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The frenzied politics of India’s internal borders

Posted By Hans Lofgren On 31 December 2013 @ 10:00 pm In India,Politics | 1 Comment

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India in the past 60 years has seen numerous regional independence movements.

But after periods of violent conflict, the militants have mostly been integrated into mainstream democratic politics.

In Punjab, for example, a deadly insurrection in the 1980s sought a free 'Khalistan' for the Sikhs, but today this state is peaceful. There are exceptions — the Indian army continues a brutal occupation of both Kashmir, where the majority has never accepted Indian control, and parts of the northeast.

Conflicts over internal borders can seem unusual from an international perspective. India is probably the only country in the world where struggles for statehood within a federal union take intense and occasionally violent forms, including mass suicides, as in the Telangana region of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. At stake is recognition of cultural and ethnic identities, the allocation of water and development resources, and access to government employment and educational institutions.

The 28 states of the Republic of India are constitutionally weaker than states in some other federations, such as Australia. The union government in Delhi can unilaterally dismiss state governments and redraw the country's internal boundaries. But in reality the politics of India is now determined at the state level, and union governments can be formed only through the participation of regional parties. People identify with their states as much as with the national whole, and sometimes even more so.

One regional mass movement is now close to achieving its long-standing objective. A new state called Telangana is about to be carved out from Andhra Pradesh, a populous state in south-central India. On 30 July 2013, the leadership of the Congress party, which heads the governing United Progressive Alliance coalition in Delhi, declared that Telangana is to be established. This follows prevarication since the government in late 2009 first signalled support for Telangana. People have struggled and died for this new state, but accepting Telangana has generated opposing mass mobilisations and at times violence in other regions of Andhra.

The Telangana issue has simmered since 1956, when Andhra Pradesh was formed on 'linguistic lines', bringing together the Telugu-speaking areas of the former presidency of Madras and parts of the former princely state of Hyderabad. But the people of the Telangana districts, with a population today of about 35 million, were never fully integrated. Their claim is of cultural disadvantage and economic and political domination by the more prosperous coastal regions. The movement for Telangana state has flared up from time to time, with hundreds of people killed or committing suicide for this cause in the early 1970s and again in recent years.

Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, a major city with a population of around eight million, is located in the midst of Telangana. It is one of India's most developed and industrialised cities, and a centre for higher education, but is surrounded by a sea of poverty. Its status following bifurcation is the source of much controversy. The most likely outcome seems to be that Hyderabad will remain for 10 years the capital of both Telangana and the remaining parts of Andhra Pradesh, which will form a state likely to be named Seemandhra.

The Telangana conflict adds to the problems that the Congress party and its 'supremo', Sonia Gandhi, face in the lead-up to the national election in 2014. The party is widely criticised for cynical electoral calculations. Andhra Pradesh has been one of its strongholds, sending a large block of Congress members to the Lok Sabha, the national parliament. In belatedly accepting bifurcation, the Congress is losing support and now finds itself internally divided in Andhra Pradesh. The Congress chief minister is openly flouting the party line.

Much is at stake from a national perspective. A new state of Telangana, which now looks almost certain, sets a precedent for other regions that also aspire to statehood. These include a
Nepali-speaking region in northern West Bengal, seeking a state of Gorkhaland, and a region of Assam striving for a state of Bodoland. India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, with a population of more than 200 million, could probably be governed better if divided into units of more manageable size. Yet smaller states do not necessarily mean better governance. Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Jharkhand, formed in 2000, are some of India’s worst-performing states in terms of corruption and economic prosperity.

Regional movements attract the poor to a greater extent than the privileged elites. The poor are more dependent on politics and welfare programs; they are more likely to participate in elections and to join political parties than the middle class. It is possible that regionalist mobilisations, as in Telangana, will bring benefits to poorer regions, such as better access to education and public sector jobs. But it is also possible that regional conflicts divert energy from India’s more basic economic and social problems.

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