

Moderates are Still the Best Bet in India

The Gamble in Punjab

Against the backdrop of almost unprecedented security arrangements, the boycott of the polls by major factions of Sikh militants and sporadic violence, Punjab holds its election today to both the country's parliamentary lower house and the state assembly. It looks more and more like a gamble by New Delhi to bring this troubled Indian state to the mainstream of national affairs, through an end, probably no more than a partial one, of the decade-long conflict triggered off by the demand for an independent state of Khalistan.

If the polls go on schedule — the voting was postponed in June last year just 24 hours before the event, a possibility that cannot be ruled out even this time — there is hardly much hope of the province electing a reasonably representative legislature, marking the end of the five years of direct rule by the central government. The number of nominations filed on February 1 for both the central parliament and the state assembly is said to be particularly low. Obviously, the deployment of nearly a lakh soldiers on security duty and another lakh of state police and paramilitary troops has not raised much hope for the personal safety of individual candidates and their supporters. Yet another discouraging factor lies in the boycott of the polls by four major factions of the Akali Dal and the two student groupings, leaving only two moderate breakaway Akali groups and the nationally-based parties, such as Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to contest the election. This means that perhaps an overwhelming majority of the Sikhs, who constitute 61 per cent of the province's 20 million population, would join the boycott, and that it will be largely the Hindu candidates who will fill the assembly and sit at the central parliament as representatives of Punjab.

This is a grim scenario which offers little or nothing by way of a possible breakthrough for any kind of settlement — or even for talks — of the Punjab crisis. A cynical explanation offered by Indian analysts is that the Congress is only anxious to pick up a few seats for itself at the central parliament, at the cost of BJP, and hand over the state administration to a Congress-dominated coalition government, with support of a handful of Sikhs elected from the breakaway factions. This is what Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao is asking for and this is probably what he will get from this gamble.

However, notwithstanding this cynicism which has consistently marked New Delhi's handling of the crisis in Punjab, some good may still come out of this exercise. The election may offer the moderates among the Sikhs and Hindus at least a forum as well as a constitutional mechanism to start talking about a way-out of the stalemate. It is said that the Rao government has already prepared a package of concessions which can be discussed at the state assembly as well as in private closed-door talks. The hope for New Delhi is that through this process, it can win more middle-of-the-road Sikhs and gradually isolate the militants. It will be a long haul. If the process can remain relatively peaceful, instead of being disrupted by senseless violence by militants, moderate forces may gradually assert themselves and lead the strife-torn province towards a meaningful settlement.

A Night of All Nights

Lailatul Baraat — the night full of mirth and more auspicious than any other has been, in popular comprehension, come to be the hours in which a whole year's nature of an individual's sailing through the vicissitudes of a choppy 'bhava-sagar' is all determined and set inviolably. While there can be endless debates on the popular idea of year-to-year determination of an individual's performance in the course of one whole year, there is no doubt that this does not and cannot detract from the glory of this night of nights for the believers. So many incidents of great religious import have taken place on this day that it has an incomparable place in the mind of Muslims anywhere in the world.

As a recognition of that the devout among the Islamic Ummah, spend the night praying to Allah and in other acts of piety which includes charity and visits to the graves of the near and dear ones. That makes all the cities and population centres in the Islamic world spend a wakeful night in movement and meditation. And this lends a festive aura to the night which is at once a happy thing to happen and the butt of some unwholesome aspects of a nature totally irrelevant to religion.

First of all there will be the lights which do the night fine but has a way of distracting the deep religiosity of the night. Then there are the crackers and small pyrotechnic pranks that tend to end in a final all pious ambience that naturally attaches to the holy night.

More than what will be written down by the angels by way of a yearly agenda for each individual, our cares should attend to making the night into one of true introspection delving deep into our deeds of the past year and resolving with all that is in us about the good deeds we shall address ourselves to realise.

It is difficult to comprehend what the government of India had in mind when it decided to go ahead with elections in Punjab despite the boycott by major Sikh parties. That the people's rule should have been restored much earlier in the state, which has been under New Delhi's control for the last six years, goes without saying. But if the Sikh leadership was to stay away, as was evident, and press its community (62 per cent in Punjab) not to vote, it was doomed to be a futile exercise.

All along, the effort has been to retrieve the Sikhs, who have come to epitomise the Punjab problem. If they remain distant or sullen, how do the polls help? In fact, one option, which was considered a way out, has been exhausted. The Sikhs may feel still more annoyed for having been 'denied' power. The Hindus also may not be happy because they want the real representatives of Sikhs to run the government and suppress violence in the state.

The elections have created another complication: the elected government will now have to be consulted on any solution of the Punjab impasse. Not only that, if ever the Centre would want to start from a clean slate, the elected government might not easily quit. New Delhi might at that time have to jettison either the government to appease those who boycotted the polls or bolster it to keep out the majority-supported Sikh leaders. It will not be an easy choice.

Was it necessary to go through the process of elec-

tions is the question that will increasingly be asked as the days go by. Now in a negative way, all Akalis have joined hands. For the time being, even the militants are on their side. It appears that this situation could well have been avoided.

Scoring Point in Debate

The ruling Congress (I) party's explanation is that the government could not indefinitely wait for the Sikh leaders to come to the negotiating table.

This is all right as a scoring point in a debate. But it does not help. The government realises that no single Sikh leader, or a set of leaders, is in a position to talk on behalf of the community. The Akali Dal, once a representative body of Sikhs, has split and resplit into many groups. All of them put together cannot deliver the goods because in the last decade one other factor, that of militancy, has got mixed into the Punjab politics.

Even otherwise, the Sikhs find it easy to start an agitation but do not know how to end it. Any one among them who has tried to do has been either denounced or killed. Master Tara Singh, the first political leader in the post-independent India, lost the support when he joined hands with the Congress. Sant Fateh Singh became unpopular following a compromise on Chandigarh, a city which Punjab demanded. More recently, Harchand Singh Longowal was assassinated after he signed an accord with Rajiv Gandhi.

To expect any Sikh leader taking upon himself the onus

of solving the Punjab problem is part of the rhetoric in which New Delhi has indulged in too often. It knows how difficult it was for moderate Sikh leaders to participate in elections without some concessions. After adopting a defiant attitude for the past many years, they could not have gone to the Sikh electorate empty handed. They would have looked like a bunch of power-seekers, who made the community undergo sacrifices to become ministers.

Centre to be Blamed

The Centre itself is to be blamed for reducing their importance. When they were in a

position to reach a settlement, they were humiliated and let down even after the oral understandings. Now that the gun has taken over in desperation, they are expected to stand up. Their own lives are in danger and fear, not reason, prevails in Punjab.

The government could have made them relevant by announcing concessions unilaterally. Prakash Singh Badal, who has once again emerged as the tallest leader among the Sikhs, has said publicly that they would have participated in elections if the government had given Punjab 'a package'. In substance it meant very little. The moderates wanted Chandigarh's integration with Punjab unconditionally but they even came to accept Rs. 1200

crore for a new capital and leave Chandigarh as a union territory.

The rest of the concessions were about the action to be taken in the future. A commission was demanded to determine the Hindi-speaking areas in Punjab for their merger with Haryana and the Punjabi-speaking areas in Haryana with Punjab. The guilty in the 1984 riots, which took the toll of some 3,000 Sikhs, were sought to be punished, particularly the politicians who had blessed the riots.

The crux of the demands was the reference of sharing the river waters to the Supreme Court. This should not have surprised the Centre, which has seen how Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have gone to the farthest limit of hostility over the Cauvery water. Not long ago did Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha write to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to complain that Karnataka chief minister Bangarappa was 'personally involved' in the Bangalore riots. Bangarappa, in turn, pointed out how the animus against the Kannadigas was built up by Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu. Punjab has been agitating peacefully for its due share of river waters for nearly 15 years now.

Unhealthy Precedent

Had Narasimha Rao referred the Punjab demand on river waters to the Supreme

Court and allocated funds even for a new capital for the state, the agitated Sikhs would have been mollified. Why the Prime Minister changed his mind after conveying the impression that he would do so, was not because of the pressure by Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Lal. But some of Narasimha Rao's cabinet colleagues are said to have argued that by announcing the concessions before the polls, the Centre would set an unhealthy precedent. Another consideration was that the concessions should go to the credit of the new government in Punjab. This can work both ways. The concessions can go away if the moderate Sikh leadership is not made accountable.

In any case, elections are means to an end, not the end by itself. The purpose is to elect a legitimate government, not to have a farce. We talk of the good of Sikhs. Is this something apart from and transcending the good of the community composing it? If the Sikhs are to be circumvented or represented by those who do not command their confidence, is that the right objective to have?

New Delhi did a similar exercise in Assam some years ago. Most people boycotted the polls. The government that emerged thereafter did not command even 10 per cent of the electorate. The Centre had to have elections all over again. It was then believed that the lost ground had been covered. But the forces, which got strengthened during the boycott, have not let Assam return to normalcy even today. What Kashmir underlines is

the absence of moderate leadership. At one time it was the forefront. But the Centre defamed it by making it occupy flats from New Delhi or by imposing the me-too-as-Srinagar. The credible leadership was crowded out, creating the vacuum for the militants to exploit. During the last assembly election, the real representatives of the people did not boycott the polls but felt disgusted after they were defeated through rigging. And now they count for very little.

Moderate Leadership

Moderate Sikh leaders have not yet become inconsequential because they have their cadres in the field, still asserting wherever they can. Their image, however damaged due to their silence over the killing of the innocent, is still somewhat intact. The government unnecessarily has pushed them to the wall.

The militants will try to obliterate the dividing line between them and the moderates to exert pressure on New Delhi. The moderates have to be careful that they are not exploited, embittered as they are. They have been prisoners of their own follies. Since the solution will, in the end, be based on the confidence they evoke, they have a great deal of ground to make up. They have to stop riding two horses at the same time. If they could continue to sustain their own identity and prevail upon the militants to give up the gun, the moderates would come to regain the ground they have lost. If New Delhi is serious about peace in Punjab they are still its best bet.

Between the Lines

Kuldip Nayar

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THE Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the guerrilla organisation fighting a secessionist war in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, has again sought and failed to gain full membership in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

OIC membership for the 23-year-old MNLF would mean recognition of its goal to establish a separate homeland for the Muslims of Mindanao. The MNLF has only observer status in the OIC.

Some Philippine government officials say the international profile that this annual quest for OIC membership gives the MNLF is all that's keeping the organisation alive.

But a trip to a guerrilla stronghold on the island of Jolo has made it clear the MNLF is far from finished.

The organisation has resumed its war footing since the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao — the result of a 1989 plebiscite mandated by the Philippine Congress' Organic Act for Muslim Mindanao.

MNLF founder Nur Misuari, who lives in exile in Saudi Arabia, condemned the act as a way of justifying the resumption of a 'genocidal war' against the Muslims.

According to Misuari, the act violated the OIC-brokered 1976 Tripoli Agreement which agreed to grant autonomy to 13 Mindanao provinces. He insists the agreement stipulated a plebiscite would be held only to let the populace determine if it wanted autonomy or outright independence. Towards the end of 1989,

Philippines: Muslim Secession on Hold

A trip to a guerrilla stronghold in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao reveals that the Muslim secessionist movement is far from finished. Luis Francia reports from Jolo, Philippines.

Misuari issued a directive ordering all MNLF field commanders and guerrillas to report to their respective jurisdictions in preparation for all-out war.

For all the sabre-rattling, however, there have been virtually no armed clashes between the Muslim guerrillas and government troops.

For practical purposes, the cessation of hostilities (the MNLF refuses to use the term 'ceasefire'), agreed to in 1989 at the time of Misuari's triumphant homecoming and subsequent meeting with President Corazon Aquino, continues to hold.

This has led observers to wonder whether the MNLF, a formidable force that put troops under then President Ferdinand Marcos severely to the test in the 1970's, has become a shadow of its former self.

But from interviews with several key MNLF personnel in Jolo, the movement appears to be in the process of preparing for what they term as the 'final struggle'.

Downplaying its fire-breathing image, it has spent the past five years engaged in the three R's: regrouping, recruiting, rebuilding. According to MNLF General

Muhammad Jumah, one of Misuari's political advisers who is directly responsible for the training of new MNLF recruits, the movement has learned from its mistakes.

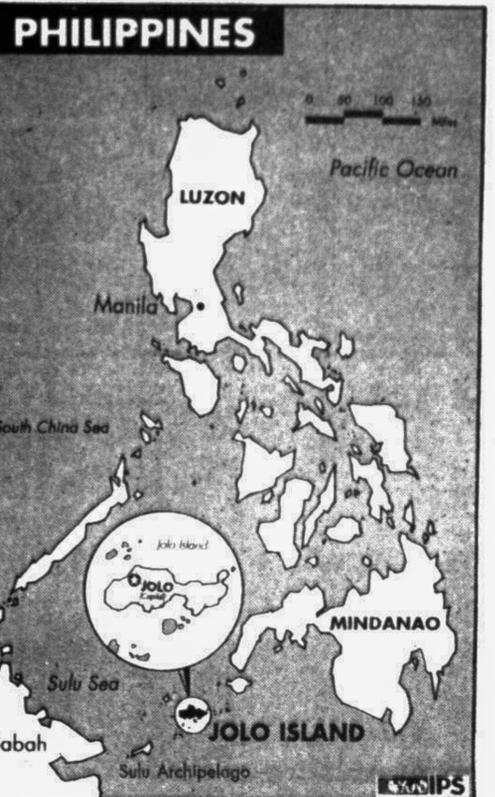
Practically moribund from 1979 to 1985, the movement was revitalised by the accession of Aquino and her meeting with Misuari in 1986. Since then, says Jumah, "recruiting has picked up, spurred on by a weak economy and the continuing lack of employment and livelihood opportunities for Muslims."

With camps in all 13 Mindanao provinces, the MNLF claims it can readily mobilise 20,000 armed guerrillas, composed of battle-tested veterans, recruits and reservists.

The stronghold of the MNLF continues to be the island of Jolo.

Except for the city of Jolo, the island is essentially under MNLF control, a condition that Philippine military authorities in the city readily admit.

A marine intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, stated that the military and the guerrillas "have a live and let live agreement. We don't shoot at them, they don't shoot at us".



Such informal detente was clearly evident on a trip to the nearby municipality of

Indanan, barely two kms past the city limits and the last marine patrol base, was a

MNLF checkpoint where a group of heavily armed guerrillas were waiting to be interviewed.

Responding to a query of where the camp was, one commander, Hassan, grinned and said, "this whole municipality is a camp".

Clearly visible along the rough road, in the different settlements, were armed men, stationary or walking about.

The commanders were all in their 40's and all had survived the Battle of Jolo, a fiercely fought three-day battle between the MNLF and the military right in the heart of the city in 1974. It was a battle that saw no clear winner, only a loser — the city itself, with its downtown and commercial centres burned to the ground.

No longer infected with naive enthusiasm, the veterans spoke quietly of a protracted struggle of preparing the young to continue the fight once they had gone.

In Indanan alone, the commanders claimed to have 5,000 men under arms, ready for battle. It helps, they pointed out, that practically every household in Jolo has guns, that kids grow up knowing how to handle these.

In response to the question of when all-out war would resume, Commander Datu Hajun replied quietly that his troops were just awaiting Misuari's instructions — and his return from exile. Misuari's continuing absence, it became clear, is the main reason the MNLF has held back.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

English medium schools

Sir, It is a tragedy that many of our children have to go to the so-called English medium kindergarten schools. They have cropped up everywhere, starting from this metropolis to the remotest towns of the country. I have nothing against English medium schools but as one associated with teaching for almost three decades I feel constrained to say that the curriculum in these schools is not consistent with the need and necessities of the children of this country. These English medium schools have been rendering considerable service, to this country — if not as much by imparting standard education in the English language whose importance cannot be overemphasized but more so by providing schooling facilities to many of our school going children. In the absence of which many of our children would be sitting at home being deprived of any school education at all.

Why many parents are compelled to send their children to English medium kinder-

garten, the reasons are obvious. The number of government schools does not suffice for the majority of our children so the private sector has come up with this venture. For all, English medium is undoubtedly an attractive salable tag to goad the parents to opt for them. The previous governments have dealt with the incorporation of English in the curricula in a rather slipshod manner. As a matter of fact, English has been forced in and out of the curricula at different levels of education in a most unrealistic manner. The Dhaka University has again made a very arbitrary decision by abolishing English as a compulsory subject at the tertiary level causing students to become graduates sans English. So of late, as a matter of consequence, a realisation has dawned on people at large that at this stage, as a developing nation we can ill afford to do away with English from our education system. The recent years have seen a backlash for the study of English leading to the setting up of different schools with the banner "English medium" luring the parents with the hope that their children will get proper

education in English which will help them in all respects in the long run.

But what do we see in these English medium schools? With the exception of a few, most of these schools are ill equipped to cope with the demand of the students. In the first place, the country is not producing as many number of teachers as adequately qualified to teach in the English medium. The students are burdened with foreign books of a very high academic standard which are beyond their capacity of comprehension and as a result their education is entirely rote learning. Then mother tongue Bangla as a subject is there with books prescribed by the Education Board but unfortunately it is taught in a most negligent manner. When these students pass out from these kindergarten schools and try their luck in Bengali medium secondary schools they fare little chance because of their incompetence in their own mother tongue. Left with no other alternative, once again these students get enrolled in 'O' levels and 'A' levels which no doubt are very expensive schooling and eventually ostracize them from their own culture and heritage creating a whole generation of children who are subservient to an alien culture. Another most important factor these schools seem to neglect is the teaching of science subjects. As most of these schools are in a makeshift arrangement they do not have laboratory facilities. So

the students cannot pursue science courses in the secondary and higher secondary levels.

So what is needed is restructuring of these English medium schools to derive real benefit out of them. First, the government has to declare a clear and definite policy vis-a-vis the position of English in our national life. The English medium schools be allowed to function with the curricula set by the government with special emphasis on the teaching of Bangla. There is not much justification for teaching Bangla as easy Bengali. Subjects like history, geography and other social sciences must be introduced in the context of Bangladesh. If a section of students decide to appear at the SSC and HSC examinations in the English medium these schools should come up to the standard to allow them to do so instead of forcing them to take courses in 'O' levels and 'A' levels by compulsion instead of choice. English education with proper respect to Bangla can do no harm to our students. Let us also not forget that at the present moment English is all-time low. English medium schools can play an effective role in enhancing the standard. Let our students who go to these schools become real good students enriched in both Bangla and English.

Farida Huq Associate Professor Titumir Gout College, Dhaka.

Why the anomaly?

Sir, Should you be passing any time through the Topkhana Road from the Bangladesh Secretariat end, please — stop for a moment in front of the CIRDP office and look to your right at the national flag atop the Foreign Ministry building and then, to your left across the street, and beyond the plush-green Eidgah maidan the national flag flying against the backdrop of the recently washed Supreme Court building.

You will of course, see the difference in colour, shape and size of the two national flags of the two important government buildings. But perhaps, you will ignore the anomaly. Will the foreigners do the same?

Hasan Shaheed Dhaka

Criminals at Mirpur

Sir, I want to draw your attention to the prevalence of hoodlums in Mirpur. I have been living there for a couple of years and during the time I have seen so called mastans disrupt construction work and heard they claimed large amount of money from the owner. On failing to meet their demand one is supposed to be attacked by them which might even lead to his tragic end.

A good number of residents of the area virtually live in the grip of a section of criminals. This is my quest to the law en-

forcing authorities why they are not taking punitive measures against those criminals and make the area congenial for the tax paying citizens.

A resident of Mirpur-12 Dhaka.

Controlling population boom!

Sir, I was happy to hear that Raja Condom has recorded its billionth sale. This is indeed an extraordinary feat particularly in a country like ours where the majority of the people remain uneducated. In the male dominated society of ours men largely feel it is up to the women to take whatever precaution is necessary for the prevention of unwanted pregnancy. Thus the use of condoms is not readily accepted by men. To manage to sell one billion of the contraceptive under these circumstances is no mean achievement.

The effectiveness of the condom in the prevention of not only pregnancy but the transmission of other diseases cannot be denied. But one cannot help noticing that the population boom in our country instead of being checked has escalated in the last twenty years. Under such dismal circumstances I cannot help wondering if those one billion condoms were actually used for the purpose that they were intended.

Zafreen Ali Khondokar Oulshan, Dhaka.