

THE REFERENDUM 2020 HAS PUT A STRAIN ON INDIA-UK TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - UK

It's tempting to dismiss the Sikh radicals-led 'Punjab Referendum 2020' rally at London as "a stunt without status", a term former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's used to trash Amnesty International's reports on troubled Northern Ireland. But Sunday's spectacle at Trafalgar Square, aimed at rallying support for a separate Sikh homeland, was more than a mere publicity stunt. It was attended by 2,500 expatriate Sikh hardliners, mostly from Britain, still wedded to the long lost cause of Khalistan.

This event not only signifies the propaganda-potential of ragtag radical groups operating from foreign soils, but Indian security agencies also see in it an insidious play by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) through a project, codenamed 'Op Express', to play the Sikh card and revive turmoil in peaceful Punjab. Such sinister portents are not unfounded. The posters calling for Sikh referendum, a cause célèbre of a US-based advocacy group Sikhs for Justice, sprung up in major gurdwaras in Pakistan during the annual Sikh pilgrimages in recent months. Some of the brains behind the London event had a criminal-militant past in the dossiers of Indian security agencies, before they fled India. This explains India's alarm and alacrity behind its frantic ---- and eventually in vain ---- diplomatic moves to block the pro-referendum show. The Westminster, however, played hardball, refusing to disallow the radicals' gathering on grounds of freedom of expression. The only comfort New Delhi got was from a parallel 'pro-India' show of Britain-based NRIs.

Back home in Punjab, the latest pro-Khalistan antic found no favour from any quarters, not even with pro-Khalistan splinter groups such as Dal Khalsa and Akali Dal (Amritsar). Rather, political parties closed ranks in condemning the bogey of Khalistan. Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh called the London event as "an attempt by a handful of frustrated ISI-backed foreign-based Sikhs to foment trouble in India".

The fallout of the event will largely be on India-UK relations. New Delhi made no effort to hide its irritation over allowing "a separatist activity which impinged on India's territorial integrity and seeks to propagate violence, secessionism and hatred". The episode has further strained the already not-so-cordial India-UK ties in the uncertain times of Brexit and its impact on bilateral trade.

But, what is certain is that India will keep up its tough stance on Sikh radicals active in some foreign countries. Earlier, New Delhi had driven home its no-nonsense approach to Canada, forcing it to course correct its approach towards the anti-India fringe in the Sikh diaspora. In that sense, the London event is a wake-up for India to not lower its guard on security and diplomatic fronts.

First Published: Aug 13, 2018 19:33 IST

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com