

BOTTOM LINE

# Congress's loss: Impact on Bangladesh



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

INDIA'S governing Congress party was badly beaten in key state elections. It seems to be a sharp rebuke by voters that could cripple the already embattled Manmohan Singh government over the final two years of its term.

The elections in the five states Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur were spread out from late January to March 3 and saw a high voter turnout, with at least 60% of the electorate voting in each state.

The party has fared abysmally in the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh of 200 million people, securing only 28 of the 403 seats. This after the "crown prince" of Congress Party Rahul Gandhi toured the length and breadth of the state over three months, speaking at over 200 campaign meetings. During the last state elections in 2007, Congress picked up a miserable 22 seats.

Uttar Pradesh has historical significance for the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty. During the past hundred years, six generations from the family have fought and won elections in Uttar Pradesh, with three of them ruling India as prime minister, including Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi.

To be fair, Gandhi has accepted blame for the defeat, despite public pronouncements by his faithful flock that their leader was not responsible.

It also proves that all the hard work put in by Rahul Gandhi could not translate into votes and seats because the local party organisation was weak and leadership was virtually non-existent, as was the case in Uttar Pradesh.

The results are also seen as a setback for Congress's star Rahul Gandhi, who led the campaign in the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh. Some political leaders are already beginning to look past Rahul to his younger sister

Priyanka, who is more charismatic and a better public speaker than her brother, as a potential political heir.

Perhaps the only consolation for the Congress Party is that the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) performed poorly in Uttar Pradesh, where it was a distant third.

Congress was expected to cash in on traditional anti-incumbency in the opposition-ruled Uttarakhand and Punjab, an important agricultural state, but it failed there too. The regional Akali Dal secured 56

seats, Congress 46 and BJP 12 in Punjab, while in Uttarakhand, Congress secured 32 and BJP 31, with neither party winning enough seats in the 70-strong house to form a government on its own.

In Goa, BJP secured 21 seats, others 10 and Congress 9 out of total 40. The only solace has been in the tiny politically insignificant north-eastern state of Manipur, but even there Congress's victory is attributed to a strong local leader rather than a powerful party.

Analysts say it shows that when the party-led federal government is battered by allegations of corruption and indecisiveness, and dogged by inflation and economic slowdown, unleashing a relatively young and sophisticated scion of the country's most famous dynasty, Rahul Gandhi, on the campaign no longer guarantees votes in today's restless and aspirational India.

A leading political philosopher, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, said that "anti-Congressism" would get a

"new lease of life" after the results as the "motive for every party is now to demonstrate that the Congress cannot govern. The central government has been facing a crisis of authority. Its moral image has been battered; its capacity for negotiating with regional parties has been diminished. These results only exacerbate this crisis of authority. In the short run, expect a rocky political ride. It will take something drastic to reverse this erosion of authority."

"Anti-Congress" said *The Indian Express* in its headline. "Anti-Congress Mood Engulfs India," wrote *The Pioneer* newspaper in its headline. *The Hindu* said the results had "dealt a devastating blow" to the Congress. *The Times of India* said the Congress-led federal government now faced a "greater uncertainty." The newspaper said that the party had paid a price by "relying excessively" on Rahul Gandhi.

However, writing in *The Economic Times*, election analyst Yogendra Yadav warned that the results in Uttar Pradesh did not "spell the end" of Rahul Gandhi or Mayawati, the Dalit leader, whose Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) government lost power to the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh.

In today's India, it seems the political landscape is different. The domination of one centralised party no longer works because political power has devolved to regional leaders and parties. Congress, analysts believe, needs to foster

and empower local leaders, but it is difficult to see that happening soon.

Congress had hoped a strong showing would rejuvenate the central government and give it leverage to widen the coalition and pressure its wayward allies to fall in line. A poor showing has left the Congress-led government limping toward the next election in 2014, even as economic growth slows and analysts say the nation is desperately in need of a transformative reform agenda.

The big question now is how these election results will impact on the Congress-led coalition government.

UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi declared that the Congress has to "pull up its socks" for the coming battles in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka. Appearing before the media on March 7, a day after the party's dismal showing in assembly elections to UP, Punjab and Goa, Gandhi said a meeting of all the leaders, including from the states, would be called to analyse the reasons. "Every election is a lesson for us, whether we win or lose, there is a lesson for us," Gandhi said.

The *Times of India* writes: "The results have put paid to any hopes of the UPA regaining an upper hand in decision making, and in negotiations with assertive allies like Mamata Banerjee. Mulayam's victory in UP means that Congress cannot hope to automatically get the Samajwadi Party to play the buffer against Didi's maverick ways."

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The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

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## Private coaching: To ban or not to ban

MD. ZIAUL HAQUE

"However tedious in many places, (it) has to be read entire." (On Poetry and Poets by T.S. Eliot)

THE education system has changed drastically over the last couple of decades. There was a time when tuition and coaching were required by students who could not cope with their studies. It was a matter of disgrace if a child went for such classes after school. Today, however, trends have changed and bright students are seen juggling between various coaching classes. Moreover, the hard fact is that the education system in schools, colleges and universities, which fails to take into account that a student's mind is an individual whole and his or her experience and knowledge should be scholastic and comprehensive, is also contributing towards the growth of these coaching centres.

Additionally, we cannot expect all the students to have high IQ, and hence cannot say that they can prepare for competitive exams on their own. Parents can help their children only up to a particular level of schooling, depending on their individual qualifications, and it would be quite difficult for them to help their children with the competitive exams. Moreover, the culture of joining these coaching centres is gaining momentum because it has been successful when it comes to guiding a student to his/her ultimate goal.

The parents realised that there was something in these centres to meet the demand of their child.

Let us give these coaching centres full credit for the reputation they have built over this short period. In this connection, a line from *The London Daily Telegraph* is worth mentioning: "Coaching can certainly help you strengthen your sense of self-worth, focus on your goals and get there, fast." If we go by facts and statistics, how many examples will we be able to put forward of candidates who are both meritorious and have passed the toughest of exams without coaching? We will find many examples of candidates who have reached the height of success with the help of these coaching centres.

Coaching centres exist because there is a demand for them. It is also true that not all schools can prepare students to score high in board exams or get through the difficult competitive exams. Yet, a complete ban on coaching classes cannot be an apt solution. Instead, they should be regularised in a certain way. There should be a gradation system for coaching classes depending upon the facilities and infrastructure they provide as well as the qualification levels and experience of the teachers. Besides, the number of years of

existence of the coaching classes should also be taken into consideration.

Once the gradation system is established a limit can be placed on the maximum fees that can be charged by the coaching centres. This way we can prevent unnecessarily high fees being charged from students who need extra coaching. Apart from the regularisation of fees and implementation of grading system, the coaching centres should be asked the students to focus more on reading text books and not just their notes. Generally, it is seen that coaching classes just focus on giving notes that are easily memorised by students without understanding the actual concepts. They should focus more on the learning process, rather than on getting minimum marks to pass the exams. The best way to do it is make students realise the importance of reading everything from the text books and preparing notes based on the content of the text books. Also, innovative ways of teaching would help students grasp the content faster. Besides, there should also be a limit on the number of hours a coaching class can teach students in a week. This should also be

regulated to ensure that students are not overburdened with studies (since they also have to attend schools, colleges, etc.) and get some spare time for extra-curricular activities and recreation.

These regulations will guarantee that there are not too many coaching centres and that only the best will survive. In schools and colleges, students hardly get personal attention and some slow learners lag behind. Also, the teaching standards sometimes vary due to

poor pay of the teachers/lecturers. So, coaching classes give students from such schools/colleges another opportunity to get good teaching and to learn more things. So, why should such centres be shut down?

Nevertheless, we must not forget that there are some coaching centres that are below the mark and play with the emotions and hard-earned money of the students and the parents. In a word, if found guilty of breaking the norms of the above stated guidelines, they should be brought to book. After all, if we contract a disease, we should try to cure it with medicines rather than killing ourselves through wrong diagnosis.

Finally, coaching centres are doing a significant job now by guiding and supporting the aspiring students, and that is what counts the most. So, we should not think of a complete ban on them. Rather, our approach should be to remove their deficiencies with proper guidelines.

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## Russia, Iran sanctions, and the China factor

MARK N. KATZ

EVIDENCE is mounting that Iran is working on acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, and that it may be closer to doing so than previously thought. The US, UK, France, and Germany -- among others -- are especially concerned about this, and wish to impose tighter UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in order to dissuade Tehran from taking this step. Russia and China, though, have been unwilling to go along with the West.

In Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin, Russian and Chinese behaviour appears to be counterproductive and perverse. By not supporting increased sanctions against Iran, the West fears that Moscow and Beijing are encouraging Tehran to think that it can rely on Russia and China to shield it from increased sanctions, and even that it can acquire nuclear weapons despite existing ones. Moscow and Beijing, though, see the situation very differently.

As the influential Russian analyst Fyodor Lukyanov (Editor, *Russia in Global Affairs*) observed in October 2009: "Russia also considers a nuclear Iran to be a very unpleasant and undesirable development of events, but not as catastrophic as the Americans see it." He then went on to note that Moscow appreciates Tehran for its cooperation with Russia in ending the Tajik civil war and for its "restrained position" regarding Chechnya. He further noted that "Tehran's potential opportunities to create problems in the Russian sphere of interests are great." Lukyanov's viewpoint is not unusual; it is very much in the mainstream of Russian foreign policy thinking.

In calling for Russia to cooperate with it on imposing further sanctions on Iran, Moscow sees the West as asking Russia to run unnecessary risks in its own relationship with Tehran. And if Iran is going to acquire nuclear weapons anyway, then Moscow has nothing to gain but much to lose for cooperating with the West against Iran.

Beijing may also see little benefit in cooperating with the West on increasing sanctions against Iran. Indeed as Barbara Slavin documented in her November 2011 Atlantic Council

report entitled: "Iran Turns to China, Barter to Survive Sanctions," Western sanctions on Iran have led to an increase in Iranian trade with -- and economic dependence on -- China. And Beijing is hardly likely to give up its increased economic influence in and leverage over Tehran that Western-backed sanctions against Iran have allowed Beijing to gain.

Indeed, China's growing influence in Iran may be giving Moscow yet another incentive not to cooperate with the West on increasing sanctions against Tehran. Previously, Moscow had hoped that Western sanctions against Iran would result in greater Russian-Iranian trade. But while this has indeed increased (to about \$4 billion in 2010), it is not nearly as large as Chinese-Iranian trade (approximately \$28 billion in 2010) has grown. If Russia were to cooperate with the West on Iran, there is no guarantee that China will do so. Indeed,

Chinese trade and influence there may grow even greater -- something that would neither be in Russian nor in Western interests.

In the Russian geostrategic mindset, the West's obsession with sanctioning Iran over the nuclear issue no matter how unlikely this effort is to succeed or how costly it is to the West and to Russia appears to be highly counter-

productive. Further, this mindset sees Western insistence that Russia join it in increasing sanctions on Iran as being either naïve, sinister, or both. Moscow has found it useful in the recent past to occasionally go along with the West in, after long delays, imposing some sanctions against Tehran in the hope of eliciting concessions to Russia from the West, Iran, or both. But Moscow is not going to join the West in more serious sanction efforts that it sees as unlikely to change Iranian behaviour on the nuclear issue, leading to problems with Iran for Russia that could otherwise be avoided, and only benefiting China at the expense of everyone else.

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