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## ANALYSIS

### GUJARAT'S DECEMBER 2007 ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN POLITICS

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It is not often that a provincial election in India, or indeed anywhere, draws international attention. The recently concluded elections in the Indian state of Gujarat did so for two reasons. One is that Gujarat is perceived as one of bellwether states for Indian national elections due by 2009. The second is Gujarat's unique position as a laboratory for the most militant variety of right-wing Hindu nationalism. Both reasons were given added weight by the election to a third term of Chief Minister Narendra Modi of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently in opposition in the national legislature.

Modi has symbolized the extreme right of the BJP since April 2002, when Gujarat suffered the worst sectarian rioting in independent India's history. The days-long pogrom against the local Muslim minority, which appeared to have the sanction of the state government, was allegedly in retaliation for the death of several dozen Hindu nationalist activists who were burned in a railroad car. Many observers saw the riots as a cynical BJP strategy to highlight sectarian division in the run-up to state elections. The BJP had suffered losses to the Congress in local elections in late 2001, causing party leaders to replace then-Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel with Modi. (As India is a parliamentary system, state chief ministers, like the national prime minister, are decided on the basis of legislative support.)

At the time, the refusal of the BJP-led national government to intervene appalled many observers and may have contributed to the BJP coalition's defeat in national elections in 2004. In Gujarat, however, the riots appeared to pay off politically, as the BJP won state elections later in 2002. Since then, many have wondered if the BJP could win in Gujarat without highlighting sectarian issues. In fact, in the recent election campaign, Mr. Modi highlighted his claims of bringing economic growth in the state by attracting foreign investment, especially from expatriate Gujaratis. The campaign was not without reference to sectarian concerns. Modi did, at one point, make reference to the train-burning incident. And Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party, which is in power nationally and was the challenger in Gujarat, made reference to Modi's apparent complicity in the riots. However, both were chastised by the Central Election Commission, which has the power to disqualify candidates who make explicit appeals to sectarian division. But if sectarian issues figured in Modi's victory, they were expressed obliquely, through his appeals to regional pride, which could be interpreted as a veiled attack on outsiders tarnishing the name of Gujarat rather than any overt effort to highlight Hindu-Muslim divisions within the state.

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Viewed as an indicator of national trends, though, the result in Gujarat is less significant than it might appear at first glance. Gujarat is one of only a few states in India's regionally variegated multiparty system, where the main contest is primarily between the country's two largest parties, the BJP and Congress party. Moreover, the BJP is far more dominant in Gujarat than in other states with a strong Congress-BJP rivalry. The December 2007 Gujarat elections were actually the *fourth* consecutive BJP victory in Gujarat and the fifth consecutive defeat for the Congress Party. The last time the Congress party actually won a statewide election in Gujarat was 1985! Thus, Mr. Modi and the BJP victory in Gujarat should not necessarily be read as a harbinger of BJP victory, and the Congress-led coalition government's defeat, in national elections.

Of greater interest in forecasting the next general elections are states with competitive BJP-Congress contests (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand)—states with multiparty contests with large numbers of parliamentary seats, and where the Congress faces an established BJP ally or vice versa. Other state elections held in 2007 do suggest that the BJP is gaining on the Congress compared to a year earlier, but there are reasons to qualify this perception. The Congress lost power in three small states (Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab)—two to the BJP and one to a BJP ally—while winning a fourth (Goa). However, the vote shares of the rival parties were close in all the contests, and the first three fit the pattern of states tending to vote out incumbents in every election. If this pattern holds, two large BJP-ruled states (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) should revert to Congress rule later in 2008. More importantly, in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, the BJP and the Congress both lag far behind two regional caste-based parties that are currently allied with neither of the major national players. For the BJP this is a major blow, as it came to power nationally in the 1990s by becoming the largest party in Uttar Pradesh.

The real electoral significance of the Gujarat election is that it marks the transformation of Gujarat into a BJP bastion similar to the Communist Party bastion in West Bengal. This sets

these two states apart from most other states, which typically experience a change in the ruling party in every election.

However, the key lesson and impact of the Gujarat and other recent state-level elections in India is not in what they tell us about voters' preferences, but rather how they were influenced by and will influence the alliance strategies of the two largest parties. India's Westminster-style "winner-takes-all" electoral system allows parties to win legislative majorities with less than half the vote, and in many state elections this happens with as low as 30 to 35 percent of the vote. Before 1989, the Congress Party regularly won large majorities with about 43 percent of the vote. However, since the 1989 elections and the rise of the BJP as a challenger to the Congress party, no party has won a majority of seats in the national parliament. Consequently, both the Congress and the BJP need allies to win and govern. Yet, alliances are difficult to sustain in an electoral system that requires parties in an alliance to agree to nominate one common candidate for a parliamentary seat. As such, in both the major parties there are factions that would prefer to avoid alliances; the "go-it-alone" strategy remains tempting since it is always possible that a slight shift in the vote would again allow one of the major parties to win a majority in parliament with less than half the vote. The Congress is less likely to attempt to go it alone in the next election after the recent state elections. In several states, parties that could be allied with the Congress—notably the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which won power in Uttar Pradesh—ate into the Congress vote. The BSP's appeal to low-caste voters who traditionally support Congress is the biggest challenge facing the Congress leadership in the next election. Conversely, it is quite possible that Narendra Modi's victory will tempt BJP hardliners into a strategy that more aggressively pushes a right-wing nationalist line. If it does so then the BJP is likely to alienate its allies—as happened recently in the southern state of Karnataka—and be marginalized. In short, it is possible that the Gujarat outcome could produce a losing strategy for the winner and a winning one for the loser.

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