Prime Minister-elect Modi: Hello solar, goodbye tolerance

When the world’s largest democracy goes through a political earthquake, people around the world notice, even in the United States. So the victory of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and its authoritarian leader Narendra Modi, has the pundits scurrying to explain what it all means. Much of the early analysis is pessimistic, and with good reason. The BJP in general, and Modi in particular, endorses a reactionary form of Hinduism that targets Muslims: it is no accident that Modi was the state premier in Gujarat during 2002, when brutal anti-Muslim riots killed scores of Muslims, engaged in mass rapes, and state authorities looked the other way or assisted the rioters. Even today, Modi is ineligible for a US visa because of his role in the events, deemed by the United States as committing gross violations of religious freedom.

But from an environmental perspective, there is some good news — a rare green silver lining, as it were.

Modi’s rule in Gujarat has brought about the most aggressive renewable energy promotion policies on the subcontinent. Years before the Center started the “Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission,” Gujarat was actively promoting solar development with a series of tax rebates, renewable energy subsidies, and permit streamlining. Modi’s Gujarat developed 900 MW of solar capacity, nearly one-third of India’s total. Little wonder that renewable energy producers are happy:

> Pashupathy Gopalan, who heads Asia Pacific, Middle East and South Africa operations of the US solar major, SunEdison, expects Modi to make a “dramatic change” to the solar industry in India, since he (Modi) knows the solar industry “very, very well” and has taken some “pioneering steps” in solar in Gujarat.
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> Pashu was referring to the Narmada canal-top project – the first of its kind in the country -where SunEdison put up a solar project on top of the canal. Pashu recalls Modi’s zeal in the project, which the Chief Minister saw as one of huge small business potential along the canal, since both water and electricity would be available close at hand.

> Another Modi-initiative in Gujarat was the ‘rent-your-roof’ concept, where households rent their roofs for companies like SunEdison to put up solar projects.

It is Modi’s very authoritarian style of rule that gives renewable energy and energy conservation a bright future under the new government. India’s energy sector has long been victimized by theft of electric power by well-connected interests, and if his record in Gujarat is any indication, Prime Minister Modi will have little patience for that: he has a reputation as a corruption fighter, and is proud that the vast majority of the state’s villages are electrified.

But he will also have little patience for international negotiations over climate policy. The BJP’s nationalism means that it will be even less likely that previous governments to accept any sort of international regime for climate. And nationalism, not environmentalism, best explains Modi’s aggressive pursuit of solar power: India’s craving for energy means that a nationalist will want to get it anywhere he can. Gujarat is also India’s second-largest developer of petrochemical facilities, and Modi’s hostility to Sunni Muslims in Pakistan and India itself will find receptive ears in Tehran, which will be eager to sell India Iranian oil.

Some observers have compared Modi to present-day authoritarian nationalists such as Vladimir Putin, or Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. On the environment, a good comparison might be someone like the Dominican Republic’s long-time President Joaquin Balaguer, who served from 1966 to 1978 and again from 1986 to 1996. Balaguer was efficient, personally frugal, and a real conservationist. But he was also brutal, and under his rule, death squads kept the country at “peace.” I think we will have the same outcome with Modi: renewables will advance forward at an accelerating pace, and that might actually begin to bend India’s emissions curves. But so will unsustainable development, and it will be anchored by a series of repressive measures. Even with the solar advantage, it will be a long few years.