



Voters’ choice

The Maldives turns the page on pre-election cynicism with a dramatic result

The interim results of Sunday’s presidential election in the Maldives have given the joint opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih a resounding victory in the direct contest with the incumbent, Abdulla Yameen. The final results will be published by the election commission by September 30 and the current government will, according to procedure, hand over charge on November 17. But it is immediately clear that Maldivian voters have ushered in change, with 58% of the voters choosing Mr. Solih. Regardless of political affiliation, Maldivians have much to celebrate with the successful completion of the election. To begin with, the turnout of 89.2% has disproved pre-election cynicism about the integrity of the electoral process. Early on, the opposition had suffered a setback when former President Mohammed Nasheed, who was seen as the frontrunner, was disqualified from contesting because of a “terrorism conviction”. Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was behind bars on the charge of attempting a coup in February this year. Just ahead of the elections too, there had also been many misgivings over the conduct of the election commission, the courts and security forces, with these worries heightened when the headquarters of the main opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party, to which Mr. Solih belongs, were raided. Counting procedures were changed at the last minute, which led to some confusion during Sunday’s polling, and many foreign journalists, including from India, were denied visas. Fortunately, the outcome has belied the worst fears about the election, and after meeting with Mr. Solih, President Yameen conceded defeat and vowed to ensure a smooth transition.

For New Delhi, the results are especially heartening as they present a chance to reset ties with Male, which have been on a downward spiral for several years. This was perceived to be a result of Mr. Yameen’s close understanding with China, to which the Maldives is now heavily indebted. Mr. Yameen responded to India’s criticism of the emergency he declared this year by clamping down on visas to Indian job holders, hundreds of whom await some movement in the matter after the new government takes over. India can also now renew talks over the fate of Indian Coast Guard and Air Force personnel stationed in the Maldives, whose visas have been pending since June. India was quick to welcome the provisional results and to congratulate, among others, the Maldivian Democratic Party, and the Jumhooree Party – to which the Vice-President-elect Faisal Naseem belongs. Going forward, New Delhi must stay clear of partisan positioning on the internal politics of the Maldives. The larger agenda must be to partner the Maldives in its stability and development rather than engaging in a tug of war with China.

Language matters

The BJP should give up its shrill rhetoric on immigration and the NRC

The process of filing claims and objections by persons left out of the draft National Register of Citizens in Assam began on Tuesday, in an atmosphere fraught with uncertainty about the documentation needed and possible recourse for those who may ultimately not clear the final list. In the draft published on July 30, as many as 40 lakh of the 3.29 crore applicants found their names missing. It is vital that the state do all it can to create an enabling environment to assist people grappling with paperwork and bureaucracy to assert their claim to being legitimate citizens of India. It is equally important that the government, in Assam and at the Centre, think the future through humanely and practically in regard to those who may remain off the final list. These persons will have many levels of appeal as next resort – but India needs to officially give the assurance that it will not condemn undocumented immigrants, who lack wherewithal and are the most unfortunate victims of poverty and South Asia’s complicated history, to their own devices. This empathy is in keeping with India’s tradition of giving refuge to those who have nowhere to go. It is disturbing that instead, even as the finalisation of the NRC is on, the register is becoming a pretext for political outreach based on xenophobia and demographic messaging. Leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is also in power in Assam, are freely recommending NRCs across India, and using the process in Assam to create new fault lines.

This weekend, at a public meeting in Delhi, the BJP president, Amit Shah, rallied the crowd by referring to infiltrators allegedly in the country, claiming they were eating away at India’s future. The comparison he made for this eating away from within was with “*deemak*” (Hindi for termites). Mr. Shah has, of late, dwelt many times on the need to identify illegal immigrants in the country, whose numbers he says are in crores. This has already drawn a response from Bangladesh, with Minister of Information Hasanul Haq Inu calling Mr. Shah’s comments “unwanted”, and also reiterating Bangladesh’s position that the NRC exercise is India’s internal matter. Mr. Inu has also referred to Delhi’s own communication, including from Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, that the NRC process is India’s internal issue. Beyond the data and diplomacy angles, there must be concern about the language being employed. Analogies to pests that attack a society from within are the staple of dangerous polarising rhetoric. The use of the NRC in electoral rhetoric is even more dangerous. Regrettably, the BJP seems determined to proceed with such mobilisation, knowing full well the damage it will cause to Indian society.

A nationalism that’s anti-national

What the RSS needs is an exposure to Indian culture and a deeper understanding of Hinduism itself



YOGENDRA YADAV

The recent outreach by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) at Vigyan Bhavan in Delhi seems to have succeeded in its principal objective: an image makeover for a niche audience. Thanks to an obsequious media and a commentariat ever willing to suspend disbelief, the event has yielded the soft, liberal gloss the RSS needed and desired. Sadly, the critics limited themselves to questions that the RSS anticipated, indeed wanted: Does the RSS exercise influence on this government? Is the RSS anti-Muslim?

It is time we asked a harder and deeper question: Is the RSS anti-national?

Theory and practice

On the face of it, this is an odd question. Nationalism, Indianness and Hindutva are very much the calling card of the RSS. This is not put on. I have known the RSS from inside and outside. Having met hundreds of swayamsevak and many pracharak, I know that an average RSS volunteer carries this nationalist self-image. I can also attest that just like the communists or old-time socialists, an average RSS worker tends to be more honest and idealist than a run-of-the-mill political leader. I am aware that on more than one occasion, the RSS has done exemplary rescue and relief work during national disasters. If anything, its critics accuse it of being ultra-nationalist. Thus, to question its nationalist credentials might appear outrageous.

Yet this question needs to be debated in all seriousness and all fair-

ness. Given the salience of the RSS in our national public life today, this is a pressing question. We worry, rightly so, about the impact of Islamic fundamentalist groups and Maoist insurgents on our nation. We debate, as we should, the challenge posed by separatism in Kashmir and Nagaland to our nationhood. But we no longer debate with any seriousness the challenge posed by the RSS and its associates to the project of nation-building the Indian nation. The question is about the theory and practice of the RSS as an organisation and its relation to the Indian nation, its past, present and future.

The nation and the past

Let’s begin with some indisputable facts about its past. Right from its inception in 1925, the RSS was not in any way active during the national movement. In fact, its associates such as the Hindu Mahasabha actively opposed the national movement. It is also a well-documented fact that V.D. Savarkar, whose ideology inspired the RSS’s founders and who remains its icon, was released from Cellular Jail in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after he wrote four mercy petitions to the Viceroy pledging loyalty to the British empire. After his release, he lived off a stipend from the British government and obeyed faithfully the conditions it had imposed on him. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, another Hindu Mahasabha leader, actively collaborated with the British during the Quit India movement while the RSS kept aloof from this biggest anti-colonial uprising. The two-nation theory was propagated by Hindu nationalists, much before the Muslim League. And it is no secret that Nathuram Godse was once an RSS member and was very much a part of its extended family when he murdered Mahatma Gandhi. Bluntly put, the RSS made zero, if not negative, contribution to the national struggle. But that is not sufficient to dub it anti-nation-



PTI

al today.

The role of the RSS after Independence is more relevant here. How did the RSS contribute to the project of nation-building? Sadly, the answer is again in the negative. The RSS was among the few organisations in independent India that refused to honour some of the key symbols of the Indian republic: the national flag, the national anthem and, of course, the Constitution of India. It speaks volumes that the head of the RSS has to clarify, nearly seven decades after the promulgation of the Constitution, that his organisation believes in it, something explicitly contradicted by his predecessor. Notwithstanding its recent claims to the contrary, the RSS does not quite subscribe to any of the key tenets of the Constitution: socialism, secularism, federalism and, indeed, democracy.

In practice, far from being a part of the solution, the RSS was always a part of the problem that India faced in its difficult journey of nation-building. The legacy of Partition and the challenge of bringing together immense diversities posed an unprecedented challenge to the nascent Indian nation. During this delicate phase, the RSS was at best an irresponsible denominational pressure group for the Hinduisation of the Indian state, opposing any and every concession to minorities and advocating a hawkish foreign policy. At worst the RSS became a ful-

crum of organised subversion of the constitutional order, as in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. If constitutional patriotism is the heart of national political life, the RSS has repeatedly stood in opposition to the nation.

More than anything else, it is the theory and practice of its nationalism that shows the RSS to be a European import, out of sync with Indian nationalism. The RSS subscribes to the now outdated European model of nation-state which assumed that the cultural boundaries of a nation must match the political boundaries of a state. In Europe it meant a uniform race, religion, language and culture as the defining features of a nation. In India it meant Hindu-Hindi-Hindustan, the slogan coined by Savarkar. India’s home-grown nationalism challenged this European model and its futile and bloody quest for matching cultural and political boundaries. Instead, Indian nationalism was about creating political unity in conditions of deep diversity of culture, religion and language.

Paradox of its workings

Today, as a rapidly diversifying world seeks to learn from the Indian model, the RSS clings on to an alien, borrowed and fractious understanding of nationalism. Worse, its model of separatism of the majority is clearly the biggest obstacle for Indian nationalism. Isn’t it odd that an organisation that claims to work for national integration has, or has had, little time and energy for an amicable resolution of some of the issues that challenge our national unity? These include intractable regional disputes (the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu and Punjab-Haryana water disputes), intra-regional tensions (demand for Telangana or Vidarbha), language issues (Punjabi-Hindi, Kannada-Marathi) or differences with racial and ethnic dimensions (violence against migrants from the Northeast in Bengaluru, Hindi

speakers in Mumbai).

The RSS version of nationalism comes into play only when there is a religious angle to any issue. It is not that they care for Hinduism either. The RSS ideologues have little knowledge of or interest in Hindu traditions. In fact, the version of Hinduism that it seeks to impose is itself a parody of orthodox Islam and orthodox Christianity and against the basic spirit of Hinduism, let alone the spirit of humanism that informs all religions. Unfortunately, the principal focus of the RSS has been to foment Hindu-Muslim differences, division and hatred. Since Hindu-Muslim violence poses the biggest single threat to national unity today, those who work for the exacerbation of Hindu-Muslim tension must be seen as anti-national, and guilty of treason.

The secessionists challenge the territorial integrity of India. The left-wing extremists challenge the writ of the Indian state. The challenge posed by the RSS is much deeper: it challenges the very idea of India, the swadharma of the Republic of India. If this is not anti-national, what is anti-national?

I am not for a ban on the RSS. Its theory and practice represent a cultural-political malady that needs a deeper cure rather than a ban. It originates in an inferiority complex of a modern Hindu, made worse by a westernised, deracinated form of our secularism. This might sound odd, but what the RSS needs is exposure to Indian culture and its multiple traditions, greater appreciation of culturally more confident Indians such as Tagore and Gandhi and a deeper understanding of Hinduism itself. If it introspects rather than hold an outreach at Vigyan Bhavan, I am sure its Sarsangchalak would recommend to the RSS what Gandhiji suggested to the Congress party: dissolve itself.

Yogendra Yadav is the President of Swaraj India

A change in the Maldives

India must seize the moment and rebuild the bilateral relationship



HARSH V. PANT

Democracy is a strange leveller. In domestic politics it has a way of springing up surprises which few anticipate. Even in foreign relations, it can make crises disappear in the same manner in which it can create them. When most had assumed that a second term for Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen was a done deal, given the controlled nature of the Maldivian elections, the people of the small archipelago in the Indian Ocean voted for change and brought to power the Opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. They came out in huge numbers with the turnout being 89.2% and dealt a decisive blow to Mr. Yameen.

Democratic vote

Belying concerns that he may not respect the outcome, after a few hours of election results, Mr. Yameen conceded defeat in a televised address by saying: “The Maldivian people have decided what

they want. I have accepted the results.”

Mr. Solih is a senior politician in the Maldives and was the joint presidential candidate for an opposition alliance of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the Jumhooree Party and the Adhaalath Party. His victory underscores the commitment of the Maldivian politicians to secure the future of democracy in their country. The exiled former President of the Maldives, Mohammed Nasheed, who was ousted by Mr. Yameen in 2012, underlined this when he tweeted that Mr. Solih had done “an extremely good service” to the people. This was a do or die battle for democrats and they succeeded.

After the results came out, India’s Ministry of External Affairs said Sunday’s election marked “not only the triumph of democratic forces in the Maldives but also reflects the firm commitment to the values of democracy and the rule of law.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi also called Mr. Solih, underscoring his support for better ties between the two countries. The U.S. State Department said the Maldivian people had “raised their democratic voices to determine the future of their country.”

The Maldives has been in turmoil since its first democratically-



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elected leader, Mr. Nasheed, was forced out of office following a police mutiny in 2012. This was followed by the controversial election of Mr. Yameen in 2013 when the Supreme Court annulled the result. Mr. Yameen was trailing Mr. Nasheed, thereby providing him an opportunity to win in the second round of voting. Mr. Yameen’s presidency saw the Maldives flirting with Islamist radicalism and the democratic unpinnings of the nation came under assault. This February, he imposed a 45-day state of emergency fearing an attempt by his political opponents to impeach him. This led him to target his own half brother and former President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and the judiciary. Even on the eve of the polling, the police was used to target the opposition MDP, amid con-

cerns that the campaign had been heavily tilted in favour of Mr. Yameen.

Mr. Yameen also fostered closer ties with China and Saudi Arabia, ignoring India and even pulling the Maldives out of the Commonwealth in 2016.

Tilt towards China

The alacrity with which Mr. Yameen embraced China caught India off guard. During his China visit last year, the two nations signed 12 pacts, including a free trade agreement (FTA). Mr. Yameen not only fully endorsed China’s ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative but also made the Maldives the second country in South Asia, after Pakistan, to enter into an FTA with China. The Yameen government pushed the FTA through the nation’s Parliament, the Majlis, stealthily, with the opposition not attending the parliamentary session.

The opposition accused the Yameen government “of allowing a Chinese ‘land grab’ of Maldivian islands, key infrastructure, and even essential utilities, which “not only undermines the independence of the Maldives, but the security of the entire Indian Ocean region”. The massive infrastructure growth funded by Chinese

debt was a key part of Mr. Yameen’s election campaign but the massive debt trap made it a difficult proposition to be accepted.

Mr. Yameen may have conceded defeat but many of the challenges the Maldives faces linger. The opposition may have been united in its desire to oust Mr. Yameen but this unity will be tested in governance. Democratic institutions have been weakened and a fragile democracy can also be susceptible to radical ideologies if not effectively governed. And China is not going anywhere in a hurry. Its economic presence in the Maldives is a reality that all governments will have to contend with.

Mr. Yameen’s ouster has certainly produced a favourable outcome for New Delhi and it should seize the moment to rebuild ties with Male. If there is one lesson out of the Maldives crisis, it is that political elites in India’s neighbours will come and go but if India can stand together with the aspirations of citizens of neighbouring countries, then the prospects of a long-term sustainable relationship will be much brighter.

Harsh V. Pant is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and Professor at King’s College London

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Ersatz nationalism

The article, “Manufacturing nationalism” (Editorial page, September 25), reminded me of what

Jawaharlal Nehru says in his books, *Letters for a Nation: From Jawaharlal Nehru to His Chief Ministers 1947-1963*: “The feeling of nationalism is an enlarging and widening experience for the individual or the nation. More especially, when a country is under foreign domination, nationalism is a strengthening and unifying force... But a more insidious form of nationalism is the narrowness of mind that it develops within a country, when a majority thinks itself as the entire nation... We have a tendency to fall into separate groups and to forget the larger unity.” Today, political parties that rule us ‘inspire’ the people ‘to fall into separate groups

and to forget the larger unity.’ An example lies in the rebuilding Kerala project, which instead of being a mission of the whole people, is being undertaken as a mission of the party.

SUKUMARAN C.V.,
Palakkad, Kerala

■ The notice from the UGC, on commemorating the ‘surgical strike’ of 2016, should be given more thought. Such actions come out of necessity or as of last resort. Violence of any kind should not be embraced, let alone celebrated. We, as a great nation, have better things to commemorate.

NEELESH KUMAR,
Chennai

Ayushman Bharat

The new health protection scheme, that has been introduced with much fanfare, may not serve its goals as the budgetary

allocation is grossly inadequate (Editorial, “Long road ahead”, September 25). The scheme appears to be modelled more or less on the lines of ‘Obama care’ in the U.S.. The speed and haste with which it has been introduced, and close to the general election, indicate the real reason – to fetch political dividends and have the upper hand with the electorate.

V. PADMANABHAN,
Bengaluru

The Hindu at 140

My tryst with *The Hindu* started when I was in plus one and it continues (24-page tabloid, “The Hindu@140”, September 20). In my workplace, many colleagues know me as the one who writes letters on a regular basis, which is a coveted recognition. The little English that I know is because of this newspaper; my day is not complete

without reading it. My only request is that the editor consider allotting more space for the ‘Letters to the Editor’ column. The pride one takes in writing to the daily cannot be described.

T. ANAND RAJ,
Chennai

■ My father has been a regular reader for almost 20 years now, unlike me as I read it when I find the time. I wish there could be a page that highlights just positive things – success stories and happy events across the world. Perhaps this will help usher in changes in society in its own small way.

MURALI YANAMANDALA,
Hyderabad

■ In my locality, there is an established belief that when a youngster is seen buying *The Hindu*, he or she is certain to be getting ready to crack the civil services examination. In my case, it

was the daily’s use of the English language that got me into the habit of reading it.

AVIR SETHI,
Zirakpur, Mohali, Punjab

■ The media landscape has changed and one reads a lot of other newspapers. But *The Hindu* takes first place. With media content now mostly on political hate speeches, crimes and trauma, there is a need to be discreet and impartial, which one still finds intact in *The Hindu*. In the 1960s, my father wrote letters frequently; I have the clippings.

GIRIJA NAIDU,
Chennai

■ It would be no exaggeration to say that the daily is a part of the family. I am now 79 and began reading the paper when I was 12. The paper played an important role in two things

– I got jobs in two giant public sector undertakings after finding the advertisements in the daily. And, my daughters found their soul mates through the matrimonial column.

LALGUDY VAITHIANATHA
GANAPATHY,
Chennai

■ The daily has helped me in grammar, especially the use of adverbs. For a new reader like me, I find it upsetting that I do not have the time to read the foreign news pages extensively.

SHIJU NEDUVELLIL,
Secunderabad

■ I have been reading *The Hindu* for a little over 50 years. I express my thanks for it helping me form my world views and some of my values.

S.A. RAHMAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

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