

INDIA STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

A test case for Modi?

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

It is ballot time for five Indian States to elect Legislative Assemblies. Elections are being held in Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Manipur. Voting started from February 4, 2017 and will be completed in phases on March 8. The results will be declared on March 11. Voting has already been completed in Goa and Punjab. The seven-phase election in the largest state Uttar Pradesh (UP) with 13.8 crore voters began on February 11 and will conclude on March 8.

All eyes are focused on the most populous (20 crores) but backward Uttar Pradesh, which has 403 seats and is considered the most important state in India. In the 2014 general elections BJP secured 71 seats out of 80, highest number of Lok Sabha seats in any state.

Interestingly, out of 14 Indian Prime Ministers so far, 9 were elected from different constituencies of UP, including Narendra Modi from Varanasi constituency. Indeed, the political discourse of UP has considerable bearing on national power politics. They say that the road to Delhi goes through Uttar Pradesh.

Several issues are at play during this election. Caste and religious diversity of the state is so unique that they play a vital role as vote banks during elections. It has 40 percent "Other Backward Communities" (OBCs); Dalits (untouchables) 21 percent; forwards castes (upper caste Hindus) 22 percent; Muslims 19 percent; and Christians 0.18 percent. The three main parties in the fray will polarise and exploit the three communities — OBCs, Dalits and Muslims — as vote banks as has happened in past elections.

In the 2012 Legislative elections Mulayam Singh Yadav's (78) Samajwadi Party (democratic socialist) won 224 seats. The old patriarch Mulayam's son Akhilesh Yadav (b.

1973) became Chief Minister. Mayawati's socialist Buhujan Samajwadi Party got 80 seats and BJP only 47.

Elections issues that have come up during campaigns by different parties are — Modi's demonetisation; corruption; law-and order; development, riots in Muzaffarnagar, Babri mosque; and the anti-incumbency factor. And then the drama related to the family feud within Mulayam Singh Yadav's family involving Akhilesh and other family members holding important official positions.

During the state elections in 2015 and 2016 despite riding a popularity wave BJP did not do well. In 2015 BJP lost Delhi to Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party and Bihar to Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal coalition. The year 2016 was also depressing for the BJP. It lost Tamil Nadu to Jayalalitha's AIADMK, West

Bengal to Mamata Banerjee's TMC, Kerala to CPI(M), and Puducherry to Congress. Only in Assam BJP gained majority to form government. Understandably, BJP party stalwarts like President Amit Shah, Prime Minister Modi, Rajnath Singh, Monohar Parrikar, etc have been campaigning hard to dislodge the incumbent Samajwadi Party.

The once mighty Congress, which is facing increasing irrelevance, also fared badly in 2015 and 2016 in State elections, not to mention the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when it was decimated. Congress-led governments now control only seven minor states. Party VP Rahul Gandhi elected from Amethi of UP has stationed himself in Lucknow to revive the party's fortunes. He entered into a coalition with SP to stave off BJP onslaught.

Thus the stage is set for a triangular battle

for ballots — BJP, SP-Congress coalition and BSP. Mayawati, representing mainly the OBCs and Dalits, wants to return from political wilderness. SP and BSP have alternated in power over the past two decades.

Akhilesh Yadav's revolt against his father was a boon for him, as he took over the leadership of the party bringing a generational shift in its politics, enhancing his reputation as a capable forthright leader. Many used to call him "half CM" as he was under the shadows of his elder in the party. Despite Akhilesh's rebellion the party is intact as Mulayam Singh has fallen in line and has been campaigning for his son. All anti-incumbency issues were blamed on Mulayam and uncle Shivpal. Akhilesh's clean image and soft demeanour appear to have endeared him with his voters. His tie-up with Rahul

Gandhi has given the SP-Congress a catchy slogan "UP keladke" (the boys of UP) portraying them as the young generation leaders of India.

In campaign rallies party leaders have been making scathing attacks on one another. Akhilesh-Rahul combine, seeking to win over 300 seats, have campaigned together and have laid out a Common Minimum Programme, with lucrative promises. BJP's Amit Shah described them as — "two shezadas one (Akhilesh) troubling the father and another (Rahul) troubling the mother (Sonia Gandhi)".

In Punjab the narrative is discouraging for the incumbent Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) — BJP coalition. SAD-BJP combine led by the octogenarian CM Prakash Singh Badal (89) has ruled the state for the last decade faces strong anti-incumbency factor. Arvind Kejriwal's AAP is seriously challenging both Congress and SAD. According to some reports AAP can get more than 90 of the 117 seats of the Assembly. Opinion polls in Goa suggest that AAP will get 14 seats, followed by BJP with 11 and Congress with 7 seats in the 40-seat Assembly.

BJP's popularity has come under scrutiny in these elections after Modi's controversial demonetisation gamble, which badly affected every segment of the people. Modi badly needs BJP victory in UP and Punjab not only to increase its number in the Rajya Sabha, where it is currently a minority, but also to get his own President. President Pranab Mukherjee will complete his tenure in July 2017. The President is elected by a combination of elected members of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

Uttar Pradesh election is crucial as none of the three parties can afford to lose. If Akhilesh loses, SP will split, and Congress's existence will be at stake. If BJP loses it will mean that Modi's "Hindutva" has failed.

It will be interesting to watch the role of regional parties and their power in Indian politics. Indeed, the current battle for ballots is a quasi-referendum on Modi's "Achhey Din".

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.



Indian children play with a mask of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party material in the village of Phulpur on February 15, 2017, after a visit from a BJP candidate for Uttar Pradesh State Assembly Elections. PHOTO: SANJAY KANOJIA/AFP

Wishful thinking on Code of Conduct for South China Sea



SUPALAK GANJANAKHUNDEE

The aggressive rhetoric coming out of Washington and the reactions from Beijing have once again raised tensions in the South China Sea. These factors always cast a shadow over the efforts to create a CoC.

AFTER years of negotiations, Asean and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct which cited that the contracting parties should exercise restraint in activities that could complicate or escalate disputes.

Rhetoric has come full circle in the dispute over the South China Sea but can the Philippines, the current chair of Asean and a claimant state, deliver a peaceful solution for the area? So far, there is little to see apart from wishful thinking from Manila as it pledges to conclude the Code of Conduct (CoC) for the South China Sea by the end of this year.

A joint working group of officials from China and Asean have agreed on a set of series of meetings to speed up the work towards creating an international legal instrument that would control the behaviour of the signatories in the contentious sea. But their actions reveal a different mindset.

China and many countries in Southeast Asia have had territorial conflicts over the sea for several decades. China, however, asserted itself and occupied the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. In addition to China, its rival Taiwan as well as Asean countries Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam are also claimants.

Asean began to use diplomatic tools to talk to China with the aim of creating a climate of good practices in the South China Sea.

After years of negotiations since the late 20th century, Asean and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of the Parties in the South China Sea in 2002.

Articles in the DOC clearly cited that the contracting parties should exercise restraint in the

conduct of activities that could complicate or escalate the disputes.

Article five of the DOC says countries should refrain from the action of inhabiting presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner.

The non-binding DOC failed to prevent any of these activities.

While China was moving southward to the South China Sea, countries in Southeast Asia began to secure their respective positions in the islands and archipelagos in the contentious sea, leading to numerous skirmishes.

Tension in modern times arose when Asean and China commemorated the 10th anniversary of the DOC in 2012. In April 2012, the Philippines Navy seized eight Chinese fishing boats accusing them of illegally operating off Scarborough Island, which was occupied by the Philippines.

In the meantime, China began large-scale island building and reclamation in the Spratlys in 2013. China occupies many locations in the Spratlys and has reclaimed more than 3,200 acres of land there. Beijing controls the Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Johnson South, Mischief and Subi reefs. At least three airfield and other military facilities were built on these features.

In December last year, Vietnam made significant progress in its land reclamation activities and upgraded its air force infrastructure in the Spratlys. In fact, Vietnam had constructed an airfield in the Spratlys way back in 1977. The recent development was in response to China's move. Some of the islets and rocks that Vietnam keeps in the Spratlys include Amboyna Cay, Collins Reef, Ladd Reef, Namyt Island, Sand Cay, Sin Cowe Island and Southwest Cay.

While maintaining good terms with all claimants, notably China, Malaysia was the first to claim some of the Spratly Islands way back in

1979 in its Exclusive Economic Zone. Malaysia lays claim to the Ardasier Reef, Dallas Reef, Erica Reef, Investigator Shoal, Mariveles Reef and Swallow Reef.

As such activities in the contentious sea raised tensions in the region, Asean looked forward to other legal instruments to maintain peace and stability once it realised that its DOC is a toothless paper.

The group called upon all concerned parties to frame a so-called CoC, to supplement — if not replace — the DOC.



Initially, Beijing was reluctant to come along as it argued that the DOC had not yet been fully implemented.

The Asean side insisted it wanted to have something more binding.

Finally, negotiations for the CoC began four years ago when Thailand was the Asean-China coordinator. A joint working group was set up to seek common ground for the code.

The efforts to have a CoC were conducted amid differences, if not disputes, among Asean members due to their respective interests with China.

There were some changes along the way over the past year.

The Philippines secured a favourable verdict from the Permanent Court of Arbitration against China but since then there has been a policy flip-flop under President Rodrigo Duterte.

The current Asean-China coordinator is Singapore, a non-claimant state.

The aggressive rhetoric coming out of Washington and the reactions from Beijing have once again raised tensions in the South China Sea. These factors always cast a shadow over the efforts to create a CoC.

However, some technical terms such as "early harvest" and "fast track" have been contrived over the past few years whenever the two sides or their working groups met to make sure they had something to capture media headlines, implying some progress had been made.

Observers believe that both sides would take longer to finalise the CoC, and it was not likely unless both sides were sure the commitment would not affect their respective occupation and activities on the ground.

Furthermore, both Asean and China would not make the CoC a dispute settlement mechanism. Beijing has made it clear that it would resolve the conflict only on a bilateral basis.

While some Asean members prefer to speak in one voice, many of them — notably the claimants — remain unsure if any multilateral mechanism could help.

But the point is the CoC will likely suffer the same fate as the DOC unless the issue of territorial conflict is seriously addressed.

Otherwise, it will be another well-intentioned but useless piece of paper.

The writer is Regional Editor, The Nation, Thailand. This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers across the region.

QUOTABLE Quote

MALALA YOUSAFZAI
PAKISTANI ACTIVIST FOR FEMALE EDUCATION AND THE YOUNGEST-EVER NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE

We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Trot and canter
- Rome's river
- News summary
- Make amends
- Dancer Castle
- Decisive wins
- Snap
- Guest's bed
- Fuming feeling
- Anvil's place
- Auditing org.
- Rent out
- Turned sharply
- Pub pints
- Comedian Hall
- Battle group
- Gilda of "SNL"
- Buddy
- Director Burton
- Magnon
- Fuss
- Count start
- Count start, in Mexico
- Frisco footballer
- Torpedo chambers

DOWN

- Kvetches
- Reception aid
- Scoop holders
- Almond
- Genus sub-division
- Dessert tray choices
- Skater Midori
- Broth starters
- Menu choice
- Fixes, as a clock
- Call for takeover
- Sardonic
- Succor
- Convention ID
- Plummer of film
- Arm bone
- Wild character
- Perches
- Bullfight bulls
- Summer, to Simone
- Swiss canton

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

H	U	G	H	S	V	O	T	E	D
A	R	R	O	W	I	M	A	G	E
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I	D	I	O	T	L	E	O	N	E
V	O	D	K	A	L	E	G	A	L

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