

LESSONS FROM FOUR ELECTIONS

More challenges to democracy ahead



BLACK, WHITE & GREY

Ali Riaz is distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, US and a non-resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council. His recent publications are "Pathways of Autocratization: The Tumultuous Journey of Bangladeshi Politics" (Routledge, 2024) and "The Charade: Bangladesh's 2024 Election" (Prothoma, 2024)."

ALI RIAZ

In the year of elections, four recent elections have sent some messages which deserve our attention, particularly considering that we are living at a time when democracy is under threat globally and extremism is on the rise. These apparently disparate elections and their results seem to have some common elements with lessons for liberal democratic forces around the world. The elections I am referring to are the Indian election, the European Parliament election, the UK election, and the election in France. Held between April 19 and July 7, these elections were closely observed for several reasons. And there have been arguments that these may serve as barometers to the future of democracy.

India's election, with the largest number of voters in the world, and with the widespread prediction that Narendra Modi's Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) will continue in power with a larger number of parliamentary seats this time around, ended up with a result which put a brake on Modi's authoritarian tendencies. Defying predictions by pollsters, the opposition alliance INDIA, led by the Indian National Congress, emerged as a formidable opposition after a decade, and BJP failed to secure an absolute majority.

The past decade witnessed a serious

Do these elections indicate a strategy to beat populist politics? In India, unlike the past two occasions, Modi's populist rhetoric did not work as the opposition made the election a choice of policy more than of personality. France's election, at least in the first round, sends a different message—populism works.

erosion of democracy in India. There were and still are concerns about what path the country will take under Modi's third term. The European Parliament election, held between June 6-9, was a gigantic endeavour because of the number of countries involved—27, to



VISUAL: STAR

be precise. With the growing appeal of rightwing populism in Europe, the question was: will the far-right eclipse the centrists and shape the future trend in Europe?

The British election, held on July 4, delivered a shift of power after 14 years from the Conservative Party to the Labour Party, as anticipated. But the results revealed a few disturbing trends. Parliamentary elections in France were held in two rounds, on June 30 and July 7, but were not anticipated to happen so soon before June 9. The early election was a consequence of the dismal electoral performance of President Emmanuel Macron's party in the European Parliament election. In a sense, it was a gamble by Macron, which turned out to be more high-stake than Macron and the French people had anticipated. The elections almost brought the rightwing National Rally (NR) to the gates of power, only to be pushed away by

must defend their records. But in these instances, including in part in the Iranian election, it was beyond anti-incumbency.

While economy is not the only reason for unseating the Conservatives in Britain, there are other factors such as the dismal state of the National Health Service (NHS). Nevertheless, the bread-and-butter issue was the driving force. In India, unemployment, falling incomes, and inflation coupled with farmers' discontent became the hurdles which Modi and his party failed to cross. France's debt situation has been a matter of concern for all in the Eurozone, while dissatisfaction has been growing among French citizens. The lesson is clear: "it is the economy, stupid."

The shock victory of France's left alliance has allowed many across Europe to heave a sigh of relief. The victory of the Labour Party in Britain, although predicted ahead

the pernicious politics of division will be shunned. It has taken root in society, and cannot be ignored. In Britain, Labour has secured an historic win, but its support has remained almost the same as 2019, and an almost 20 percent swing from Conservatives did not go to Labour or LibDem, but to the extreme right wing Reform UK party. The Reform UK party has secured more than 14 percent of the popular vote, and has placed itself as the third largest party ahead of the LibDem.

In France, even after the left parties came together and reached an understanding with the centrist parties, the vote share of the NR and its allies stood at 37.6 percent. These figures echo the results of the European Parliament elections, which saw a surge of rightwing parties in Germany, France, Italy, and Austria. Although the European Parliament has limited power for domestic

issues, the rise of the rightwing parties was not a complete surprise. Indeed, one can take comfort in the fact that despite rightwing parties performing well, the centre-right and centre-left groupings have retained their dominance in the European Parliament. But what will happen in the future if the present trend continues is an open question. If there is a lesson, it is that the danger to liberal democracy is not over. Instead, the coming years will be more challenging.

Do these elections indicate a strategy to beat populist politics? In India, unlike the past two occasions, Modi's populist rhetoric did not work as the opposition made the election a choice of policy more than of personality. France's election, at least in the first round, sends a different message—populism works. The same is the message from the rise of the Reform UK party. In the European Parliament elections, the right-wing parties which did well are known for their populist rhetoric. Some analysts, for example, Max Boot in the Washington Post, suggest that centrist politics is the antidote to populism. He refers to the policy shift of the Labour Party under Keir Starmer vis-à-vis Jeremy Corbyn as an example. Undoubtedly, Starmer has moved the party to the centre, but there has been a price for that too. The Labour Party has secured less popular votes than in 2019.

The argument that moderation and centrism is the way to go does not resonate with the French election results, as the Left alliance has some parties which have somewhat left-extremist positions. The voters have not rejected them. As such, these elections have not made any serious dent to populist politics.

There is a need for soul searching as to how to address the rising appeal of populist demagogues. In the United States, Trump is the personification of such pernicious populist politics. His appeal to the voters has not subsided; instead, with less than five months to go before the election, he is ahead of his opponent Joe Biden.

Both the Indian and French elections demonstrated that in the face of grave threats from undemocratic political forces, it is imperative to close the ranks and build an alliance. The opposition alliance INDIA is a bloc of disparate parties, but their decision to stand together to challenge the Modi regime provided an alternative to Indian voters. Similarly, the NPF in France is not a cohesive alliance. In fact, the partners were engaged in rhetorical battle until the first round of the election. Whether they can work together and work with centrist parties will be tested in the coming days. But for the moment, one must acknowledge, the left has played an historic role.

How a US act revived Sino-Indian confrontation over Tibet



Brig Gen (retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, former election commissioner of Bangladesh, is senior fellow at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPIG), North South University (NSU). He can be reached at hhintlbi@yahoo.com.

M SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN

On June 12, 2024, both houses of US Congress passed a bipartisan bill called "Promoting a Resolution to Tibet-China Dispute Act," better known as "Resolve Tibet Act." The act calls on China to find a "peaceful settlement" to the 65-year-old Tibet issue through dialogue with the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, who is in exile in Dharamshala, India. The Dalai Lama was rescued from Lhasa to India in March 1959, when Chinese troops were about to take over the Tibetan capital. He still heads a "Tibetan Government in Exile," based in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, despite strong Chinese disapproval.

Almost six decades after the Sino-Indian war over the Tibetan border issue and the Dalai Lama's ambivalent stand on Tibet's sovereignty, the US' Resolve Tibet Act would certainly bring the issue out of historical obscurity. The issue was thought to have been frozen after the China-US rapprochement and the US' acceptance of the One-China policy in 1972, while India is also said to have reconciled with the claim that Tibet is an integral part of China.

The issue was settled to an extent when China reconciled with India's takeover of Sikkim, considered one of the five fingers of Tibet, during the visit of India's late Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1979. But China never gave up its claim over outer Tibet including Aksai Chin, Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh—declared as one of the five fingers of Tibet by Mao Zedong—in the northeast.

Since its creation in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has denied the outcome of the Shimla Convention of 1914, which was attended by representatives of autonomous Tibet and the Republic of China

(ROC). Though the ROC attended the meeting, it refused to endorse the border agreement, claiming that the entire Tibet had historically belonged to China and would always remain an integral part of it.

The India-China dispute particularly centred on the western border in Eastern Ladakh, involving Aksai Chin—with there being controversy over the acceptance of the Macartney-MacDonald Line versus the Johnson Line. PRC claimed the Karakoram watershed line to be the correct dividing line, rejecting India's claim based on the Johnson Line further to the east. During his official visit to India in 1960, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai refused to adjust the border along the Karakoram Range in exchange for recognition of the McMahon Line in Arunachal Pradesh. This refusal, despite efforts by then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, regarding

After meeting the Dalai Lama, the US delegation also visited India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The fact that the Indian PM decided to meet with the US delegation sends a clear message to China as regards to India's position. Predictably, the delegation's visit drew angry responses from the Chinese authorities, who view the act as interfering with China's internal matters.

the Tibet and Dalai Lama issue, dashed hopes for a peaceful settlement between the two governments.

The complex relationship soured not only over the border dispute but was compounded by the involvement of CIA, India and Pakistan in the Tibet uprising and the extrication of the Dalai Lama, primarily facilitated by India, which provided him refuge. As a result, what began as an exemplary third world

supply and troop deployment issues on the northeast through the Siliguri Corridor, also known as the Chicken's Neck. East Pakistan at that time stood in the way of any alternative supply route to the Chicken's Neck. And it's worth noting that China was increasing its presence at Nathula Pass in Sikkim and the Namka Chu Pass in Tawang region, posing a threat to the Siliguri Corridor between Tetulia, Bangladesh, and Nepal.



Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama exchanges greetings with former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during their meeting at Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, India, June 19, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

relationship between China and India soon turned bitter.

These issues were central to the 1962 Sino-Indian war, in which India suffered defeat in both Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. The events of the war remain ingrained in the Indian psyche and continue to influence its military strategy and geopolitics. China unilaterally withdrew from Arunachal Pradesh but retained control over Aksai Chin. And the Chinese claim over outer Tibet in Arunachal Pradesh remains a contentious issue.

During that war, India faced significant

India learned an important lesson about its strategic handicap, vis-à-vis Arunachal Pradesh, which could be a flashpoint in any Sino-Indian conflict. But things have changed drastically since 1962, and both countries are now nuclear powers. And yet, reports indicate that both have heavily militarised along the McMahon Line, especially after the Sino-Indian Doklam standoff on the Sikkim-Bhutan border.

Chinese presence in Doklam makes it easier to threaten the corridor in the event of a wider conflict. Therefore, India's strategic pursuit of alternatives, such as the Kaladan

route, is insufficient due to its longer and more perilous journey. And so, the other obvious alternative being talked about in many leading Indian newspapers is through Bangladesh.

While the US was in the process of enacting the Resolve Tibet Act, China issued a new official map showing the entire Arunachal Pradesh as being a part of Tibet, changing its name to Xizang. What is interesting is that, within a week of the Act passing on June 18, a bipartisan seven member US Congressional delegation visited Dharamshala and met with the Dalai Lama.

Moreover, the act says that, "claims made by officials of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party that Tibet has been a part of China since ancient times are historically inaccurate." And that, "United States public diplomacy efforts should counter disinformation about Tibet from the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party, including disinformation about the history of Tibet, the Tibetan people, and Tibetan institutions, including that of the Dalai Lama." It further calls on China to negotiate with the Dalai Lama's government in exile.

After meeting the Dalai Lama, the US delegation also visited India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The fact that the Indian PM decided to meet with the US delegation sends a clear message to China as regards to India's position. Predictably, the delegation's visit drew angry responses from the Chinese authorities, who view the act as interfering with China's internal matters.

Given these circumstances, it's important to ask where Bangladesh stands in regards to the geostrategic tensions between China and India. Bangladesh also needs to seriously think about the implications of allowing Indian logistical routes to bypass the critical Chicken's Neck for potential military-logistical buildup, perhaps against China in the future. Thus, it is essential to clarify whether India is seeking transshipment, transit, or a corridor through Bangladesh—which India has been trying to get since the time of Bangabandhu's government.