



Count on democracy

With polling concluded, India needs to heal itself from the bitter, fact-free campaign

With the seventh phase of polling for the 17th general election over, the anxious wait is now for counting day. The election dates were announced on March 10, and the first phase of polling took place on April 11. The entire process will take 11 weeks to complete; polling itself was spread over six weeks. The consolidated turnout till the sixth phase was 67.37%, as against 66.4% in 2014, and there were 8,049 candidates. The compulsions on the Election Commission of India to stretch the exercise into a painfully long-drawn process are unclear. Given the absence of a rationale for such a prolonged schedule, doubts were raised whether it was designed to help Prime Minister Narendra Modi campaign in the widest possible manner. That was the first instance of the EC's impartiality and integrity coming under doubt during this election season, but not the last. A series of lapses that followed accumulated into a crisis of credibility for the commission. By being reluctant to hold Mr. Modi to standards set in the past, the EC has bruised its reputation. The process of decision-making in the three-member commission itself was called into question, with one member notifying the others that he would not participate in meetings on complaints regarding violations of the Model Code of Conduct unless his dissent, when made, is recorded in the final order. The wisdom of holding elections over stretched phases needs to be revisited in light of this year's experience and feedback from stakeholders. And restoring its reputation and integrity must be the commission's immediate priority.

Some self-reflection is called for as the country concludes a bitterly fought election during which boundaries of civil public debate have been crossed and norms breached. What makes 2019 unprecedented is not that inappropriate words were used and misinformation spread, but the fact that India witnessed an increasing tendency to normalise these. In the 2019 campaign, the leaders of the government preempted a fact-based debate on its performance of five years by blocking or contaminating official data on job generation and other parameters, and successfully pushed electioneering into a fact-free zone filled with emotive and divisive issues. This was a double whammy for democracy. On the one hand, informed discussions have become difficult, and on the other, social tensions have risen. The outcome on Thursday remains a suspense, but the incoming Prime Minister, whoever that will be, must take the initiative to rally all Indians around a truly inclusive and secular national agenda as soon he or she takes over.

Ten years on

Sri Lanka has not done enough to usher in reform and reconciliation since 2009

Is one decade of peace enough to undo the devastating effects of a civil war that lasted nearly three decades? As Sri Lanka completes 10 years since the brutal and decisive war against Tamil militants came to an end, it must be acknowledged that the country has not achieved much tangible progress towards ethnic reconciliation, accountability for war-time excesses and constitutional reform that includes a political solution. The fruits of peace are limited to the revival of economic activity, but the pervasive grievances of the Tamil minority remain. Some progress has been made in resettlement and rehabilitation, but complaints abound. Many say their land continues to be held by the military, which also controls huge swathes of state-owned land. Preliminary steps were taken towards forging a new Constitution, but the process seems to be at a standstill. There is no sense of closure for families affected by the disappearance of thousands over the years. The creation of an 'Office on Missing Persons' has not inspired enough confidence. There is no mechanism to secure justice for those massacred in the closing stages of the war. What continues is the fractious politics of leaders of the national parties. Jockeying for power has overshadowed the promise of good governance, economic growth and a push towards a constitutional settlement.

Half the period since the end of the war was marked by triumphalism and also warding off international pressure for an inquiry into possible war crimes. The year 2015 brought to power a new regime, a fresh promise of democratic governance, and the infusion of a spirit of political and constitutional reform. Any reckoning at the end of 10 years would possibly have been marked by a tabulation of peace-time gains and failures. However, a month ago everything changed. The Easter Sunday bombings have taken the country back to the time when terrorism was the dominant theme. This time, there is no real 'underlying cause' to address; no group or organisation to talk to; and no tangible political grievances to redress. The serial blasts, executed by fanatical elements apparently inspired by the Islamic State, may be a flashpoint for a fresh round of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension. Already there was some indication last week when Sinhala mobs attacked predominantly Muslim villages in waves, destroying property and threatening the people. Anti-terrorism laws and emergency regulations are back in full measure. The biggest adverse fallout is that a new dimension has been given to inter-ethnic suspicions that may deepen distrust among communities. As prospects of accountability for past crimes and constitutional reform recede, some sections, including the incumbent regime, may believe economic development may be enough to propel the country forward. But when tensions persist among communities, nothing can make up for the absence of reconciliation and trust among all sections. Never has Sri Lanka needed a shared sense of nationhood among all its peoples more than it does now.

Taking stock of Islamic State 2.0

The belief in India and Sri Lanka that they are shielded from radical extremist tendencies needs a relook



M.K. NARAYANAN

On Easter Sunday this year, April 21, Sri Lanka witnessed a series of coordinated bomb blasts, killing over 250 people. It was the heaviest toll in Sri Lanka in terms of lives lost since the civil war ended in 2009, thus ending a decade of peace.

The orchestrated attacks, on three churches and three hotels frequented by tourists, were clearly intended to forward a message. The way they were carried out further indicated that the dynamics were global though the perpetrators were locals. The pattern of attacks on the churches was not dissimilar from Islamic State (IS)-mounted attacks on churches in Surabaya in Indonesia in May last year, and in Jolo in the Philippines this January. The IS's statement soon after the attacks put to rest all speculation. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself was to announce subsequently that the attacks in Sri Lanka were revenge for the fall of the Syrian town of Baghuz, the last IS-ruled village overrun by Syrian forces in March this year.

Key setting for radicalism

The question most often asked is why Sri Lanka was chosen by the IS to announce that it was business as usual. A more relevant question might well be why an IS attack of this scale had not been seen in this region previously. South Asia today is a virtual cauldron of radical Islamist extremist activity. From Afghanistan through Pakistan to the Maldives to Bangladesh, radical Islamism everywhere is an ever present reality. Both India and Sri Lanka, however, prefer to believe

that they are shielded from such tendencies, but this needs a relook.

In the case of Sri Lanka, it is by now evident that officials had turned a blind eye to the fact that areas such as Kattankudy and its environs in the northeast have become hotbeds of Wahabi-Salafi attitudes and practices. Muslim youth here have been radicalised to such an extent that it should have set alarm bells ringing. The example of Zahran Mohammed Hashim, who founded the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) in 2014 in Kattankudy, and within a couple of years expanded its membership multi-fold, was one index of what was happening. Hashim, who was among the terrorists who carried out the Easter Day bombings and died in the process, had swayed hundreds of impressionable youth with his oratory to support his radical agenda and was able to transform the moderate Islamic landscape to a more radicalised one. From this, it was but a short step to embark on the path of terror.

The advent of the IS occurred at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, at a time when a new breed of terrorists had emerged, inspired by the Egyptian, Sayyid Qutb, and the Palestinian, Abdullah Azzam. Combining this with the practical theology of Afghan warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani made for a potent mixture. In addition to this, the IS introduced the concept of a new Caliphate — especially al-Baghdadi's vision of a Caliphate based on Islamic history. This further ignited the imagination of Muslim youth across the globe and became a powerful magnet to attract volunteers to their cause. Employing the themes of hijra and bay'ah, Sunni Muslims everywhere were urged to migrate to the Islamic Caliphate. At the peak of its power, the IS held terri-



tory both in Iraq and Syria, almost equal in size to the United Kingdom.

Pivotal role of the Net

Islamic State 2.0 remains wedded to this idea of a caliphate, even though the caliphate is no longer in existence. It retains its ability to proselytise over the Internet, making a special virtue of 'direct-to-home' jihad. It continues to manage a 'virtual community' of fanatical sympathisers who adhere to their doctrine.

IS State 2.0 includes several new variations from the original concept. Returnees from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq appear more inclined to follow tactics employed by other 'oppressed' Muslim communities, as for instance the Chechens. In Sri Lanka, a close knit web of family relationships has ensured secrecy and prevented leakage of information, thereby opting for methods of old-time anarchists. Reliance on online propaganda and social media has vastly increased. The IS has also refashioned several of its existing relationships.

Tactics have varied from 'lone wolf' attacks that were seen over the past year and more in the West, to coordinated, large-scale simultaneous attacks on multiple targets, as witnessed in Sri Lanka. The real threat that the IS, however, poses is that it is able to convince the Muslim extremist fringe

that their time has come. The 'idea' is the medium. As the IS morphs into IS 2.0, 'territorial flexibility' is being replaced with 'strategic flexibility'.

Ideas have an enormous impact. Radicalisation, in any event, has less to do with numbers than with the intensity of beliefs. The struggle is not against presumed disparities or injustices meted out to Muslim minorities. Rather, it reflects the quest for a new militant Islamist identity. It has more to do with the internal dynamics of Muslim societies, which across the world appear to be tilting towards radicalist tendencies. Saudi funding and the role of foreign preachers are playing a significant role in this.

Lessons for India

India must heed the lessons of what occurred on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. India is already in the cross hairs of the IS, and the announcement that the IS has created a separate 'province' should not be ignored. Some of the claims made may appear exaggerated but the threat posed by IS 2.0 is real.

Links between IS groups in Sri Lanka and India currently stand exposed and they should be cause for concern. The kingpin of the Easter blasts, Hashim, was linked to jihadis in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He had a corresponding unit in Tamil Nadu. Indian authorities may do well to revisit the September 2018 criminal conspiracy case registered in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, which contained certain over-arching plans by the IS to target Hindus and non-Muslim activists in India. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) during its investigations has since come across links connecting IS units in Kerala and Tamil Nadu with the NTJ in Sri Lanka. These need to be pursued further. Detailed investigation by the NIA is called for to unearth

connections of the kind that involved Aadil Ameer, a Sri Lankan software engineer suspected in the Easter bombings, in India.

The number of Indian returnees from Syria may be small, but each of them would have come back having lost 'all sense of purpose'. Their memories would only be of relentless artillery barrages, rocket fire and the air strikes that battered IS strongholds into submission. This is bound to nurture feelings of revenge — mainly against the West but extending to other segments as well. The attacks on luxury hotels and churches in Sri Lanka do smack of revenge against so-called atrocities on the IS in their Syrian stronghold.

IS 2.0 is likely to nurture two types: the less informed rabid supporters and a band of highly radical ideologues who can entice Muslim youth to their cause. The path to radicalisation of both segments is through the Internet. Time spent alone online listening to propaganda can produce fanaticism of the most extreme variety. It could promote a binary world view of a conflict between 'believers' and 'non-believers', allowing radical Islamists to set the agenda. Zahran Mohammed Hashim is a striking example of how an individual can sway hundreds of impressionable youth in favour of a cause and not only transform the landscape from moderate Islam to radicalised Islam, but also induce the cadres to embark on terror. It is not so much the NTJ per se as propaganda by erstwhile leaders such as Zahran Hashim, who are the true flag bearers of a new era of radicalist Islam, and of the new brand of terror that they propound.

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Not in the Mahatma's name

The BJP's messaging on Pragma Singh Thakur's utterances and candidature is extremely sinister



APOORVANAND

The recent uproar over the glorification of Mahatma Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, by the Bharatiya Janata Party's Bhopal candidate Pragma Singh Thakur has forced her party to tick her off. It should be a solace for us that there is at least one non-negotiable in Indian politics, that the political cost of the celebration of the murder of the Mahatma is formidably high! But now we would be told to let the matter rest as she has been chided even by her mentors.

Attack on secular politics

Let us look at the implication of this approach, that Ms. Thakur, sans this statement, should be acceptable to us as a potential representative in Parliament. She continues to be the 'symbol of Hinduism', as she claimed Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said of her. Our satisfaction over the condemnation of Ms. Thakur makes us forget that she is being audaciously presented as the most fitting answer to secular politics,

which holds that a person accused of attacks on Muslims cannot be a people's representative in India.

The idea that a Hindu can never indulge in a terror act is, in fact, another way of saying that terror acts are always committed by non-Hindus. Or, by Pakistan, which for BJP leaders is a proxy for Muslims. Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, while talking about the Samjhauta Express blast case acquittals, claimed that it was unimaginable to accept that Hindus could be involved in such acts, and that he believed that in all such crimes there was the hand of Pakistan. A crime has been committed, and since the Hindu suspects cannot (being Hindus) do it, it can only be Muslims even if they are not caught — this is the underlying assumption.

It is this theory which is being thrown at us by the BJP by presenting Ms. Thakur as its choice for the electorate of Bhopal. It has another sinister aspect. She was selected knowing well that she could not be a choice for Muslims. Her selection is therefore a message to Muslims that by not voting for her, they disregard the sentiments of Hindus, thus showing intolerance towards the majority.

By supporting her, the 'symbol of Hinduism', they have a chance to endear themselves to the Hindus. If they don't, they would al-



K.V. SRINIVASAN

ways be a suspect. This argument is not new. Many pundits, while accepting that Mr. Modi was a divisive figure, urged Indians to choose him as he was the best bet for the economic development of India. So, can Muslims be so sectarian as to think only about themselves while the greater national interest is at stake?

The swift and determined move by the BJP to reject her statement on Godse is a clever ploy to make this issue irrelevant while judging her. It is as if we are asked to judge Godse, setting aside the act of murder of Gandhi by him. There are 'respectable' people who feel that Godse spilt his case by murdering the Mahatma. They regret this folly as they believe that there was strong merit in his ideological stance. According to them, he rightly opposed the Muslim appeasement of Gandhi, his anger at the dangerous friendliness of Gandhi towards Pakistan is correct, and his impatience with the

unwise and impractical pacifism of Gandhi is to be understood if we want to make India strong.

We are asked to understand that there was a reason Godse was forced to kill Gandhi. We are asked to not treat him as a simple criminal. He was driven by high ideas. To make him a man of ideas, he is constantly humanised. We have seen over the years people talking about his childhood, his education, his editorship. Gandhi must have done something really horrible to provoke a thoughtful human being to turn into an assassin. If anything, they imply, he was a just assassin!

So, we are asked to move away from the trivia, that is the act of the murder, to the substantive, the issues raised by Nathuram in his 'brave defence' in the court, which had moved people to tears even then.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), unlike the Islamic State and the Maoists, understands it well that an individual and identifiable act of violence makes it abhorrent and repulsive for the masses, whereas anonymous acts of violence are always more palatable. It was therefore important for Savarkar to distance himself from his disciple, Godse, to remain respectable. For the RSS it was necessary to disown Godse to be able to keep working on the

majoritarian ideas he shared with or had learnt from Savarkar and the RSS. No known RSS hand soils his hands with blood; yet it is the politics of the RSS, not at all different from Godse's, which makes blood flow.

From Gandhi's perspective

Gandhi had said again and again that it would be better for him to die if India were to become inhospitable to Muslims. He was talking to those who were objecting to the recitation from the Koran at his prayer meetings. Death he could accept but not the narrowing of his heart! Neither bowing to threats or force! In the same invocation, he said, if you ask me to recite the Gita at gun point, I would refuse to obey you.

Gandhi told his audience, your heart is also large. Don't constrict it. It is this challenge which needs to be accepted. It requires immense bravery of intelligence and humanity to be able to hear Gandhi. This intelligence would tell us that the distancing from the murder of the Mahatma by the co-travellers of Godse is in fact a strategy to enlarge the space for majoritarian ideas and draw more and more Hindus towards them, thus making Gandhi irrelevant while keeping his facade decorated.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Dissent in the EC

Ever since the elections to the 17th Lok Sabha were notified, the functioning of the Election Commission of India has been caught in controversy. To ensure a level political playing field and take steps to curb malpractices and slants, the EC should enforce the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). But this appears to be more on paper than in practice. Astonishingly, the "clean chits" to political leaders — in reality, one leader alone — despite violations and intemperate speeches, have been glossed over. In this context, the Chief Election Commissioner's contention that the dissent in the EC is more to do with its internal functioning is not in consonance with the ground reality. It is obviously too little and too late in ensuring a free and fair poll (Page 1, "Ashok Lavasa pulls out of poll

panel meetings on model code", May 19). Even in the Supreme Court, minority and dissent opinion has invariably been made public. Then why not those of the EC's? The EC's conduct has marred and tarnished its reputation for integrity and impartiality which needs to be protected at any cost

S.K. KHOSLA,
Chandigarh

■ If it was an unprecedented move by four sitting judges of the Supreme Court to have addressed the media over allocation of sensitive cases by the then CJI, equally unprecedented now is one of the ECs deciding to recuse himself from meetings concerning alleged violations of the MCC. His grievance points to the opaque functioning of the country's election watchdog while the Chief Election Commissioner's dismissal of the issue betrays institutional

hubris. He is patently wrong. Not only should the dissenting note of any member be properly recorded but the complainant should also be furnished with the copy of the order along with the dissenting note of a member, if any, as a matter of rule. After all, one can always obtain such information under the RTI. The justification that while dealing with an alleged violation of the MCC, the EC does not function as a quasi-judicial authority does not cut ice as it does act as an adjudicating body.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

Kedarnath visit

The Prime Minister's carefully choreographed 'spiritual visit' was nothing short of campaigning for the final phase of polls from a place of worship (May 19). But then he is too big for the poll panel to hold him

accountable. Meanwhile, we have to take him at his word that he was praying for the country's well-being and not his party's fortunes. No matter what he does or does not do, piety is not something to be demonstrated in order to influence the voters.

D. DAVID MILTON
Maruthanode, Tamil Nadu

Candid talk

From not having directly interacted with the public even at the level of a ward councillor, it is striking that within a short time of entering into politics, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is able to spell out, with her non-nonsense replies, a clear opinion on political personalities and the issues the country is facing. Perhaps with a little bit of grooming, she can hone her abilities to aspire for greater posts. As such, there should not be

any problem for Ms. Vadra "to be anything her party wants her to be" (Interview - Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, May 19).

A. JAINULABDEEN,
Chennai

Use with care

With a smartphone in hand, it has become child's play to forward one-sided messages (Open Page, "The social media overdose", May 19). While distorted political messages can at least be discarded with disdain, the volume of abusive messages doing the rounds regarding religions or caste leaves one to wonder whether we live in a civilised society. What is required is self-discipline. Such divisive messages would affect our own

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

An election page story titled "Bihar will be a walkover for the NDA: Sushil Modi" (May 19, 2019) erroneously talked about Mr. Nitish Kumar's return to the JD(U). It should have been his return to the NDA.

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