

End hatemongering is Bihar's message to Modi, says NYT

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Washington: Bihar's electorate has sent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi a message: "Put an end to hatemongering", said the influential New York Times on Tuesday.

An editorial "A rebuke to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi" in the New York Times said that during a national election in India last year, Modi promised "development for all".

As prime minister, he has yet to deliver big economic improvements, "but in the meantime, members of his government and political party have shredded his promise of inclusion by inflaming sectarian tensions".

"Now, voters in the country's third most populous state have sent Modi a message: Put an end to the hatemongering," said the daily.

The editorial said that "poisoning politics with religious hatred is bound to squander the country's economic potential at a time when India should be playing a bigger and more constructive role in South Asia and the world".

"India's history is filled with examples of religious and caste-based violence that set the country back. Those conflicts subsided during India's rapid economic growth, but many Indians now fear a resurgence."

On Sunday, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost a legislative election in Bihar. A grand alliance of secular parties "united by their antipathy to the Hindu nationalist BJP" won 178 constituencies in the 243-member legislative assembly to the BJP's 53.

The daily said that many political analysts see the loss as a "repudiation of Modi" because he and his top aides campaigned vigorously in the state and many ads carried his image, rather than photos of local politicians.

In the months leading up to the Bihar election, hard-liners in the BJP and organizations affiliated with the party stoked India's long-simmering sectarian tensions.

"The party's lawmakers pushed for beef bans around the country ostensibly to protect the cow, which many Hindus consider holy, but really as a ploy to divide Hindus and Muslims, some of whom eat beef."

Mobs riled by the anti-beef crusade have killed four Muslims suspected of slaughtering, stealing or smuggling cows in the last seven weeks. And in August, unidentified attackers shot and killed Malleshappa Madivalappa Kalburgi, a scholar and vocal critic of Hindu idolatry. Hundreds of writers, filmmakers and academics have protested the growing intolerance by returning awards they received from the government-supported bodies.

NYT went on to say that Modi has "not forcefully condemned the beef-related killings, despite pleas by Muslims and other minorities. He has tolerated hateful and insensitive remarks by his ministers and by BJP officials".

During a campaign stop in Bihar, Modi "tried to exploit sectarian divisions by telling voters that the secular alliance would reduce affirmative action benefits for lower-caste Hindus and tribes in favour of 'a particular community' - an apparent reference to Muslims".

And BJP president Amit Shah, one of Modi's closest advisers, told voters that a victory for the alliance would be

celebrated in Pakistan, the Muslim-majority neighbour that has fought several wars with India since 1947.

"Voters in Bihar saw through the BJP's attempts to divide them. They, like most Indians, are looking for leaders who will improve their standard of living. Bihar is one of the poorest states in India but has grown fast in the last 10 years under the leadership of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who is credited for cracking down on crime, building roads and increasing the enrollment of girls in schools."

The editorial said that Modi and the BJP secured a majority in the lower house of Parliament last year with promises of economic reforms.

"Now, to push through those reforms, the party needs to win the control of the upper house, which is elected by state assemblies. It won't win those elections unless Modi gets rid of the officials in his government and party who are fueling sectarian culture wars," it added.

The daily noted that there are things Modi could do administratively to improve the economy, like investing in education and health care and building infrastructure. "Voters in Bihar have sent the BJP a clear message. Modi should heed it."

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