

The ensuing Indian elections

Cruelty is all they have left



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

SINCE the element of surprise is virtually non-existent, Indian elections, the largest democratic exercise in the world, has failed to capture popular imagination. There are routine stories in the media and even the slogan 'India is shining' has failed to attract adequate attention.

By all accounts Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has the image of a leader, who really cannot be challenged. His has been a smooth government, which cannot be faulted on almost any account. Although there are doubts about the credentials of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and particularly its rabidly communal wing Rashtriya Sevak Sangha (RSS), Vajpayee has managed to stay above the communal bickerings in an India torn from time to time by Hindu chauvinism. Even on the vexed issue of Babri mosque, the historical mosque razed to the ground decade years ago under the secular regime of Indian National Congress. The Hindu militants of the BJP raise the slogan from time to time that they will erect there Ram Mandir (Hindu temple dedicated to the venerated god Ram). Vajpayee has cleverly managed to avoid being entangled in this controversy.

The adroit politician Vajpayee has timed perfectly his move to start his long road to accommodation, with his

arch rival Pakistan. It was not an easy change of heart for Atal Behari Vajpayee. He like all his Indian predecessors have fought shy of starting a dialogue with Pakistani leader occupying the seat of power, who would wear the military uniform. Indeed Vajpayee had started the Bus diplomacy with the predecessor of the current Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Musharraf had ousted Sharif in a military coup some three years ago. Vajpayee demonstrated utter frustration at the

two wars have been fought and two years ago a mini war in the high Kargil mountains was fought. The two states nearly started a war when suspected Pakistanis infiltrated into the seat of Indian democracy, the Parliament.

It seems that Atal Behari Vajpayee is ready to give the benefit of the doubt to Gen. Pervez Musharraf. It is besides good election politics. While renewing the dialogue with his Pakistani counterpart Vajpayee has stated that this would be his last effort at making peace with Pakistan. Vajpayee is

separates the two parts of Kashmir. The beautiful vale and its surroundings are under the control of India and the part of Kashmir adjacent to Pakistan is under Pakistani control. The northernmost part of Kashmir, that is Ladakh touches nearly China as well. It is certain that a settlement will entail major concessions from both sides. Here the elected government of Vajpayee has a built-in advantage. On the other hand power base of Gen. Musharraf is extremely fragile. His base is really the armed forces and how far they will be prepared to make concessions is the great unknown.

Atal Behari Vajpayee is facing Sonia Gandhi, the president of the main opposition Indian National Congress. The Gandhi-Nehru name is still kept alive in memory of its historical role in winning independence and she was placed at the head of the Congress party for continuation of the family name. There are not many Indians, who expect Sonia, the Italian born widow of Rajiv Gandhi to defeat Vajpayee. Yet the Indian election in spite of the catchy slogan 'India is shining' is unable to catch on popular imagination. Thus the speculation is centering around L.K. Advani, who at 78 may appear a trifle too old to inherit the mantle of the successor.

What about the Muslim vote in India? In the Nehru-Indira and Rajiv days they voted solidly for the Congress because in Congresses they saw the best safeguard against militant Hindus. The situation has changed considerably and the BJP in spite of its communal credentials is wooing the Muslim vote. One wonders what is going to be the fate of secularism, which holds a place of pride in the Indian Constitution, in BJP hands.

The largest democracy of the world is about to vote. If the results were not so predictable, this would attract attention of the entire world.

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THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

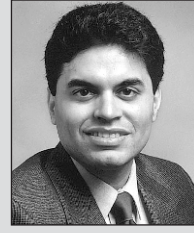
Atal Behari Vajpayee is facing Sonia Gandhi... What about the Muslim vote in India? In the Nehru-Indira and Rajiv days they voted solidly for the Congress because in Congress they saw the best safeguard against militant Hindus. The situation has changed considerably and the BJP in spite of its communal credentials is wooing the Muslim vote.

arrival of a military leader at the helm in Pakistan. For some time Gen. Musharraf was in the dog house and was ostracized throughout the world. As a fall out of 9/11 of 2001 US President George Bush needed Musharraf's help in his effort to destroy the Taleban regime of Afghanistan, neighbour of Pakistan, and Musharraf made his return to the world stage.

A peace deal with India is of utmost importance for Pakistan. For the entire length of the existence of Pakistan, which is little over half a century, India and Pakistan have been locked in a bitter dispute mainly centering around the beautiful state of Kashmir, in the Himalayan mountains. For the possession of this state

nearing 80 and does not expect to hold the reins of power for much longer. This is good election politics because Indians like the Pakistanis are tired of this half a century old dispute with her neighbour. Interestingly both sides are careful not to raise expectations to a very high level. Thus we see that the two sides are continuously building bridges and discussions are continuing at high technical level. Thus after a break of 15 years Indian cricketers are visiting Pakistan. The first match in the series was played in Karachi and the supporters of both sides were a model of civility.

The two sides very wisely have not started with the long and intractable dispute of Kashmir. A line of control



FAREED ZAKARIA writes from Washington

DOES it matter whether the carnage in Madrid last week was the act of the Basque terrorist organization ETA or of al Qaeda? Of course there are important differences between the two. ETA is a local organisation, al Qaeda a global one. The former is secular, the latter religious. But they have something in common that is revealing about the nature of terrorism. Both groups had a political agenda, but as their political cause has lost steam, they are increasingly defined almost exclusively by a macabre culture of violence.

"The purpose of terrorism," Vladimir Lenin once said, "is to terrify." Like much of what he said, this is wrong. Terrorism has traditionally been used to advance political goals. That's why a rule of terrorists used to be: "We want a few people dead and a lot of people watching." Terrorists sought attention, but didn't want to make people lose sympathy for their cause. Yet with many terrorist groups -- like ETA, like al Qaeda -- violence has become an end in and of itself. They want a lot of people dead.

Some in Spain have argued that if indeed al Qaeda proves to be the culprit, then Spaniards will blame Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. It was his support for America and the war in Iraq, they say, that invited the wrath of the fundamentalists. But other recent targets of Islamic militants have been Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, not one of which supported the war or sent troops into Iraq in the aftermath.

Qaeda's declaration of jihad had, as its first demand, the withdrawal of American troops from Saudi Arabia. Osama bin Laden does not seem to have noticed, but the troops are gone -- yet the jihad continues. The reasons come and go, but the violence endures.

The Middle East scholar Gilles Kepel makes an analogy between communist groups and Islamic fundamentalists. In the 1940s and 1950s, communist groups were popular and advanced their cause politically. By the 1960s, after revelations about Stalin's brutality, there were few believing communists in Europe. Facing irrelevance, the hardcore radicals turned to violence, hoping to gain attention and adherents by daring acts of bloodshed. Thus the proliferation of terror by groups like the Red Brigades and the Baader-Meinhof gang. Similarly, for decades Islamic fundamentalists tried to mount political opposition in Arab countries. Frustrated by failure, they have become terror machines and nothing more.

ETA follows this pattern. Having been founded to protest the brutal suppression of the Basques under Franco's reign, it floundered as Spain became democratic and provided the Basques with increasing levels of autonomy. Almost every demand of Basque nationalists has been met over the past decade. Basques run their own region, collect their own taxes, have their own police, speak their own language, broadcast their own television and radio programmes. As a result, support for ETA is down to 5 percent at most. In fact, support for Basque nationalism has waned considerably.

It is in this context that ETA announced in 2000 the "reactivation of armed struggle." In the next two years it launched 87 bombings and assassinations, in which 38 people were killed. But because of effective police work by Spain and France, ETA's attacks dropped to 20 in 2002, with five deaths, and so far this year there have been 17 hits, in which three people were killed.

In the past ETA hit only Spanish politicians, policemen and other symbols of Spanish rule. Now it indiscriminately targets civilians. In its region, it murders Basques who dare speak out against secession, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear. "Violence has become ETA's

Spanish authorities have estimated that the number of diehard ETA activists is well under 100. Most estimates of active al Qaeda operatives are in the hundreds. Technology means that small numbers can still do great harm -- as last week's tragedy amply illustrates. But that should not obscure the reality that the violence is a sign of weakness.

main rationale," a former separatist who renounced ETA long ago told the Financial Times last year. "The exercise of violence creates antibodies. ETA's new recruits can digest barbaric acts that would have been unthinkable under Franco: the torturing of town councillors, the killing of children, of traffic wardens and local policemen. ETA is now led by its most extreme elements, those who are prepared to go furthest in all this senseless killing."

ETA's goal -- the creation of a single Basque nation -- is not as fantastical as is al Qaeda's dream of a restored Islamic caliphate. But given that part of the Basque lands it wants to unify are in France, and none of the French Basques has any interest in this plan, it is utterly unrealistic. The goal is a charade, an excuse for bloodletting.

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Fared Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International. (c) 2004, Newsweek Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Can't we set an example of good two-party system?

ERSHAD KHANDKER

WE often hear that political parties should work unitedly for national development. The expectation is understandable but the terminology here is little suspect. When the party in power and the opposition are united, there is a government of national unity in power. Such an eventuality would only happen when the country is in a crisis situation.

The meaning and sentiment of the expression "unity" is clear. What is being asked for is "unity" of purpose. In a democracy, the ruling party and the opposition need to work according to the traditional definition of a party in power and a viable opposition. The country would be seen to have a functional democracy with accountability, transparency, and good governance. Then the world would have confidence in the stability of our political system leading to economic benefits and success in securing increased investment.

Most people know the realities of politics in Bangladesh. In two successive parliaments, the opposition boycotted parliamentary proceedings! The leaders of the political parties do not speak to each other, not at least in state functions and do not attend the same functions or meetings. The reality, lower down the rank, is not much better and the relationship between the rank and file members of the parties, positively sinister.

We may need the introduction of "bi-partisan" politics in Bangladesh. It means that, members of one political party could vote for a bill introduced by another party, if they feel that the bill would serve the interest of the constituency they represent. When a bill is passed by bi-partisan unity, usually a small number of parliamentarians break rank with their own party stance, and vote to see

the passage of a particular bill. The party temporarily losing the support of this small number of M.P.'s does not take action against the partisan party men, knowing that the political careers of the party men where at stake. Re-election to a seat in the Senate, parliament or a legislature known by a different name, depends on a good track record of representing the issues of the constituency. Democratic party senators, from conservative Southern American states could be seen to abstain or vote for bills introduced by the Republican party, on such issues as tax cuts or abortion and fear no reprisals from their own party. Come re-election, these bi-partisan voters, could claim to have worked for their constituents by showing their voting record on conservative issues. The Republican party members could do the same, vote for a bill to increase the size of the police force, a declared aim of former President Clinton, a Democrat. Law and order is a strong issue for the conservative Republican Party.

The concept of bi-partisan politics is just one ideal and practice that shows the level of tolerance existing in other democracies. There is no need to import any foreign ideals. We need to learn the more tried and tested methods adopted in other countries. The election commission in India is independent, British parliament has a unique tradition of neutral speaker of parliament, and so on.

Bangladesh is blessed to have only two major political parties. This system is tailor made for ensuring political stability. Even developed countries like Italy and Spain are forever battling with political instability and coalition politics. Instead of confrontation, the two parties in Bangladesh should work together as two institutions of democracy. When such a thing happens, it would be a happy day for democracy in Bangladesh.

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