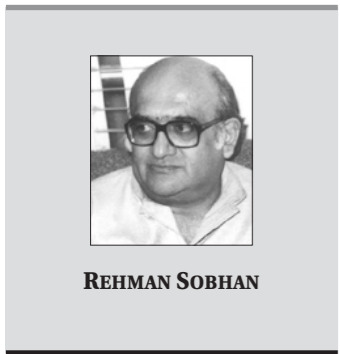


# Lessons from the Indian elections Interpreting the results



REHMAN SOBHAN

This is the first of the author's two-part series on the Indian polls.

THE outcome of the recent elections to the Lok Sabha in India has taken the whole world, including India and Bangladesh, by surprise. Various explanations are being offered both by political pundits as well as self-serving political players, for this reversal of fortunes, which has witnessed the Indian National Congress (INC) led alliance displace the Bharatya Janta Party (BJP) led alliance, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) from state power. It is argued that the NDA's campaign slogan of "Shining India" to project the sense of "feeling good" which was believed to have permeated India became counterproductive. It was believed that large numbers of voters did not feel that good because the light from "Shining India" failed to brighten up their miserable lives. The polls in India were seen to reflect a rejection of the NDA and a vote of protest against their pursuit of market-oriented reforms. As with all such sweeping assumptions about political change in India, usually based on rather sketchy information, at least in Bangladesh, the facts are somewhat at variance with the reality. This piece is designed to analyse more closely the actual voting behavior of the Indian electorate and to deduce from this the problems which may lie ahead for the new Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, and his recently inducted coalition government.

An overview of the election results indicates that the Congress and its principal allies who contested the recent elections as the *United Progressive Alliance* (UPA) won 220 out of 545 seats in the Lok Sabha. The UPA is composed of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Indian National Congress (INC) in Maharashtra and a number of

smaller parties. The UPA could however also draw on the support of its collateral allies, the Samajwadi Party (SP) led by Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by Ms. Mayawati, also in UP, along with the Left Front (LF) largely made up of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). This broader alliance gives the UPA a clear voting majority of 341 in the Lok Sabha. In contrast, the BJP and its allies known as the *National Democratic Alliance* (NDA) won 185 seats. However, whilst the NDA contested the election as a cohesive alliance with a single list of candidates the UPA led by the Congress was a much looser alliance where in particular states members of the broad alliance were in direct contestation with each other. The Congress on its own won only 145 seats which exceeded the 138 seats won by the BJP on its own. The Left Front covering the CPI-M (43 seats), the CPI (10 seats) and sundry smaller parties allied to the CPI-M in West Bengal, won 62 seats. Other significant members of the Congress alliance such as the SP won 36 seats, exclusively in Uttar Pradesh, the RJD won 21 seats, exclusively in Bihar, the DMK won 21 seats, exclusively in Tamil Nadu and the NCP located only in Maharashtra, led by Sharad Pawar, who broke away from the Congress, won 9 seats.

Indian politics is today a much more fractured affair so that a victory for the Congress in a national election is a much less decisive affair than it appears in the newspaper headlines. Nor is the ostensible defeat of the BJP alliance as comprehensive as it seems. If you break down the votes across the states it is noteworthy that the BJP alliance scored decisive gains in several states. These include: Madhya Pradesh where BJP won 25 out of 29 seats and is in full control of the State legislature with Uma Bharati as Chief Minister. Rajasthan, where BJP won 21 out of 25 seats and retains a big majority in the State legislature. Punjab, where even though the Congress is in office at the State level, the BJP in alliance with the Srimoni Akali Dal (SAD) won 11 out of 13 seats to the Lok Sabha. In Orissa, the Biju Janta Dal (BJD) -- BJP alliance won 18 out of 21 seats to the Lok Sabha and retained its majority in the State legislature winning 92 out of 147 seats. In Chattisgarh, out of 11 Lok Sabha seats the BJP won 10 compared to 1 by the Congress.

The most significant gain for the BJP led alliance was in Karnataka where the Congress party had control of the State legislature and had

the largest number of representatives to the Lok Sabha in the 1999 elections. This state along with Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh was one of the success stories of India's IT revolution. The State Congress administration led by S.M. Krishna, earned itself a good name as the poster child of the IT revolution. The BJP had so far never emerged as a significant force in any election south of the Vindayas. However, in the 2004 election, for the first time in India's political history, the BJP emerged as the dominant party in a Southern State, Karnataka, winning 18 out of 28 seats to the Lok Sabha

the Congress has for some years been marginalized as a political force. These two states were once the heartland of the Congress Party where such stalwarts as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Gobind Balabh Pant, Maulana Azad, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Lal Bahadur Shastri in UP and Rajendra Prasad in Bihar dominated the political scene. Today the Congress is reduced to a minor political presence in UP where only the immediate heirs of the Nehru dynasty are assured of being elected to the Lok Sabha. In this election, courtesy of its alliance with the SP, the Congress won 9 seats out of the 22

the state, reportedly initiated by the RSS, the parent body of the BJP.

The Congress did well in the 7 North Eastern States where along with the CPI-M they won 13 out of 24 seats in contrast to 8 won by the BJP and its allies. In the largest state in the region, Assam, the Congress won 9 out of 14 seats compared to the 10 it held in the outgoing parliament while the BJP won 2 seats and its ally the Asom Gono Parishad won 2 seats. A significant gain for the Congress was its defeat of the much respected folk-singer, Bhupen Hazarika, who surprisingly contested on behalf of

In Maharashtra the Congress and its allies won 22 seats compared to 15 in 1999. The NDA won 25 seats compared to 26 in 1999. This suggests that the Congress made significant gains but the balance of political power in the state still remains divided.

If we were to sum up the breakdown of the 2004 Lok Sabha election in the more populous states it would read as follows:

NDA gains: Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Karnataka, Punjab, Chattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh

UPA gains: Andhra Pradesh,

cant gains in the recent elections. However, its biggest victory was recorded against the TDP in Andhra whilst its victories over the BJP were registered in less populous states though its gains in Gujrat were significant. The most decisive defeats inflicted on the NDA in the larger states owed to parties with strong regional bases such as the Left Front in West Bengal, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the SP and BSP in UP and the RJD in Bihar.

The BJP led alliance suffered a significant and unexpected reverse in the elections but it took a major coalition of diverse political forces to inflict this defeat on the party. The decisive defeat of two of its regional allies, the AIDMK and the TDP, contributed significantly to the erosion in the fortunes of the NDA. The BJP remains a significant force in Northern India, where along with its allies it holds State office in Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Chattisgarh whilst it has made significant gains in the Panjab.

The Congress today holds national office again through its own political gains, for which Sonia Gandhi's leadership, once written off as a liability, played a significant role. However, its retention of power depends significantly on a diverse conglomerate of allies ranging from the Left Front, to the DMK, the SP, BSP, the RJD and the

NCP. Smaller parties within the alliance have not been discussed here. Most of these major allies of the Congress have been accommodated in the new government where 25 Ministerial portfolios out of 65 have been allocated to them.

Dr. Manmohan Singh's task as Prime Minister will not be an easy one. Even though the Congress is the dominant party in the Cabinet it has to take account of the concerns of its partners. This does not only derive from the fact that they can withdraw their support to the Congress if their interests are not adequately taken into account but because electorally they have played a significant role in the victory over the NDA. If Parliament is to be dissolved and the Congress has to go back to the voters it can only aspire to challenge the BJP if it can count on its allies to stand by them at the polls. Unless Sonia Gandhi can parley her enormously enhanced prestige, into significantly enhanced electoral support for the Congress in such states as UP, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the electoral capacity of the Congress to challenge the NDA on its own remains far from decisive.

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Next: Policy agendas and alliance

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compared to 8 for the Congress. In the concurrent election to the State legislature the BJP won 79 out of 224 seats compared to 65 by the Congress. If the Congress hopes to retain power in the State legislature of Karnataka it can only do so in coalition with the Janata Dal (Secular) led by Mr. Deve Gowda, the former Prime Minister of India in 1996, which won 58 seats.

The Congress not only lost ground to the BJP in Panjab, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa and Karnataka but it also projected a weak presence in states where its alliance partners have emerged as the dominant force. In Kerala, for example, the Congress has historically been in a permanent state of contestation for power with the Left Democratic Front (LDF). In the current Lok Sabha elections the LDF won 18 out of 20 seats with one seat going to the Muslim League and another to the BJP. For the first time in electoral history the Congress did not win a single seat from Kerala in the Lok Sabha. In West Bengal the Left Front scored a decisive victory winning 35 out of 42 seats. However, as part of the alliance arrangement the Congress contested 9 seats of which it won 5 seats, including one by Pranab Mukerjee who managed to win an election in West Bengal after many years. The decisive losers were the NDA made up of Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee who won only one seat, her own, and the BJP who won one seat and lost their seat in Krishnanagar.

In both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

seats it contested. The main challenge to the BJP in UP and Bihar comes from the regional, caste based parties such as the SP or the BSP. In the recent election, the SP and BSP made substantial electoral gains at the expense of the BJP whilst in Bihar the RJD inflicted a comprehensive defeat on the NDA. In UP the BJP won only 11 seats out of the 37 they contested compared to the 25 seats they held in the outgoing parliament. In contrast the SP improved its tally from 26 seats to 37 seats in the current Parliament. In Bihar the RJD won 19 seats out of the 23 they contested whilst the Congress as part of the UPA contested only 4 seats and won 3.

One of the most decisive defeats inflicted on the BJP and its principal ally, the AIDMK led by Ms. Jayalalita, a breakaway party from the DMK, was in Tamil Nadu, where the DMK led by Karunadhi and its allies won all 40 seats contested for the Lok Sabha. The AIDMK held 11 seats in the outgoing Parliament and the BJP 4 seats all of which were lost in this election. The Congress won 10 seats leaving it as a minority partner of the DMK in Tamil Nadu. The strength of the DMK in the new Lok Sabha is reflected in the fact that they were allocated 8 ministerial portfolios in the new Congress led government.

The decisive victories of the Congress Party in the current election were limited to a few states. The most spectacular success was in Andhra Pradesh where along with its allies the Congress won 36 out of 42 seats. The Congress on its own won 29 seats compared to 5 won by the Telegu Desam Party led by Chandra Babu Naidu which was a complete reversal of their seat position in the outgoing parliament. In the concurrent state elections the Congress inflicted a massive defeat on the TDP which had held office in Hyderabad over the last decade and was seen as one of the vanguard states of the IT revolution in India.

The other states where the Congress won decisively were in Delhi, Haryana, and Jharkhand, the state carved out of the tribal areas of Bihar. In Delhi the Congress won 6 out of 7 seats, defeating a number of sitting MPs of the BJP. In Haryana, the Congress won 9 out of 10 seats, inflicting a decisive defeat on the BJP and its local ally the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD). In contrast in the 1999 elections to the Lok Sabha, the Congress did not win a single seat in Haryana where the INLD and the BJP held 5 seats each. Only 1 seat was retained by the BJP in Haryana in the current election. In Jharkhand out of 13 Lok Sabha seats the Congress won 5 and its allies 6 leaving the BJP with 1 seat compared to the 9 seats they held in the outgoing house. Congress also registered significant gains in Gujarat where they won 12 out of 26 Lok Sabha seats snatching 7 seats held by the BJP in the outgoing house. This significant gain by the Congress may be viewed in the context of the decisive victory by the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi in the recent state assembly elections in Bihar in the wake of the communal massacres in

the BJP from a seat already held by the BJP. The CPI-M retained its hold in Tripura winning both seats but the outcome in the other 5 states was mixed with BJP in fact winning the 2 seats held by Congress in Arunachal Pradesh and sharing seats with Congress in Meghalaya. In Nagaland and Mizoram the local parties retained their dominance.

Haryana, Jharkand, Gujrat, Assam, Delhi, Maharashtra

Left Front gains: West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura

Regional Party gains: Uttar Pradesh (SP and BSP), Bihar (RJD), Tamil Nadu (DMK),

The above evidence indicates that the Congress certainly made signifi-

5x3

9x4

4.5x2

4.5x6