A Bellwether for Narendra Modi as India's largest state goes to the polls

MEERUT, India — An election now underway in India's most populous state is being closely watched as a referendum on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's eight years in office, during which he has often pursued a Hindu-first agenda that observers say has empowered his supporters' polarizing emphasis on religious identity.

Voters in Uttar Pradesh, a largely impoverished state of 200 million people in northern India, say they are concerned about the pandemic-battered economy, with youth unemployment widespread, housing shortages, and the rising cost of food and fuel.

But the governing Bharatiya Janata Party has focused on religion, and on reinforcing new coalitions that have formed around caste, even as tensions between the state's majority-Hindu population and its minority Muslims have been rising.

The party is apparently counting on that divisive tactic to resonate in Uttar Pradesh, a bastion of the Hindu right, preserving its hold on power in the state and putting it in a favorable position for a general election in two years.

Here's a look at the major issues as voters in Uttar Pradesh and four other states, from coastal Goa to Uttarakhand on the border with China, go to the polls. Voting takes place over a month; the first set of results are expected March 10.

In January, Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu monk who is the top official in Uttar Pradesh, laid out in stark terms how his party hoped to define the coming election.

During a TV news interview, Mr. Adityanath, an acolyte of Mr. Modi's and a potential successor as prime minister, cast the election in terms of "80 versus 20" — a thinly veiled reference to the rough percentage of Hindus in the state compared with Muslims.

Referring to three high-profile Hindu temple development projects in a subsequent interview on state television, Mr. Adityanath said that "these 20 percent are those who oppose Ram Janam Bhoomi, they oppose Kashi Vishwanath Dham, they oppose the magnificent development of Mathura Vrindawan."

In India, religious and caste identity has long played a part in voters' political calculations, and Uttar Pradesh is a stronghold of the B.J.P.'s Hindu nationalist ideology.

Still, the backlash to Mr. Adityanath's remarks was swift. Within days, several high-profile B.J.P. members defected from the party, joining the Samajwadi Party. That party, which is widely seen as representing the interests of the Yadav caste and other disadvantaged castes, has formed an alliance with other, smaller caste-based parties that were historically rivals.

One defector was Swami Prasad Maurya, who as a state cabinet minister focused on the interests of the state's socially or educationally disadvantaged castes, known in India as "Other Backward Castes," or O.B.C.s.

"B.J.P. leaders, in the arrogance of power, did not listen, did not give any importance" to minorities' concerns, Mr. Maurya said.

Some of the smaller O.B.C. groups that helped propel the B.J.P. to power in the last state election, in 2017, also expressed disillusionment. If enough members of these groups vote for opposition parties this time, the B.J.P. may struggle to retain power.

Harmeet Singh, a voter who runs a trucking business in Meerut, an industrial city in western Uttar Pradesh, disapproved of Mr. Adityanath's framing of the vote in religious terms.

"Why they ask votes in the name of Hindus and Muslims? Why not ask for votes on your performance?" he said.

"We employ both Hindus and Muslims," he added. "This polarization will hurt the country."

The B.J.P.'s focus on religion may not be enough to take voters' minds off their economic struggles, political analysts said.

Across India, the pandemic has buffeted the economy and people's confidence in the government.

The unemployment rate, which was as low as 3.4 percent in 2017, stood at nearly 8 percent in December 2021, with rates far higher among young people. And even as incomes have fallen for many, inflation has sent prices soaring for staples like tea, meat, cooking oil and lentils.

"There is a change of political discourse. It's not about mandir and masjid," said Zoya Hasan, a political commentator, using the Hindi words for temple and mosque. "Economic issues are far more important for people."

This new focus on the economy among voters in Uttar Pradesh could threaten the B.J.P.'s firm hold on the state, Ms. Hasan said.

"The B.J.P. has all the resources and all the power, but this election seems to be showing that new majorities can be formed," she said.

As campaigning ended this week, economic issues were foremost on the minds of voters interviewed in western Uttar Pradesh.

"What we want is better public service like good education, good health facilities and employment for our children," said Surender Yadav, a sugar cane farmer and a member of an O.B.C. group who said he had voted for the B.J.P. in 2017 but would not again.

"These are the basic issues, but there has been no improvement," he said.

nytimes

Bangladesh sizes up Typhoons for fighter requirement

Bangladesh has a requirement for 16 new multirole combat aircraft (MRCA) to augment and eventually replace its aging Chengdu F-7s and MiG-29s, and the nation wants to turn westward after decades of purchasing its fighter aircraft from Russia and China. The impetus for the shift came in 2015, with the appointment of a new Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Abu Esrar, who wanted to phase out the Bangladesh Air Force fleet of Russian and Chinese fighters and replace them with Western aircraft. Esrar evaluated the Eurofighter Typhoon at the 2016 Farnborough International Airshow and he reportedly "fell in love with it." Esrar's successor, Air Chief Marshal Masihuzzaman Serniabat, appears equally enthusiastic, though a planned evaluation with Leonardo fell victim to the Covid pandemic.

Bangladesh's Directorate General Defence Purchase (DGDP) launched a tender in 2017 for the purchase of eight fighters, plus options for an additional four, under the Forces Goal 2030 program. Later increased to 16 aircraft, the tender calls for a new-build, twin-engine fighter, with each engine producing at least 12,125 pounds of dry thrust and over 17,635 pounds with afterburner. The minimum payload will be five tonnes with at least eight weapons hardpoints. Additional stipulations call for the new fighter to come with active electronically-scanned array (AESA) radar with an air-to-air range of 93 miles and an air-to-surface range of 31 miles, an infrared search and track (IRST) system, and an integrated electronic warfare (IEW) and electronic countermeasures (ECM) suite.

Bangladesh now fields a modest force of about 44 fighter aircraft, consisting of eight MiG-29s and MiG-29UBs assigned to No. 8 Squadron at Kurmitola (Bangabandhu airbase), the military enclave of Dhaka International Airport, and the survivors of 28 Chengdu F-7BGs and four FT-7BGs assigned to Nos. 5 and 35 Squadrons at the same location. Some 16 older F-7MB and eight FT-7MB aircraft have retired from service. Four of the MiG-29s were updated to MiG-29BM/UBM standards in Belarus between 2019 and 2020 and the remaining four are expected to follow, but they are no match for modern 4.5 generation fighters, while the F-7s are verging on obsolescence.

Under the 2009 Bangladesh Armed Forces Forces Goal 2030 modernization program, the Bangladesh Air Force received 16 Yak-130 advanced jet trainer and light combat aircraft ordered in 2013, and planned to purchase eight Sukhoi Su-30SME aircraft in 2017. Relations with Moscow soured after it supported Myanmar over the Rohingya issue, however, and worsened after Russia agreed to sell the Yak-130 and Su-30 to Myanmar. Dhaka also did not like Moscow's stipulation that it should buy MiG-35s along with the Su-30, and began seeking a new solution.

Accordingly, the Bangladesh Air Force asked the government to earmark around 25,200 Crore Taka ($3 billion) for 16 Western multi-role fighters with an advance of 6,300 Crore Taka for the financial year 2021-22. That will allow the Bangladesh Air Force to seek a complete package with aircraft, support, training, and a variety of weapons. It must also include the creation of a maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) facility in the country.

Quite apart from the difficulties experienced by Dhaka in reaching an agreement on the Su-30, senior Bangladeshi officers felt that the aircraft would not provide sufficient operational advantage or overmatch because the Su-30 remains the mainstay of regional rivals India and Myanmar. Since the Bangladesh Air Force is so much smaller than those of potential foes it needs to achieve a favorable exchange ratio to impose a sufficiently heavy cost to deter any aggression. Using the same aircraft type would make that harder to achieve.

Western fighters carry significant advantages over Russian and Chinese types, and the Saab Gripen and Lockheed Martin F-16 reportedly have been offered and considered, though Bangladesh now plans to acquire more capable twin-engined fighters. The Dassault Rafale (in service with the Indian Air Force, which could be a drawback) and the Eurofighter Typhoon stand as the aircraft under consideration.

Although Italy is the Eurofighter partner designated to market the aircraft in Bangladesh, it seems likely that the UK also would support any formal campaign.

The report following the third Bangladesh-UK strategic dialogue in 2019 stated: "The UK further expressed its readiness to support Bangladesh with procurement of high-caliber multi-role combat aircraft alongside other modernization programs."

Many in the Dhaka defense establishment believe that the Eurofighter Typhoon could give Bangladesh the capability edge it needs and could provide the deterrent capability it has lacked since the country became independent in 1971.

Schools in Nepal Demand Reopening as Virus Cases Decline

KATHMANDU:Schools in Nepal on Sunday demanded the government open up physical classes that were shut down for weeks as the number of COVID-19 cases began to decline.

Teachers say online education was limited to only a small part of the population living in the urban parts of the Himalayan country while a majority of students were being deprived of their chance to learn.

The number of coronavirus cases fueled by the omicron variant has peaked in the past weeks but was declining in the last few days.

"We are ready to open the schools, students are eager to get back, guardians are willing to send their children and the number of virus cases are on the decline so there is no reason for the government to continue the ban on schools," said Tika Ram Puri, president of the Private and Boarding Schools Organization Nepal.

"The standard of education is deteriorating and students are getting the wrong idea about education in the country because of the long and frequent shutdown of schools," said Sangina Gomja, high school science teacher. "Students in the villages haven't had much education in the past two years."

Students across Nepal lined up to pray at the temple of a Hindu goddess on Sunday as the country celebrated the annual Basant Panchami festival that marks the arrival of the spring season.

The goddess Saraswati is considered to be the deity of wisdom, knowledge and learning. Students would normally be celebrating the festival in their schools but this year they were all at home.

"Schools should open soon because we students have so much problems like disruptive internet, power cuts, disturbances at home and we are not able to study well," said 12th grade student Rubita Karki.

WHO hails Pakistan's efforts in controlling COVID-19 cases

ISLAMABAD: Country Representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) Pakistan, Dr Palitha Mahipala on Friday lauded the efforts of federal government in controlling the COVID-19 cases across the country. In a media briefing, he said Pakistan had shown an effective response in fighting against the pandemic as a good number of the Pakistani population had been vaccinated. Pakistan, he said, had developed an efficient vaccination system, with ensuring the availability of the vaccine in stock. Appreciating the efforts of Pakistan against COVID-19, Dr Mahipala said, "I was surprised to see vaccination centres available in the smallest villages, and it is great to see Pakistan carrying out screening tests. A huge number of coronavirus tests have been done so far, which is a great achievement." Discussing the Omicron variant, Mahipala said even though it was just the flu, the people should still be cautious. He said Pakistan had faced fewer hospitalizations during the fourth wave of the pandemic as it was making the vaccine accessible to everyone.

"Pakistan is one of the countries to carry out genomic sequencing, while it has set up 100 testing labs within the duration of three months," said Mahipala, adding that the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) and the Ministry of National Health Services had shown great response. He said a sufficient number of vaccines had been administered to the citizens partially and completely across the country. He added the donor agencies and the media had played a strong part in fighting against COVID-19.

Bangladesh facing 'epidemic' of child drownings

DHAKA: It was a late December morning when Fahima Akhter saw her youngest son for the last time. Two-year-old Omar Faruque was in front of the family home, playing with his cousins. His mother had been watching him but became distracted by household chores. Minutes later, the youngster had disappeared.

"I live in a joint family with my in-laws. It's a 10-member family. There were some other family members in the yard also," Akhter told Arab News. "No one noticed when little Faruque suddenly disappeared and walked to a nearby pond. It's a five-minute walking distance for a toddler. While cooking in the kitchen, I heard a loud noise as if something fell into the water."

She rushed to the pond only to find her son's body floating in the water.

"We could have prevented the drowning of Faruque if we had built a fence on the way to the pond. It was a very costly lesson and irreparable loss," she said.

Akhter is one of thousands of Bangladeshi parents to have lost children to unintentional drowning last year. Crisscrossed with rivers and canals, Bangladesh has one of the world's highest drowning rates for under-fives.

Dr. Aminur Rahman, deputy executive director at the Center for Injury Prevention and Research Bangladesh, estimated that the number of incidents could have more than doubled during the coronavirus pandemic, as lockdowns had forced many daycare centers to close.

"Earlier also the drowning of children was like an epidemic," he said. "But it was increased during COVID days since schools were closed and children remained unguarded in many cases."

The latest government data, compiled in 2016, showed that more than 30 toddlers had drowned in Bangladesh every day. While no nationwide survey has been conducted for the past six years, the injury prevention center last year recorded 19 child drowning deaths only among the kids attending its nurseries in two districts of the southern Barisal region. "Before COVID-19, the number was seven," Rahman added.

A recent study by Somashte, a Bangladeshi media monitoring NGO, also showed a sharp increase in drowning incidents involving children aged below five. Based on newspaper reports, it estimated the number had more than doubled since 2020.

Little has been done to address the situation since the 2016 national survey revealed the scale of the problem.

"Since 2016, we didn't do much to prevent the drowning of the children," Rahman said, adding that efforts should be made to start building fences around bodies of water.

"It will help a lot in reducing the drowning incidents among children."

He said programs to teach life-saving techniques should also be introduced throughout the country.

"I have noticed most of the drowning victims are brought dead to healthcare centers in remote areas of the country as it takes several hours to transport the patients," Rahman added. "If cardiopulmonary resuscitation could be given to the victims immediately after the rescue, many lives could have been saved."

Authorities say they are planning to launch a pilot scheme for drowning prevention this year.

"After pneumonia, drowning is the main cause of our children's deaths below the age of five. So, we want to eradicate this problem from the country," Mohammed Tariqul Islam Chowdhury, early childhood development specialist at the Bangladesh Shishu Academy, the national academy for children that will be implementing the program, told Arab News.

Tajikistan: Restore Internet in Autonomous Region

The Tajikistan authorities should immediately restore full internet connectivity in the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO), Human Rights Watch said today. Internet access was cut on November 25, 2021, following large protests over the killing of a local man in the capital, Khorog.

Tajikistan should also immediately disclose where Amriddin Alovatshoev is being detained and allow a lawyer of his choosing immediate access to him. Alovatshoev, a migrant leader from the eastern Tajikistan region, known by its Russian acronym GBAO, was forcibly disappeared and returned to Tajikistan from Russia sometime in the last month.

"Closing down communication in the GBAO region not only violates the right to freedom of expression but is making life difficult and even dangerous for the whole population," said Syinat Sultanalieva, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Tajik authorities should restore access to the internet without any further delays."

The central Tajik authorities shut down access to both mobile data and most fixed-line internet access in Khorog, as soon as protests erupted on November 25 over the fatal shooting of a local man as he was being arrested. The man, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov, was wanted in connection with an alleged assault on a public official in early 2020. Access to the internet was cut off earlier in the rest of the region.

A spontaneous rally of several thousand people protesting Ziyobekov's killing spilled into violence as government forces used live fire to disperse the crowd, fatally wounding two people. Several law enforcement officers are also reported to have been wounded.

The protesters agreed to disperse on the fourth day of rallies after an independent 44-person commission was established to investigate the deaths of Ziyobekov and the two protesters. It has become known as "Commission 44." The government said it would not prosecute protesters and would restore internet connectivity, but two months on, it has not. Internet connectivity in Khorog is currently only available to employees on the premises of some government institutions, including the police, and the banks.

The shutdown comes amid wider political uncertainty in the region, home to the Pamirs, an ethnically and religiously distinct minority in Tajikistan. Alovatshoev, who had been living in Russia, is alleged to have helped organize a picket outside the Tajik embassy in Moscow in November concerning the killings and protests in Khorog. His family said they have not heard from him since January 11, 2022, when he was detained by Russian law enforcement.