



The opposition Congress Party supporters celebrate a surprising win in the Indian election as the ruling NDA coalition has already conceded defeat.

Jubilant Congress celebrates win

AFP, New Delhi

Ecstatic supporters of India's Congress party danced to thumping Hindi pop on car tops, flashed victory signs and waved flags across New Delhi after their surprise win in national elections.

Traffic came to a stop as a sea of party workers in dozens of vehicles flocked to the Congress headquarters in the heart of the capital amid drumbeats and shouts of "We want Sonia Gandhi to be the prime minister."

Party activists hanging precariously from the side of trucks held up for the cameras a toddler wearing a cap emblazoned with Congress's hand symbol, vying for attention with an old man draped in clothes

covered with party emblems.

Leaders of the 119-year-old party, led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, heir to India's most famous family, opened boxes of sweets and embraced one another as they took in the news from television and their own counting office.

Exit polls during the marathon five-round election had predicted losses by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalists, but none predicted they would be routed by Congress.

"It is a stunning surprise," Congress senior leader Jairam Manesh told reporters as he came outside, as a giant drum was rolled into the office for the celebrations.

A giant balloon in the shape of

the Congress hand symbol was anchored to the ground waiting to be released as a chain of firecrackers burst.

"Heartiest congratulations for your win sir, particularly in Gujarat. That must have been so sweet," wished a bystander to party member Shakeel Ahmed Khan.

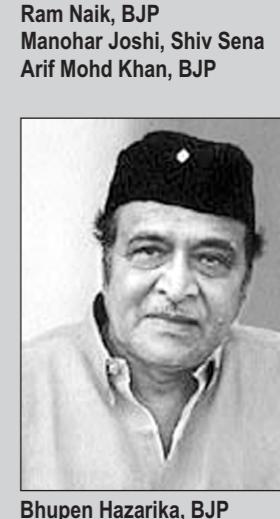
Congress was forecast to have made inroads in Gujarat, the western state ruled by the Hindu nationalists where 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, died in bloody religious riots in 2002.

"The result in Gujarat shows that the people have rejected the BJP's communal policies. They have instead given us a clear-cut mandate to rule," Khan told AFP.

WINNERS

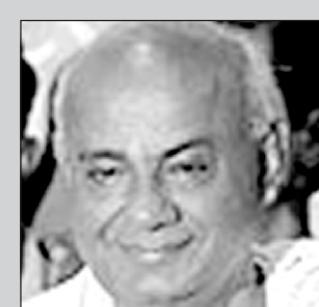


LOSERS



Ram Naik, BJP
Manohar Joshi, Shiv Sena
Arif Mohd Khan, BJP

Laloo Yadav, RJD
Jyotiraditya Scindia, Congress
Sachin Pilot, Congress
Akhilesh Yadav, SP
Sharad Pawar, NCP



Naresh Gujral, SAD
Ujjawala Shinde, Congress
Moushumi Chatterjee, Congress



Maneka Gandhi, BJP
Mamata Banerjee, TMC
Mehbooba Mufti, PDP



HD Deve Gowda, JD(S)
Sharad Yadav, JD(U)
Shahnawaz Hussain, BJP



Smriti Irani, BJP

O Rajagopal, BJP

Ram Vilas Vedanti, BJP

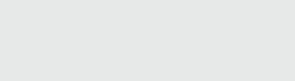
Arif Mohammad Khan, BJP



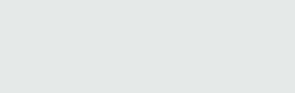
Navjot Singh Sidhu, BJP



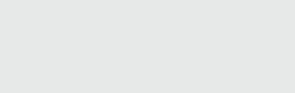
Mayawati, BSP



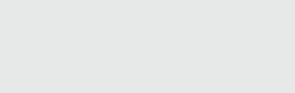
LK Advani, BJP



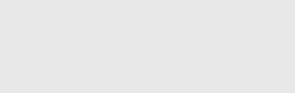
Nitish Kumar, JD(U)



Ajit Jogi, Congress



Omar Abdullah, NC



Yashwant Sinha, BJP

Neglecting the poor spelt doom for NDA

AFP, New Delhi

The stunning election loss suffered yesterday by India's ruling Hindu nationalists was the price paid for their focus on the surging urban economy instead of the rural masses, analysts said.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) "India Shining" campaign slogan touted India's blistering eight percent economic growth, proliferating mobile phones and shiny highways -- a vision that jarred for the poor still struggling for food, water and electricity.

"The economic policies of BJP, which did achieve many things they had set out to achieve, alienated much of the electorate which are much too poor and marginalised to benefit from them," said political

analyst Pran Chopra.

"It has cost it the support of a very large section of the population. The sympathy and concern for the hardships of the poor were not reflected in the BJP's policies," he said.

Some two-thirds of India's billion-plus population lives off agriculture.

Chopra said the common voter was more bothered about roads in their villages, not national highways or India's record 110 billion dollars-plus of foreign exchange reserves.

The government gambled on the election five months ahead of schedule after a strong monsoon brought a bumper harvest and amid consistently high personal ratings for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, a 79-year-old poet.

Instead of being a liability, Gandhi, the widow of slain former premier Rajiv Gandhi, seemed to have struck a rapport with women voters, he said.

Vajpayee completed a rare trinity of being sworn-in Prime Minister three times consecutively though his first tenure was cut short in 13 days and the second in 1998 in 13 months. May 13, 2004 turned out to be unlucky for him.

Astute parliamentarian, warm and persuasive leader and a sensitive poet, Vajpayee has been described as the moderate and tolerant face of "hardline" party. He was first sworn in as Prime Minister on May 16, 1996 but resigned 13 days later when he failed to muster a majority on the floor of the House.

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Vajpayee's biggest defeat at peak of popularity

PTI, New Delhi

Ironically the biggest defeat of his political career came when Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was at the peak of his popularity as a statesman and a leader with pan-India appeal.

BJP, which has often accused Congress of promoting personality cults, fought the elections in his name on his record of leadership but voters did not buy brand Vajpayee.

The stunning electoral reverse could eventually mean a sad end to a very distinguished career which saw the rise of a Gwalior school teacher's son to the leadership of a billion people.

with Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani trailing far, far behind.

An election that was supposed to have been won easily by Vajpayee turned out to be the worst moment in his distinguished public career.

Never a gambler, the 79-year-old leader chose to call the elections six months ahead largely at the insistence of his senior colleagues who spoke of so-called "feel good" and "India shining" factors.

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Election officials said Gandhi, a former financial consultant who was standing for parliament for the first time, grabbed 70 percent of all votes polled in the constituency.

Rahul's mother Sonia Gandhi, who is poised to sweep into power following a spectacular electoral victory by her Congress and its allies in the national election, had won from the same seat in 1998 with a margin of 314,000 votes.

"For Rahul we had expected nothing short of this," said Akhilesh Singh, president of the regional chapter of the Congress party.

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