

## Just how 'fragile' is the border situation in eastern Ladakh?



Sushant SinghTIMESOFINDIA.COM

Mar 22, 2023, 19:35 IST

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*Last week, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said the situation along the LAC in eastern Ladakh remains 'very fragile' and 'quite dangerous' in terms of military assessment. A security expert weighs in on how the situation has come to pass*

It has been three winters that thousands of Indian soldiers have endured in harsh climes and unforgiving terrain as they remain deployed in a forward posture on the China border. While the spotlight has been on Ladakh, the army has pushed troops and equipment further ahead to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh as well. With summer approaching, and the weather turning more conducive for military operations, these men are now transitioning from the winter deployment to the new deployment posture.

Last week, army chief Gen Manoj Pande said that the situation on the LAC is "stable", but there is a need to keep a very close watch on it. A day later, speaking from the same platform, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said that the situation along the LAC in eastern Ladakh remained "very fragile" and is "quite dangerous" in military assessment.

*Watch: 'Situation in eastern Ladakh is very fragile'*

Indian Army soldiers stationed at Galwan Valley in Ladakh (Photo: PTI)

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Stable and very fragile are anything but synonyms. The television anchor asking the questions was the same in both the cases, but busy lobbing easy full-tosses to be dispatched to the proverbial boundary. He didn't dare question the minister about his radically different assessment.

### So what's the case?

Jaishankar said the reason for this assessment was "because there are places where our deployments are very close up". In Ladakh, it is only at Depsang and Demchok that the soldiers from both sides continue to remain deployed in an eyeball-to-eyeball situation.

At other places — Galwan, Gogra, Kugrang, Pangong and Kailash Range — the two sides have agreed to disengagement, creating mutually agreed buffer zones that remove the soldiers a few kilometres apart.

Specific details about these buffer zones or the disengagement agreements have not been made public by the government. It is not clear whether these buffer zones are on the Indian side of the LAC, as reported, and if they are for a fixed time. The government has been claiming disengagement as a success but if these so-called buffer zones are largely on our side of the LAC, such a no-patrolling arrangement will not be favourable to India, except as a temporary expedient and straddling both sides of the LAC.

Disengagement ought to be only the first step of a three-step process to establish peace, tranquillity and stability on the borders. It should be followed by de-escalation where soldiers are pushed far apart by a sufficient distance, say 50km or 100km, depending on the terrain and available infrastructure. This move allows for

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A file photo of army vehicles moving towards Ladakh. Since the summer of 2020, thousands of Indian soldiers remain deployed in a forward posture on the China border (Photo: PTI)

Though it is an important measure to stabilise the situation, China has flatly refused to discuss this step in areas where disengagement has taken place. More surprisingly, India has stopped publicly speaking about it as well, halting instead at disengagement as its end goal.

The final step must be de-induction of additional military units that have been brought to Ladakh and Aksai Chin by the two sides after the border crisis began in 2020. It would require the restoration of a certain amount of trust between the two countries, as New Delhi cannot be sure if the Chinese will not replicate the events of summer of 2020 by taking control of territory on the Indian side of the LAC in Ladakh in another sudden move.

Having scrambled to move its reserves to hold the line in 2020, the army has since reassessed its troops requirement for the China border. This reorientation has led to a significant reallocation of military units and formations from the Pakistan border to the disputed border with China, and the army is in no mood to de-induct these troops out of Ladakh.

### **Who's afraid of Beijing?**

Besides deploying troops along the LAC — fresh estimates suggest four People's Liberation Army (PLA) divisions in Ladakh — China has constructed massive military and dual-use infrastructure on the border. This includes roads, bridges, airfields, heliports, deployment

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areas for weapons, soldiers' accommodation and high-end communication networks. It has created more options and significantly curtailed the deployment time needed by the PLA to launch operations against India.

The Indian side has also been trying to augment its border infrastructure, but it is limited by the constraint of a smaller purse and tougher terrain. China has the advantage of a flatter terrain on its side, which allows for both lateral and axial mobility, while the Indian side is crisscrossed by valleys and mountains that makes it tough to build roads.

Moreover, China also has a head start on infrastructure construction, having started this with its 'Go West' policy in 1999, while the Indian side only moved to play catch-up after the United Progressive Alliance government came to power in 2004.

Aggravating this disparity in border infrastructure is the increasing power asymmetry between China and India. China is a much bigger power than India in every domain, whether economic, diplomatic, technological or military. This gap has only widened since Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister in 2014, pushing India into a defensive mindset against China.

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All this came to a head last month when Jaishankar ruled out any proactive options against the PLA on the border: "Look they (China) are the bigger economy. What am I going to do? As a smaller economy, I am going to pick up a fight with the bigger economy? It's not a question of being reactionary, it's a question of common sense."

Jaishankar is also fond of asserting that ties with China can't be normal until the crisis on the border continues. But it is under his watch, especially during the past three years of the Ladakh border crisis, that India's trade with China has reached all-time highs. The trade deficit in China's favour has shot up to record levels. It is hard to understand how these burgeoning economic ties are not an indicator of normalcy in bilateral ties with China.

If strong economic ties with China are common sense for the minister, his stance on diplomatic ties with Beijing is neither common nor sensible. He says that Chinese President Xi Jinping's two proposed visits to India this year, for the Shanghai Cooperation



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Chinese President Xi Jinping is expected to meet PM Narendra Modi during his proposed visits to India for the SCO summit in June and the G20 summit in September (Photo: PTI)

The same Jaishankar, as foreign secretary, had claimed that China's desire to host a successful BRICS summit in 2017 led to successful and quick disengagement of the Doklam crisis with India. Why should that logic not be applied now?

It is obvious that the government has conceded psychological primacy to China and is afraid of provoking Beijing, lest it militarily escalates the situation on the border. The government has thus refused to seek a return to the status quo ante of April 2020, and has limited itself to demanding disengagement and buffer zones.

By curtailing its aims on the border, India has shrunk its negotiating position with China. This policy of appeasing Beijing will neither make the situation less fragile nor less dangerous. It will only put greater pressure on an overstretched army and reduce India's influence in South Asia.

"To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." Whether Jaishankar concedes or not, China has evidently realised Sun Tzu's dictum. It is another matter that India couldn't have been subdued without the pusillanimity and timidity of its political leadership in the past three years.

*The writer is Senior Fellow at Centre for Policy Research*

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**Vivian Wang** *New York Times*

Mar 10, 2023, 14:50 IST



*As Xi Jinping starts his third term as president, he is pushing sweeping changes to the rest of the country's leadership to elevate his allies. What does this mean for China and the rest of the world?*

China's top leader, Xi Jinping, was confirmed to a norm-breaking third term as state president Friday (March 10), further formalising his position as China's most dominant leader in decades.

The announcement was no surprise: Xi oversaw the abolition of presidential term limits in 2018, and in October he secured a third term as head of the Chinese Communist Party, the position from which his real authority derives. Now, as the annual meeting of China's rubber-stamp legislature concludes in the coming days, many of his loyalists are being elevated to the rest of the country's leadership.

They will be tasked with reviving the economy, which is languishing after three years of Covid restrictions, bolstering security and seeking self-sufficiency in strategic technologies to counter what Xi has described as a campaign of "all-around containment, encirclement and suppression" by the United States.

The picks for many of those positions are clear, though some uncertainty remains around others. Here's a look at the lineup:

### **Premier**

Premier is the second-most powerful position in China, and it is set to go to Li Qiang, who last fall was elevated to be the No. 2 official in the Chinese Communist Party. As premier, Li will be China's top bureaucrat, leading the country's cabinet and wielding broad authority over economic policy.

The position has weakened under Xi, who was widely seen to have sidelined the outgoing premier, Li Keqiang. But some analysts say that Li Qiang may play a larger — though not necessarily more influential — role than his predecessor. The former Communist Party secretary of Shanghai, Li Qiang is a longtime ally of Xi, and his elevation is likely a product of his perceived loyalty to the top leader. Last spring, for example, he oversaw the bruising two-month coronavirus lockdown of Shanghai, executed in the name of Xi's "zero Covid" policy.



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As premier, Li Qiang will be China's top bureaucrat, leading the country's cabinet and wielding broad authority over economic policy (Photo: AFP)

Li's experience leading economically important regions — in addition to Shanghai, he also held top posts in affluent Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces — has fueled some hopes that he will promote business-friendly policies. But he lacks experience in Beijing, which could make him more reliant on Xi's continued support, and less likely to raise policies at odds with the top leader's wishes.

Li's new position is set to be confirmed on Saturday (March 11), and at the end of the congress, he will make his public debut as premier at a news conference with vetted questions.

### Executive vice premier

The executive vice premier is the highest-ranked of China's vice premiers, the officials directly under Xi and the new premier. This post is expected to go to Ding Xuexiang, who for the past few years has served as a secretary and chief of staff to Xi.

In this role, Ding is also likely to be responsible for day-to-day economic policy. The outgoing executive vice premier, Han Zheng, was a former Communist Party secretary of Shanghai credited with guiding that city's transformation into a cosmopolitan financial capital. Ding, by contrast, has never led a province, working largely as a behind-the-scenes technocrat.

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The executive vice premier post is expected to go to Ding Xuexiang, who for the past few years has served as a secretary and chief of staff to Xi (Photo: Getty Images)

But like others slated for promotion, Ding has long-standing ties with Xi. He is widely believed to be the office director for China's National Security Commission, a secretive body that has grown more influential as Xi has emphasised the need for vigilance against foreign and domestic threats. He has also frequently traveled with Xi, both domestically and overseas.

Han, the current executive vice premier, was named China's vice president, a largely ceremonial role.

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#### Head of China's legislature

Zhao Leji, named No. 3 in the party hierarchy last fall, was approved as the head of the National People's Congress, China's legislature.

The legislature nominally has the power to make laws and amend the constitution, though decisions are in reality made by top party officials. Zhao has kept a relatively low profile, but his

**Now Reading: Why is India afraid of prov** responsibilities in recent years have been weighty: He has led the party's discipline inspection commission, in charge of implementing Xi's campaign against official corruption and disloyalty.

That campaign has been key to Xi's consolidation of power and purging of rivals. Before taking on the disciplinary role in 2017, Zhao was a top official in charge of party personnel issues, giving him deep experience in the party's internal affairs.



Zhao Leji has led the party's discipline inspection commission, in charge of implementing Xi's campaign against official corruption and disloyalty (Photo: Reuters)

### Head of political advisory body

At the same time as the annual legislative meeting, another group, which acts as a political advisory group to the government, also meets in Beijing. This group, called the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, is likely to be led by Wang Huning, the No. 4 Communist Party official.

In this role, Wang will oversee about 2,000 representatives who ostensibly offer political and social policy suggestions; in reality, the conference works more as a soft power force for the party, mobilising resources and non-party members across Chinese society to back the party's agenda.

Wang is known as the party's chief ideologist: He has served three consecutive top leaders in creating propaganda and writing speeches and policies. He helped shape Xi's motto of the "Chinese Dream" — a vision of national rejuvenation, shepherded by Xi — and his political rise signals the continuation of the party's hardline, anti-Western policies.

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Wang Huning is known as the party's chief ideologist. He has served three consecutive top leaders in creating propaganda (Photo: Getty Images)

### Economic czar

Working closely with Li on reviving China's economy will be He Lifeng, another trusted former aide to Xi.

He, who is expected to become a vice premier overseeing economic and industrial policy, is the current head of China's National Development and Reform Commission, the country's economic policy planning committee. In that role, he has overseen the drafting of China's five-year plans and large investment projects both at home and overseas.

Compared with the outgoing economic czar, Liu He — a Harvard-educated economist who also led trade negotiations with Washington — he has little overseas exposure. He worked for 25 years in southeastern China's Fujian province, including on and off with Xi when he was rising through the ranks there, and then became deputy Communist Party secretary in the megacity of Tianjin.

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He Lifeng, who is expected to become a vice premier overseeing economic and industrial policy, is the current head of China's National Development and Reform Commission (Photo: Reuters)

His close ties to Xi suggest that he will be key to carrying out the leader's vision of a security-oriented, state-led society, where economic growth comes second to ideology.



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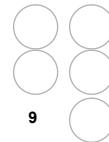
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## The royal battle that's erupted over the Nizam's fortune

[Sudipta Sengupta \(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-sudipta\\_sengupta-479201872\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-sudipta_sengupta-479201872), [Syed Akbar \(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-syed\\_akbar-479231525\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-syed_akbar-479231525) & [Robin David \(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-robin\\_david-6597\)](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/author-robin_david-6597)TNN

Mar 14, 2023, 10:42 IST



*Following Mukarram Jah's death, his eldest son, London-based Azmet Jah, was named successor. But at least two other groups are not willing to accept this. There's too much money at stake*

Fifty-six years after the death of Mir Osman Ali Khan, Hyderabad's seventh Nizam who was once said to be the world's richest man, a fresh war of succession is brewing among the royal descendants. The latest trigger is the death of Mukarram Jah, the last titular Nizam of Hyderabad, on January 14 this year.

While a quiet ceremony held days later at the Chowmahalla Palace pronounced Azmet Jah, the London-based eldest son of Mukarram Jah, as the next head of family, the event led to serious heartburn in other camps — the Sahebzadas (descendants of the sixth and earlier Nizams) and the descendants of the seventh Nizam led by Najaf Ali Khan. All three teams claim the royal pie belongs to them.

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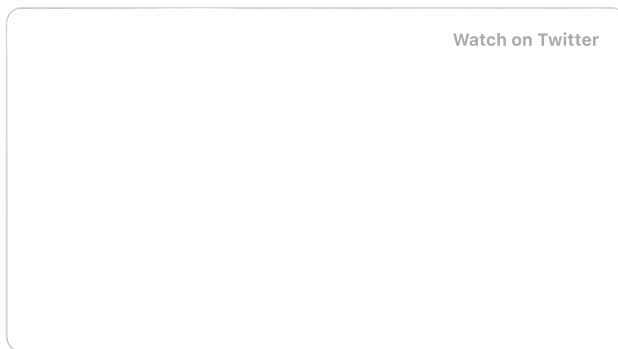
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TOI spoke to multiple representatives from the three groups to unravel this family feud and understand why every group has a different 'leader' and what's the wealth they are staking claim to.

### **Team Azmet Jah**

As the eldest son of Mukarram Jah, supporters say Azmet Jah is the only person fit to be crowned his successor. And as the next head of family, all rights to properties and valuables accumulated by the Nizam — either by way of inheritance or gifts — are bound to be passed on to the 62-year-old.

Nobody else, be it the other grandsons of the seventh Nizam or relatives, has any right to these riches. While there is no exact account of the wealth, Azmet Jah, by virtue of his position, has control over four heritage palaces in the Hyderabad — Falaknuma, Chowmahalla, Narzi Bagh (also called King Kothi palace) and Purani Haveli — spread over 50 acres within the city and each crammed with art and artefacts of very high antique value.

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The King Kothi palace in Hyderabad used to be the official residence of the Nizam VII

Then, there's a host of trusts set up by Osman Ali Khan (they had a total corpus of Rs 40-50 crore in 1950) and a couple of properties in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. The Nizam's family also controls exclusive waqf properties through the Nizam Auqaf Trust that run into several thousand crores.

With members of the other camps claiming equal right to some of these properties, Azmet Jah's well-wishers recently issued a caution notice asking the public to beware of such people who were positioning themselves as "direct descendants of the Asaf Jahi dynasty" for "personal gains".

"During his regime, the seventh Nizam had set up multiple trusts for charitable works and welfare of family members. A trust was set up specifically for the benefit of the extended family as well. So, while the members have a right to that trust, they have no right to anything else," says a member of the Azmet Jah camp.

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Mukarram Jah, Azmet Shah's late father who was the eighth Nizam of Hyderabad, and his wife Esra Jah at Chowmahalla palace after his coronation ceremony

### Majlis-e-Sahebzadagan Society

By their own estimate, the society members number around 4,500 — all descendants of the sixth Nizam, Mahboob Ali Khan, and his predecessors. They are objecting to Azmet Jah's crowning, alleging misuse of funds and the lack of interest shown by him in taking care of the family. In retaliation, this group has put forth their own leader, Raunaq Yar Khan, who was even crowned the ninth Nizam at a ceremony in Moghalpura, a neighbourhood in Hyderabad, on March 2.

While the seventh Nizam had set up the Sahebzadas of Sarf-e-Khas Trust (it had an initial corpus of Rs 2.5 crore) exclusively for them, it barely serves them anymore. Each member today gets a paltry sum (in some cases just Rs 20 a month) as the trust's corpus was not managed properly and the number of claimants has increased manifold over the years. They are now fighting to revive the trust along with a share in all properties — some located in Mumbai and Mahabaleshwar as well.

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Rounaq Yar Khan (sitting, extreme left) and other descendants of Nizam I to VI at a meeting in Hyderabad. Majlis-e-Sahebzadagan Society annointed Raunaq Yar Khan as the ninth Nizam

“There was also a miscellaneous trust with Rs 9 crore that was set up for the family. Even that’s dried up,” says a representative of the group, accusing Azmet Jah and team of failing to replenish these trusts so that family members can earn a basic living. “Right now, some Sahebzada members get money only once in three months,” he adds.

### Splinter group

Some members from the Sahebzadagan Society have split to support Azmet Jah. The group has formed its own society with Mir Hashmat Ali Khan as its president. It has also announced that Azmet Jah has agreed to donate Rs 5 crore to the trust to increase the monthly pensions of members. Hashmat Ali says they have requested him to sanction Rs 20 crore and allot land for a residential colony for descendants of the first nine Nizams.



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## The Nizams of Hyderabad

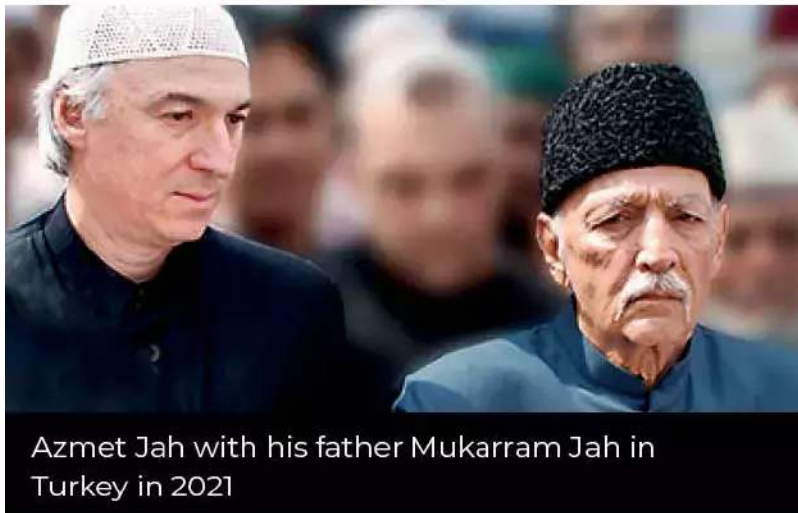
### Who are the Asaf Jahs?

Originally subedars or governors of the Mughal empire looking after the Deccan, they established their individual identity as the Mughal rulers' grip weakened. The Asaf Jahs or Nizams of Hyderabad trace their lineage to the first Caliph of Islam, Hazrat Abu Bakr, about 1,400 years ago. The title of Asaf Jah was bestowed upon **Mir Qamaruddin Khan** (1671-1748) after he was made the Deccan governor. Asaf Jah refers to Asaph the wise, who was associated with the kingdoms of David (Hazrat Dawood) and Solomon (Hazrat Sulaiman)



### What does Nizam mean?

Nizam-ul-Mulk, shortened to Nizam, is the title of the dominion's administrator. Hyderabad had 10 Nizams – the first being Mir Qamaruddin Khan, who ruled from 1724 to 1748, and the last Mir Osman Ali Khan or Nizam VII. However, three of the Nizams, who ruled between 1748 and 1768 – Nasir Jung, Muzaffar Jung and Salabat Jung – did not hold the title of Asaf Jah. Thus, only seven Nizams are recognised as Asaf Jahs



### Who was Mukarram Jah?

Mukarram Jah was the grandson of Osman Ali Khan, who bypassed his eldest son, Azam Jah, to name his grandson as his successor. Mukarram Jah was sworn in as the titular Nizam VIII of Hyderabad after his grandfather's death in 1967. Mukarram Jah continued as the titular Nizam till 1971 when privy purse and royal titles were abolished by then-PM Indira Gandhi. Mukarram Jah died on January 14, 2023, following which the succession battle erupted

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Team Najaf Ali Khan

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Led by him, this group approximately comprises 195 members scattered all over the world and who claim to be direct descendants of the seventh Nizam. Their contention with Azmet Jah's elevation is also rooted in the lack of involvement that he has had with the affairs of the family so far.

"He has never been around and not cared about the family. How can he suddenly turn up and pronounce himself as the head of the family with rights over all the property and money?" asks a member of the group that has even filed a partition suit in a Hyderabad civil court. They have been claiming a stake in the four palaces and the case is pending in court.

They have also demanded a share in the Hyderabad Fund (Rs 325 crore) that was settled in favour of the Government of India, and the seventh Nizam's grandsons Mukarram Jah and Muffakham Jah.



The group headed by Najaf Ali Khan says Azmet Jah never took interest in the family's affairs, and can thus not claim rights over all the property and money

### Some of these 4,500 Nizam descendants get paid Rs 4 to Rs 150 a month

Imagine having the world's richest man in your family tree, but all you get is the bitter fruit of penury. Mir Osman Ali Khan, the seventh Nizam of Hyderabad, was rumoured to have used a 185-carat diamond — the Jacob's Diamond — as a paperweight. In 1937, he

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was on the cover of the Time magazine for being the world's richest man (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pakistan-politics-partition-the-enthralling-tale-of-the-worlds-richest-man/articleshow/77326553.cms>) with an estimated wealth of billions of dollars.

Today, however, one branch of the Nizam's family — the descendants of the first to the sixth Nizam — have none of the airs of a rich heir. They live in Hyderabad doing odd jobs and running small businesses. The famed wealth of the Nizam seems to them like an old, faded photograph where they can barely make out the smudged contours of a glorious past.

Per the last count, there are about 4,500 Sahebzadas, as they are called, brought together under one roof — the Majlis-e-Sahebzadagan Society. They have small, faded ID cards endorsing their membership to this nearly bankrupt trust which pays them a cash dole of anywhere between Rs 150 and Rs 4 every month.

The society members recently met in the Old City of Hyderabad, had some biryani carrying the rich fragrance of saffron, and appointed one of the descendants of the family, Mir Raunaq Yar Khan, as their Nizam. The only sign of old grandeur under the shamiana that day was the long line of the dark maroon Rumi Topi, or cap, that many of them had put on, just like Mir Osman Ali Khan did.

In the Hyderabad of old, the cap signalled aristocracy. Today, however, many of the Sahebzadas struggle to hide their hard life despite their lineage.

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Mir Sajid Ali Khan, a Sahebzada as the Nizam's descendants are called, does odd jobs for a living and scoffs at the meagre allowance he gets

Meet Mir Sajid Ali Khan, dressed in a simple shirt and pants, and hiding his left hand in his trouser pocket as it has been paralysed. For the most part, he had made a living as a car mechanic, but about 15 years ago, a car crashed on him while he was repairing it, leaving one side of his body paralysed. The 40-year-old has three children and feeds his family by doing odd jobs. "I get Rs 18 every month from the trust as a 'salary,'" he says. "How can one live on that money?"

Mir Sayeed-ud-Din Khan, in his mid-60s, has a son working in 'Saudia'. As a result, he doesn't need to work for a living. Also, he doesn't need to come to the trust and pick up his Rs 133-per-month allowance. "You can't get two decent lukhmis for breakfast with that money," he says. You expect him to laugh, but he doesn't, preferring to give a stiff, expressionless look. For those not initiated into Hyderabadi cuisine, lukhmi is a variation of the samosa, a flat square filled with mincemeat.



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Mir Sayeed-ud-Din Khan doesn't even bother to collect his measly share

And then there is Fatima Barkat-un-Nisa, who once worked as a schoolteacher but stopped because of health issues. "To come to the Old City just to get my monthly allowance of Rs 20. 25 is no longer feasible," she says. "I can't afford the Rs 500 one-way taxi ride to come to the office. Although, we visit the office once a year just to establish that we are alive."



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Fatima Barkat-un-Nisa says she visits the office once a year just to establish she is alive

She says there are Sahebzadas who make a living as auto drivers or as a domestic help in other people's homes, but they would prefer not to be identified. "There are many members who need the small amounts the trust gives out," she says. "That is how desperate they are."

There is talk among the descendants of Mir Osman Ali Khan leaving crores in two trusts – the amount ranges from about Rs 2 crore to Rs 9 crore, which would have been a princely sum in the 1950s. Today, they are left with empty coffers. The members are hoping they will be identified as legal heirs of the last Nizam and regain some of the lost glory, even if it is reflected glory.



***[The fascinating tale of the last Nizam of Hyderabad](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/the-fascinating-tale-of-the-last-nizam-of-hyderabad/articleshow/97052805.cms)***  
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Thousands of descendents!!

Seemingly the only contribution of the Nizam's had been POPULATION EXPLOSION!!

Besides, tax collected by Nizam...

7 1

REPLY

**Mihir Nanthur** (<http://mytimes.indiatimes.com/profile/662110289>)

Government should confiscate everything

7 4

REPLY

**Uday Gokhalay** (<http://mytimes.indiatimes.com/profile/662110289>)

Who cares ? The wealth, neighbouring Kingdoms

Azmet Jah (left) was anointed head of the Nizam family, and Raunaq Yar Khan, who was proclaimed leader of a rival faction  
rstwhile hapless citizens and

7 1

REPLY

UP NEXT

How Chinese big show revealed Xi's vulnerabilities



Vijay Gokhale

Mar 12, 2023, 21:01 IST



The first session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) of China opened in Beijing on March 5. With nearly 3,000 members it is, in nominal terms, the largest parliament in the world but, in reality, the full membership meets only once annually for two weeks. For the rest of the year, it 'outsources' legislative authority to a standing committee of around 175 carefully selected legislators who 'sanctify' the decisions taken by the communist party of China.

This year's session is important for three reasons.

First, this NPC has re-elected Xi Jinping as president for an unprecedented third term after a constitutional amendment abolished the two-term limit in 2018, putting to rest the fiction of 'collective leadership'.

- Han Zheng, the outgoing executive vice premier, will be vice president, a constitutional position that, until Xi became president in 2012, was held only by the heir-presumptive. That is no longer the case – Xi has not nominated an heir – but the position is still important.

Han would be an acceptable face for the West because as the party secretary of Shanghai he had good relations with Western businesses. The state council (council of ministers) will also be formally reshuffled.

- Li Qiang, who already holds the second highest position in the communist party, will be the new Chinese premier.
- Ding Xuexiang, Xi's trusted confidante, will be executive vice premier, some say in order to prepare him as an eventual successor to the president.

A point of interest will be whether the new foreign minister, Qin Gang, is elevated to the position of a state councillor, which might signal the high importance that Xi attaches to foreign policy during a time when, in his own words, "Western countries led by the US have imposed all round containment, blockade and suppression of China."

**Party's expanding grip:** The process of party-state integration, which is already well underway since 2017, is being extended to two key areas – technology and finance. A new National Financial

**Now Reading: Why is India afraid of provoking China?** Regulatory Administration, that subsumes the existing banking and insurance regulatory commissions, and a China Securities

Regulatory Commission are being established as 'de-risking' measures.

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**The party was deeply shaken by the public mood at the end of last year when zero-Covid became unbearable, and it is almost as if the report wants to drive home that the party is listening and addressing their concerns**

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A new Central Science & Technology Commission is also being set up to concentrate investment and efforts into making China the leading technology power, and the National Data Administration is being established to coordinate the building and managing of all data infrastructure, data security and digital supervision. These two commissions have strong national security considerations behind their establishment as China prepares for the technology wars that America has launched.

Third, the annual session is a platform for the party-state to outline its future priorities. This is usually done through the Annual Government Work Report that the premier presents on the opening day. A few things stand out in the report which are worth taking note of.

**Rattled by public mood:** It emphasises that the challenges were 'beyond our expectation' and makes the point that priority was given to people-centric policies that ensured stable growth, employment and prices in spite of these challenges.

The party was deeply shaken by the public mood at the end of last year when zero-Covid became unbearable, and it is almost as if the report wants to drive home that the party is listening and addressing their concerns.

On the employment front things are not going well. The general unemployment rate has held steady at 5% since 2019, but it is touching 20% for new and recent entrants in the job market, and this is the segment from which political agitation might start. The

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party appears concerned at this possibility and the report is intended to send these segments a clear message of continuing policy support.

**Consumption's falling:** The party-state is also deeply worried about falling domestic consumption and the fact that despite stimulus measures it is showing no signs of revival. Boosting market confidence and expanding domestic demand to promote a full economic recovery are the priorities now. This will make it hard to realise the growth target of 5% set by the party-state for 2023. Even if spending on infrastructure and technology-driven innovation is boosted in line with Xi's determination to strengthen domestic capacities, neither can be expected to alleviate the contraction in domestic consumption.

China, thus, faces an uphill battle to get the people to spend more at a time when the impact of the pandemic and the prolongation of zero-Covid policies have depressed consumption.

**Wooing Europe:** China is hoping that foreign investment and businesses will return to stimulate growth. A charm offensive has been launched in Europe. However, here too, the party's prioritisation of the state-owned enterprises as the economic backbone, and language suggestive of a continuing campaign against private enterprise in the name of preventing monopolies and the "blind expansion of capital" is unlikely to boost the confidence of foreign investors.

The real-estate sector continues to be a large problem hidden in plain view, and was barely addressed in the premier's report.

Overall, it's a subdued NPC session as China calculates the domestic and international costs of its zero-Covid policy. The rhetoric reaches great heights as the leader begins his third term as president, but it cannot hide the plain truth about the systemic shortcomings of his domestic and foreign policies.

*The writer served as Foreign Secretary and is author of 'After Tiananmen: The Rise of China'*



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**mmm (http://mytimes.indiatimes.com/profile/mm1)**

These REDs are blood-thirsty VIRUSES. Democratic nations should unitedly FIGHT & BOYCOTT Fake Virus-CHINA products.

12

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REPLY

**Shankara Rao T S (http://mytimes.indiatimes.com/profile/sshankararaot)**

No one believes China since the country effectively insulates its people from information flow to outside world and at the same time people of China d...

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