

ISAS Brief

No. 38 – Date: 24 December 2007

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Who Wins in the Gujarat Election?¹

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Mr Narendra Modi, has won the elections in the western Indian state of Gujarat overwhelming all opposition. But aside from the electoral arithmetic of a majority of seats in the newly elected legislature, not even the BJP is a clear winner in Gujarat today. If anything, Gujarat has thrown up a long list of casualties, and while most commentary on the elections will focus on the winners, this piece will focus on the losers. In this election, in the view of this writer, the losses are more significant than the gains.

The most prominent loser is the Indian National Congress, India's main ruling party, and Gujarat's chief opposition party. Its failure to defeat, or even weaken, Narendra Modi's BJP, despite the anti-incumbency factor (the BJP has been in power for three terms), has dented its political capital nationwide. The defeat has eroded the political appeal and credibility of Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi who personally led the Congress campaign in Gujarat. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh campaigned too but so insignificant was his impact that Modi did not even rebut the Prime Minister in his electoral rallies. Instead, he trained his guns, and successfully in the end, on Sonia Gandhi. It must surely be worrying for the Congress that its party President, her heir apparent and the Prime Minister, three of its main leadership faces, failed to make a political impact in a significant Indian state. Perhaps even more worryingly, the Congress failed to project a local Gujarati politician as their Chief Ministerial candidate in the run up to the elections. The Party's opportunistic reliance on renegade BJP politicians to prop up their electoral tally backfired badly – it diluted the Congress's standing on secularism, and they failed to deliver the votes.

The Congress Party's continued dependence on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty for leadership is a proposition with sharply decreasing returns, and unless a second rung of popular leaders is groomed across India, the party's electoral fortunes will continue to decline. Manmohan Singh will be under increasing pressure to perform, to discover his 'political' dynamism, or risk being replaced as Prime Minister. Being just 'honest' and 'decent' clearly isn't a vote winner. India wants a leader who connects with the people, and for all his controversial and

¹ The views reflected in the brief are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS).

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hardline political views, Modi does connect with the masses. The Prime Minister, intelligent and civilised though he is, seems too much of a technocrat to be an effective politician.

The second loser from the outcome of Gujarat is the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at the centre in New Delhi. The Congress Party and its allies in the Left Parties have spent the better part of the last few months bickering over the Indo-US nuclear deal, with repeated threats issued by the Left Parties to bring down the government. The amount of time and political capital consumed by this infighting, not to mention an open division in the ranks of the 'secular' coalition, played right into the hands of the opposition BJP. The Indo-US nuclear deal, another likely loser of this election, now stands at the edge of the dustbin of history, which the Left will now demand be done, while the UPA hobbles towards completing its full term in office in 2009, a concession that the Congress will extract from the Left. After such a resounding win for the BJP in Gujarat, it is unlikely that any of the UPA members will risk an early election. However, the alliance will have much to do to salvage its credibility in the run-up to the next general election.

The state of Gujarat may be seen as a loser from this election outcome as well. The home of Mahatma Gandhi, home to India's most entrepreneurial citizens, and a perpetually booming economy, the state is now more famous for its brute Hindu majoritarianism. No amount of economic development can redeem the political degeneration of Gujarat's majority. The sound of an angry crowd at a Modi rally baying for the blood of an already dead man, a certain Mr Sohrabuddin killed sometime earlier, along with his wife, extra-judicially by the police for allegedly being a terrorist, signals a worrying state of affairs. The fact that a crowd wanted him dead, even though there was no evidence of his crime, or any conviction in a court of law, is a chilling testament to the dangerous indoctrination of the people at large.

The victorious BJP, for whom this victory has come as a shot in the arm, may yet come to regret the 'Modi-isation' of its politics. The BJP had been making a concerted effort to project itself as a more moderate centre-right political party in the recent past, but this electoral outcome will raise the ante for a return of the hard line Hindu Nationalist face of the party. Electorally speaking, such a lurch to a right may make the BJP less acceptable in states outside Gujarat, which have a greater number of minorities and where the Hindu's as an entire unified group haven't necessarily coalesced around the BJP. So while Modi and his virulent rhetoric may have won Gujarat, the BJP may yet lose electoral ground in politically moderate parts of India if it chooses to deploy similar rhetoric. And Modi himself, the undisputed victor today, may find his future national ambitions hampered by his rhetoric in Gujarat just like L. K. Advani, who has long been politically hobbled by his role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Much has also been made of Modi's excellent economic governance. It is true that there has been considerable economic progress in Gujarat under Modi's watch and the Chief Minister is reputed to be honest and sincere in delivering his promises, which is why investors, both domestic and foreign, flock to Gujarat. However, there is a need to qualify this achievement. The rhetoric of economic success masks deep inequalities within Gujarat, especially the urban-rural divide. The rural economy is depressed and suicides among farmers are regular occurrences in parts of the state (The Gujarat government has admitted to 489 farmer suicides since 2003). Economic growth has not eased the strident nature of communal politics in the state. In this election, Modi had to resort to communal rhetoric in the final phase of campaigning – for example, he deliberately gave Muslim names (the equivalent of Tom, Dick and Harry) to refer to random criminals and anti-social elements – to consolidate the Hindu

vote. Development was ultimately, at the crucial final stage, dropped as a campaign issue like a hot potato.

But let us leave aside the politicians, political parties and one state. The biggest loser from this election is India herself, or at least the idea of India, as we have known it. India was founded on the noble principles of democracy, secularism and equality for all before law. The principle of secularism lies threatened in Gujarat, and there is evidence that the Muslim minority is reduced to the state of a ghettoised, demonised, and isolated community living in their own country as second class citizens. Muslims in Gujarat are no longer able to send their children to the best schools or even rent houses in 'Hindu' enclaves. There is flagrant disregard for the rule of law, when murderers confess to their crimes on camera (the famous Tehelka expose) yet roam free, and the Chief Minister does nothing to stop extra-judicial killings (the Sohrabuddin case). And all this is covered by the fig-leaf of democracy. Brute majoritarianism is a more apt description of the political system in Gujarat.

In the long run, nobody is likely to be better off once fascism takes roots, particularly when it is sheltered under the cloak of political democracy.

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