

Gandhi family charisma on the wane

COOMI KAPOOR

TWO days after the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh celebrated its fourth anniversary in the office, voters in the southern state of Karnataka gave it a big jolt when they elected its archrival and main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power. This was the first time ever that the right wing, pro-Hindutva BJP had won power in any southern state. Last Sunday's (June 1) loss of Karnataka was particularly bad news for the Congress-led ruling coalition. Already pushed to the corner by the sharp rise in prices of essential everyday items and a worsening internal security situation, the UPA government had pinned its hope on the outcome of the Karnataka Assembly elections to provide it much needed morale boost. Instead, it received a drubbing. Even voters in the cosmopolitan state capital, Bangalore, gave it the thumbs-down.

The Congress' defeat could virtually paralyse the central government. Having lost almost all significant state elections since it first assumed power in May 2004, the party would no longer be in a position to push its policy-agenda any further.

With allies like the communists making its life difficult on the controversial nuclear agreement with the United States and other economic policy measures, there is now a real threat that the Manmohan Singh government would reverse the trend towards economic pragmatism and, instead, embrace controls and curbs on free market economic activity.

The immediate headache for the prime minister was the galloping price of crude oil. State-owned oil refining and marketing companies stared financial ruin in the eye as the government refused to allow them to charge cost prices for petrol, diesel, kerosene, cooking gas, etc.

At present, oil marketing companies are obliged to absorb one-third of the burden of the increased crude prices, while the other two-thirds is shared equally by the oil refineries and the government. Private sector oil refining and marketing companies like Reliance and Essar export all their production since they cannot afford to sell in the domestic market at the depressed prices at which public sector companies are obliged to sell.)

However, this formula has been overtaken by the recent spurt in international crude prices. Failure to compensate oil-marketing companies, either through higher retail prices or higher cash payouts from the government, or a mixture of the two, would cause them to go into liquidation.

However, the government's dilemma is that if increased retail prices of fuel it would become even more unpopular. Besides, the rise in oil prices would further stoke inflation since the road transport sector is bound to pass the additional cost to the users.

On the other hand, a failure to raise the prices could bankrupt oil companies and dry petrol pumps. Currently, the difference between the cost and retail prices of oil products is projected at Rs235 billion (\$5.57 billion).

Ironically, management of the economy was the strong suit of the prime minister. But, as was borne out by the Karnataka verdict, the government has failed on the economic front as well.

Besides the sharp spurt in inflation, particularly in the prices of everyday food items, the woeful state of urban infrastructure in Bangalore and other towns in the state cost the Congress Party dearly.

The loss of Karnataka -- despite the massive farm loan waiver amounting to over Rs70 billion (\$1.65 billion), despite the much-hyped rural employment guarantee scheme, despite sustained campaigning by Sonia Gandhi and her apparent Rahul Gandhi -- is a huge blow to the ruling Congress Party.

Clearly, the Gandhi family's charisma is on the wane. The party also lost a string of parliamentary and assembly by-elections held simultaneously in several states across the country.

With a fresh parliamentary election due by May next year, there is no denying that the dice is loaded against the Congress Party.

Manmohan Singh, admittedly a rare Indian politician with a deserved reputation for financial integrity, has no pulling power with the people. His poor political management and the worsening global economic situation have inevitably resulted in a high rate of inflation and a sharp economic slowdown.

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE total fertility rate of 2.7 per woman, as at present in Bangladesh, could be considered as low fertility by any standard. This rate is lower in comparison with many Asian and most African countries. Mr. Arthur Erken, Country Representative of UNFPA, has advised adoption of appropriate future strategies keeping Bangladesh as a low fertility nation in view.

There is no scope to be complacent with this total fertility rate since it should be at least 2.1 to reach the stage of replacement level of fertility, and the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) should reach 72% from the 55.8% as at present. To increase the CPR to 72%, mobilisation of resources, energy and investment must be doubled with combined initiatives of government, non-government organisations and private sector enterprises.

No doubt, fertility decline is the success story of Bangladesh under a challenging environment where level of education, per capita income, empowerment of women, and social conditions and beliefs are not conducive to attaining the targets of the millennium development goals (MDG).

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare can claim commendations for the significant reduction of TFR from 6.3 in 1974 to 2.7 in 2007, and population growth rate to 1.42%. Besides, there are some more success stories, like introduction of oral rehydration therapy, building of mass awareness for safe drinking water, reduction of smoking, distribution of Vitamin A supplements, control of TB, leprosy and malaria, expanded program of immunisation etc., resulting in an increase in life expectancy at birth.

A few health problems like hypertension, hepatitis, liver cirrhosis, renal failure, gastroenterology, STI/RTI, drug abuse, arsenic poisoning, anthrax, maternal and child health, and malnutrition have emerged as positive threats.

The findings of the demographic and health survey 2007 has reemphasised this trend of

Fertility decline: Rhetoric or reality?

There could be special packages to increase male contraception, sterilisation, promotion of IUD, and introduction of emergency contraceptive pills to increase the acceptance rate of contraceptives. A social movement with intensive BCC campaign should be started with the participation of community volunteers, women's groups, satisfied clients, ansars and village defense parties. Experience of some successful interventions should be replicated in low performing and hard to reach areas to make the fertility decline a reality.



fertility decline as reality, not rhetoric. But the result of a few specific studies reveal certain alarming findings negating the achievements, as well as posing serious threat to the program itself.

A study conducted by Population Council, Dhaka reveals that 76% of the rickshaw-pullers of Dhaka City are involved in extra marital sex with commercial sex workers without using any condom. Most of them are not aware of safe blood transmission, or implications of diseases like syphilis or gonorrhoea.

Only 9% of the women are aware of reproductive tract infections or sexual tract infections, which might result in serious morbidity.

It is alarming when a study finding reveals that the incidence of pre-marital sex is much higher in rural localities than in urban areas, where adolescent health care is absent and emergency contraceptive pill is unknown as a method for the prevention of pregnancy.

Traditional healers, barefoot doctors, quacks and rural practitioners of alternate medicine take the advantage of termination of pregnancy in a crude manner, creating a serious threat to the women's health.

Early marriage and childbirth as determinants of fertility indicate a dismal picture, when 66% of women marry before their 18th birthday and median age at first birth is 19 years.

In Bangladesh, fertility is negatively related with wealth. Rich people are more likely to have fewer children than the poor people. TFR of women in the poorest quintile is 3.2, whereas it is 2.2 among the rich quintile.

It can be safely stated that neo-natal health care is extremely inadequate, 85% of the deliveries take place at home, 70% of the pregnant mothers suffer from anaemia, 15,000 women die annually during child birth, and 70% of the women do not have any access to ante-natal care. Besides, the drop-out rate of contraception is almost 47%, sterilisation is decreasing, insertion of IUD is poor, and traditional methods of

contraception comprise more than 8% of the contraception prevalence rate, creating a scope of false reporting.

It is also difficult to call it a success story when 700 children die in a day from acute respiratory infection and pneumonia, and 45% of the children are born with low birth weight. Besides, 50% of the children are stunted due to malnutrition and 17% of the women are shorter than the expected height.

The present fertility decline is not enough to overcome challenges of food crisis and demands on the health services. The addition of 3 million people every year is really a threat to the economy and food security.

It is more alarming when

demographic estimates indicate that the population will reach 17.20 crores, and 50% of the rural population will migrate to urban cities by 2020. The total population will reach 28.20 crores by 2051, with almost double the present density. At the same time, cultivable land will be covered by housing, with reduction in the numbers of farmers and transfer of profession to the service sector from agriculture.

Thus, there should be drastic reduction in fertility, with a clarion call for one child norm, with the provision of multiple disincentives for crossing the limit. There could be a way out to combat the situation with a fresh policy guideline in the Health Policy. The Health, Population, Nutrition Sector Program should not falter in achieving the targets, and PIPs must be implemented as schedule.

The existing health infrastructure is one of the best in the third world countries, and should be managed properly, if necessary by outsourcing the same. FWV, FWA, HA, AHI should be recruited afresh and trained to provide door to door services, and they could be effectively involved in delayed marriage campaigns and programs for small family norm advocacy.

Community volunteers could be involved wherever manpower mobilisation appears to be difficult, especially in chars and hard to reach low performing areas of Sylhet and Chittagong Divisions.

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Experience of some successful interventions should be replicated in low performing and hard to reach areas to make the fertility decline a reality.

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What to do if you have way too much money

EVERY now and then, top government officials look at their coffers, and say out loud: "Wow. We have way too much money. How can we blow the lot?"

From me comes the obvious answer, which is: "Hey. Why ask me? I'm a newspaper columnist."

But some bright spark in the civil service always comes up with the sort of proposal they like: "Let's offer to host an unimaginably large and expensive event so that we can build an entire city with loads of costly infrastructure and stuff, and then overspend disastrously on every item."

Now if my wife made a suggestion like that (and she does, at regular intervals), I would un-categorically reject it in the strongest possible terms, using words such as: "Yes, dear, maybe later."

But governments are different. They adore such suggestions. Officials immediately promote whoever suggested it to Minister of Finance and Junkets, and start throwing truckloads of taxpayers' money into the hands of their friends in business, temporarily interrupting their normal activity, which is throwing truckloads of taxpayers' money into the hands of their friends in business.

For decades, the Olympic Games were considered the best way of losing huge sums of money fast, but they didn't happen often enough. They were "quadrennial," which means "every four years," and should not be confused with the word "bicentennial" which means "sexually ambiguous."

So governments introduced the World Expo, a second excuse to build unnecessary cities. These were originally every fourth year, or "quadraphonic," but are now "bisexual," which means "every two-to-six years."

World Expos come in two sizes. The big ones, such as Shanghai 2010, are advertised so heavily you get sick of them. Already, all large outdoor surfaces, including the dark side of the moon and John McCain's forehead, have been reserved for promoting this event.

Then there are tiny ones, which you hear nothing about. One of these starts this coming weekend in Zaragoza, Spain. (I hadn't heard of it either.)

Although the main purpose of World Expos are to waste taxpayers' money on things that disappear without trace, organisers occasionally accidentally achieve something.

This was the case in Paris in 1889. Instead of World Expo, the uppity French insisted on calling it Expo Universelle (perhaps so they could waste extra money on intergalactic landing strips). One of the useless things they built for that show is still there, 120 years later, although they still haven't thought of a use for it. Yes, it was the Eiffel Tower, now said to be the most recognisable building on Earth after the life-guards' changing room from Baywatch.

Occasionally, World Expos act as proof that the universe is governed by a huge, all-powerful Sense of Irony. In 1984, "Water as a Source of Life" was the theme of the World Expo in New Orleans, a city later destroyed by floods.

The World Expo that starts this weekend in Zaragoza is also on a watery theme: the coming water shortages predicted for this planet.

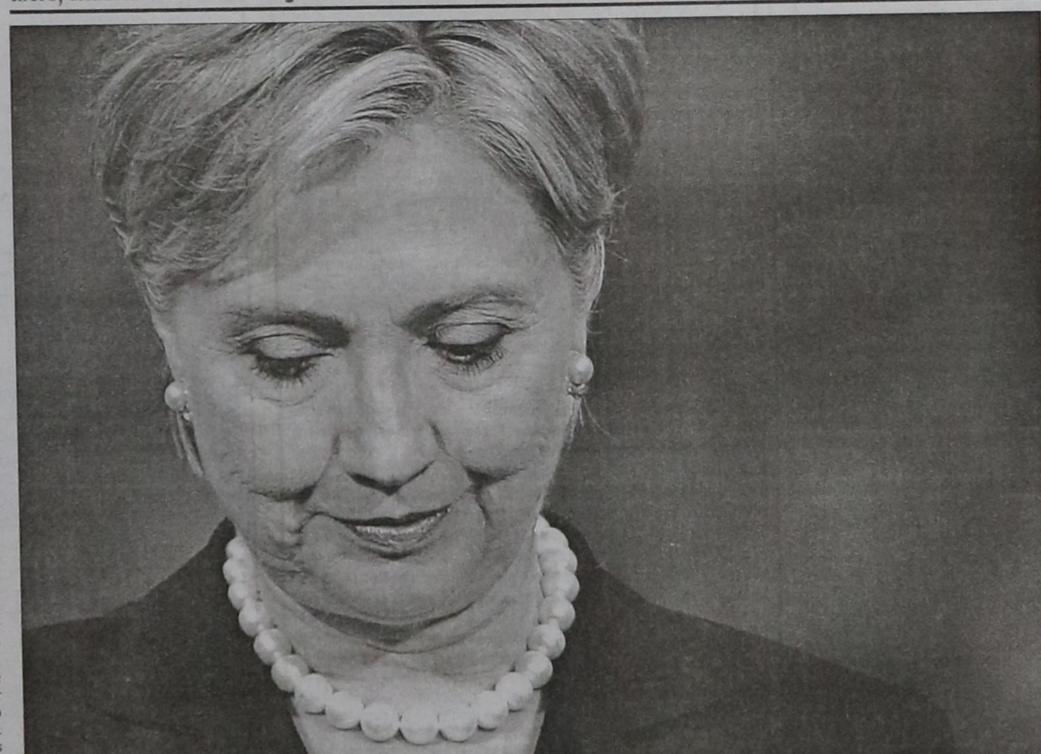
I tried to explain the water threat to my friends (idle Asian yuppies, like attracts like), but they couldn't get worked up about it. "I don't see what the problem is," said one. "I'll just drink Coke instead."

No doubt the Zaragozans (don't they sound like an alien race?) have rejected this cheap and easy solution.

It doesn't waste enough money.

Hillary Clinton's decline falls into a pattern

Hillary Clinton's decline thus falls into a pattern. It is part of recent American history. She has fought an epic battle and lost. But no one, not even her detractors, can be certain that she has lost the wider war. The future is still out there, either as Obama's running mate or as the Democratic presidential nominee in the future. She is still only sixty.



withdrew and Johnson faded away, to re-emerge later as JFK's running mate.

In 1988, it should have been a smooth ride to the Democratic nomination for Senator Gary Hart. He was the frontrunner in what was quickly becoming a packed race. But then a beautiful woman called Donna Rice was spotted sitting on his lap on a boat named, curiously, "Monkey Business." Hart went downhill from there. It was Governor

Michael Dukakis who became the nominee and almost became president before losing to George H.W. Bush.

Speaking of frontrunners turning into losers, in 1972 Maine senator Edmund Muskie was the man who Democrats thought would take on President Nixon at the election. The media then made some crass attacks on his wife Jane, prompting Muskie to break into tears in public. The American public was not

impressed and turned to the liberal George McGovern, who was then crushed in a Nixon landslide. In 1992, New York's Mario Cuomo was the Democrats' frontrunner for months, until an unknown Bill Clinton, despite Jennifer Flowers-related sex, edged him and everyone else out to claim the mantle at the party convention.

In the world of the Republicans, New York Governor

Nelson Rockefeller was for a number of years the man who would one day become president. He never did, but in 1964 he was in a strong enough position to wrestle the nomination away from Arizona senator Barry Goldwater. Then the Goldwater loyalists pounced on him, and his second marriage was made much of in order to undermine his commitment to family values. His liberalism was run to the ground.