



A Special Report

Indian Elections 2014: Implications for Bangladesh

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Will India lose its secular principles?

by AYESHA KABIR

A new trend has emerged in Indian politics during this elections where focus has been placed on the person rather than the party. Modi has been pitched forward as the likely Prime Minister of India, overshadowing his party BJP. These opinions were expressed at a recent panel discussion.

Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) organized the discussion on **Indian Elections - 2014: Implications for Bangladesh** on May 5, 2014 at a local hotel in the city.

The panel of experts discussing the topic were Brig. Gen. Shahedul Anam Khan (retd), Editor, Defense and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star; Professor M Shahiduzzaman, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University; and Professor Piash Karim, Department of Economics and Sociology, BRAC University. The meeting was presided over by Maj. Gen. ANM Muniruzzaman (retd), President, BIPSS.

In his welcome address, Gen. Muniruzzaman said that the Indian elections had significant implications for Bangladesh and other neighbours of the South Asian region. This was being regarded as the biggest democratic practice with a total of 81 crore 45 lac registered voters. A large number of youth were also active in the voting process. The elections were taking place in nine phases. Eight phases were over and the last phase was on May 12, after which the results were to be announced on May 16. Five million persons were conducting the elections. It was also to be noted that Bangladesh featured prominently on the agenda of some of the leading candidates.

Professor Shahiduzzaman Khan said that the Indian elections had suddenly catapulted into a position of Prime Ministerial candidates more than the party position. In this case, Modi was a rather odd choice for BJP. He was semi-literate and instigates disunity between Hindus and Muslims. He has spewed venom at Mamata Banerjee and Bangladesh.

Despite past stances, the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has taken a position in favour of Bangladesh opposed to Modi. Despite predictions of a landslide for Modi, Mamata's Trinamool will capture most of the seats in West Bengal. Nitish Kumar is strong in Bihar. Other than Maharastra, there is really not that much of overwhelming support for Modi.

Having said that, if BJP does win 250 seats, then no one can stop him. However, there has been a fall in his popularity in the last two weeks. The title 'Butcher of Gujarat' has tarnished his image. Then the discovery of his neglected wife has prompted people to ask, if he can't even acknowledge and care for his wife, how can he run the entire nation? Nevertheless, the speculation continues as to what will happen if Modi becomes Prime Minister of India. India may have a Prime Minister with a weak centre, but powerful states.

Again, there are the internal dynamics of BJP. Sushma Swaraj and the seniors like Advani and Vajpayee, are openly critical of Modi.

Professor Shahiduzzaman said that there were many reasons that Bangladesh was concerned about the Indian elections. There were many critical issues between Bangladesh and India to be resolved. The River Teesta issue and the maritime boundary issue were just a few among many. The Teesta issue should be taken to international forum, Shahiduzzaman stressed. The Bangladesh government had to prepare itself to deal with the new Indian government. BJP has failed to show any recognition of the fact that Bangladesh had disassociated itself from the issue of India's northeast states. Even the present government of India had not shown any recognition of this.

Professor Piash Karim pointed out that nation states are always inter-dependent and are never isolated on either a global scale or a regional scale. He said, India is a very important scale of reference for us. Because of the issues of transit, water sharing, border killing and such, we need to observe the Indian election closely.

Modi government will make a difference in Bangladesh, Piash Karim contended. Personal perceptions do count. He referred to the book *The Blood Telegram* wherein the author Gary Bass pointed out that Richard Nixon personally resented Indira Gandhi, whereas Kissinger and Nixon both liked Yahya Khan. Personal perception made a difference. The Mujib family and the Gandhi family had developed close ties which remained till now. If the Gandhi family was no longer in power in Delhi, would that make a difference?

Professor Piash went on to say that Modi's extreme anti-Muslim stand would intensify anti-Indian feelings in Bangladesh. Yet the public perceive Awami League as a close ally of India. So how will the Awami League government manage the anti-Indian stand of the people if the resentment intensifies further?

Indian foreign policy has a continuity, he said, so the hegemony will continue. However, he added that the beauty of a liberal democratic democracy was that it had a modifying effect on extremists. Modi may have to curb his extremism.

The question now, Piash Karim stated, was 'what do we do?' Small developing countries like Bangladesh would have to assert themselves, define priorities, have effective foreign policy in place, take into cognizance the multi-faceted complexities of regional relations, such as India-China relations, etc. Bangladesh would have to learn how to manipulate international and regional politics. This would require some kind of national consensus on basic foreign policy.

Brigadier General Shahedul Anam Khan began by saying that the Indian elections had never been as exciting as this one. It seemed to be centred on a single personality, Narendra Modi. He asked, are we over-reacting? We are harping on an individual, but it is not a given that he'll be the Prime Minister.

He went on to say that Indian representatives at various forums had reassured that there would be no change in Indian foreign policy even if there were a change of government in

India. That would mean the inequitable issues would remain in the same status. The foreign policy of India would still be run on raw and crude national interests.

He also asked the question, 'what do we do?' He said that Bangladesh's political parties would have to cut across party lines on issues of Teesta, enclaves and other contentious issues. The policies in these matters shouldn't be party-centric. Whether the opposition was anti-Indian or the ruling party was pro-Indian, was not the issue. The policies would have to be pro-Bangladesh. There had to be a common front for a coherent foreign policy.

Our best bet is ourselves, said Shahedul Anam. India has stuck to its stand that India comes first when it comes to matters of Teesta, etc. Even Mamata is adamant about these matters. BJP is talking about illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India. They talk of 20 million Bangladeshis in India. This is sheer rhetoric. Are we prepared to put our foot down and ensure Bangladesh comes first on such issues, he asked. Bangladesh seems to be Indian-locked to an extent. We can also say a good part of India is Bangladesh-locked. Have we used our geo-strategic position to our advantage? Have we ever prepared a policy on an all-party basis?

Opening the floor to questions and comments, General Muniruzzaman said that the panelists had given us much food for thought. He said that the predictability of the Indian election has stolen some of the thunder out of the issue. He said that Modi had 'modified the concept of the Indian election. Modi was speaking of revisiting the country's nuclear policy, of amending the no-strike-first option. These were matters of significance.

Reza Hossain, former MP of BNP, said that Modi had Muslim blood on his hands. He came as a BJP candidate and BJP was a declared Hindu nationalist party. India was called the largest democracy, but Britain was considered the Mother of Democracy. British Prime Minister Cameron had said that Britain was a Christian country. Since 90% of the people in Bangladesh were Muslim, BNP could declare itself to be a Muslim nationalist party.

Ayesha Kabir of PROBE Weekly said that whether it was the Congress or BJP in power, India's foreign policy had never been conducive towards Bangladesh. So it was up to Bangladesh to come up with a foreign policy that would protect its own interests. However, the concept of Bangladesh's two major political parties reaching a consensus regarding foreign policy was hypothetical. Given Awami League's stand as an ally of India and BNP's radically different stand, what pragmatic solution could there be in this regard, if any?

Israfil Khasru, businessman and youth leader, asked whether it was actually the bureaucracy that was to blame, rather than the politicians who always bore the brunt of the blame. He said that perhaps it was bureaucratic stagnation that was responsible for our failure, not lack of political will.

Ashok Nath of Stockholm University said that the issue could be viewed a little more positively. He said India and Bangladesh need each other. Speaking of certain contentious issues, he said that natural resources would be a problem for everybody. These had to be solved in the best way possible.

Major General Matin (ret'd), Bangladesh's former Defence Advisor to India said that he didn't envisage any change in India's foreign policy. Bangladesh and India's relationship would remain the same. We have to tackle the problems, he said.

Brigadier Shahedul Anam Khan (ret'd) said that there was no dearth of goodwill on the part of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has done plenty to assuage India's fears. As for Teesta, this was a matter of life and death. There was the matter of land boundary agreements which Indian hadn't implemented. He also said that if there was no consensus between the two major political parties of Bangladesh on such issues, these would be difficult to resolve.

Piash Karim, talking about consensus between Bangladesh's major political parties, said this seemed almost impossible at present. One could only hope. He spoke of a paradigm shift in Bangladesh where social movements, environmental movements were being taken up by various quarters, NGOs and others and these issues could be taken to international forums. As for whether it was the bureaucracy or the politicians who were to blame, Piash Karim laid the blame squarely on the politicians' shoulders, saying that politics was in the driving seat.

Regarding Bangladesh's relations with India, he said the reality was that relationship between two nations was not a love affair. Bangladesh was grateful to India for its assistance in 1971, but this gratitude was not eternal.

Taking up General Muniruzzaman's pun, he asked, can Modi be 'modified'? He said individuals are important. Man had a fascination for demi-gods, an almost Freudian father fixation.

Prof. Shahiduzzaman said that Bangladesh's reality resembled that of Israel. Israel had chosen to be a theological state, surrounded as it was on all sides by Arab nations. He said, Bangladesh was surrounded on three sides by the powerful 'secular' Hindu nationalist India.

He said that recently Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar has said he was happy that Bangladesh had upheld secularism. Prof. Shahiduzzaman said that we would rather be happy if they resolved the issues of Teesta, wire fencing and so on. He said, we don't intend to be a theological state, but the fact remains that Islam defines us. That is why we are different from India. That is why the two-nation theory emerged. That is why we have remained independent of India rather than merging with it.

Piash Karim also spoke on the religious identity of Bangladesh, saying that even though we are Muslim, we shouldn't make BNP into Bangladesh Muslim Party. If we do so, we'll be playing into Modi's hands. We don't want to be reactive, he said.

Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, BNP's Vice Chairman, said that it was weakness on the part of Bangladesh if they couldn't handle the changes in India. He asked, are we over reacting? We are just observing, he contended. He quoted Professor Anisuzzaman, the Bangladeshi who recently received the Bharat Bhushan award from India. Professor Anisuzzaman has said that there was "fear of the unknown on both sides." What was this unknown in India-Bangladesh relationship?

He said that the focus on Modi depicted a new trend in India, to have a prime ministerial candidate whom we assume will dictate the policies of the country. He said that Modi had monopolised focus internationally.

Shamsher M Chowdhury asked what will define India's foreign policy in the region. He gave the reply -- security, security and security. BJP was linking illegal migration to security.

He said impediment to strong relations between India and other countries was the regionalism in India's politics. For example, Tamil Nadu impacted India's relations with Sri Lanka in a big way. Mamata's West Bengal government and the Assam government impacted relations with Bangladesh. He said that relationship had to remain between two capitals.

He went on to say that the perception was that India had a preferred political party in Bangladesh. The Indian government had tried to change that perception, but the perception had become even stronger than before.

Zeeshan Khan of Dhaka Tribune said if religious nationalism grows in India, Bangladesh should remain more secular. Professor Rukhsana of the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, asked, given the existing political divide, how can we have a truly independent foreign policy?

Nadeem Farhad, political advisor at the Netherlands Embassy, said that the Citizenship Act of India stated that anyone residing in India more than 12 years was entitled to become a citizen of India. How would that impact on illegal migrants?

Col. Khairul Ahsan (retd) said that alongside government-to-government interaction, people-to-people interaction could also build up confidence between the countries.

Maj. Gen. Jamil (retd) said Bangladesh's present government was the country's most India-friendly government so far. They won't jeopardise the present relationship they enjoy for one Modi in power.

Piash Karim asked whether we wanted to see a strong central government in India or not. He said that at times we need a weaker central government in India. It can be in our better interests to have a weaker and disunited India.

Speaking of the migration issue, he said this was a very common issue and 90% of migration took place south-south, among the developing nations. He said, Indian can't stop this no matter how many barbed wire fences they put up on the border.

Shahedul Anam Khan said that there was no legal migration regime between the two countries. However, there was movement across the border. There was seasonal migration. During natural calamities this was common. When there were floods in Assam, the people of

Assam migrated into Bangladesh. He said Modi's stand in this regard was creating resentment at places within India as well. He said internal dynamics dictated foreign policy.

Winding up the discussion, General Muniruzzaman said that this was the first time during Indian elections that certain questions were being asked. Will India maintain the continuity of its secular principles? Is dynastic politics coming to an end in India? The entire issue was as interesting as it was complex.