



Not losing in defeat

K. Palaniswami has proved to be an artful survivor despite the AIADMK's massive losses

Seldom does someone on the losing side have so much to be satisfied about in defeat as Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami. The massive drubbing suffered by the AIADMK-BJP alliance in the State may be a notable outcome of the Lok Sabha election, but the positive takeaway for him is that he remains in office, and with added sheen of stability. By garnering nine out of the 22 Assembly constituencies that had by-elections alongside the Lok Sabha polls, the ruling AIADMK has got enough seats to stave off the prospect of losing its majority in the 234-member House. Although it lost 13 seats to the Opposition DMK, its tally went up to 123, five above the requisite majority. Another upshot is that T.T.V. Dhinakaran, the principal challenger to the AIADMK for Jayalalithaa's legacy, ended up losing so badly that he may not be in a position to wear away any more legislators from the party jointly led by Mr. Palaniswami and Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam. With none of Mr. Dhinakaran's candidates coming close to victory in any of the Lok Sabha or Assembly constituencies, the possibility of so-called fence-sitters leaning towards him has disappeared. In two years, Mr. Palaniswami has survived challenges to his leadership, first from Mr. Panneerselvam, who later became his ally in a joint attempt to keep out Jayalalithaa's friend V.K. Sasikala, and later Mr. Dhinakaran. He survived the first crisis by striking a deal with Mr. Panneerselvam and his supporters. To combat the crisis caused by the Dhinakaran faction's revolt, the party got 18 MLAs loyal to him disqualified from the House. The ensuing litigation kept his regime going. The disqualification tactic did not turn out too well in the end. Ten of the DMK's 13-seat haul came from vacancies created by disqualification on defection charges. But the AIADMK managed just enough to survive in government.

The next question was whether Mr. Palaniswami would survive an electoral test, given that this was the first election held after the demise of Jayalalithaa and DMK supremo M. Karunanidhi. With his government seen as a proxy of the BJP regime at the Centre and the mood in the State being one of antipathy towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the AIADMK had to contend with double anti-incumbency. Losing around 20 of the 22 Assembly seats could have propelled arch-rival and DMK president M.K. Stalin to power. But while the DMK alliance had to share the honours in the Assembly by-elections, in the Lok Sabha constituencies it won a landslide. Mr. Palaniswami's electoral strategy was largely geared towards retaining as many Assembly seats as possible. He succeeded in the limited objective of protecting his regime. Mr. Stalin, the undoubted overall winner on the electoral field, will have to wait for another day to try to dislodge the artful survivor at the helm in Tamil Nadu. Despite a stellar show at the hustings, the DMK remains out of power at the Centre and in the State.

It's there

It's obvious why so many try to scale Everest — but the safety protocol must be tightened

Mount Everest, the world's highest peak at 8,848 metres, draws adventurers from all over. But the mountain on the Nepal-China border is fast becoming a dangerous place to visit even for the hardened mountaineer. The inherent risks were this month highlighted with a photograph by Nirmal Purja, a Gorkha ex-soldier. The image, which went viral and altered the manner in which people worldwide imagine what it is to scale Mt. Everest, showed a long queue awaiting a final tilt at the summit, with all the dangers such a wait holds. This season, at least 10 climbers have died or gone missing, including four Indians. Experts have been calling for Nepal to restrict the number of permits. It awarded a record 381 for this spring, each fetching \$11,000 (climbing from the Tibet side is more expensive). On Wednesday, 200 climbers ascended the summit, a new record for a single day. Last year, 807 managed to reach the summit. In 2012, the United Nations estimated that there were more than 26,000 visitors to the Everest region, and this figure has grown manifold since then. Nepal officials argue that permits are not issued recklessly, and that jams such as this year's near the summit are on account of spells of bad weather, which result in mountaineers being compelled to summit within a narrow time-frame. Waiting in sub-zero temperatures at the rarefied altitude can be fatal — this season's deaths were mostly due to frostbite, exhaustion, dehydration and lack of oxygen.

This year's drama has caught the public imagination, as happened in 1996 when eight persons died in a single day amid an unexpected storm — events of and around that day were the subject of Jon Krakauer's bestselling book, *Into Thin Air*. The adventure industry that is built around the human desire to scale the peak has meant many amateurs take up the challenge, confident that support teams and specialised equipment will make up for their lack of adequate mountaineering experience. The fallout is that in case of a disaster not only are some of them unable to manage, but they hold up others, putting them in harm's way. The commercial operations have led to the Everest being called the world's highest garbage dump as many climbers discard non-critical gear and fail to clean up the mess. It is unlikely, however, that this season's tragedies will deter future summiteers, as the hypnotic lure remains intact. As George Mallory, the English mountaineer who perished in the attempt to scale Everest, reportedly said of its pull, "Because it's there." But the authorities must learn from this year's tragedies and work out an optimum number of climbers and strengthen safety measures.

How to rescue genuine secularism

The government must focus on its primary business; to prevent religion-based violence, oppression and discrimination



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

One word conspicuous by its absence not only from the election campaign but perhaps from the entire political discourse in recent times was secularism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi brought it back in his victory speech. Most political parties in the last 30 years had practised a *naqli* (fake) secularism, he said. His great achievement, he implied, was to have unmasked these fake secularists and single-handedly dismantled secularism. Until now, for Mr. Modi, fake secularism has been the handmaiden of minority appeasement. Next day, however, he spoke of winning back the trust of the minorities, who, he said, have been deceived and cheated by other parties. With this, fake secularism was given a different meaning; it does not pamper but cheats minorities. In other words, it does not satisfy their real needs, but only gives the illusion of doing so. Here, Mr. Modi acknowledges that Muslims are a deprived lot. So, what, according to Mr. Modi, is *asli* (genuine) secularism? The answer he gives is the inclusion of minorities in '*sabka saath sabka vikas*', which is translated by his party as 'justice to all, appeasement to none'. To this he added '*sabka vishwas*', winning the trust of all.

Fears of minorities

On the treatment of minorities by other parties, the Prime Minister is partly right and partly wrong. Wrong, because the insecurity amongst minorities is created largely by Mr. Modi's own political supporters. Lynchings in the past few years and the fear such ran-

dom violence creates are only the tip of this gigantic iceberg. Right, because when in power, most non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parties have done little more than provide security. Now, the condition of feeling safe and secure must not be underestimated. Freedom from fear is important, and to live in the fear of being lynched only because you are a Muslim is a very real unfreedom indeed. Yet, political parties have not helped Muslims with their *vikas*. Some have even pampered the orthodoxy within their communities and have done little to bring them out of their ghettos. So, this secularism is partly fake because it has often meant tolerating minority communalism, and hobnobbing with the most selfish and conservative spokespersons of the multiple Muslim communities of India.

It is very sad indeed that in the election campaign, these 'fake secularists' failed miserably to speak up for Muslims. Perhaps they were terrified that if they spoke of the legitimate interests of Muslims, they would be immediately branded as pro-Pakistan, anti-national or anti-Hindu. Yes, 'fake' secularism has failed the minorities and the people of India, but the BJP and its supporters, particularly the so-called 'fringe', must take a lot of blame for that. This needs course correction and the nation would be grateful to the Prime Minister if he began that process.

But is the secularism propounded or implied by the Prime Minister genuine? At least in theory, '*sabka saath sabka vikas*' gets one thing right: no individual citizen should face discrimination on grounds of religion. Basic amenities, good health, education, housing and employment should be available equally to all, regardless of their religion. If he succeeds in this endeavour, he would make great strides towards realising secularism.

However, secularism combats



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not just discrimination and other worse forms of inter-religious domination such as exclusion, oppression and humiliation. It is equally opposed to intra-religious domination, i.e. the domination (of women, Dalits, dissenters) within every religious community. For instance, the fight against the hierarchical caste system in India, quite like the struggle against the church in European history, is integral to the fight for secularism — a point noted by both Ambedkar and Nehru. Equally important for secularism is opposition to religious fanaticism and bigotry. Neither of these is explicitly captured by '*sabka saath, sabka vikas*'.

Misunderstanding secularism

That Indian secularism is not anti-religious is widely understood — but not that it is simultaneously against both forms of institutionalised religious domination. How did this misunderstanding develop? First, the struggle against inter-religious domination (a defence of minority rights, opposition to majority and minority communalism) became separated from the fight against intra-religious domination (religion-related patriarchy and caste domination, fanaticism, bigotry and extremism). Then, this intra-religious dimension was jettisoned from the meaning of secularism and, much to the detriment of its overall value, secularism began to be identified, by proponents and opponents alike, exclusively with the defence of minority

rights.

This opened the door for viewing secularism first as a tool to protect the interests of Muslims and Christians, of no relevance to Hindus, and then for twisting it to appear as pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu. The strength of Indian secularism — its advocacy of minority cultural rights — was easily made to appear as its weakness and the burden of its defence, rather than be shared by all citizens, fell on the shoulders of minorities and 'pro-minority' secularists. This is unfair. Secularism is needed as much to protect Hindus from intra-religious domination, from their 'fringe elements', as well as from proponents of religion-based caste and gender hierarchies. And required equally to protect minorities from their own orthodoxies and extremisms. *Asli* secularism plays that role. *Naqli* secularism protects fanatics and legitimises gender and caste-based domination.

Secularism today has other problems. One is its intellectual failure to distinguish communitarianism from communalism. Communitarianism simply notes that an individual is at least partly defined by his or her religious/philosophical commitments, community and traditions. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to claim that one is a Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian/atheist etc, and to take legitimate pride in one's community or be ashamed of it when there is good reason to be.

Communalism is different. Here one's identity and the existence and interests of one's community are viewed, even defined, as necessarily opposed to others. It is communal to believe or act in a way that presupposes that one can't be a Hindu without being anti-Muslim, or vice-versa. Communalism is communitarianism gone sour. It is to see each other as enemies locked in a permanent war with one another. Every decent In-

dian national should be against communalism. But no one should decry legitimate forms of communitarianism. It is simply wrong to conflate communitarianism with communalism.

Attention must also be drawn to another problem of Indian secularism. Our education system often fails to distinguish religious instruction and religious education. No publicly funded school or college should have religious instruction, best done at home or in privately funded schools; but reasonable, decent education should include elementary knowledge of all religious traditions. A deeper understanding of these traditions is vital, for it would enable students to discern their strengths and weaknesses and identify what in them is worth preserving or discarding. But Indians come out of their education system without any critical understanding of their religio-philosophical traditions. As a result, a defence of our own religious traditions or critique of others is shallow and frequently mischievous. This too is fake secularism.

What is to be done?

What then must be expected from real, genuine secularism? Justice to all citizens, affirmation of all reasonable religious identities, rejection of majority communalism, careful defence of legitimate minority rights only when accompanied by a robust critique of minority extremism, and a critical appraisal of religions with a deeper, empathetic grasp of their traditions. The government's primary business is to prevent religion-based violence, oppression and discrimination. Perhaps, those outside the government should attend to its other functions. Together, we may just rescue our genuine secularism.

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Global implications of the mandate

It opens the window for India to take advantage of economic opportunities in the geopolitical space



SHASHI SHEKHAR

The clear and decisive mandate for Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a defining moment in India's democratic history. Its extent, which is manifest from the highest-ever voter turnout in a general election and the share of votes won by the winning coalition, creates its own very unique set of circumstances.

To put this in perspective, as the world's largest democracy, India has a staggering 900 million-odd voters, of whom about over 67% turned out, making it about a little over half-a-billion people participating in the general election of 2019. Out of this, the winning coalition is estimated to have earned close to 300 million votes. When we compare this with the next biggest democracy, the United States, which has a population of more than 320 million, the magnitude of the mandate earned by Mr. Modi becomes clear.

It is a unique moment for India

that the rising aspirations of people in one of the fastest growing economies have resulted in this kind of a mandate. While it raises the bar on expectations, more importantly, it gives the leadership of the country the necessary wherewithal to take the kind of decisions that are needed to put India on a high growth trajectory. At a time when two of the largest economic powers in the world, the U.S. and China, are locked in a trade war of sorts, this mandate opens the window for India to take advantage of economic opportunities that are likely to develop in the geopolitical space. To get the Indian economy on the right trajectory, to spur our exports and to create jobs — while this kind of a mandate creates expectations, it also empowers the leadership to take the right decisions to realise the same.

A chance to steer geopolitics

The poll result also paves the way for India to take its rightful place in the world order not just as a participant in the deliberations that happen at multilateral platforms but, more importantly, to set the course for the kind of change that we would like to see in the world. India over the last five years has taken a leadership position in quite a



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few initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance, while facilitating global action on climate change through the Paris Agreement. India has also projected its soft power through a global projection of yoga to shine the spotlight on how Indian spirituality can be a force for greater good. Now, with this kind of political mandate and the unique set of global circumstances it has been delivered in, the expectation is even higher that India would take up its rightful role in steering geopolitics in a host of areas: from global trade to regional conflicts to setting the global direction in emerging technology areas such as artificial intelligence and space exploration, to name a few.

India's democracy after Independence is a very unique experiment, just a few years away from

turning 75. There is no democratic parallel anywhere else in the world to the Indian context and the Indian experiment. This is missing in the manner in which the global media, especially influential western media outlets, have tended to view India. This mandate ought to be a wake-up call for global media outlets to shun their myopic view of the democratic discourse in India. They must now discard the stereotypes they still use in their reportage.

The mandate also places Mr. Modi as first among equals within his peer group of world leaders today. While a whole generation of strong leaders have emerged from among the G20 nations, be it the U.S., Japan, Russia, Turkey, Australia, Indonesia or South Africa, only Mr. Modi can credibly claim to have been tested by the largest number of voters in a free and fair election. The mandate gives India's voice heft at key multilateral platforms. It creates the opportunity for him to advance Indian values and advocate uniquely Indian ways of solving global problems.

Protecting interests

The mandate also calls for a new creed of techno-nationalism as a counter to borderless techno-acti-

vism that has threatened Indian interests through its pursuit of innocuous agendas (net neutrality and privacy) which have advocated measures inimical to India. The political mandate demands that India devise ways and means to stay ahead of the curve in emerging technology areas such as 5G and artificial intelligence, among others. It calls for out-of-the-box thinking as India can no longer risk being left out of setting the course for technology changes that will not only shape the global economy but also geopolitical dynamics.

India is also the largest open market to global technology majors which continue to locate their computing and storage infrastructure outside India and beyond Indian jurisdictions. The mandate demands that India leverage the strength of its democracy and the power of its markets to ensure that the global platforms play by rules that do not hurt the Indian national interest. While India continues to benefit from global digital innovations, this needs to happen within a framework that enhances Indian interests.

Shashi Shekhar is CEO, Prasar Bharati. The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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After the debacle

The infectious sycophancy witnessed in the Congress from the days of Indira Gandhi is still alive and kicking. No one was in doubt that Congress president Rahul Gandhi's offer of resignation as the party president over the party's disastrous performance in the Lok Sabha election would be wholeheartedly rejected by the Congress Working Committee (CWC) packed with Gandhi-family loyalists. The CWC has authorised him to undertake a complete overhaul and restructuring of the party. A good suggestion. But should this not begin from the top? There are reports of Mr. Gandhi pointing fingers at the State leaderships for their failure to highlight alleged corruption in the Rafale deal, little realising that his poorly crafted slogan, "chowkidar chor

hai", had not only failed to gain any traction but also backfired on him with Narendra Modi accusing former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of corruption. If Mr. Gandhi is adamant about stepping down, why force an unwilling soldier to lead the charge in politically challenging times?

S.K. CHOUDHURY, Bengaluru

■ The result in Karnataka (considered a Congress bastion) and the surge of the BJP in West Bengal should have forced the grand old party to initiate drastic measures. Continuing with Mr. Gandhi will progressively push young blood to defect to some other party since a Congress revival is not on the cards — at least in the near future.

V. LAKSHMANAN, Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

■ Victories and defeats are not uncommon in electoral

politics. Mr. Gandhi is a charismatic leader and he must display an attitude of courage. Just as there are millions who support the party that has won, equally there are those who look to him with hope and expectation. One election debacle is not the end of the world. Mr. Gandhi must guide and inspire the party rank and file, revamping and rejuvenating the party at the grass-root level. He must advise the cadres to work among the people. Act like a statesman and look forward to the next election. Work sincerely for the people and power will follow.

D. GEORGE VAREEKAL, Burhanpur, Madhya Pradesh

On majoritarianism

Narendra Modi has achieved a landslide victory but it is his majoritarian politics that has become a source of anguish and concern. The dangers of majoritarian politics were best explained

by Jawaharlal Nehru at the meeting of the AICC in May 1958: "Communalism of the majority is far more dangerous than communalism of the minority." He noted that communalism is a part of our society and explained why Hindu communalism was far more dangerous. "When the minority communities are communal, you can see that and understand it. But the communalism of a majority community is apt to be taken for nationalism." This is the danger we are facing today. It was Mahatma Gandhi who also said: "You represent the vast ocean of Indian humanity." He added, "India does not belong to Hindus alone." These are prophetic reminders for the BJP.

N.G.R. PRASAD, K.K. RAM SIDDHARTHA, Chennai

Fire safety

Flagrant violations of building and fire safety

norms are the order of the day because of the virus called corruption (Editorial, "Fire and laissez-faire", May 27). What prevents the state machinery from ensuring that fire-fighting skills are enhanced by enabling the required equipment and trained manpower and resources? There is no purpose served in holding inquiries for violation of norms if States do not wake up to the reality of improving the efficiency of the fire services departments across the country. Safety nets and ladders seem to be alien ideas. With skyscrapers mushrooming, basic fire-fighting measures in such high-rise buildings must be a priority..

GANESH SURATH, Secunderabad

■ Not a single multi-storey apartment block I have seen in this city has space for a fire tender to get close to it and go around in case of a

major fire. All this is the result of an apparently compromised governmental authority that is beholden to builders. Builders often hand over buildings to buyers even without basic fire-fighting devices such as sensors, alarms and extinguishers.

S. JAGATHSIMHAN NAIR, Thiruvananthapuram

May and Brexit

It is unfortunate that Britain is still struggling to leave the European Union ('World' page, "Brexit became a trap for Theresa May", May 25). British Prime Minister Theresa May's resignation will throw the country into further turmoil and it appears that a soft Brexit deal is very unlikely. A snap parliamentary election or a second referendum on the issue appear to be the only options.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

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