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India and Pakistan make a volatile mix

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider

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KARACHI - Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif opened a new chapter in India-Pakistan relations by attending the oath-taking ceremony of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 26 in New Delhi. The two leaders expressed their views on issues of common concern and Modi announced that he would visit Pakistan. Though Modi and Sharif apparently seem on the same page in wanting to promote bilateral cooperation, rather than confrontation, Modi's political track record of being anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan could yet shatter hopes for an India-Pakistan detente.

It is a hard fact that the world's largest democracy is now led by a hardliner whose Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) gained an outright majority in India's parliament, the first time in 30 years that a party has won enough seats to govern India without the support of other parties. Today, Modi is the representative of those who would like him to engage in a blame game against Pakistan to consistently mount pressure on Islamabad. Similarly, Modi's record of bigotry and violence against Muslims in India sends a ripple of anxiety to the country's biggest religious minority.

Modi fully exploited anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiments in India to win the general election. During his campaign, he even suggested undertaking cross-border covert operations against terrorists in Pakistan on the pattern of the operation conducted by the US in May 2011 in Abbotabad in which Osama bin Laden was killed.

Last month, Ramdas Kadam, a leader of Shiv Sena and Modi's ally party, remarked at an election rally in Mumbai that Modi would destroy Pakistan within six months if he were to come to power. was mainly based on anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan remarks. The virulence of Modi's pre-poll rhetoric raised concerns among 170 million Muslims in India and for Pakistanis.

Modi is considered expert in engineering massacres on communal lines. The massacre of up to 2,000 people from the Muslim community in Ahmadabad in Gujarat in 2002 when Modi, a hardline Hindu nationalist, led the state government remains a blot on his political career. With Modi now in control over the central government, there are fears among Indian Muslims that more massacres of their co-religionists could take place, particularly in India-controlled Jammu and Kashmir in a bid to change the demography of the state.

Right-wing Hindu nationalist leaders have always provoked public sentiment through hate statements and fiery speeches against Pakistan and its military spy agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and have created hurdles in bilateral efforts to normalize India-Pakistan relations. ISI-bashing has been an essential part of their recent election campaign. During his campaign, Modi pledged to re-think India's no-first strike nuclear policy and to take a hard line on Kashmir.

Hindu nationalist parties have been involved in inciting Hindus against the Muslim community. Pravin Togadia, a leader of the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad, faces a police investigation after a video appeared to show him urging Hindus to evict Muslims from their neighborhoods in Gujarat.

On the other hand, Pakistan is currently ruled by the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), led by Prime Minister Sharif, who won last year's election. Theoretically, the PML-N is a right-wing party, yet in practice it follows no hardline ideals. It is a rightist party just because it supports peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban, but it rejects the Taliban's radical agenda and theocratic approach to the interpretation of Islamic law. It has not taken a hardline approach to Hindu nationalist propaganda against Pakistan. Nor has it vociferously and vehemently expressed its reservations about the role of India's Research Analysis Wing (RAW) in funding a separatist insurgency in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province.

Sharif is in favor of granting "Most Favored Nation" status to India and opening land borders in an effort to increase bilateral trade. This is exactly not what could be expected from a right-wing party in Pakistan. Sharif attended Modi's swearing in ceremony and released 150 Indian prisoners as a token of goodwill before leaving for India.

Modi's war-mongering and jingoism against Pakistan pose a serious threat to regional peace that may harm the delicate balance of power in South Asia and trigger an arms race between India and Pakistan. Modi's election victory strengthened the views both of Jihadi organizations in Pakistan and of war-mongering Hindu nationalist groups in India.

Modi has been engaged in creating war hysteria which has raised international concerns about a deadly flare-up on the disputed Kashmir border between two nuclear-armed nations that have gone to war three times in the past. It is the acrimony and sourness of their history that makes the

relationship between the two states extremely sensitive and ripe for exploitation by war-mongering groups on both sides of the border.

If Modi is led by his hardline electorate, tensions will continue to escalate between two neighboring, nuclear-armed countries. The anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan mindset in power in New Delhi is bound to create a situation that may lead to a fourth war. Pakistan's engagement with India on its eastern border is also likely to divert attention from its western border with Afghanistan.

Washington cannot afford any escalation of tension between the two arch-rivals and will not be happy to see Pakistan engaged in saber-rattling or brinkmanship with India at a time when the US is poised to withdraw most of its forces from Afghanistan by the end of this year. The US and its Western allies have, however, been mum over provocative statements from India's hardline Hindu nationalist leaders that may push the subcontinent into dangerous confrontation.