

# Poor excuse

**N. Balakrishnan** says the Hong Kong government can in good conscience send back Indian 'asylum' seekers

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of India can immediately see that Indians arriving in Hong Kong to seek "political asylum" are engaged in a scam. It is true that large numbers live in poverty but as far as political and personal freedoms go, Indians are not deprived in the fair sense of the word.

In fact, many Indians and foreigners argue that India's poverty is the result of granting civil liberties and freedoms too early in its economic development history, freedoms which have become available only recently in much richer East Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan.

In a large country of more than a billion people, there are bound to be individuals and groups who feel they are not treated fairly. This is true of even the US, and there are already reports that a small number of Americans are preparing to migrate to Canada should Donald Trump be elected president in November. This does not mean that an American landing in Hong Kong next year seeking "political asylum" should be provided refuge.

The asylum law is there to protect against political, religious or other forms of persecution for their beliefs, not for fleeing poverty. Under these criteria, there is no case for Hong Kong to entertain asylum requests from Indians.

India's poverty is epic. The nation has more poor people than the entire population of the US. What is even worse is that the social indicators of poverty, such as nutrition, children's height and education, are even worse than in poorer countries in sub-Saharan Africa. There are historical and cultural reasons for this shameful state of affairs, which mercifully is changing, albeit slowly. Hundreds of millions will remain poor in India for decades to come.

But the asylum policy is about persecution. And, when it comes to personal liberties, India has a very good record. It holds regular elec-



**Asylum is about persecution. And when it comes to personal liberties, India has a very good record**



tions arranged by an independent Election Commission using electronic voting machines across the country, a feat not matched by most developing and even some developed countries. The current prime minister comes from a family that used to sell tea in a train station and the previous incumbent comes from the Sikh community, who make up less than 2 per cent of the population.

Of course, like minorities everywhere, those in India have complaints, some valid. Muslims are the biggest minority and they face discrimination. However, India is not the only place where Muslims face such problems, as reports from the US and Europe show. Besides, India has had two Muslim presidents and Muslim names can be found among the richest five Indians.

Under Indian law, Muslims can follow their own laws, which allow for such things as marrying four women and not giving women a fair share of an inheritance – practices which are forbidden in many Muslim-majority countries. The Muslim population of India is growing in both absolute and relative terms to that of the majority Hindu popula-

tion. Life for Muslims, like that for the majority of Indians, is tough but is not tough enough for them to claim "asylum".

As for Christians, the church is the second largest landlords in India after the government. The Christian church manages and controls some of the most prestigious educational institutions. And Indian law guarantees that it can give preference to members of its own "communities" in admission to these institutions, a practice not allowed in most of "Christian" Europe.

As far as ideological views go, India has three large communist parties. It was one of the first countries in the world to elect a communist party government in state elections, in 1957. Throughout the cold war, communist parties in India continued to operate legally and controlled state governments for decades, whereas in most of East and Southeast Asia, they were banned and had to operate underground. There are also areas, such as Punjab and Kashmir, where separatist movements are supported by a minority and who have a vociferous diaspora of supporters

abroad. In short, it is difficult to make a case that anyone in India is politically oppressed.

Those turning up in Hong Kong are clearly engaged in an organised



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racket to seek employment. The current "asylum" racket is well documented and organised by an unscrupulous cabal of lawyers who are gaming the system for their own monetary gains, rather than any sympathy for "asylum" seekers.

Unfortunately, there are innocent victims in all this – the legitimate Indian tourists and travellers, half a million every year, who visit Hong Kong.

Hamstrung by treaty obligations

from sending back "asylum seekers", the Hong Kong immigration authorities are harassing legitimate Indian visitors.

Europeans are already considering changing their post-second-world-war asylum laws, given the current refugee crisis.

The US has institutionalised its refugee policy on ideological grounds and has no room for purely "economic" migrants. For example, all refugees from Cuba are given immediate asylum but refugees from Haiti are turned back immediately, in spite of the fact that it is the poorest country in the American hemisphere.

Given the way refugee laws are practised elsewhere, and the acceptable political freedoms prevailing in India, the Hong Kong government can, in good conscience, turn back Indian asylum seekers. There is no reason why India should object, since the main intention of these people is to prove that India is a repressive country, which it is not. India is not likely to punish any of them. India's courts have even refused to punish those who arranged meetings in government-funded universities to call for the break-up of the republic.

According to reports, the Hong Kong government has been trying to get the Indian government to stem the flow "at source". This is unlikely to work. India is a "soft" state, where all sorts of insurgents demand "rights".

The Indian government can hardly control its own borders; millions of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh seep in every year. Controlling the "travel agencies" in India that are engaged in the "asylum" tourism to Hong Kong is not likely to be a priority for Indian government agencies facing enormous challenges on multiple fronts.

Thus, Hong Kong should send Indians back home, safe in the knowledge that they will not be punished on return. In return, the immigration authorities here should stop treating legitimate Indian visitors as potential criminals.

While India remains a poor country, it punches above its weight in IT services and has the fourth largest number of "start-up" companies in the world. If one arm of the Hong Kong government is promoting an "innovation" economy, then the city should be encouraging more business visitors from India. By sending back these "asylum" seekers, the Hong Kong government will be doing the majority of Indians in Hong Kong and India a big favour.

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## Brussels attacks may signal a shift in IS focus

**Andrew Hammond** fears the deadly bombings this week won't be the last as Islamic State, suffering setbacks in the Middle East, tries to reassert its destructive capability in Europe

Brussels was struck on Tuesday by major, apparently coordinated terrorist bombings, at the airport and on the metro system, that killed at least 31 people and injured hundreds. The attacks at the heart of the de facto capital of the European Union occurred only four days after the arrest in the city of Salah Abdeslam, Europe's "most wanted man" and one of the Belgians linked to the Paris atrocities in November. He was caught after an intense police shoot-out, and Belgian authorities had previously warned of potential reprisals.

The self-ascribed Islamic State (IS) terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. In subsequent raids in Brussels, authorities have discovered an IS flag and also a stack of chemical products, plus explosive devices containing nails.

While key uncertainties remain, Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders said at the weekend that Abdeslam "was ready to restart something in Brussels, and it may be the reality because we have found a lot of weapons, heavy weapons ... and a new network around him in Brussels".

Key questions will now be asked about the preparedness of Belgian and wider European intelligence agencies for such attacks.

The fact that the atrocities were carried out by IS will fuel concerns about European citizens radicalised and drawn to the group by its propaganda. Some of these foreign jihadists have now returned to their home countries in Europe from the Middle East. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation in London estimates that as many as 11,000 foreigners may have fought in Syria alone, from some 74 countries, the majority from Arab countries.

A central concern is that these individuals, who potentially include up to 2,000 from Western Europe, plus others from North America, Australia, Southeast



**Islamic State planning appears to be increasingly centred around multiple, sequenced atrocities**

Asia, and Africa, will return battle-hardened, with significantly greater terrorist capability and resolve. And it is believed that, per capita, Belgium is Europe's biggest contributor of fighters to Syria, with Brussels a particular hot spot.

US President Barack Obama has already expressed "deep concern" about this issue, echoing comments of others, including British Prime Minister David Cameron. Moreover, FBI director James Comey has even warned about the prospect of a "future 9/11" caused by the increased flow of these foreign fighters.

What this underlines is that while Belgium was targeted on Tuesday, cities across the continent are potentially vulnerable, as the Paris attacks showed. This has been recognised by leaders including French President Francois Hollande, who noted that Tuesday's attacks struck at "the whole of Europe".

The fact that this is a European-wide issue is reflected in the tightening of security across key sites on the continent. French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced he was deploying 1,600 additional police to border crossings and air, sea and rail infrastructure.

Meanwhile, it emerged earlier this month, only days before these latest attacks, that London's police and security forces are working on the possibility that the capital could be hit by up to 10 attacks on the same day.

What this reinforces is the fact that IS planning appears to be increasingly centred around multiple, sequenced atrocities, as Brussels underlines.

This will provide an unfortunate propaganda coup for IS at a time when its fortunes in Iraq and Syria may be ebbing, with some reports that it may have lost around a fifth of the territory under its control in those two countries over the past 14 months, and potentially 40 per cent of its revenue, much of it from oil, according to research company IHS.

In that sense, Tuesday's terrible actions are a way for the network to try to re-emphasise to the international public its continued destructive capability in Europe, despite recent setbacks in the Middle East.

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People in Berlin mourn the victims of the Brussels attacks in front of the Belgian embassy. Photo: Xinhua

## How far can Donald Trump's fake machismo go?

In our time, women have been gaining political power as never before. There are (by my count) 17 female presidents and prime ministers around the world today. Sixty-three of the world's countries have now had at least one female head of government or state in the past half century.

But it's not the fact of their being female that is important, so much as the feminine style today's female leaders have brought to politics. The powerful women of the 1970s and 1980s – Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher – were iron ladies, famous (metaphorically speaking) for having more *cojones* than the average male politician. By contrast, the female leaders of our time are not just female; they are also feminine. The archetype is German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Now, when a man seeks to sum up feminine qualities, he is almost certain to be accused of sexism, so please read this trigger warning before you step out of your safe space. I believe in the equality of the sexes. And what I am about to say is not based on prejudice but on half a century of research.

What I have noticed is that, compared with me and my male relatives, my grandmothers, mother, sister, daughter, ex-wife and wife share or shared the following traits. They talk a lot more before arriving at decisions. They are mostly better at doing many different things at once. They are slightly less inclined to lose their tempers. And they have multiple handbags, the cluttered contents of which often seem as puzzling to them as they are to me.

Not all feminine traits translate

**Niall Ferguson** says in words and deeds, the US presidential hopeful and his ilk repudiate the rise of feminine traits in politics, led by a new generation of women leaders (and some men)

into the realm of politics, but these do. Thus, Merkel's political style combines the gift of the gab, multitasking, never losing her cool and a certain amount of tactical clutter.

European and Turkish leaders spent last week wrangling over a plan devised by Merkel to solve the movement of migrants to Europe. This is the kind of negotiation she relishes. The final round, she said last Friday, would be "anything but easy". You can almost see the thin-lipped smile at the prospect of yet another 3am deal. If ever a leader preferred jaw-jaw to war-war, it is Mutti ("Mummy") Merkel.

But ask yourself how Europe got into this mess. On German television last July, Merkel reduced a young Palestinian refugee to tears by explaining that her family might have to face deportation. "There are thousands and thousands of people in Palestinian refugee camps," she explained. "If we now say 'you can all come' ... we just cannot manage that." The waterworks worked. Six weeks later, Merkel had opened the gates of Germany and was declaring: "We can manage that." All kinds of historical explanations have been offered for her epoch-making change of mind, including her East German upbringing but, to me, it was the essence of feminine politics. Faced with Reem Sahwils

tears, the chancellor's reaction was an impulsive attempt to comfort her, followed by a massive U-turn.

Likewise, all kinds of historical explanations have been offered for the rise of Donald Trump, but I now see a simpler one. He is just the latest standard-bearer of a worldwide revolt against feminine politics. Leave aside terms like populism and fascism: this is caveman politics – not just male, but aggressively, crassly masculine. Vladimir Putin is the Russian version. Narendra Modi is the Indian version. Xi Jinping is China's macho man. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is Turkey's. They talk tough. They strike tough poses. They would never, ever comfort a crying girl.

"What you find with Donald Trump is he's a counterpuncher," explained Corey Lewandowski, Trump's campaign manager, last Thursday. "Someone punches him and he punches back, and he punches back much harder." When Trump said that Hillary Clinton got "schlonged" by Barack Obama in the 2008 primaries, Clinton accused Trump of having "a penchant for sexism". Trump shot back that her own husband had scarcely been a role model. In the words of Lewandowski, "He punched back at her 10 times harder."

This crude talk is the essence of

anti-feminine politics. Last week, rhetorical violence turned to actual violence at a series of Trump rallies. You cannot imagine anyone throwing a sucker punch during a Merkel speech. Nor can you imagine Clinton threatening "riots" if she is denied the Democratic nomination. She wants to "Make America Whole Again" – a classic feminine slogan – not to punch a hole in America.

Note, too, that Trump and his ilk are repudiating not just female leaders but also the "girlie-men" leaders of the post-cold-war era,



**A man who has to reassure the world about the size of his genitals is not macho**

who were very young, went to the gym, sipped Pinot Noir, and had metrosexual policies to match.

The big question now is whether macho politics can take The Donald all the way to the White House. The pundits expect him to lose, partly because even more people disapprove of him than disapprove of Clinton, partly because Trump appears to have alienated every constituency except white non-Hispanic males without college degrees.

I hope that is right, but – having badly underestimated Trump