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BJP's Victory in UP: Development or Communal Tensions?

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

Synopsis

The ruling BJP's emphatic win in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, along with success in Uttarakhand and Manipur have placed the party on a triumphant path for the parliamentary elections of 2019. While the BJP has focused on economic development to gain these victories, fears of Hindu extremism has risen in the country.

Commentary

THE RULING Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) win in recent state elections in Uttarakhand, Manipur and particularly in Uttar Pradesh (UP) — India's most populous state—shows that the party is firmly entrenched to win the 2019 parliamentary election. With these victories, two-thirds of the Indian population now lives under BJP rule.

The BJP rose to power on the strength of its economic policies that it claimed to have particularly benefitted the poorer sections of the society. However, the controversial appointment of the firebrand Hindu cleric Yogi Adityanath as the chief minister of UP has renewed fears of Hindu extremism in the country.

Important Factors

In 2014, riding on the 'Modi wave' and the pro-development agenda, the BJP emerged as a leading actor on the Indian political landscape. Given Prime Minister Narendra Modi's controversial past, BJP had to grapple with its own set of difficulties and obstacles. Several Indian liberals and intellectuals have accused Modi and his administration of being a far-right government. The party has also had to face

criticism for failing to create jobs and most recently, the demonetisation policy that many economists assessed as political suicide.

However, the BJP has silenced its most ardent critics with its victories in the state elections. Anti-incumbency and the party's resistance to pander to caste politics (at least in some states) ensured its successes. For instance, in UP the previous ruling party - the Samajwadi Party (SP) - has been ineffective in controlling communal rifts and ensuring security.

Furthermore, the SP, along with another regional party, the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), appeased the vote bank in communities such as the Yadavs, the Dalits and the Muslims, while ignoring the rest. PM Modi's campaign of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas' (development for all) in UP, where 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, proved to be more attractive than traditional caste politics.

Pro-Poor Policies

PM Modi's support was enhanced when he launched the *Jan Dhan* Account scheme (zero-balance bank accounts) in 2014. This was a major step towards an inclusive banking and financial system allowing poor sections of the society to open bank accounts. As of March 2017, the number of such accounts in India has reached 220 million (with 34 million in UP alone).

Similarly, the Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) subsidies given out over the past two years to poor households now number 20 million as compared to 13 million issued over the last 60 years. This is in addition to the provision of *mudra* loans (small loans) for entrepreneurs to about 60 million youth from rural populations.

Most significantly, the policy of demonetisation, although quite cumbersome to a large section of the Indian population, was understood as a step that hurt the rich more than it did the poor. Additionally, the BJP government at the centre has had no corruption scandals against it in its 2.5 years of governance, advancing its image as a clean and reliable party.

Such factors have also been responsible for many defections from the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) to the BJP in different states, some of which happened ahead of state elections.

Assessing Hindutva

The BJP's power consolidation and the controversial appointment of Yogi Adityanath, notorious for his communal statements, as the chief minister of UP has raised the fears of the public regarding the growing 'saffronisation' and India's slide towards becoming a Hindu nationalist state. Previously, liberals had questioned various incidents such as the murder of a Muslim man for purportedly storing cow meat in his fridge, the Ghar-wapsi (reconversion to Hinduism) programme and various other points of communal tensions.

Moreover, the issue of labelling anyone opposing the government as anti-national has become rampant in online forums and social media. Modi's weak responses to

these incidents have been attributed to his dependency on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), a right-wing, Hindu fundamentalist organisation and the ideological backbone of the BJP. The RSS is quite notorious for perpetrating fear and communal tensions, an attitude that spills onto the BJP as well.

After the appointment of Yogi Adityanath, incidents such as Muslims being asked to leave a village and groups trying to hoist a BJP flag on a mosque have surfaced. Similarly, the formation of 'Anti-Romeo' squads by CM Adityanath have already elicited complaints regarding the excesses of such squads bordering on moral policing.

Recent incidents of unidentified arsonists setting ablaze meat and fish shops have also taken place, further supporting opinions that the rights of religious minorities may be compromised in a BJP-dominated UP. Such signs do not bode well for the state which has continuously witnessed the highest number of communal incidents over the past few years.

The BJP will mostly likely win the 2019 general election but it remains to be seen if it will stick to its pro-development agenda or relax its grip over the extremist elements among its followers. While CM Adityanath has stated the need to work with all communities, media houses have questioned his ability/willingness to control extremist followers given his past statements.

Consequently, the Modi administration will have to work hard to protect its minorities and any failure in this regard will greatly damage the country's image as a rising international power.

Mohammed Sinan Siyech is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
