PIB, THE HINDU Newspaper and Editorial Current Affairs

Posted at: 12/04/2019

Voters needn't know source of political funding: govt.

Why in news?

Voters do not need to know from where political parties get their funds, the government argued in the Supreme Court.

Government stand:

- The court cannot kill the electoral bonds scheme for the sake of transparency, Attorney General K.K. Venugopal said.
- He argued that the bond was an **experiment to eradicate black money** and the court should not intervene now.
- The government position was in contrast to the stand of the Election Commission of India.

ECI Stand:

- The ECI submitted to the court that electoral bonds had **legalised the anonymity of political donors** and the parties receiving contributions.
- It said the **right to vote meant the right to make an informed choice**. Knowing the candidate was only "half the exercise."
- The voters should also know the source of funding of parties who put up these candidates.
- It is more important to know the principal than the agent, its counsel and senior advocate Rakesh Dwivedi submitted.
- To this, Mr. Venugopal countered on Thursday: "Their contention is that voters have a right to know. Right to know what? Voters do not need to know where money of political parties comes from."

Black money in polls:

- The Attorney-General said transparency cannot be used as a mantra.
- He said elections are being fuelled by black money, which is democracy's greatest evil. "You can see the way black money is seized day after day," he addressed a Bench led by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi.
- Advocate Prashant Bhushan pointed to how earlier there was anonymity in political funding through cash donations, and now, electoral bonds, allow anonymity in political funding through banking channels.
- But the Bench asked Mr. Venugopal whether the bank would be able to identify the donor and the political party concerned from the electoral bonds. If not, the entire exercise of trying to fight black money would be futile.
- Justice Sanjeev Khanna, on the Bench, said merely knowing KYC [Know Your Customer] information would not block the entry of black money into political funding.
- KYC only covered the identity of the bond purchaser and would not be able to tell whether the money he used to buy the bond was black or white.
- Besides, Justice Khanna said black money could be converted to white by routing it through multiple shell companies.
- The arguments were heard on a batch petitions of petitions challenging the legality of the electoral bonds scheme. The court reserved the case for orders. Chief Justice Gogoi informed in court that the order would be pronounced on April 12.

India stares at pile of solar e-waste

Why in news?

By 2050, India will likely stare at a pile of a new category of electronic waste, namely solar e-waste, says a study made public. Currently, **India's e-waste rules have no laws mandating solar cell manufacturers** to recycle or dispose waste from this sector.

Solar e-waste in India:

- India's PV (photovoltaic) waste volume is estimated to grow to 200,000 tonnes by 2030 and around 1.8 million tonnes by 2050, said the study by Bridge To India (BTI), an energy consultancy firm.
- India is among the leading markets for solar cells in the world, buoyed by the government's commitment to install **100 GW of solar power by 2022**. So far, India has installed solar cells for about **28 GW** and this is largely from imported solar PV cells.
- **Solar cell modules are made by processing sand to make silicon, casting silicon ingots, using wafers to create cells and then assembling them to make modules**.
- India's domestic manufacturers are largely involved in assembling cells and modules.
- These modules **are 80% glass and aluminium, and non-hazardous**. Other materials used, including polymers, metals, metallic compounds and alloys, and are classified as potentially hazardous, says the study.
- India is poorly positioned to handle PV waste as it doesn't yet have policy guidelines on the same, a lack of a policy framework is coupled with the fact that even basic recycling facilities for laminated glass and e-waste are unavailable.
- Despite the e-waste regulation being in place for over seven years, only **less than 4% of estimated e-waste is recycled in the organised sector** as per the latest estimates from the Central Pollution Control Board.
- While the solar sector continues to grow robustly, there is no clarity on solar waste management in India.

Pakistan claimed the Kohinoor diamond

Why in news?

Pakistan has claimed the Kohinoor diamond, which is in the collection of famous jewels of the British royals. The country's Information minister

Fawad Chaudhry said the jewel should be returned to Pakistan.

Demand for British Apologies:

- Fully endorse the demand that the British Empire must apologise to the nations of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the Bengal famine.
- These tragedies are a scar on the face of Britain, also Koh-e-Noor, must be returned to Lahore museum, where it belongs," said Mr. Chaudhry in a social media post.
- Indian Officials did not say anything on the matter.

Fighting fake news

Why in news?

The Bombay High Court has said that the various platforms are expected to follow the voluntary code of ethics of the IAMAI.

Commitments so far:

- Facebook recently said in a statement that the company had spent more than 18 months assessing "risk" across its platforms to help ensure that the Lok Sabha election was free from interference, both foreign and domestic.
- Facebooksaid the company had **focussed on key areas** including blocking and removing fake accounts; fighting the spread of misinformation; stopping abuse by domestic actors; spotting attempts at foreign meddling; and taking action against inauthentic coordinated campaigns.

Regulation Issue:

- While Facebook's statement on what it has done ahead of the polls could be viewed as a suo motu initiative, the larger question of **whether and how exactly social media platforms could be**

regulated under Indian law in the context of their apparent vulnerability to be used for disseminating fake news and manipulating opinions in the crucial run-up to the election, remains a rather grey area according to legal professionals.

- And late in March, on a public interest litigation petition seeking the imposition of curbs on social media use to ensure "the purity of election process".
- The **Bombay High Court directed that social media platforms would be expected to follow the voluntary code of ethics that had been developed by the Internet and Mobile Association of India** (IAMAI) and had been accepted by the Election Commission.
- Nonetheless, existing legal provisions may be less than adequate to address the unique challenges posed by social media.
- Former Supreme Court judge Asok Kumar Ganguly said **Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act (RPA)** was incapable of regulating social media. Section 126 is inadequate to deal with evolving problem of fake news and misinformation. [Section] 126 was enacted in 1996, when the problem did not surface, he said.
- We know scientific developments take place fast, whereas legislation is always slow," the former judge said.
- **Section 126 places an embargo on the publishing and broadcasting of content that is likely to affect the election only when the content is being aired with 48 hours or less to go before voting.**

'Does not apply:

- Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sunil Arora has acknowledged the Act's limitations in terms of empowering the EC to act against social media.
- **Section 126, at the moment, does not apply to print media and social media**, that is the law, Mr. Arora had admitted, while releasing the poll schedule.
- A proposal to amend the law had been sent to the Law Ministry, he said.
- However, the volume of fake news spread via social media is massive. Facebook said it had removed more than **1.5 billion fake accounts** globally in April-September 2018, a jump from the 1.3 billion such accounts it had purged in the previous six months.

- Besides churning out massive volumes of fake content, it is now evident that individual operators on social media are trying to influence minds and voting patterns.

Legal Options:

- Legal options are limited for now, Justice Ganguli said.
- The **voluntarily developed code** by the stakeholders is the only alternative for free and fair elections, and the court can always fill the gaps in law by providing suitable directions.
- But does the "voluntarily developed code" really work? Facebook, which counts India as its biggest market with 300 million users, asserts it does.
- To check the authenticity of content on its platforms in India, the company appointed **seven fact-checkers,** whofollow "international norms of fact-checking" to ensure credibility of the process.

Expenditure check:

- But former CEC S.Y. Quraishi contends that there are provisions to curb the misuse of social media.
- Using the existing provisions, a candidate or a party's expenditure can be monitored by the EC.
- The political advertisements also need to be cleared by the Commission," said the former poll panel chief. "It is a continuing cat and mouse game," he added.
- However, he acknowledged the logistic challenge. Even hundreds of media monitoring committees, "decentralised and spread across the country may not be enough" to monitor the material churned out every second on social media. "It is an evolving process," Mr. Quraishi said.

Freedom of expression:

- Alok Prasanna, senior fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, Bangalore, flags another issue — freedom of expression.
- How much you control and whether that infringes one's right to talk or campaign on social media, is not for the EC to decide. Thus, the debate has to take place on another level relating to intermediary liability, he said.
- Jurisdiction was also a concern. All of these social media companies

are based outside India, regulating them is an issue. Perhaps it is better to talk to them [and] work with them within the law of the land to ensure fair elections," Mr. Prasanna opined.

- Referring to the Bombay High Court order and the three-hour response time that social media firms had been allowed to remove flagged items, Mr. Prasanna pointed to a provision in Germany.
- In **Germany,** if any content is posted on any platform by any individual [that] violates law and if the particular social media platform does not remove it, then the platform would be liable for such violation.

U.S. charges Julian Assange with hacking conspiracy

Why in news?

U.S. prosecutors announced charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, accusing him of conspiring with former **Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning** to gain access to a government computer as part of one of the largest compromises of classified information in U.S. history.

Extradition to US:

- Mr. Assange, arrested by British police in London and carried out of **Ecuador's Embassy**, faces up to five years in prison on the American charge, the U.S. Justice Department said in a statement.
- His arrest paved the way for his possible extradition to the U.S.
- Mr. Assange's indictment arose from a long-running criminal investigation dating back to former President Barack Obama's administration.

What is the issue?

- It was triggered in part by the 2010 publication by WikiLeaks of hundreds of thousands of U.S. military reports about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and American diplomatic communications.

- The Justice Department said Mr. Assangewas arrested under an extradition treaty between the U.S. and Britain and was charged with **conspiracy to commit computer intrusion.**
- The indictment said Mr. Assange in March 2010 engaged in a conspiracy to assist Ms. Manning in cracking a password stored on Defense Department computers connected to the Secret Internet Protocol Network, a U.S. government network used for classified documents and communications.
- The Justice Department said Ms. Manning had access to the computers as an intelligence analyst and was using them to download classified records to transmit to WikiLeaks.
- Cracking the password would have enabled Ms. Manning to log on under a username other than her own, making it harder for investigators to determine the source of the illegal disclosures.
- Mr. Assange was secretly indicted in March 2018 and the indictment was unsealed on Thursday, a U.S. law enforcement official said.
- Ms. Manning, formerly named Bradley Manning, was jailed on March 8 after being held in contempt by a judge in Virginia for refusing to testify before a jury in what is believed to be related to the Assange investigation.

Sudan President Omar al-Bashir ousted, placed under arrest

Why in news?

President Omar al-Bashir, who ruled Sudan with an iron fist for 30 years, was overthrown in a coup by the armed forces which announced a two-year period of military rule to be followed by elections.

Aftermath:

- In an address on state television, Defence Minister Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf said Mr. Bashir, 75, was under arrest in a "safe place" and a **military council was now running the country.**
- Seated on a gold-upholstered armchair, Mr. Auf announced a **three-**

month state of emergency, a nationwide ceasefire and the suspension of the constitution.

- He also said Sudan's air space would be closed for 24 hours and border crossings shut until further notice.
- Sudanese sources told Reuters that Mr. Bashir was at the presidential residence under "heavy guard". Mr. Bashir was being held with "a number of leaders of the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood group".
- Mr. Bashir has been **indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague** and is facing an arrest warrant over allegations of **genocide in Sudan's Darfur region** during an insurgency that began in 2003 and led to death of an estimated 300,000 people.
- The downfall of Bashir follows the toppling this month of Algerian strongman Abdelaziz Bouteflika, also following mass protests after three decades in power.

Military rule again?

- Names of Mr. Bashir's possible successors that have been circulating include the Defence Minister, an ex-military intelligence chief, also an Islamist, and former army chief of staff Emad al-Din Adawi.
- Mr. Adawi is said to be favoured by regional neighbours at odds with Mr. Bashir over his Islamist leanings.
- Thousands of people flocked to an anti-government protest outside the defence ministry, while huge crowds took to the streets in **central Khartoum**, dancing and shouting anti-Bashir slogans.
- Demonstrators called for a civilian government and said they would not accept an administration led by military and security figures, or by Mr. Bashir's aides.
- Omar Saleh Sennar, a senior member of the Sudanese Professionals' Association, one of the main protest groups, said it expected to negotiate with the military over a transfer of power.
- Some demonstrators, who have rallied against Bashir since Dec. 19, said they feared the delay would allow him to go into exile.
- Troops deployed around the defence ministry and on major roads and bridges in the capital.
- Soldiers stormed the headquarters of Bashir's Islamic Movement, the main component of the ruling National Congress Party.
- The security service earlier announced the release of all political prisoners.

Fate unclear:

- Mr. Bashir, a former paratrooper who seized power in a **bloodless coup in 1989**, has been a divisive figure who has managed his way through one internal crisis after another while withstanding attempts by the West to weaken him.
- Sudan has suffered prolonged periods of **isolation since 1993**, when the United States added Mr. Bashir's government to its list of terrorism sponsors for harbouring Islamist militants. Washington followed up with sanctions four years later.
- The latest crisis has escalated since the weekend, when thousands of demonstrators began camping out outside the defence ministry compound, where Mr. Bashir's residence is located.
- Clashes erupted on Tuesday between soldiers trying to protect the protesters and intelligence and security personnel trying to disperse them.
- Since December, Sudan has been rocked by persistent protests sparked by the government's attempt to raise the price of bread, and an economic crisis that has led to fuel and cash shortages

---

A genetic method to empower conservation

Why in news?

Scientists have been using genetics to study wild animals for several years now. However, a new genetic method developed by a team, including scientists from Bengaluru's National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), hopes to make studying as well as conserving wild species quicker, easier and cost-effective by deriving information from animal sources containing extremely low-quality DNA, including faeces and cooked meat.

New Method:

- Their method, described in the study published in the international journal Methods in Ecology and Evolution, relies on identifying

multiple, short portions of DNA segments in a single experiment (**a 'multiplex PCR'**), followed by '**next-generation sequencing**', in which multiple fragments of DNA can be decoded simultaneously, and several times, in an automated process.

- The team tested their method on **Caribbean queen conches and tigers**, two "extremely different species that had strong conservation needs," to show how this approach could be used generally

- The team obtained DNA from the faeces, hair and saliva of 75 wild and captive tigers to identify individuals and close relatives, and RNA from 279 queen conch samples.

- They then decoded between 60 to 100 single nucleotide polymorphisms or SNPs, one of the most common types of change seen in genetic material, in these samples.

- The team was also able to identify the geographic regions these individuals belonged to.

- Apart from using this for animal monitoring, it could also potentially be used to obtain intelligence on wildlife trade.

- Testing several hundred samples simultaneously and decoding up to 1000 SNPs per sample would cost as low as $5 (less than ₹350).

- The biggest advantage is that this would take just five days while older methods take at least a month.