



Supporters of India's Congress Party celebrate at Gandhi Bhavan in Hyderabad yesterday with their party's clear victory as the vote counting of the national elections drags on. PHOTO: AFP

## Not supporting Congress was a mistake: Lalu

ANI, New Delhi

Rashtriya Janata Dal supremo Lalu Prasad Yadav on Saturday admitted that not supporting the Congress was a mistake.

"It's the mandate for the people," Lalu said, adding that he harbored no grudges against Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

Lalu lost from the Patliputra parliamentary seat to JD (U) rival Ranjan Prasad Yadav, but won from the Saran constituency against BJP rival Rajiv Pratap Rudy.

Nitish Kumar, whose party registered major electoral gains in Bihar, didn't miss a chance to take potshots at Lalu.

"The lantern (BJD's election symbol) has broken and the oil that was spilt set on fire the bungalow (LJP's symbol) as the arrow (symbol of JD-U) was right on target," he said.

"The people of Bihar have rejected negative politics pursued by BJD president Lalu Prasad and LJP chief Ramvilas Paswan and have given a positive vote to my government which has been successful in bringing about peace, communal harmony and development," he added.

# Young MPs likely to find place in new cabinet

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

With the electoral verdict clear, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance will next turn its attention to government formation and there is strong likelihood that young parliamentarians will find a place in the council of ministers, said party sources.

"The Congress president Sonia Gandhi has already promised that young MPs who have worked hard and proved themselves will be included in the cabinet this time," said a senior party leader.

After a spectacular showing in the staggered Lok Sabha election, key ministries including finance, defence, external affairs and home will be retained by the Congress.

As a new government must be formed by June 2, the party's leadership is meeting to review its performance that will be followed up a cabinet meeting to be presided over by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Among the Congress veterans who will find their way back into government will be Pranab Mukherjee, P. Chidambaram, Kamal Nath, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Hans Raj Bhardwaj, A.K. Antony, Kapil Sibal, Jairam Ramesh, Vayalar Ravi, Anand Sharma, Sushil Kumar Shinde and S. Jaipal Reddy.

According to party insiders, among the Young Turks who are likely to figure in Manmohan Singh's cabinet will be Jyotiraditya Scindia, Milind Deora, Sachin Pilot and Jitin Prasad.

Another possible inclusion

could be former UN under-secretary general Sashi Tharoor who created history by winning the Lok Sabha seat from the Kerala capital, Thiruvananthapuram.

Manmohan Singh said he would try to persuade Congress general secretary, Rahul Gandhi, to join the cabinet after the ruling Congress-led coalition's win in the election.

"It is my wish that he should be in the cabinet. But I will have to persuade him," the prime minister told reporters.

Rewarding cabinet berths for the Congress party's allies - the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra - will also be discussed by the party leadership.

## Rahul's summer of content

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

This is clearly Rahul Gandhi's summer of content. The self-effacing Nehru-Gandhi scion, who was once seen as a reluctant politician who shunned the media, is now being credited for his starring role in the resounding victory of the Congress in the 2009 elections and the revival of the party in Uttar Pradesh.

Senior party leaders have been quick to lavish praise on the 39-year-old Rahul Gandhi, along with his mother and Congress president Sonia Gandhi, for the decisive victory of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which defied most pollsters' predictions who were projecting a fractured verdict.

The 2009 elections will shine in the Gandhi family

lore. The year saw a stunning transformation of the Gandhi heir apparent into a shrewd strategist and politician as he emerged from his mother's sheltering shadows to campaign tirelessly in the blistering summer heat, addressing as many as 10-15 rallies a day.

Rahul Gandhi's role in mobilising the youth power, his strenuous efforts at rejuvenating the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most populous state where the party machinery had virtually ceased to exist, and his robust defence of Manmohan Singh as the party's prime ministerial candidate against the BJP's onslaught were seen as some of his singular contributions to the party's victory.

"The electorate wants the youth to come up. Rahul Gandhi should get the credit," senior Congress leader Kapil

Sibal told IANS.

"People have shown faith in Rahul Gandhi's leadership," said Congress leader Digvijay Singh.

"The feedback we got from our workers was how Rahul Gandhi, in the past two-and-a-half years, worked in every area, and we had the confidence that it would help us," said party leader Ambika Soni.

"The way youth, for the first time, has shown enthusiasm for elections and has thought about joining politics is all because of Rahul Gandhi," Soni added.

The Congress general secretary in charge of youth affairs who became MP for the first time from Amethi in 2004, Rahul Gandhi proved to be a relentless campaigner, turning on his charm on voters, trumpeting the Congress' achievements with panache and demolishing opponents with withering sarcasm.

## Advani proposes to shun leadership in new House, BJP rejects

PTI, New Delhi

Taking responsibility for BJP's poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections, its Prime Ministerial candidate L. K. Advani on Saturday offered not to be the party leader in the new House which was, however, rejected.

Addressing a press conference in New Delhi, BJP General Secretary Arun Jaitley said Advani proposed at the meeting of the party's Parliamentary Board, which discussed the outcome, that a new leader be elected to lead the party in the Lok Sabha.

"However, the Board asked

him to continue to guide the party," Jaitley said adding that party President Rajnath Singh has been authorised to talk to Advani not to press for his demand.

Accepting defeat of the party, he said, "Though no party or a combination has got a clear majority, the BJP believes that the UPA has the best mandate to rule." He said the BJP's defeat was the "collective" responsibility of the party.

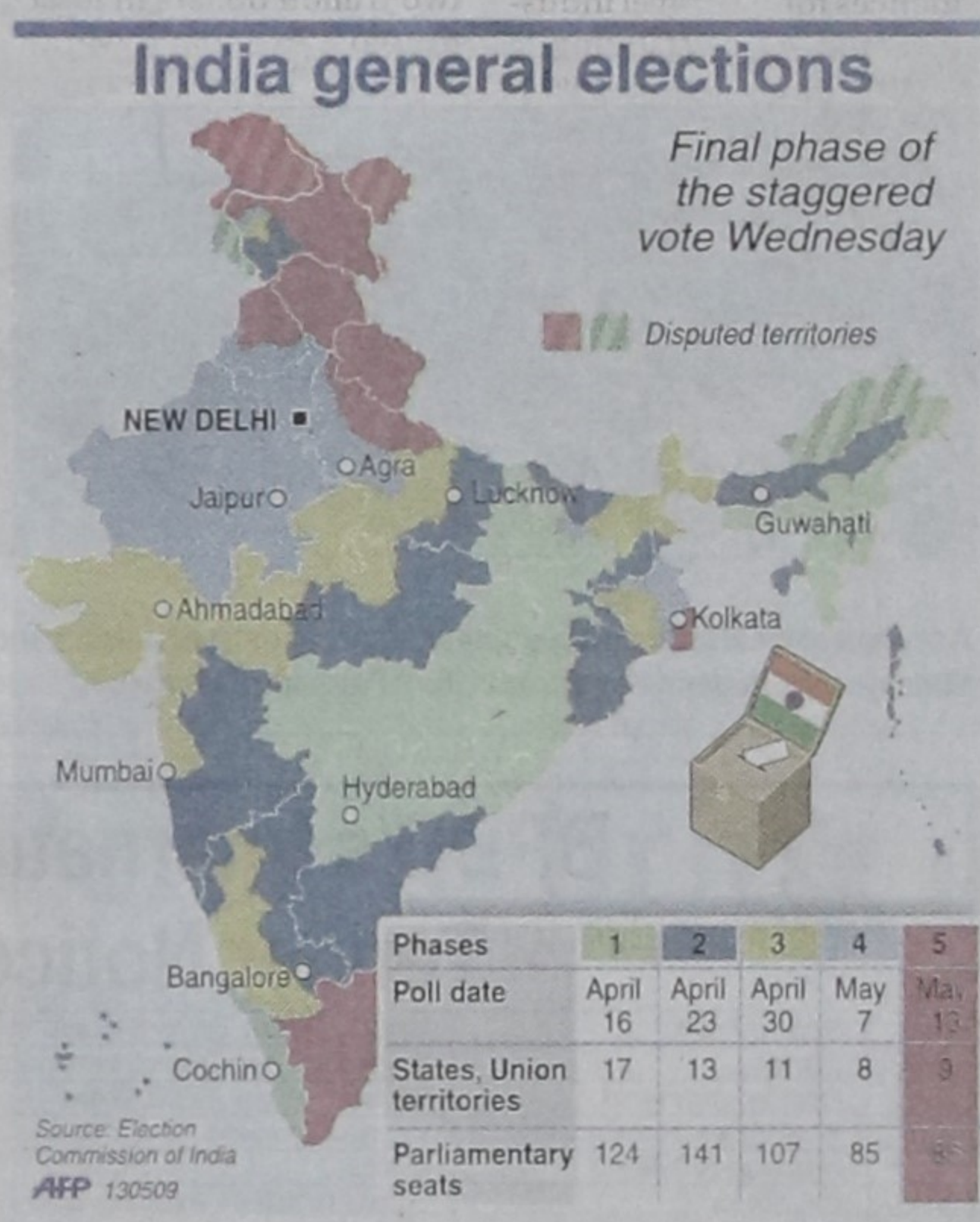
"It is not outright rejection of NDA's policies as we have done exceedingly well in some states while below expectations in others," he said.

## Exit polls were off the mark again

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The exit polls have gone wrong yet again. While all the surveys had predicted an edge for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), they also said the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would be a close second. But as results came in Saturday, the gap between the two was expected to be a whopping 100 seats.

The exit polls gave the UPA 185 to 205 seats and the NDA 142 to 198 while predicting as many as 110 to 130 seats for the Third Front, which, as trends reveal, may not cross even half of that.



## Congress celebrates election victory

AFP, New Delhi

Supporters of India's Congress party set off firecrackers and danced in the street on Saturday as they celebrated election results that swept them back into power with unexpected ease. "I am astounded at the outcome," said 37-year-old Chhote Lal, one of many activists distributing sweets to crowds gathered at the party headquarters in New Delhi.

The thousands of young and old supporters chanted "Jai Ho" (Victory), echoing the song from the hit film Slumdog Millionaire that was taken up by Congress as its campaign slogan.

The party was expected to pick up more than 190 seats in

its own right -- Congress' best showing since 1991 -- and, along with its allies, was well ahead of the Hindu-nationalist opposition-led group.

"With our alliance partners, we will have a safe majority," Congress spokesman Kapil Sibal said.

Activists were unanimous that it was the party's Italian-born president Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul, 38, who were responsible for the success.

Congress led India's campaign for independence from Britain in 1947, and Rahul's great-grandfather was Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister.

"It is all the work of Sonia and Rahul," said Ravish Prabhu, 36, from the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

## A deserving PM in waiting

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

He once described himself a politician by accident but today Manmohan Singh, who nearly risked his government on Indo-US nuclear deal, is a prime minister by design as he prepared to assume the top post after Congress' stunning success in general elections.

Singh, the architect of economic reforms in the country, is all set to play his second successive innings as prime minister and would become only the second person to do so after a full-term.

Widely regarded as one of the cleanest persons in public life, Singh has never won any election and hence was nominated by his party to the upper

house of Parliament way back in 2004.

Congress' victory would come as great relief for 76-year-old Singh whom the Left parties accused of compromising India's sovereignty to the US over the Indo-US nuclear deal, while the opposition had criticised him as a puppet prime minister.

"It's all destiny, if you are destined to serve the country, you will," Singh's wife Gursharan Kaur had said in an interview last month about her husband landing the top job.

Singh's greatest contribution, however, is the economic reforms process that he set in motion in the early 1990s.

A D.Phil in economics from Oxford University and author of 'India's Export Trends and

Prospects for Self-Sustained Growth' - an early critique of India's inward-oriented trade policy - Singh opened the Indian economy, cut taxes and red tape to set the country on the path to high economic growth.

As a result of debt build-up in the early 90s, India was on the verge of default in respect of external payment liabilities, its capital market went into a tailspin, and its sovereign ratings slashed.

It was Singh, who was roped in 1991 by the then prime minister PV Narasimha Rao as finance minister who initiated macro-economic reforms that included opening the market to foreign investment and bringing in precious foreign exchange.

## Congress on a high after comeback in UP

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Congress leaders were jubilant Saturday after making a comeback in the politically significant state of Uttar Pradesh, where it was leading in 22 of 80 seats, with many giving credit to their general secretary Rahul Gandhi.

"Uttar Pradesh is a political force," Rahul Gandhi, who represents Amethi in the state, said at a press conference here as it became evident that the Congress was going to confound predictions and improve substantially on its nine Lok Sabha seats in 2004. Several leaders credited

him with the party's showing in the elections.

Said Communications and IT Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia: "All credit goes to Rahul Gandhi for single handedly reviving the Congress in Uttar Pradesh... What worked was the combination of Manmohan Singh's policies and Rahul Gandhi's thrust on party cadres and youth."

"It's the victory of the Congress policies implemented under the leadership of the party president Sonia Gandhi and general secretary Rahul Gandhi," said the president of the state's party unit, Rita Bahuguna Joshi.

## For Mamata, the elections were only a semi-final

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kolkata

From being the solitary representative of her party in the outgoing Lok Sabha to severely denting the red bastion in West Bengal - for Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee it has been an aggression-filled five years that saw her usurping not just the communist slogans but also their once-captive rural vote bank.

As the 54-year-old Banerjee's alliance with the Congress seemed set to win the majority of seats, pushing the Left Front to its worst ever parliament tally from the

state, political pundits have started speculating whether she can continue the momentum to usher in change in the state in the assembly polls two years from now.

Banerjee's loyalists have dubbed the Lok Sabha election as the semi-final. All eyes will now be on the assembly polls two years from now to see whether 'Didi (elder sister)' wins the final to take the most coveted chair in the state secretariat, Writers Buildings.

Banerjee, who comes from a working class neighbourhood of south Kolkata's Kalighat and is known for her

austere lifestyle, ran the risk of going into political oblivion when her party was battered in the 2004 general elections. Her victory from Kolkata South was the party's sole success then. The Trinamool was decimated in the assembly elections two years later with only 30 out of the state's 294 seats in its kitty.

But it is ironic that Banerjee's change of fate started with the Left government announcing a project that many believed could lead to a turnaround in the state's industrial fortunes - the Tata Motors' Nano car project in Singur.



Indian polling officials count votes from electronic voting machines (EVM) at a counting centre in Srinagar yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

## NC-Congress combine sweeps Kashmir polls

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Srinagar

The National Conference (NC)-Congress combine won five of the six Jammu and Kashmir Lok Sabha constituencies while an independent was leading in Ladakh.

NC president Farooq Abdullah was declared winner from Srinagar constituency after he defeated his closest rival Itikhar Hussain Ansari, of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), by a margin of nearly 32,000 votes.

## Did youth give thumbs-up to Cong?

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Twenty-year-old Raeesha Khan had a jubilant 'It's thumbs-up Congress!' as her status message on Google chat Saturday. Following the number game closely on the TV as the poll results kept pouring in from across the country, she, like many young people, said they were glad they voted for the Congress.

"I voted for the Congress candidate of my constituency. For me it was the party that was important. Unlike the BJP, which kept digging up graves of age-old

issues, people like Rahul Gandhi spoke about the importance of youth power in building the future of the country. That's what is important," Khan, a college student, told IANS.

Rajiv Jain, a PhD student, similarly said: "Thank God, Congress did so well! With all the BJP leaders looking so confident over the last few days, I was a little worried."

"We need young leaders today, like Omar Abdullah, Sachin Pilot and Rahul Gandhi who have new ideas and fresh perspective to important issues. And we definitely don't want a party whose candi-

dates keep talking on religious lines, when there are much more important issues to deal with," he added.

In a performance that dealt crippling blows to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies as well as the Communist-led Third Front, the Congress tally in the 545-member Lok Sabha rose sharply from the 145 seats it won in 2004.

Accepting that it had probably underestimated the young voters, Tarun Vijay, who heads the Dr Syama Prasad Mookherjee Research Foundation, the think tank of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), said

on TV the party, among other things, 'ignored the youth'.

Political analyst N. Bhaskara Rao however said that it was not so much ignoring the youth that mattered, but the kind of message that went out by the BJP.

"I don't think the BJP ignored the youth. In fact they started their e-campaign much before the Congress. However the BJP did a lot of negative campaigning while the Congress did positive campaigning. The BJP kept talking about the past, while the Congress talked about the future," Rao told IANS.