

Mediatization of politics and the role of Muslims in the Telangana conflict in Andhra Pradesh/India.

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In the numerous political and social conflicts that continue to exist in the 21st century an increasing qualitative change can be observed, caused mainly by a process of mediatization that is structuring social relations in a new way. An indicator of the growing influence of (new) media is the usage of the term “Facebook Revolution” to refer to the recent regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt. The actual significance of the media is controversial among scholars. Whereas optimists see social changes as entirely media-generated, skeptics regard new communication technologies as mere instruments. Avoiding media-centric assumptions, a few authors (Cottle 2006, Strömbäck/Esser 2009) deal with mediatized conflicts and the contradictions between political logic and media logic. Media logic replaces political logic when, for example, political campaigns are commodified, transformed into entertainment with politicians appearing as actors, for easier consumption by an audience. These complex interactions are, however, neither deterministic nor universal and have yet to be explored by empiric and comparative research.

The current dispute over the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh is one example of a highly mediatized conflict with contentious political communication involving a multitude of individuals and occurring on several levels. Its origins go back to the linguistic reorganization of Indian states in 1956 and the resulting merger of two Telugu-speaking areas. Since then the inhabitants of the Telangana region have felt exploited by the eastern part of the state concerning economic and irrigation resources as well as public employment. Seeking the creation of a new state within the Indian union, the Telangana movement consists of different political parties, ranging from the Communist Party of India (CPI) to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with the regionalist Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) as the main force. It is also backed by large groups of non-partisan social movements. As the demand for Telangana is not based on a linguistic, ethnic, religious or caste-based identity it can also include Urdu-speaking Muslims and others. Muslims have specific reasons to support the movement, including recognition of Urdu, better quotas in reservation, as well as an increased political influence due to a higher percentage of the population in the Telangana region.

The importance of the media in the Telangana conflict is evidenced by the fact that the ongoing mass mobilizations were themselves triggered in large part by a dramatic media event – the fast-unto-death of TRS chief KCR. Pictures of the dying politician drove people to the streets and led the Indian government to initial concessions. This research project seeks to explore the mediatization of the Telangana questions on three levels: the symbolic constitution of Telangana, media strategies of the protagonists, as well as the possibilities of participation through various media outlets.

Before obtaining political recognition, it is necessary to establish a collective identity that is inherently different from East Andhra. The discursive battle against Telugu unity propagated by opponents of the bifurcation is largely successful, though the competing narrative of a primordial Hindu-Muslim divide circulated by Hindu nationalists has continued to create fissures in Telangana identity. Muslims who had initially endorsed the idea of a new state have abandoned the idea in fear of a rising communalism. Furthermore the Telangana community has to present itself as a distinct

but legitimate part of a harmonious Indian mosaic, opposed to secessionist demands in other regions like Manipur.

The struggle for Telangana engages numerous media strategies and protest repertoires. This includes the production of media events which enable the visibility of the Telangana question in the Indian public sphere. Thus the bifurcation of Andhra has been successfully framed as a current and urgent crisis waiting to be solved by the government. Apart from these new media opportunities, this mediatization is also linked to constraints like the constant creation of spectacular and newsworthy acts. What is the relationship between a Telangana counter public sphere and the traditional media? Can Telangana media activists really exert long term influence on public discourse and the political agenda?

It is also worth exploring whether the intensified mediatization presents another possibility for the political participation of a larger segment of society. The institutional field of politics has to, in part, consider the interests of the Muslim community, although this is due to the fact that almost all parties are dependent on the "Muslim vote" for parliamentary majorities. Interviews with movement activists shall investigate whether the use of media makes it possible to undermine the dominance of traditional elites or whether a digital divide reproduces existing social inequalities.