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"NDA government's Hindu Tilt; FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT" by S L Rao

Narendra Modi and the BJP got an overwhelming majority in the Lok Sabha elections on the repeated promise of development. The victory was helped by the incompetence and blatant corruption in the UPA 2 government. But the untiring efforts all over India by thousands of RSS volunteers to get people to vote for the BJP was essential. The BJP government has to deliver the promise; while keeping the RSS happy and cooperative.

Without the RSS, the BJP cannot be a winning political party because it does not have the cadres that the RSS does. Did RSS cadres excite Hindu sentiment in their voter contact? It would be surprising if they did not. The invisibility of non Hindu BJP candidates and Members in Parliament is evidence that the BJP is essentially a Hindu party.

The new government's focus in office seems to be on foreign affairs and development. The RSS and its associated organizations have already gone public with Hindu propaganda; witness Dina Nath Batra's books extolling the Hindu discoveries in science hundreds of years ago, and predating inventions that history books say were more recent. These books have now been added to the reading material in Gujarat schools. Another instance is the propaganda without evidence, of cases of Muslims entrapping Hindu girls into marriage and then converting them to Islam-'love jihad'. Yet another is the inflammatory speeches by swamis and others campaigning for the BJP in the state by-elections; the anti-Muslim rhetoric especially in Uttar Pradesh. A big issue which will not die is the attempt to take the Hindu philosophy of acceptance of all faiths and incorporating all beliefs, to an extreme by saying that all other religions are in fact part of Hinduism, so that there are Muslim Hindus, Christian Hindus, Sikh Hindus, etc. While this is acceptable in philosophical debate, it arouses passions when it becomes public propaganda. .

If the government does not at least periodically distance itself from this kind of rhetoric, it could swamp its development agenda. The development mantra is aimed to bring improvement in living standards, better health services that are accessible and affordable to all, more educational institutions and greater focus on their quality, improving livelihoods through a massive programme of skills development, and constantly expanding the numbers in employment. The very many poor who lack basic comforts, sometimes not even enough food, with inadequate services for health, education, skills development and nutrition must quickly experience a change in their lives. Urbanization must be

supported by better infrastructure, housing, water supply and sanitation in urban areas. Economic growth and development will result in more consumption of goods, and also of services like health, education, and so on. This must reflect in an increasing volume of the production of consumption goods (from agriculture and manufacturing). There must also be a greater availability of services. So infrastructure and manufacturing must boom. This has not happened for some years.

The absence of any counter by the central government to the Hindu propaganda which has gained in public pitch since the general elections can have many negative consequences for economic development.

It could revive the Western obloquy of Mr Modi after the 2002 Gujarat riots, except that he is now the Prime Minister and it will therefore be very disparaging to India. The Americans had refused him a visa to visit the USA. After he became Prime Minister they backtracked hastily, with visits by three Secretaries including State and Defence-and of the Clintons and a personal call from President Obama. There was considerable propaganda against him in Britain by M.P.'s and in the media. He was accused of fomenting/precipitating/encouraging the riots. This was despite many investigations and trials not framing any charges against him. It ignored the many serious communal riots in Gujarat in earlier years when Chief Ministers were not accused in this way. After he became Prime Minister, the British sent many top Ministers to smoothen the relationship. But a revived hate campaign against the Prime Minister in the media in these countries could affect investments into India. It will happen if the Hindu rhetoric is allowed free play.

The Modi government has already changed direction in foreign relations, with a strong tilt to Asia and particularly Japan and China, both of whom have huge foreign exchange reserves and low interest rates. The creation of a development bank with 100 billion dollars to start with is another sign of moving towards Asia. Japan and China were not bothered by the earlier accusations against Mr Modi and indeed, reached out to him.

It is domestically that the rabid Hindutva agitations and rhetoric will have the most negative impact. It could result in Hindu-Muslim tensions, even riots, as young Muslims and Hindus move from rhetoric to street actions. Communal violence especially in our cities will disrupt normal life, transport, manufacturing and the investment climate. It will distract much top government attention from development issues to dealing with law and order. It will slow down consumption and hence living standards will not rise as desired. Exports will be adversely affected. Volatile oil prices will add another serious hurdle. Almost certainly the Pakistan border will become more active. Terrorism internally will rise. The development agendas described earlier will be adversely affected.

The Opposition parties will mount agitations against the BJP government. Like the BJP did to

the UPA 2, the small Opposition can paralyze the Lok Sabha, despite their small numbers. They will prevent legislative progress in the Upper House. They can prevent the reforms in direct and indirect taxation, and particularly the introduction of the goods and services tax.

Development will need improvement in the speed with which the capability to deliver services is created and its quality. Construction of infrastructure services is tardy: power plants, roads, metros, flyovers, mining, mass housing, to name a few. This can be seen and experienced in all parts of India. The situation has got worse in the last ten years. It will be worse when there is internal unrest.

Yet, a BJP government must keep the RSS in a good mood. It needs the RSS for its foot soldiers. Many in the BJP including the Prime Minister, grew in the RSS and will have much sympathy for its ideology and rhetoric.

The challenge for Mr. Modi is to reconcile the two conflicting demands, of development and the Hindu tilt. What it might actually do is to walk a tight rope and accept the tilt where it might not cause unrest; for example, introduce Hindu prayers in a bigger way than presently, in schools and public functions. It could encourage ayurveda and yoga and other Hindu related remedies for better health. It could place restrictions on cow slaughter, which might hit exports but not significantly in overall terms. It might go slow on the special schemes for Muslims introduced in the UPA régime, and leave Muslims in a backward condition. It could continue the targeting of Muslims whenever there is a terrorist incident. The aim will be to keep Muslims backward relative to other communities.

It will be a sad day when a government resorts to such discriminatory practices. A large majority in Parliament, control of most state legislatures and being feted by many foreign countries vying for a share of the Indian markets, will allow the government to do so. One hopes that the BJP will keep it to the minimum.

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