



Election Commission of India

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Pre-electoral tension

Elections are looming in India. And as the economic story of the ruling Congress Party deteriorates, so does its politics. When all else fails, there's always communal tension. Campaigns which call on caste, religious and regional loyalties can help both Congress and the main opposition, the BJP, take votes from strong regional parties. But the divisiveness is a disaster for India.

The current flare up in communal politics started in India's Northeast, where 85 people have been killed and 400,000 displaced in fighting between

Hindu Bodo tribesmen and Muslims. To make matters worse, the violence has spilled over into other states.

Muslim protests in Mumbai against the unfair treatment turned violent, killing two people, and rumours of Muslim retaliation in social media and by text messages led more than 30,000 migrants in Bangalore to rush home to the Northeast in terror. And that has led to a clumsy round of censorship of Twitter by the Government.



BY JEFF GLEKIN

It is a good moment for statesmanship from the two leading parties. But the BJP is all too prone to use fear and anti-Muslim prejudice to energise its core Hindu-nationalist support. Congress is a secular party which is committed to the protection of the nations minorities. But the fear of

religious violence plays well for it, so its leaders are all too prone to sensationalise the threat.

Recent polls predict a rout for both the national parties in the 2014 elections. Smaller regional parties, many of

which unabashedly fan the flames of communalism, are rising. The political mix is bad for the economy.

The BJP has abandoned past commitments for reform, in part to try to retain the loyalty of India's three million shopkeepers, while the government seems unable or unwilling to push an aggressive reform agenda.

The new mood could turn the 2014 election into a debate over India's social problems; shielding the government from a more studied assessment of its economic mismanagement. And if the politics of fear win out, an economic revival will become even less likely.