

Alliance signal from ground zero of India's electoral battle

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

POLITICS, so goes the old adage, is the art of the possible. More so when it is the election season in India. In the build-up to the parliamentary elections just about three months away, the most important political realignment took place with Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party headed by Akhilesh Yadav. Setting aside their fierce hostility of nearly a quarter of a century, they struck an alliance for the coming polls in Uttar Pradesh state, considered the ground zero of India's national poll battle because it sends the highest number (80) of members to the Lok Sabha. Hence, the popular view that the party or combination of parties that win in Uttar Pradesh gets to the half-way mark to rule India.

It is not the first time the two parties—the BSP with its base among Dalits and others at the bottom of caste ladder, and the SP with its support base among other socially backward castes, mainly Yadavs—have joined hands. They had done it successfully in 1993 in Uttar Pradesh state assembly polls and formed a coalition government before the alliance fell apart in June, 1995 following the beating up of Mayawati by SP workers in a guest house in Lucknow. That incident saw the two parties remaining sworn rivals in Uttar Pradesh till now. In politics, history at times has a strange way of repeating itself. About 25 years ago, it was Akhilesh's father and SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati's



Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayawati and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav take part in a press conference to announce their political alliance in Lucknow on January 12.

PHOTO: AFP

mentor and BSP founder Kanshi Ram who had scripted the alliance to counter the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Indian politics at the height of the Ram temple movement. And now, it was left to Mulayam's son and Kanshi Ram's protégé to firm up the alliance once again to take on the BJP.

The alliance aims at wooing back the votes of Dalits, Scheduled Castes, Yadavs and Muslims who together comprise about fifty percent of the electorate in Uttar Pradesh. The SP and the BSP are aware of the fact that a huge consolidation of votes cutting across castes in Uttar Pradesh had contributed to the BJP's securing a clear majority in parliamentary elections five years ago.

An equally spectacular consolidation had powered the BJP to an unprecedented victory for the saffron party in the state assembly polls in March 2017. In 2014, the BJP bagged 72 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats and three years later, got 323 of the 404 assembly seats. Interestingly, the BJP secured 42 percent of vote share in Uttar Pradesh, equal to the combined vote share of the SP (20 percent) and the BSP (20 percent) in 2014. The SP and the BSP had fought the polls in 2014 separately and while the former managed just five seats, the latter drew a blank prompting an angry Mayawati to blame EVMs for her party's performance.

There is a general agreement that the

SP-BSP alliance will prove a very tough challenge to the BJP in Uttar Pradesh in 2019. A back-of-the-envelope calculation by the Indian media projects the SP-BSP tie-up has the potential to bring down the BJP's tally of 72 parliamentary seats of 2014 by half this year. But electoral politics is not just about arithmetic. A lot will depend on how much the SP and the BSP can make their new-found alliance and the bonhomie between Akhilesh and Mayawati percolate to the grassroots workers of the two parties after years of animosity. No doubt, the two parties have the capability of transferring their votes in each other's kitties. A glimpse of this was available in two parliamentary bypolls in Uttar Pradesh last year when the alliance between the SP and the BSP ensured the defeat of the BJP. However, it will be quite a challenge to replicate the same camaraderie across the entire state given 25 years of deep-running hostility between the two regional outfits. The social groups represented by the SP and the BSP have conflicting economic interests, and consequent turf battles for supremacy had often resulted in violent clashes in the past. Secondly, the two parties have to work hard to select the constituencies they will fight based on their prospects and determine the winning chances of their candidates.

The SP-BSP alliance left out from its purview the Congress party which has already indicated that it is prepared to go it alone in Uttar Pradesh. The Congress had in the past a glue for votes across the caste hierarchy. So, on the face of it, the SP and the BSP and

the Congress contesting separately ensures a split in anti-BJP votes. But there is a speculation that there is a tacit understanding between the Congress and the SP-BSP combine although there is not much available evidence on record to support such a line of thinking except that the Congress is contemplating installing a Brahmin as the head of its Uttar Pradesh unit ahead of the elections. That could be a signal to the upper castes, a section of which is said to be unhappy with the BJP. The Congress is also hoping that its recent victory in assembly polls in the three heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh will woo back Muslim as well as backward castes votes. If the SP and the BSP can regain the core of their support bases and the Congress can make a dent in the upper caste votes which the BJP hopes to win through the recent legislation on ten percent quota for the economically weak among forward castes, it could spell trouble for the saffron party.

With the SP-BSP tie-up firm, the game of alliance-building across Indian states like Karnataka, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana is either in place or in the processing of being finalised. What is noteworthy is, most of these alliance-making exercises have been confined to opposition parties. But it is the alliance saga and other political developments in Uttar Pradesh which, unlike in many other states, resonate in a bigger way.

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Tamimi, Malala and Rahaf—icons of freedom

PERVEZ HOODBHAY

NEW forms of resistance to old systems of oppression; three girl-children of near impossible courage have captured the world's imagination. Ahed Tamimi, Malala Yousafzai and Rahaf Mohammed are iconic symbols from the West Bank to London and from Toronto to Tokyo. None is celebrated in Pakistan although one is our very own. Why? And what does this say about us?

Tamimi, who turned 18 this month, has fought Israel's occupation of Palestine since she was 11. At 16 and still tiny, a hard slap on a fully-armed Israeli soldier's face bought her eight months in prison. She spent jail time educating other incarcerated youngsters in legal methods to confront their oppressors. In the Palestinian territories, she is revered. In Israel, she is reviled, the sentence considered too light.

Tamimi knows occupation firsthand. Her father had been beaten into a coma, her brother is still in jail. Her aunt died, pushed down the stairs by a soldier at a military court. Today, large crowds gather to hear her speak against Israel's theft of land and water. Meanwhile, the authorities hover around, ready to send her back to jail for "incitement". Unfazed, she hopes to go to college and someday confront Israel in international courts.

In a Jew-hating country like Pakistan that's heavy in rhetoric against the "Zionist entity", is Tamimi a heroic figure? Not so! Urdu columnists have barely mentioned her. Just a thin sliver of English-adept liberals recognise her name, as they do Rachel Corrie's. But

they too are ambivalent. A student recently wrote to me that Tamimi's strain of activism was "self-serving and superficial".

Good girls are supposed to be obedient and passive, so this doesn't surprise. Female activism—even for the right cause—is deplored by entrenched patriarchies. Who knows when some tiny wisp of a girl might turn upon you? Tamimi's father recounts with amusement that when Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan told her he stood with the Palestinians, she duly thanked him and then asked why she had to have a visa for Turkey when Israelis don't. Erdogan's face went red.

I sometimes wonder if our coldness to the photogenic Tamimi comes from her blue eyes, light skin and flowing golden curls. Does the Pakistani identification mechanism get upset if a Muslim girl is blonde? Does blondness put her on the side of the West? Or is our reticence because she flatly refuses to wear a headscarf, although her mother does?

Malala Yousafzai does cover her head but remains unpopular. She's no militant feminist and her message is boringly monotonous—the right of girls to education. With thousands of girls' schools across our cities, many urbanites are not impressed. But in Swat under Taliban occupation it earned her a bullet in the head, one that the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan gladly owned.

As though resenting her survival, many Pakistanis ask: what has Malala done to earn her Nobel Prize except get herself shot and show us in a bad light? The answer is: plenty! With intelligence and conviction she has deftly used the

West's good impulses to further her single goal—education for girls everywhere. Her impact grows as large donors, such as Apple and the Gates Foundation, pour money into the Malala Foundation for schools in Afghanistan, Brazil, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey.

That so many Pakistanis should question Malala's Nobel bespeaks their small-mindedness, poverty of thought, and an unhealthy fixation on the West's failings and political prejudices. Sure, the West's humanitarianism is selective—that's clear as day. Malala received a rapturous welcome in Western capitals and the United Nations. On the other hand, in 2016, the United States denied the "terrorist" Tamimi a visa for her speaking tour, "No Child Behind Bars/Living Resistance". Only the European left celebrates her.

Pakistan's treatment of Malala has been shabby. Countless conspiracy theorists love to believe that her shooting was faked and she is propped up by powers hostile to Islam. Correspondingly, Arab conspiracy theorists describe Tamimi as an invention of Zionist intelligence and media.

Such stupidities must be set aside. Malala and Tamimi must be judged by what they did, not how the West or anybody else sees them. For different reasons, both properly deserve Nobels. Malala laid bare the barbaric nature of the Taliban who, two years later, went on to massacre Army Public School children in Peshawar. Tamimi fearlessly challenges the age-blind and gender-blind brutality of Palestine's occupiers.

Rahaf Mohammed, born into the

world's most woman-hating nation, is of an entirely different kind. She fought just for herself, not for others. Her cause was to exercise choice, to live her life the way she wanted to and not be forcibly dictated to. But why denigrate that? Every individual cherishes freedom but just a few dare fight for it.

Life had been tough for this independent-minded girl. After she cut her hair short, she was house-imprisoned for six months. Her mother

Tweeting desperately for help from a barricaded airport hotel room in Bangkok, she feared being deported back home. What would her influential father, the governor of a Saudi province, have done in the name of family or national honour? Would her fate have been better than that of Jamal Khashoggi?

In conclusion: Tamimi fights settler colonialism, Malala concentrates on empowering the girl child, and Rahaf



From left to right: Ahed Tamimi, Malala Yousafzai and Rahaf Mohammed.

PHOTO: AFP

and brother beat her until she bled. Kept like a camel in a shed, she dreaded being married off one day, perhaps to become some Saudi prince's third or fourth wife. Instead, she dreamed of a career, freedom to wear what she wanted, freedom to marry who she might choose, and freedom to keep or renounce the religion of her birth.

Now safely in Canada, the teenager's dramatic escape from her conservative family riveted the world last week.

fled to live the life she wants. Their stories are extraordinary and inspiring. Of course, countless other stories won't ever make it into the open. But so what? Crucially important is for us to realise that in honouring each of these iconic figures, we honour human dignity and every person's right to freedom.

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QUOTEABLE Quote



VOLTAIRE

(1694-1778)
François-Marie Arouet, known by his nom de plume Voltaire, was a French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher.

Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Flock fathers
- 33 Hatchet's kin
- 34 Fiesta wood
- 38 Where Gauguin painted
- 41 Volcano shape
- 42 Fond fellow
- 43 Melt base
- 44 Astaire's partner
- 45 Sports figure
- 18 Lesson leader
- 22 Passover feast
- 24 Left over
- 25 Chinese chairman
- 26 Bud
- 27 Standard
- 30 Answer
- 32 Influence
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