

Indian Congress Party supporters celebrate victory in front of Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi's residence in New Delhi yesterday. Congress-led alliance swept to a commanding election victory on Saturday, crushing its Hindu nationalist rivals and setting up a second term for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Indians vote for stability

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The strongest message, sent out by the Congress-led UPA victory in Indian parliamentary elections, is the people's look out for "stability" -- free from pulls and pressures of a coalition of myriad of regional parties.

Congress and its allies may have fallen short of a majority mark of 272 in the 545-member Lok Sabha but they are no longer dependent on a horde of regional or Left parties for the survival of the new government.

Left parties and regional outfits had hoped that like the last 12 years, they would play the roles of "kingmakers and party-spoilers" in a coalition arrangement but a clear mandate for Congress had crushed their hopes -- be it Mayawati-led BSP, Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, RJD of Lalu Prasad, Karunanidhi-led DMK in Chandrababu Naidu's TDP or AIADMK of Jayalithaa.

Congress' much improved performance in this polls, compared to its show in the previous general election five years ago, saw the party regaining much of its pan-Indian appeal which had waned since late 1980s owing to the party ceding space to regional parties.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will head a government without the crutch of Left parties or unpredictable partners, which had buffeted him in decisions relating to economic reforms during his previous stint from time to time since 2004.

Senior leaders of Left parties, which had withdrawn support to the UPA government in July last year, acknowledged grudgingly that Congress' stability plank was a big draw for voters. Among the Left leaders to admit this are Sitaram Yechury, Mohd Selim and Biman Bose of CPI-M.

Analysts said the election result is an endorsement of Congress' positive campaigning showcasing the achievements of UPA government's populist schemes like Rs

70,000-crore loan waiver package for farmers announced by the government last year and its flagship socio-economic development project the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

An important reason for Congress' victory was that it decided the right alliance partner -- Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, NCP in Maharashtra and DMK in Tamil Nadu for seat-adjustment. Barring these three parties, Congress decided not to go for partnership in any other state including in politically key Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where RJD, LJP and Samajwadi Party are its national-level allies.

Not to go for alliance in what has come to be known as the "Hindi heartland" comprising states like Bihar and UP was a big gamble and it paid off handsomely for Congress in UP where the party scripted a fine revival story by winning 21 of the total of 80 seats, nearly at par with Samajwadi Party and BSP which had been dominating the state's politics for over two decades.

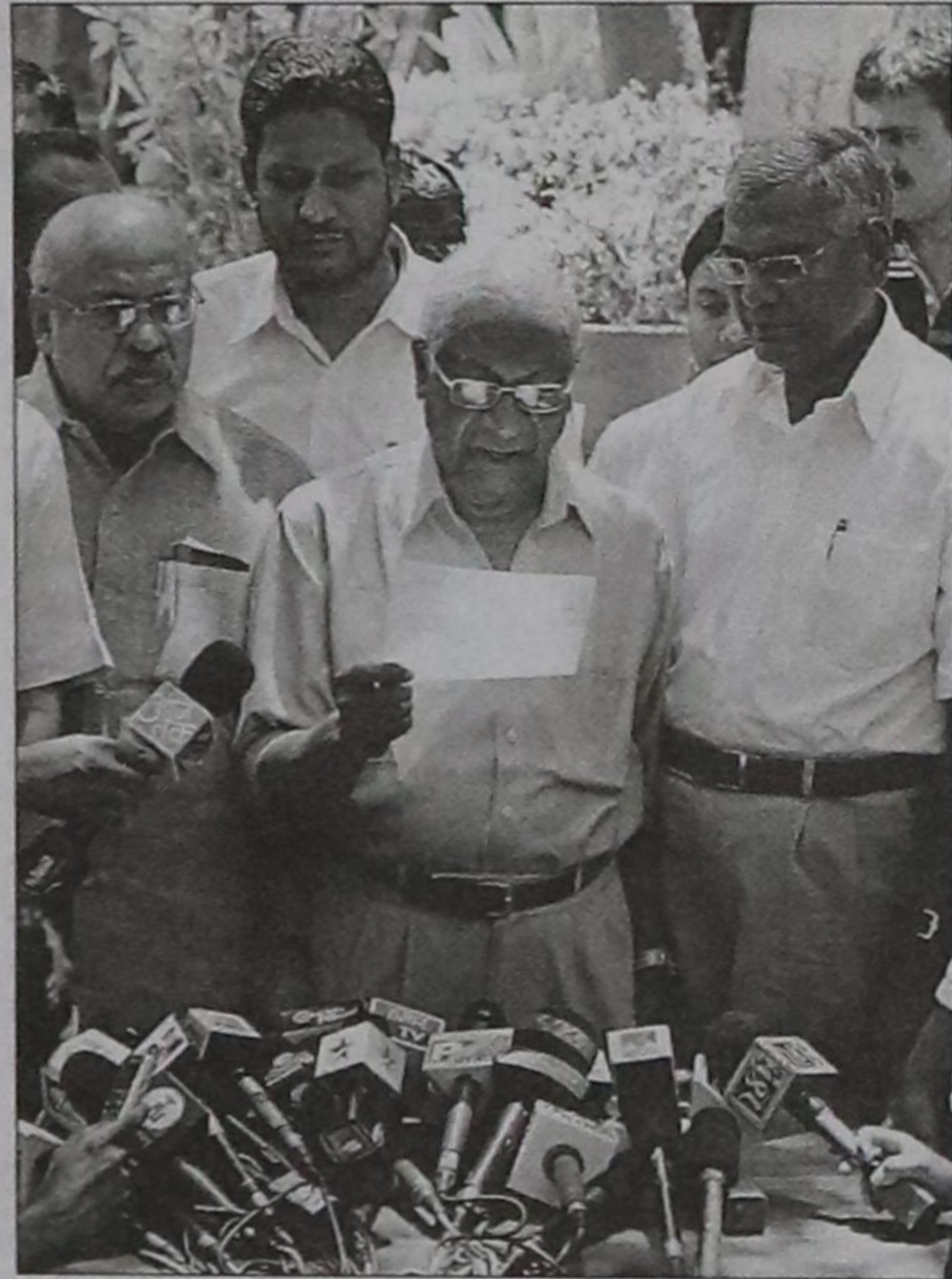
UPA win a vindication of its policies, says NCP

PTI, New Delhi

NCP yesterday said the UPA's victory in the Lok Sabha polls was a vindication of the policies adopted by the coalition and expressed support to the Congress in government formation. "UPA's win is a vindication of the policies, programmes and values for which the UPA came together."

People of India have reposed faith in the alliance irrespective of caste and creed across the country," senior NCP leader Praful Patel said. He said, "The NCP will now support the formation of the new government".

The Union Minister said the country has already seen a stable and progressive government under the leadership of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi.



Communist Party of India general secretary AB Bardhan (C) addresses the media, along with Communist leaders D Raja (R) and Chandrachuram (L) after a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

Victorious Varun, Maneka Gandhi meet Advani

ANI, New Delhi

BJP leaders Varun Gandhi and Maneka Gandhi arrived here to meet Lal Krishna Advani at his residence on Sunday morning, following reports of the latter's wish to step down from party's parliamentary board.

On Saturday, Varun Gandhi won from the Pilibhit Constituency and his mother Maneka Gandhi registered victory from Aonla Lok Sabha constituency in Uttar Pradesh.

The meeting holds significance, as it is to be seen whether the party holds more responsibilities to the young firebrand leader Varun Gandhi.

Varun Gandhi's poll campaigning had sparked a lot of interest in political circuits, following his alleged hate speech at an election rally in Pilibhit and slapping of National Security Act by the UP govt. against him on March 29.

He was put behind bars by the Mayawati government in Uttar Pradesh.

Lok Sabha to host four Gandhis for first time

PTI, New Delhi

In an unparalleled feat for a political family, four members of the illustrious Nehru-Gandhi lineage would simultaneously occupy seats in India's 15th Lok Sabha, albeit in rival camps.

With BJP's firebrand leader Varun Gandhi making it to the Lok Sabha for the first time, Parliament will be host to two mother-son duos of India's first political family representing two main political parties.

While Congress President Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul will be part of the ruling coalition, BJP leader Maneka Gandhi and her son Varun, the saffron party's latest poster boy will be seated on the opposition benches.

This will be the first time four members of the family, though from its two estranged factions, will simultaneously be in the Lok Sabha that has for most part of its history seen at least one member of the Nehru-Gandhi clan.

Mamata 'celebrity brigade' triumphs in West Bengal

PTI, Kolkata

Dismissed by the Left, the 'celebrity brigade' of Trinamool Congress -- two popular filmstars and a singer-poet -- emerged triumphant in the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal pulling an upset in the Marxist bastion.

Though the trend of cinestars turning to politics is quite common in other parts of the country, it is for the first time that West Bengal has sent two famous actors -- Tapas Pal and Shatabdi Roy -- to Parliament.

When Trinamool Congress leader announced the candidatures of the "stars", the Left had described it as a sign of ideological bankruptcy, but it appears that they have managed to strike a chord with the electorate.

Mamata wants early Assembly polls in West Bengal

ANI, Indo-Asian News Service, Kolkata

Having registered a thumping victory in the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress chief Mamta Banerjee on Saturday demanded an early Assembly elections in the State.

Mamta says the latest election results show that people of the State do not have any confidence in Communist Party of India (Marxist) led front here.

Expressing gratitude to people for their support, Mamta said that she salutes them for the way they fought against CPI-M terror and exercised their franchise. She dedicated her party's victory to the people.

Meanwhile, West Bengal Congress chief Pranab Mukherjee on Saturday said the alliance between the Trinamool Congress and Congress paid dividends with the people positively responding to it.

But Pranab refused to view the LS election results as an expression of people's "no confidence" on the ruling Left Front government.

"This is not an Assembly election, but Lok Sabha poll. I am not saying the results showed people's no-confidence on the LF govern-

ment." Talking about the TMC and Congress alliance in the LS elections, Pranab said that people of the state wanted the alliance for the Lok Sabha polls and they responded positively to "our fight in the election together."

On the verge of his convincing win in Jangipur constituency for the second time in a row, Mukherjee said, "We formed this alliance to honour people's expectations. People have positively responded to it."

On the Trinamool Congress joining the UPA government, its leader Dinesh Trivedi said: "We are not really in the game of bargain, we are going to work for the people. We have a significant number - the largest number (19 seats) as far as UPA allies are concerned. I am sure the Congress will be interested to have the Trinamool on board."

He also said that Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee would not fight for any position. "Our main ally has been the Congress. We haven't reached the stage where we are talking about anything. It's between (Congress president) Sonia Gandhi and Mamata. They have a fantastic equation, and will do whatever is good for democracy and for the people."



Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi, general secretary Rahul Gandhi (R), and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee (C) attend the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Advani walks into the sunset

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The defeat in general elections 2009 is all set to spark a churning in the top leadership of India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party whose prime ministerial candidate LK Advani is firm on quitting as the leader of the opposition.

Soon after it became clear on Saturday that Congress-led UPA is all set to return to power with a decisive mandate, Advani conveyed to a meeting of the BJP parliamentary board that he would like to step down as the leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha.

However, the board turned down his offer but the 81-year-old leader remained firm in his decision.

BJP sources said by offering to resign, Advani has indicated that when the party's newly-elected members of Lok Sabha meet here in next few days to elect their leader, they should look for a new person.

BJP's most charismatic

leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee already in retirement and his contemporary Advani may also follow suit. At the age of 81, this was his last chance to be the prime minister had his party won the polls, but like some other deputy prime ministers in Indian politics, he too appears to have missed the bus.

As long as Vajpayee was there, Advani had always been overshadowed by the former. While Vajpayee was seen as the liberal face of BJP Advani the mascot of strident Hindutva who had taken out a controversial 'Rathayatra' in 1980s.

Advani's repeated attack on Manmohan Singh as the "weakest" PM boomeranged badly on BJP when Congress hit back at him and exposed his own vulnerable point as Indian Home Minister when dreaded terrorists were released in return for safety of passengers of an Indian Airlines aircraft hijacked to Afghanistan in 1999.

Advani had brought the Hindutva ideology into the political discourse of India, tapped a new right-wing space but could help the party only up to a point as Congress looked organisationally jaded and bereft of fresh ideas to regain its strength.

With Advani now walking into virtual sunset, the opportunity has come for BJP's next line of leaders like Murli Manohar Joshi, Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley, Rajnath Singh and Narendra Modi, party insiders say. This could also spark power struggle in the party.

Rajnath Singh is the party president whose tenure ends this year-end and he will be under tremendous pressure to make way for others. For one, under Singh's leadership, BJP has fared poorly in the elections particularly in his home state of Uttar Pradesh where the party finished fourth behind Congress, BSP and Samajwadi Party.

Singh is also not in good

terms with some other senior leaders of the party and is reportedly busy undercutting his potential rivals within the party. Singh was involved in an open feud with party general secretary Arun Jaitley over the composition of candidate selection committee in the run up to this year's election. Jaitley even stayed away from the committee meetings for a few days before a shaky truce was brought about.

The challenge for BJP is to ensure a smooth transition to its second-rank leaders to come to the top and make the party a credible opposition having the potential of making it to the power.

The names doing the rounds in party circles to succeed Advani as leader of the opposition are those of Jaswant Singh, who is in the same post in the Rajya Sabha, Murli Manohar Joshi, former BJP president, Rajnath Singh and Sushma Swaraj.

Pakistan to expand its 'war on terror' into Qaeda's stronghold

ANI, London

After announcing an 'all out war' against the Taliban and other extremists in the Swat Valley, and claiming to have sanitised scores of militants in the region, Pakistan is planning to extend its war to the lawless bastion of al-Qaeda where Osama bin Laden is supposedly hiding.

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has said that the Swat offensive would be extended to Waziristan, and areas close to the tribal regions along the Afghanistan border.

"We're going to go into Waziristan, all these regions, with army operations. Swat is just the start. It's a larger war to fight," The Times Online quoted Zardari, as saying.

Admitting that Pakistan was going through its worst crises since its inception, Zardari said the country needs massive support from the international community.

"Pakistan would need billions of pounds in military assistance and aid for up to 1.7 million refugees, the biggest movement of people since the country's split from India in 1947," he said.

Referring to the military assistance of one billion dollars, which Pakistan is receiving at

present, Zardari said the country needed much more financial and humanitarian support.

"We need to develop our capability and we need much more support. We need much, much more than the 1 billion dollars military aid we've been getting, which is nothing. We've got 150,000 troops in the tribal areas just the movement of that number would cost 1 billion dollars."

The Pakistani army is planning to break into Waziristan and Darra Adam Khel region.

Waziristan is the headquarters of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan which is led by Baitullah Mehsud.

Zardari also highlighted the need to relocate the thousands of displaced people in order to build trust among them.

"If we don't they will turn against the government and we will lose the impetus we've managed to create in the country against the Taliban," he added.

The Pakistani army has claimed to have killed more than 750 militants in the last two weeks when the operation was started. However, it has not been able to back its claims with any substantial proof.



Pakistani army troops patrol streets as they pass internally displaced civilians who has fled military operations against Taliban militants in troubled Swat valley and Buner, near a makeshift camp in Mardan yesterday.

US military aid to Pakistan linked to AQ Khan 'interrogation'

ANI, Washington

While Pakistan is eagerly waiting for the US Congress to approve the 1.9 billion dollars aid bill for it, a pending bill before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, if approved, can choke the US military assistance to Pakistan.

The bill, marked-HR 1463- has been pending in the House of Representatives since March after it was introduced, and has now been passed on to the Committee on Foreign Affairs for further action.

The bill, if adopted, will require Pakistan to produce the disgraced nuclear scientist Dr AQ Khan before American interrogators to qualify for the US military aid.

The bill under its section one titled 'Findings', mentions Dr Khan as the leader of a gang of nuclear proliferators who supplied nuclear technology to countries, which posed a threat to the United States, The Dawn reports.

This means that the bill if passed by the committee

would certainly create more problems for Pakistan.

The bill was moved by Congresswomen Jane Harman, and Ellen O Tauscher, and Congressmen Edward R. Royce and Gerald E Connolly.

"One of the most important challenges confronting the intelligence community is learning the nature of and damage done by the worldwide network in nuclear centrifuge technology, bomb components and training run for almost two decades by AQ Khan," Congresswoman Harman had said at the time of tabling the bill in the house.

The 72-year-old Khan was under house arrest in Islamabad since February 2004, when he confessed on television to sending nuclear secrets to Iran, Libya and North Korea, although he later retracted his remarks.

However, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) had dismissed all the charges levied against him in February this year.