

India: Do BJP's latest victories suggest an emerging new social coalition?

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With its impressive performance in the Maharashtra and Haryana Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party has clearly reconfirmed its status, established by the Lok Sabha elections, as the principal pole or central point of reference in Indian politics. Behind its latest success, and not least its marginalisation of established regional parties in the two states, lie medium- and long-term factors which are likely to influence Indian politics for some time to come.

We are likely to see an even more assertive, masculine BJP under an absolutist leadership which is no longer bound by internal constraints, leave alone external ones, in pursuing its old trade-mark Hindutva agendas, including a Ram temple at Ayodhya (of which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has reminded it), as well as the new "love jihad" campaign, which recently yielded it rich dividends.

The BJP won an outright majority in Haryana, with a 33 percent vote-share, despite a majority of the Jats voting against it, and its erstwhile ally Akali Dal deserting it. This is itself remarkable. But of even greater national consequence is the BJP's 122/288 seat victory in Maharashtra, India's most-industrialised and second most-populous state, and long a Congress bastion. This is the first time ever that a non-Congress party has crossed the 100-seat mark in Maharashtra.

True, the BJP's vote-share in Maharashtra is just under 28 percent, and its best-projected leader Devendra Fadnavis polled slightly lower approval for Chief Ministership than the Shiv Sena's Uddhav Thackeray. But the BJP risked going solo despite the assured victory of its 25-year-old alliance with the Sena, which had led in 244 of 288 Assembly segments in the Lok Sabha elections.

The risk paid off. The result not only changed the relationship of political forces at the state level, and together with the Haryana outcome, helped the BJP overcome the big setbacks it suffered in the recent Assembly byelections. More crucially, it established the BJP's national pre-eminence.

Three sets of factors help explain the BJP's performance, each more important than so-called "Modi magic" or hangover of the "Modi effect" from the Lok Sabha polls. These are: state-level anti-incumbency, especially in Maharashtra; the BJP's success in creating the elements of a new social coalition or bloc across different caste-community layers; and the sheer force of the party's surcharged campaign which overwhelmed its opponents' lifeless, timid, often defeatist, canvassing.

According to a post-election survey by CSDS-Lokniti, the Congress-National Congress Party (NCP) coalition was widely seen as corrupt and ineffective. For every voter who was "fully satisfied" with its performance (13 percent), at least two (28 percent) were "fully dissatisfied". More than five times more respondents (36 percent) thought the government "very corrupt" than those (7 percent) who thought it "not all that corrupt". In Haryana, 75 percent of those who were aware of the land controversy involving Robert Vadra thought the government was suppressing the facts. The BJP in both states succeeded in winning support from what might be called a "coalition of the extremes":

the upper castes, especially Brahmins, on the one hand, and the Other Backward Classes, and to an extent, Dalits and Adivasis, on the other. It split the hitherto dominant Marathas, who form one-third of the population.

Thus, in Maharashtra, a majority (52 percent) of the upper castes voted for the BJP, as against 16 percent for the Congress, and even less for the others. The BJP also won the highest proportion (38 percent) of the OBC vote—more than twice the Shiv Sena's 16 percent, the next highest. It also won one-third of the Adivasi vote, followed by the NCP's 16 percent. But it got only 13 percent of the Muslim vote, compared to the 53 percent that went to the Congress. (CSDS-Lokniti figures.)

Add to this the higher proportion of the votes the BJP got from the rich (35 percent) than from other income groups, in contrast to the Congress; and you see a much less inclusive variant, of the original winning Congress coalition of the 1950s-1960s, based on the upper castes-upper classes—"core minorities" (Muslims-Dalits-Adivasis). This new coalition or bloc, with a strong Hindutva consolidation based on communal violence, won the BJP the Lok Sabha elections in the North.

In Haryana too, similar factors were at play, with upper-caste and educated groups, especially urban ones, strongly favouring the BJP, and Dalits and OBCs too backing it under the influence of the Dera Sacha Sauda cult and khap panchayats.

Yet another factor was Haryana's intense social conservatism. Respectively 88 and 84 percent of CSDS respondents oppose marriage within the same gotra and village; 51 percent support khap panchayats (only 22 percent oppose them), and 70 percent object to women wearing jeans. Evidently, the BJP plays along with, and gains from, this reactionary conservatism.

The BJP is likely to attempt to turn such coalition-building, combined with tapping social reaction, into a national election strategy, especially if it can attract OBC and Dalit youth with the promise of "development" after the "Gujarat model", itself an illusion.

This model isn't about development, but unadulterated GDP growth—in which too Gujarat has been surpassed by many other states. It doesn't lead to modernisation, or human capacity enhancement through healthcare, education and other amenities of a civilised life, let alone equity. It basically translates into employment for an aspirational subaltern class or group which has invested all its family savings in low- or mediocre-quality education without much hope of landing a job.

Regrettably, no party, including the BJP, has half-way coherent policies that can generate jobs or gainful self-employment for these restive subaltern layers. The BJP will soon let them down. Its economic policies can at best deliver sweetheart deals, tax-breaks and super-profits to corporations, without creating jobs or even raising wage rates (in which Gujarat is a national laggard). This has distressing, indeed dangerous, implications for Indian society.

Not to be underrated is the Modi-Amit Shah leadership's ability to mobilise a high-powered election campaign, financed by Big Business and run by RSS foot-soldiers. Under its impact, an astounding 40 percent-plus of voters deciding to choose the BJP close to election day or during the canvassing period—a record unmatched by any party regardless of political merit.

The Maharashtra-Haryana results will further feed the hubris of the Hindutva forces, and increase insecurity among the minorities. Worrisome signs have already appeared through the debut of the Hyderabad-based Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen in Maharashtra, where it won two seats and became the runner-up in three others. This reaction to rabid Hindu-communalism spells further social-political marginalisation and ghettoisation of Muslims who already feel beleaguered—an ominous development.

The BJP's victory run has aggravated the Congress's political paralysis. The Congress's response to the latest results has been supine when not downright disingenuous and based on trading charges. It must accept that the Sonia-Rahul leadership—which temporarily stemmed its post-1984 long-term decline—has failed; the time has come to move on. But it lacks the elementary courage to do so—and its dynastic leadership the decency to make way for others.

It's hard to see how the Congress can recover unless it gathers that courage and reinvents itself through a bold, imaginative, frankly Left-of-Centre programme without ifs and buts, which reconnects it to the plebeian masses. Or else, it will go into the dustbin of history.

A strong presence of the Left parties, which could have helped shift the centre of gravity of Indian politics in a pro-people/poor direction, will be sorely missed. Alas, these parties are themselves in a grave crisis, which they barely diagnose, leave alone resolve.

What does the BJP's growing dominance mean for the regional parties? Are they destined to go the way of the Shiv Sena or Om Prakash Chautala's Indian National Lok Dal? The Sena has been vulnerable in recent years. Its long-term decline was masked to some extent by its electoral gains from allying with the BJP, but got accelerated by the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena split and Bal Thackeray's death. To begin with, the BJP piggybacked the Sena; but the equation got reversed. The INLD, also dynastic, and Jat-based, has been out of power for 10 years and is set to decline further.

However, this doesn't quite apply to regional parties embedded in two-party systems, like Telugu Desam, Telangana Rashtra Samiti, AIDMK-DMK or Biju Janata Dal. But the Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal (United), Rashtriya Janata Dal, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, and especially the Bahujan Samaj Party, will face a tough challenge from the BJP. As will the regional units of the Congress in the states where it's in power.

Despite similarities in deviousness, venality and corruption, the BJP isn't turning into another Congress. But whether a "BJP system" of politics evolves as a rival to the "Congress system" that Rajni Kothari once famously described, remains an open question. What's beyond doubt is that India is in for social turmoil and serious political trouble.

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<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/10/26/An-Emerging-New-Social-Coalition%3A-The-BJP%E2%80%99s-latest-victories>