghan security forces, building their confidence and capabilities in tackling insurgents in their country. For the time being, all eyes are on President Ashraf Ghani to make his next move.

(Kriti M Shah is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation, Delhi)

Afghanistan: Time-line

14 January- Afghan security forces detain give suspects in Peshawar attack

26 January- United States Agency for International Development suspends International Relief and Development in Afghanistan for 'serious misconduct'

29 January- Afghan forces retake Chak after 13 years of Taliban rule

5 February- Afghan security forces kill 18 militants in Nangarhar province

6 February- Ashraf Ghani attends Munich Security Conference in Germany

11 February- Asia Development Bank (ADB) pledges \$130 million in aid to Afghanistan

23 February- 30 Hazara passengers taken hostage on bus

3 March- Ghani fires 27 senior Afghan police officers on charges of corruption

2 April- Suicide bomber kills 17 in Khost province

10 April- Gunmen storm building in Mazar-e-Sharif, kill 10

16 April- Power shortage closes Kandahar factories

19 April- Ghani and Iran's Ayatollah Khameni meet in Tehran, stress ties

21 April- 16 ministers sworn into Afghan's lower legislative house

23 April- Government holds first cabinet meeting

24 April- European Union extends its police mission in Afghanistan until the end of 2016

28 April- Ghani meets Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, open Attari checkpoint to trade

4 May- Afghan officials, Taliban meet in Doha, Qatar

11 May- 19 kidnapped Hazara passengers released

13 May- Ghani, Nawaz Sharif pledge to fight terrorism together in Kabul

14 May- Kabul hotel attacked by Taliban, killing 14

20 May- Government appoints 8 provincial governors

26 May- Afghan envoy meets Taliban officials in China

21 June- Taliban attack Afghan parliament

30 June- Taliban attack NATO convoy in Kabul

7 July- Afghan officials and Taliban meet for talks in Islamabad

9 July- Ghani visits Russia for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Ufa

13 July- Suicide bomb kills 33 in Khost

30 July- Afghan government confirms, Mullah Omar died in 2013

10 August- Weekend of violence in Kabul, kills over 55 people

12 August- Gunmen kidnap 12 Hazaras in Ghazni

27 August- Afghanistan signs trade agreement with Turkmenistan

3 September- Regional Economic Cooperation Conference opens in Kabul

23 September- Afghan civil aviation takes over air traffic control

27 September- ISIS fighters attack Nangarhar checkpoints

28 September- Taliban enter Kunduz

29 September- Abdullah Abdullah speaks at the UN

2 October- US military plane crashes in Jalalabad killing 11 on board

5 October- US bombs Doctors Without Border hospital in Kunduz

14 October- Taliban withdraw from Kunduz

15 October- Barack Obama halts Afghan withdrawal

23 October- Afghanistan elected to UN Economic and Social Council

25 October- 7.5 magnitude earthquake hits Afghanistan, killing more than 300

2 November-US announces massive al-Qaeda training camps destroyed in Afghanistan

3 November- Afghanistan, China sign three cooperation agreements

11 November-7 Hazaras beheaded in Kabul

23 November- 5.9 magnitude earthquake hits northeast Afghanistan

1 December- NATO pledges funding to Afghan Security Forces until 2020

8 December- Ghani opens Heart of Asia conference in Islamabad

9 December- Taliban attack Kandahar airport, kill 50

11 December- Afghan intelligence chief resigns

14 December- Taliban attack Spanish embassy in Kabul

17 December- US, Britain deploy Special Forces to Helmand

18 December- Afghanistan joins WTO

21 December- Taliban capture Sangin district in Helmand

22 December- Suicide blast kills 6 US troops in Afghanistan

Dec 24- Narendra Modi visits Afghanistan, inaugurates new Afghan parliament building

Bangladesh: Political violence distracts from border-solution

Joyeeta Bhattacharjee

The year 2015 was an eventful year for Bangladesh. The country achieved many milestones. The most significant ones included the country graduating to a middle-income country from list of least developed nations, the resolution of land boundary dispute with India, and the Bangladesh team reaching the quarterfinal of Cricket World Cup, Prime Minister Sheikh Haisna receiving UN award for Human development.

In spite of these successes, there had been some events that dampened the spirit of jubilation. These included the long political violence because of blockade staged by the opposition in the early part of the year, growth in militancy activities, and the targeting of 'independent' bloggers and minorities. All these incidents disturbed peace.

Taking recourse to the established wisdom that the past forms the basis for future here an attempt is made to assess how the year 2015 was for Bangladesh, with the hope of understanding what lays ahead for the country in 2016.

Political conundrum

The country witnessed the worst kind of political violence due to opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) nation-wide marathon blockade in the initial months of the year. The BNP enforced the blockade with the intention of driving the Awami League government out of power because the party

believed that the present government was holding onto power illegally since it considers 2014 parliamentary elections, illegitimate. The BNP did not participate in the 2014 elections.

More than 100 people were killed during the blockade running for months as petrol bombs were hurled to refrain them from coming out of their homes. Since it hardly could make a dent on the stability of the Awami League government, the protest ended inconclusively. Mindless political violence caused inconvenience to common people, and political parties were criticised for their action.

The situation started to stabilise with around April as both Awami League and the BNP agreed to participate in the municipal corporation elections for major metros. The participation of both the political parties in the elections was welcomed by all, with the hope that the culture of confrontation in the politics would finally end. Unfortunately, controversies soon engulfed city corporation elections as the BNP withdrew from the elections mid-day through the polling day, charging the ruling party with 'mass foul-play'.

Politics in the country showed some positive signs by the year end as both the Awami League and the BNP participated in the municipal elections. Although most of the seats went in favour of the Awami League, the participation of the BNP raised optimism. It was seen as a major step towards strengthening of democracy. Besides it raised hopes about the two parties participating in the next parliament elections.

The year was not favourable for Jamaat-e-Islami, the influential religion based political party. Most of its top leadership remained behind the bars as they are accused of war crimes during the liberation war of 1971. The JI's two top leaders convicted of war crimes were executed. In 11 April, Jamaat leader Khamrul Zaman was hanged. On 26 November, BNP leader Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Jamaat Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Muhahid were executed.

Bloggers killed

The year saw one of the worst incidents of militant attacks experienced in a decade. As many as nine civilians and two security personnel died due to militant attacks. Besides, the security forces also discovered various hideouts of militant organisations and recovered huge cache of arms and ammunition, indicating a reorganisation of the militant groups in the country.

At least five bloggers, critical of the ideology of the militants, were killed. There were also attacks on the foreigners -- an Italian NGO worker and a Japanese agriculturalist were killed by militants. Besides, there were also attacks on the minority communities. An Italian priest was killed in November. There was bomb blast at the function of the Shia community, in the same month. There was also suicide attack in an Ahmediya mosque in December.

The revival of militancy raised serious doubts about the success of the counter-terror steps that the Awami League government initiated after coming

to power in 2009. The Government was criticised for its inability to control in particular the attacks on bloggers. The 'Islamic State' (IS) claimed to be behind these attacks, but the security agencies denied IS' presence in the country.

Social media ban

Citing security concerns, social media sites like Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp, were blocked ahead of execution of war criminals, Ali Ahsan Mojahid and Saluddin Quader Chowdhury, in November. The ban on Facebook was lifted on 10 December. Again, on 13 December social media sites, Twitter, Skype and Imo, were also jammed.

Restrictions on all the social media sites were lifted the next day but this act by the government attracted international attention. Also, there were protests inside the country. These incidents suggested the growing popularity of the social media in Bangladesh and their influence in the country.



Another incident that attracted international headlines was the story of migrants fleeing poverty in Bangladesh for better future abroad and thousands adrift in the Andaman Sea. Mass graves were discovered in Thailand and Malaysia, exposing the menace of human-trafficking and the

risks involved. This prompted the government to clamp down on the human trafficking networks. Government brought back many of its citizens who were saved by Myanmar Navy.

Hiccups and pick-up

The economic performance of the country was not good in the early part of the year due to political unrest that adversely affected transport services, exports, and private investment. With the improvement of situation later, the economy ended on a positive note. The government had targeted 7.3 percent of growth of gross domestic product (GDP) in its national budget for the financial year FY-15. The actual growth was 6.5 percent.

The early political unrest affected the investors' confidence significantly. In FY-15, the investment-GDP ratio was around 29 percent. At the end of the year, investment was 0.7 percent lower than what was targeted for, however it was 0.4 percent more than the previous fiscal.

Remittances by Bangladeshis working overseas, one of the country's major foreign exchange sources, showed a downward trend. Remittances grew by 7.5 percent in FY-15. It needs to be mentioned that remittances' growth was negative from July-November 2015 although manpower-export was on the rise.

Export growth was also not encouraging. In FY-15, exports registered a 3.5 percent growth, much below the targeted 10 percent and certainly a drop from 12.1 percent achieved in FY-2014.

The performance of the readymade garment (RMG), one of the major export products of Bangladesh, was not impressive. RMG export grew only by 4.1 percent in FY-15. To analysts slow growth in RMG export is reflective of supply chains disrupted by political demonstrations in early 2015, soft demand from the European Union and the US, and a marked decline in the prices for cotton, a major input cost that affected pricing.

Against this, imports rose by 11.2 percent, from 8.9 percent in FY-14. Higher imports of food grains, machinery, fertilizer, and industrial raw materials were the cause. Slower growth of exports than imports caused a widening of the trade-deficit.

However, the country's performance on controlling inflation was good. Inflation was 6.21 percent in November 2015 which was very close to the target of 6.2 for 2016. The factors that contributed to the low inflation included lower international commodity price, restrained monetary growth and a stable exchange rate between Bangladesh taka and the US dollar, the international currency.

Pakistan ties suffer

Bangladesh's relationship with most the major powers remained friendly and warm. There were no major changes in its relationship with the US, the European Union and China. Its relationship with Islamic nations also remained cordial. Its relationship with most of the South Asian neighbours except Pakistan was more or less cordial.

In 2015, it was Bangladesh's relationship with Pakistan that attracted major headlines. Ever since Bangladesh constituted the International War Crime Tribunal to try the criminals of Liberation War of 1971 the relationship has been facing jolts. But in 2015 the relation turned from bad to worse.

Pakistan has been critical of the trial of war criminals. But things deteriorated after the Pakistan Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning the execution of two war criminals in November. Bangladesh protested against this move of Pakistan, calling it 'interference in domestic affairs'.

To turn things bad, an official of the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka was accused of financing terror in the country. Although Pakistan recalled the accused diplomat, the two countries were caught in a major diplomatic row. In December, Bangladesh recalled its envoy posted in Islamabad, without specifying reasons. Pakistan retaliated by expelling one Bangladeshi diplomat.

Landmark year

The year 2015 was landmark year for India and Bangladesh relationship. In the year bilateral relationship achieved new heights. But the events that need special mention include the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and two, the June 2015 Bangladesh visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In May, Indian Parliament unanimously passed the LBA, thus removing the last obstacle for making the land boundary agreement functional. The ratification of the LBA resolved the boundary



dispute between the two countries, including the 'enclaves' issue' that were pending since Partition in 1947. The unanimous ratification of the in Indian Parliament was greatly appreciated in Bangladesh and greatly helped in boosting the image of India. In August, the LBA finally became functional.

The success of the LBA created a positive atmosphere for Prime Minister Modi's visit, adding additional warmth to the friendship between the two countries. During his visit, India and Bangladesh signed 22 agreements in areas of connectivity, trade, security health and education which are going to benefit both the countries.

Among these are the proposed Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for Indian companies, a measure which will immensely help Bangladesh to attain economic benefit as this will not only bring investment but also will create jobs. Another significant outcome was India's \$2-billion line of credit line (LOC) to Bangladesh.

The Indian LOC will be utilised mostly to improve the infrastructure in Bangladesh, mostly in upgrading the railway infrastructure. Such measures are likely to have long-term impact on that country economy as it will help to prepare the

required infrastructure necessary to realise its dream of becoming a major transport hub in Asia. Like the previous year the cooperation in security, economic and trade relations progressed in 2015.

Despite all the positives there have been some of the disappointments. Mainly there has been no progress on the issue of illegal migration. The issue of Teesta still remained pending.

Way forward

Considering the developments of 2015, it is assumed that there is no major threat to the Awami League government and it is likely to complete its term. Parliament elections are due in 2019. The present status of the Opposition BNP is not likely to change. It will remain an ‘illegitimate’ Opposition as it is not present in Parliament.

However, it is too early to assume whether political stability will ensure improvement of the security scenario. To deal with rising militancy in the country, the government will have to take stronger measures.

In spite of the gloomy economic environment globally, some predict that the Bangladesh economy will have a brisk improvement. According to some estimates, the GDP will maintain more than six percent growth. Exports are likely to grow due to economic recovery in the US and the Euro Zone. Remittances will remain a major source of foreign exchange earnings. The expectation is political stability will boost investments.

(The writer is a Research Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Delhi)

No of militancy victims in 2015

Month	Civilians	SFs	Terrorists	Total
January	0	0	6	6
February	1	0	10	11
March	1	0	0	1
April	0	0	4	4
May	1	0	0	1
June	0	0	0	0
July	0	0	1	1
August	1	0	0	1
September	1	0	0	1
October	3	1	1	5
November	1	1	5	7
December	0	0	4	4
Total	9	2	31	42

Source: www.satp.org

List of Agreements signed between India and Bangladesh during PM Modi's visit

1. Exchange of instruments of Ratification of 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 protocol
2. Exchange of letters on Modalities for implementation of 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 protocol
3. Bilateral Trade Agreement(renewal)
4. Agreement on Coastal Shipping between India and Bangladesh
5. Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade(renewal)
6. Bilateral Cooperation Agreement between Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution and Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) on cooperation in the field of standardisation.
7. Agreement on Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus service and its protocol
8. Agreement on Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala bus service and its protocol
9. Memorandum of Understanding between Coast Guards

10. Memorandum of Understanding on prevention of human-trafficking
11. Memorandum of Understanding on prevention of smuggling and circulation fake currency notes
12. Memorandum of Understanding between India and Bangladesh and for Extending a New Line of Credit(LoC) of \$2 million by government of India to government of Bangladesh.
13. Memorandum of Understanding on Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean
14. Memorandum of Understanding on Use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports
15. Memorandum of Understanding for a Project under IECC (India Endowment for Climate Change) of SAARC
16. Memorandum of Understanding on Indian Economic Zone
17. Cultural Exchange Programmes for the years 2015-17
18. Statement of Intent on Bangladesh-India Education Cooperation (adoption)

19. Agreement between Bangladesh Submarine Cable Company Limited (BSCCL) and Bharat Sanchar Nagar Limited for leasing of international bandwidth for internet at Akhaura
20. Memorandum of Understanding between University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, India for Joint Research on Oceanography of the Bay of Bengal
21. Memorandum of Understanding between University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh and University of Jamia Milia Islamia, India
22. Handing over of consent letter by Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA), Bangladesh to Life Insurance Cooperation (LIC), India to start operations in Bangladesh

Source: "India, Bangladesh sign 22 agreements, Modi announces line of credit worth \$2 billion", IBNLive.com, 6 June 2015

Bangladesh: Time-line

5 January – BNP Chairperson, Khaleda Zia called for blockade, it was the first anniversary of the last general election boycotted by the party.

26 February – Murder of Abhijit Roy, American-Bangladeshi online activist, known for his Bengali blog Mukto-Mona.

19 March – Bangladesh reached the quarter finals in cricket and played their first match against India. The team led by Mashrafe. India won by 109 runs.

13 April – Rickshaw puller shot to death in Eskaton, Bakhtiar Alam Rony, son of Awami League MP, named in the case.

14 April – Group of youngsters sexually abused women during the Bangla New Year celebrations Suhrwardy Uddyan next to Dhaka University's TSC.

10 May - Bangladesh bans Islamist militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team, which claims responsibility for killing and assaulting several pro-secular public figures.

31 July - Swap of 162 enclaves between India and Bangladesh ended one of the world's most intractable border disputes.

9 September – Students protested against VAT on tuition fees for Universities all over the nation, police and students clashed in Rampura.

2 October – Nine year old shot in the leg allegedly by Gaibandha MP Manjurul Islam Liton.

31 October - Faisal Arefin Dipan of Jagriti Prokashony was murdered in his office in Shahbagh.

7 November – Six people sentenced for death for the killing of two boys - Rajan in Sylhet and Rakib in Khulna.

18 November – Government blocked Facebook, Viber, and Whatsapp in Bangladesh citing security concerns over the execution of war criminals.

22 November – Three war criminals were hung for their crimes against humanity during the War of Independence, they were - General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Matiur Rahman Nizami.

25 December – A suicide attack took place in an Ahmadiyya mosque. The attacker died and several were injured.

Bhutan: Connectivity with neighbours

Mihir Bhonsale

The Himalayan nation's economic and people-to-people ties with neighbours were strengthened in the year 2015. The signing of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) in Thimphu on 15 June opened a new chapter in the relations between some of the fastest growing economies in Asia.

The BBIN sub-regional cooperation is a special arrangement among the 4 SAARC member-nations to exploit opportunities of trade and investment through strengthening of connectivity. The first step in this direction was the signing of the MVA that aims at seamless road travel between the countries bettering trade and people-to-people ties.

The most important domestic development was that of the news of the royal heir. The announcement of the King Jigme Keshar Namgyal Wangchuck that the royal couple were expecting the heir to the golden throne saw celebrations across the length and breadth of the country. Successive monarchs in Bhutan have played an instrumental role in the overall development of the country.

In a bid to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the country, the Prime Minister visited India and appealed to invest in Bhutan at the Vibrant Gujarat Summit held in Ahmadabad in January. Bhutan also undertook measures to improve ease of doing business in the country. This was reflected in the country's improvement in rank in the Ease of Doing

Business Index that moved 54 notches ahead from last year to 71.

Bhutan was represented in several multilateral summits including the 70th UN General Assembly and the COP21 in Paris. In the latter, the country was commended for its efforts in fighting climate change. Bhutan maintained in her Intended Nationally Determined Contributions that the country would maintain 60 percent of its forest cover, an "ambitious target" according to many.



Awaiting the heir

The country that swears to the *Tsa-Wa-Sum* (King, Land and People) celebrated the news that the King and Queen were expecting a prince around the time of Losar festival. The King announced the heir to the royal throne at the 60th anniversary celebration of the 4th king on 11 November.

The Wangchuck dynasty that has ruled the Land of the Thunder Dragon for more than a century, since 1907, has been the main force behind the country's progress. Especially, the contribution of the 4th

King towards the nation's progress has been held in high esteem ever since he was crowned in 1971 at a ripe age of 17.

Bhutanese kings and the people share a reciprocal relationship unparalleled in history of any modern nation. The confidence of previous monarchs in the people was reflected when the third King in 1953 gave powers to the National Assembly (NA) to dethrone the king or his successors with a two-thirds majority.

Again, reaffirming the close bond between the monarchy and people of Bhutan, the King in 2005 abdicated his throne and handed over to his successor. He also announced the 1st general elections in 2008 and promulgated a new constitution. The Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, 1949 was also revised in 2008 to the effect of Thimphu getting more powers to maintain its external relations.

Hence, expectations galore ride on the shoulders of the heir prince.

The search for good governance in the country continued in 2015. The trial and conviction of Foreign Minister Rinzin Dorji was held as a major achievement for the country's ombudsman and political class in cracking down on corruption and bringing transparency and good governance in the country. The King had earlier sounded his strong disapproval to the reign of corruption in the country.

The High Court's Bench I convicted Rinzin Dorji in September and sentenced him to 1 year prison sentence. He was convicted of misusing the Haa

Dzhongkhag's pool vehicle to transport private timber from Haa to Thimphu.

Earlier, the accused minister was granted official leave in January till the resolution of the case against him. Anticipating, an aversive court verdict, the government recommended his replacement to the King in July. Damcho Dorji replaced him as the foreign minister.

Repatriation-linked FDI

The Tshering Tobgay government has aimed at attracting Foreign Direct Investment in the country. In a major policy change, firms were allowed to repatriate dividends in convertible currency like US Dollar and Indian Rupee. This was expected to be of great help to FDI companies involved in priority service sectors like hotels.

The World Bank ranked Bhutan 71 among 189 countries around the world for ease of doing business. The bank in its annual report Doing Business 2016 released on 28 October, put Bhutan 54 notches ahead from its previous report that had put it on 125th position.

Encouraging private sector in the country to propel economic growth, the government launched the Public Private Partnership policy that aims at paving the way for the government to partner with private sector in providing infrastructure and development. The government hopes to overcome twin economic challenges, weak condition of the private sector and limited resources to provide infrastructure and services.

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay asked the private sector to be ready for having a pie of the hydropower sector. In a networking dialogue with the private sector, Tobgay urged investors to invest in hydropower and construction sectors to prepare in terms of competitiveness and productivity.

In 2015, the Business Opportunity and information Centre (BOiC) that is a special purpose vehicle to stimulate the economy and thus lower the lending rates received an overwhelming response. The BOiC approved 998 projects amounting to more than Nu 250 million from the two revolving funds instituted under the economic stimulus plan. The economic stimulus package was granted by the Government of India.

But, the institution of the BOiC got embroiled in a legal entente after the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) asked the government to merge BOiC with Bhutan Development Bank Limited. On recommendation of the taskforce set up to look into the merger, the cabinet in December approved the merger proposal.

Budget review

In a rare setback to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) led government, the National Assembly (NA) amended the National Assembly Act. It provided for appointing a nine-member National Assembly finance committee comprising MPs to review the budget. This came as a shock for the PDP government the NA resolution came all of a sudden.

The government drew flak from the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) party has urged the Parliament to

prioritise employment through a press release. The government had earlier asked the employment creation task force to come up with more recommendations, but DNT said that is doing so, the government is overlooking the reports, studies already available on the basis of which adequate actions could be taken.

Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay kick-started a new initiative in 2015. He visited 4 gewogs of Transhibji Draketen Langthel and Tangsibji in Trongsa as part of the initiative to visit all the 2015 gewogs to get feedback from the people on the policies of the government.

2015 was not a positive year for the hydropower sector in the country. The 11th Five Year Plan (FYP) target of installing capacity of 4,536 MW was scaled down to 3,356 MW. Delay in the commissioning of the 1200MW Punatsangchhu I project was said to be the main reason behind the inability to meet the target.

Hydropower target revision also pushed the National Council to question the government, as to what alternative they have to the inability to generate 10,000 MW by 2020. The Council sought clarification after the Economic Affairs Ministry said that the said target was not achievable.

On a positive development front, the country's rupee reserve increased by Rs 4.5 billion between the period November 2014 to October 2015 taking the total INR reserve to Rs 20.27 billion. This was the highest INR reserve within the country since 2009, according to the central bank.

However, external debt exceeded the size of the economy by 12 percent. The Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan stated that the country's debt to Gross Domestic Product ratio stood at 112 percent that is 12 percent over and above the size of Bhutan's economy. According to the RMA, almost 75 percent of the debts are Indian National Rupee driven loans for hydropower.

Crime a concern

The crime scenario remained an area of concern as the country saw 30 percent increase in cases involving possession of controlled substance and a 10 percent increase in its illegal transaction. Youth made up 60 percent of the 950 people that were arrested in connection of drugs in the last year.

The Bhutan police have expressed worry as drugs have assumed the status of birthday gifts. Bhutan is hence become a source of as well as a destination for the controlled substances. The Royal Bhutan Police has said that there has been a drop in the nationwide crime rate by about 15 percent compared to last year. The RBP said that compared to 2013 when 3288 crime cases were recorded, 2014 saw 2775 cases.

The Gross National Happiness index improved from 2010 value of 0.743. In 2015, a total of 91.2 percent of Bhutanese were narrowly, extensively, or deeply happy. Out of it, 43 percent were extensively or deeply happy. The aim is for all Bhutanese to be extensively or deeply happy. Bhutan is closer to achieving that aim in 2015 than it was in 2010 said the report.

New chapter

Road connectivity with neighbour's Nepal, India and Bangladesh got a boost with the signing of the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement. This ushered in a new chapter in the history of the region. The BBIN MVA clears the ground for a seamless movement of passenger and transport vehicles among the BBIN countries.

Bhutan has the opportunity to connect emerging trading centres of Thimphu, Phuentsholing and Samdrup Jongkhar with Kathmandu, Kolkata, Guwahati, Dhaka and Chittagong. The framework agreement clears the way for Bhutan to sign bilateral or trilateral agreements involving these sub-regional partners. Movement of vehicles across borders has been thought out to facilitate trade and movement of freight with passenger carrying vehicles, a value addition.

The framework uses the principle of reciprocity, i.e. for every truck Bhutan allows into Nepal, Bhutan has also to allow 1 Nepali truck within its territory. This, will also be applied to movement of passenger vehicles, subject to due clearance of immigration requirements by the passengers.

Bhutan will find herself amidst an economically growing region and benefit from increase in trade within the region. More investments are expected to flow in the country, with road and rail connectivity with the countries within the sub-region. The softening of borders would also allow increased people-to-people ties.

Fellow SAARC member-nations, Nepal and Sri Lanka also saw visits by the Bhutan's Prime Minister. Tshering Tobgay handed over a cheque of 1 Mn USD to Nepal Prime Minister, Sushil Koirala towards earthquake rehabilitation efforts that struck on 25 April. Prime Minister met his Nepali counterpart and conveyed the King, Jigme Keshar Namgyal Wangchuck's concern and anguish for the people of Nepal in the wake of the devastating earthquake.

The first annual bilateral consultation between Bhutan and Sri Lanka was held in April. The President of Sri Lanka, accompanied by several Cabinet Ministers engaged in bilateral talks with the visiting Bhutanese Prime Minister and the Bhutanese delegation.

The bilateral discussions focused special attention on initiatives in education and human resources development, health, aviation and cultural cooperation as well as regional and multilateral initiatives, and, ways and means of further enhancing this engagement.

Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay extended a warm invitation to Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena to visit Bhutan at an early date. He observed that although Bhutan is a landlocked country and Sri Lanka an Island, the two countries shared a special spiritual affinity and an unique friendship which binds the two peoples in a special way.

China talks

The year 2015 saw the completion of 30 years of diplomatic relations with Japan. The East Asian

complimenting the relations gave grants for rebuilding bridges worth nearly 2 billion yen besides signing 3 new grant assistance projects totalling to 193 million yen. Japan International Cooperation Agency also promised aid for glacial lakes outburst and help Bhutan build an inventory of glacial lakes.

Border continued to remain the focus of talks with neighbour, China. The 23rd round of boundary talks with China on 24 August. The two sides decided on carrying out the final phase of the joint technical field survey of disputed areas in Bhutan, in September. Earlier, Chinese Ambassador, Le



Yueching met Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay on 17 July and expressed happiness over the relations between the two countries.

Yueching also admired the development paradigm of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness. He called Bhutan a "good neighbour, partner and friend."

Relations with Western countries including the European Union and U.S. also grew from strength-to-strength in 2015. European Union in May announced release of 20 million Euros of the

promised aid of 42 million euros towards poverty alleviation, food security and democratisation by beginning of 2016.

U.S. Ambassador to India, Richard Verma, co-accredited to Bhutan, visited Thimphu in April.

Of GNP and MDG

The multilateral engagement of Bhutan continued in 2015 with growing importance accorded to her in at least two major summits. Foreign Minister Damcho Dorji in his speech at the 70th UN General Assembly session on 2 October claimed that Bhutan has achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNP).

Bhutan was applauded for setting the ‘most ambitious pledge’ during the climate talks in Paris or Conference of Parties (COP) 21. Bhutan continues to bear the brunt of flash floods, strange pattern of rainfall, new diseases that hamper yield and hence there is a growing realisation within the small country that “It may be not our doing, but the impact doesn’t differentiate. And fragile ecosystems like Bhutan’s will bear the brunt.”

This was reflected in the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC’s) submitted by the country, Bhutan emits 2.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent CO₂ against the sequestration by forests, which is about 6.3 million tonnes of CO₂. Bhutan also pledged to maintain 60 percent of its forest cover.

Twin-visits to India

The year under review began with Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay showcasing Bhutan as an investment and business destination at the ‘Vibrant Gujarat Summit’ held in Ahmadabad. Tobgay shared the dais with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and spoke on the business friendly policies of the Bhutan government and urged investors to invest in Bhutan.

The Bhutanese Prime Minister was India-bound for the second time in June when he attended the Global Conclave of leaders in Goa. He spoke at the Conclave on 15 November on the theme, “Learning from Civilisation”. On his 5 day visit he met Indian



defence minister, Manohar Parrikar and the Governor and Chief Minister of the state of Goa.

A parliamentary delegation from Bhutan led by Speaker of the National Assembly, Jigme Zangpo visited New Delhi in June. The delegation conveyed condolences on behalf of Bhutan on the passing away of former President Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam in May. The delegation also met Prime Minister Modi,

the latter called the visit a proof of support for India-Bhutan ties.

Modi appreciated the wisdom of the successive Druk Gyalpos of Bhutan in guiding the country to democracy. The delegation attended a session of parliament and met Parliamentary Affairs Minister Venkaiah Naidu.

Tobgay again met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations in September. A spokesperson of the Indian external affairs ministry said on the sidelines of the global summit that the hydro-power projects that were being built by India's support once completed will save 11 million metric tonnes of carbon.

The fourth round of Indo-Bhutan Development Talks reviewed the progress of projects worth Rs. 4,000 crore aided by India. New Delhi committed Rs 2800 crore as Project Tied Assistance (PTA), Rs 850 crore for Programme Grant and Rs 850 crore for Small Development Projects (SDPs) for Bhutan's 11th Five Year Plan from July 2013 to June 2018.

A total of 85 PTA projects and 485 SDPs have been broadly agreed for implementation during the current Plan period. The two sides reviewed the overall progress of PTA projects and agreed to a reprioritized list of projects, according to New Delhi. The Bhutanese side thanked the Indian side for the steady and timely disbursement of funds.

Reaffirming their commitments for a safe border, border management authorities from both India and Bhutan met for the 10th round of talks in Thimphu

on 3 September. The meeting reaffirmed commitments for safe border by border management authorities from both India and Bhutan. Both parties discussed strengthening measures along the 700 KM border.

Hydro-power cooperation

It was a mixed year for bilateral hydro-power cooperation with India. The 126-MW Dagachhu Hydropower Project commissioned in the year. It was also made public that the Mangdechu hydro-power project is ahead of schedule, according to project authorities. The project is 60 percent complete and is likely to be commissioned by 2017.

The commercial flow of energy from the Dagachhu project to India began with the commissioning involves only the project's first 63MW unit. The facility is a joint venture between DPGC, Tata Power Co. Ltd. and the National Pension & Provident Fund of Bhutan (NPPF).

Bhutan's woes in meeting the installation targets under the 11th Five Year Plan (FYP) seemed no end, with the scaling down of the target of installing capacity of 4,536 MW to 3,356 MW. Bhutan's internal assessment puts the blame on the delay in the commissioning of the 1200MW Punatsangchhu I project.

The Himalayan kingdom had an unusual visitor in October, the chief minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee who in her 5 day visit (5th October to 9th October) sought better, investment, trade, rail and road connectivity, besides people-to-people contact between the Eastern Indian state and Bhutan.

The chief minister met the King, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and his cabinet ministers besides business representatives from the country. Her visit as described in a media report is said to have strengthened the historical, geographical and spiritual relations that West Bengal shares with Bhutan.

Bhutan complimented India's soft power initiative of marking 21st July as the International Yoga Day. On 21st June 2015, the Embassy of India to Bhutan, organized a Mega Yoga Session at the Multi-Purpose Hall of the Royal Institute of Management, Thimphu to celebrate the First International Day of Yoga. Over 500 people comprising children from select schools, students from colleges.

(The writer is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata)

Bhutan: Time-line

14 January: Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay met Indian President Pranab Mukherjee on the Bhutanese Prime Minister's 9 day visit to India.

5 February: The Business Opportunity and information Centre (BOiC) approved 149 projects in the six eastern dzongkhags during the inauguration of its regional office in Trashigang.

21 February: The nation observed His Majesty The King Jigme Keshar Namgyal Wangchuck 35th Birth Anniversary. The 126 MW Dagachhu Hydropower Project commissioned.

29 March: King Jigme Keshar Namgyal Wangchuck and Queen Jetsun Pema attended the funeral service of Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

9 April: Lyonchhen, Tshering Tobgay begins 3 day official visit to Sri Lanka.

22 April: U.S. Ambassador to India, Richard Verma on a visit to Bhutan, met Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay.

27 April: Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay traveled to Kathmandu to convey solidarity and support to government and people of Nepal following the disastrous 25 April earthquake.

20 May: European Union announced release of 20 million Euros of the promised aid of 42 million euros towards poverty alleviation, food security and democratisation by beginning of 2016.

15 June: Transport ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India known as BBIN group signed the Motor Vehicles Agreement in Thimphu.

16 June: Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay presented state of nation report, an annual report on the performance of the government till date.

17 July: The Ambassador of the People's Republic of China, Le Yucheng called on Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay during his visit to Thimphu.

21 July: Foreign minister, Rinzin Dorji replaced by the minister for Home and Cultural Affairs Lyonpo Damcho Dorji.

3 August: The Gomo statue from Namgyel Tshe Lhakang, Selwa in Punakha that had gone missing in 2009 was recovered and returned.

7 August: The cabinet decided to dissolve the Committee of Secretaries (CoS) an institutional arrangement that was in place for the last 14 years.

24 August: The 23rd round of boundary talks held with China.

1 September: The National Work Force (NWF) wage rate revised by about 30 to 35 percent.

3 September: Former foreign minister, Rinzin Dorji convicted by the High Court's Bench and handed up to 1 year prison sentence in the Haa Dhozghang case.

2 October: Foreign minister Damcho Dorji delivers address to the 70th session of the UN general assembly in New York.

5 October: Chief Minister of Indian state of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee begins 5 day visit to Thimphu.

27 October: A High Court bench on 27 October convicted 3 accused in Lhakhang Karpo case and sentenced them to 1 year prison.

28 October: World Bank ranked Bhutan 71 among 189 countries around the world for ease of doing business.

11 November: Nation celebrated when the King Jigme Kesar Namgyal Wanchuck announced that he

and Gyaltsuen are expecting a Prince, their heir to the Golden Throne.

15 November: Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay speaks at the India Conclave in Goa, India.

10 December: The country signed the "Declaration European Union" for cooperation in Climate Action and Strategy in Paris.

15 December: Bhutan was up 4 places to rank at 132 in the United Nations Human Development Report 2015.

17 December: King, Jigme Keshar Namgyal Wangchuck addresses the 108th National Day gathering in Paro.

India: Harsh realities confront Modi government

Satish Misra

Year 2015 did not go pretty well for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, unlike the preceding one, his first year in office. The year marked the end of the new government's proverbial 'honeymoon' with the people at large, as it came face-to-face with the harsh political, economic and socio-religious ground realities. The elan and the verve with which Modi had conducted the affairs of his government in the initial six months and till the beginning of 2015 began to gradually disappear and touched a low-point by the time year ended though the Prime Minister had many positives on the foreign policy front.

The government had come to power on 27 May 2014 after securing a huge popular mandate in the general elections and won a clear majority in the Lok Sabha, or the House of the People, in the bicameral parliament. It was also the first government to have a single-party parliamentary majority after the late Rajiv Gandhi had done so as far back as 1984. The popularity and acceptability of the Prime Minister was at its peak when the year began as the BJP had not only won the 16th general elections but had also won state assembly elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand, subsequently.

The BJP had also performed exceptionally well in the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly elections

where it emerged as the second largest party. For the first time, the BJP tasted power as well in the troubled northern border state though as a junior partner to the People's Democratic Party (PDP).



The alliance government assumed charge in February though the elections had been held in November-December, 2014. The polls had produced a 'hung assembly', leading to the imposition of President's rule for a period. The log-jam got broken and the alliance-formation was credited to the leadership and popularity of PM Modi.

No more a vote-catcher

The BJP and the PM Modi faced their first setback in February 2015. It could win only three seats in a 70-member Delhi assembly in the election held in the union capital. The Aam Admi Party (AAP), which was launched in November 2012, won 67 seats while the Congress, which was in power in Delhi till 2013, was wiped out electorally, failing to win even a single seat.

Riding on the popularity of Modi who had emerged as a big vote-catcher in general election and four assembly elections held earlier, the BJP was confident of its victory in Delhi but the country's capital's electorate proved to be a big

disappointment exploding the then prevailing myth of the BJP's invincibility under the Prime Minister.

The Delhi results, having exploded the myth of the electoral invincibility of the BJP along with dwindling appeal of the Prime Minister, impacted the national politics in a major way. The BJP and Modi's political opponents saw a new hope as efforts began to form new political equations to defeat the BJP politically in other states as well.

Much at stake, but...

The next political battle was in Bihar where the BJP had won 22 seats while its allies had bagged nine seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, in a total of 40. Four opposition parties, namely the JD (U), the RJD, the Congress and the NCP, had just managed nine seats in the general elections when Modi's popularity was at its zenith.

Much was at stake in the Bihar assembly election, which was held in five phases between October 12 and November 5. When results were announced on November 8, the BJP was in for a big political shock as the party along with its allies failed not only to win a majority in the 243-member House but its electoral performance proved to be worst than of 2010, when it had won 89 seats. The party could win only 53 seats while its allies fared much worse.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was defeated by an alliance of the ruling Janata Dal (United), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress.



The JD (U)-RJD-Congress 'Grand Alliance' emerged winners. Modi, who had campaigned extensively addressing over two dozen public meetings, could not mobilise votes in favour of his party and allies despite his meetings were well attended but large turnout at his meeting did not convert into votes.

Non-deliverance

A host of factors contributed to the electoral losses in Delhi and Bihar assembly elections. On the one hand, the loss was the result of the failure of the government to deliver on promises made during the Lok Sabha election campaign and on the other hand several moves and missteps of the Modi government did not produce the desired results.

The rise of price of essential commodities, the arrogance of law-makers as well as party leaders, the BJP's heavy dependence on the 'Modi magic', relegating local leadership in states going to elections and preference for leaders from other states, abandoning the 2014 development agenda

over communal issues were some factors which contributed to the electoral loss in Bihar.

Failed expectations

On the legislative front, the NDA government fell short of its own and as well as the country's expectations. The massive victory in the popular election in 2014 which gave the BJP a huge majority in the Lower House of the bicameral parliament made the Modi government believe that it could push its agenda without taking the Opposition on board. The arrogance of numbers created a belief among the ruling party lawmakers that it could legislate at its will but the ground reality was entirely different as the combined opposition had numbers on its side in the Rajya Sabha.

The Government encountered the first hurdle when it sought to amend the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, Re-settlement (RFCTLARR) Act 2013 which had been enacted by the previous UPA government of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The Government, after failing to overcome opposition's reservation on the need to amend the Land act, decided to promulgate an ordinance on December 29, 2014. Land, over which many battles and even wars have been fought since time immemorial, once again became an issue over which the BJP-led NDA government and the Opposition got embroiled to change people's perception so that voters could be influenced for electoral battles.

The issue agitated the popular mind, particularly in the country-side, as both the ruling alliance as well

the Opposition Congress presented their respective cases to the people's court. Other opposition parties also launched public protests. The government succeeded in getting the proposed amendments to the bill passed by the Lok Sabha where it had a clear majority but it got stuck in the Rajya Sabha where the combined Opposition has the numbers on its side. The failure of the government to get the parliamentary approval for its bill negatively impacted the image of the government in a major way.

Though the government could not get couple of its bills like the Goods and Services Tax or the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Bills passed through the Rajya Sabha for want of required numbers, yet it could get parliamentary approval for many of its bills like the Land and Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh which had been hanging in fire since 1974. Similarly, the long-pending Insurance Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2015 was passed by the two Houses of parliament, paving the way for foreign investments in the insurance sector.

Defending the corrupt?

A few scandals related with the chief ministers of the BJP-led state governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh broke out in 2015. The Congress and the rest of the Opposition demanded heads to roll but the Modi leadership preferred to defend them. In a scandal that came to be known as 'Lalitgate', the names of Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj got mention, while

in the ‘Vyapam scam’, the hands of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan were said to have been soiled.

There were allegations of financial corruption against Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh also. PM Modi, who had come to power promising to root out corruption and to punish the corrupt, chose to maintain silence and this slowly and gradually changed the public perception about him and his government.

‘Intolerance’ again

The Modi government, the BJP and its mentor- Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh- also had to confront allegations of intolerance which affected their image adversely. ‘Intolerance’ has been growing in the country for last couple of years but it appears that the coming to the power of the BJP-led government in May 2014 had facilitated an environment in which communities and people with positions in society and government began to feel emboldened and were no longer willing to accept the “other”. Debate and dissent possibly became the obvious casualty in the atmosphere where questions were being raised on what to eat, what to wear, what to see, what to hear and what to read.

Historical fault-lines between the majority Hindus and minorities predominantly Muslims have come under tremendous stress and strain in last couple of years and are acquiring threatening proportions if communal incidents irrespective of the fact who is the victim and who is the culprit, utterances from responsible persons in the government, politics and

society and counter-protests are to be taken note of and are not to be dismissed or brushed aside as mere “law and order” issues.



While many other incidents and utterances of some of the Ministers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi government and BJP leaders along with some members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) failed to create a serious impact possibly because the government was enjoying a honeymoon period but the killing of a 73-year old rationalist critic of Hindu idolatry MM Kalburgi in August this year followed by the lynching of a Muslim by a mob near country’s capital on 29 September over a rumour that deceased person had killed a cow and had not only eaten it but also had stored beef in his refrigerator have resulted in country wide protests.

There were protests over rise in the communal temperatures as many artists including writers and poets returned their national awards which were conferred on them by different governments in New Delhi. The fact that President Pranab Mukherjee felt the need of expressing his concern and apprehension on an issue thrice within a fortnight

only established the seriousness and gravity the head of the state attached to the value of tolerance.

On October 19, he sought to draw attention of his government and people to growing trend of intolerance in the country expressing the “apprehension whether tolerance and acceptance of dissent are on the wane”. The President said further on 20 October, ““Our civilisation teaches us to promote tolerance, to accept differences and to respect dissent.” Earlier on 7 October, the President had expressed his concern over growing intolerance saying: “We can't allow core values of our civilisation to be wasted. The core values are that civilisation has celebrated diversity, promoted and advocated tolerance, endurance and plurality”.

Words of concern and expressions of apprehension from the Head of State possibly point to the proverbial tip of the iceberg of the problem that is confronting society and the nation. The Prime Minister's silence rather his perceived unwillingness to express his disagreement or disapproval of these developments particularly two incidents created the necessary ground for the protest momentum to grow.

Strains with RSS?

Despite two electoral defeats, Modi's hold on the party continued while his relations with the mentor-organisation, the RSS, appeared to develop some strains. The RSS began to assert itself trying to push its own *Hinduatva* agenda as was clearly visible in Bihar elections and thereafter. The ‘Ayodhya issue’ was again revived with the approval of the RSS

which clearly undermined the developmental agenda of the Prime Minister in popular perception.

The government's attempt to set up a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC), through the 99th Constitution Amendment, passed by both Houses of Parliament in 2014 suffered a serious setback as the country's highest court declared it as unconstitutional in October 2015. The government, after a massive victory in Lok Sabha elections, had received support from a majority of political parties but it did not take opposition from the judiciary while amending the Constitution, into its strategy.

Not many positives

On the economic front too, there were not many positives. A sharp fall in crude oil price in the global markets as a matter of fact worked to the advantage of the government as reduction in the import bill not only helped in reducing the trade deficit but it also brought money to government coffers to launch schemes for the benefit of the poor and deserving sections of the Indian society.

The share index, Sensex, stood at its lowest in the last 20 months disappointing retail and institutional investors. Industrial production, manufacturing and consumer non durables shrunk while exports took a heavy beating with figures suggesting a fall of over 20 per cent. Despite a sharp decline in crude oil prices, foreign exchange reserves also came down. The economy did not pick up even though Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had allocated Rs 70,000 crores of public funds on infrastructure to

spur growth. Inflation remained at around five per cent thanks to Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy. Another disturbing factor was that whole sale price index remained in negative around two per cent.

Notwithstanding the above negatives, the country hopes to register an economic growth of 6 per cent plus in the 2015-16 financial year.

Foreign policy

The US, Israel and Japan became relatively more prominent in the foreign policy approach of the new government while relations with China had more visibility than substance. The year began with aplomb as US President Barack Obama came visiting as the chief guest at the country's 66th Republic Day. The US President announced \$ four billion in bank loans, \$ two billions for green energy projects and \$ one billion from the Exim Bank of the US at the India-US business summit.

Indian foreign policy began to move closer to the US since the BJP-led NDA government assumed charge in May 2014. This trend was further strengthened in 2015 as New Delhi subtly began to play the role of an informal ally of Washington in the US's anti-China strategy. At the same time, the new government took steps to boost ties with Israel bringing the bilateral relationship into open reversing the previous government's subtle policy towards Tel Aviv in deference to the sensitivities of the Islamic nations and domestic Muslim population.

President Pranab Mukherjee became country's first Head of State to visit Israel in October since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. It was a confirmation of the country's growing ties with Tel Aviv. Earlier, Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon paid a visit and spoke openly of growing defence ties. Israel is one of the largest suppliers of highly sophisticated weapons and security systems. Later in November, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh went to Israel.

PM Modi had visited Tokyo within the first few months of his coming to power. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe paid a three days return visit in December. Japan also became a key feature of the foreign policy of the new government possibly in realisation of the fact in New Delhi and Tokyo that China is becoming a global power. This was clearly reflected in the joint statement that was issued during Abe's visit.



The statement's title "India and Japan vision 2025: Special Strategic and Global Partnership, Working Together for Peace and Prosperity of the Indo-Pacific Region and the World" highlighted the growing strategic affinity between the two countries which was further stressed in the signing of a civil nuclear pact that had been hanging in fire for couple of years.

Though Modi paid a three days return visit to China in May and held in depth discussion with the Chinese leadership but there were no breakthroughs on the unresolved border problem or on how to bridge the growing trade gap. Instead, the two sides agreed on some "do-ables" like setting up of a hotline between the military headquarters of the two countries. It was also agreed to set up a task force to counter widening trade deficit and market access issues.

The Prime Minister was in Russia for two days, from December 23, to put back drifting bilateral ties on rails. On December 24, India and Russia ink 16 pacts including one on joint manufacture of military choppers and another on building nuclear plants during the Prime Minister's visit. The five-day Third India and Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-III) was held in New Delhi from October 26 to which record number of leaders of the African Union came. The summit resulted in bringing India closer to the African continent. The summit declaration sought to address developmental aspirations of African nations and how India could play its due role in the process.

Neighbourhood policy

The government's neighbourhood policy, which is one of the areas the Prime Minister had decided to focus when he assumed charge in 2014, encountered hurdles in 2015 as relations with Pakistan, Nepal and Maldives deteriorated though prospects of the resumption of the bilateral dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad brightened in the last two months of the year after a meeting between the prime ministers of the two countries on the sidelines of the UN sponsored Global Climate conference in Paris. Modi paid an impromptu visit to Lahore to greet Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif on his birthday on December 25.

India's relations with Sri Lanka moved on a positive track. Sir Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena came visiting India in February, the first overseas destination after recording a historic win against incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa, in the 8 January nation-wide polls. While in Delhi, Sirisena signed a Civil Nuclear Cooperation pact after talks between Prime Minister Modi.

In turn, PM Modi also paid a state visit to Sri Lanka in March – the first one by an Indian Prime Minister, or any other VVIP in 27 long years, after the late Rajiv Gandhi in 1987. Others had visited Colombo, to participate in SAARC Summits. Later in September, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe came visiting within a month of his assuming charge and held extensive discussions on sensitive issues including devolution of power to Tamil dominated regions and issue of Indian fishermen being detained by Sri Lankan authorities with Modi.

Ties with India's eastern neighbour Bangladesh were yet another positive as the Modi government succeeded in getting a long desired constitutional amendment bill on Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) passed through the two houses of parliament and was signed by the President on 6 June. The bill had been hanging in fire since 1974. The LBA settled old border disputes including enclaves since the partition of India in 1947. During the Prime Minister's visit to Bangladesh in June, 22 bilateral agreements were signed. On November 11, Bangladesh hands over top ULFA leader Anup Chetia 18 years after his arrest in Dhaka.

However, relations with Nepal and Maldives deteriorated. The new Constitution of Nepal, which was promulgated on September 20, became the cause of strain as Madhesis and Janjits, who were demanding some provisions in the new Constitution to address their concerns, launched protests in the region which borders India. Protests, which also turned violent as protestors clashed with the Police, led to heavy disruption inter-border trade which caused shortages of medicines and other essential goods in the hills of Nepal. India's balancing efforts failed to resolve the issue as protests continued and anti-India sentiments rose in the valley as people there held India responsible for their shortages and miseries.

At international conferences and forums, India led from the front playing a helpful role to evolve consensus. India's role at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change sponsored Conference of Parties 21 (COP21) in

Paris was constructive, cautious and conscientious. New Delhi's approach in Paris, based on furthering country's crucial developmental interests.

(The writer is a Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Delhi)

India: Time-line

1 January – The Modi government sets up NITI Aayog in place of the Planning Commission

25 January – A declaration of friendship, a renewed ten year defence partnership and the nuclear breakthrough mark the second summit between Prime Minister Modi and U.S. President Barack Obama.

29 January – Dr. S. Jaishankar appointed Foreign Secretary

10 February – Aam Aadmi Party wins Delhi Election with 67 out of 70 seats

28 February – Union Finance Minister allocates Rupees 70,000 crore for public spending on infrastructure

1 March – Mufti Mohammed Sayeed becomes Chief Minister of J&K heading a PDP-BJP coalition

17 March – The Supreme Court sets aside quota for Jats

1 April – Supreme Court stays summon issued by special court against former PM Manmohan Singh in the 'coal scam' case.

24 April – Rajya Sabha passes a private member's bill providing rights for transgenders

6 May – Rajya Sabha passes the 119th constitution amendment bill to enable the ratification of the land boundary agreement between India and Bangladesh

30 May – UP government files a case against Nestle India after excess lead is found in Maggi noodles

10 July – ISRO launches 5 satellites from a UK based company

27 July – Former President APJ Abdul Kalam passes away

5 September – Defence Minister announces implementation of OROP

14 October – Government to begin de-classification of Subhash Chandra Bose files

20 November – Nitish Kumar sworn in as Bihar Chief Minister for a fifth time, after winning the assembly polls in alliance with one-time bête noire, Lalu Yadav's RJD

19 December – Delhi High Court grants conditional bail to Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi in the National Herald case

22 December – Rajya Sabha clears Juvenile Justice Bill

Maldives: Imprisonments and impeachments a hurdle still

N Sathiya Moorthy

At the end of *circa* 2015, Maldivians can take heart on at least one aspect of the Maldives that they have inherited. Never before – and hopefully, never after – in more than a thousand years of continuous history has the nation’s politics come up with a year full of action-packed days, and at times hours, each more unanticipated than the earlier one.

High levels of awareness in the small-size population also meant that in democratised Maldives ‘political’ imprisonments and vice-presidential impeachments kept the focus away from the nation’s lifeline of economy and development. With the result, continual governmental initiatives for the medium and long-terms got their due attention, if at all, only as the year began winding up.

It was equally so in the case of foreign policy, where ‘democracy’ issues put the government continually on the defensive, barring in the case of India and China – but for exactly opposite reasons. Yet, India-Maldives relations moved from normalcy to strains to near-normalcy by the year-end. In tune, the China relations, despite visible increase in interactions and development partnership, seemed to be heading to a conceptual plateau, where no new initiatives could be visualised in the year after.

Political/criminal conspiracy?

It’s anybody’s guess if the Year-2015 would have turned the way it did had it not been for the end-of-

2014 resolution by the Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) central committee, calling upon President Abdulla Yameen to quit office. Worse still, by simultaneously asking Yameen to hand over power to Jumhooree Party (JP) founder, Gasim Ibrahim, the MDP might have shot itself in the foot, instead.

At least a major part of the New Year’s (2015) politico-legal developments might not have had a leg to stand on but for the MDP resolution. Despite passive international sympathy and overwhelming western support, the MDP initiative was still a ‘political conspiracy’ leading to a constitutional coup. It was the kind of coup that the MDP has been claiming that unseated party leader, President Mohammed Nasheed in February 2012.



It is anybody’s guess if the Yameen leadership would have resisted the temptation of re-activating the pending ‘Judge Abdulla abduction’ case against Nasheed, had it not been for the 4 December 2014 resolution. Nasheed looked invincible even ahead of the 2013 presidential polls that Yameen ultimately

won, after a series of Supreme Court interventions and Election Commission protests. In the next, 2018 presidential polls, ‘anti-incumbency’ might have been a factor that Yameen might have had to encounter, additionally.

Year-2015 witnessed at least three or four ‘coup attempts’ against President Yameen, one more open than the earlier one, so to say. In January, the police raided the home of then Defence Minister Col Mohamed Nazim when he was not in the country, President Yameen then sacked him and had him arrested on ‘terrorism charges’, for allegedly conspiring to assassinate top government leaders. This was followed by street-protests by the Combined Opposition, following the one on 1 May, police arrested religion-centric Adhaalath Party leader Imran Abdulla for inciting people through his rally-speech. The former is in prison for 11 years after the conclusion of trial. The Imran trial was yet to move forward at the end of the year.

These were followed by two vice-presidential coup-bids, so to say. First, Vice-President Mohammed Jameel Ahmed went on in self-exile to the UK, followed by his impeachment, with Opposition MDP’s support in Parliament. In September-end, Yameen and entourage, including the First Lady, escaped a blast on his official boat, while returning from the annual Hajj pilgrimage. After a series of raids, arrests and sacking of senior officials involved in security, new Vice-President Ahmed Adheeb, then on a 11-day-long official visit to China, was arrested on return. He was charged with criminal conspiracy to assassinate the President and

step into his shoes. Yameen also publicly charged Adheeb with conspiring to have him impeached with Opposition MDP support, after buying up MPs from the ruling combine.

There is nothing on record to prove the coup theories in toto. Yet, Yameen’s China-funded high-investment job-creation development projects, if allowed to take off, could have eroded the single-largest share of votes and registered party membership of the MDP and Nasheed. Or, so it seems to be the unmentioned but possibly intended part of the Yameen strategy for re-election bid, already launched during 2015 but not taken forward in full swing. These are all still in the realm of speculation and political interpretation – but they remained as factors, yet.



In retrospect, did China’s prospective developmental engagement (or that of any other major economic power-house) unnerve the MDP and Nasheed that they saw their future electoral chances dipping, if a self-proclaimed ‘economy man’ like Yameen was allowed to stabilise? Did Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s 2014 visit – the first by a Chinese leader – and two-in-a-row China visit by Yameen in three months, again in 2014, signal, by the year-end, that MDP’s democracy agenda from

2008 and before might end up having to give way to something more?

Was this realisation also a contributory factor for the MDP, already aggrieved by Nasheed's pressure-cooker exit in 2012 to reset the nation's focus from an anticipated developmental agenda to their known comfort zone of democracy, liberalism and more? Or, were the party and the leader also in too much of a hurry, without waiting for the next presidential polls, to acquire a popular mandate. Needless to point out, they had desisted from going to the courts, even if for form, challenging the controversial Yameen elections of 2013?

Comfort zones

Prospects of arrest, anyway, was a Damocles' Sword hanging over Nasheed's head, ready to be called in at a politically opportune – or, inopportune time -- by anyone's in Yameen's place. The latter having specifically vowed against anti-Nasheed political vendetta in his November 2013 victory speech, it is anybody's guess why neither side moved ahead on this score – Yameen legally and the MDP, politically, tactically, or diplomatically – or, all of them put together, to have the pending 'Abdulla case' annulled. At the end of the day, the MDP leadership was not too much naive to have over-looked the legal-judicial knife hanging over the head of their most popular (and the nation's single most popular) leader.

The MDP was too simplistic enough to have launched what promised to be a long drawn-out political movement for President Yameen's exit,

only weeks after he had commenced the second of his five-year term. As subsequent events and developments showed, they got their tactics and strategy all wrong, from the very word, 'Go'. As of now, the MDP has given the impression that they have not grown beyond their street-fighters' days and image, not to have assessed the mood and methods of their chief opponent.

The MDP thus ended up putting Yameen in the same mould as that of the relatively tired and old half-brother President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Owing to his long tenure (1978-2008) had got used to his coloured and/or shielded views of things, and did not see or feel the moss growing under his feet. The alternative the MDP strategists had to compare



Yameen with was Nasheed's immediate successor/replacement in his chosen Vice-President in Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik.

Waheed did not have any popular base or support, beyond those of his political under-writers, when he was President (2012-13). The MDP is paying the political price for the paucity of strategy on the one hand and Nasheed is doing so, with a 13-year term in prison, on the other. Much, if not all of it could have been avoided if only the MDP had thought before acting – than continue to count on their 'act-

first-think-next’ strategy, which could work only under certain circumstances.

The timing of Nasheed’s arrest was as surprising as the subsequent conversion of an ordinary criminal case into a ‘terrorism case’ was shocking. Today, when the Supreme Court is seized of the prosecution’s appeal against the trial court’s 13-year jail-term, after the High Court threw it out on the question of *locus standi*. After holding out from participation in the trial halfway through, and refusing to move the High Court later, Nasheed too has since challenged his conviction and sentence in the Supreme Court.

It is anybody’s guess why Nasheed did not challenge both the conviction and trial-procedure, starting with the case-conversion into a ‘terrorism’ charge at the trial court in the first place. It is even more surprising why his international team of lawyers seemingly stopped with global campaign for his freedom and did not advise him on the issue of *locus standi* until the High Court ruled that only the convict, and not the State’s Prosecutor-General, could have moved the appeal for a reduced sentence, or outright discharge, in the first place.

The Yameen Government converted a criminal case into a terrorism charge, at a confusing time for itself – as both the leader and the leadership did not know what (else) to do with Nasheed after the MDP launched what seemed to be the campaign for the presidential polls three years away, with the demand for the President’s exit. In turn, Nasheed and the MDP sought to convert what was a legal case inside

the court hall into a political case in every sense, and outside of the court and also of the nation.

At the end of the day, and at the end of *circa* 2015, the MDP has won it politically and in the international arena, but not on the domestic front – either politically or legally. There is a lesson in it for the two, and for others of the ilk in the country and elsewhere, too – leaders and leaderships that refuse to draw the fine-line between law and politics, end up paying a (heavy) price for it. Today, Nasheed’s ability to contest the presidential polls depends not on any reduction of his jail-term by the Supreme Court, but only on its on throwing out his conviction *in toto*.

Considering that Judge Abdulla’s ‘abduction’ was a fact, and considering that President Nasheed, while in office, had confirmed on camera, his role in what is patently an ‘illegal arrest’, the only way possibly the Supreme Court could consider his possible freedom is to rule favourably on the controversial conversion of an ordinary criminal case into a ‘terrorism case’. In such a case, it would remain to be seen if the SC or the prosecution would consider altering it back to a ‘criminal case’. At this stage, any prison term for Nasheed could lead to automatic disqualification for contesting the 2018 presidential poll.

‘Defence-less’ ministers

If the ‘Nasheed case’ is a stand-alone politico-legal affair, the same cannot be said of President Yameen’s handling of other chosen personalities around him, during the year. In fact, the year’s

political problems in/for the nation commenced with the midnight raid on the house of (then) Defence Minister, Col Mohamed Nazim (retd), in mid-January, his subsequent dismissal and arrest on ‘anti-State’ activities. He too stood trial, again on terrorism charge, and the trial court handed down an 11-year jail-term. Following his arrest was that of Nasheed in the ‘Judge Abdulla case’, in which the latter’s estranged Defence Minister from those days, Tholath Ibrahim Kaleyfaanu, is undergoing a 10-year term in prison.

Incidentally, it’s this estrangement, caused after Tholath crossed over to the anti-Nasheed camp in the weeks and months after the latter’s exit from presidency that is obviously behind the MDP not taking up his case for freedom along with that for Nasheed. Tholath had reportedly made incriminating observations about Nasheed before the National Inquiry Commission (NIC), which probed the events leading up to Vice-President Waheed taking over as President, in February 2012. It goes without saying that should international pressure or an Apex Court order facilitate freedom for Nasheed, it could automatically extend to Tholath, too.

A third VIP originally charged in the ‘Judge Abdullah abduction case’ was Brig-Gen Ibrahim Didi (retd), who was the Male Zone Commander of the nation’s army, namely, the Maldivian National Democratic Force (MNDF), at the time of the Abdullah arrest. At present an MDP Member of Parliament, Didi obtained trial court sanction for travelling overseas for medical treatment, without

having to face trial immediately. With the trial court holding that army officers of every grade were only obeying orders from above, he has since returned home, to be exonerated by the court.



Two VPs in three months, yet...

If 2015 thus witnessed the incarceration of two former Defence Ministers cutting across the political spectrum, the worse was possibly reserved for the office of Vice-President. The year saw two successive Vice-Presidents, both personal choices of Yameen, for the second top-most job in the country, being impeached within three months of each other.

Of them, Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, Yameen’s running-mate in 2013, is now on self-imposed exile in the UK, and thus may have escaped detention on one ground or the other. His successor, Ahmed Adheeb, was arrested on his return from a 11-day official visit to China, and charged with an assassination plot against Yameen when the latter was returning from the annual *Haj* pilgrimage to Islam’s holy city of Mecca.

In choosing Jameel, Yameen not only looked at the non-Male, mostly southern votes that the latter could bring in, just as rival Nasheed had hoped his own running-mate, Dr Mustafa Lufty, would do.

Unlike Nasheed since becoming President in 2008, Yameen promptly handed over the oversight of ‘welfare ministries’ to VP Jameel’s immediate care, thus retaining his own greater interest and focus on economic issues, given also his own previous experience as President Gayoom’s Finance Minister.

Jameel, who had been with the 2008 losing presidential candidate, Hassan Saeed, who in turn could transfer almost all of his first-round 17 percent anti-Gayoom, non-Nasheed vote-share to the latter in the second round, obviously did not take kindly to the MDP wooing away one-time party colleague, Ahmed Shaeed, who went on to become the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in post-Saddam Iraq after the Maldivian Parliament refused him confirmation as Foreign Minister for a second time. That was all before his seeking self-exile in the UK as Vice-President, and later being impeached – that too with the ‘democratic’ MDP’s full backing, both inside and outside Parliament.

Even while relying on Jameel as a chief and real constitutional aide, Yameen was also promoting Adheeb, who was the all-important Minister for Tourism, in an economy centred on the sector, and added a host of developmental and political responsibilities to his portfolio. Adheeb, a near-novice till the other day, thus became the all-important deputy of Yameen’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), headed by half-brother Gayoom as its founder. When founded, Adheeb as Tourism Minister also headed the nation’s SEZ Board, a Yameen innovation to attract foreign investments in

designated ‘special economic zones’. Adheeb also stood in for a host of senior ministers, when the latter went overseas, either on work or on holiday.

After two impeachments in three months, the country at the end of 2015 was without a Vice-President for nearly two months – and remains so even weeks into the New Year. Though the PPM-led coalition has a clear majority in Parliament for getting any nominee of the President cleared, Yameen may be embarrassed to go back to the House with a new name so soon, thus getting more bad publicity than ‘*la affaire* Nasheed’ has already got him, particularly overseas.

What was/is even more inexplicable was the sudden imposition of emergency under a presidential proclamation, based on reports that apart from the boat-blast targeting Yameen, the police had also unwrapped a larger conspiracy that involved two hired Sri Lankan assassins, weapons from the MNDF armoury finding their way to some island-resorts and the timely defusing of a truck-bomb, not far away from the presidential palace, ‘Mulee-aage Palace’ in the heart of capital, Male.

Poor judge?

Wonder of wonders, if not joke of all contemporary Maldivian jokes, President Yameen withdrew the emergency just a week later, without explaining what purpose had the promulgation served in the first place. Better or worse still, the MDP claimed victory, saying that the party’s pressure on the international community had worked on Yameen, for him to withdraw the emergency. Yet, the party

could not fully exploit its original claims that the emergency was aimed only at denying police permission for the party to organise yet another public rally, after its pre-emergency and post-emergency protests turned out to be tame affairs.

Yet, the events of the past years, particularly pertaining to his once so-called inner circle has questioned President Yameen's capacity as a good judge of people – the kind of mistake that the rival MDP's Nasheed too seem to have committed ahead of him, or alongside him. In addition, scarred by his experience with VP Waheed in his time, Nasheed obviously influenced his MDP parliamentarians to support a parliamentary motion, for impeaching VP Jameel without his presence or defence, after the latter had left the country.

If there was any 'secret deal' aimed at ensuring early freedom for Nasheed in turn, there the Government's talks with MDP's sole representative and parliamentary group leader, Ibrahim 'Ibu' Solih (a childhood friend and relative by marriage) failed without a trace. Towards the end of the year, the MDP was making yet another out-of-court 'reconciliation attempt' with the Government, the party being represented by Nasheed's cousin, Eva Abdulla. The Yameen leadership would not relent, saying they would talk only to the party, not a prisoner.

Economy & foreign policy

In Yameen's Maldives, economy and foreign policy (including security policy) have got as much inter-linked as Nasheed-centric domestic politics has got

intertwined to the human rights concerns of the 'international community' (*read: West*). It was a dividing-line in more ways than one. As events unfolded nearer home, it became increasingly clear that the human rights and democracy concerns of the West centred exclusively on Nasheed and the MDP, and did not extend to others, including incumbent Vice-Presidents and Defence Minister (Col Nazim), who also faced out-of-turn 'terrorism charges' and imprisonment, and a predecessor in Tholath Ibrahim.

All of it meant that Maldivian foreign policy needed to go beyond 'human rights'. The picture will become clearer when the western case on 'human rights' and consequent war-time 'accountability issues' in the equally geo-strategic Indian Ocean neighbour of Sri Lanka. There, the issues relate(d) to the larger yet 'minority' Tamil population, its sense and reality of political and war-victimisation. While Maldives' geo-strategic security concerns continued to influence the nation's foreign policy, as did economic diplomacy, when the nation's contemporary aspirations are hemmed in by inherent limitations.

In the Gayoom-led past, the Government's economic initiatives based on leasing out uninhabited islands for high-end resort tourism created a new generation of educated Maldivians with greater exposure and awareness. At one-level, it meant louder demands for greater and faster democratisation. At another level, the economic aspirations of the individual got stepped into the next phase but at a faster pace. Greater the

democratisation process, faster did the society moved on to the accompanying next phase of individual economic aspiration. In context, Nasheed as the face of contemporary ‘Maldivian democracy’ would have had to make way for an ‘economy man’ that Yameen projected himself to be.

Whether one concept should be at the cost of the other, and why the same person between them could not have rolled the two concepts into one under a common national denominator also owed to their individual and individualistic personalities and political background and image. As President, Nasheed did attempt to address larger economic issues as well, but he did not give himself the required (political) time required for the purpose. If anything, his efforts at fast-tracking de-democratisation, but in the name of democratisation, did the MDP in. The goose was cooked the day the MDP created/manipulated situation(s) for second-round allies from the 2008 presidential polls. The slide began there, and there was neither a going back, nor a fall-back strategy at reversal.

It’s anybody’s guess why President Yameen could not have continued with the existing democratised polity, if not move further, and yet adopt his economic vision for the nation and its people. If anything, he has cut himself in the mould of half-brother Gayoom, and the latter’s predecessor, Ibrahim Nasir. The temptation, if any, for the leaders of smaller island-nations in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood to visualise the self in the frame of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew may have worked for

Gayoom, but not for Sri Lanka’s J R Jayewardene first, and Mahinda Rajapaksa. Nor could it work for Yameen, and for the same reason. Unlike Lee, they all have inherited a democratic Opposition in their nations that could revive/hit back with a vengeance that the ruler may not know how to handle, after a time.

Yet, in terms of sources for political support and resources for economic prosperity, Yameen now counts on China as much as Lee had the US behind his Singapore. Here again, Yameen faces a peculiar Maldivian situation that did not exist in the case of Singapore, when China was less-developed and less outgoing than at present. In the immediate neighbourhood, Yameen’s Maldives has to balance India-China equations. In the larger Indian Ocean context, the Sino-American geo-strategic adversity, if it came out in the open, could catch Maldives unawares. Just now, it is the India-US geo-strategic relations that seem to be substituting for the American angle.

Yet, the US has more than once expressed its interest to engage with nations such as Maldives in what is acknowledged as their Indian friend’s ‘traditional sphere of influence’. This could have multiple and unmanageable politico-diplomatic consequences for smaller nations like Maldives. The latter has only their ‘sovereignty’ to hedge in such circumstances, but if it were to compromise it all by itself in terms of ‘territorial integrity’, then it could have long-term consequences for the region, and at times the world as a whole, which Maldives would be incapable of handling. It’s such concerns that

Maldives' closest and larger neighbour like India seems more concerned about.

'India first' still

India's economic assistance to Maldives, rather than be bolstered by the controversial GMR deal when President Nasheed happened to be in power, got mixed-up in domestic politics, much more in the archipelago than in the larger neighbour. It's a chicken-and-egg question but greater Chinese politico-economic engagement began becoming increasingly visible around the time public sector State Bank of India (SBI) decided against extending a \$ 50-m to the Government of Maldives – which the latter promptly repaid, and surprisingly faster.

Yet, India's traditional economic cooperation, and Maldives' traditional dependence on India for day-to-day essentials remain. For long now, India has clubbed Maldives along with Bhutan as two nations exempted from all export-bans, though in this case, Indian court orders have banned export of construction sand from southern States, in recent years. Coming as it did in the midst of the 'GMR controversy', the sand-export ban did send out wrong signals to Maldives. If during the end-2014 Male drinking water-crisis, common neighbour Bangladesh supplemented the timely Indian assistance, during the sand-export crisis, it substituted India, instead.

Unlike commonly believed, Beijing made a big-time entry into Maldives when President Nasheed opened the Chinese Embassy in Male – the very day Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was

landing there to participate in the 2011 SAARC Summit. From then on, there has been no turning back for China in Maldives, though Nasheed himself had to go. Particularly after the GMR fiasco, it's China to which Maldives now looks up to, for big-time investments, which is also expected to have a politico-electoral angle in the domestic context, given the perceived job-creation and income-generation potentials. Today, China is in the forefront of Yameen's SEZ scheme and is funding the much-visible Male-Hulhulmale sea-bridge project, which is expected to be completed well ahead of the 2018 presidential polls.

There still seems to be some confusion in the India-Maldives-China equation, all-round. President Yameen has since clarified that for Maldives, "India comes first". Yameen, as also his Foreign Minister, Dunya Maumoon, have reiterated through 2015, that Maldives would not allow non-regional players into the Indian Ocean. As may be recalled, the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka, trilateral maritime security cooperation agreement remains, and there is no reason why India could not take the initiative to evolve it into a trilateral maritime security/defence agreement, as originally thought of.

Ironies of the year

For all this, however, President Yameen is still walking the tight-rope, on multiple fronts. The domestic front can quieten only after a mutually agreeable solution is found to the 'Nasheed question'. Going beyond the judicial angle and the pending Supreme Court case, the Government and the MDP would have to look not only at the question

of freedom for Nasheed but also the question of his qualification to contest the presidential polls in 2018.

Under the existing circumstances and given the constitutional bar on a convicted person not being able to contest polls until three years after the completion of sentence, Nasheed can have hope, either if the SC annuls the trial court verdict, or the Yameen leadership with its two-thirds majority in Parliament, or the People's *Majlis*, helps amend the Constitution, to facilitate the same.

The forgotten irony of Maldives-2015 is none of these. The year's problems got flagged off by the end-2014 MDP resolution, asking Yameen to hand over the presidency to Gasim Ibrahim, who was not in the constitutionally-mandated warrant of precedence. The latter included only the Vice-President and the Speaker of the *Majlis*, who however could not complete the residual term as the VP but could only preside over fresh presidential polls within 60 days.

Whether Nasheed, who was not in the country at the time was in the know or not, the MDP resolution implied that any forced or manipulated replacement of President Yameen by Gasim Ibrahim (after both VP Jameel at the time and PPM's Speaker had joined forces or impeached), and the latter presiding over fresh presidential polls would implicitly have for the MDP, Gasim's 'transferrable' 25 percent vote-share from the first-round of 2013 elections – and for good.

If the MDP had concluded that Gasim was Maldives' equivalent of India's late Charan Singh (who wanted to occupy the Prime Minister's chair, even if only for a day), and hoped that he would retire from active politics afterwards, today Gasim is almost on 'forced retirement', but at Yameen's initiative and behest. Possibly reading between the lines of the MDP resolution, Yameen (obviously) got Government agencies to slap US \$ 90-m recovery proceedings from Gasim's Villa Group of companies and also got the law amended to bar those above 65 from contesting presidential and vice-presidential elections.

It's another matter that Yameen simultaneously got the lower age-limit downed from 35 to 33 years, if only to facilitate his then favourite, Minister Adheeb, to be elevated Vice-President. It's the only time in Maldives and possibly elsewhere that election laws were amended with just one person in mind – who was neither the President himself, nor a close relative of his. And Adheeb today is in prison, stripped of vice-presidency. The criminal charge against him is that he had plotted the assassination attempt. Politically, Yameen claimed that Adheeb had also conspired with his MDP rivals to have the President impeached.

Today, Gasim has made up with Yameen, has declared his retirement from future presidential polls, and has reaffirmed his unstinted support for the Government, after wavering in-between and leading the combined Opposition, for Nasheed's freedom. The greater irony is the continued imprisonment of religion-centric Adhaalath Party

(AP) leader, Sheikh Imran Abdulla, who jumped into the opposition fray, more in favour of Gasim than Nasheed and the MDP, *per se*.

Even without the party's constant cross-over from one side to the other, the AP had begun losing the 'fundamentalist' image, and to overseas radical forces, in the IS. A dozen or so of Maldivians have died, fighting for IS in Syria, after smuggling themselves out of the country. Nearer home, the 'assassination plot' against Yameen got greater socio-political credence, as only weeks earlier a local TV channel had telecast a purportedly social media threat (with a IS flag in the background) to the President's life.

Anti-terror grouping

Together, multiple factors like the Nasheed detention and human rights, development-funding and China, and religious radicalisation and overseas IS all have a bigger say on Maldives' domestic politics and on a politically-polarised society and divided families, than even larger geo-strategic concerns, where India continues to matter the most. As the year began drawing to a close, Maldives signed up for Saudi-led 33-nation Islamic security force against international terrorism, with possibly no direct say in decision-making. It remains to be seen if the Saudi initiative is an extension of the continuing US-led global war on terrorism, an out-sourced Islamic element, or a stand-alone, if not competing force, but with the same goal.

On the development-linked foreign policy front, the year closed with Japan opened an embassy in Male, thus reviving the decades-old ties that had slackened in between. After his India and Sri Lanka visit as President, Yameen had chosen Japan for his first major non-neighbourhood visit. China had to wait, but would it have to wait now again, will also be the Maldivian question for the New Year, on stand-alone development funding on the one hand and India-US linked strategic security paradigm, on the other!

(The writer is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, Chennai Chapter)

Maldives: Time-line

19 Jan: Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim raided, sacked and arrested on 'terrorism charges', for conspiring to eliminate President Yameen and other Government leaders.

23 Feb: Former President Mohammed Nasheed arrested for pending trial in the 'Judge Abdulla abduction case', which is changed to a 'terrorism case'

13 Mar: Nasheed convicted and sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment

21 July: Vice-President Mohammed Jameel Ahmed goes on self-exile to UK, Opposition MDP backs his impeachment in Parliament

28 Sept: Yameen escapes blast on presidential boat while returning from annual Hajj pilgrimage. First Lady injured

24 Oct: Vice-President Adheeb arrested on return from a 11-day official tour of China, impeached for conspiracy to assassinate President Yameen. Police raid homes and offices of several officials. New Defence Minister takes over

Myanmar: Elections sweep in winds of democratic change

Mihir Bhonsale

Unlike the near-monotony of decades, the year 2015 was truly a landmark for Myanmar. The General Elections held on 8 November saw the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by iconic leader and Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, cornering almost 80 percent of the total number of parliamentary seats. The NLD's victory completely over-shadowed the ruling Union Solidarity Development Party's (USDP) dismal performance, and also the total failure of most ethnic parties.

The year also saw the signing of the historic National Ceasefire Accord by eight armed ethnic minority groups, thus setting the stage for political dialogue. But heavy fighting between the government forces and at least three non-signatory ethnic groups forced thousands to flee the war-zone with many even taking refuge in neighbouring China.

The year 2015 was also a year of protests opposing government policies. The students and teachers associations demonstrated against a new education law. The Letpadan crackdown on student demonstrators further widened the rift between the protestors and the government. Later, the new education law was passed in Parliament and approved by the President.

Myanmar's relations with China, known as "*pauk-phaw*" (brotherly) went through testing times.

Incidents like the exodus of Myanmar people from Shan State following Myanmar's army's clashes with rebels and the reproach from China for artillery-shelling by Myanmar in an operation against the Kokang rebels strained relations between the two neighbours. China, however, was quick to feel the pulse of change and solicited a consistent and positive position on bilateral relations from the then Leader of Opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi.

The US and other western powers welcomed the successful conduct of the general elections as a step forward in the democratic transition of the country. But the US also continued the economic sanctions on Myanmar, in the name of human rights violations in the Rakhine State.

Regional allies, including ASEAN member-States and especially Thailand had strained relations with Myanmar owing to the migrant-boat crisis and the 'Koh Tao trial'. A Thai court convicted two Myanmar nationals for murdering British tourists and in December 2015 and awarded death penalty. Two regional-level meetings of ASEAN to address the situation of the migrant boat crisis failed to yield results.

The cross-border surgical strike carried out by India to act upon anti-India militancy along the Indo-Myanmar border remained the defining moment in relations with India. Senior General Aung Min Hlaing visited India, when he met Indian ministers and army chief, and also discussed ways to contain militancy on the border and increase defence cooperation.

New Delhi sent out congratulatory messages to the President Thein Sein for successful conduct of polls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated both Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein. Efforts to streamline ongoing connectivity projects were taken by both sides in 2015.

Defining moment

The sweeping victory of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in the 8 November general elections was the defining moment of 2015 for Myanmar. The change of guard became imminent from the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) to the party led by the democracy crusader who cornered around 80 percent parliamentary seats in first ‘free and fair’ polls since 1989.

Though the NLD was front-runner in the contest, it was least expected to would win 80 percent of parliamentary seats. The polls were held in roughly 1100 constituencies across the country on November 8. Some 91 political parties were in the fray. The National League for Democracy (NLD) reached a majority of the total seats in both the House of Nationalities and the House of Representatives of the Assembly of the Union, which is enough for its nominees to win election as president and first vice president in the Presidential Electoral College, and for control over national legislation.

The NLD also bagged a majority of total combined seats in the State and Regional Hluttaws, including 21 out of the 29 Ministers of Ethnic Affairs. With the final tally of all elected seats (township and

ethnic), it is believed they will have the ability to control most local governments and parliaments, either entirely on its own or with the support of ethnic parties.

The exceptions to this are the Rakhine State Hluttaw, where the Arakan National Party won a plurality of total seats and is expected to govern with the NLD's support. Likewise, in the Shan State Hluttaw, the USDP (which won a plurality of elected seats) and Military Representatives control roughly equal number of seats to the combined total. Various other parties, led by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and the NLD are in the second and third place, respectively.

Power-sharing



Election year, 2015, began on a not very good note for the NLD as the military-controlled Parliament voted out the constitutional amendment, Article 59 (f), aimed at facilitating Suu Kyi's to contest the presidential polls later. Parliament also voted out against the constitutional guarantee requiring 75 percent House majority for amending the Constitution. Under Article 59 (F) Suu Kyi was

denied a chance to become the President or Vice-President of the country.

Suu Kyi gave the 67th National Day ceremony a miss, signalling at the ever increasing gap between the NLD and the government. She remained vocal about the course of reforms undertaken by the Thein Sein government in the country. Speaker of the lower house of the parliament, Thura U Shwe Mann was removed from the post of the the President of ruling USDP just at a time when Shwe Mann and Suu Kyi seemed to have an understanding developing between them on power-sharing in a post-election scenario.

Religious extremist apolitical groups threatened to have dampened NLD's electoral chances after the passage of the Race and Religious Laws Bill, that Ma Ba Tha, a religious extremist group had put its weight behind. The Ma Ba Tha held rallies across the Bamar-dominated areas and accused the NLD of having a pro-Muslim bias. They called voters to support the USDP. But, poll results went on to show that the Ma Ba Tha's propoganda fell on deaf ears.

The real challenge remained for both NLD and the USDP was on eliciting support of ethnic parties. But no pre-poll alliances seemed to have come through and 1/3rd of nearly 100 odd political parties that registered to contest the polls were ethnic parties. They were expected to play a detrimental role after winning in constituencies dominated by ethnic minorities. But, ethnic parties fared poorly barring Arakan National Party and Shan Nationalist State Party, in a polarised contest between the NLD and the USDP.

Ceasefire on, but...

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed by eight armed ethnic groups in presence of President Thein Sein and a host of national and international dignitaries on 15 October 2015, bringing to a happy conclusion, the long-winding road of negotiations. This paved the way for political dialogue that the National Ceasefire Coordination Team would hold sometime in 2016.



But the NCA was not signed by many groups including the Wa, Shan and Kachin. This, according to critics, is a consequence of the government's divisive policy, leading to the formation of two camps -- one, cajoled into signing NCA led by the Karens, and the other led by the Kachins, who kept away.

Intense clashes between government troops and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) from the beginning of 2015 did not set a good precedent for negotiating peace with the ethnic groups. The

Kachin confrontation was followed by the challenge posed by combined forces of Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Party (MNDAA), Taung National Liberation Army and Arakan Army.

Phenomenal growth

Foreign Direct Investment that was estimated to be \$ 8.1 in the first nine months of the 2014-15 fiscal. The expansion of the telecom sector was the reason behind the phenomenal growth. The Asian Development Bank estimated that the Myanmar economy grew at 8.5 percent in the 2014-15 fiscal, an increase of 7.8 percent from the previous year's figure. The growth target for 2015-16 fiscal year was fixed at 9.3 percent by the Planning Act, approved by President Thein Sein in April.

As of November 2015, Singapore topped the investment list with an investment volume of over \$ 2.1 billion, followed by China with over \$ 665 million, according to Myanmar's Directorate of Investment and Company Administration. Within this period, Myanmar's oil and natural gas sector received the most foreign investment, totalling over \$ 2 billion, followed by the transportation and communication sector with \$ 736 million and the manufacturing sector with over \$ 685 million.

During the first quarter of 2015, the Sino-Myanmar pipeline was officially commissioned. Both natural gas and oil pipelines run for 771-km from the offshore oilfields off the west coast of Myanmar, to the southern Chinese city of Kunming. Ending the impasse over the investment in the Dawei Special Economic Zone, Japan officially came on board,

after the project that was begun in 2012 was suspended due to lack of funding. Under the new agreement, Japan, Myanmar and Thailand will equally contribute \$ 166,000 towards the project.

The Yangon Stock Exchange opened with big expectations. It received a grand opening and a US \$ 24-million investment but the bourse will not be operational till February 2016, or later.

Cyclone Komen devastated many regions of the country and took a toll on the growth rate as rescue and rehabilitation measures are certain to have an effect on the economy of the country. Incessant rains rocked the country from July to September, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency in four worst-hit regions in the west-Magway Division, Chin and Rakhine states. The floods affected more than one million people, and destroyed farmlands, roads, rail-tracks, bridges and houses.

Comprehensive law?

The 10 March crackdown of the police on peaceful demonstrators in Letpadan (Pegu division) led to a spate of protests across the country by students and teachers associations under the banner National Network for Education Reform. The new law claims to be comprehensive in nature, replacing separate laws for primary and higher education.

Critics singled out the bill's ambiguity in spelling out the extent of autonomy, provisions that curb freedom of assembly and association and that it ignores minority groups in their opposition to the

bill. The Education Bill was signed by the President in September.

Protests also broke out in the country against the trial of the two Myanmar nationals arrested as prime suspects in the Koh Tao island murder case. Protestors, who included civil society organisations, activists and journalists, alleged that there were inconsistencies and bias in the investigations, trial and conviction. The two nationals were handed out a death sentence on 24 December 2015.

Rohingya issue

The world had its eyes glued on to poll-bound Myanmar. The tenacity of political and economic reforms and the nation's transition to democracy remained priorities for Western powers. Following the successful conduct of polls, President Thein Sein and the Election Commission were commended for holding 'free and fair' elections in the country. The victorious leader of NLD, Suu Kyi received congratulatory messages from US President, Barack Obama, British Prime Minister, David Cameron, Chinese President Xi Jinping and UN Secretary- General, Ban Ki-moon, among others.

Many Asian countries, including Japan sent congratulatory messages, to the incumbent government for crossing this important landmark in the transition to democracy. However, the US continued with its pragmatic position. It expressed concern over the disenfranchisement of Rohingya Muslims and disqualification of candidates based on

arbitrary application of citizenship and residency requirements.

The US continued economic sanctions on Myanmar, citing persistent concerns over human rights abuses, particularly in Rakhine State. But post-elections and the expected coming to power of the NLD augured a shift in the American policy. The US Treasury Department announced a limited easing of sanctions on the Asia World Port Terminal, the busiest of Yangon's four container terminals.

Strained relations

The year was not so good for Myanmar's relations with its regional allies- China and the countries of the ASEAN bloc. Though, China was quick to sense the electoral favourites and managed to make Suu Kyi visit China on at least two occasions, Myanmar drew flak from China.

In March, China lodged protests against the mistaken killing of four Chinese nationals in



Yunnan province, during Myanmar's air raids targeting the Kokang rebels. Beijing, in response, warned Nay Pyi Taw of resolute measures by deploying jets and military reinforcements along the

Myanmar border. The ensuing clashes between the TNAA and the Myanmar army led to the displacement of over 100,000 people living in Shan State and forcing a large number amongst them to flee to neighbouring China. Beijing also did not take kindly to a Kachin court handing out long sentences to 150 Chinese nationals for illegal logging.

Incidents of reproach galore, but Beijing did not lose the sense of the winds of change in the election year and invited Suu Kyi to visit Beijing in June. The iconic leader, during her five-day visit, met President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. Xi Jinping in his meeting with the iconic Myanmar Opposition leader hoped that irrespective of the domestic situation in Myanmar, it would take a consistent and positive position on China-Myanmar relations. Suu Kyi said her party valued the relationship with the Chinese Communist Party and admired its achievements. She also called, China a neighbour and added that “neighbours cannot be chosen.”

Strained relations with ASEAN countries were in focus after vessels carrying hundreds of Rohingya migrants were stranded at sea following Thailand’s crackdown on migrants originating from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Myanmar faced criticism for prosecuting Rohingyas at home leading them to take perilous sea journeys. An official meeting was called in June to discuss the crisis that was attended by Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia. Myanmar refused to recognise that the migrants taking to the sea were of Myanmar origin.

A meeting was also held in December to address the situation and deliberate on plan to end the migrant boat crisis. The 4 December meeting of foreign ministers of ASEAN countries too did not yield results in finding a long-lasting solution to the migrant issue. In a related development, the UN Security Council for the first time held a closed-door meeting on the human rights situation in Myanmar.

The UNHRC chief, Zeid Rad’al Hussain, made a detailed briefing on the dire situation and institutional discrimination faced by Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. US Ambassador to UN, Samantha Power tweeted that the meeting was a “historic first”.

Relations with Thailand remained at a low, even though Thailand came on board by the assurance of investments worth \$ 166,000 in the Dawei Special Economic Zone in South Eastern Myanmar. The visit of Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to Myanmar in December 2014 was instrumental in seeking Bangkok’s commitment towards the project.

However, relations with Thailand were impacted after citizens and civil society organisations held protests against the implication of two Myanmar nationals in the Koh Tao murder protests. Protestors alleged that the Koh Tao murder trial had certain inconsistencies and the two Myanmar nationals were made scapegoats. President, Thein Sein had also asked the visiting Thai Prime Minister to ensure a fair probe in the case. In December, the two migrants were convicted and awarded death penalty

for murdering a British tourist and his wife by a Thai court that again reopened the wounds.

Big-ticket investments

Japan intensified economic cooperation with Myanmar with increasing its aid and investment. The two big ticket investments made by Japan was in the Dawei Special Economic Zone and the Thilawa SEZ. The 5th Myanmar-Thailand Joint Level Committee Meeting resolved that a special purpose vehicle will be jointly set up by Myanmar and Thailand after Japan agreed to take one third equity stake in the Dawei Special Economic Zone. The Dawei SEZ was officially opened in September and was possible only because of Japan's commitment.

Also, Three Japanese banks, the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ (BTMU), Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp, and Mizuho Bank that had earlier won three out of the nine licenses granted to foreign banks to operate in Myanmar along with Japan's aid agency, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will jointly be developing the Thilawa Special Economic Zone just outside Yangon.

Cross-border strike

The most important development on the Myanmar's relations with India was New Delhi's claim to having carried out a cross-border surgical-strike in Myanmar and neutralising militant camps in which 38 militants of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Independent Nagaland (Khaplang), NSCN (K) were killed, on 9 June. This was a retaliatory move by

Indian joint forces to an NSCN strike, strike on an Indian Army patrol, killing 18 soldiers in Chandel district of Manipur, bordering Myanmar. Nay Pyi Taw a day later said that the Indian armed forces never entered Myanmar territory.

Though the official versions differed between the two sides, the incident brought back to focus the continuing operations of anti-India militants from Myanmar. The NSCN (K) has a ceasefire agreement with Nay Pyi Taw and is said to have bases in Myanmar along the 1,700-km border with India. This brought into question whether Myanmar was doing enough to contain anti-India activities from its soil. In what is a rather peaceful border, militant activities are said to have increased in recent years through regrouping of several militant outfits and they increasing their strength to carry cross-border attacks.

The issue was discussed during the four-day visit of Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, Min Aung Hlaing to New Delhi in June, just a few weeks after the Manipur operations. The security situation along the Indo-Myanmar border was reviewed. The Myanmar's senior general is said to have sought security cooperation from India, especially in modernising her armed forces. Myanmar was also keen on New Delhi modernise her Navy.

Bilateral trade-target

Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry, Nirmala Sitharaman said that India's bilateral trade with Myanmar will reach \$10 billion in the next five

years and Indian investments in Myanmar would cross \$2-billion mark. Sitaraman was in Nay Pyi Taw for the 5th India-Myanmar Joint Trade Committee meeting on 17 February. Sitharaman underlined the need for improving border trade by offering Myanmar, banking arrangements suited for the purpose.

Efforts in achieving synergy between domestic priorities and bilateral trade with Myanmar seemed to be the approach of India's Ministry of commerce and industry. The Indian minister in her visit to the bordering Indian state of Manipur earlier in the year had said that her government is keen on trade and plantation projects in the region as part of the Special Economic Zone in the state.

In another stride in bilateral economic cooperation, the commencement of the Dawei SEZ opened a window of opportunity for India to explore in detail the potential of Chennai port in this regard. The next bilateral meeting of the trade committee has been fixed in Chennai.

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee in no unclear terms spelled out the importance of intensifying bilateral trade as a pivot to Myanmar-India relations, when Myanmar Vice President Dr Sai Mauk Kham visited India in early 2015. The Vice President met Indian external affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj and Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. In 2015, big connectivity projects got a boost especially the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport.

New Delhi approved a revised cost estimate of Rs.2904.04 crores for the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar. The project will provide an alternate access route to the North-Eastern region of India and contribute towards the region's economic development. Being a key connectivity project, it will promote economic, commercial and strategic links between India and Myanmar.



Trilateral highway

The year 2015 was also a leap forward for the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway after the Indian Ministry for Road Transport and Highways hinted at a trial-run for the IMT after the protocol is cleared. The year also marked the signing of the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) between the Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India in June that promises seamless road travel between the nations.

The Trilateral Highway project connecting Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand would help connect South Asia to South-East Asia. Early in 2015, a field survey for the proposed 579-km Imphal-Mandalay bus service began comprising a

joint team from India and Myanmar. The initial proposal for the bus service was submitted to New Delhi in 2009.

India again was amongst the first to send aid via sea and air to Myanmar for rescue and rehabilitation following the devastating cyclone. New Delhi joined efforts once again after the Cyclone Nargis in 2008 to help Nay Pyi Taw cope up with the effect of the cyclone that left hundreds dead and displaced more than 10 million people.

(The writer is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation)

Myanmar: Timeline

1 January 2015: The Union Election Commission in a special message announced that General Elections would be held in early November. It also said that the commission is busy preparing voter lists.

4 January 2015: Aung San Suu Kyi gives 67th Independence Day parade a miss while 13 armed ethnic groups attend the function on an invitation of the Union government.

15 January 2015: The tussle between the military and the Kachin Independence Army intensified leaving 1,000 people to flee their homes Hpakant.

23 January 2015: Vice President, Dr. Sai Mauk Kham met Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Mukherjee called for increased bilateral trade with Myanmar.

11 February 2015: Clashes between government troops and combined forces of Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Taung National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army continue in Laukkai in the Shan state.

10 March 2015: Police crackdown on student's demonstrators against the new education law in Letpadan in Pegu Division.

17 March 2015: The 7th round of ceasefire talks between the government and the armed ethnic groups begins in Yangon.

8 April 2015: National Education Law passed in the Lower House of the Parliament.

10 April 2015: Six parties that included NLD leader, Aung San Suu Kyi met President Thein Sein to discuss ways forward for amending the constitution.

6 May 2015: A 12 point agreement was reached by armed ethnic groups assembled at a conference in Wa stronghold of Panshshang.

15 May 2015: A boat carrying 300 Rohingya migrants found drifting in Thai waters, leaves for Malaysia after Thailand clarified that it was the country's policy of blocking entry of such migrants.

19 May 2015: China lodged protest against artillery shelling by Myanmar injuring 5 people in the Yunnan province through a statement that urged Myanmar to take effective measures to curb such incidents.

4 June 2015: Twenty Indian soldiers killed in an ambush with NSCIN(K) rebels in Chandel district of Manipur state along the Indo-Myanmar border.

9 June 2015: Indian Army in coordination of Air Force carried out a cross border operation into Myanmar killing at 38 rebels that are believed to have been responsible for the 4 June ambush.

11 June 2015: NLD leader, Aung San Suu Kyi met Chinese president, Xi Jinping on her maiden 5 day visit to China.

2 July 2015: A special delegation formed by armed ethnic groups convened in Chiang Mai in Thailand to discuss the nation's peace process ahead of the meeting with government's chief peace negotiator.

8 July 2015: Election Commission announces 8 November as the date for general elections, fixes 8 August as the deadline for parties to submit list of candidates.

23 July 2015: China hit out at the long sentences awarded by a court in Myanmar to 150 Chinese nationals for illegal logging in Kachin state that borders China.

30 July 2015: Government declares a state of emergency in the four worst-hit regions in the west—Magway Division, Sagaing Division, Chin State and Rakhine State due to torrential rains.

13 August 2015: Speaker of the lower house of the Parliament, Thura Shwe Mann was axed from the post of president of the Union Solidarity Development party after a midnight political swoop on party headquarters.

26 August 2015: Fighting erupted between armed ethnic outfit the Arakan Army and Border Guards Bangladesh injuring 1 BGB soldier.

1 September: Minimum wage fixed by the government at 3,600 Kyat per day comes into effect.

10 September: NLD leader, Aung San Suu Kyi begins her party's election campaign in Kayah state, known to be a stronghold of the incumbent USDP.

15 October: Eight armed ethnic groups signed the ceasefire accord on 15 October in presence of representatives from several countries.

8 November: Myanmar holds polls in a free and fair manner, NLD confident of a victory.

13 November: Opposition party, NLD cornered more than 80 percent of the seats in both houses of parliament winning a landslide victory.

15 November: Kachin Independence Army clashed with government troops in the mountains 5 miles, South-east of Mohyin in the Kachin state.

2 December: NLD leader Suu Kyi met President Thein Sein and Commander-in-Chief Hlaing Ming Hliang in two separate meetings and discussed peaceful transition of power.

4 December: Aung San Suu Kyi termed her meeting with former military chief Senior General U Than Shwe as having 'great result'.

24 December: A Thai court convicted 2 Myanmar nationals for murder of 2 British tourists in Thai island of Koh Tao in September 2014 and awarded both the convicts, death penalty.

Nepal: A tumultuous year, all-round

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

The year 2015 could be dubbed a 'year of turbulence' for Nepal. It was so both physically and politically – as the Himalayan Republic was rocked not only by one of the world's worst earth-quakes but also constant and continuing bickering on constitution-making. Caught in the political melee was the friendly Indian neighbour, who got the blame, after having been praised all-round for its unprecedented assistance in the face of the earlier earth-quake.

The year started with a blame-game by the nation's political leaders for missing the self-proclaimed deadline for the promulgation of the country's new constitution as they failed to reach a consensus on key issues. The process of re-framing the new constitution got delayed as the country faced worst natural disaster like April 25 earthquake and its aftershocks. As a consequence the country is still grieving the loss of life and property caused by recurrent earthquakes. The epicentre of the devastating earthquake, measuring 7.9 on Richter scale, was Lamjung, around 77 km northwest of Kathmandu. According to the official estimate, at least 8000 persons lost their lives, with more than 14,000 wounded and nearly 600,000 houses destroyed.

The April 25 earthquake created a situation where the two giant neighbours of the country, India and China, played important role in relief and

rehabilitation of the victims. In fact, the Chinese



officially showed their willingness to work with India in reconstructing the disaster-hit Nepal. As time passed by, China came closer to Nepal with its financial assistance while the distance between Nepal and India got widened. Political tension in Terai region aggravated the misunderstanding between these two neighbours.

Nevertheless, 20 September 2015 was marked as a historic day in Nepal. The new constitution of the country was promulgated by the President Ram Baran Yadav by putting his signature to five copies of the new constitution 2072 that firmly established Nepal as a federal democratic republic based on pluralism and secular values.



Political deadlock

The political deadlock over the framing of the new constitution continued unabated in the first half of the year. The Maoists and the Madhesi continued to put pressure on the Constituent Assembly to arrive at a consensus on certain contentious issues such as the adoption of Parliamentary model, the judicial set up and the electoral system. The most pertinent of these issues was however, federalism and the delineation of boundaries. The inclusion of five Tarai districts- Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari, Kailali and Kanchanpur - in the proposed federal states remained a contentious issue. As a result of the failure of the political parties to arrive at a consensus on federalism, the constitution-drafting process got scuttled a few times.

Amidst such political anxieties brewing over constitution-drafting, a deadly earthquake struck the country on 25 April, with its epicentre in the Gorkha district. The worst affected regions were Kathmandu followed by Rasuwa, Dolakha, Dhading and Gorkha districts. Major historical monuments such as Basantapur Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square were destroyed. Bureaucratic hassles and slow functioning of the government hampered reconstruction efforts by national and international organizations and NGOs.

The earthquake wreaked havoc on the country's economy. The country had initially expected a growth by 4.6 percent in 2015 but with the

earthquake hitting the region, several sectors such as mines, industry, construction, wholesale and retail, hotels and restaurants, financial sector and real estate were severely affected. Consequently, the gross domestic product (GDP) has gone down. It was still hoped that agricultural sector would grow by 1.8 percent, industrial sector by 2.7 percent and service sector by 3.9 percent respectively. The country faced a gradual change in the structure of economy. Contribution of agriculture and industries sectors to GDP had a declining trend while that of services sector is on rise.

In the post-quake months, a significant political development was the 16 points agreement signed on 8 June by the four major political parties of Nepal namely, the Nepali Congress, CPN-UML, UCPN (Maosit) and the Madhesi Janadhikar Loktantrik. The aim was to facilitate the constitution drafting process and appoint a Federal Commission to decide over the delineation of provinces after the promulgation of the Constitution.

Even this agreement was met with opposition from the Madhes based parties which objected on two cardinal grounds: a) that the agreement allegedly went against the spirit of the Interim Constitution and the Supreme Court; b) that they were not consulted while formulating the agreement. The discontent of the Madhesi parties continued to brew in the following months as they insisted on an 11 state model as opposed to 6 provinces agreed upon by the ruling parties.

Amidst such profound misgivings, the new Constitution came into being on 20 September, transforming the country into a federal, democratic republic. It marked a historic moment for the nation whose constitution was written, for the very first time, by the elected representatives of its people. It was hoped that the promulgation of the new constitution would end the decade long political instability and attract domestic and foreign investment.

Despite the new Constitution being welcomed as a triumph of democracy, political and economic instability continued to plague the nation and its people. The new constitution failed to placate the demands of the Madhesis and the Tharus who remained outside the constitution drafting process and have been engaged in violent agitations since then.

New Prime Minister

Baburam Bhattarai, former Prime Minister and also the most prominent Maoist leader of the Unified CPN-Maoist party, resigned on 26 September. His resignation was speculated to have been largely due to his personal differences with the party Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal. Another major development was the election of K P Sharma Oli of the UCP party as the new Prime Minister on 11 October. In a voting contest that was held after parties failed to arrive at a solution regarding minority rights in the new constitution that had triggered violent agitations, Oli replaced the incumbent Sushil

Koirala. Oli came to power with the promise of revising the constitution and containing the Madhesis. It was also speculated that the alliance of Oli and Prachanda would be stronger in the hills while that of Bhattarai and the Madhesis would prevail in the Madhes.

The Terai region is home to major industries in the country and is the principal conduit through which important international trade routes can be accessed. The nation would have drawn immense benefits from the opportunities created by new constitution, had peace and unity prevailed. Unfortunately, the ethnic unrest spearheaded by the Madhesis in the months following the promulgation of the new constitution has virtually paralysed the economy of the nation.

Madhesi protests

The prolonged Madhesi agitation disrupted normal life, bringing trade and business to a complete halt.



Clashes along the Nepal-India border prevented Nepal bound freight from entering Nepal. As the year drew to a close, Nepal suffered from acute

crisis of essential commodities such as medicines, fuel and food. With prices of essential commodities shooting up beyond the means of the ordinary middle class and the poor, black-marketing of fuel and cooking gas became rampant, striking at the heart of the economy and making revival difficult, if not entirely impossible, in the near future.

The year 2015 has been a landmark year for Nepal as the country gets its first elected female President. The election of CPN-UML vice-chairman Bidhya Devi Bhandari as the first President of the country under the new constitution marked a historic moment. Fifty-four-year-old Bhandari won 327 votes out of 549 in Parliament. Her closest contestant, Kul Bahadur Gurung of the Nepali Congress, got 214 votes. The number of absentees was 48 during the vote, which took place after the assembly failed to meet the deadline to propose a candidate based on consensus in accordance with the new Constitution.

It was almost decided that Bhandari would be the first President after 12 ruling parties, including the third and fourth largest parties of the country, namely, the United Communist Party of Nepal (UCPN) and Rastriya Prajatantra Party of Nepal (RPPN), had pledged their support. It is noteworthy that after the promulgation of the new Constitution, Onsari Gharti was elected as the Speaker of Parliament. Therefore Bhandari's win became the second major event where another very important position in the government to be held by a woman. It is also interesting to note that her victory in the



parliamentary election for president was announced by the woman Speaker of the House.

China getting closer?

China's influence in Asia has increased remarkably over the past decade. In this context, Nepal holds strategic interest for China's security and larger South Asia policy-objectives. For Chinese perspective, peace and tranquillity along its south-western border is especially important as it shares a large stretch of its border with India, with whom it has had lingering border disputes. Nepal thus plays a pivotal role in China's regional geo-political priorities, and the bilateral relationship between Nepal and China today reflects not just China's border concerns but encompasses its larger goals in the region. China seems keen to deepen its economic ties with Nepal.

Its commitment to bolstering the relationship was seen recently after the 25 April 'Great Quake'. Besides sending teams of rescue experts, medical personnel and relief supplies to Nepal in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, China has also pledged to continue providing help in the future. It is noteworthy that China will give Nepal around \$ 500 million of grant assistance between 2016 and 2018. It has been reported that the money will be allotted within five major areas like infrastructure, livelihood, cultural-site renovations, disaster preparedness and health. The help should go a long way in getting Nepal back on track.

According to media reports, China sent troops to Nepal to repair a highway, which has been blocked by landslide. Upon receiving an emergency aid request from the Nepalese government, China's State Council and Central Military Commission decided to dispatch 100 armed police officers for the China-Nepal Highway repair, the Xinhua news agency reported.

Nepal and China celebrated 1 August as the anniversary day of 60 years of establishment of their diplomatic relations. President Ram Baran Yadav and Chinese President Xi Jinping exchanged congratulatory messages on the occasion of the 60th anniversary. Similarly, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also exchanged congratulatory messages on the occasion. A 'walkathon' (walking marathon) was organised in Kathmandu to recall the diplomatic journey with China, which started on 1 August

1955. Foreign Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey, Chief Secretary Lilamani Paudyal and Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Wu Chuntai jointly inaugurated the 'walkathon' organized by Nepal Chamber of Commerce.

India-border agitations

Owing to disruption of fuel supply from the main



exporter in India on account of agitations across the Nepal-India border the demand for power in Nepal increased drastically. Most of the families started substituting cooking gas fuelled stoves with electric appliances. On the other side power-cuts also increased for as long as 10 hours or more everyday and as a result the demand for electricity exceeds supply. Having faced the crisis the Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) and the Petro-China Company Limited, a wing of China's biggest state-owned oil producer, China National Petroleum Corporation, signed a historic memorandum of understanding (MOU) on October 28 to import petroleum products from the northern neighbour.

The MOU was seen as a prelude to ending a four-decade supply monopoly of the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC). Following the deal, China provided 1,333 kilolitres (kl) of petrol to Nepal in grant. Encouraged by the MoU between the NOC and Petro-China, the government then planned to sign a commercial deal with China to import at least one-third of the nation's total petroleum demand to deal with acute crisis of fuel in the wake of protests in the Tarai region. However, owing to lack of clarity over double taxation on petroleum products from China, the signing of commercial agreement with Petro-China is yet to take place.

According to statistics, 77 percent of Nepal's energy demand is being fulfilled by fuel wood while hydrocarbons like coal and petroleum constitute only two percent and eight percent respectively. Nepal is said to have one of the highest hydropower potentials in the world, with a capacity of 83,000 MW of which 42,000 MW is said to be economically feasible. However, apart from the various hydropower projects being developed at present, the country's total installed hydroelectricity capacity stands at a far from encouraging figure of around 700 MW. In a country that boasts of enormous hydro-power potential, hydroelectricity accounts for a mere 2 percent of the total energy consumed. This clearly suggests that there is a big gap between electricity that could be supplied, and what is actually being supplied.

Against this backdrop, some experts argue that Nepal should sign a similar agreement with

Bangladesh to fulfil its petroleum needs. Bangladesh is in a position to meet Nepal's energy needs provided that certain arrangements are settled between the two nations. A high-level NOC delegation visited Bangladesh in November to assess all the possible options for importing cooking gas, petrol, diesel, kerosene and air turbine fuel.

SCO membership

Besides, in 2015 Nepal established formal bilateral diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan and Jamaica and thereby the number of states with which Nepal has formal diplomatic relations has now reached 139. On 30 June, Nepal and Kazakhstan tied a diplomatic knot as Nepali Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Nepal to the United Nations Durga Prasad Bhattarai, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Kazakhstan to the United Nations, signed a Joint Communiqué' at a special ceremony held at the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan in New York.

On the other hand Nepal and Jamaica, a Caribbean island nation formally established diplomatic relations on 1 October. Nepalese Foreign Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey and Jamaican Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade Minister A J Nicholson signed a joint communiqué in New York agreeing to formally establish bilateral diplomatic relations.

A landmark event in country's foreign policy in the year 2015 was its inclusion in the Shanghai

Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a dialogue partner. The 15th SCO Summit held in Ufa, the Russian Federation, in July 2015 had approved Nepal, together with Cambodia, Azerbaijan and Armenia as dialogue partners, while awarding full membership to India and Pakistan. The SCO member states include China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and its Secretariat is stationed in Beijing.

Engagement with India

Nepal has always shared a unique bilateral relationship with India which is sustained by common culture, language and religion between the two nations. In the past decades, India has substantially contributed towards promoting the socio-economic development of the Himalayan Kingdom. The year 2014 was particularly significant in the bilateral relation of the two countries with high-level visits by the leaders of both countries laying the foundation of a new era of peace, goodwill and co-operation in various spheres such as culture, connectivity and constitution.

The year 2015 however, proved disruptive in terms of Nepal's engagement with India. The first half of the year witnessed few fruitful developments that seemed to take forward the understanding arrived at between the two countries in the previous year. The year began with the Indian Government approving three new bi-directional cross border air-routes at Janakpur, Bhairahawa and Nepalgunj points. Such a step was crucial for facilitating regional flights and

also improving air connectivity between India and Nepal.

The next meaningful development was the visit to New Delhi by a Nepali official team headed by Finance Secretary Suman Sharma on 12 January 2015. The purpose was to discuss ways to simplify procedure to use the \$1 billion line of credit which was extended to Nepal by the Exim Bank of India in 2014. The loan would be used in funding projects such as Budhi Gandaki Hydroelectric Project, Mahakali III Irrigation Project and a multi-lane motorable bridge over the Mahakali river in Mahendranagar.

India also expressed its commitment towards building a gas pipeline linking India and Nepal in addition to the petroleum pipeline it had already agreed to construct. The Indian Minister of State for Oil and Natural Gas, Dharmendra Pradhan instructed the Indian Oil Corporation to increase the quota of LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) supply to Nepal from 22000 tonnes to 30000 tones. An increased supply of fuel was expected to assist Nepal in tiding over the fuel crisis that it had been grappling with for few months. Pradhan also reiterated India's willingness to strengthen and explore other areas of cooperation in the oil and gas sector with Nepal.

India played a pivotal role in the post-quake reconstruction efforts by Nepal. Immediately after the earthquake, India sent 187 tonnes of supplies, including 50 tonnes of water, 22 tonnes of food and

two tonnes of medicine. Around 300 disaster-relief troops reached Kathmandu soon after the earthquake and trucks loaded with supplies travelled by land from India's eastern region to Nepal's rural areas.

Indian planes were the first to land in Kathmandu with water, food, earth-moving equipment, tents, blankets, mobile hospitals, specialized rescue teams and specialized manpower to help restore electricity supply. Increasingly, as the country's only major airport in Kathmandu got crowded with flights from other nations, India started moving most of its relief materials by road to Nepal.

The National Disaster Response Force, medical teams and various NGOs based in India significantly contributed towards the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Nepal; such relief efforts were monitored by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who promised long-term assistance as well. The Indian army also arranged for medical relief to be provided to the earthquake ravaged districts of Nepal. Transit procedures were simplified for facilitating the flow of relief materials into the affected districts of Nepal. In the arena of health, an important friendly step taken by India, independent of earthquake relief efforts, was to give NRs 51.5 million to Nepal in order to help the latter in fighting iodine deficiency diseases (known as goitre).

India agreed to Nepal's request for allowing the movement of vehicles imported from a third country into Nepal through four border points by amending

the bilateral Treaty of Transit. Nepal had requested India for the move citing the requirements of additional handling facilities, special carriers and equipment which added to the cost and time of clearance of vehicles from Kolkata port into Nepal.

As the year progressed, two major agreements signed between these two countries seemed to buttress the friendship between them. The first was the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) signed on 15 June 2015 between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. The agreement was hoped to promote in a major way the exchange of traffic rights and cross border movement of goods, traffic and people.

The next significant agreement was the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed on 24 August for the construction of an Amlekhgunj-Raxaul Oil Pipeline. This agreement was the result of a promise made by Narendra Modi during his visit to Kathmandu in August, 2014. The pipeline, once completed, is expected to ensure uninterrupted supply of fuel to Nepal which suffers from persistent fuel shortage and therefore, relies on oil tankers.

Bilateral tensions

Notwithstanding such positive developments, disagreement over the drafting of the new constitution led to tension between the two countries in the second half of the year. The problem started in the wake of the promulgation of the new constitution, with Indian Government asking Nepal

to make ‘seven amendments’ to the new constitution that would directly address and accommodate the concerns raised by the disgruntled Madeshis and the Tharus. Nepal has since then accused India of imposing economic blockade along the borders.

Such a decision is believed to have resulted from India’s displeasure with the new Constitution. India is also suspected of being hand in gloves with the Madhesis in launching violent protest and unsettling the socio-economic and political fabric of the country. The blockade along the border was stated to have blocked the essential transit routes from India to Nepal that in turn, prevented essential cargos from entering Nepal. It led to acute shortages of food, fuel and medicines in the country.

Despite India denying its role in imposing any blockade and repeatedly asking the Nepal Government to resolve its internal issues on a priority basis, anti-India sentiment began to gather momentum towards the end of the year with India’s interference in Nepal’s internal affairs being perceived as a breach in the India-Nepal relationship.

(The writer is a Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Kolkatta Chapter)

Nepal: Time-line

7 January – Passports for sexual minorities issued with a gender category added to tackle widespread

discrimination against the country’s sexual minorities.

19 January – Feasibility studies conducted for laying an LPG and gas pipeline to Nepal for supply of cooking fuel from India.

5 February – Agreement for joint monitoring of the border pillars and no man's land between India and Nepal between officials of both countries

27 February – The Supreme Court has annulled two controversial provisions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Commission on Inquiry into Enforced Disappearances (CIED) Act that give discretionary powers to the transitional justice mechanisms for amnesty and to the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction to prosecute human rights violators.

28 February – Protesters and police clashed in Kathmandu at a demonstration by some 30,000 people led by the Maoist opposition to demand that political parties reach a consensus on a new constitution, in the biggest street march in Nepal in years.

18 March – Prospects of greater electricity trade prompted Bangladesh and Nepal to set up state-owned power traders and maximize the benefits of electricity commerce.

10 April –China planned the construction of a 540-kilometre high-speed rail link between Tibet and Nepal, passing through a tunnel under Mt Everest.

13 April – The investment board cleared China's Three Gorges International Corp to build a long-

delayed \$1.6-billion hydropower project, the single biggest foreign investment in the Himalayan country.

7 May – The devastating earthquake not only killed thousands but may have also shrunk the height of the world's tallest peak - Mount Everest - by about 2.5 cm, according to analysis of satellite data.

22 May – Heads of the governments of India and China agreed to work jointly with Nepal for its reconstruction, rehabilitation and development endeavours, respecting the country's sovereignty and independence.

4 June – The leaders of the Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), UCPN (Maoist) and the Madhesi front reached consensus on the disputed issues- federalism, judiciary, electoral system and form of governance. The parties agreed on federalising country with six provinces.

11 June – The task of constitution making that remained blocked at the CA's Constitutional Political Dialogue and Consensus Committee (CPDCC) for several months progressed as the committee settled disputes and the major political forces inked a 16-point deal.

23 July – The Constituent Assembly (CA) has received altogether 33,016 suggestions through various means of communications as the deadline for registering feedback on the draft constitution expired.

27 July – A high alert has been sounded at the border posts in Pithoragarh and Champawat districts,

having a 241 km long border with Nepal, in the wake of a terror attack in Gurdaspur district of Punjab.

30 July – At least 35 people were killed in landslides that swept away houses at different places in Kaski, Myagdi, Baglung and Chitwan.

14 August – Protests against the seven-state federal model continued in different Tarai districts continued especially in Jumla and Jajarkot. More than 30 people were injured in clashes with security personnel.

21 August – SAARC member countries have agreed to extend assistance in economic and infrastructure sector of member countries by mobilizing SAARC Development Fund (SDF).

24 August – Nepal signed an MoU with India for the construction of a 41-km-long petroleum pipeline to import petroleum products from India. The pipeline from Raxaul in Bihar to Amlekhgunj in Nepal is estimated to cost Rs 275 crore and is expected to be completed in three years.

20 September – Nepal on September 20 adopted its new fully secular and democratic Constitution, achieved after seven years of painstaking deliberations and amid violent protests.

25 September – India attributed the obstructions seen at the various entry-exit points along the Nepal-India border to the ongoing unrest, protests and demonstrations on the Nepali side.

9 October – The Asian Development Bank (ADB) today approved a new \$15 million grant to rebuild

schools, provide microloans to help restore livelihoods, and to boost awareness of disasters in the 14 districts most severely affected by the recent earthquakes.

7 October – The Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC) 9 invited bids from interested firms to supply petroleum products in a bid to ease fuel crisis ahead of the country's biggest festivals—Dashain and Tihar.

11 October – The Parliament elected K. P. Sharma Oli, the leader of a moderate Communist party, as Nepal's 38th Prime Minister, as the country struggled to navigate unrest over its new Constitution.

28 October –CPN-UML Vice-Chairman Bidhya Devi Bhandari has been elected as second and first female president of Nepal garnering majority votes in the election held at parliament.

6 November – Nepal and China have agreed to operationalise seven other border trade points effectively, besides making customs offices in earthquake-affected areas functional.

18 November – The government on November 19 named a seven-member team to sign the first commercial oil deal with Petro-China in Beijing.

4 December – Nepal and China have agreed to accelerate the process of the constructing a dry port at Timure of Rasuwa district.

25 December – An eight-point agreement with the Chinese government for speeding up preparations to

ink a deal to import petroleum products from China was signed.

Pakistan: Land-mark year in fighting terrorism

Kriti M Shah

The year 2015 was a landmark year for Pakistan as state and civil society came up with a much awaited resolve against terrorism. The working of the civilian government, under Nawaz Sharif and the military under Raheel Sharif acquired a unique level of understanding and acceptance in the country. With the military raging a full scale war on militants in the country, Pakistan marked a decline of 48 percent terrorism incidents in 2015.

While public confidence in the military has remained unwavering, the civilian government needs to further strengthen the counter terrorism framework in the country, by making it more collaborative among various law enforcement agencies and more non-discriminatory.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb

Operation Zarb-e-Azb is a comprehensive military offensive against militant groups in the country, launched in June 2014 after an attack on Jinnah International Airport. While the latter half of 2014 saw state action against militants under the operation, the real impetus came in the midst of the massacre of children at the Army Public School in Peshawar in December. The attack orchestrated by the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan saw the killing of over 132 children in one of the country's worst ever terrorist attacks.

For a country that has long seen jihadists use militant Islam as a tool to dictate domestic politics, any action against jihadists had long seemed unlikely. This changed after the attack with the government implementing a National Action Plan or NAP to combat the terrorism menace plaguing the country. Some of the measures in the NAP included amending the constitution to set up military courts to try terrorists, banning space for terrorists in electronic and print media, cutting financial aid to terrorists and lifting the six year moratorium on the death penalty.

The NAP was unique in the sense that it successfully galvanised political parties at the provincial and federal level, from across the spectrum to fight terrorism along with bringing the counter-terrorism framework of Pakistan into public discourse. The credit of changing the narrative from viewing terrorists as 'victims' of the US invasion of Afghanistan to labelling them as the 'enemy' largely goes to the military.

The military under its chief Lt. Gen Raheel Sharif stepped up the intensity of Operation Zarb-e-Azb post the massacre. By the first anniversary of its operation, the military had destroyed 837 terrorist hideouts in North Waziristan, recovered 253 tons of explosives, captured 18,087 weapons, conducted 9,000 intelligence based operations and killed 2,763 militants at the cost of 347 officers and soldiers.

It is important to note that the figures detailing the success of the operation come from the Inter

Services Public Relations or ISPR, the military media organization. No independent media organization has been allowed to embed with troops battling in North Waziristan. Therefore keeping in mind that the operation has proven to be largely successful in the provinces it operates in, the figures from the ISPR need to be taken with a grain of salt given their role in glorifying the military's "heroic deeds". Nonetheless, the improved security situation in North Waziristan and FATA has brought a sense of peace and security among the masses.

Civil-military relations

Historically, Pakistan has had a volatile relationship between its military and elected governments. However the relationship between the two has evolved in 2015 into a unique 'bipolar' form of government. Nawaz Sharif, now in his third tenure as prime minister has realised the tremendous goodwill the military enjoys among the masses. He has learnt that alienating, ignoring or disregarding the military complicates the mechanics of governing rather than simplifying it.

The military too, has learned that the people of Pakistan do not support military governments when they are in power and prefer a return to democratic electoral politics. Therefore the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif has accepted the role of the military as a co-partner in running state affairs, while the military has learnt how to exercise its influence without ousting the elected government from power.

This dual power structure in Islamabad and Rawalpindi has been characteristic of Pakistan in 2015.

This form of civilian-military rule has gained the approval of many politicians, media houses and analysts in the country. Understanding the necessity of having politicians and the generals working closely together to face domestic security threats, the dual power structure has found wide acceptance amongst the Pakistani people. Gen Sharif, with help of a glitzy media campaign run by the ISPR has successfully used this acceptance of the people and has projected himself as a saviour or messiah for the people, who have long awaited such military action against extremists in the country. With his popularity at its peak, Gen Sharif has thereby tilted the delicate balance of civil military relations in his favour with the public giving him a free ride to 'whatever it takes' to clean up the country.

The developments in Karachi over 2015 are an example of the rising power of the military. The Pakistani Rangers under the direction of Gen Sharif have cracked down heavily on militants and mafia



groups in the crime infested city. As a show of strength, the military has also turned the fight against terrorism into a political war by targeting opposition parties such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) in the city, arresting many of its top leaders on charges of corruption and raiding its offices.

This has led the MQM chief Altaf Hussain and the PPP chief and former president of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari publically criticising General Sharif in May and June 2015 for harassing their supporters and destroying democratic institutions in the Sindh province, leading to serious differences between the provincial and federal government. In the midst of such political opposition, Nawaz Sharif has sheepishly supported the military's actions.

The appointment of Naseer Khan Janjua as the National Security Advisor (NSA) evoked a familiar sense of foreboding, and solidified the idea that the military had taken over matters of national security completely. Janjua is a military man who has served only in the military prior to his appointment and his closeness to the General is well known. While he can brief the prime minister on military options such as the exchange of gunfire along Pakistan's borders, he is ill equipped to offer policymaking advice.

In addition to this, Raheel Sharif has made his mark on the international sphere with many countries recognising his importance and influence on security in the country and appreciating his reputation as a "doer". In January 2015, General

Sharif met with David Cameron the Prime Minister of the UK at Downing Street followed by a meet with Joe Biden in the White House in November. Besides his frequent trips to China to discuss the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and talks with the Taliban, Gen Sharif's visit to Russia was a big win for the army chief, as Moscow which as previously avoided strategic ties with Pakistan for decades- began negotiations for helicopter deals and gifting Pakistan a \$2 billion pipeline. Therefore in 2015, the military came to dominate matters of both internal security processes as well as Pakistan's foreign policy in its entirety edging out the civilian government.



Foreign policy

Pakistan has willingly assumed the responsibility of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table for peace talks with Afghanistan, however little progress has been made over the years. Afghanistan argues that Pakistan is soft on the Taliban, offering them refuge along the border and not dealing with them effectively despite attacks on Afghanistan being plotted on Pakistani soil. Keeping this in mind, Pakistan has stated that it cannot be expected

to broker talks with Taliban and be expected to fight with them at the same time.

However in February 2015, an opportunity for peace emerged when Raheel Sharif visited Kabul and informed President Ghani that the Taliban would be ready for peace talks. However prospects for peace diminished as quickly as it emerged when it was discovered a few days before the talks in July that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar had been dead for two years leading to a power struggle within the Taliban. While talks with the Taliban were called off Raheel Sharif visited Kabul a number of times during the year in an effort to rekindle the stalled dialogue.

Realising the central role of the army chief in influencing the future of his country, President Ashraf Ghani was the first President of another country to visit the General Head Quarters (GHQ) of the Pakistan Army on an official visit in November 2015. Soon after in December 2016, a statement from Ghani's office struck a positive note. Kabul stated that Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China would hold their first meeting on peace related issues in January 2016.

Relations with India

Pakistan's relations with India in 2015 was characterised by the periods of distrust and blame placing, followed by attempts to bolster peace from both sides. In July 2015 in Ufa, Russia at the BRICS Summit Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and

Nawaz Sharif attempted to kick start a new season of engagement between the two countries.

The two leaders agreed to have NSA-level talks to discuss issues related to terrorism, meeting of directors of the Border Security Force and the Rangers and undertake other confidence building measures like releasing of fishermen who had strayed across international borders and were languishing in jails on either side. However, a month later, history repeated itself when the talks were called off following Pakistan's then- NSA Sartaj Aziz's insistence of meeting with Hurriyat leaders prior to talks.

In September, speaking at an event in Rawalpindi, General Sharif described Kashmir as the "unfinished agenda" of Partition and threatened India of an "unbearable cost" of war if the "enemy" ever resorted to any "misadventure, regardless of its size and scale-short or long." These remarks seemed to have influenced Nawaz Sharif to also demonstrate his 'firm' stance on India. This was highlighted at the UN General Assembly a few weeks later on 30 September 2015 when Sharif raked up the Kashmir issue, terming its non resolution as a failure of the UN. He also proposed a four-point "peace initiative" with India which included demilitarizing Kashmir. India registered its strong disapproval of the speech.

During Nawaz Sharif's early days as prime minister in 2013, the leader of the PML(N) voiced his desire to normalise relations with India. However two

years into his third tenure as prime minister, and wrestling between an ambitious military and growing opposition, Sharif's plan for rapprochement with his country's arch enemy seemed to have been discarded all together. This was until November 2015, when on the sidelines of the COP 21 summit in Paris, Modi and Sharif were photographed shaking hands and talking for few minutes. The media frenzy that typically follows any interaction between Indian and Pakistan leaders was subdued with the government terming the interaction as a "courtesy meeting."

On 6 December 2015, the National Security Advisors of both countries met in a secret meeting away from the prying eyes of the media in Bangkok. This was followed up by the Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj's visit to Islamabad the following week for the annual Heart of Asia conference where she met with the advisor to the Prime Minister for foreign affairs and Janjua's predecessor Sartaj Aziz and Nawaz Sharif himself. The tables took dramatic yet positive turn yet again when a few weeks later Prime Minister Modi made a surprise stopover in Lahore in December 25 to wish Nawaz Sharif on his birthday much to the amusement and astonishment of the world media, ending the year on a high.

The thaw in relations between the two countries in the last few months of the year increased the space for civilian leadership to restructure political structures within the country and regain control over

foreign policy with India in what was clearly a year belonging to General Sharif.

Relations with China

In April 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Islamabad where he unveiled a \$46 billion infrastructure blueprint for Pakistan. Given Pakistan's strategic location as a gateway to the Gulf states and the Middle East, China's plan was to secure a trade route through the Gwadar Port and

establish an ambitious economic corridor. President Xi's visit saw 51 agreements signed between Beijing and Islamabad, from which the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a standout development.



The CPEC which will run from Kashgar in China to the Gwadar Port is a potential game changer for Pakistan. The corridor is expected to boost economic growth and inject foreign capital into the Pakistani economy. China, a long term ally of Pakistan, is also keen to work on gas, coal and solar energy projects under the CPEC framework. If successful, the CPEC has the potential to double

Pakistan's current capital and bring some much needed relief to the energy starved country.

However, given security concerns, disagreements over the route of the corridor and the insurgency in Balochistan, the CPEC faces many future difficulties.

Internal politics

There was some relief for the Nawaz Sharif government in the latter half of 2015 after what had been a tumultuous 2014 following the protests by the Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaaf. In the wake of the APS tragedy, the opposition's street agitation wore away and the Sharif government resumed its place on the side of the military, allowing the military to push into the domain reserved for elected governments.

However, despite the ever decreasing space for civilian government to function, the local government elections in Punjab and Sindh in November provided Sharif's PML(N) party with a much needed confidence booster. Winning majority of the seats in Punjab (the Prime Minister's stronghold) and Sindh (thanks to the military's campaign in Karachi) proved that Sharif's political base was intact and significantly stronger than it was during the PTI protests in 2014.

According to a survey conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency in October, Nawaz Sharif was the

most popular political leader of the country with an approval rating of 75%. Such figures far exceeded that of Imran Khan (49%) and Altaf Hussain of the MQM who was the least popular political figure with a 13% approval rating.

However it is of importance to note that while Sharif's popularity grew as the year progressed, he rarely attended parliament and his party passed very few laws in 2015. Cabinet meetings were not held with regular frequency and the Cabinet Committee for National Security never convened any meetings. This reflects the lax attitude of the party in power to give parliamentary proceedings the importance they deserve. The personalised governance of the Sharif administration is also reflected in the lack of action against radical religious groups in southern and central Punjab.

What more now?

While Pakistan has taken the early beginning steps in combating terror, much is left to be done. In December 2014, Nawaz Sharif had vowed to make no distinction between the 'good' Taliban (ones that keep the territorial dispute of Kashmir alive or use Pakistan to gain leverage in Afghanistan) and the 'bad' Taliban (ones that attack Pakistan). However few steps have been taken against the 'Good Taliban'.

The effectiveness of groups such as Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Haqqani network has been all but beaten. While

Pakistan has repeatedly promised India that it would bring a speedy conclusion to the trial of those accused in the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, little has been done to show for it. In fact, Pakistan has gone so far as to release the alleged mastermind of the attacks Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi on bail in March.

Although the government has banned coverage of Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, LeT fronts that are terrorist organizations as well, they have resisted from taking more meaningful steps such as seizing the organization's sizable physical assets. If Pakistan seeks to gain a greater international reputation for being tough on terrorists, and for Nawaz Sharif to break further ground with India more concrete steps need to be taken in this regard.

Another weakness of the operation has been the lack of government coordination with the government of Afghanistan to strengthen the borders in North Waziristan to prevent militants from fleeing into Afghanistan. A news report in *The Express Tribune* stated that "at least 400 families affiliated with militant groups-including members of al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan- crossed into Afghanistan in December and now live in the homes of locals in lawless parts of the country." By not strengthening their western border security, the Pakistan military can turn Afghanistan's eastern provinces into a 'new North Waziristan'.

Since the lifting of the moratorium on executions, more than 300 persons have been executed in the

country, according to Amnesty International and the Justice Project Pakistan. The introduction of military courts has led to many in the country and abroad has expressed their concern over the constitutionality and legality of such courts given reports that the vast majority were not convicted on terror offences.

The government therefore must strengthen the civilian judiciary by introducing legislation that protects judges, lawyers and witnesses in terror related cases. In addition, certain features of the NAP remain neglected, such as reform of madrassas and the monitoring of private schools. Action should be taken on these issues for Pakistan to reaffirm the world that it takes terror seriously and that it is not a fragile state.

Above all, it is important to realise that Pakistan's acute internal and external security challenges cannot be handled by civilians or the military alone. They will have to combine resources and work together without any discrimination or bias towards certain groups. Furthermore, the civilian government must no longer neglect the imperatives of controlling terrorism in the country and must use its power of legislation to bring further reform in this area. A functional elected government, irrespective of the military's power, is a must for any democratic country and absolutely vital for a country like Pakistan.

(The writer is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation, Delhi)

Pakistan: Time-line

3 January- US drone strike in North Waziristan, kills 6 militants

6 January- National Assembly, approves constitutional amendment to establish military courts

13 January- US Secretary of State John Kerry visits Pakistan

26 January- 80 percent of Pakistan plunges into blackout, following rebel attack on transmission line

- Raheel Sharif visits China

27 January- Pakistan criticises India inclusion in Nuclear Suppliers Group

13February- Shiite mosque in Peshawar attacked, killing 20

17 February- Nawaz Sharif and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu meet in Islamabad for Pakistan-Turkey High Level Strategic Cooperation Council

23 February- Federal cabinet approves China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) deal

3 March- Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar visits Islamabad

6 March- Upper house election results in victory for PML-N

10 March- Pakistan test fires' Shaheen-III ballistic missile

11 March- Pakistan soldiers raid MQM headquarters

-Pakistan lifts moratorium on executions

13 March- Zaki ur-Rehman Lakhvi, mastermind of 2008 Mumbai attacks, ordered to be released by highest court

30 March- Pakistan evacuates hundreds of citizens stranded in Yemen

3 April- Nawaz Sharif visits Turkey to discuss Yemen crisis

6 April- Pakistan, Sri Lanka sign six memorandums of understandings, including one of nuclear energy

9 April- China agrees to help Pakistan build Iran-Pakistan pipeline

10 April- Pakistan parliament votes to stay out of Yemen war

14 April- Pakistan's counter-terrorism department kill al-Qaeda commanders in Karachi

18 April- Pakistan arrest 47 Indian fishermen

21 April- China finalises \$28 billion trade deal

23 April- Pakistan, Iran strike \$5 billion trade agreement

27 April- 44 dead as storm hits northwest Pakistan

12 May- Nawaz Sharif and Raheel Sharif visit Afghanistan

13 May- Gunmen kill 42 in attack on bus in Karachi

15 May- Pakistan military kill 15 Taliban militants in North Waziristan

19 May- Pakistan, Afghanistan sign accord to share intelligence

22 May- Police raid Zulfiqar Ali Mirza, leader of Pakistan Peoples Party home

28 May- Pakistan hangs Baloch insurgents behind plane hijacking

2 June- US, Pakistan strikes kill 14 militants

3 June- Raheel Sharif says Kashmir is an “unfinished agenda of partition”

5 June- Malala Yousafzai’s attackers acquitted

15 June- Afghan Taliban commander killed in Peshawar

19 June- Arrest warrant issued for Pervez Musharraf

10 July- Pakistan, India agree to fight terrorism in Ufa, Russia

24 July- Pakistan agrees to buy 8 submarines from China

13 August- China, Pakistan sign \$20 billion worth of MoUs

14 August- Pakistan sentences 6 men to death for Army Public School massacre

19 August- Pakistan invites Kashmiri separatists to High Commission in Delhi

31 August- US National Security Advisor Susan Rice visits Pakistan

8 September- Urdu made the official language of Pakistan

10 September- Border agency officials from India and Pakistan meet in Delhi

15 September- Pakistan, China conduct joint military exercises

18 September- Taliban attack Peshawar Air Force base

30 September- IMF approves \$500 million to Pakistan

- Nawaz Sharif speaks at UN, accuses India of terrorism

6 October- India-Pakistan backchannel negotiations at UN General Assembly collapse

19 October- Nawaz Sharif visits the US

20 October- Lt. Gen Naseer Khan Janjua replaces Sartaj Aziz as national security advisor

22 October- US announces it will sell 8 F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan

27 October- 7.5 magnitude earthquake kills 230 in Pakistan

2 November- Nawaz Sharif's PML-N wins majority in local district elections

14 November- Pakistani airstrikes kill 17 in Taliban stronghold near Afghan border

16 November- Raheel Sharif visits US, meets Vice President Joe Biden

2 December- Pakistan executes four involved in Army Public School attack

9 December- Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj visits Islamabad, meets Nawaz Sharif

10 December- India and Pakistan agree to renew peace talks

13 December- Turkmenistan-Afgahnistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline inaugurated

17 December- Pakistan says its part of Saudi-anti terror alliance

22 December- China, Pakistan ink deal for coal power plant

25 December- Indian PM Narendra Modi makes surprise trip to Lahore to greet Pak counterpart Nawaz Sharif on his birthday

Sri Lanka: Landmark polls

N Sathiya Moorthy

Two nation-wide elections in eight months, and the political trajectory and the international imagery of Sri Lanka underwent a total make-over in the year 2015. Rather, both flowed from the defeat of incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 8 January advanced presidential polls that he chose to order in the first place. This was followed by the defeat of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), now headed by successor-President, Maithripala Sirisena, in the 17 August parliamentary polls, which the latter had called in turn. The fact remained that victory for the SLFP in the parliamentary polls could have heralded the greater acceptance of Rajapaksa still in the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community, to the perceived detriment of the minority Tamils and Muslims.

The defeat of Rajapaksa in the presidential polls, that too by his senior political and ministerial aide, Sirisena, was as history-making as the former lending political leadership to the nation's armed forces in the complete neutralisation of the LTTE terror-group after three decades of war and violence. If the war victory was among the reasons – and not the only one – for Rajapaksa's re-election victory in 2010, the ghosts of war would haunt him during the long run-up since to the 2015 outing.

International opprobrium, combined with domestic Tamil sentiments, on allegations of war-crimes and 'accountability issues' ensured that the community voters joined hands to hand him over an electoral

defeat, in the place of a military defeat that the LTTE could not. Yet, if Rajapaksa lost the



presidential polls so very completely, it owed also to Muslim perceptions that post-war, his Government was now looking the other way, when Sinhala-Buddhist extremists group, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) began targeting them.

It was clear as day light that with a substantial share of Muslim votes intact as in 2010, Rajapaksa could still win a third term, which he had facilitated through a post-war constitutional amendment. The latter removed the two-term upper-limit, which was the only restraint under the 1978 Second Republican Constitution, on the all-powerful Executive President. Despite allegations of political high-handedness and high-level corruption, Rajapaksa was expected to retain an electoral upper-hand among the majority, southern Sinhala voters. The presidential poll figures of 2015 proved as much.

Combination of factors

It owed to a combination of factors, and not just the residue of war-victory popularity. Through the four years of the conclusive ‘Eelam War IV’, Rajapaksa had given the kind of political leadership to the armed forces’ effort, without yielding to the LTTE’s terror-tactics, the attendant propaganda war, in which again the LTTE excelled. Sri Lanka under Rajapaksa also made the Sinhala voters in particular feel that the West was shown the red-line for them not to cross in terms of international pressure, war-crimes charges and human rights violation claims.

The results proved even more. It was not enough for a President-elect to win a majority from among the majority community. He or she should even more have more than a fair share of the minority votes, comprising mainly the Sri Lankan Tamils, Upcountry Tamils and Muslims (not necessarily in that order, in terms of demography). The Rajapaksa camp seemed to have been more aware about this than even its opponents.

The SLT community was opposed to the Rajapaksa leadership, either out of ‘his’ war victory against the LTTE, or allegations of ‘war-crimes’ by the armed forces, which too they put at the doors of the Executive President officially, and Rajapaksa personally and politically – or, both. The Muslims were with Rajapaksa in 2010 in particular, but the succeeding attacks on the community by the new-found Sinhala-Buddhist ‘nationalist’ outfit, namely, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) did Rajapaksa, in. Clearly, the community was not convinced that the Government was not being strict enough in putting

down BBS violence against Muslims, their mosques and business establishments. Rajapaksa lost the Upcountry Tamils, owing mostly to the disenchantment with the group(s) in his camp.

Hence, when the results from the ‘Tamil-speaking’ areas of these three ‘ethnicities’ became known in the wee hours of the counting-day (9 January), Rajapaksa conceded the election. His camp did not (have to) wait for the completion of vote-counting from the Sinhala South. The Maithri-Ranil camp too did not have to wait for commencing their victory celebrations. By evening, 9 January, Sirisena had



been sworn in President at a public rally, and he in turn swore in Ranil as Prime Minister.

‘National Unity’ Government

The latter’s parliamentary majority would come to haunt the newly-formed ‘National Unity Government’ of the ‘Big Two’ in Sinhala polity, along with their alliance-partners, cutting across ethnicities, communities and ideologies. This, and not the pre-presidential poll promise of advanced

parliamentary elections, would decide on the date. It was more so in the case of the dissolution of Parliament, after the new ‘unity government’ began facing one problem after another in a House.

These were problems of government’s making, including graft charges against Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake and improper deals involving Central Bank Governor, Arjuna Mahendran, a Singapore citizen. The Rajapaksa loyalists from within President Sirisena-led SLFP and nearly-disowned UPFA allies, held sway in deciding the parliamentary majority.

The parliamentary poll results were not entirely unpredictable. The parties forming the ‘National Unity Government’ fighting on a single front, with a minor departure, made it again – twice in eight months. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the majority party of the war-torn Sri Lankan Tamil community in the North and the East contested alone. So did the centre-left Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a muted and mutated form of the one-time militant southern Sinhala outfit.

Within the ruling combine, PM Ranil’s UNP holds an upper-hand, both in names of numbers in Parliament, ministry and the relative importance of portfolios. President Sirisena’s SLFP is seen as a junior partner. It is treated, and behaves as one. This is at the crux of the internal differences within the SLFP, from which the UPFA allies have been kept out. The Government now has a pyrrhic majority in Parliament, but clearer than one in the post-presidential poll days.

The concern for the government and its unity would still continue to revolve around the votes that the SLFP garnered in the parliamentary polls in particular. There is silent/open acknowledgement that they are all ‘Rajapaksa votes’, owing to the ‘war victory’ five years ago and also to what he was supposed to be standing for – in terms of ethnic issue, war-crimes and development. His loyalists in Parliament, numbering around 50 in the 225-member House could feel the pressure first, and begin returning the pressure, later, to the government, as and when the customary post-poll voter-honeymoon with their new rulers begin losing its sheen.

Priorities cut out, but...

To the credit of the new poll alliance and later-day dispensation, they did stand by some of their commitments, post-poll. They may not have met the 100-day calendar that they had announced, pre-poll, but some of it did happen, and without much delay. It was thus that Parliament passed a 19th Amendment to the Constitution, annulling much of the additional powers and unlimited times an incumbent to contest the Executive Presidency – beyond the existing ban after two terms. The Amendment also introduced the 17-A institutions for high-level appointments, which did not work from the word, ‘Go’ since the pre-Rajapaksa era, too, but were also annulled by his 18-A.

On a more ‘personal side’ and in standing up to the poll-promise of restoring the independence and honour of institutions, the new Government restored Chief Justice, Shirani Bandaranayake, even if only

for the record – to be followed by the first Tamil CJ in K Sripavan. Like CJ Bandaranaike, the new Government also restored disgraced war-time army commander, Gen Sarath Fonseka, to full honours and elevated him the nation’s first-ever Field Marshal – even though he and his wife had lost the parliamentary polls. The continuing pro-Tamil gestures since have included the President’s personal efforts to have Tamil ‘farmlands’ in their usage/occupation, released, even it only a small portion, to begin with. The Government also initiated moves to have Tamil prisoners with no proven cases or charges pending against them, to be freed, and/or their pending cases re-examined for the purpose.

By the very poll manifesto of the new combine, they had cut out their priorities for the next five years in office. One of the early promises of presidential candidate Sirisena was to order early parliamentary elections – but that did not happen by the promised 100-day deadline after his and PM Ranil assuming office, on 9 January. So did not many, if not most of Sirisena’s poll promises. Despite detractors’ criticisms, which came mostly from the Rajapaksa camp through the year, the very change of regime seemed to have breathed in a whiff of fresh air and with that some changes in the corridors of power, which had heated up through the predecessor’s 10-year regime.

It was advantage thus for the twosome, and the average voter – whether he had voted for them or not – was ready to take it all in his stride. That however cannot be said of politicised sections like

trade unions and students, who launched one agitation after another. Some of them turned violent, and in some others, the police turned violent, denting



the new government’s reputation and the voter’s expectations from them. There were also graft charges against the new rulers, but it all got watered down during the initial honeymoon period with the voter. The period turned long, as one election followed another. In the New Year, 2016, nationwide local government polls are due, and that could well be the early touchstone for the continuing popularity of the new dispensation.

There is no denying the easing of tensions between the Government and the war-affected Tamil community, after the latter had voted for Sirisena in the presidential polls, and supported the ‘National Government’ without joining it – both before and after the parliamentary elections. With the two Sinhala majors having formed the ‘National Unity Government’, the TNA as the third largest party in the post-poll Parliament got for its leader, R Sampanthan, the ‘Leader of the Opposition’ post. In a refreshing turn, the TNA offered the position of the ‘Chief Opposition Whip’ to the ‘Sinhala-Buddhist’ left-nationalist, JVP, the right-of-centre JHU having joined the new Government.

The New Year and the years ahead would show how the national government functioned, and how popular and acceptable it had become with the grassroots-level party cadres. It is not unlikely that in the interim they could sail together, but any grand alliance of the kind could gather ideological dissenters and adversarial personalities under a new flag. Alternatively, one or both of the 'Big Two' by sheer association with each other under the national government format could lose overall credibility, with the cadres and voters alike. In either case, a faceless alternative could emerge. It could be under a Rajapaksa, directly or indirectly. It could pass by the Rajapaksas and their times, and appear a little later. Its success or failure would depend on a variety of factors, including 'staying capacity' over the medium and long terms. The New Year and the years following will hold a candle.

In the immediate, the problems were instead within the 'minority' Tamils and their polity. The TNA, elected to rule the Tamil near-exclusive Northern Province (NP) was threatening to implode from within as other moderate Tamil political predecessors had done. It was the sagacity of the party leadership and the compulsions from the larger Tamil community voters that kept things under relative control. In a way, it had an ideological twist, ahead of the parliamentary polls after Chief Minister, C V Wigneswaran, asked Tamil voters to 'choose the best' without himself campaigning for the TNA, *per se*. In the end, parties and individuals identified with the former Supreme Court Judge, failed muster strength, and the party identity prevailed with the Northern voters. The other issue

within owed to personality issues, which has been a dominant factor in the Tamil politics of the nation.

International probe

The leadership-change meant that Sri Lanka was entailed to a reprieve from the West-dominated UNHRC, where 'war crimes' and 'accountability issues' had been a hotly debated topic and subject of successive resolutions over the previous years. The March 2015 session gave the new government time till September, to report back on its intentions and proposed course on accountability probe and reconciliation measures. When Sri Lanka was seen as continuing to be dilly-dallying as during the previous regime, the US sponsor of the previous resolutions mustered diplomatic muscle for yet another resolution. It all ended with Sri Lanka ending up co-sponsoring a resolution, the crux of which meant that the nation was agreeable to an 'international probe' into 'accountability issues' – both against the armed forces and the LTTE.

Between the two, Sirisena and Ranil seemed to be playing 'good cop, bad cop' with the international community on international probe. The former is rooted in the land as predecessor-boss Rajapaksa. The latter was/is known to be tilting towards the West, particularly the US, from his UNP's post-Independence posturing and positions in the Cold War era. It was also diplomatically convenient for the two leaders and their parties to be doing so, lest they should be provoking strong street reactions inside the country, one way or the other – and possible hurt sentiments in the armed forces, too. If it's not Sinhala reaction, it could well be those of the

Tamils, who are still recovering from their hurt, losses and destructions from the long decades of war. Needless to point out, the international community's sympathise and support are hence with the Tamils – and it could remain so for some more time, at the very least.

The new government leaders are doing a great balancing act. They need to keep the Rajapaksa's busy with court cases, necessitated in terms of poll promises on the one hand and ensuring that the former President does not use the 'war crimes' issue to keep the Sinhala political pot boiling in his favour. His successors, like him, are now possibly out to tell the West that if they conceded to their own UNHRC commitments, Rajapaksa, whom they purportedly loved to hate still, could be back at the centre-stage.

Nearer home, they are well aware of his continuing popularity among the Sinhala-Buddhist voters at large (going beyond what they want the world to believe as an 'extremist' periphery). The corruption cases against the 'First Family' of the predecessor regime, their being hauled up for investigations, possibly court cases in the New Year, they seemed to hope, would do the trick for them. It can cut both ways, but how, how far and when remains to be seen.

Balancing overseas ties

A noticeable departure from the Sri Lanka of the Rajapaksa's second term was the restoration of ties with immediate neighbour India and the West, without exactly losing out on the China front. If the

Rajapaksa era was marked also by Chinese President Xi Jinping visiting Sri Lanka in 2014, for the first time in 28 years, an Indian Prime Minister in Narendra Modi, visited the southern neighbour on a bilateral visit. It was not Sri Lanka's fault, particularly when previous PM, Manmohan Singh, had kept the world guessing and cancelled his proposed Sri Lanka visit for the Commonwealth Summit, owing to political pressure from the DMK partner in southern Tamil Nadu.

The world took greater notice when Modi converted his Sri Lanka visit into a four-nation Indian Ocean neighbourhood visit (though later, he dropped Maldives from the list). Modi also visited northern Jaffna and other places in the country, and also addressed the Sri Lankan Parliament. Earlier, in February, as has become customary, President Sirisena too made India, his first overseas destination after assuming office. Months later in



September, PM Ranil would do so, too. To Ranil's credit, it should be said, he did not stir out of the country in his official capacity until after he had won a popular mandate in the 17 August parliamentary polls.

Going against the unsought pre-poll promise of cancelling the China-funded Colombo Port City project of the Rajapaksa era, the new government first modified it into a review. As the year drew to a close, there were clear indications that the project would stay after all. Alongside, the new government also cleared new China-funded infrastructure projects of their own, following up in a way on the original proposals from/to the Rajapaksa dispensation. The world's pre-poll expectations for the new leadership to 'balance off' China from the country did not happen – nor was it seen as happening ever.

Instead, the Sirisena-Ranil duo balanced the China-centric security concerns, particularly for India, with equally well-publicised bilateral military cooperation and initiatives – and with western nations, too. On the UNHRC/HR front, the US and the rest of the West continued to try the carrot with the new dispensation, too, reserving the stick, possibly, for a later date. China, which had kept away from the 'Sri Lanka HR discourse', continued to do so, but in the back of their minds, Sri Lankan leaders are not unlikely to be looking around for permanent backing from a veto-power in the UN, though in the UNHRC, the veto did not count.

(The writer is a Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, Chennai)

Sri Lanka: Time-line

8 Jan: Polling for presidential polls, advanced by incumbent, Mahinda Rajapaksa

9 Jan: Common Opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena wins, sworn in President. Ranil Wickremesinghe becomes new Prime Minister, forms 'National Unity' government.

21 Jan: Disgraced war-time army commander, Sarath Fonseka's rank, civic rights restored. Made Sri Lanka's first Field Marshal later (22 March)

28 Jan: Impeached Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake restored for a day. Senior-most judge, K Sripavan succeeds as CJ

16 Feb: President Maithripala Sirisena makes India his first overseas destination. PM Ranil does so months later, after obtaining a popular mandate (14 September)

13 Mar: Narendra Modi becomes the first Indian PM on a bilateral visit for the first time since 1987 (Rajiv Gandhi), addresses Sri Lankan Parliament, prays at Buddhist shrines, visits war-torn Northern Province, and Upcountry Tamil areas

27 Mar: UNHRC gives six months for Sri Lanka to return with plans for probing war-time accountability issues, ethnic reconciliation, etc.

29 April: Parliament passes 19th Amendment to the Constitution, Executive Presidency powers trimmed, Constitution Councils under 17-A restored and 18-A all but nullified

26 June: President dissolves Parliament months after the promised deadline, after his SLFP members join one-time UPFA allies threaten no-trust vote against Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake, on the 'Central Bank scam'

involving the son-in-law of Bank Governor, Arjuna Mahendran

17 Aug: PM Ranil's UNP-led alliance wins parliamentary polls, forms 'National Unity Government' with President Sirisena's SLFP support. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa wins seat from Kurunagela district, loses hopes of becoming PM. TNA's R Sampanthan named the 'Leader of the Opposition'

25 Sept: Sri Lanka co-sponsors UNHRC resolution, providing for 'international investigations' into war-time accountability issues