

IN IRELAND'S COMPLEX TROUBLES, LESSONS FOR INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The communal clashes of April in Northern Ireland caught the media attention of many countries, but not in India, though the events carry relevant lessons and warnings for this country. Those riots, that left 74 policemen injured, threaten to undermine the fragile peace between Protestant pro-British loyalist unionists who want to remain part of the United Kingdom forever, and Catholic pro-Irish nationalists who wish Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland.

The riots are the culmination of a complex mix of change, resistance to change, and ingrained political and social inertia. Northern Ireland altered enormously for the better after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and for the accord to have received strong support across the divided island was a remarkable achievement. This Agreement began the process of dismantling border controls between the North and the Republic of Ireland, but subsequent developments showed that social issues remained unaddressed: both religious communities 'experienced little or no peace dividend after the Agreement, and poverty and deprivation linked to educational under-achievement and high unemployment affects both nationalist and loyalist areas alike' in Northern Ireland. There is an obvious lack of social and economic opportunities; 120,000 children are living in poverty, and more than 40,000 people remain on the social housing waiting list. Between 1998 and 2014, an abnormal number of suicides was registered, and that gloomy statistic keeps growing. The localities most deprived during the pre-Agreement communal riots remain the most deprived areas within Northern Ireland today.

Britain's break from the European Union (Brexit) was always going to prove a major stress test for Northern Ireland because 56% of its electorate voted to remain in the European Union. Much of the present anger relates to the specific protocol concerning Northern Ireland, which 'provided for the territory to remain in the customs union and single market of the European Union while protecting its status as part of the United Kingdom'. Nevertheless, the Irish Protestant loyalists argue that the deal puts the union at risk. The unionist party 'campaigns for Brexit on the basis that a United Kingdom outside the European Union would make a future united Ireland much more difficult to achieve, but the opposite has actually turned out to be true, and a united Irish island is now being discussed in a way that scarcely seemed possible prior' to the Brexit referendum of 2016.

Accordingly, as a recent opinion article says, the Irish Catholic nationalists are talking up the prospects of achieving an early united Ireland and demanding a vote on it, which instils acute anxiety among the union loyalists. In short, 'Brexit has encouraged a strong revival of identity polarisation, and a possible Irish Language Act, that would give the Irish tongue equal status to English in Northern Ireland', is feared by unionists as yet another nail in the United Kingdom's coffin. Demography has changed since the Good Friday Agreement; no longer do unionist parties have the majority, but political inertia prefers a vacuum, so progress toward an equitable and liveable peace has stalled. The article adds, 'past traumas continue to weigh heavily on current politics in Northern Ireland and that is unlikely to change as the twin challenges of managing the Protocol and preventing communal violence occupy the attention in that territory, Dublin and London in the years to come'.

Elections scheduled next year to the 'Northern Ireland Assembly will be followed in 2024 by an important vote on the Northern Ireland Protocol because under the terms of the Brexit agreement, the Assembly will have to vote on whether or not to accept the continuing operation of the Protocol. Should unionists decide to boycott this vote, the legitimacy of the Protocol will be thrown open to question. The timing of any potential Scottish referendum on independence — also likely to be held around 2024 — may well further destabilise Northern Ireland's fragile politics', says the [opinion article](#).

All things considered, there is no person more like a Northern Irish Catholic than a Northern Irish Protestant and vice versa, although obscurantists are loath to accept that basic reality. The fact that the people are just one, with parity in mutual fear, esteem and consent, is never addressed and artificial differences are played up by political elements wishing to stoke communal sentiments and keep both communities at the mercy of irresponsible and divisive forces. While the British, Irish and American governments have condemned the violence, there is a lack of local political leadership to stabilise this volatile situation.

Peace is an extraordinarily brittle entity, and any functioning democracy must ensure a daily commitment to addressing communal issues with vigilance, tolerance and compromise. These are lessons to be drawn in India. The recent violence in Northern Ireland shows that every country needs leadership that takes responsibility for peoples' social and economic problems and steers prejudices away from entrenched phobias. The ruling party in India needs to be aware that creating religious tensions between communities has incalculable deep-seated negative consequences that will severely damage every section of society and all our established political and national institutions.

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