

Modi's modus operandi failing in Gujarat

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After the initial forecasts that Bharatiya Janata Party was set to win the elections in the Indian state of Gujarat, the tide seems to be turning against it.

Is the tide turning in Gujarat? A month ago, most Gujarat politicians, social scientists, activists, bureaucrats, and citizens agreed on the dead certainty of the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the Assembly election — but with a smaller margin.

Today, they say, the BJP could lose — despite the Congress's timid campaign. The Congress skirted issues concerning the 2002 violence, didn't take on the BJP's "Glorious Gujarat" slogan, or gather the nerve to field more than half-a-dozen Muslims in a state where 20 Muslim MLAs used to get elected. But it might still get catapulted into power.

All exit polls after the first-phase voting in 87 constituencies (of a total of 182) forecast a vote-swing away from the BJP. NDTV forecasts a loss of 13 seats for the BJP, placing it behind the Congress.

Such a defeat will be a seismic shock for the BJP and a historic setback for the Sangh Parivar. LK Advani's laughable anointment as the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate will only aggravate the shock.

Ideologically, the setback will be worse than the BJP's rout in the 2004 national elections. It will prove that a politics based on religious hatred, which rejects pluralism, isn't sustainable even in a "Hindutva laboratory" state.

Current estimates of the BJP's seats tally by government agencies vary from 70 to 80 seats, way below its 2002 score of 127. Even the party's assessment is reportedly that it's sure to win only 63 seats; and optimistically, another 15.

The BJP is clearly on a downswing in Gujarat. How has this come about? Four broad factors explain it: shifts in the party's social support-base; reassertion of what may be called normal or mundane politics vis-à-vis ideology-driven politics; changed intra-Sangh Parivar relations; and Modi's personalised, confrontationist campaign.

The long expansion of the BJP's base in Gujarat has apparently ended. Between 1992 (Babri demolition) and the 2002 massacre, the BJP split the Congress's traditional base among Gujarat's "core minorities", consisting of Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims, and also among middle-level layers like Kolis. Thanks to Hindutva, it attracted many Adivasi and Dalit votes in 2002. Using the state, it browbeat Muslims and prevented them from voting against it.

However, over the past year or longer, these groups have been returning to the Congress. The BJP has lost much support amongst Kolis, and the powerful Leuva Patels, important in Saurashtra and Kutch (which elect almost a third of Gujarat's MLAs).

These shifts can eliminate or reverse the BJP's small three percentage-point vote over the Congress

in 2004, itself down from 10 points in 2002. This is happening in Saurashtra and the southern tribal belt, and in parts of central and northern Gujarat.

It's only among urban upper caste-upper class Hindus that the BJP enjoys unshakable support. And although 40 per cent of Gujarat's population is urban, the small upper-crust elite can't swing elections.

Secondly, Modi has concentrated power and tried to demolish normal, routine politics based on deal-making and patronage. He totally bypasses the party and the Parivar. Senior BJP functionaries have no access to him.

He thought the banner of Gujarat's asmita (glory), "development" and "Vibrant Gujarat" would produce magic. But the asmita slogan couldn't cover up the chasms and sleaze in society. "Development" got reduced to worship of growth without inclusion. And "Vibrant Gujarat" is going the way of "India Shining" in 2004 — exposing the BJP to popular scorn for celebrating dualistic growth.

Reality is now catching up with Modi. Hindutva has become irrelevant to the public's mood. Mundane issues like high electricity bills, expensive toll-ways and a wilting Bt-Cotton crop, are chipping away at the edifice Modi tried to construct out of tall claims about investment and industrialisation.

Gujarat's is a case of unbalanced, warped development. It's falling behind other large states in gender, health and environment indices: 74 per cent of its women and 47 per cent of children are anaemic. Gujarat's infant mortality and malnutrition rates remain stubbornly high.

Gujarat's patriarchy indices are frightening. The sex-ratio is an abysmal 487:1000 in the 0-4 age-group and 571 in the 5-9 group (national averages, 515 and 632). Gujarat's health indices are barely higher than Orissa's. In social sector spending (as a proportion of public expenditure), Gujarat is second lowest among India's 21 major states.

The Mumbai-based Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy says the Gujarat's power deficit this year averaged 10.7 per cent and peaked at 23.7 per cent. This helped the Congress put Modi on the mat on "development".

A third adverse factor for Modi is serious infighting in the BJP. More than 40 "rebels" are challenging official candidates. The RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and other front organisations have decided not to help the BJP.

Absence of door-to-door campaigning by RSS pracharaks in cities will be a major blow to the BJP. As will be the absence of canvassing by the Hindu-proselytising organisation Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, in tribal areas. Once, these groups produced pro-BJP synergy, crucial in past elections. Now they'll work against the party—a double whammy.

Finally, Modi ran a sectarian, foul and demagogic campaign with countless low-level tactic, but failed to attract large audiences. No other BJP leader got a good response either. By contrast, Congress leaders' rallies were well-attended. Although their campaign was weak on secularism and justice, it cornered Modi on governance.

In response, a desperate Modi played the anti-Muslim card. He shamelessly justified the cold-blooded murder of Sohrabuddin Shaikh in a "fake encounter", and maligned Muslims. This blatantly violated the Election Commission's Code of Conduct, which prohibits hate speech. It was a shocking admission of the state's complicity in murder. Ironically, this will only encourage Muslims to go and

vote against Modi.

The Election Commission has taken note of his grave electoral malpractice. Sadly, to appear “even-handed”, it also issued notice to Sonia Gandhi for her “merchants of death” speech. But the two speeches aren’t even remotely comparable.

The EC must correct this error and severely punish Modi. But what Modi needs most is political punishment—from Gujarat’s electorate.

P.S.

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