

Analysis

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Women take centre stage in India protests

As a crowd of protesters swelled around them under the watchful eyes of dozens of policemen in riot gear, a cluster of young female students in burqas stood outside their university in New Delhi shouting anti-government slogans. "What is happening in the country is wrong," Shabana, a 21-year-old student at Jamia Millia Islamia University, said through the veil covering her face. Jamia Millia is a major public university in the capital where a large number of Muslims study. "They can't suppress our voices."

As protests in India against a new citizenship law that critics say targets Muslims grow by the day, they have drawn many women and girls - some housewives, some students with hijabs covering their hair, and others in full-length burqa robes - in a rare sign of public anger against the government. The women can be seen painting graffiti on university walls, organising rallies and gathering funds for posters and food for protesters.

Shabana, who would only provide her first name, said she had been moved to act after some of her friends had been injured when police stormed the Jamia campus to break up a protest involving hundreds of students last weekend. At least 200 students were injured as police fired tear gas and used batons to disperse the crowd. The police have denied using excess force. "I had to lie to my parents, but I'm still here, because this is important. We need to speak out," Shabana said at the rally yesterday. "I was horrified when I saw their injuries."

The protests, some of the most widespread in India in recent years, erupted on Dec 11 after Parliament passed the controversial law, which protesters say is an attack on India's secular foundations. The Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi insists the new law is essential as it eases the path for minorities from neighboring countries to gain Indian citizenship. But critics say it is biased as it excludes Muslim immigrants.

'We are not scared'

Many protesters Reuters spoke to over the past week are Muslim women and girls from conservative backgrounds. Some said they had to sneak out of their homes to join the protests. "My mother stops us from stepping out, but if we do not show strength now, then how will we encourage others to step out?" said Nazia, a 13-year-old schoolgirl protesting outside the university. In the past, women have played a prominent role in many Indian protests, including those that broke out following the brutal rape of a young woman on a Delhi bus in 2012.

But the current displays of public anger include people not usually seen out protesting. Social norms have often restricted participation by Muslim women in the public arena in India. Most girls and women interviewed declined to give their full names as they did not want their families to know they were involved in the protests. Shumaila, a 24-year-old PhD scholar at the Jamia university, said that many women from around the surrounding neighborhood had also come out in solidarity with the students. One of them was Nadia Khan, a 35-year-old housewife who said: "The government has forced us to come out on the streets." "We are not scared of the government or the prime minister. We are ready to take a bullet in our chest," she said. "We know how to fight for our rights."

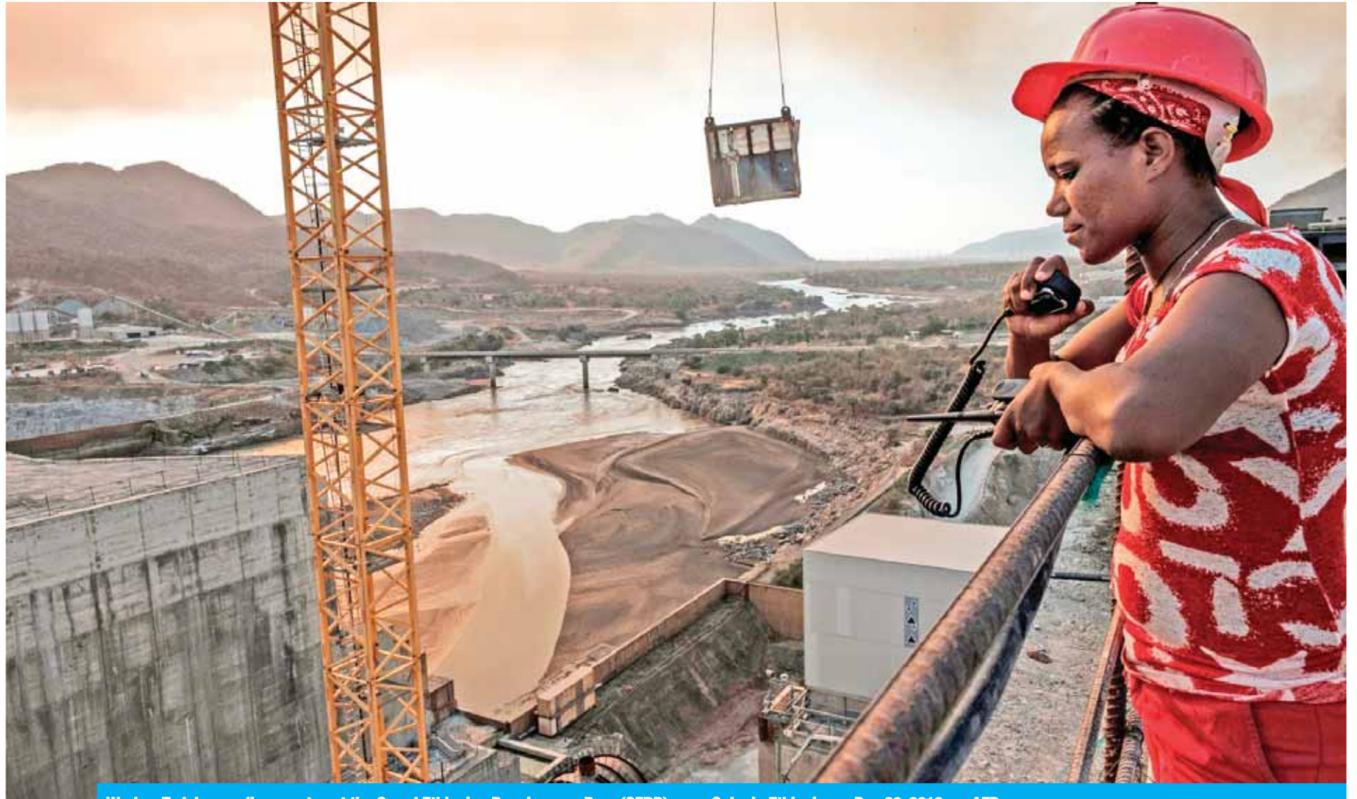
Among the most striking images of the protests that began in India's northeast before mushrooming across the country, was one of three young women pointing fingers in the air and shouting slogans from the top of a wall outside the Jamia campus last week, with a throng of protesters around them. One of those women, Chanda Yadav, comes from the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where she says she was raised in a conservative environment in which women's voices were suppressed.

"There were restrictions on everything from the kind of clothes I wore to what time I would come home from school," said Yadav. "I would always argue with my family over it. My uncles would often say, 'Shut up, you've got a big tongue!'" Yadav, 20, is now a Hindi language masters student at the Jamia university, and her voice, as she stood alongside two hijab-clad school-mates, was among the loudest at the protest. Yadav said she was a Hindu, but felt strongly that all Indians needed to come forward to oppose the law. "This is not the issue of just one community," said Yadav. "What they are doing to Muslims today could happen to anyone tomorrow." — Reuters



Participants hold placards as they take part in a 'Burqa and Bindhi' protest against India's new citizenship law in Bangalore on Jan 5, 2020. — AFP

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Worky Tadele, a radio operator, at the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), near Guba in Ethiopia, on Dec 26, 2019. — AFP

Power-starved Ethiopia rallies around Nile dam

Cell phone batteries constantly dying, health centres bereft of modern equipment, a dependence on flashlights after sundown - Kafule Yizgaw experienced all these struggles and more growing up without electricity in rural Ethiopia. So five years ago, he leapt at the chance to work on a project designed to light up his country and the wider Horn of Africa region: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a 145-metre-high, 1.8-kilometre-long concrete colossus that is set to become the largest hydropower plant in Africa.

"Our country has a huge problem with electricity," Kafule, 22, told AFP recently while taking a break from reinforcing steel pipes that will funnel water from the Blue Nile River to one of the dam's 13 turbines. "This is about the existence of our nation and, in my opinion, it will help us break free from the bondage of poverty." The dam is expected to begin producing energy by the end of this year.

Across Ethiopia, poor farmers and rich businessmen eagerly await the more than 6,000 megawatts of electricity officials say it will ultimately provide. Yet as thousands of workers toil day and night to finish the project, Ethiopian negotiators remain locked in talks over how the dam will affect downstream neighbours, principally Egypt. The next round of negotiations starts Thursday in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, and is likely to renew focus on Cairo's fears that the dam could bring water and food insecurity for millions of Egyptians. Ethiopians at the dam site say they are doing their best to focus on the task at hand, though they bristle at suggestions that their country is overstepping in its bid to harness the Blue Nile for its development. "When we do projects here it's not to harm the downstream countries," said deputy project manager Ephrem Woldekidan. "There is no reason that the downstream countries should complain (about) it because this is our resource also."

Rising Nile tensions

The Nile River's two main tributaries - the Blue and White Niles - converge in the Sudanese capital Khartoum before flowing north through Egypt toward the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt depends on the Nile for about 90 percent of its irrigation and drinking water, and says it has "historic rights" to the river guaranteed by treaties from 1929 and 1959. Tensions have been high in the Nile basin ever since Ethiopia broke ground on the dam in 2011.

The International Crisis Group warned last March that the countries "could be drawn into conflict" given that Egypt sees potential water loss as "an existential threat". In October, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, fresh from winning the Nobel Peace Prize, assured lawmakers that "no force can stop Ethiopia from building the dam" and said "millions" of troops could be mobilised to defend it if necessary. The United States stepped in to jumpstart a tripartite dialogue with Sudan that is supposed to resolve the dispute by Jan 15. The biggest initial hurdle is the filling of the dam's reservoir, which can hold 74 billion cubic metres of water. Egypt is worried Ethiopia will fill the reservoir too quickly, reducing water flow downstream. After the latest round of talks in Sudan last month, Sudanese irrigation minister Yasser Abbas said there had been "progress" on the issue but no breakthrough.

Kevin Wheeler, an engineer at the University of Oxford who has studied the dam, said he was hopeful a deal on the filling period could be reached by January 15, but that additional issues would emerge down the line. "Coordinated operations between the reservoirs along the Nile are likely to be an ongoing discussion that may continue for years, decades, and centuries to come, particularly as populations grow, development continues, and global

climate patterns continue to change," Wheeler said.

Ethiopia's push for power

Thousands of farmers have allegedly been displaced since work on the dam began. The US-based NGO International Rivers has accused Ethiopia of disregarding the dam's environmental impacts, which remain understudied. The group has voiced concern about "great degradation" that, along with changing weather patterns due to climate change, could "result in irregular episodes of flooding, drought and mudslides".

Ethiopia has responded to such statements by noting that a study group including experts from Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan has been tasked with assessing social and environmental impacts. Meanwhile, officials in Addis Ababa are focusing on the country's push for power. Ethiopia is striving for universal electricity access by 2025, though currently more than half the population of 110 million lives without it.

Even in Addis, power is patchy, and the city suffered weeks of blackouts during the most recent period of electricity rationing in May and June 2019. Dawit Moges, head of a medical laboratory, said the cuts drove up his generator costs and, because they were not predictable, led to delayed results and unreliable blood sample readings. "You've collected specimens, you're processing the specimens and boom, there is no power. All those specimens, you may not be sure about the results," he said, adding that he hoped the dam would yield a steady power supply. "I want it to be completed as soon as possible and go into production." The same is true for Harsh Kothari, head of Mohan Group, which runs five manufacturing units producing everything from shoes to electric cables and barbed wire. — AFP

In Iraq, Trump threat brings bitter flashbacks

US President Donald Trump's threat to sanction Iraqis "like they've never seen before" if Baghdad kicks out American troops has brought back haunting memories of a decade under international embargo. "If the US imposes sanctions on Iraq, the dinar will plummet and we'll be sent back to the past, to the days of the economic embargo," said Hisham Abbas, an Iraqi shopping in a commercial district of the capital.

On Sunday, Iraq's parliament voted to urge the government to oust foreign troops from its soil, among them some 5,200 US troops helping local forces beat back militants. Trump quickly slammed the decision. "If they do ask us to leave - if we don't do it in a very friendly basis - we will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before," he said. "I'll make Iranian sanctions look some-

what tame." Under ex-dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq was put under crippling global sanctions and an oil embargo seen as the toughest in history, cutting off trade and financial interactions with the outside world. Its GDP was slashed in half, the Iraqi dinar collapsed and dozens of factories shuttered, leaving families relying on ration cards and slim salaries. The measures were lifted in the years following the US-led invasion in 2003 and Iraq's economy has slowly tried to reintegrate with the rest of the world. It is now OPEC's second-biggest crude producer and living standards have risen - most Iraqis own imported clothes, phones, cars and computers.

Sanctions 'nuclear option'

But after Trump's comments, bitter memories of shortages and collapsed currencies came rushing back. "Everything the Iraqi people suffered in the 1990s will come back. The economic embargo will come back," worried Saleh, a middle-aged Iraqi with a thick mustache. "It'll be like the era of Saddam Hussein, and worse. There won't be any cash left," said Samer, another shopper. The US has been particularly angered in recent months by repeated rocket attacks targeting the US embassy and American troops. In response to those attacks, a senior US official at

the Baghdad embassy told AFP months ago that Washington was considering a range of ways to ramp up pressure on Iraq. "One possibility is sanctions, and limiting the cash that comes into Iraq. That would be the nuclear option," the official said. The US has already blacklisted Iraqi nationals, armed groups and even banks for their ties to Tehran and has hinted more sanctions are coming.

But they have so far left alone Iraq's oil revenues, which make up more than 90 percent of the state's budget. US and Iraqi officials previously told AFP that an oil embargo, like the one imposed now on Iran, would be too hurtful to a country considered an ally by Washington. The US has so far sought to shield Iraq from the impact of its energy sanctions on Tehran by granting Baghdad a waiver to keep importing Iranian electricity.

But Sunday's vote could change all that. "One of the steps the international community could take would be halting financial interactions with Iraq," speaker Mohammad Halbusi told MPs during the session. "We would no longer be able to keep up our commitments to Iraqi citizens," he warned. In his comments on Sunday, Trump went further than just sanctions, threatening to make Iraq reimburse Washington for a "very extraordinarily expensive" base hosting US troops. — AFP

Trump gambles big as commander in chief

As a real estate magnate and politician, Donald Trump has always loved breaking rules and putting on a show. Now in Iran he's following the same pattern - only this time as commander in chief of the world's biggest military. Whether negotiating skyscraper deals or conducting a trade war with China, Trump can resemble a flamboyant and highly unpredictable poker player. As he said in his autobiographical book "The Art of the Deal," the role thrills him. "Money was never a big motivation for me, except as a way to keep score. The real excitement is playing the game," he wrote.

The difference now is that he's playing with drones, warplanes, cruise missiles and other lethal cards in a game that risks plunging the United States into yet another Middle Eastern war. With last Friday's stunning drone strike against key Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, outside the airport in the Iraqi capital Baghdad, Trump yet again upended the status quo - and alarmed his critics. The attack was "wildly counterproductive," said John Mueller, a foreign policy expert at Ohio State University.

Soleimani has been a top US enemy during two decades of conflict in the region. But Trump's predecessors, Barack Obama and George W Bush, are said to have held off from killing the wily commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps for fear of the consequences. As pointman for Tehran's wide-ranging regional network of official and covert military alliances, Soleimani was far more than just a general - he was one of the most impor-

tant figures in Iran. His killing, Mueller said, "will unify people on the side of the mullahs" just when their theocratic, deeply anti-US regime is increasingly unpopular.

Trump, as usual, pronounced himself free of such concerns. "He should have been taken out many years ago!" the president tweeted soon after the killing. "General Qasem Soleimani has killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time, and was plotting to kill many more... but got caught!"

Reckless or refreshing?

Trump justified his trade war with China in much the same way. For decades, other presidents were too weak to dare to take on Beijing's unfair trade practices, he claimed. With nuclear-armed North Korea, another long-running US foreign policy headache, Trump again threw out precedent. After first threatening "fire and fury" against the isolated dictator, he went on to declare leader Kim Jong Un a good friend, betting that his own charisma and personal touch would succeed where harsher policies had failed.

The results in both cases are mixed. A thaw has been declared in the trade war, but China remains far from reforming its economy, while the outwardly more friendly North Korea has steadily consolidated its nuclear power status. Now the Iran drama sees that Trump doctrine being applied for the first time to a crisis with the real risk of imminent war.

And Trump's detractors are nervous

that he has blundered, or will blunder, into disaster. "The moment we all feared is likely upon us," Democratic Senator Chris Murphy tweeted at the weekend. "An unstable President in way over his head, panicking, with all his experienced advisers having quit, and only the sycophantic amateurs remaining. Assassinating foreign leaders, announcing plans to bomb civilians. A nightmare."

The top Democrat in Congress, Nancy Pelosi, has announced plans to vote on a war powers resolution aimed at putting a check on Trump's military actions to avert a "serious escalation" with Iran. The president's backers, however, say his blunt style and risk-taking policies are exactly what the United States needs. "This was long overdue," said Thomas Spoehr, a retired army lieutenant general who heads defense studies at the Heritage Foundation think tank.

Following recent attacks against US troops in Iraq and the embassy in Baghdad, Trump had to strike back hard or end up ruining US credibility, Spoehr argued. "America's reputation, its respect in places like the Middle East, depends on our ability to stand up," he said. "When people cross American red lines... they know there's going to be a response."

Spoehr pointed to Trump's moving of the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem - a gesture seen by much of the world as highly provocative to the Palestinians - as more proof the president has the right instincts. Predictions that the switch would "set the region on fire" proved far-fetched, Spoehr said. Trump "doesn't constrain himself with normal conventional wisdom". — AFP

