

**COMMENT & ANALYSIS: India's false alarms: PERSONAL VIEW PADMA DESAI: The BJP's recent electoral victory has raised worries about the economy, Moslems, nuclear weapons and political chaos. But such fears are overdone**

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The world's largest democracy has come through its latest test. Last month, after a remarkably smooth electoral process, a new Indian government was sworn in. But the narrow victory of the Bharatiya Janata party, the "Indian people's party", raises some alarming questions.

Does the BJP's campaign slogan of swadeshi ("cultural nationalism") mean that India's economic reforms, based on progressive insertion into the global system, will be halted or even reversed? Will the BJP's Hindu activists turn out to be a hard core driving anti-Moslem agendas, or be reduced to a lunatic fringe in policymaking? Will India become openly nuclear? Is the fragile 20-party coalition headed by the BJP confirmation of India's descent into alliance-based politics and therefore into political chaos? These fears are not fantasies. But, in each case, it is reasonable to be optimistic. Swadeshi, and the associated assertions that "India is for Indians", are sentiments that hark back to the days of the independence movement. Indeed, swadeshi was a cultural artefact that helped mobilise the masses in Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent insurrection against British rule. In the same vein, it is not a call to arms for specific economic policies but rather an outcry against the fact that India, after half a century of independence, has lost its international status and its war on national poverty. Both can be blamed largely on its abysmal economic record.

That immense economic failure was caused not because swadeshi turned India inward but because the Indian elite chose socialist notions for running the economy. It was Jawaharlal Nehru, educated in Fabian socialist ideas at Cambridge, not Mahatma Gandhi with his ideas about India's self-sufficient villages, who governed India. Absurdly high protection for domestic industry and stiff restrictions on inflows of direct equity investment were inherited by the reformist Congress government of P.V. Narasimha Rao, former prime minister, which began to reverse this self-imposed, crippling exile from the world economy in the summer of 1991.

The BJP's constituencies include an assortment of shopkeepers, sadhus (holy men) and stockbrokers; its coalition partners are mostly regional parties. None of these groups has an obvious stake in economic nationalism. Indeed, they are free from the ideological baggage that, coming from the left, decimated India's economic performance. Paradoxically, the BJP-led government may be able to move rapidly on India's next phase of reforms.

The chances of the BJP indulging in Moslem-baiting are also slim. Such action would disrupt the coalition whose primary need will be to survive. Besides, the BJP cannot be unaware that its voter support had risen steadily to 20 per cent as long as it played the Hindu-revivalist card. When it was perceived as having overplayed its hand with the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, the vote got stuck there.

Nothing works so magically in moderating the extremism of a political party as getting closer to power: extremism may get you started but you cannot finish with it. The BJP has shelved its plan to build a Hindu temple at Ayodhya. It has also postponed plans to introduce a uniform civil code for all, including Moslems. True, a uniform code that extends modern rights such as the elimination of polygamy and the payment of alimony to all Indians is an idea that makes good sense. But it is increasingly appreciated that Moslem leaders must initiate such reforms or else the idea would appear as an invasion of Moslem traditional rights.

The option to go public with nuclear capability was a good election sound bite. But India has managed pretty well, as has Israel, in acquiring unacknowledged capability. Here, the "don't ask

and don't tell" policy is clearly the smart choice. Even if Indian policymakers believe the nuclear powers have no business telling the non-nuclear powers to remain so, the fact is that India would hurt itself by acting openly on this position. The forces of civil society are arrayed against non-proliferation and, as Bill Clinton, the US president, discovered on the landmines treaty, you take them on at your peril. So the BJP has sheathed its nuclear sword.

India's political future remains the most troubling question. There have been successive coalition governments since 1991. There have been two elections in less than two years; and another one might soon be precipitated. On the other hand, an equally likely scenario is that of India's evolution to a stable two-party system. The BJP has come so close this time to becoming a party with a simple majority of seats in the lower house that it can be expected to mount efforts to broaden its appeal.

Equally, the Congress party has seen its declining fortunes arrested under Sonia Gandhi's leadership. If the window of opportunity she has provided is seized upon to rejuvenate the party with a reformist agenda and grassroots organisation, Congress can once more become a party to contend with. So India may wind up with two dominant parties, the Congress and the BJP, much like the Democrats and the Republicans. Political stability would then be more than just a dream.

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