

# Political Titans at War

With no political party or alliance having commanding grasp of the electorate, the danger of another hung parliament looms in India, writes

Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

"**P**OLITICS is war without bloodshed," said Mao Zedong. Only a battle of that war of politics is being bitterly fought between two main contenders in the Indian political arena — BJP and Congress — with however bloods spilled and vengeance unleashed. In a 5-phase election staggered over a month an estimated 610 million voters will be casting their votes to elect 545 members of the Parliament's lower house. It could have been festive in the world's largest democracy but being the 3rd general election in three years it has lost much of its lustre with only a 55 per cent voter turnout during the first phase — the lowest among the last four general election.

For an ostensibly fatigued electoral of India it has turned out to be a ritualistic exercise. They simply want to get over it hoping against hope that it would result in some stability for the country.

After a period of hectic electioneering and at least one round of polling that stability seems elusive. With no political party or alliance having commanding grasp of the electorate the danger of another hung Parliament looms. The contenders however have their areas of strengths and weaknesses reflecting on their electoral prospects.

The BJP with an aggressive "Hindutva" on the top of its agenda has been trying to catalyse a Hindu resurgence in India with phenomenal success. In less than two decade's of electoral politics it is the top of the scoreboard for the last three years. There is no visible sign that its score can be beaten even this time. The BJP ideology

seems to have taken a burgeoning Hindu middle class of India by storm. The storm has been intensifying over the years making the country's Hindu majority restive to vindicate its ancient glories.

Frustrated by endless broken promises of the congress government in the past a substantial numbers of Dalits and Muslim minority have cynically turned to BJP camp as clients seeking patronisation of a winning party. The party activists of the BJP are duly indoctrinated and its leaders are experienced and astute. Much of its strength stems from the workforce belonging to huge Sangh Parivar. In spite of a lack-lustre performance during 13 months of his coalition government, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate is acceptable for his personal charm to a wide spectrum of electorate.

Mr. Vajpayee, also the party's star campaigner is a vastly experienced politician and an enviable orator with a life dedicated for the promotion of the politics of his conviction. He moves about like a messiah and arouses passions in the audience for a kind of revivalism. He made full use of his extended incumbency to project his party as a symbol of that revivalism and the Kargil conflict came handy in doing so. He could cunningly steal the credit for chasing out the Pakistan-backed intruders and presenting Kargil as 'our war'. He forced a rediscovery of India in the people who found in BJP the only deliverer.

The party's management of electoral politics is masterly. Before the election it has been

able to cobble up an alliance of 23 parties — not only disparate but also notoriously heterogeneous. It was contrary to the assumption that the parties would desert BJP after its ignominious fall. Through influence, intrigue and intimidation it can bring together parties diagonally opposed to each other — a tribute to its adept realpolitik. BJP could manage a merciful Ms Jayalalita for long thirteen months!

With its intimate knowledge of opponents, their stratagems and temperaments it could form successful alliances which invariably helped BJP to notch up its tally.

Pitted against this formidable political formation is Indian National Congress with more than one century's history behind it. Nourished by modern Indian nationalism it spearheaded India's independence movement, gave the country's secular constitution and ruled India for nearly four decades. Most of the stalwarts of Indian politics belonged and contributed to the glory of this party. The proverbial Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty which is synonymous with modern Indian history also embellished it. True, there has been a decline in the party, but like a declining empire or civilisation it still emits its glow. Will that glow be enough to shore up the party's sagging popularity?

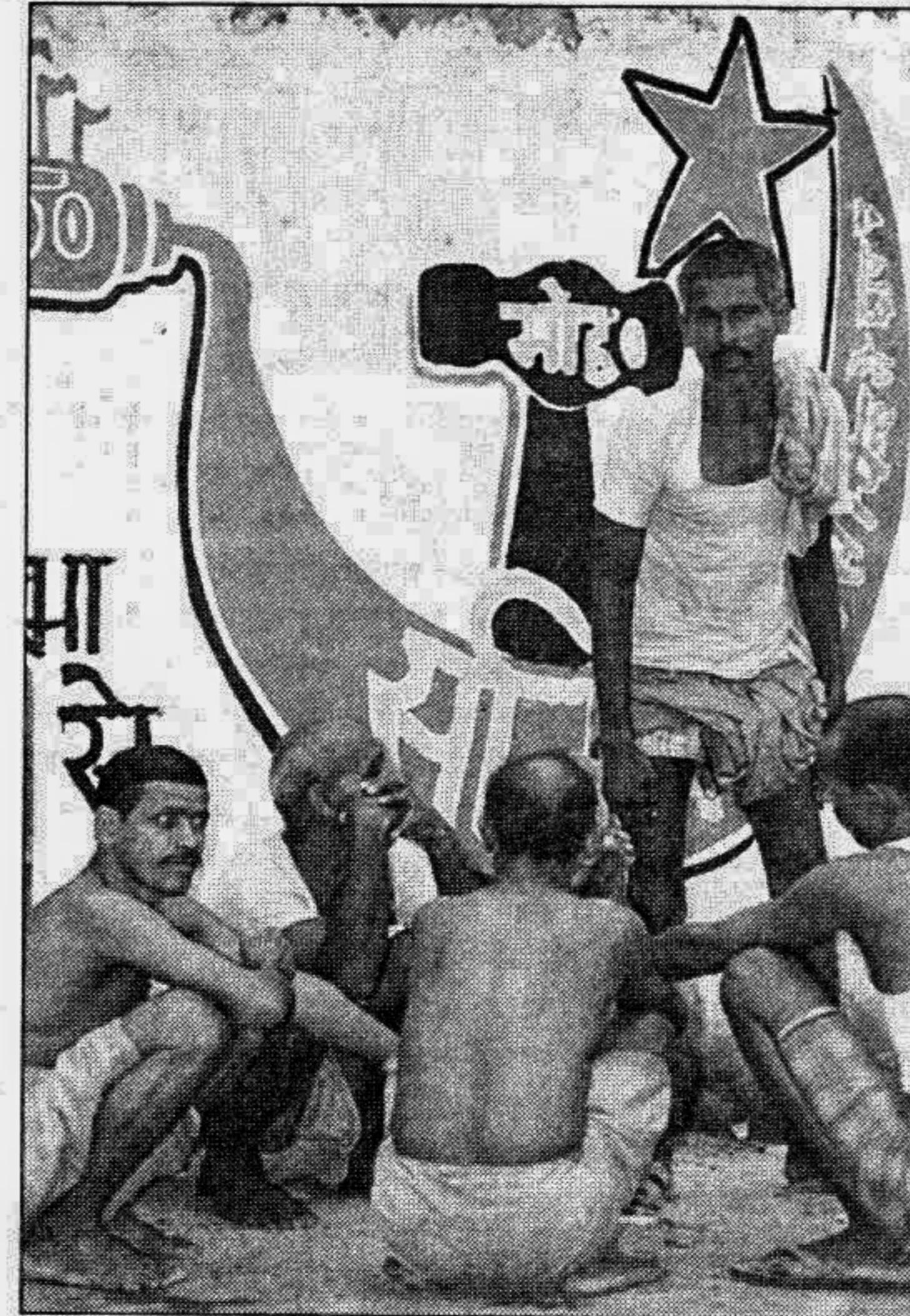
The common Indians are fond of mythical figures that abound in Indian mythologies. That fondness still lingers. The towering personality of Jawaharlal Nehru once influenced the Indian politics in a way that has few parallels in contemporary history. After him two more generations of

the dynasty personified by Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi and later the latter's son, Rajiv Gandhi — charted the course of the history of modern India. The tradition is now carried forward by Sonia Gandhi, of course, with the scar of her foreign origin.

The foreign origin is however not her only drawback in India's turbulent electoral politics. She is at best a political novice further handicapped by her party's main plank — the country's secular multi-culturalism is now a devalued currency. The stability — the party's current electoral slogan is suspect in public eye after its dismal performance after the fall of Vajpayee government. Sonia Gandhi could neither articulate her party planks nor clearly explain during her entire election campaign how was she going to provide a one party stability when her own party was not quite in order.

Unlike the alliances of the BJP which are firmly handled, her poorly attempted alliances are rather fragile, often wrecked by dissent and misunderstanding. Her secular friends, except CPI (M) have predilection more for the BJP. However the gloss and mystique of the dynasty lend enough credence to Sonia's personality. Priyanka and Rahul, who accompanied Sonia in her campaign trial without the scar of foreign origin, are added source of strength to the Congress.

The Indian National Congress is the only party which has a Pan-Indian spread and still the largest vote base as evident from the elections held till last year, although the base is definitely shrinking. Only



Daily labourers in Calcutta are waiting for work and talking to each other in front of an election symbol

what the party lacks is the discreet management of its potentials. The moribund, out-dated and the corrupt leadership of the party is not equal to the task.

On the balance, the 13th Lok Sabha election in India is indeed a clash of the titans. The incumbency, in the context of a developing country, is usually a liability. But the caretaker government of Vajpayee has been

able to turn it into an asset. The prudent use of incumbency has given Vajpayee an edge in the election. Whether that will work as an election winning factor in the back drop of BJP's continuing callousness with regard to minority persecution (latest in Mayurbhanj, Orissa) remains to be seen. Till early next month the anxious Indians will wait, fingers crossed, to see the election outcome.

THE shift on the nature of dialogue on Kashmir was more pronounced than it seemed. From "Kashmir could only be discussed at the international level" to "we can take it up at any level", the change was unmistakable. Islamabad also cast off its chronic aversion to the Simla Agreement and senior ministers in the Nawaz Sharif government actually made statements in favour of the pact, which according to the Indian interpretations, had bilateralised Kashmir.

Beneath these shifting sands of Pakistan's Kashmir policy was another level of unmitigated change. And it was the way Islamabad's decision-makers looked at the new dynamics of the Kashmiri struggle. The Kashmiri freedom struggle was always promoted as a force which could bleed the Indians as the Afghan struggle supposedly bled the Russians in Afghanistan. However, the brutal repression of the Indian forces of the Kashmiris and the massive killing of the flower of Kashmiri youth involved in the struggle had surely taken some wind out of its sails. This left Pakistan with the dilemma of either upping the level of its support to the struggle by militarily backing it, and thus running the risk of further losing international goodwill, or supplementing it by more flexible, diplomatic course of action.

The Lahore process was precisely that course of action.

The domestic dynamics need some explanation: Economics is overtaking politics. India sees its formidable economic potential. Pakistan sees its formidable economic problems.

But then came Kargil and incidents like the shooting of the Pakistani plane. Far from being a dissolving trouble spot, Kashmir is relapsed to its role as a potential trigger of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. What are the prospects of a solution to the Kashmir problem?

From the vantage point of the present bitterness in Islamabad-Delhi ties, President Bill Clinton's letter-diplomacy urging both India and Pakistan to re-start the Lahore process of talks, might appear out of sync with reality. From the outside world's perspective, however, this remains the only hope of solving the outstanding disputes between India and Pakistan, including Kashmir. The constant pressure by Washington and the rest of the world on India and Pakistan to go back to the negotiating table in the same spirit as the Nawaz-Vajpayee meeting in Lahore, shows an expectation that if the two sides talk to each other over a longer period of time, solutions will emerge to even the most intractable and divisive issues.

This is the reason, more than any other, that western diplomats and policy makers were horrified at the outbreak of the Kargil crisis. The whole episode exploded in the face of their sanguine hope that India and Pakistan were on the verge of a genuine breakthrough. Indeed informed western diplomats claim that one of the many possible solutions to the Kashmir problem which could have been sold to both Islamabad and Delhi was a division of Kashmir, five-year autonomy to the valley and some adjustments "here and there" on the Line of Control. They believe that if Delhi and Islamabad had not locked horns over Kargil, Kashmir could have been settled.

Given these in-built (or Bhutto-built) problems and constraints, how can the PPP hope to stage a comeback on the national stage? Khalid Ahmed, the well-known journalist and an old friend, sent me a paper he wrote recently on the subject called "What the PPP should do."

Basically, Khalid has argued that the Kargil fiasco represents a watershed in our history, and has handed the PPP an opportunity to present the country with a clear-cut alternative. Instead of being a Mus-

lim League clone, it should revert to its roots of being a secular, liberal and progressive party. The party leadership must realize that the army is a conservative, right-wing institution that will neither welcome nor facilitate its return to power. Therefore, instead of constantly trying to appear it and blindly supporting its high-risk policies in the region, the PPP must recognize that the world has changed. Economic strength and not military might determines a country's standing in the world. In this scenario, nations need to think and act in a responsible, rational manner to gain the respect and the support of the world community.

Pakistan is truly a unique country. Two-and-a-half years ago, the PPP was shattered and its leader reviled around the world. But in a very short period, Nawaz Sharif has created conditions for the return of his nemesis through his bull-in-a-china-shop style of governance. Unfortunately, her own limitations as a person and as a politician prevent her from capitalizing on her rival's blunders.

Normally, we would shrug our shoulders, say "Too bad!"

and get on with life. But alas,

we are stuck with the PPP,

warts and all. If our hard-won

democracy is to function at all,

a viable opposition is essential.

And if the opposition is as

shop-worn and soiled as the

PPP, there is very little we can

do about it. However, its leader

has been presented a golden op-

portunity to burnish her and

her party's image and return to

the fray. But I would be please-

dly surprised if she were to

bite the bullet and come out

with a plea of "Mea Culpa" to

the nation.

Maybe she is waiting for all

of us to say: "BB come back. All

is forgiven."

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

# Beneath the Shifting Sands

Pakistan has been left with the dilemma of either upping the level of its support to Kashmiris by militarily backing them, and thus running the risk of further losing international goodwill, or supplementing it by more flexible, diplomatic course of action.

Syed Talat Hussain writes from Islamabad

# The Minorities and the Polls

by Asghar Ali

the Muslim vote. The Dalit vote will mainly go to the Bahujan Samaj Party of Mr. Kanshi Ram and that of the backward classes will be split between the SP and the BJP, with Mr. Mulayam Singh mainly claiming the Yadav vote. Some Muslim leaders and secularists in U.P. say the bulk of the Muslim vote will go to the Congress(I), while others feel that it will be split fifty-fifty between the Congress(I) and the SP. Very few Muslims are likely to vote for the BSP. But had there been an alliance between the Congress(I) and the BSP, the bulk of the Muslims would in all likelihood have voted for the alliance and both the BJP and the SP would have suffered.

Observers maintain that Brahmins in U.P. who are said to be dissatisfied with the BJP, are keenly watching the Muslim voting trend. If they are convinced that the bulk of the Muslim vote will go to the Congress(I), they would follow suit. The Brahmins, the observers say, would be only on the winning horse. The Muslims in U.P. seem to be angry with Mr. Mulayam Singh on two counts — for not doing anything to ameliorate their conditions. Even in police recruitment mostly Yadavs were selected and very few Muslims were taken. Second, he is blamed for "betraying" the formation of a secular government at the Centre after the fall of the BJP Government. At the

same time, there is no visible trend of the Muslims voting for the Congress(I) though their alienation is not as intense as it was before. Mr. Salman Khurshid, PCC(I) president, has not been able to win over their hearts. A veteran Muslim Congressman told me that many Muslims even looked at him with suspicion. Another opinion is that the Muslims will not vote en masse for any party but may vote tactically to defeat the BJP-led alliance. This seems largely true.

The BSP has given ticket to Muslims in proportion to the community's population in U.P. This is a healthy trend and if the Congress(I) also follows this, it will be able to win over many Muslims. In Maharashtra also, the Muslims also do not face an easy choice. In the last Lok Sabha elections, Mr. Pawar was the architect of a secular alliance consisting of the SP and the Republican Party, which attracted Muslim votes en masse and the Shiv Sena-BJP candidates won only 15 seats out of 48, whereas the Congress(I) alliance bagged 35 seats. But this time round, the scene is gloomy and the Sena-BJP alliance has taken heart from the Congress(I) split. Mr. Pawar is trying hard to win over the Muslims. Though they have placed their demands before him, the Muslims suspect that he might support the BJP-led alliance at the Centre. In any case, his splitting the

Congress(I) will certainly benefit the BJP at the Centre. The Ulama Council in Maharashtra recently formulated a charter of demands including reservation for Muslims in jobs and in educational institutions and representation to the community in proportion to its population in the Legislative Assembly and in Parliament. But it goes rather too far when it demands that Article 44 requiring the Centre to enforce a uniform civil code be abolished. First, no Government is going to abolish the personal laws and enforce a uniform civil code and, secondly, such a demand would only give the communal forces an issue they are looking for to consolidate the Hindu vote. Leaders and intellectuals of the Muslim community should be careful while formulating their demands.

Reservation in jobs for Muslim as a whole will be counterproductive, triggering a backlash from the upper caste Hindus. On the other hand, the demand for reservation for backward class Muslims corresponding to their Hindu counterparts is more than justified. The Muslims are also demanding the setting up of minority financial corporations both at the Centre and in the States so that they could get loans for starting businesses and for buying taxis and autorickshaws at a lower rate.

This will boost the income of self-employed Muslims as many Muslims are self-employed. Their representation in government jobs, specially in the police, should also increase. It is woefully low at present. The demand for proportional representation in the Assemblies and Parliament is reasonable. The representation of Muslims in Parliament in post-independence India has never exceeded 7 per cent.

The Ulama Council is likely

to appeal to the Muslims to vote

for the Nationalist Congress in the Assembly elections and for the Congress(I) for the Lok Sabha elections. This is a tactical move, intended to defeat the Sena-BJP at the State level and the BJP and Sena candidates at the Central level. The pulling down of the Babri Masjid is no longer an emotional issue, but in Maharashtra implementation of the Srikrishna Commission report continues to have a relevance for the Muslims of Mumbai, which witnessed riots in the wake of the demolition. In Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Kerala, the Muslims are expected to vote by and large for the Congress(I). Earlier, in Karnataka, the Muslims massively voted for the Janata Dal. But the Dal is a shambles now and the Muslims will switch to the Congress(I). The same it seems, is the case in Andhra Pradesh. Mr. N. Chandrababu Naidu and

his Telugu Desam Party have no more appeal for the Muslims as he is supporting the BJP Government at the Centre. Even otherwise, the Congress(I) seems to be on a comeback trail. By promising to ban the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, it has increased its appeal for the minorities. The Christian community, which has been under attack by these Sangh Parivar outfits would also welcome the promise. In the northeast, the Christians are much more influential and the BJP has not much ground support there.

The Muslims in Tamil Nadu would seem to prefer the AIADMK-Congress(I) alliance to the DMK-BJP line-up. Ms. Jayalalitha has also told the Muslims that she would have no truck with the BJP in future. In Bihar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav will continue to attract the Muslim vote. Now that the Congress(I) is also aligning with the RJD, it will have even greater appeal. In West Bengal, of course, there will be no change as the Left Front's position seems unshakable and the Muslims have great faith in it.

Apart from these general trends, the Muslims and the other minorities will vote tactically, supporting the CPI, the CPI(M) and independents to defeat the BJP-led alliance.

By arrangement with The Hindu of India

# A Sorry State of Affairs

Irfan Husain is worried about politics of Pakistan

the electoral process.

I have often asked my PPP friends why they don't dump Benazir Bhutto as she has become such a liability for their party. They tell me that whatever their personal reservations about their leader, the fact is that without her, the party would split along provincial lines. Apparently, she is the only one with the stature to hold it together. This is a sad reflection on a political organization established thirty years ago, but this state of affairs is an indication of the lengths Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, his widow and his daughter have gone to in order to ensure that the party should remain a family fiefdom. In or out of power, the rivalries and tensions between senior members of the party seethe just below the surface. This infighting is encouraged

by Benazir Bhutto who has ensured that nobody can question her leadership. This is precisely why there have never been any elections within the PPP: apart from wanting to handicap her close associates, the PPP leader does not wish a colleague to establish a base within the party.

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