

intimidation, rehabilitation, re-schooling or vocational training, each child is constituted as a separate case. This has also led to a lot of friction within village communities. Those who bartered away all their possessions to the LTTE in order to keep back their children or those whose children are still languishing in a camp in the Vanni are resentful of the undue attention being showered upon the recently released child combatants, by NGOs and INGOs. The wistful comment of a little boy watching a young girl recently

released by the Karuna group riding a bicycle that had been gifted to her by an INGO particularly epitomises this disjuncture: "If I had joined the LTTE I could have got a bike like that too." This is not conducive to producing an environment for collective resistance. The kind of 'capacity building' we need in this country is the support and encouragement of more such collectives for that is the only way resistance can be strengthened and sustained. ■

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## INDIAN ELECTIONS: A DEMONSTRATION FOR SOUTH ASIA

Rajan Philips

The BJP's surprising defeat and the smooth transfer of power to a new government of the United Progressive Alliance, with Manmohan Singh as India's first Sikh Prime Minister, have wider implications in the South Asian region. Apart from foreign policy and regional security implications, the Indian elections are also of politically demonstrative significance for all South Asian countries. Unlike most or all of its neighbours, India has been steadfast in its adherence to constitutional democracy. Among India's six South Asian neighbours, only Sri Lanka has held regular elections throughout the post-colonial period, but even Sri Lanka has become notorious for monkeying with its constitution. The recent elections demonstrate India's democratic depth, its reasonably successful transition from dominant-party governance to alliance-based governance, the electoral power of India's poor in challenging the presumptuous march of globalism, and the people's rejection of the BJP's persistent and systematic efforts to undermine the tradition of Nehruvian secularism.

"The Congress is the country and the country is the Congress", declared Jawaharlal Nehru in 1953, six years after India's independence. If it was inevitable that the Congress Party should eventually implode, it was also inevitable that the upshot of its disintegration would be the lack of an all-India replacement to it. And it has been so. Neither the present Congress nor the BJP can pretend to be a national party as the old Congress was. Regional parties have emerged to fill the void, and even parties with a national outlook, like the CPM, have become reliant on their regional bases. A single-party majority is no longer achievable, even without a proportional representation system as in Sri Lanka, and the Indian politicians have been forced to forming alliances to provide stable governance at the centre and in the states. Prime Minister Vajpayee, an enigmatic lone ranger on the right, has been particularly successful in forming and maintaining governing alliances. In him, the BJP found a moderate magnet to attract those disenchant-

with the decadent Congress, but who otherwise would have been repelled by the BJP's extreme Hindu nationalism.

The Congress and other secular political parties finally learnt the lesson of forming alliances and have now beaten the BJP at its own game. But to succeed as a government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other Congress leaders will need all the political savvy given their inexperience in managing coalition governments. It is remarkable that the Congress accounts for only 147 seats, just over a quarter of the total Lok Sabha seats. Their pre-poll allies bring up the seat tally to 217, still below the half-way mark for a majority and making them depend on the Left Democratic Front for a secure parliamentary majority. The CPM continues to be puritanical in refusing to be part of the new government and the cabinet, but there is no mistaking the Left's resolve to provide a stable and secular alternative to the BJP. The Common Minimum Programme of the governing alliance is at least an indication of the new government's seriousness in identifying and facing what should be its most fundamental challenge in the light of the voters' rejection of the BJP. The same challenge is also confronting other South Asian countries, and it is the challenge of reconciling the imperatives of a global economy that selectively favours only a small section of the population, on the one hand, and the cultural and economic existential needs of others who constitute the majority, on the other.

The *Hindutva* movement in India, and its minuscule *Sinhalatva* imitation in Sri Lanka, are in favour of marrying unbridled global capitalism with a narrowly defined national culture, particularly religion. The two movements derive much of their sustenance from the materially prospering urbanites and the culturally alienated expatriates, neither of whom have any interest in or link to the mass of the urban and rural poor. Nor do they suffer any compunction in championing, on the one hand, Hindu or Buddhist nationalism, as the case may be, and supporting the current lopsided American policy in the Middle East under the most overtly

Christian-right Bush Administration, on the other. An interesting regional contrast is that in India the BJP promotes open capitalism and asecualism, whereas in Sri Lanka it is the pro-business UNP that portrays itself as being secular and minority-friendly. There is also the related difference between the Indian tradition in which secularism is conflated with socialism, and the Sri Lankan tradition where socialism has usually been a subordinate ally of exclusive Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Viewed another way, the challenge facing the new governing alliance in India is also a great opportunity for reconciling globalism and mass priorities, as well as for accommodating religious pluralism within the framework of political secularism. Even the task of the 'socialists', if one might put it that way, should now be that of challenging global capitalism to address mass priorities and minimize the uneven appropriation of its benefits, rather than a religious pre-occupation with overthrowing a non-existent imperial capitalism. One aspect of globalism is the virtual monopoly over national policies and programmes that the World Bank and the IMF have come to exercise. The Washington policy gurus should be told to follow the logic of their own hectoring insistence on unbundling monopolies and local decision making and allow national governments to decide on national priorities. No other country in the non-western democratic world has the stature and the *gravitas* to do this except India. The BJP obviously listened too much to the Bank and the Fund fundamentalists in creating a whole Ministry of Disinvestment. In the past, India might have over-carried itself in predicating economic development primarily on the state, but there is no need now to blindly overreach in the opposite direction. The difference that the new government could make in this regard would be of benefit not only to India but also to its neighbours.

The second aspect of globalism poses an even tougher challenge. And that is of addressing the priorities of the majority of the population who are involved in agricultural production, again a major problem common to all South Asian countries. There have been no shortage of efforts in India to deal with the agrarian question under different policy regimes - the periodical Five Year Plans, the 1959 Nagpur Congress resolutions, the Green Revolution of the 1970s, and the more recent trade liberalization measures. But hundreds of millions of agricultural workers and the middle to lower stratum of peasants are still the victims of what might be called the 'double squeeze': the squeeze on the agrarian sector relative to other sectors of the economy, and the squeeze within the agrarian sector favouring the landlords and rich peasants at the expense of the workers and poor peasants. It would be anachronistic to envision agrarian reform in 2004, without involving the market, but if the BJP's defeat should mean anything, it is imperative for the government to provide a safety net for the farmers from the vagaries of weather and fluctuations in the global economy. The Common Minimum Programme's proposal to guarantee an annual minimum period of employment at minimum wages for every rural household on asset creating public works projects, appears to be a two-pronged strategy targeting both rural poverty and the need for rural infrastructure. In regard to the latter, the BJP's and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's defeats should be a lesson to other South Asian governments who disproportionately allocate resources to super-highways, tourism, subsidising five-star hospitals, urban enhancement and information technology, and abandon the rural sector to the mercy of the elements.

Needless to say, the prospects for religious pluralism and political secularism have been enhanced by the defeat of the BJP. BJP ideologues never missed an opportunity to challenge the premises and the validity of Nehruvian secularism. Throughout its period in office, the BJP government was persistent in the ideological contamination of India's education system. The Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, Jayaram Jayalalitha and Narendra Modi, enacted ill-advised anti-conversion laws in their respective states. Although the election was not a referendum on anti-conversion legislation, it is not unremarkable that Jayalalitha did not win a single Lok Sabha seat in Tamil Nadu and that the Congress made impressive gains in Gujarat. More importantly, stung by the election verdict, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister is retracting her anti-conversion law. There have been demand for similar anti-conversion laws in Sri Lanka, directed against Christian fundamentalists accused of converting Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity. In India, the anti-conversion campaign targets Christian, Buddhist and Islamic organizations accused of converting lower-caste Hindus to their respective religions. Hopefully, the message from Chennai will not be ignored in Colombo. While deliberately organised conversion efforts should not be condoned, there is equally no justification for enacting anti-conversion laws that will only breed bigotry and intolerance in society.

Secularism in India has its own historical and contextual meaning: it is quintessentially political and constitutional and thoroughly lacks the anti-clerical and de-ritualizing roots of Western secularism. Historically, as well, while Western nationalism arose at least partly as an antidote to official Christianity, indigenous religions became the defining matrices for the emergence of nationalism in South Asian societies under conditions of (Christian) colonial rule. India is preeminently religious and is infectiously ritual in its ways, and it will remain so. But India is also multi-religious, and it has demonstrated that as a multi-religious society it can survive and thrive without ceasing to be religious, but only insofar as religion is not politicised. It is the latter that Nehru sought to ensure through constitutional secularism, and what is more remarkable than the *Hindutva* opposition to Nehru is the passionate avowal of secularism by so many other Indians including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Dalits and the Communists.

Their acclamation of Sonia Gandhi to be Prime Minister was more a part of that avowal, and less an affirmation of dynasty. For her part, by gracefully declining to accept the premiership, Sonia Gandhi has taken the winds off BJP's protest plans and given a major fillip to the stability of the new government. Inadvertently, perhaps, and despite her 'foreign origin', she has also set an example for the dynastic women in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, who take to politics more as the residual heirs of their families and less on the basis of their individual merits or political programmes, not to mention their lack of even a modicum of Asian feminist credentials. Not many countries in the world would legally allow a person of 'foreign origin' to be their Prime Minister, and unlike its South Asian neighbours India is back on the secular track - pursuing a vigorous alternative to self-destructing theocratic politics. At least in this regard, 'India Shining', the BJP's election blitz that went awry, has been given a valid meaning. ■