

## INDIAN ELECTIONS

## No Wave Marks the First Phase

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

*The voting pattern as assessed by the observers shows that no "wave" is there for any party and the race for the power remains wide open with the BJP and the Congress being the forerunners.*

THE first phase of the voting in the Indian elections is over while balloting in the largest democracy and population-wise second biggest country in the world will be completed in another three phases culminating in the first week of March. The results would be known immediately after the voting in the last phase is over and a new lower house of parliament (Lokshabha) will be given by March 15 and a new government is expected to take over by March 20.

However, who will this time take the reigns in New Delhi is uncertain since the hustings are unlikely to give a clear winner and in such an event the formation of the new government may be delayed in the midst of claims by the contending parties if none really comes up to make a rationale claim for power. In the process, exploration of the majority — whether it is the single largest parliamentary party or a coalition — may take some time to crystallise and formation of the new government may be delayed. If any clear winner emerges through the polls — either by the forerunner Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with its allies or the Congress with those supporting it in a broad-based understanding — this will come as a big surprise to all and would shatter all calculations of the polls scenario.

The claims to this effect made both by the BJP and the Congress that they alone or with the help of their supporters will be able to form the government are not being taken seriously by the analysts or the authoritative quarters. Such claims are only expected by a major player of the political spectrum and are only a part of the rhetoric now. Gone are the days when a single party could command comfortable majority in parliament and could rule the country by its own strength.

Obviously, the centre of attractions are the two main political parties and their star campaigners — Atal Bihari Vajpeyi and Sonia Gandhi. The 15-party United Front (UF) which ruled the country under two governments during the in-

terregnum of the last elections and the current ones makes no claim that it would secure a majority and will form the government. However, the UF says that the turn of events of the scene following the polls could be such that it may once again lead the nation like what happened after the last polls.

The front has no dearth of good leaders in the form of I K Gujral, H D Deve Gowda, Sharad Yadav or Ram Vilas Paswan from the Janata Dal which is the main component of the UF or Jyoti Basu of the CPM and Inderjit Gupta of the CPI or G K Moopanar of the Tamil Manila Congress or even Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party — which all form the UF.

The UF which together had more seats in the last house compared to the single largest BJP or the second parliamentary group Congress, is unlikely to be able to retain its strength and as such suffers from no illusion that it will form the next government once again in India. But the BJP and the Congress are certainly in the thick of government formation and any of their leaders is the likely prime minister.

The first phase of the polling covering 222 parliamentary constituencies in the 545-seat Lokshabha was spread over several states including the "Hindi heartland" belt like the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as well as including all the seven seats in the capital Delhi. The voting has already settled the fate of such leaders like the interim prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral from Jalandhar in the Punjab and the friends and political allies turned foes like Janata Dal president Sharad Yadav and former Dal president and present Rashtra Janata Dal chief Laloo Prasad Yadav from a constituency in Bihar.

Laloo is the former chief minister of Bihar and had to quit his position facing a corruption charge while his wife Rabri Devi is the current chief minister in the state. The violence in first day's balloting in India took maximum lives in this Bihar state. Here, two powerful Yadav's are fighting to retain their image and influence and much of the terrorism was reported from their parliamen-

the history and governance of the independent India.

The constituencies covered in the first phase are seen as BJP and also the Congress stronghold and much of their expected returns are to come from these 222 seats. But the trend did not indicate any pro-BJP wave in the mood of voters although the party is expected to fare well in these areas. The percentage of the voters who turned up at the polling stations was more or less like that in the last elections when no party had any clear favourable trend.

Sonia factor is expected to help Congress also by bringing more female voters to the booths since Sonia is considered as closer to the womenfolk for a variety of reasons including being herself a woman and her sullen glamour.

The BJP launched scathing attack on the Italian-born lady for her being a foreigner and having what is called less links with the Indian culture. But the general people were not much disturbed by this allegation as Sonia delivered her speeches in Hindi and in most cases was accompanied by her daughter Priyanka and son Rahul. She cast her vote in a New Delhi polling centre with son Rahul who has been called back from London especially for the Congress campaign.

A notable feature of this election is that the country's president Dr K R Narayanan cast his vote making a departure from the former head of the country. In the past the Indian presidents refrained from casting votes evidently to give an impression that this ceremonial highest office is supposed to be neutral. But president Narayanan and his wife cast votes as they stood on a queue in the "Rastrapati Bhavan" polling station. The president coming from an humble but educated background in the southern Kerala state felt that he like any other citizen of the country should also take part in the important voting process.

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## The US\$ 82 Question

*... barring one or two exceptions none of the top 16 businessmen of this country accompanying the PM refused the US\$ 82. Some of these honourable gentlemen bought perfumes duty free for several hundred dollars but the US\$ 82 they took as a matter of right!*

## AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

On strike on the GST issue is nothing but open blackmail. No wonder the PML hierarchy are now looking to expatriate Pakistanis to come and rub some of their magic charm on the homeland to reinvigorate the economy.

Let us take the potential taxable sectors one by one. First are the half a million or so unfortunate souls in the salaried class, bearing most of the tax burden, a majority percentage being government servants. The initial premise must be that everyone who gets a salary must pay taxes, irrespective of the size of his salary structure, on a flat basis, clubbing together all his revenue. Suppose we were to levy 5 per cent on all income, the person getting a minimum Rs.3,000 per month would get Rs.150 deducted and someone getting Rs.15,000 per month would get Rs.750 deducted and so on. This premise must be then implemented for all the self-employed without exception, whether it be a small trader, a barber, a tailor, etc. A local Council must decide the quantum of flat tax to be levied, the minimum slab being designated by the Federal Government. For those getting under Rs.3,000 per month, the employer will have to pay 5 per cent taxes without deducting any tax from employees with everyone who earns a salary must be in the tax slab without exception. As regards Corporate taxes, these should be brought down to 30 per cent of profits, calculating profits at 15 per cent of total revenues. The aforementioned can be computed into a flat 5 per cent on the corporate revenues, something in line with the GST.

So as not to allow revenue slippage at the lower slabs, Corporations will be restricted to paying at the very minimum what they had been paying on the average for the past three years. It would be the duty of the local Union Council to ensure that everyone and every property in their area is registered as a tax-paying entity. To cover various loopholes experts' advice must be taken. We must get everyone into the tax net, one way of doing this is to decentralise the levying of taxation down to the grassroots level with revenue proceeds deposited under Federal Heads in banks. Every area wants to show it has more population so as to get more government funds. Increase in population means need of more civic services. Commensurately, the local taxes must be related to popu-

Within days of Mian Nawaz Sharif coming to power, he reduced taxes across the board to generate enthusiasm among businessmen. While congratulating themselves for getting the concessions, what the businessman gave back to the PM was a kick in the teeth as they demanded more and more concessions. The moral of this example is that this is a bunch whose greed can never be assuaged. On a recent visit with the PM's entourage a gentleman came down the aisle in the aircraft bearing envelopes containing US\$ 82 as daily allowance for the three days stay. While it was understandable that the government functionaries needed the money as they have limited means of income, except for one or two exceptions none of the top 16 businessmen of this country accompanying the PM refused the US\$ 82. Some of these honourable gentlemen bought perfumes duty free for several hundred dollars but the US\$ 82 they took as a matter of right.

There is a dire need to reduce customs and excise duties as the present high rate means more pilferage. For all finished goods and products the customs duties must be 15 per cent while the excise duties must not be more than 5 per cent with capacity tax levied on industries to avoid manipulation by individuals. On raw material, spares etc the customs duties must be kept at 5 per cent so as to encourage the manufacture/assembly of products in Pakistan in view of the cheaper labour available. Instead of protecting industries which are they have limited means of income, except for one or two exceptions none of the top 16 businessmen of this country accompanying the PM refused the US\$ 82. Some of these honourable gentlemen bought perfumes duty free for several hundred dollars but the US\$ 82 they took as a matter of right.

For a time the Arabs were basking in the glory of their Pan Arab nationalism led by the patriotic leaders Nasser and Gaddafi. Egypt, Libya and Syria formed United Arab Republic to bolster the Arab Nationalism; the dream was, unfortunately for the Arabs short-lived. The question of Palestine and the existence of Israel were the intractable problems that united and divided the Arabs during the last half a century. Their alliances formed and faltered around it.

Kuwait had an independent existence even before Iraq came into being in its present form and the boundary. Kuwait's ruling family never saw them as a part of Iraq although Iraq always thought otherwise. During early 70s the question of Iraq's claim over Kuwait was raised but not permanently solved. Iraq had always thought that at an opportune moment in the future it would annex and occupy it and nobody would raise an eyebrow. Such an opportunity

arose after the indecisive Gulf War in which Iraq and Iran both suffered massive losses and Iraq more heavily, economically, when Saddam miscalculated the risks of Kuwait invasion and subsequent annexation in the face of the total opposition from its Arab neighbours and Western allies. Iraq lost the war heavily.

Iraq was forced to disgorge its illegal occupation of Kuwait. Iraq once again suffered mightily in the hands of the superior Arab war machine. The allies imposed no-fly zones to the North and to the South and imposed economic sanctions and Iraq was not allowed to sell its oil, dependent on which was its entire economy.

UN passed resolutions under which UNSCOM was formed whose duty was to destroy Iraq's nuclear capability, its weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological war arsenals. Iraq, to give it its due credit, for a long time, co-operated with the commission and

## Letter From America

## Are Some UN Inspectors Spies?

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

*Iraq is defenseless. Does the West want to prove their manhood by taking potshots at a caged animal? According to sane American public opinion, the US has no legal or moral right to attack Iraq.*

operation. Washington was not happy... Mr. Richard Butler, the head of Unscos: are you the reason why Australia has joined the coalition against Iraq?

The Journal wrote on February 11: "United Nations inspectors routinely have given briefings to military officials in their home countries after returning from Iraq missions. The briefings run against the official policy of the agency conducting the inspections, the UN special commission, Unscos, which tells its inspectors to keep all information confidential."

The Journal continued: "The briefings could fuel Iraqi claims that the US and other inspectors are spies for their governments... The briefings are a touchy subject these days for Unscos, says one US inspector who gave briefings to Pentagon researchers and US arms control officials... Richard Butler, head of Unscos denied there were routine briefings, while acknowledging he has no way of knowing what inspectors do when they return to their employers."

Ronald G. Manley, a British Unscos inspector until 1994, says: "Every time I returned home I was wheeled in to the Ministry of Defense. The government is paying for you, so they feel they have the right. Manley says the practice raised concern within Unscos because the government that gets the briefing may reach a starker conclusion about Iraqi weapon programme than Unscos itself."

Tim Travani, an Iraq specialist who worked for Unscos says that some inspectors are using their experience to help their governments fight political battles over how to deal with Iraq."

The previous day, Messers Michael Ratner and Jules Lobel, two lawyers who litigated Delium vs. Bush, the case that forced President Bush to obtain Congressional approval before the 1991 war against Iraq, also disagreed with the New York Times contention that the January 1991 law and various United Nations resolutions grant the President sufficient authority to attack Iraq. The January 1991 law does not apply to subsequent resolutions, and cannot be stretched to cover a United Nations resolution covering inspections passed months later. Nor do any United Nations resolutions give the President, or the Congress

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What can one say about Britain. They were up to no good when they were powerful. Now that they are not, they are still best friends with the devil. It is pity that the only way a nation of no consequence can attract attention itself is by exposing its shame, and by licking America's boots! In the juvenile parlance, the British need a good hiding!

On February 13, a New York Times reader could not resist a swipe at President Clinton: "At the same news conference at which President Clinton countenanced the use of military force against Saddam Hussein, we find the President telling us, on the question of Northern Ireland, 'Nothing worth having can be accomplished through violence.' My, how circumstances change principles!"

Iraq is defenseless. Does the West want to prove their manhood by taking potshots at a caged animal?

According to sane American public opinion, the US has no legal or moral right to attack Iraq. Professor of Law John Quigley of Ohio State University wrote in the New York Times on February 12: "... it is a dubious conclusion that a bombardment of Iraq by the United States and Britain would be lawful. You rely primarily on Security Council Resolution 687, adopted at the end of 1991. Persia Gulf war, which requires Iraq to destroy weapons of mass destruction under international supervision. If the Security Council's mandate has been violated, it is, under the United Nations Charter, up to the Security Council — not the United States and Britain — to do something about it."

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It's the West that is killing the Iraqi children, not Saddam. It is they who enforce a "no fly" zone. It is they who stop food and medicine from reaching Iraqi children, not Saddam. Next time the US State Department recites human rights violations in other countries, some one ought to take two days to recite the names of millions of the Iraqi children murdered by the US-sponsored embargo.

President Clinton, in light of the fact that we have heard so many lies from you regarding the situation in Iraq, how can we believe you when you say you have had no sexual intercourse with Monica Lewinsky, and that you did not ask her to lie about it! You have already forfeited personal moral authority to lead the world. Now please do not squander the US's role as the moral leader of the world.

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Neither US nor UK have, however, sent their envoys looking for a solution as they maintain that it is up to Iraq to abide by the UN resolutions fully. The impasse has to be resolved by diplomatic means only as the world has no appetite of subjecting the innocent Iraqi civilians as hapless preys of collateral damage in search of Saddam's "evil weapons."

President Clinton is about to make a big mistake. The US was expecting street riots to erupt in Muslim countries during the Gulf War. They were surprised when nothing happened. There were two reasons for it: Muslims did not like Saddam invading Kuwait, and Muslim nations were part of the Gulf War coalition. Muslims are now seething with anger. They realize that they have been used — the West's real agenda, hidden from them, was the complete destruction of Iraq. That is why there are no Muslim nations in the world.

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