

INDIA

BJP: Facing the question of its political relevance?

M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN assessing the 'mood of the nation' several opinion polls conducted before the state assembly elections in four northern Indian states of India as late as January last -- only a month before the polls -- predicted 'the return of militant Hindu' meaning that the BJP's Hindutva plank would again sweep the election results. The signs of such progressives were abundant. Not only the VHP (Viswa Hindu Parishad) took a defiant line to start constructing the Ram temple at the disputed site of demolished Babri mosque by 15 March, regardless of what the law, judiciary or government say, Vajpayee and his close associates, notably the Home Minister L K Advani stoked new nationalist militancy over the question of 'cross border terrorism' and with their sabre-rattling on Indo-Pakistan border. The BJP projected the election as a referendum on the Vajpayee government's headline policy on national security and terrorism. Vajpayee even boasted that his party would win even without the supports of Muslim voters who, however, constitute a substantial part of the electorate in some of the states. Belying those opinion polls' predictions and BJP's pre-election hubris the party was humbled into defeat in all four states where the assembly elections were held.

With these losses the party now finds itself in a precarious situation in state capitals. Of India's 28 states the BJP will now wield power in merely four states, only one of which -- Gujarat -- is a major state. Although the party has been trounced in all four states it was however inflicted with its most fatal blow in UP -- known to be the route that leads to south block. By historical evidence, once dislodged from this most populous state that sends almost one-fifth of Lok Sabha members, the parties in the past, especially the Congress, could no longer hold power at the centre. Aware of the fact, the BJP spared no efforts to keep the state under its control.

But according to the vote tally

when the poll results were declared the BJP, as an individual party, came a poor third with its 88 seats in an assembly of 403. In the assembly election of 1996 the party won 174 seats and its vote share was 32.51 per cent. In 1998 Lok Sabha election it rose to 36 per cent. The upsurge was attributed to Vajpayee which could not, however, be retained by the party afterwards. In 1999 Lok Sabha the party's vote share fell to 27.6 per cent and it led

The steady decline in the BJP's vote share between 1996 and 2002 in India's heartland states suggests that the ruling party's standing with the people now faces distinct question mark. The claim of the political opponents of the BJP at this stage that the party has lost its legitimacy to rule at the centre will not be much exaggerated

in only 110 assembly constituencies. The BJP's seat share this time is indicative of further fall in vote share. In contrast, both SP (Samajbadi Party) and BSP (Bahujan Samajbadi Party) have consistently increased their vote share since 1996.

Even if BJP could save its face in UP the party was, in last election, virtually wiped out from Punjab, another key state of northern India. Here an SAD (Shiromoni Akali Dal)-BJP alliance could secure only 44 seats in a 117-member House, against the Congress' impressive 62 seats even with its 'Blue Star' stigma. The real loser in the state has been the BJP the vote share of which dropped to 4.8 per cent -- a figure that underscores the scale of defection in its urban Hindu base. The Punjab election has emphatically reversed a seemingly inexorable saffron tide in the state. Although in both assembly and Lok Sabha elections in the past the SAD-BJP alliance performed well, by 1999 the urban Hindus were totally disenchanted as many rural Sikhs were with the SAD. The corruption, poor administration and absence of developmental agenda stripped the government of the massive popular support it had received just two

years earlier. The alliance's fortune reached its peak in 1997 assembly election when BJP's Hindu support helped SAD to raise its share of popular vote to 37.5 per cent. Correspondingly, the Congress' vote share then fell to 26.4 per cent but by around last election time it rose to 38.1 per cent.

However, the BJP's electoral setback was most pronounced in Uttaranchal state. All the ministers of an outgoing BJP government

including two major BJP allies, BJP alliances, and left parties. As a result, BJP's space for political manoeuvre vis-a-vis its rivals will be seriously circumscribed as will be its choices for decision making and policy making further reduced in the period ahead. As evident from the results in a series of state assembly elections in last few years, the voters have rejected in unambiguous manner the BJP's politics of communal mobilisation and the resultant ineptitude in governance and policy making on the hard issues of the polity.

The steady decline in the BJP's vote share between 1996 and 2002 in India's heartland states suggests that the ruling party's standing with the people now faces distinct question mark. The claim of the political opponents of the BJP at this stage that the party has lost its legitimacy to rule at the centre will not be much exaggerated. Such claims are likely to be intensified only with weeks and months ahead. The BJP will be in a mess of worse kind as it may be bidding for power in crucial states like UP through tricks and expedient tactics. The 'constitutionally dubious statements' of BJP-appointed UP governor with regards to the ministry formation in the state are indicative of several controversial steps which may already be in the offing. But the institution of the governor acting as the centre's agent and each of their steps will now onward be under closer scrutiny.

After almost a decade of the triumphant march of the Hindu Right, the opposition parties in India's parliament and all those opposed to the anti-secular, anti-democratic and chauvinistic policies of the government led by BJP will now have tremendous opportunities to gain upper hand and reshape the polity. The trend set by state assembly elections has already paved the way in that direction even before the next Lok Sabha election due in 2004.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

"South Asia needs to bury inherent mistrust for common good"

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE need for increased cooperation among the countries of South Asian region as well as the problems and bottlenecks proving as obstacles to the desired close interactions in various fields were the subjects of discussions in Dhaka the other day. The just-concluded two-day talks covering different aspects of the issues at stake have brought into sharp focus the paramount need for the regional countries both at government and non-government levels to forge close cooperation as far as possible overcoming the barriers. Indeed, the discussions under the aegis of the South Asian Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) was an exercise in right direction in the sense that such deliberation would immensely contribute in sensitizing the requirements of the hour considering the larger benefits of the more than one billion people living in the most populous region of the world. The occasion was the policy dialogue on SACEPS task force reports on South Asian cooperation that coincided with the second board meeting of the organization that emerged out of a recognised need to build an institution that would give a distinct shape to the realisation of a shared future for the region. SACEPS was formally launched in Dhaka on January 14, 2001 with a two-day policy dialogue that brought scholars and experts from the regional countries and the high profile event had attracted the attention of both policy makers and the media. This time too, the two-day programme was participated by noted experts from South Asia in various areas and focused on the critically important areas with a view to making relevant quarters more aware of the need for early actions to accelerate the pace of collective development in the region.

Definitely, measures to develop cooperation and friendship are somewhat a complex task in South Asia which is a tension-ridden and conflict-prone region. Despite the presence of the cooperative approach like the SAARC and occasional exchange of visits among the member countries at different levels including at the top, political climate in the area remains uncomfortable and at times so much so that the region attracts headlines in international news because of flare-up of tensions.

However, this is a common scene in the South Asia for many years and this has not considerably improved even though countries mainly responsible for the unhealthy situation say they spare no efforts to promote the political

environment in this part of the world. This claim notwithstanding, two principal actors of the scenario -- India and Pakistan -- seldom miss any opportunity to lash at each other to blame for the deterioration of their bilateral relations as well as overall condition in the region. While South Asia has now become the cynosure of all eyes because of the shifting of the focus stemming from the massive terrorism in the United States and following actions by the US-led forces in the Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are showing fresh bilateral tensions over the developing situation. Both supported or even agreed to extend certain facilities to the United States to launch attack against Afghanistan but they have also developed new differences because of their divergent approaches on the issue of "terrorism" and how to tackle the crisis. Evidently, they seek to evaluate the scene from their own points of view and this has resulted in new ingredients of susceptibilities in New Delhi-Islamabad ties. However, the much-delayed but much-awaited SAARC summit did take place under this situation amidst worsening political climate and the event in the capital of Nepal some time ago at least cast a sobering effect on the area despite the fact that there no major qualitative change has since taken place in the unhealthy scenario. Confidence building measures (CBMs) are necessary not only between these two neighbours, who are political and military rivals, but also other countries of the area for improving ties at a reasonable scale in South Asia. Such measures are imperative between Bangladesh-India, India-Nepal, Sri Lanka-India, Bangladesh-Nepal and even between Nepal and Bhutan. It is not meant to say that bilateral relations between countries of the region other than India and Pakistan are bad or hostile but there is no denying that certain issues of sensibilities often tend to bedevil their ties which need to improve through the CBMs. Greater CBMs are need of the hour for the region to promote itself as far as possible. While it will be naive to think that the existence of many sensitive matters in the bilateral ties that affect the desired level of cooperation and amity will disappear through CBMs or other constructive steps, it is certainly possible to minimise the adverse effects on the bilateral relationship and consequently in the overall regional ambience.

The SACEPS dialogue broadly devoted to this issue and the outcome is seen as a strong message to the regional countries to bury their differences to the extent that cooperative efforts receive a boost rather than getting bogged

down in the quagmire of political squabbles. Such issues like "Energy cooperation in South Asia", "SAARC social charter", "Macro-economic policy", "Common investment strategy in the region" and "Trade related issues" - which all form the cornerstone of a meaningful cooperation in the area, dominated the deliberation. Leading figures from Bangladesh government like finance and planning minister Saifur Rahman and Maldives planning and national development minister Ibrahim Hussain Zaki were speakers in the programme along with scholars and experts from seven countries who participated. Many issues -- both sensitive political and ambitious economic -- came up in the discussions in a free and frank atmosphere when participants found both agreement and differences in basic approaches in various matters. But what is praiseworthy was the broad intention that problems affecting the path of cooperation must be addressed with a positive attitude and mistrust and inherent inhibitions be abandoned or minimised although the task is not easy. The line of regional governments on many issues is well-known but the participants did not necessarily toe such lines of respective countries and gave vent to their views on how things can really improve and the effort for cooperation can be more effective. To pursue the objectives of the SACEPS, six task forces were constituted to address the vital issues of cooperation in South Asia. Each task force has got together eminent policy-makers, outstanding professionals and researchers. Final output of the task forces are expected to be placed before the heads of government of South Asia and will be exposed to wide public discussions in order to build up support within the civil society and others. The task that the SACEPS has undertaken in complex and difficult but unremitting endeavour towards the goal of effective and expanding cooperation in South Asia in the vital areas will definitely make the work easier. This is a positive exercise in the tension-laden region whose most people are mired in poverty and struggling to attain a minimum standard of decent livelihood. Hopefully, SACEPS and similar bodies would not slacken their efforts in the good direction so that increased cooperation takes effect in a greater way, which would contribute to the development of the region and welfare of its people.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS

NEPAL

Maoists come under fire for targeting development

KATHMANDU POST REPORT

A DAY after several groups of Maoists went on a bridge-destroying spree in the mid-western Terai district of Bardia, damaging at least three bridges, and bringing the movement of traffic from Banke to Bardia to

a grinding halt, parliamentarians on Tuesday April 2 strongly condemned the Maoists' move and called on the rebels to stop their violent and anti-development acts.

According to reports from Bardia and Banke, traffic movement along the Bardia-Nepalgunj highway came to a complete standstill after the rebels bombed a section of the 116-metre-long bridge over the Mankhola. Police said the mid-night explosions made a four-foot wide gap on the bridge, making it virtually impossible for vehicles to move on. The bridge is located 15 kilometers west of Nepalgunj.

The rebels also bombed parts of the Bhada bridge near Gulariaya,

the district headquarters, and another smaller bridge of the Babai irrigation project in the same district. Another report from Baitadi said the rebels have destroyed 45 village development committee (VDC) offices, 20 of them badly, over the last

three weeks in the far-western hill district. Prior to this, the rebels have torched hundreds of VDC offices

across the country. Besides coming down heavily on the rebels for targeting hundreds of VDC offices and few hydropower and drinking water facilities around the country, the lawmakers, most of them opposition, criticised the

government for failing to ensure law and order situation. While calling on the rebels to stop such "barbaric and irresponsible anti-development acts", they demanded that the government soon start reconstructing the VDC offices and hydropower and drinking water and

hydropower facilities.

"What are the Maoists up to? Their violent anti-development acts make no sense," said a visibly infuriated Pashupati Chaulagain, a main opposition CPN-UML lawmaker from Dolakha. Echoing the sentiments of several other ruling and opposition lawmakers, he demanded that the Maoists' anti-developmental activities be checked and reconstruction of VDC offices be started.

In the Upper House, a few ruling party lawmakers demanded the resignation of the ministers, who have

failed to provide adequate security to the sites and sectors under their respective jurisdictions. Ganga Datt Joshi of the ruling Nepali Congress demanded that the ministers for Water Resources, Education, Labour and Transport Management, and Home Affairs quit from their posts.

Before it were just industries, the backbone of national economy, and

government property. Now, the lawmakers expressed deep concerns Tuesday afternoon that the Maoist rebels, waging a violent warfare for the past six years or so, seem to be out to destroy the development infrastructures around the country -- something that makes everyone's -- both Maoists' and non-Maoists' -- life easier and better, if not prosperous. The rebels have literally gone on a vandalism spree in recent days, targeting mainly development facilities. A few days ago, they chopped off drinking water pipelines in the remote eastern hill district of Okhaldhunga, leaving the residents of its district headquarters high and dry, and forcing them to go for other sources of drinking water. They destroyed the power plant of the 12-megawatt Jhimruk Hydroelectricity Project in Pyuthan district earlier this week and attacked the Modikhola hydel project. Prior to this, they attacked a small hydro plant in remote Bhojpur district in the eastern hills.

The rebels have also damaged the offices of several road development projects in Surkhet, Jajarkot and

Pyuthan districts. Meanwhile, a fresh report from Dolakha said that an ambulance carrying an injured accident victim could not make it to the capital city Tuesday evening after the rebels felled a huge tree and blocked the highway. The ambulance later returned to Charikot, the district headquarters.

Courtesy: Kathmandu Post

PAKISTAN

The next prime minister of Pakistan

DR FARID A. MALIK

THE selection of the Prime Minister should not be the sole domain of the establishment. It is time for the people to speak out. After all the PM has to be elected by the electorate and not by the outdated Baboos of Islamabad. The selectors at the Capital have always done a very poor job mainly because their approach has been seriously flawed. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was the last real PM of Pakistan with an able assembly. By all standards the performance of the 1970 House was remarkable. It not only legislated but also delivered.

Muhammad Khan Junejo, the handpicked PM of the establishment, did break loose from the controls of his mentors. Finally he had to pay for his pro-people policies and was dismissed by the dictator who had selected him to take dictation. The question arises: Can the problems of the country be resolved with the dictation of the Baboos? If Islamabad has all the answers why has it failed to deliver? The absolute rule of the establishment under Generals Ayub, Yahya, Zia and Musharraf failed to meet the expectations of the people, why?

Dictation is no solution. Obedient servants of Islamabad may be good listeners but poor managers and leaders. With hands tied Benazir Bhutto was inducted PM twice (BB-I and BB-II). With mind frozen Nawaz Sharif was allowed to become PM on two occasions (NW-I and NW-II). Then there were the brief interludes of the Caretakers (Jatoi, Mazari, Qureshi, Khalid). Since 1988 no one has been able to reverse the rot and deliver. While Islamabad has insisted on dictation whose theme is outdated the people of Pakistan have suffered.

In 2002 the dictation gives,

takers and seekers should be bundled out of the democratic process as they are the custodians of status quo and stagnation. Unlike his predecessors Gen Musharraf seeks real democracy and change which the champions of status quo cannot deliver. The next PM will have to break the inertia and deliver. Selectability/electability of the desirables will bring dictation seekers to the fore with no results or relief for the masses.

Outside the regime of dictation several options are available to the General. In Iran there is a council of Elders which scrutinises all candidates before clearing them to con-

over. Authority is associated with abuse of power and national resources.

Can anyone in authority in the last two decades stand up and tell the nation what has he/she done for the people of Pakistan. There is a long list of excuses, justifications and blame to pass around but no results. The everlasting baboos blame the politicians for faulty rules of business. The politicians are frustrated at the 'Karwais'-and-no-results approach of the bureaucrats. The Khakis blame everything on corruption and adhocism. Who is thinking of producing results?

Somehow honesty of purpose

Individuals come and go while institutions remain. Let us think about Pakistan, its people and its institutions. The next PM has to steer the country out of the quagmire of status quo. There is unfinished agenda and un-implemented plans. The devolution process is on-going. It is time to assemble the comrades-of-change at Islamabad. Pakistan deserves the best. Real men have to take charge of the country and implement the people's agenda.

test elections. The entire record of the individual is checked with special emphasis on public service.

Once cleared then the voters make the final choice. The reformist President of Iran was also approved by this council. Selective accountability and checks are not effective. Accountability is like law, either it applies to everyone or no one. The disqualification process must apply uniformly to all candidates. The condition of Bachelor's Degree is too stringent for a country with a literacy rate under 40 percent. Illiterate voters also make poor choices.

The education standard can be lowered to intermediate with other strict evaluation factors like loan/tax/bills default, community service, reference check, public inputs, employment record, litigation and conviction, cases and claims pending, personal/family profiles, conflict of interest, standing in community, financial strength etc. Even after elections the candidates should be subject to disqualification or withdrawal by the electorate. Only an able house will be able to elect an able PM. The Council should be able to simplify the choices for the common man.

Pakistan with a population of 140 million people is not an easy country to govern. The PM as the head of the government has no easy job. In parliamentary democracy the PM is both the leader of the house and the executive head. He has to command support from fellow members and attain co-operation from the administrative set-up and of course keep the establishment happy. Over the years the overwhelming status quo has produced its own inertia. The state has emerged as a major nuisance. Parasites have taken

and consideration for Conflict of Interest (CoI) has been lost over the years. There is no one left to guide the guardian or stand-up to him. Dictation not dissent has become the norm. Survival and longevity in power is considered success. With the electronic media firmly in control of the establishment, projection and drama has taken over. Press remains free and the only reliable link to a democratic order.

In Iran, in order to institutionalise change massive cleansing of the system was carried out. National interests were declared supreme. Individuals working against common interests were prosecuted and punished. Everyone was required to do his best for the nation. Iran is now emerging as a strong democratic country with sound economic foundations.

The next PM will have to move fast to dislodge the establishment stranglehold over Islamabad. He would need consensus and support from the house. Without leadership his/her task would be impossible. Once the political framework is covered the task of management will start. Currently there is an emphasis on including 'technocrats' in the assemblies. As always there is confusion about their identification and selection.

A 'Technocrat' is a 'Technical Manager'. Every doctor, engineer, scientist, accountant, lawyer etc. cannot be termed a 'Technocrat'. When management issues became complicated the know-all 'Generalists' were replaced by professionals who were trained to manage in their own areas. A doctor once trained in Health Care Administration or an engineer in 'Technology Management' qualifies to be called a 'Technocrat'. Usually Technocrats

replace the bureaucrats, not the politicians. The 'Generalists' were replaced by 'Technocrats' the world over about half a century ago. Unfortunately in Pakistan only the bureaucrats have survived, everyone else has been made to perish.

Most 'Technocrats' are not trained to be politicians as the skill sets are different. Politicians excel in public dealing and usually know what the people desire. Their strength is in their inter-personal skills. No politician has ever been successful without good public contact. Peoples Party has survived as a political force due to its grass-root linkages with the common man. The Muslim League by contrast has relied more on the establishment for support. The Jama'at-i-Islami has relied on ideology and discipline but has not been able to win mass public support.

A 'Technocrat' with no political background is bound to fail as PM. Appropriate national priorities can only be established by inputs from true representatives of the people. Gen Musharraf has rightly pointed out the abandoned Social Action Programmes. Most of these initiatives were thrust on the people without discussion, debate and consensus. Politicians too have to learn the art of consensus which the establishment politicians did not practise. Political maturity can only be achieved if the democratic process is allowed to function.

Liaquat Ali Khan performed reasonably well as the first PM of Pakistan. He was an honest politician with solid political background and experience. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was the first elected PM under the 1973 Constitution. He successfully completed his tenure and called for general elections. ZAB's administration was very efficient.

No one doubted his abilities to deliver but were critical of his heavy-handed methods that eventually cost him his position. His credentials stand out. Muhammad Khan Junejo performed reasonably well as PM. Despite pressures from the establishment he stood his ground and played an important role in the restoration of democracy.

Individuals come and go while institutions remain. Let us think about Pakistan, its people and its institutions. The next PM has to steer the country out of the quagmire of status quo. There is unfinished agenda and un-implemented plans. The devolution process is on-going. It is time to assemble the comrades-of-change at Islamabad. Pakistan deserves the best. Real men have to take charge of the country and implement the people's agenda. The party must come to an end and reality set-in. In the words of Allama Iqbal, in the huge caravan there must be a Hussain (AS). The nation anxiously awaits one.

Courtesy: The Nation