

1998 1(20)

DECCAN HERALD, APRIL 13, 1998

JMS - PK

BJP POLITICS AND INDO-PAK RELATIONS

Derailment or engagement?

By DEEPA M OLLAPALLY

IT was easy enough to characterise the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when it was out of power. During the election, the BJP leadership projected the party as disciplined and ideologically cohesive. Now in power, it is beginning to resemble the blind men's account of the elephant, or appearing different things to different people. This is a change to be welcomed and indeed encouraged.

We are accepting coalitions as narrowing maneuverability for the regime in power. But when the ruling party's orientation is relatively narrow and ideology based, a diverse base of support could buy greater flexibility. In the BJP's case, a diluted "national agenda for governance" and continuing coalitional pressures could be just what Prime Minister Vajpayee needs to gain greater freedom of action from the strictures of the earlier BJP manifesto. If so, Indo-Pakistan relations under BJP stewardship need not deteriorate in any dramatic fashion.

After all, it was during the "strong" Narasimha Rao period that relations with Pakistan took a nosedive in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, which continued largely unchecked for a long period. It was left to Deve Gowda's "weak" government to begin the process of re-engagement with Pakistan in 1996, only to be deepened dramatically by an equally weak successor government headed by I K Gujral.

Clear pointer

In the Indian context contrary to popular belief, there seems to be no significant correlation between the strength of the government and its ability or inclination to be more positively disposed towards a dialogue with its neighbour. Pakistan's experience however suggests otherwise, with practically every Pakistani commentator receptive to improving relations with India pointing to

Nawaz Sharif's popular mandate as offering a historic opportunity.

Notably the BJP's election manifesto (similar to the UF and Congress) has given importance to better ties with the neighbouring countries, including the creation of the South Asian Free Trade Area by 2002.

Positive aspect

The need to move ahead on economic, as distinct from political, issues seems to have made some headway with the current Pakistani regime. To that end, India has already accorded most favoured nation status to Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif's decision to allow greater imports from India last year brought a mixed reaction in Pakistan, with some quarters arguing against it on the grounds that it would send the "wrong" message that Pakistan was ready to mend fences, freezing the Kashmir dispute, while others faulted it for not going further than it did. The economic crisis facing Pakistan and self-interest arising from that is of course what is driving Nawaz Sharif's India policy forward. The recently reported 10% reduction of Pakistan's defence budget in real terms (which came under severe attack by Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto) would suggest a similar compulsion. For Sharif, this would clearly be more palatable under a benign South Asian environment. Under such circumstances, the BJP needs to tread carefully and not play into the hands of Sharif's naysayers.

Many have been quick to point out the differences between Gujral and Vajpayee toward Pakistan, but if the current Prime Minister's experience as Foreign Minister under Morarji Desai during 1977-79 is any guide, their differences may be narrower than assumed. Vajpayee's tenure is often referred to as the "golden period" in Indo-

Pakistan relations by Pakistanis. Even allowing Desai some credit for the more favourable foreign policy orientation, it is a good sign that Vajpayee is keeping his own counsel in international relations by retaining the Foreign Minister portfolio.

Interestingly, Nawaz Sharif seems to be fairly confident of being able to continue constructive relations with Vajpayee, and has attributed some of BJP's stronger stands to election rhetoric. The two are expected to meet at the SAARC summit in Colombo in mid-July. Perhaps the Indo-Pakistan dialogue which hit a snag in September 1997 over misunderstandings on establishing a Working Group on Kashmir can be renewed with fresh impetus from a personal meeting with Vajpayee and Sharif. The last meeting between Gujral and Sharif in New York last September was clouded by some reports of an attempt (which was then denied) by the US and Pakistan to have trilateral talks, wholly unacceptable to India. In any case, the dialogue since 1996 has managed to survive the "missile" problem of June 1997, the line of control firing which heated up before Foreign Secretary level talks last year, and most recently the expulsion of diplomats from the respective countries and reciprocal accusations in the Coimbatore and Lahore bomb blasts.

Less vague

Indo-Pakistani relations cannot be divorced from nuclear politics and the BJP's platform which included the much repeated phrase, "we will re-evaluate the nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons" is important in this connection. But Vajpayee almost immediately clarified the statement with "if need be," and the most likely result of BJP statements on the nuclear

issue will be to simply make India's stand slightly less ambiguous than before. The BJP's rhetoric might even have bought India a somewhat higher degree of strategic credibility relatively cheaply. The appointment of George Fernandes as Defence Minister (he so far is not known as a strong supporter of the more ambitious nuclear policy) suggests that no big change in India's nuclear policy is likely any time soon.

Spurt in sight

Not surprisingly, some strong reactions have come from the Pakistani leadership to follow suit in reaction to the BJP's statements on the nuclear issue. It is not clear however whether the most recent Pakistani claim of having successfully carried out a Hatf-V or Ghaury surface-to-surface missile with a range over 1,500 kilometres is one such response. More likely, an independent momentum for missile development seems close to being achieved, regardless of who is in power in India or in Pakistan, for that matter.

Relations between the two neighbours cannot also be easily compartmentalised into domestic and international arenas and the assumption of power by the BJP could bring special problems. If the BJP's Hindutva line becomes more prominent, Pakistani ideologues could stretch and try to find a mirror image of the Hindu nation building project, particularly for their own domestic political reasons. But India's strength lies precisely in its pluralist national project, with its diverse strands of faith and culture. If this is eroded, it will no doubt weaken India's socio-political fabric, with obvious strong negative repercussions for its relations not only with Pakistan, but with other states as well.

(The author is Fellow, International & Strategic Studies Unit, National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISc Campus, Bangalore)