

cials and people alike, and were encouraged to explore trade and investment possibilities. However, Malaysian officials described the visits as “exploratory,” due to the deficit in basic transport infrastructure and trade regulations. Malaysia has tremendous potential for developing infrastructure, but its only investment in the Russian Far East at present is a timber concession in Khabarovsk operated by Sarawak-based Rim-bunan Hijau.

Khabarovsk senior official Viktor Ishaev strongly encouraged investment in timber, mining, and fisheries. Dr. Mahathir indicated that once transportation logistics are ironed out, potential trade could increase greatly, for example, in foodstuffs such as fruits and vegetables, which are currently imported from as far away as Spain and Morocco. Ishaev, a Duma member, expressed his view that Russia would enter a “stable development phase” after the Presidential and Duma parliamentary elections. “It’s a real honor for the citizens of Khabarovsk to have the head of the Malaysian government visiting us,” he declared. “Malaysia is a very stable country and I think this is because the Prime Minister doesn’t get changed very often.”

In Buryatia, President Leonid Potapov, Dr. Mahathir, and three leading Malaysian businessmen discussed investments in mining. Dr. Mahathir is the first foreign head of state to visit Buryatia since it became an autonomous region in 1991. President Potapov and his wife had visited Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, in July. Buryatia is reported to have some 500 types of minerals, mostly unexplored. The region is also reported to have among the highest literacy rates in Russia; it has five science-focussed universities. In both regions, tours of aircraft manufacturing plants that produce Russia’s Sukhoi-class fighters and, in Buryatia, the MI-171 helicopter, topped the itinerary. Demonstration air shows were arranged in both, but in Buryatia, veteran Royal Malaysian Air Force Lt. Col A. Munisamy (ret.), currently a project manager at Aerospace Industries Malaysia, did the honors in an MI-171, which he gave high marks. Malaysia is keenly interested both in providing aircraft servicing for Russian-made planes and helicopters operated in Asia, as well as marketing the aircraft. Dr. Mahathir’s visit to the Russian Far East was capped by a tour of Lake Baikal, the world’s largest freshwater lake.

Dr. Mahathir’s Russia-China tour was a groundbreaking event in Asian bilateral and regional relations. It is, thus, all the more regrettable that the Western press chose to ignore the trip, or wasted time at press conferences asking nuisance questions about the firing of his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim, and whether the trip were not a “ploy” to win points with Malaysia’s Chinese population in advance of general elections. So blatant was this from Western media at his Beijing press conference, that Dr. Mahathir specifically called for Asian media to counter their lies. In the case of the Russian regions, he urged special efforts to educate Malaysia, Khabarovsk, and Buryatia about each other.

BJP expected to form new government after India’s general elections

by Ramtanu Maitra

Preparations for the next general elections—which will be held between the middle of September and the first week of October, the vote counting will begin Oct. 6—have begun. Candidates have been chosen and, in some cases, they have begun seeking votes. The first reaction from the electorate suggests that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will gain a significant number of seats, and is sure to retain its standing as the single largest party. At this point, it seems that the BJP will form the next government with the help of its umpteen allies, but will not remain as vulnerable to their whims as it has been. This means that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who is carrying the party on his shoulders, will once again be the Prime Minister and, perhaps, for a full five-year term.

The BJP’s impending electoral success may have little to do with the way the electorate is evaluating the party’s performance. As it happens so often in Indian elections, this expected victory may be yet another occasion when a party wins handsomely because its main opponent—in this case, the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress Party—failed to get its campaign off the ground. However, what is real is the Vajpayee factor, whose increased stature has debilitated the Congress Party. And, it seems that the Congress Party has not made up its mind whether to attack Vajpayee or to praise him.

Based on my recent meetings with a number of people, including a handful of Muslim editors of Urdu papers, it seems that the Congress Party has done next to nothing to grab Muslim votes, which earlier were definitely moving toward it. The Congress Party had thrived throughout the 1950s and 1960s on Muslim and scheduled caste support. But, when Indira Gandhi broke up Pakistan by helping to create Bangladesh, Muslims in India began to drift out of the Congress Party fold. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims are a majority in a number of districts and where almost every Muslim family has a member who has migrated to Pakistan, the emergence of an anti-Congress Party attitude among Muslims provided an opportunity for non-Congress Party political leaders to form state-level parties where the Muslims were given a berth. Later, during Rajiv Gandhi’s



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is likely to be re-elected; his political stature has increased, and voters are supporting him in hopes that he and his party, the BJP, will be able to provide a stable five-year government.

bumbling rule, when his relative and cabinet member Arun Nehru unlocked the Ram Janambhoomi temple in order to coax the Hindus away from the BJP, the Muslims saw through the game and moved further away from the Congress Party. And, then, during the government of Congress Party Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Babri Masjid mosque was destroyed by Hindu chauvinists.

During most of the 1970s and 1980s, Muslims were moving from one “secular” party to another, increasingly voting *en bloc* against the Congress Party. Eventually, with the advent of Prime Minister V.P. Singh, the great social engineer who was hell-bent—under outside influence—to tear the Indian social system apart, two parties emerged, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the party of the *dalits* and untouchables, and the Samajwadi Party (SP), which is a metamorphosis of many semi-socialist groupings. These two parties preach secularism, anti-Brahmanism, and pro-minority jargon, and have succeeded, at least temporarily, in bringing most Muslims into their fold. But, these two parties lie highly exposed. Their vacuous caste politics, their promises to provide power to the underprivileged, and their anti-

intellectual affectations are laughed at by most Muslims, and, yet, they still vote for them.

Muslims stay put

This time around, because of the failure of the SP, and the fundamental hostility that exists between the Muslims and the untouchables (in every Hindu-Muslim riot, the Muslims had to fight the untouchables, and not the Brahmins, or even other caste members, who will not go out with a dagger or a gun to kill), the Muslims were ready to move out. The Kargil war in Kashmir, which the Muslims of India did not find difficult to blame on Pakistan, at the same time made them weary of the BJP—at least, such was the sentiment among the majority of Muslims. At that point, Muslim votes were ready to be plucked by the Congress Party, but Sonia Gandhi and her sycophants did not know whether to blame the BJP for the war, or to support the BJP for India’s “success” in the war. As a result, the Muslims have stayed electorally where they were—some distance away from both the Congress Party and the BJP.

This seems to be the situation in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But, wherever Muslims do not have such alternatives—such as supporting a strong organization like the BSP or the SP—the Muslims will vote for the Congress Party or abstain. There is little likelihood that a significant percentage of the Muslim votes will be cast in favor of the BJP. This is a ghost that the BJP will have to deal with in the coming days. In other words, in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Muslims will vote for whoever they think will be able to defeat the BJP. This is also the case in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh states.

But the majority of Indians are not Muslims, and it seems that more of them will be voting for the BJP and its allies. Except for a small number of people, the vast majority were not impressed by the Kargil war, or any other specific aspect of BJP rule. What definitely has propelled many of them toward supporting the BJP, is Vajpayee and the possibility that the BJP will be able to provide a stable five-year government. Regarding Sonia Gandhi, people are wary. The middle class is against her, and the poor are not quite sure what she represents. While Indira Gandhi could separate her personal life-style from her political life-style, and earn the trust and respect of the poor, Sonia Gandhi has a lot to learn. More importantly, perhaps, is the problem of Sonia Gandhi’s dependence on the people who have dragged the Congress Party down. These sycophants are intensely despised by Congress Party grassroots workers. Sonia Gandhi’s biggest failure so far is that she hasn’t brought new blood into the campaign, and her total inability to generate hopes among the electorate.

It is possible that, before the elections, the BJP will falter and the Congress Party somehow will pick up the pieces. Although unlikely, it could happen. But, the preconditions do not exist, at least as of now.