

Australia's new Rudd(er)



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The 2007 federal elections of Australia have ended and the results are out. The registered public has voted to oust the current Prime Minister John Howard and bring in Kevin Rudd. With this, the 11-year reign of the conservative Liberal-National party coalition comes to an end, and the centre-left Labor Party's reign begins. The Prime Minister-elect Kevin Rudd now awaits swearing-in, which is expected to take place any day next week.

Labor Party can very well thank its stars, and thank its star Kevin Rudd for bringing it to the victory. The Party's ratings have risen ever since Kevin Rudd became its leader in December 2006. Before that, the Party couldn't have expected to show a result half as good, as none of their leaders were popular enough with the public, while the ruling coalition was riding high on a strong economy. Rudd, with his clean public persona and strong character, upset the cart for the ruling coalition and won the votes over for the Labor Party.

Makings of this serious, smart and disciplined personality can be traced to his childhood. Born on 21st September 1957 on a farm north of Brisbane, Kevin Michael Rudd studied at a boarding school in Brisbane. But after his father's death when he was 11-years-old, his family - his mother and three elder siblings - were evicted from the farm and had to live under hardship. Four years later, he joined the Australian Labor Party, his family's experiences having partly contributed to that decision.

Rudd studied at the Australian National University in Canberra graduating with First Class Honours in Arts (Asian Studies). He did his major in Chinese language and history, and is proficient in Mandarin. From there, he joined the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1981, serving in Australian embassies in Sweden and China.

Coming back home in 1988, Rudd changed paths and was appointed Chief of Staff to the Labor Opposition Leader in Queensland, Wayne Goss. He became Chief of Staff to the Premier of Queensland when the Party won office in 1989. In 1992, Goss appointed him Director-General of the Office of Cabinet, where he earned the nickname of Dr. Death for cutting back and restructuring the Queensland public service. The many reforms introduced by him included one for development of a national program for teaching foreign languages in schools.

That wasn't enough. He stood for elections from Griffith in 1996 and lost. He stood again in 1998, and won by a two per cent margin. He has increased his majority with every subsequent election and now holds Griffith by 17 per cent margin. Between elections he ran his own business as a Chinese consultant for Australian firms.

Rudd was promoted to the opposition front bench after 2001 elections and was appointed the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs. In this role, he strongly criticised the Howard government over its support for the United States in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent operations there, while maintaining Labor's position of support for the Australian-American alliance. Rudd's policy experience and parliamentary performances during the Iraq war made him one of the best-known members of the Labor front bench.

A committed Christian with increasing popularity, he seemed particularly well equipped to appeal to the suburban swing voters who tend to decide Australian elections. And so it seems to have happened. The rest, as they say, is history.

There was only one incident that ever threatened to dent Kevin Rudd's prospects. In August this year, there emerged news reports of his visit to a New York strip club, four years ago. While many Australians were left surprised at the revelations about this sober politician's colourful background, jokes abounded in the media of "Reckless Rudd". Yet, the Australian public took it pretty well and the incident just brought him closer to the common man there.

Now, Mr. Rudd is the Prime Minister-elect. And he is already outlining what he intends to do. He is breaking away from his predecessor's policies and has promised to sign the Kyoto Protocol and also to pull Australian troops out of Iraq. While this leaves the United States as the only developed nation in the world now remaining to sign the Kyoto Protocol, withdrawal of the troops could also bring a chill in Australian-American ties. Still, Mr. Rudd does however support the military campaign in Afghanistan and plans to visit the United States early next year. He has already outlined that the areas of industrial relations, the war in Iraq, climate change, Australian federalism, social justice, and the future of Australia's manufacturing industry are major policy concerns, and his government's attention will be on them.

Pakistan's athletic wealth uncommon

AYESHA ALEEM

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) is a group of nine Foreign Ministers of member countries that meet and seek to examine serious and persistent threats to Commonwealth countries. The body is restructured every two years, most recently in 2007, and in 2005 before that. This year's arrangement was especially controversial with Pakistan being excluded on account of the emergency imposed in the country, which has not been lifted despite international calls to do so.

The last time Pakistan was excluded from the body was in 1999 when President Pervez Musharraf took over the country in a calculated military coup. It remained suspended till 2004. With the suspension lifted, it would have been eligible to join this year's assembly. However, it was dropped due to its political scenario.

This decision of the CMAG was met with widespread protests among the legal community and human rights activists in Pakistan, who marched to the house of former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in Islamabad, to express their disdain. In retaliation, The Pakistan Ministry has now said that it will 'review its association and further cooperation with the organisation'. However, this reaction was after caretaker head of state Mohammed Mian Soomro, telephoned British premier Gordon Brown and Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon to plead against the suspension. McKinnon had said that Pakistan was in "serious violation" of the group's core values and was suspended immediately "pending the return of the rule of law and democracy".

The foreign ministry of Pakistan

has said that the country is moving towards a democratic model and that the emergency is a temporary measure necessary to avoid a serious internal crisis but that the situation is now 'returning toward normalcy'.

While the decision has been termed 'symbolic' and one to have been taken in 'sorrow' rather than 'anger', ultimately, it's the Pakistani people who suffer - a people that have suffered under the pressures of the absence of a democracy all these years. The decision is being reiterated as one that is targeted only at the President - one that is likely to punish him but meting out a sentence that he will be able to bear. However, the impact of such a move is borne by the Pakistani public and is an embarrassment that they will be smarted by.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this turmoil is that suspension of Pakistan from the CMAG means that the country's athletes will not be allowed to participate in the Commonwealth Games, the next ones of which are to be held in 2010 in India. This will be a particularly violent blow for the nation that shares a chequered past with its neighbour. Although Pakistan's participation at the time is still open for discussion, the political mess prevalent in the country could stand in the way of the nation's sports performance, causing it to take a beating and undermine its chances of competing in such an august event.

It will have to be seen what 2010 holds in store for Pakistan. In the meantime, as nearby New Delhi gears up to host one of the world's most prestigious sporting events, Pakistan's political future that already hangs in the balance is further precariously balanced, being weighed down by its uncertain athletic future.



New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the Radio City Rockettes lit the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center on Wednesday November 28. - Pic courtesy Google images

France on a rough track

Nicolas Sarkozy faces the worst crisis of his government as power workers join the ongoing strike

SHILPA KRISHNAN

In France, power workers have joined their colleagues from the railways on strike. Apparently, they too have special pension schemes that the government says are outdated and must be reformed. The national statute regulating the working conditions of gas and electricity workers, dating from 1964, covers everything from public holidays to medical treatment in the work place. The workers argue that giving way on

pensions would prove to be their doom.

The term "conflict" is not new to France. France has been plagued by strikes and riots for ages. Earlier, culture was the culprit. French law made it easy for thousands of ethnic French from former colonies of North and East Africa, India and Indochina to live in mainland France. From Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, 1.6 million emigrated into France. However, after the 1973 energy crisis, laws limiting immigration were

passed. But as of 2006, the French national institute of statistics INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques) estimated that 4.9 million foreign-born immigrants live in France. Little wonder then that there are frequent clashes between immigrants and locals and France is often in the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Once this issue was partially resolved, there cropped up the issue of internal conflict

with respect to strife and unrest.

Also called the hyper President, Nicolas Sarkozy's problems have been further compounded after the latest outbreak of riots in Parisian suburbs. To top that, he has to deal with the fact that all the gas and electricity workers have gone on a strike. The next few days are testing times indeed. Whether or not he will live up to the role remains to be seen. Until then, the world just has to wait and watch.