

# Indian elections and the Bangladesh perspective

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HERE is a similarity in the just announced results of the Indian elections with Bangladesh's on December 29th. The winners in both cases were expected to win but the ultimate results were beyond their most optimistic expectations. In India's case, the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) overcame the anti-incumbency bug to return to power. Manmohan Singh, already named to become Prime Minister for another term, will thus become the first PM after Jawaharlal Nehru in 1961 to return to office in successive elections. It was the Congress' best show in many decades. The party won 203 seats; a number they passed in 1984 and 1991, both held after assassinations (1984, Indira Gandhi; 1991, Rajiv Gandhi) that brought the party sympathy votes.

In the final tally, the Congress led UPA won 260 seats, just teasingly short of the magical figure of 272. Its main opponent the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secured 158 seats. In the last elections, the Congress had won only 145 seats and was at the mercy of its alliance partners, an amalgam of left and regional parties, to govern India and carry out the economic reforms crucial to India's future. This time, the party is much better poised to stamp its authority on alliance partners and thus it will be better placed to carry its agenda of economic reform. It can get the remaining number short of 272 without any horse trading. The elections will thus bring a stable government in New Delhi.

The results have given a national party the mandate to govern the country after many decades when politics in New Delhi was subjected to the regional agenda with region based parties sharing power with a national party like the Congress or the BJP in a manner where they could dictate many of the decisions. In fact, one of the most decisive verdicts of the Indian elections has been the choice of the voters against regionalism, although before the elections regional leaders such as Mayawati, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, Narendra Modi and a few others were being touted as possible Prime Ministers. The elections have thus rejected regionalism in national politics.

Among the other clear choices that the voters have made, one is undoubtedly for a secular India. BJP leaders themselves have put blame on Varun Gandhi's anti-

Muslim hate speech during the campaign and Gujarat Chief Minister Mr. Narendra Modi's name coming up as a possible Prime Minister of India as two of the main reasons for NDA's resounding defeat. Mr. Modi earned notoriety both in India and abroad for his role in instigating anti-Muslim riots in his province in 2002 for which he has been blacklisted for US visa by the US authorities. The Indian voters have thus cast their votes for secularism and against communalism.

The UPA, however, did not win the elections on just these negative factors. The voters have taken note of the positive changes that India has achieved in the last five years and concluded that they needed the Congress for another term with a clear mandate to transform India into one of the top economies of the world. They have also voted with the clear perception that in the turbulent times through which India is passing with the rest of the world, she needed at the centre a national party that would look to the outside world rather than get bogged down with conflicts and politics in the regions of India. The results indicate a faith in the Congress for its policies and outlook.

The routing of the left front that had been a major obstacle for the Congress-led government is another major outcome of the elections. The left led a third front and lost even in its traditional strongholds of Kerala and West Bengal. It came out of the UPA government and opposed many of the economic reforms and the civil nuclear deal with the USA. Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool bagged 19 seats and with Congress winning 25 of the 42 seats in West Bengal, leaving the left with 15, it gave rise to speculation that the left's decades-old stranglehold in WB may be fading. The voters have also unequivocally rejected the left in national politics as a third force.

The voters' choice for UPA will have a positive impact on how India builds its strategic partnership with the United States. When Manmohan Singh signed the civil nuclear deal, President Bush was in office. As Prime Minister of a stronger Indian government, Manmohan Singh can now build upon that partnership with President Obama. He will now be in a more comfortable situation dealing with President Obama on other issues extending from economic reforms to climate change. President Obama will also find himself dealing with a new and strong Indian government at a time when the US is deeply involved with security of the region, with situation in Pakistan and



Afghanistan sliding and in need of a dependable regional ally. A strong government in New Delhi will also send equally strong signals abroad to dispel fears of foreign investors.

Indian voters have always been fascinated with charismatic national leaders and for good reasons. In the British days, they were fascinated with Gandhi, Patel and a host of other national leaders. In free India, they were fascinated with Nehru and then Indira Gandhi. Then as regional politics took hold in New Delhi, charismatic national leaders became history. This year's elections witnessed the re-emergence of charisma in Indian politics manifested with all the charm and aura in the person of Rahul Gandhi, whose mother Congress Chief and wife of late Rajiv Gandhi matched her son as another charismatic leader in Indian politics. The son and mother duo had a significant impact on voters in favour of the Congress led UPA. Rahul, the anti-thesis of his cousin Varun, is now seen as a

Prime Minister waiting in the wings and will surely be inducted in the new government.

For Bangladesh, the results have opened opportunities on a number of fronts. It will allow our government to interact with a stable government in New Delhi led by a resurgent Congress with which the Awami League has traditional and historical affinity. As a Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh is wise and positive and we can expect that in his second term he will focus more on improvement of relations with neighbours including Bangladesh. The elections will bring into Indian politics a new generation of leaders led by Rahul Gandhi who can be expected to look forward to a better South Asia than has hitherto been the case. We were disappointed at the way relations have been handled since the AL came to office in January, particularly surprised that the Indian Foreign Minister visited Dhaka and had failed to meet the leader of the opposition while

meeting the Army Chief. We hope the new government will be more sensitive towards Bangladesh.

The Indian elections have many lessons for us if we are willing to take. The grace with which LK Advani accepted defeat is a lesson that, if taken by our leading politicians, could really open a world of opportunity for us. His offer to resign to take responsibility for his front and party's defeat is a democratic tradition that we could emulate in Bangladesh. On his part, Manmohan Singh sought Advani's support and constructive criticism to run the new government, saying: "we must open a new chapter in the working relations between the government and the principal opposition." Sonia Gandhi's leadership style where she has put the nation before self is one our political leaders could follow.

The new governments in India and Bangladesh are expected to run parallel over the next five years. These are momentous times when opportunities

are knocking at our doors. In Bangladesh, there has been a perceptible change in mindset for better relations with India based on mutuality. A strong government under Manmohan Singh can ensure a similar change in the Indian mindset. The two Prime Ministers must meet without losing time to cash upon the wind of change in our respective countries. They should send the message to the respective administrations that they have the political will for the change in the mindset that has kept Bangladesh-India relations from achieving their potentials. We should also make diplomatic efforts to reach Sonia Gandhi for her support in building Bangladesh-India relations and not get bogged down at the level of the Indian External Affairs Ministry where we seem to be stuck at the moment. The new Indian Government will take office after the parliament meets on June 2nd.

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## Nepal on the brink, again

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The resignation of Nepali prime-minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal "Prachanda" on 4 May is a lethal blow to the Nepali peace process. Prachanda's announcement was made in protest at President Ram Baran Yadav's move to reverse the Maoist-led government's decision to sack the head of the Nepali Army (NA) General Rookmangud Katawal on the grounds of failing to integrate People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers into the NA.

While Prachanda's resignation was surprising, it is not totally unexpected. Amalgamating the NA and PLA has been an agonisingly slow process, primarily because of unrelenting suspicion and mistrust between the Army and United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) cadres. However, the frustration felt by the Maoist leadership over integration is indicative of their general impatience over implementing deeper, wider-ranging reforms in Nepal. This is a problem both of the Maoist's own volition and of spoiling efforts by rival political parties. One the one hand, the UCPN-M has failed to make a complete transformation to peaceful and competitive democratic practices. For example, rather than dismantling their paramilitary structure, the Youth Communist League (YCL), the Maoists have sustained the YCL which continues to undertake violent land seizures from wealthy landowners and terrorise ordinary Nepalis for the Maoists' political purposes. Conversely, rival political parties such as the Nepali Congress (NC), must be held accountable for their inability to help build the consensus required to secure stability. Moreover, the NA has also been a profoundly destabilising presence over the course of the peace process, failing to make itself more transparent and accountable to civilian authorities in Kathmandu, since the CPA was agreed on.

The implications of this episode have ushered a fresh wave of dirty politics in Kathmandu. In the wake of his departure, a video was released - of Prachanda speaking last year exaggerating the strength of his forces prior to the verification process of 31,000 PLA monitored by the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) in 2007 - primarily to discredit the legitimacy of both the UCPN-M and UNMIN. With UNMIN's reputation in tatters, the luxury of having a respected international and neutral mediator in the midst of the peace process has now been lost.

So what does the future hold? The difficulty of answering this question, as prominent Nepali journalist Prashant Jha notes, is that "most observers...fail in assessing the Maoists correctly because [they] end up using the same categories, attribute the same motivations, and expect similar tactics from them as from other political actors." Certainly, the desire of dogmatic Maoist cadres to implement a people's republic, which contradicts the very essence of competitive democracy, renders power-sharing and compromise with other political parties extremely difficult.

However, once in power the Maoists

have showed themselves to be flexible. The key now is to encourage the UCPN-M to make the complete transformation to a democratic player and cease its unrelenting ambitions for a one-party state. This process will be made much easier if symbolic action is taken against the NA, and Katawal be forced to resign. Without the Maoists in government, outstanding aspects of the process, in particular drafting a new constitution, will not be completed. As they have demonstrated through boycotting the CA since Prachanda's resignation, the UCPN-M has the capacity to cause considerable disruption in Kathmandu, even if they will not return to the gun.

After frantic attempts by the Nepali Congress and UML to secure 301 votes in the Constituent Assembly, a new government coalition led by the United Marxist-Leninist (UML) Madhav Kumar Nepal is close to being formed, although division within the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) over whether to launch a leadership of their own may delay or scupper this agreement. Whether or not an agreement is reached, however, without a mandate from the Nepali electorate and political road map for the future of Nepal, the coalition is unlikely to be either effective or last for any significant period of time. Things are going to get worse before they get better.

This crisis has prompted renewed interest from regional and international observers and it is especially important to note the role played by India. Although the Indian government rarely intervenes directly in Nepalese affairs, New Delhi is adamant that the independence of the NA must be maintained in order to provide a counter-balance to the Maoists' power. India is also worried by Beijing's increasing influence, illustrated by the zero-tolerance policy towards pro-Tibet protesters over the last twelve months.

To this end, India organised several key diplomatic visits to facilitate an agreement between the Army and the Maoists. Rather than diffuse the tensions, personality clashes and suspicion between Indian diplomats and the Nepali officials only served to worsen the relationship, not only between the NA and UCPN-M but also between New Delhi and the Maoist leadership. Yet improved India-Maoist relations are essential if the UCPN-M is to be brought back into the coalition and reignite the peace process. Prachanda's admission after leaving office that he sought assistance from India over army integration shortly before his resignation indicates that, in spite of their rhetoric, the Maoists recognise that Indian support is essential for the long-term stability of Nepal. Moreover, and in contradiction to what many analysts in New Delhi may argue, assisting the UCPN-M is beneficial for Indian interests, especially in light of its growing demand for electricity which can be served by Nepal's considerable resources of hydro-electric power.

Source: IPCS, New Delhi

## UN racism conference and Iran's president

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ON 20th April, at the second UN sponsored conference on Racism in Geneva, the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the floor as the opening speaker of the main session. He spoke against the policies of the US and its allies on Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel.

The first conference on Racism was held at Durban in South Africa in 2001 and this conference in Geneva was therefore dubbed as Durban II. Durban I conference adopted a 219-point declaration, embracing all aspects of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Ten states stayed away from the Geneva conference, namely the US, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Poland, The Netherlands and after the Iranian speech, the Czech Republic, the UN said. Meanwhile, some National Human Rights Commissioners have spoken against their country's boycott.

### President Ahmadinejad's speech

English translation of some excerpts from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech at the conference is quoted as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen: Following World War II, they (the West) resorted to military aggression to make an entire nation homeless under the pretext of Jewish suffering. They sent migrants from Europe, the United States and other parts of the world in order to establish a totally racist government in the occupied Palestine. In fact, in compensation for the dire consequences of racism in Europe, they helped bring to power the most cruel and repressive racist regime in Palestine."

"It is all the more regrettable that a number of Western governments and the United States have committed themselves to defend those racist perpetrators of genocide, while the awakened, conscious and free-minded people of the world condemn aggression, brutalities and bombardments of civilians of Gaza."

"What are the root causes of US attacks against Iraq, or invasion of Afghanistan? Was the motive behind the invasion of Iraq anything other than the arrogance of the then-US administration and the mounting pressures... to expand their sphere of influence, seeking the interest of giant arms manufacturing companies, affecting another culture with thousands of years of historical background, eliminating potential and practical threats of Muslim countries against the Zionist regime?"

"Why indeed were almost a million people killed and injured, and a few more millions were displaced and

Experts say that the Durban II conference raised several contested issues like racism, Islamophobia, freedom of speech and colonialism. The question is why colonialism? They believe that this is the basic explanation of the chasm that manifested itself in the walk-out yesterday. Colonialism was supported and justified by racist ideas and executed in a spirit of Caucasian and Christian supremacy to "civilize" others. It is not the only history of racism.

became homeless? Why indeed have the Iraqi people suffered enormous losses amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars? ... Wasn't the military action against Iraq planned by the Zionists and their allies in the then-US administration, in complicity with the arms manufacturing companies, and the owner of the world?"

"The United States and its allies not only have failed to contain the production of drugs in Afghanistan, but also the illicit cultivation of narcotics multiplied in the course of their presence. The basic question is what was the responsibility of the then-US administration and its allies? Did they represent countries of the world?"

"Have they been mandated by them? Have they been authorized on behalf of the people of the world to interfere in all parts of the globe, and of course mostly in our region? Aren't these measures a clear example of egocentrism, racism, discrimination, or infringement on the dignity and independence of nations?"

### Arab positive press reaction

The Iranian President's speech attracted largely positive reaction across the Arab world. Looking at the Arab press' reactions, the views on racism differed dramatically from those of the Western press.

As Egyptian columnist Mahmoud Mubarak wrote in al-Hayat on 20 April, "The seven years that have passed since the first conference in Durban, I have been some of the most racist in recent history." From an Arab perspective, the US is to blame for much of this: the war on terror, Iraq, Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, Quran-pissing in Guantanamo, have all been products of a resurgent neo-colonialist US under President Bush.

Add to that the Muhammad cartoons, Israel's incriminate wars on Lebanese and Palestinian civilians, the continued occupation of Palestinian territories, and the racist ideology that underpins it. One then wonders, according to Mubarak, why none of these issues will be on the agenda at Geneva.

The Op-ed on 21 April in another of the pan-Arab London dailies, Al-Quds

Al-Arabi, follows suit. Why did the European delegates walk out, when Ahmadinejad, deplorable as he may be, "only spoke the truth?"

This only underscores that the West is not fully committed to freedom of speech. In a conference on racism, critique of Israel, "the most racist regime since the dawn of time," should be a natural target. At the very least, the critique should be listened to in full details. By walking out the EU delegates "consented to Israel's position."

### The Geneva Declaration

All but 10 of the 192 UN member states adopted by consensus on 21st April a declaration at the UN Conference in Geneva calling for protecting vulnerable people and fighting against racism, discrimination and intolerance.

"I am optimistic this document will have a great future and lead states to combat racism and racial discrimination," said Yuri Boychenko, the Russian diplomat who headed the committee which drafted over several frantic months the final declaration text.

The adopted text at the conference was a slimmed-down version of earlier options, from which the most controversial sections and phrases were removed. It contains no mention of Israel and does not support limiting free speech to curb critiques of religion as some had feared.

The 143 articles in the new declaration call for protecting vulnerable minorities and specifically name of some groups including the Roma and people infected with HIV or AIDS.

The text includes a paragraph recalling that 'the holocaust must never be forgotten' while also urging states to combat impunity for crimes of genocide. It names 'neo-Nazi, neo-Fascist and other violent national ideologies' as dangers that need to be combated. Much of the text deals with mechanisms and so-called 'best practices' for states to implement when trying to eliminate discrimination.

Sweden, which took over the Czechs as the voice of the EU after Prague decided on a boycott, welcomed the adoption. "We have successfully pushed issues, including the importance of freedom of speech as a

basis for democracy and in the struggle against racism," said Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Nyamko Sabuni, the minister for integration and gender equality. They also praised the document for including 'the importance of protecting people subjected to different forms of discrimination.'

Most delegates who took the floor in the main plenary spoke about thematic issues of concern such as the Middle East conflicts, Islamophobia or the legacy of colonialism, and steps their countries have taken to improve their record on racism.

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Racist ideas or racial discrimination of other people have existed in many other parts of the world and in different historical periods. But it is one that has shaped our modern world decisively, and its effects persist in territorial conflicts such as that over Palestine since 1948 when a new Jewish state was created out of Palestinian lands, displacing millions of Palestinian people who are still refugees in foreign lands.

The English philosopher, political economist and Member of Parliament, John Stuart Mill (1806-73) recognises that liberty does not license individuals to do as they please in his famous "Essay on Liberty." That would mean the absence of law and of order, and ultimately the destruction of liberty. Liberty is measured not by the freedom exercised by one person, but rather by the freedoms exercised by us all including the Palestinians.

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