
THE PAKISTAN FACTOR IN INDIA'S ELECTIONS

- 12.04.2019

Asia Times (11 April 2019)

For weeks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had cautioned voters in rallies that a vote for the opposition party, the Indian National Congress, would be a vote for Pakistan. This was his bid to make the Congress look like a party that is in cahoots with an enemy state.

Then on Wednesday, with but one day to go before the start of this months general elections, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan threw what cricketers call a googly, a surprise delivery. He said that Pakistans chances of negotiating peace with India would be better with a right-wing government in New Delhi.

While opposition parties went to town pointing out the immense irony of Khan appearing to endorse Modi, theres no doubt that Pakistan is a major factor in Indias elections. This is so in even more ways than are suggested by the obvious campaign references made by all key political parties in the fray.

The February 14 [terror strike at Pulwama](#) in the troubled northern state of Jammu and Kashmir and the February 26 [retaliatory strikes by the Indian Air Force](#) at Balakot in Pakistan are already dominant themes. But there is a lot more to the Pakistan factor.

Appearances count

In the state of Rajasthan □ which sends 25 members to the Lok Sabha, Indias lower house of Parliament □ the electoral discourse has usually been fashioned by the political winds wafting in from Pakistan.

In the last national elections, in 2014, senior leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) including its Rajasthan vice president, Onkar Singh Lakhawat, went big on the alleged meddling by Pakistan in Indian polls.

They accused Pir Pagaro VIII, spiritual head of the Pakistan-based Sufi Muslim Hur community, of backing the candidacy of Jaswant Singh, a former external affairs minister. Singh in 2006 had led a 36-member delegation on a pilgrimage visit to the Hinglaj Mata □ a Hindu temple □ in Pakistans Baluchistan province. Along the way he was reported to have met the Hur holy man.

During last years elections to the 200-member Rajasthan assembly, the Congress fielded Saleh Mohammed as its candidate for the Pokhran seat. Mohammed, the son of Ghazi Fakir, the India representative of the Hur sect, won the election and is now minister of minority affairs in the

Congress government led by Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot.

Political jockeying

Its unsurprising, therefore, that □ amid the raging debate over the nationalism question □ the long simmering and potentially polarizing set of issues concerning the future of displaced citizens has once again reignited political discourse in hustings this year.

In order to escape religious persecution or on account of matrimony or family links or just a search for greener pastures, waves of migrants headed to India from the adjoining Sindh district of Pakistan following partition in 1947.

Settling mainly in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, the displaced either have been living on short- or long-term visas or have been granted Indian citizenship.

In Rajasthan, 140,000 of the Pakistan-displaced have so far been granted Indian citizenship, while applications of 25,000 others are pending. The majority of the refugees are Hindus □ with a sprinkling of other sects including Sikhs, Parsis, Jains and even Muslims. Many are engaged in contractual jobs in the construction industry.

Migrations are continuing to happen; sometimes they come in as trickles, sometimes as torrents, said Hindu Singh Soda of the Seemant Lok Sangathan, a voluntary organization fighting for the rights of displaced people from Pakistan. Families of this community have also continued to expand, as children are born.

Those granted citizenship are compelled to lead lives of second-rate citizens, while the situation is even more atrocious for those not granted citizenship, Singh complained. Both the Congress and the BJP have remained negligent to our rights and demands. A legal or policy framework on the rehabilitation of the migrants does not exist. Therefore, we have decided to make this election count.

The parties have no choice but to pay attention. In a move seen as having explicit political connotations, the Narendra Modi government approved citizenship rights of another group of 12 refugees at a function presided over by Barmer District Collector Himanshu Gupta on Tuesday.

Congress candidate from Jodhpur Vaibhav Gehlot □ who is incumbent Chief Minister Gehlots son □ in a written handout has committed himself to setting up a rehabilitation board to work out a legal, institutional and administrative framework to accommodate the displaced from Pakistan.

In their rallies across the dusty districts of their desert state, Rajasthan BJP leaders have been vowing to enact and implement the proposed Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, which states that Pakistani migrants having valid proof of stay in India for a continuous period of seven years can become eligible for citizenship.

The BJP's position on the citizenship question comes with a rider, as the Act provides that Pakistani citizens who migrated to India after the cut-off date of 2014 are not eligible for citizenship. There are far too many bureaucratic hurdles and complexities, complained one Pakistani migrant, Gordhan Bhil. The BJP has not done enough to bring justice to the Pakistani migrants.

Growing political heft

Pakistani migrants are mainly concentrated in Jodhpur, but some are spread out across other bordering districts including Jaisalmer, Barmer, Sri Ganganagar and Bikaner. Because such groups can make the critical difference between victory or loss of a candidate in a keen contest, the groups standing has assumed political heft over the years.

This was evidenced in the events following a February 18 order by the Bikaner district magistrate, instructing Pakistani citizens to vacate the geographical boundaries of the district within 48 hours.

Less than 24 hours after the order had been issued, the Gehlot-headed state government issued a press release stating that the order did not apply to displaced people from Pakistan.

In the 2013 elections to the state assembly, the BJP fielded Tarun Rai Kaga – a Pakistani displaced person – as a candidate for the Chauthan assembly seat in Barmer. Kaga won with a big margin. This time, Congress candidates in bordering districts have been photographed visiting camps of the Pakistani-displaced to seek their votes.

Muslims and Hindus have largely lived in a state of peaceful co-existence. The attire and food habits of the Hindu Rajput or the Meghwal communities are identical to those of the Mangniars or Langas, who are Muslim tribals. It is quite common in border areas to find the Mangniars and Langas singing Hindu religious songs at Rajput weddings.

Tensions have increased, however, and a sustained ideological campaign by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) – the ruling BJP's mother organization – is often blamed for a worsening of social rifts.

There is a trend towards radicalization, both among the Hindus and the Muslims, said Bhuvnesh Jain, who works with a Barmer-based organization called the Society for Upliftment of Rural Economy (SURE). The polarization along communal lines is even more visible in these elections.

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