

# ISAS Special Report

**No. 43 – 15 May 2017**

Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## **BIPP-ISAS Joint Seminar on “South Asia and Global Change”**

Silvia Tieri<sup>1</sup>

On 3 April 2017, the Pakistan-based Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP) hosted a seminar, in association with the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), on “South Asia and Global Change” in Lahore (Pakistan). The event was organised in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding that the two partnering think-tanks signed in 2016.

Dr Shahid Najam, Vice-Chairman and Member of the Board of Directors of the BIPP, chaired the event. There were three main speakers, representing both the institutions – Mr Shahid Javed Burki, Chairman and Member of the Board of Directors of the BIPP, and also Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ISAS; Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Principal Research Fellow at ISAS, and also Member of the Board of Directors of the BIPP; and Ms Silvia Tieri, Research Assistant at ISAS.

Following introductory remarks, Dr Najam passed the floor to Dr Chowdhury who provided an overview of the current situation in the states of South Asia from a political and geo-strategic standpoint. Dr Chowdhury’s presentation was centred on the need for cooperation versus

---

<sup>1</sup> Ms Silvia Tieri is a Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at [isasts@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasts@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

conflict, which, in his view, is of absolute centrality to contemporary South Asia. He highlighted the reasons why South Asian states, in times of uncertainty, as at present, should refrain from engaging in secondary disputes and instead calibrate their strategies in order to achieve mutual benefits. He presented three main arguments to emphasise this point: the turn towards anti-globalism and the protectionism by the United States (US), which is abandoning its historical arbitral role within the international community; China's apparent unwillingness to succeed the US in such role; and the incentives that will flow from regional cooperation for South Asian nations.

Dr Chowdhury assessed the new foreign policy position of the US and its implications for the international balance. He stated that, when framed within its historical context, US President Donald Trump's support for Brexit and his turn towards protectionism are not in contradiction but rather in consonance with the broader pattern of America's behavior. Throughout several decades and under different presidencies, the US has always oscillated between isolationism and engagement. Trump's stance can, therefore, be interpreted as another of America's periodical and recurrent inward shifts, this time motivated by the supposedly detrimental consequences of globalisation that North Americans have been suffering from.

The focus of his presentation then shifted to China, whose rise as a global actor is sustained vis-à-vis the evident decline of the US. China is, in his view, unlikely to engineer a paradigm shift, Beijing's political culture being centred on the concept of harmony and balance (*yin-yang*). It is more likely, instead, that China will keep acting within the existing framework, building an equal relationship with the US, without trying to take up the leadership role that has historically belonged to Washington from the World War II till the beginning of the war on terror.

As a result of the reasons cited, Dr Chowdhury concluded that, today more than ever before, cooperation is the only option for states to adopt. It is easy to foresee that, with the inward and protectionist shift by the US, the various regions of the world will soon deepen their respective cooperation mechanisms. South Asia, however, seems to contradict such a logic, with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) being in a state of semi-paralysis, mainly due to the India-Pakistan conflict.

He recommended that the path of regionalism should not be abandoned. The disastrous consequences of a possible intra-South Asian war are as obvious as the benefits of a stronger SAARC. A robust South Asian trade sector is a necessity which appears even more urgent considering the protectionist shift by the US, and the possible consequences that this could have for global free trade. He recommended furthermore that South Asian countries should refrain from engaging in resource-consuming disputes which are not central to their interests and are, instead, detrimental to the effectiveness of regional cooperation. The smaller countries in the region should be enabled to secure a safe and balanced position without the need of having of “choosing” between the two larger neighbours, that is, India on one side and China on the other.

Ms Tieri’s presentation focused on the politicisation of religion as a major trend in recent geopolitics, and she provided an overview of the recent elections in India, with particular reference to the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). In a broad introduction, she noted that the current political discourse is characterised by themes and formulae which we would, until recently, have imagined to be typical of medieval history only, such as religious intolerance, crusades and clash of civilisations. This is emblematic of the re-emergence of religion (or, the politicisation of religion) as a dominant geopolitical factor in international politics at large and also in the domestic politics of many countries.

South Asia is a good example of such trends. The region has achieved notable results in term of economic development and its leverage in international relations has consequently grown as well. On the other hand, many unresolved issues, some of these being religion-based politics as well as conflicts, keep hindering the progress of the region. She stated that this is the wider context within which some of the recent Indian events should be framed.

Ethnic tensions in post-war Sri Lanka, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan are some key examples of politicisation of religion occurring in South Asia, other than those in India.

Ms Tieri analysed some recent developments in India. In the country, while the threat of Islamic radicalisation remains real, Hindu extremism seems to have come to the fore again. While the Hindutva-inspired Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been leading the country since 2014, fears of a possible *saffronization* (that is, a paradigm shift towards Hindu extremism, as different

from the Hindutva ideology of Hindu supremacy in India) have become more evident following recent elections. In UP, India's biggest state, the BJP has recorded an incredible victory. However, the election led to divisive public opinion because of the supposedly communalist tones used during the campaign and the absence of Muslim candidates on the BJP ticket in a state which has a significant Muslim history and a sizeable Muslim population. Furthermore, the party appointed Yogi Adityanath, as Chief Minister of the state. Seen as a controversial figure, Adityanath faces a number of criminal cases and has been viewed as a polarising figure in communal politics.

Reflecting on the implications of the appointment, Ms Tieri sought to find a reason for what, at first sight, seemed to be an inexplicable decision by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party to appoint Adityanath. On the one hand, illogical is the point that choosing a *mahant* (chief priest) like Adityanath would appeal to the Brahmin and high-caste electorate, because an explicitly *caste-based* stance by the party would clearly antagonise other stakeholders, such as the Other Backward Classes and Dalits, who have been fundamental to the BJP's success. On the other hand, the move appears rather bold in the light of considerations in terms of foreign policy and international reputation, since the new chief minister's reputation seems to be in clear contrast to the image of India that Modi's government is committed to promoting on the international stage.

The turn of events in UP are subject to diametrically different interpretations. Some maintain that a real *saffronization* is taking place in India and the BJP, strengthened by this, will not adopt any "inclusive" strategy generally associated with the opposition Indian National Congress party. Others consider the possibility that the BJP's most pro-Hindutva features will be tamed by the neutralising power of the Indian political system, which imposes on this party transition towards moderation if it wants to secure a wider electoral base.

Mr Tieri's paper had an open conclusion, noting that, although the time is not ripe yet to assess the situation in definitive terms, the first measures adopted by the new chief minister – such as a shut-down of slaughterhouses presaging a ban on beef-eating and the resultant unrest – question the future of Modi-led India as a mature and secular democracy.

Mr Burki offered a brief concluding presentation where he stated that, contrary to what is commonly thought, the American and the Indian policy-making processes are not led by

religion; and that is the case in China and, remarkably, in Pakistan as well. He emphasised that Pakistan, especially, is often mistakenly judged as the home to a political system in which the public and religious spheres are combined. Contrary to what such stereotype would imply, policies in Pakistan are set and implemented with no regard to the role of religion, which might be central to the life of the country in spheres other than that of policy making.

Citing his current research on the search for answers to questions such as what happens after Trump, what is *Trumpism*, how the theory of the clash of civilisations applies to the current situation, what are the consequences of Trump's presidency for South Asia; Mr Burki elaborated on the concept of *Trumpism*. He quoted a scientific study on its origin, one that monitored the demographic and socio-economic evolution of different categories of "rednecks". The results showed that the only group in America facing a decline in life expectancy was the one consisting of lower middle class, ethnically white and poorly educated individuals. It is indeed this group of voters whom Trump had reached out to, and that constituted the backbone of *Trumpism* at the grassroots level.

Mr Burki concluded his presentation by emphasising the importance of studying and being aware of the unprecedented political processes and movements which are now taking shape in the US since the rise of Trump and will keep producing fundamental changes in the global economic order. This will be highly negative for countries like Pakistan.

The session ended with the concluding remarks by Dr Najam. He summarised the main points of the three presentations and voiced general concern over the current political events in India and the US. He also underlined the importance for think tanks like the BIPP and ISAS of remaining alert and abreast of changing the international situation.

The seminar was followed by the launch of the BIPP's Annual Report on the state of the economy in Pakistan, which this year, focused on agriculture and water.

. . . . .