

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Doug Bandow: Will Modi be a prime minister for all Indians?

By Doug Bandow

May 23, 2014

For years, India has disappointed expectations. Tagged as the next great power preparing to challenge China and, eventually, America, India, instead, has lagged economically, stagnated politically, and battled religiously.

Now, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has won a stunning political victory. India's future depends on Modi's ability to transcend his sectarian roots and govern on behalf of all Indians.

Throughout the Cold War, the Delhi government kept its people poor by mismanaging the economy. Politics was dominated by the dynastic India National Congress Party. Eventually the Congress Party began economic reforms, and the BJP broke the Congress political monopoly.

Of particular concern is the government's inability or unwillingness to combat religious violence and prosecute those responsible. Explained the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: "India has struggled to protect minority communities or provide justice when crimes occur due to a lack of political will, political corruption, and religious bias by government officials."

Much violence occurs between the two largest groups, Hindus and Muslims, but other religious minorities also are targeted. In 2007-08, in the state of Odisha (formerly known as Orissa), rioting Hindus murdered scores of Christians, forced thousands to flee, and destroyed many homes and churches.

Unfortunately, Modi was implicated in one of the country's worst episodes of sectarian violence. In 2002, in the state of Gujarat, in which Modi served as chief minister, Hindu rioters killed more than 1,200 people, mostly Muslims, and forced 150,000 people from their homes. Critics charged Modi with both encouraging the violence and failing to stop it.

Modi was absolved of responsibility, though prosecutors may not have looked very hard. He defends his conduct, saying he only wishes he had handled the media better.

However, Modi has ridden a sectarian tide to power. He graduated to the BJP from the Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (“National Volunteer Society”), which he joined in his youth. He denounced Muslims early in his career and a number of his closest associates are pronounced Hindu nationalists.

The good news in Modi’s victory is that he was elected to reform the faltering economy, not stoke the fires of religious hatred. Gujarat has prospered and the BJP is committed to relaxing India’s often-stultifying government regulations. The quickest way for the new government to discourage foreign investment would be to trigger more sectarian violence.

Relations with the U.S. will be a key issue. They recently have suffered from trade disputes and criminal allegations against an Indian diplomat in New York.

Modi’s election poses another challenge. In 2005, the State Department refused to issue him a visa because of his presumed role in the Gujarat violence.

President Barack Obama congratulated Modi after the latter’s victory and extended an invitation to visit America. No doubt the visa ban will be quietly forgotten.

The responsibility to reconcile is not Washington’s alone. Set to become perhaps the most powerful Indian prime minister since Indira Gandhi three decades ago, Modi should set foreign governments and, even more important, his own citizens at ease.

After the election results were announced, he said that “The age of divisive politics has ended, from today onwards the politics of uniting people will begin.” It was a good beginning, but he must live up to that promise.

Modi has a historic opportunity. His government will be the first in years to enjoy a solid majority in the Lok Sabha, or lower house. The people he will represent are both entrepreneurial and impatient, demanding the chance to better their lives. The Indian people need more opportunity, not more dependency.

The choice soon will be up to Narendra Modi. Much around the globe depends on what he decides.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of “Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire” (Xulon Press).