



# Indian elections, Modi and Bangladesh

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UNFORTUNATELY, the Indian prime minister did not make Bangladesh the first destination of his foreign tour, neither has he expressed his intentions to make Bangladesh his second home, as offered by the Bangladesh Prime Minister in her congratulatory message to Narendra Modi, and that too even before he was sworn in as India's first post 1947-generation prime minister. It was amusing to see a parallel drawn by our PM to the resounding popular support to BJP and her claim of similar support to the AL by the Bangladesh voters. The Congress drubbing was seen by the BNP as a thrashing of an AL backer.

The reactions of the two major parties were predictable. No election in India in recent times had elicited so much interest and speculations in Bangladesh than the May election which brought BJP to the seat of power in Delhi and made Modi the Prime Minister of India. The victory of BJP had one important implication for Bangladesh. Unlike the Congress, the BJP is not likely to play favourites. And one wonders whether a BJP government would have underwritten the January 5 elections in Bangladesh, as the Congress government did, if it were in power in Delhi then.

May 2014 ushered in the third phase of change of India's polity, the Third Republic, or Modi's Republic, if you like, that witnessed perhaps the end of elitist and dynastic politics; the first two phases being between 1950 and 1989 and 1990 and 2014 respectively. And each phase had its specific focus on economy, social change and foreign policy orientation.

For the first time perhaps in India a national election was focused on a person rather than the party. 'Is baar Modi sarkar'

or 'this time it will be Modi government', was a common refrain heard around India during the election campaign, although many grassroots workers had expressed their indignation at such a position of the BJP leadership.

Although, the election result was a foregone conclusion, no one had predicted the rout of the Congress which did not even qualify as the main opposition in the parliament singly.

In Bangladesh it was not so much the prospect of BJP as a party coming to power that was the cause for concern. It was an individual, in the person of Narendra Modi, whose prospect of becoming the prime minister of India, which was the cause of trepidation amongst India watchers and political

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analyst in Bangladesh. After all this was not the first time that BJP was likely to come to govern the country. It had done so once as the lead party in the NDA coalition in 2004.

If his antecedents and political rhetoric against Bangladesh influenced our perception of Modi, his Hindutva ideology was a matter for equal concern for the liberal secular elements in this country. The likelihood, of saffronisation of India, of taking India away from its secular path to a Hindu state, of a paradigmatic shift from a liberal and inclusive society to an India being a land of Hindus only, was seen in Bangladesh as being a negative influence that might strut up the ultra rightists in this country. Radicalisation and extremism is no respecter of geographical borders and there is naturally a positive inclina-

tion towards one another and of coalescence of thought between radicals no matter the different religions they belong to.

It was Modi's antecedent as Chief Minister of Gujarat that attracted international attention too. Some commentators went so far as to beseech the BJP leadership not to make Modi the prime minister for the sake of India's social and political integrity. Most saw Modi with blood stained hands, he being the alleged perpetrator of one of the most brutal killings of Muslims in India – the Gujarat carnage of 2002 following the Godhra incident, although a judicial commission had absolved him of complicity in the massacre.

For Bangladesh he provoked unease for

his past statements on the so called illegal Bangladeshis in India. In fact it was a political statement that the BJP had been making both when in power and in the opposition for a long time, coming out with outlandish figures of 20 million illegal Bangladeshi in India. In the May election rallies, Modi made commitment to expel the so called Bangladeshi residing illegally in his country were he to be elected to power. However, that is a statement he has not repeated since election although some of his lieutenants have not forgotten to remind Bangladesh that that is still an issue between the two countries.

The one question that we had been asking our Indian friends and interlocutors is whether the BJP, given the umbilical link between it and the RSS, would be able to resist the communal organisa-

tion's pressure in formulating policies. It was quite natural under the circumstances for the BJP to be back-seat-driven by its ideological mentor.

The prediction that the RSS would not be a big factor in the governance of the country since the BJP has a majority in the parliament has not, frightfully, turned out to be correct. There is an attempt underway already for the implementation of the Hindutva ideology. The textbooks are undergoing changes and history is being rewritten RSS style. Even more worrisome is the incidence of conversion of Muslims and Christians by the RSS and the declaration by RSS leader of making India a Hindu Rashtra.

This has reportedly caused Modi some discomfort and one would like to see what substantive action his government takes to assuage the fears of the minority that such utterances have created.

Modi's transformation from the chief minister of a state to the prime minister of a country was remarkable. His government's effort to reengage with the region and with the world was evident in its articulation and praxis of his foreign policy agenda.

On the bilateral plane Modi has displayed more political commitment than Manmohan Singh in approaching the unresolved bilateral issues. The BJP has changed its stand on the LBA although the Assam BJP has not fully endorsed the idea as yet. However, he has managed Mamata Banerjee to shun her recalcitrance regarding the Teesta deal. But the bill did not come for hearing in the winter session of the Parliament. All Bangladesh can do now is to wait for India and Modi to deliver on the commitments.