



Disclosing dissent

People are entitled to know whether or not the poll panel's key decisions are unanimous

The rejection of the demand of one of the Election Commissioners that dissenting opinions be recorded in the orders passed by the three-member Election Commission on complaints of violations of the Model Code of Conduct may be technically and legally right. However, there was indeed a strong case for acceding to the demand of Ashok Lavasa at least in regard to complaints against high functionaries such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The EC has been rightly widely criticised for giving a series of 'clean chits' to the PM, despite some questionable remarks that appeared to solicit votes in the name of the armed forces. Added to the widespread unease was the unexplained delay of several weeks in disposing of complaints against Mr. Modi. It is in this context that Mr. Lavasa's dissenting opinion may have been relevant enough to merit inclusion in the EC's orders. After all, the public is aware of the allegedly offending actions and remarks, and is entitled to be informed if the decision was not unanimous. In this hotly contested election, one in which the level of discourse was abysmally low, the onus on the poll panel to maintain a level-playing field and enforce the election code was quite high. Making public a dissent in the final order would have deepened the popular understanding of the issues in play.

The law requires the multi-member EC to transact business unanimously as far as possible – and where there is a difference of opinion, by majority. Therefore, there is nothing wrong if decisions are made by a 2:1 ratio. The apparent justification for excluding any dissent from the final order, but merely recording it in the file, is that the practice of including dissent is limited to quasi-judicial matters such as allotment of symbols. Should recording of a dissenting opinion be based on such a distinction? A more appropriate distinction would be between decisions that require reasoning – absolving the Prime Minister of an election code violation surely ought to be one – and administrative matters that need to be resolved with dispatch. If members have specific reasons for deciding for or against a particular course of action, there would surely be no harm in spelling out their respective positions. It would be unfortunate indeed if Mr. Lavasa stays away from meetings concerning violations of the Model Code of Conduct. However, as he has taken up the issue through as many as three letters, it is reasonable to infer that there is some basis for his grievance. At a time when the institution's reputation is being undermined by sustained criticism, the EC should not shy away from making public any difference of opinion within. It would be unfortunate if the majority in the EC were to be afraid of any public reaction that may result from disclosure of a split opinion.

Eye in the sky

RISAT-2B will enhance India's monitoring capabilities for civil and military purposes

With the successful pre-dawn launch of RISAT-2B satellite on May 22, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has added another feather to its cap. The satellite will enhance India's capability in crop monitoring during the monsoon season, forestry mapping for forest fires and deforestation, and flood mapping as part of the national disaster management programme. Given that overcast skies are a constant during the monsoon season and during times of flood, the ability to penetrate the cloud cover is essential. While optical remote sensing that relies on visible light for imaging gets obstructed by clouds, RISAT-2B will not. Much like the RISAT-1 satellite that was launched by ISRO in April 2012, RISAT-2B will also use microwave radiation. Unlike visible light, microwaves have longer wavelength and so will not be susceptible to atmospheric scattering. Microwave radiation can thus easily pass through the cloud cover, haze and dust, and image the ground. Hence, RISAT-2B satellite will be able to image under almost all weather and environmental conditions. Since it does not rely on visible light for imaging, it will be able to image the ground during both day and night. The satellite does not have passive microwave sensors that detect the radiation naturally emitted by the atmosphere or reflected by objects on the ground. Instead, RISAT-2B will be transmitting hundreds of microwave pulses each second towards the ground and receiving the signals reflected by the objects using radar. The moisture and texture of the object will determine the strength of the microwave signal that gets reflected. While the strength of the reflected signal will help determine different targets, the time between the transmitted and reflected signals will help determine the distance to the object.

The RISAT-2B satellite uses X-band synthetic aperture radar for the first time; the synthetic aperture radar was developed indigenously. Unlike the C-band that was used by RISAT-1, the shorter wavelength of the X-band allows for higher resolution imagery for target identification and discrimination. Since it has high resolution, the satellite will be able to detect objects with dimensions of as little as a metre. This capacity to study small objects and also movement could be useful for surveillance. As K. Sivan, ISRO Chairman and Secretary, Department of Space, had said last month, the satellite could be used for civil and strategic purposes. RISAT-2B will have an inclined orbit of 37 degrees, which will allow more frequent observations over the Indian sub-continent. With ISRO planning to launch four more such radar imaging satellites in a year, its ability to monitor crops and floods as well as engage in military surveillance will be greatly enhanced.

The search for a 'majority'

How the BJP's Hindutva demographic is founded upon splitting and depoliticising hereditary identities



FAISAL DEVIJI

Since elections were grudgingly introduced to India under British rule, they have put into question the existence of a nation. The British denied the reality of such a nation by pointing to India's rivalrous diversities of caste, creed and culture, and introduced separate electorates for religious groups. Indian politics is still informed by an anxiety to define and maintain a national identity. The partition of India in 1947, to create a Muslim homeland in Pakistan, gave substance to this anxiety but was also meant to resolve it. Secessionist movements or Maoist insurgencies have subsequently questioned though never threatened India's integrity.

Beyond diversity

These regional, religious or ideological threats are suspected of receiving the support of 'foreign hands', from Britain, America and Russia in the past to Pakistan and China today. Yet they are side-shows to the problem of India's diversity: its lack of a European-style national majority defined by language, race, culture or religion. Not only does every social category in this vast country break down into ever smaller units, but the expansion of democracy ensures that each can set itself up as a political identity of its own.

This fragmentation peaked during the country's economic liberalisation in the 1990s. An invigorated private sector and the proliferation of new political identities along caste and regional lines made Hindutva the only credible basis for a national majority. The state-defined nationalism of the past, which added up India's diver-

sities in a cultural hierarchy, crumbled in this new market of politics. But unlike Islam in Pakistan, there is nothing theological about Hindu nationalism. It is a secular movement for which religious belief, however genuinely held, possesses political meaning only as the majority's culture.

A national future

Novel about the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is its attempt to create not a political majority in the elections but a national one. This conflation allows it to turn the vote into a referendum about nationality. In the past, majorities were achieved arithmetically, by bringing together social groups not simply on an ideological platform, but by promising each some entitlement or share in power. The party able to attract more and larger groups formed the government. In 2014, however, the BJP shifted away from such electoral arithmetic, and achieved its national majority by a process of polarisation.

This entailed splitting existing groups not only from each other but also internally. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP was able to lure less entitled lower castes from more entitled ones to place them under the leadership of upper castes. By ignoring the State's Muslim population, it was also able to collect Hindu votes in the name of Hindutva rather than caste. Instead of achieving its majority by consolidation, the BJP did so by fragmentation, appealing not to the largest number of voters but an effective and disaggregated core. Its national majority depends upon the dismantling of inherited constituencies.

Yet this national majority is not simply engineered by party strategy, illustrating rather the political disintegration of social groups in urban India. Low caste and Muslim voters, who in the countryside might never support the BJP, can do so when they migrate to towns



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and cities. This is not due to any privilege or protection they receive from the party, but perhaps because the national majority it represents is increasingly based on social fractions rather than units, on individuals rather than groups. This makes the BJP India's most modern party, its fractions representing the future, while the Opposition's whole numbers belong to the past.

But the past isn't dead in India, and the future hasn't yet come to pass, so there is no guarantee that Hindutva will win the day. In 2004 the BJP was turfed after its first full term in office by 'traditional' and often rural voters left behind by the new realities of urban India. But any repetition of this act is subject to the law of diminishing returns, given the country's rapid urbanisation and the social change it produces. The BJP thus turns out to be less conservative than the Congress, and can no longer be described as an upper-caste party dedicated to perpetuating tradition.

Because it depends upon traditional groupings based on caste and creed, the Congress is marked by a culture of nepotism. While not immune to such corruption, the BJP's more meritocratic and ideological style indicates a break with this past. That it can only achieve its majority by fragmenting and depoliticising social groups tells us how revolutionary the party is. It absconds with the supporters of its own caste and re-

gional allies. Even middle and upper-class families that once voted for a single party have been split by the BJP, and thus rendered politically impotent as collective agents.

Although the BJP hasn't fragmented all India's social groupings, it has revolutionised the meaning of the majority there. The minority, too, has therefore ceased to be a politically transient form and come to represent an 'anti-national' force in BJP rhetoric. This means that the Opposition can now be identified with the two most important exemplars of treachery in nationalist narratives: Muslims and Maoists. While centrist parties like the Congress are therefore seen as favouring Muslims, leftist ones are understood as supporting a Maoist insurgency to divide the country.

Retiring minorities

Apart from their disparities of size, constitution and outlook, the most striking difference between Muslims and Maoists is that the latter are political actors, while the former appear to lack politics. As the country's largest minority, Muslims represent not only themselves but every group that can be called one. Their depoliticisation thus heralds that of all India's hereditary groupings. Muslims stand in for all that is traditional about India, from the tendency of castes and creeds to vote collectively in return for political favours (called 'appeasement' in the lexicon of Hindutva) to non-modern ways of life.

The fact that Muslims are no more likely to sustain 'backward' practices than anyone else is irrelevant, the point being to delegitimise the political identity of all traditional groups. Apart from the insurgency in Kashmir, however, and the existence of small parties in one or two regions, Muslims have no political presence in India and are under-represented in Parliament, the civil service and the

armed forces.

Muslims have become models of political quiescence under the BJP, making a living largely as petty traders, artisans and labourers in the private sector that opened up with India's economic liberalisation. They no longer seem capable of protesting against any grievance, which these days includes scattered episodes of mob lynching over accusations of eating beef or eloping with Hindu women in acts of 'love jihad'. This depoliticisation may be due to their remaking as economic subjects outside the state as much to their abjection.

If economic liberalisation and the market it created allowed Hindutva to achieve power, it led Muslims to opt out of politics, no longer a 'vote bank' for any party. But upper castes have also abandoned public life for the private sector. Politics has increasingly become the preserve of the numerically dominant Other Backward Classes (OBCs), with upper castes funding and influencing political parties from outside. Muslims are unable to do this and have exited the system as a casualty of India's democratisation.

Characteristic tension

The BJP's majority is founded upon splitting and depoliticising hereditary identities. While these groups continue to exist as social entities, their members are recruited to the BJP's strongly individualistic and anti-caste ethos, with Muslims and other minorities representing the backwardness of traditional loyalties. As long as inherited social structures exist, Hindutva's national majority and its ideal of modernity remain incomplete. Yet in a tension that marks the politics of Hindutva, these groups are still required to win elections even as they are depoliticised in the process.

Faisal Devji is Professor of Indian History at the University of Oxford

Looking for secular alternatives

If the non-BJP parties don't coordinate, the Muslim community's struggle for fair representation will continue



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

According to a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, many Muslims voted for Narendra Modi in the 2014 election, particularly in Gujarat, U.P. and Karnataka. They believed in the party's slogan, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. However, it did not take long for them to realise that the party had no intention of following this slogan. Mr. Modi's polarising campaign this time unmasked the carefully packaged aggressive majoritarianism that was sold as 'Sabka Vikas' in 2014. Lynching of people on the suspicion of storing beef and a ban on cow slaughter, among other things, generated outrage among Muslims against the BJP, an anger far greater than what we saw after the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992.

Split votes

Given this anger, it was quite clear who the community would vote against in the 2019 general election. However, Muslims did face a dilemma over which party to vote

for, especially in constituencies where there were three-cornered contests. In Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, for instance, Muslims realised that merely voting against the BJP would not help as their votes would get split between the Congress and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) combine (in U.P.) and the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (in Delhi). The anxiety the community faced was that their votes would get split and they would not be represented in Parliament, even as the BJP juggernaut rolled on.

The widespread perception is that Muslims vote en bloc. Till 2004, nearly all political parties believed that the most effective way to secure Muslim votes was to extract a fatwa from Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid in Delhi. Even non-Congress Prime Ministers such as V.P. Singh and Deve Gowda sent emissaries to the Imam to secure fatwas. Maulana Syed Abdullah Bukhari emerged as a Muslim mass leader owing to his fierce opposition to Sanjay Gandhi's notorious sterilisation programme during the Emergency. Since then, the Shahi Imam's fatwa was seen as the only way of securing the Muslim vote. Fortunately this backfired in 2004. Imam Sayed Ahmed Bukhari, who succeeded Syed Abdullah Bukhari after his death in 2000, urged Muslim voters not to



PTI

see themselves as slaves of secularists, and passed a fatwa to vote for the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The Muslim community chose to ignore it and the NDA was defeated, but the practice of issuing fatwas continues, though it is noteworthy that there were no fatwas this time.

Since 1977, Muslims have been looking for various non-Congress secular alternatives. Some regional parties in U.P., West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have been big beneficiaries of this shift of loyalty of Muslim voters from the Congress ever since. The Congress's effort to woo them back has had mixed results. For instance, 2009 saw the return of Muslim voters for the Congress, but in 2014, the BJP increased its Muslim vote share. While Muslims have been looking for secular alternatives to the Congress for long, it was only after the 2014 Lok Sabha election, when split votes ensured

that Muslim representation in the 16th Lok Sabha hit an all-time low, that Muslims really began to worry about their votes getting split among parties.

Some argue that the Modi regime's response to the triple talaq issue has created a pro-Modi constituency among Muslim women. Perhaps Muslim women have some appreciation for the proactive response of the Modi regime. However, it would be an insult to the common sense of Muslim women to presume that they fail to see how little they would gain from the contentious Bill in the larger context of the Hindutva-inspired aggression over the community which is increasingly subjugating its men, women and children into statelessness.

Flawed idea of unity

In 2014, there were 54 Muslim candidates in U.P. and not one got elected. Seventeen of them came second in their constituencies. Only in the Kairana bypoll in 2018 did Tabassum Hasan of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (as a joint Opposition candidate) enter Parliament. At present, there are 20 Muslim candidates, but owing to the SP-BSP alliance, there is a strong possibility of more Muslims getting elected to the 17th Lok Sabha from U.P. This time, the Opposition parties are more united than they were in

2014, but this is not enough to arrest the BJP's rise. A fair chance for an overall increase of Muslim presence in Parliament exists compared to 2014 even though this election has been India's most polarising election along religious lines so far. The BJP has not fielded any Muslim in U.P., as was the case in 2014.

The voting behaviour of Muslims, like the voting behaviour of Hindus and other communities, cannot be attributed to one cause. While appeals or threats might remain party strategies (BSP chief Mayawati appealed to Muslim voters to vote against the Congress, and Union Minister Maneka Gandhi warned Muslims that she would have second thoughts about helping them if she wins from the Sultanpur seat without the community's help), for Muslims to maximise the utility of their votes they need to probe the veil of darkness that Opposition parties often cast over them owing to the flawed idea about the community's sense of unity. Therefore, without the unity of all Opposition parties, the Muslim community's struggle for fair representation will continue, and this in turn will help the BJP's agenda.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The Opposition's logic

The Opposition's "concerns" about EVMs are born more out of fear of losing the election rather than a sincere attempt at streamlining the electoral process ("Tally EVM-VVPAT slips before final counting, Oppn. tells EC", May 22). The Opposition must accept the verdict, whatever it is. In case of any doubt, these parties can always approach the court. Casting aspersions on the functioning of the Election Commission is dangerous for democracy. V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

The Opposition parties

have devised a strange logic to justify or find fault with the electoral verdict – if the Opposition wins, that means the people have favoured these parties, and if they lose, it means that something is wrong with the EVMs and with the Election Commission. Strangely, in the world view of the Opposition parties, nothing is ever wrong with them. G. NATARAJA PERUMAL, Elathur

Failing the dope test

It is shocking that Gomathi Marimuthu has failed the dope test twice and even worse that the Anti-Doping Agency did not report the

fact that she tested positive a month ago ("Gomathi fails dope test twice!" May 22). This amounts to cheating. Sports persons must realise that they let down fans when they test positive for banned performance-enhancing drugs. N.R. RAMACHANDRAN, Chennai

The secular fabric

The secular fabric is being destroyed because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on crimes against minorities ("Time to rebuild India's secularism", May 22). Even if he condemns these crimes, he speaks too late. His silence is then seen as

encouragement for perpetrators of such crimes. If Mr. Modi comes back to power, it will signal that a majority of Hindus endorse the Hindu supremacist ideology of the RSS, an organisation that has penetrated not just institutions but the everyday life of the common man. T.S.N. RAO, Bhimavaram

Though it is true that crimes against the marginalised are on the rise, the writer has conveniently omitted a few facts. For instance, persecuted Christians too will be granted citizenship

under the Citizenship Bill. While Opposition leaders have made it a point to label the BJP as communal, it is also true that they themselves are not as secular as they claim – in this election campaign, for instance, BSP chief Mayawati made an open appeal to Muslims to not vote for the Congress as the votes would then get split

and that would help the BJP win. The writer could have provided many examples of how public discourse has worsened, of 'appeasement politics' and polarisation for electoral gains, but cherry-picked examples to suit his narrative. NIKHILESH N., Hyderabad

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>The picture caption in a Sports page story titled "FI legend Niki Lauda passes away" (May 22, 2019) had erroneously given his year of birth as 1939. It should have been 1949.

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