

BJP victory in Gujarat



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE resounding victory in the Gujarat state assembly elections of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), widely seen as a communal organisation, has definitely come as a shot in arm for the party and controversial Chief Minister Narendra Modi, but is unlikely to change its fate considerably at the national level.

Many would like to see this win as a strong indication of BJP's bright chances of coming back to power in the next general elections, expected in early 2009. The party, rather unexpectedly, lost the polls to the Congress-led alliance last time, and is now making a formidable bid to return to power through the coming elections.

The BJP has even started projecting Lal Krishna Advani, the former party chief and the ex-deputy prime minister, as the next prime minister of the country. Advani, himself, in his comments on the party's victory in Gujarat appeared upbeat about capturing power in the South Block in the next polls.

MATTERS AROUND US

Many human rights and civil society bodies are frustrated over the outcome of the polls as they consider this absolves, in the eyes of the people, Modi and his government of serious human rights violations and of encouraging communal hatred and policies.

He has at least some reasons to feel emboldened, particularly after the BJP won in Gujarat, the important western state. The Congress, not unexpectedly, is somewhat crestfallen by the elections results as it finished a distant second in the race.

Nevertheless, the Gujarat elections outcome should not be seen as a dress rehearsal for the likely polls scenario at the national level. While the federal balloting is still quite far away, and it is obviously out of question at this stage to predict who will win, it can be concluded that the Gujarat result can, in no way, make the BJP really upbeat about its success in the next national elections.

The Indian elections in federal and state assembly levels are fought largely on different issues, and the outcome of the smaller polls is only seldom reflected at the national level. Even if it is, it is not necessarily because of the identical character of the two polls, but entirely on merits of two separate polls.

Instances are galore that a big party, which had done fairly well in the state polls ahead of the national elections, cut a sorry figure in the

balloting at the national level. This is not meant to undermine the massive win of the BJP in Gujarat, where certainly the party deserves kudos for its performance in the polls, fighting the Congress, which controls the federal government. However, it would be quite naïve to read too much in the outcome.

Gujarat has been the stronghold for the BJP for the last several years and the party spares no effort to maintain its dominance here, primarily for the reason that any development seen as weakening of the organisation in this sensitive state will send a very adverse signal about its politics and future all over the country.

Gujarat has been a talked about state because of the communal carnage that occasionally takes place, highlighted by the riots of 2002 when more than 200 people, mostly the minorities, were killed.

What is the worst aspect of the communal disturbances in Gujarat at that time is the accusation by many quarters that the government itself, under the patronage of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, encouraged the anti-minority carnage.

The secular parties like the

Congress, the leftists -- CPI(M) and the CPI -- the Samajwadi party and others have always castigated Modi and his government for not only their utter failure in protecting the lives and property of the minorities but also intentionally patronising the massacre.

Many in India and outside believe this had, unfortunately, happened. The image of Modi at personal level took such nosedive that he was once, as chief minister, refused visa to the United States, evidently for his communal record. Still, he and his party went on to win the polls later.

The victory of the BJP in Gujarat was anticipated, and some even predicted a bigger margin like a two-third majority, which did not come about. The party won 117 seats in the 182-member legislature, while the Congress finished with only 59 seats.

But it should not obscure the fact that BJP's tally has come down this time from 127 seats while the Congress got eight seats more. Congress thought that the anti-incumbency

factor and the infighting in the BJP about Modi's leadership might

weaken the party to the extent of losing the polls. This has not happened, although BJP's strength has now been reduced.

Congress supremo, Sonia Gandhi, who is also the chairperson of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh campaigned tirelessly, but could not make enough dents in the opposition's bastion.

Definitely, Narendra Modi and the BJP must be credited for overcoming the anti-incumbency problems and the internal squabbles, which, however, were of small scale. Modi himself was at the forefront of the campaign, and the success of the BJP in the polls is undoubtedly largely because of the charisma that he enjoys among his followers.

The reasons for BJP's victory in Gujarat can be summed up for three factors. First, the Modi government ran on a development platform in Gujarat, one of the most affluent states of India.

The government further contributed to its acceleration in the industrial and other sectors, which was the main interest of the people at large. His communal image notwithstanding, Modi was not accused of corruption or other wrong doings. The Congress campaign lacked orchestrated and sustained steam.

Lastly, and more importantly, the BJP mobilised all its efforts in the state as it could not afford to lose the polls in this particular state because its existence, in many ways, rested



BJP supporter, wearing a mask of Chief Minister Modi, celebrates victory.

on the results of the Gujarat elections.

Many human rights and civil society bodies are frustrated over the outcome of the polls as they consider this absolves, in the eyes of the people, Modi and his government of serious human rights violations and of encouraging communal hatred and policies.

Secular forces, both in and outside India, are clearly dismayed by the development, which, however, has not come as a surprise. It

is the peculiar character of Gujarat politics that has ensured the victory of a chief minister and his party in the elections. But this, in no way, erases the crimes that Modi and his people had perpetrated earlier, and his election campaign along strictly communal lines can also never be approved as he is very much at the helm of the government.

Narendra Modi may have won another election, but his record,

both in the past and also

at present, does not speak well for Gujarat, the land of Mahatma Gandhi, father of the Indian nation and ardent promoter of non-violence.

It remains to be seen how he conducts his state government, especially in approaches towards minorities in secular India, in the coming days.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is the Chief Editor of the BSS news agency.

Of detained DU teachers



ANM NURUL HAQUE

TWO Dhaka courts have started the trial of four teachers and 15 students of Dhaka University (DU) after framing charges against them for breaching the emergency power rules (EPR) during the August violence on campus. Five of the accused were in the dock while 14 others, who are students, were absconding.

The court rejected the discharge petitions filed by the detainees -- Prof. Sadrul Amin, the President of DU Teachers Association (Duta), Prof. Anwar Hossain, the General Secretary of the Duta, Prof. Harun-ur-Rashid, social science Dean, Prof. Neem Chandra Bhowmik, Chairman of applied physics department and student Moniruzzaman.

The courts have started the trial at a time when everybody was

BY THE NUMBERS

It is appreciable that the caretaker government has initiated a move for permanent ban on politics by teachers and students of public universities and colleges in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutes of higher education. We think that the government should go for amendment of the University Ordinance 1973 to bring back the universities to the right track.

expecting unconditional release of the teachers and students. In a bid to defuse tension on the campus, the government, on December 8, assured the teachers' representatives that the teachers would be freed in two weeks.

Police filed a case on August 22 against some 6,000 unnamed students and teachers of DU and outsiders for violating the EPR and vandalising public and private property.

The second case was also filed against 5,000 unnamed people, including DU teachers and students, on same day for similar offences.

The DU teachers brought out a protest procession following the violence that flared up in the DU campus on August 20 and 21, erupting from a brawl between an army man and a student during a football match.

Police arrested four teachers and a student of DU in late August, who were later implicated in two cases for allegedly violating the EPR.

A speedy trial court in Rajshahi, on December 4, handed down two years rigorous imprisonment each to four RU teachers for breaching the EPR by bringing out a silent procession on the campus on August 21.

The government finally freed the four convicted teachers of RU in the face of growing public demand, and claimed that the release came following a petition of mercy to the president from the convicted teachers. But the freed teachers rejected the government's claim, saying that they had not sought the presidential clemency.

The spread of violence outside the DU campus clearly indicated that some elements were out to

destabilise the government, using the students' unrest as an opportunity. Strangely, the government, without searching for the real culprits, picked out the university



Four DU teachers detained in connection with violating Emergency Power Rules.

teachers as if they had planted the seed of violence.

The government formed a one-member judicial inquiry commission led by a retired High Court judge to investigate the violence, who urged the government to be compassionate and considerate towards the respectable and elderly DU teachers and not to go for any action.

The report said that any sort of action against the DU teachers and students might further aggravate the congenial atmosphere on the campus.

The detention of the university

teachers has been agitating the minds of the conscious citizens over the past many months. The people welcomed the government's moves of freeing four RU teachers and assuring release of DU teachers and students in two weeks.

The stance taken by the detained DU teachers and their families not to seek presidential clemency, and the decision of the RU released teachers to go to higher court challenging the verdict, is commendable indeed. Let the judiciary have a chance to prove its independence.

Coming to the specific issue of the four detained DU teachers, it needs to be pointed out here that the charge of instigating students' protest in violation of the EPR is appalling, at the least.

On the other hand, both the complainants who lodged two separate cases against 6,000 and 5,000 unnamed people, including DU teachers and students, failed to articulate who actually violated the EPR.

Had these teachers been guilty of committing crimes like deception, grabbing public properties or misappropriating funds, they would certainly not draw public sympathy. But bringing out a silent procession on the campus to pro-

test police intemperance does not qualify as a crime in the public eye. Therefore, the university teachers have received widespread support.

Arrest, trial and jailing of the teachers is not an answer to the colossal problems that our public universities have been facing. Naked politicisation in every field of national life has not spared the education sector, and political nepotism in recruiting unfit teachers in the public universities has contributed to the decline of quality in higher education.

The most silent decay in our national life has occurred in the sector of higher education, due to politics by teachers and students. Frequent strikes, violence and other distractions have been taking a heavy toll on the general students of the public universities.

Education is an area which has been kept above all political rivalry in most of the countries in the world. Sadly, both the politicians and the university teachers of Bangladesh are conspicuously devoid of such sense.

There is no place for free thinking in the universities nowadays, as the teachers have got involved in partisan politics, abusing the autonomy of the universities; and they are even getting promotions wielding political clout, said Dr.

Kamal Hossain, the eminent jurist of the country, while speaking as the chief guest at a roundtable on Education - Students and Expectation held in the city on September 7.

The conscious citizens of the country really do not like university teachers getting involved in partisan politics and being branded as blue or white or pink, instead of providing proper education.

It is even more shocking that university teachers go on mass leave or lead protest processions like partisan hacks against the arrest of political leaders, setting aside their prime duty of teaching. The university teachers, who enjoy highest respect in the society for their intellectualism, must not put down this honour by behaving in an irresponsible manner.

It is appreciable that the caretaker government has initiated a move for permanent ban on politics by teachers and students of public universities and colleges in a bid to restore proper academic atmosphere in the institutes of higher education. We think that the government should go for amendment of the University Ordinance 1973 to bring back the universities to the right track.

ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

Australia's new foreign policy



HARUN UR RASHID

AUSTRALIANS threw out decisively the almost 12-year old conservative government on November 24, and installed a Labour Party government led by former diplomat Kevin Rudd.

Australia suffers from a dilemma: it is culturally aligned with the West but is a part of the Asia Pacific region. Paul Keating, Labour prime minister in the early '90s, in his book:

Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia Pacific (2000) asserts: "Australia is a legitimate part of this region ... this right derives in part from geography. It springs most particularly from the dense network of interests which bind Australia and our neighbours: the

BOTTOM LINE

If election pledges are any guide, Rudd will have the opportunity to make the country different from that of Howard's era. Former Labour prime minister Paul Keating once said that "if you change the prime minister, you change the country." This seems to be occurring, hopefully, in Australia under the new prime minister.

60 per cent of our trade which goes to East Asia."

Past policies under the Howard government

During the early '50s and '60s, conservative Prime Minister Robert Menzies was voicing the fear of resurgent Japan and expansionary China, and cultivated relationship with the US to preserve Australia from the "yellow peril." The Howard government followed Menzies and ignored Australia's network of interests with Asia, and shifted emphasis from the region to the West. The fear of Asia remained the dominant undercurrent in Australia's foreign policy during the Howard years.

On one of his first foreign visits, to Indonesia in 1996, after the winning the election, Howard outlined only the negatives that differenti-

ated Australia from Indonesia. It was a strange and most undiplomatic speech. Observers say that his predecessor, Paul Keating, was close to the Indonesian leadership, and Howard wanted to show that he was different from his predecessor by pointing out only the differences, and not the similar concerns of the region.

Howard almost neglected South Asia. He cancelled his first intended visit to India in the late '90s. Later, he realised that India was an agent of change and was growing economically, like China. But the damage was done. Furthermore, the Speaker of India's Parliament was to visit Australia, but airport formalities, including intention of body searching the speaker, put off the visit.

Although the Howard government had deep commercial interests with China, he supported the alliance of India-Japan-Australia-US to contain the power of China in the Asia Pacific region. Both the former Japanese prime minister and former Australian foreign minister did not directly mention a security alliance, but spoke of the alliance of four democratic countries in strengthening peace and security in the region. But no one can miss the implications of such an alliance at the initiative of the US.

As a result, Australia did not win the hearts and minds of the people of the Asian region, rather Asian countries looked upon Australia as the "Deputy Sheriff" of the US in the region. Howard showed muscle power with smaller Pacific Island

States, and was largely instrumental in making East Timor independent from Indonesia.

New policy directions

The new Prime Minister Rudd's government policies will have an impact not only on domestic area but also on foreign relations.

It appears that Rudd understands the importance of its geo-political role in the region. Rudd believes that the strength of Australia lies in the engagement with Asia. In the past, the Labour governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (1983-96) wanted to put Australia in a different geographical UN group, with the Asia-Pacific region. Currently, Australia belongs to the European and others group.

If Australia maintains cooperative and trustful relations with the Asian states, it can mediate among them in resolving issues that may occur. Furthermore, if Australia understands more about Asian ethos and values, it can provide advice to the West as to how to deal effectively with the region. In that way Australia, a middle-power nation, can influence the events both in Asia and in the West.

The first act Rudd, as the prime

minister, did was to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which the Howard government resisted partly because the Bush administration did not become a party to it. Although the ratification is symbolic, others, including Asian states, that Australia does not blindly follow the US policy and it can act on its own, see it.

Australia and China need each other. China needs natural resources from Australia, and Australia receives huge boost in its budget from its exports to China. The suspicion that Australia is part of a China-containment coalition is likely to disappear under Rudd's government. Rudd assured, in fluent mandarin, China's President Hu Jintao during the Apec Summit in Sydney that his government would not play "the US card" against China.

On Iraq, Rudd pledged to withdraw 550 Australian combat troops from Iraq, and reversed the Howard government policy to keep the combat forces as long as was necessary. Last September, at the Apec meeting in Sydney, President Bush met with Kevin Rudd, the then opposition leader.

It is understood that Rudd told the US President that although he was committed to the US-Australia

alliance, he would withdraw troops from Iraq. Howard was perceived to have gone too far in following Bush in sending troops to a distant land, Iraq, while New Zealand did not. If there is a Democrat in the White House in 2009, he would be on the same wavelength as Rudd.

Australia's relations with the US will remain strong, but with a difference. Australia will take care of its national interests in not following blindly the US policy in the region and elsewhere. Academics say that instead of always leading the cheering squad for the US, Australia is likely, under Rudd, to cultivate some of the skills of a helpful passenger of a bus driven by the US. These include encouraging careful steering, some timely map reading, a judicious use of brakes and, not least, better road manners. These would serve the interests of both the countries.

Already, the US Assistant Secretary of State, Nicholas Burns, visited Australia in recent days and met with new Foreign Minister Stephen Smith. The prime minister is likely to visit Washington early next year.

Under Prime Minister Rudd, Australia's relations with its biggest neighbour Indonesia are likely to turn a new page. The historical

baggage of Howard's apathy and East Timor's independence may not dog Indonesia's relations with Australia. During the Bali Climate Change Conference, Kevin Rudd met the Indonesian president on December 11 and assured him of all cooperation with Indonesia in fulfilling its role in the region.

Kevin Rudd is likely to pursue a much gentler, less muscular, and non-invasive policy towards small Pacific Island states. New Zealand has more clout and influence with the events of the Pacific Island states than Australia under the Howard government did. Already, Rudd has met New Zealand's Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark in Brisbane, and spoke of joint cooperation in maintaining stability and peace in the region.

If election pledges are any guide, Rudd will have the opportunity to make the country different from that of Howard's era. Former Labour prime minister Paul Keating once said that "if you change the prime minister, you change the country." This seems to be occurring, hopefully, in Australia under the new prime minister.

Barister Harun Ur Rashid is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.