

DAY AND DATE: TUESDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2024

PAKISTAN IN TURMOIL

INSTABILITY WILL FOLLOW ANY ATTEMPT TO SUBVERT THE MANDATE FOR IMRAN KHAN.

Pakistan's February 8 elections were marred by an uneven playing field, with former Prime Minister Imran Khan, a popular figure, incarcerated since May 2023. His party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), faced obstacles, including being barred from using its symbol, leading to the fielding of independent candidates. Many PTI leaders were jailed or on the run, and the election saw a systematic effort to dismantle Khan's political influence. Despite these challenges, the PTI-linked candidates secured 93 seats, and independents won 101 of the 265 total seats. As no bloc had an absolute majority, PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif, with army backing, called for a unity government, excluding the PTI. An in-principle agreement between PML-N and PPP for political stability hints at a coalition government sidelining the PTI. The PTI alleges electoral irregularities, calling for protests, revealing public discontent and distrust. The military's attempt to reshape the political landscape through elections has highlighted Khan's enduring popularity and the potential for renewed instability in Pakistan.





DAY AND DATE: WEDNESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 2024

HOMEWARD BOUND

QUIET DIPLOMACY WITHOUT BRINKMANSHIP HELPED INDIA'S CASE IN QATAR.

In a significant turn of events, all eight former Indian naval personnel, previously facing a shocking death sentence in Qatar, have been released after about three months. The individuals, including seven retired naval officers and a sailor working for Dahra Technologies, were arrested in 2022. Despite sparse details about the case, the charges were serious enough to warrant the death penalty, which was later commuted to imprisonment by an appeals court in December, while the conviction was upheld. The Indian government's success in securing their release can be attributed to strategic diplomatic approaches, including pursuing the case in Qatari courts, avoiding escalatory rhetoric, and involving high-level talks, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussing the matter with Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in December. This case underscores the efficacy of quiet diplomacy, especially in crucial relationships, such as India's with Qatar, where economic, political, and geopolitical interests are intertwined. Qatar is vital to India as a West Asian power and an intermediary during conflicts, while India is crucial for Qatar's gas exports and relies on the country for remittance from over 800,000 Indian workers. The decision to refrain from seeking international intervention and employing harsh diplomatic measures contributed to a satisfactory outcome for all parties involved.

DAY AND DATE: THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2024

FARMING CONSENSUS

THE CENTRE MUST ADDRESS GRIEVANCES OF FARMERS THROUGH TALKS.

Farmers from Punjab are protesting at the Haryana border, demanding legally guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP), debt waiver, cancellation of international agreements affecting agriculture, and a minimum pension of ₹5,000. This protest, led by the non-political SKM, follows the 2021-22 protest, which ended after the government repealed three controversial agricultural laws. Fissures among interest groups in Haryana, Punjab, and western U.P. and Rajasthan are evident. Other protests include those in western U.P. against the Jewar airport project, Sonipat farmers opposing land acquisition for power cables, and a national rural and industrial strike on February 16 called by SKM and trade unions with demands, including the repeal of four labour codes.

While the government engages in talks with Punjab farmers, a legal guarantee of MSP seems unlikely. The police have halted the protesters 200 km from Delhi, and the MSP-based procurement by the FCI is debated for its uneven impact, benefiting surplus producers but bypassing subsistence farmers. The situation calls for a revamped public support system for farming to ensure national food security. Acknowledging political undertones and the need for a new support model, the government should lead efforts to establish a national consensus on agriculture's future.



DAY AND DATE: FRIDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2024

UNBONDED

THE ELECTORAL BONDS VERDICT IS A BLOW FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION.

The Supreme Court of India has invalidated the Electoral Bond Scheme (EBS), emphasizing the threat posed by anonymous high-value donations to electoral democracy and governance. The scheme allowed individuals to purchase electoral bonds and donate them to political parties, raising concerns about a quid pro quo culture between donors and beneficiaries. The Court declared the entire scheme unconstitutional, specifically citing its infringement on voters' right to information. The judgment also criticized the amendment to the Companies Act, which removed the cap on political donations without disclosure requirements. Since 2019, the Court mandated the disclosure of donation details. This decision aligns with the Court's history of safeguarding voter rights, including interventions such as introducing the 'None of the Above' option and disclosing candidates' assets and criminal histories. The Court found the EBS failed the proportionality test, asserting that curbing 'black money' was not the least restrictive means to protect voters' right to know. The ruling extends the principle of transparency to corporate donors, addressing concerns about potential influence on policy decisions. Despite the positive outcome, questions arise about the delay in deciding the scheme's validity and the potential impact of substantial donations on policy measures and campaign resources.



DAY AND DATE: SATURDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 2024

BRAVE NEW WORLD

INDIA MUST INVEST IN FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH TO DEVELOP RELIABLE DRUGS.

Negotiations for a free trade agreement between India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) are reaching a crucial stage, with intellectual property rights emerging as a major point of contention. Since 2008, concerns about the protection of pharmaceutical and biotechnology patents have persisted, particularly due to Switzerland and Norway, key EFTA members hosting major industry players. The pharmaceutical sector faces an ongoing struggle between innovators and generic-drug manufacturers, with patenting and compulsory licensing acting as historical mechanisms to balance interests. However, new challenges, such as data exclusivity, are arising in trade talks. Under this provision, clinical trial data becomes proprietary for a minimum of six years, potentially impacting India's drug industry, a significant exporter of affordable drugs. Despite Indian officials rejecting data exclusivity in FTA negotiations, leaked drafts suggest its inclusion. The evolving landscape necessitates India's investment in an ecosystem capable of ethical drug trials and original molecule development to secure its position in the global pharmaceutical industry.

