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November 5, 2020

**The rise of Jacinda Ardern**

The writer, a Chevening scholar, studied International Journalism at the University of Sussex.

While the world remains invested in the outcome of the American polls and how the next president will shape the future through his policies and vision, it is another election in another continent and time zone that grabbed the headlines a couple of weeks ago.

New Zealand’s center-left Labour Party swept to power on the back of a landslide victory for another three-year term. Delayed by a month due to the pandemic, “the Covid election” as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern put it, gave the Labour Party 64 seats in the 120-member parliament with 49.1 percent overall votes. The center-right National Party managed to secure 26.8 percent with 35 seats and emerged as the second-largest parliamentary party.

It is for the first time that New Zealanders handed a clear majority since 1996 when the present voting system known as the Mixed Member Proportional representation was introduced. Coalition governments have been the norm in NZ. Even Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern formed a coalition government with the Greens and the nationalist New Zealand First in 2017.

The elections were also accompanied by two referendums on whether to legalise euthanasia, and cannabis for pleasure. While the people voted overwhelmingly in favour of giving terminally ill people a choice to bring their life to a close, they rejected the use of cannabis.

According to New Zealand laws, a binding vote with a minimum of 50 percent affirmative count is a must to approve the referendum. Reportedly, 65.2 percent of voters gave their verdict in favour of assisted dying, whereas the second referendum question on the use of cannabis could elicit 46.1 percent as per the results announced by the electoral commission on October 30. The Labour government now has until November 2021 to legislate on the results.

For the majority of people in South Asia, New Zealand, an island country with a population of five million, is known more for cricket than anything else. It was in March last year when a gruesome shooting by a white supremacist at a mosque in Christchurch put New Zealand at the center of the global conversation.

As grief overwhelmed New Zealanders who were shocked by the grotesque nature of the crime, it was Jacinda Ardern, the young female prime minister, who emerged as a stateswoman to heal deep wounds.

Through her conduct, she taught world leaders how a tragedy of such proportions should be handled, divisions bridged and hopes in a peaceful future revived. And it was through her demeanor, words, and actions that she sent out a message of human solidarity, unity and revival in the face of heavy odds.

Ardern’s bold and empathetic leadership presented a sharp contrast to the rising trend of far-right, divisive, and Islamophobic politics in much of the West. In an age of chaos, anarchy, and faith-based violence, she stood for pluralism, and made a strong case for interfaith harmony and bridge-building to fight the shared challenges of extremism, racial hatred, and terrorism.

In a BBC interview, she threw light on the power of human compassion to create a sense of togetherness when she said: “It takes courage and strength to be empathetic, and I’m very proudly an empathetic and compassionate leader. I am trying to chart a different path and that will attract criticism but I can only be true to myself and the form of leadership I believe in.”

In what many described as a masterstroke in public messaging, the New Zealand leader refused to name the terrorist in her speeches and statements. In one of her comments, she stated unequivocally: “Speak the names of those who were lost rather than the man who took them. He may seek notoriety but we will give him nothing, not even his name.”

The second challenge that has tested leaders around the world is the current coronavirus pandemic. How leaders handle one of the greatest public health crises humanity has faced will have a bearing on their political careers as well as their place in history.

Here again, Jacinda Ardern has led her country’s response to the pandemic that can only be termed as effective, consensual, and result-oriented. In line with her characteristic empathic leadership style, she took to Facebook Live chats to regularly connect with the people, assuring them of her government’s support during the lockdown, warning them of risks posed by the pandemic and fostering a national resolve to fight out the virus as a national duty.

Benefiting from her degree in communication studies, Ardern designed her outreach approach to the people not only strategically but also emotionally. Her message of empathy for others living outside of “our bubble” was clear, impassioned, and consistent. Former NZ premier Helen Clark in whose Labour government Ardern embarked on her political journey stated that people feel that she “does not preach at them; she is standing with them.”

A poll conducted by a research organization, Colmar Brunton, in April this year as the pandemic roared across the world showed that 88 percent of the New Zealanders approved the measures taken by the government to fight the pandemic. Her decisive approach and the imposition of an early lockdown and closure of borders provided space for her government to plan anti-virus measures. Her deft and confident handling of the pandemic bolstered her government’s ratings after a February poll showed that people were not happy with the performance.

Experts have, however, warned that despite achieving success in effectively taming Covid-19, Ardern’s challenge lies in dealing with the post-pandemic economic recovery. She ran an electoral campaign woven around social issues such as better healthcare, housing affordability, environmental issues, minimum wage, and tackling homelessness, etc.

The recession induced by the slowdown in economic activities that is currently underway not just in New Zealand but also the world over is likely to aggravate poverty and unemployment, and deepen inequality. This basket of real-life issues that affect every household will severely challenge Ardern’s leadership in months down the line.

The kind of landslide win that New Zealanders have given Ardern has generated heightened expectations in terms of performance, and outcomes. For countries that are struggling to mitigate virus-related losses, the full recovery to the pre-Corona period will take time. In this difficult economic environment, Jacinda Ardern will continue to be judged against the touchstone of the expectations as well as her campaign mantra.

The strength of her leadership lies in the contrast that she presents to the world leaders such as Trump, Macron, and Modi in terms of personalities and messaging. Her inclusive politics and a powerful message of “Be strong, be kind” is a foil to the surge of racism, popular nationalism, and Islamophobia that is ripping the world apart.

Ardern belongs to a rare breed of young contemporary leaders who think that the rules-based international order erected on pluralistic values is still capable of steering humanity out of its current state of divisiveness and polarisation.

However, the challenges in their way are daunting if not insurmountable.

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