

India's diversity promises shaky coalition yet again

AFP, New Delhi

India's masses go to the polls next week in a wide-open election that no single party can win, leaving the prospect of a shaky coalition government of disparate and often ill-suited "allies".

The world's largest democratic exercise will be held over five stages from April 16 to May 13, allowing 6.1 million security and poll personnel to fan out across 543 parliamentary constituencies in 28 states.

India's two main national parties -- the incumbent Congress and its opposition rival the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- both know they have no chance of winning enough seats to govern alone.

Consequently, "victory" for either means emerging as the single largest party and then winning over the greatest number of regional parties to secure a parliamentary majority.

For some observers, the growing number and clout of regional parties is a proud reflection of India's diversity, with its 1.1 billion people, dozens of languages and at least six major religions.

But others fear being governed by weak and increasingly unwieldy coalitions where national policy is hostage to the whims of small groups catering to their own parochial constituencies.

India needs "a seasoned leadership to tackle major problems facing the country which are a sharply slowing economy and political volatility in our immediate neighbourhood in South Asia", said political analyst Neeraj Chowdhury.

"But we seem to be heading for a fractured mandate," Chowdhury said.

Although some parties will contest the polls as a coalition, the decisive alliance building will take place in what is being called the election's "sixth phase" -- after the results have come in.

Yogendra Yadav, senior fellow at Centre for Study of Developing Societies, sees this final round of political horse trading as a betrayal of voter intentions.

"The problem with post-poll alliances is that they leave the people out," said Yadav, arguing that the final make-up of the government should not be left in the hands of party "middlemen".

Two veteran politicians are the main contenders for the prime minister's office -- the 76-year-old current premier Manmohan Singh of the Congress Party and the BJP's LK Advani, an 81-year-old former home minister.

The two men have traded personal campaign barbs, with Singh portraying Advani as a divisive sectarian and Advani dismissing the prime

minister as a "weak" puppet controlled by Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

In the wake of last year's attacks on Mumbai, both parties have sought to position themselves as the natural guardians of India's national security, as well as the best choice for steering the country through the current global economic crisis.

India's fragmented political structure and vast size means that few parties can claim nationwide appeal. That, and a strong sense of religious and social identity, mean that local and regional issues will be more to the fore.

"Local issues in the end are going to dominate... and often of the worst and lowest common denominator -- caste and communal mobilisation," said Ajay Sahni, executive director of the Institute of Conflict Management in New Delhi.

On the campaign trail, Congress is banking on the charisma of its star campaigners from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty -- Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul, the 38-year-old great-grandson of India's first premier Jawaharlal Nehru.

Advani, despite his age, has kept up a punishing campaign schedule and has been photographed lifting hand weights under the slogan: "He has the experience of 80 and the enthusiasm of 20."

Advani is best known for leading a Hindu revivalist

campaign in the early 1990s that breathed fresh life into his party but polarised Hindu and Muslim sentiment.

Neither Congress nor the BJP is expected to garner more than 150 seats, and their combined share of the popular vote is unlikely to top 50 percent.

Alliances are proving a headache for both parties with some regional groups sensing an opportunity to play hardball and waiting to see how the election results pan out before committing themselves.

Others have come together in a loose alliance of left-leaning and regional parties called the "Third Front" which is pushing itself as a viable alternative to the Congress and BJP-led coalitions.

One major regional grouping, The Bahujan Samajwadi Party (Dalit Society Party), has gone a step further by announcing its intention to fight as a national party and to challenge the big two in their strongholds.

The BSP is led by the charismatic Mayawati Kumari, 53, a firebrand orator and self-styled champion of India's Dalits -- the oppressed class formerly known as untouchables.

Mayawati has made no secret of her ambition to emulate Barack Obama's success in India, and become the country's first "untouchable" prime minister.

Heritage sites left in ruins

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resources shortage and lack of capacity building facilities for the current situation.

But the irony is the existing Antiquity Act is very old and inadequate to preserve heritage and its text could not be translated in Bangla 38 years into independence.

"Heritage affairs should be maintained by heritage-oriented people. It cannot be maintained by government staffs," said Asiatic Society of Bangladesh President Prof Sirajul Islam. He referred to the autonomous heritage departments in America, Europe, Japan, Australia and even in neighbouring India.

Prof Sirajul added, "Neither money nor manpower shortage can be a problem in maintaining heritage sites. Heritage can earn money from inside and outside the country. The problem is our approach and lack of expertise."

"Though the archaeology department claims they are following Conservation Manual and Archaeological Works Code, it exists only on papers. Practically they are just destroying the sites violating existing laws," said Prof Shah Sufi Mustafizur Rahman of department of archaeology, Jahangirnagar University.

Noted historian Prof Abdul Momin Chowdhury said, "The experts must reach a consensus on how conservation of archaeological sites should be maintained."

Prof Sharif Uddin Ahmed said, "Conservation is a science meaning you cannot do whatever you like. Skilled artisan is a must to ensure proper conservation. To develop such expertise people should be sent abroad for training, while those who know history and archaeology must be involved in conservation."

CONSERVATION, PRESERVATION & RESTORATION

The case of restoration, conservation and preservation in Panam in Sonargaon launched by the BNP-Jamaat-led four-party government can be an example of how the process violates existing laws.

After the 1/11 changeover the caretaker government formed an enquiry committee to look into the Tk 17 crore restoration works in Panam. The process was earlier halted midway following widespread criticism as it was in fact damaging ancient monuments.

The enquiry committee recommended cancellation of the process saying it does not have a master plan.

Enquiry also found colours used on 'restored' parts were too shiny and bear the testimony of modern age rather than reviving originality of the ancient monuments. Besides, cement and sand were used in plastering instead of lime-surki for restoration works causing further damage.

Moreover, RCC (rod-cement-concrete) pillars and beams were used instead of wooden ones though international laws direct to preserve and display antiquities with original materials and authentic documents.

Surprisingly, despite having enough evidence of irregularities and neglect the enquiry committee did not recommend action against anyone.

"Some deviations occurred as we had to work in an abnormal situation in Panam. We had to displace the occupants first and allow some deviations considering durability of the monuments," said Shafiqul Alam. He claimed the work in Panam was not stopped and its second phase might start any day.

Another example of negligence is 'preservation' of Shat Gambuz Mosque (60-Dome Mosque) funded jointly by the Bangladesh government and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) during BNP-Jamaat rule.

A separate enquiry committee headed by Prof Sharifuddin Ahmed found 'preservation' of Shat Gambuz was carried out by making on-spot decisions without conducting a study. This was gross violation of the international charter for conservation and preservation.

Based on spot decisions all 60 stone-made pillars but one were cased by bricks and then plastered to 'strengthen' those, investigators say.

The archaeology department officials have failed to show any study that had found the pillars were not strong enough to support the ceiling.

The enquiry committee recommended action against the officials responsible in vain.

A member of the committee said only one pillar remains in original state and the rest have been just "destroyed" during 'preservation'.

Another example can be the site of "Harishchandra Rajar Dhibi" in Savar. Though three sites in Savar including the "Dhibi" were announced protected in 1920, the archaeology department could not even demarcate those with fences.

The international law says security of a site is the first to be ensured.

FURTHER NEGLIGENCE

The latest example of neglect by the archaeology department has occurred in Ballati Jaminder Bari in Manikganj.

The department replaced three doors at three main entrances to the Jaminder Bari last year. A broken but original

wooden door remained and was repaired, but the department replaced the other three with iron-made doors having modern designs.

"We have installed the iron-made doors to ensure security to the Ballati palace. Wooden doors could not ensure security," said the former DG.

"If we want to preserve antiquities with all its authenticity all the sites will either be lost or destroyed as we don't have enough fund and manpower," comments an archaeology official.

THE ANTIQUITY ACT

The existing Antiquity Act, 1968 is just a version of the act formulated during the British rule. A ridiculous amendment was made in 1976 through an ordinance only to replace the names Pakistan by Bangladesh and rupee by taka.

A committee formed recently to update the Act is considering bringing some important amendments to the Act.

The committee thinks abolishing the provision of the advisory committee and entrusting its work with the DG would be an important amendment.

Experts say if such amendment is brought irregularities will rise by hundred times and antiquities will be lost forever. They suggest adding some strict criteria to ensure participation of experts from multiple disciplines.

The Act also discourages examination of archaeological evidence like earth, coal and ash abroad as there is no clear provision in this regard.

It even does not have the provision to take action against any persons involved in preservation, conservation and restoration in case of any loss as section 30 offers indemnity.

High security for Indian PM in Assam after blast

AFP, Guwahati

Police tightened security yesterday in India's northeastern Assam state for a visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a day after a series of explosions in the region killed 10 people.

The six bombings and grenade attacks in Assam's largest city, Guwahati, and elsewhere in the state left 60 people wounded.

"Security forces have been put on a state of high alert to prevent any further rebel attacks," chief minister Tarun Gogoi told reporters.

Police have launched a hunt for the bombers who they say belong to the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).

Singh was scheduled to visit the eastern town of Dibrugarh on Tuesday to address an election rally before national polls begin on April 16.

His visit coincides with 30th anniversary of the founding of the ULFA, and police said they had received tips that the separatist outfit was planning attacks to mark the occasion.

One powerful explosion tore through a market in Guwahati Monday afternoon, while there were three other bombings and two grenade attacks across Assam, including one at a police station.

Castro welcomes US lawmakers seeking to break the ice

AFP, Havana

President Raul Castro has welcomed US lawmakers in his first meeting with US officials since he took Cuba's helm last year, state media reported, ahead of a potential dialogue with the United States.

Castro, 77, welcomed the Americans -- seven Democrats from the US Congressional black caucus -- Monday in the name of his ailing elder brother, former president Fidel Castro, 82, a US nemesis for five decades.

The US group had met Friday with National Assembly speaker Ricardo Alarcon, as delegation leader Representative Barbara Lee said the talks pointed to a change in the tone of relations between foes Havana and Washington.

Lee said the group was hopeful US-Cuban relations would change for the better under US President Barack Obama. "That's why we're here," she said.

Fidel Castro had met Lee on her prior trips to Cuba, but Raul said he "had not had the honour" of meeting her, according to Cuban television.

While campaigning last year, Obama said he was open to new dialogue with Washington's adversaries, including Cuba, and as presi-

dent he has moved to lift some restrictions on US citizens travelling to Cuba and to ease cash transfers to the island.

At the lawmakers' landmark meeting with Raul Castro, the Cuban government also was represented by Alarcon and the Communist Party's top official for the capital city, Pedro Saenz. Both are members of Cuba's Politburo.

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez was also there as was Jorge Bolanos, the head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, state media said, without offering details on the talks.

The outreach came after Fidel Castro said the communist nation welcomes dialogue with the United States and did not want five decades of confrontation with its powerful neighbour to drag on.

Fidel Castro's comments came as the US lawmakers visited Cuba to try to end mutual distrust and amid reports that Obama was planning to ease economic sanctions, including travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans.

"We're not afraid to talk with the United States. We also don't need confrontation to exist, like some fools like to think," Fidel Castro said in an article on the Cubadebate website Sunday.

Israel tests Arrow interceptor missile

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday carried out a successful new test of its Hetz (Arrow) interceptor missile, a project launched two decades ago, public radio said.

The Arrow intercepted, and destroyed a ballistic missile comparable to Iran's Shahab-3, which can reach the Jewish state, that was fired by an Israeli fighter plane over the Mediterranean, it said.

It was the latest successful test of the Arrow, a project launched in 1988 during the now-defunct Star Wars programme under late US president Ronald Reagan.

The Arrow programme was stepped up after Israel was hit by 39 Iraqi Scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War.

Development of the Arrow is now half-funded by Israel's main ally, the United States. Israel has carried out more than a dozen successful tests of the Arrow under various conditions.

Israel considers Iran to be its arch-foe following repeated statements by the Islamic republic's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for the Jewish state to be wiped off the map.

Brokers maintain close ties

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government and these are then sold to recruiting agencies in Bangladesh to make money.

Although the government rate for workers wishing to go to Malaysia for work stands at Tk 84,000, the actual cost incurred by a worker now ranges between Tk 2 lakh and Tk 3 lakh. The workers are forced to pay a chain of brokers at different levels only to be exploited and stranded when they reach the foreign land.

Again when these hapless workers land in Malaysia, manpower brokers 'buy' them from their employers or outsourcing companies and supply them to other workplaces for temporary work. The exploitation doesn't end at that, the brokers also charge money from the worker's wages leaving the labourers with only the minimum for their sustenance, and sometimes, nothing at all.

These unauthorised brokers often confine workers to rooms known as 'godowns' when they demand jobs, salaries or register a protest.

It is ironic, but not really surprising, that most of the leaders and members of Bangladesh Workers Welfare

Association -- set up in Malaysia to ensure welfare of workers under the leadership of Talat Mahmud Khan -- are manpower brokers.

Sources allege that this association is actually more occupied in covering up labour problems than helping the workers.

Asked why the labour wing did not take measures against these brokers who indulge in such a degree of malpractices and are responsible for ruining Bangladesh's labour market, Talat failed to give any satisfactory answer.

"You cannot do anything about the association as they have other businesses to run too," he said during an interview with The Daily Star at the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur on March 3.

He said the main problems did not lie with brokers, rather the recruiting agencies in Bangladesh.

Talat, however, admitted the exploitation of workers by the brokers.

He said, "They take money from both sides -- both the recruiting agencies and employers in Malaysia -- but they do not perform their end of the bargain, which is why

they cannot put pressure on employers for payment of salaries or other things including renewal of work permits."

Replying to another question, Talat claimed he had written to Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) that each recruiting agency should have at least one authorised representative in Malaysia so that he (Talat) can contact them when problems arise.

The labour counsellor said he made similar recommendations to the taskforce on overseas employment during their visit to Malaysia during the tenure of the caretaker government.

But the reality is that no recommendation ever yielded any results. Rather the exploitation of workers continued unabated and after the Malaysian media highlighted the workers' plight along with an interview with Talat Mahmud, the authorities cancelled 55,000 work visas to Bangladeshis.

Asked if brokers influence employers or outsourcing companies to get more job approvals authorised than jobs available, only to make more

profit, Khan said the situation is actually dependant on a demand and supply equation.

Talat said that the Malaysian government is responsible for the availability of excessive job approvals.

"If we do not attest approvals, some Malaysian employers bring letters from the prime minister's office (Malaysian) stating 'they will solve everything' if problems arise."

Though officials say it is the responsibility of the home ministry, and not of the high commission, to verify the genuineness of the job approvals, Talat said that it was not possible for him to verify all approvals from around 9000 companies by himself.

When the blame game and denials and confessions continue, there are still no steps from the government to make these unauthorised brokers accountable in any way.

Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Secretary Ilias Ahmed told The Daily Star on March 29 the government was discussing the issue of bringing manpower brokers under legal framework with BAIRA.

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পদ্মকুন্ডি

আবেদনপত্র পাঠাবা যাবেঃ
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আবেদনপত্র পাঠাবা শেষ তারিখ ২৫ এপ্রিল, ২০০৯

পদ্মকুন্ডি কালচারাল ফাউন্ডেশন (প্রিসিএফ)

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RMG workers

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Officer-in-charge (OC) Abdur Rashid of Gazipur Police Station said the accident took place when a Tongi bound brick laden truck rammed a rickshaw leaving the victims critically injured. They died on the way to Gazipur Sadar Hospital, added police sources.

Locals captured the killer truck and set it on fire. Later they started vandalising vehicles on the highway, police said.

As the news spread, over three hundred agitating garment workers from different factories came out and joined the rampage on the highway leaving at least 15 buses wrecked and two trucks charred, locals and police said.

Gazipur Sadar fire fighters reached the spot and doused the two blazing trucks. During the rampage the demonstrators also put barricade on the highway from around 8:15am, sources said.

OC Rashid said the agitating workers and locals lifted the hour-long barricade on assurance of punitive measures against truck drivers.

The driver of the truck, however, managed to escape the scene, he added.

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