

India - Verdict 2009: Lessons for the Left

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The results of 2009 elections can be described as a string of surprises not only for many well-entrenched parties and seasoned politicians but also for a host of commonsensical notions about contemporary Indian political reality. Of late, it became rather customary to look at elections in India through the prism of coalition politics, caste equations and regional diversities. Verdict 2009 has given a serious jolt to this facile view and reasserted the underlying structural dynamics of Indian politics. Conventional wisdom would not have given the Congress anything more than 150 seats, but the fact that the Congress managed to notch up as many as 206 seats from across the country clearly reveal a national verdict which cannot be reduced to a mere sum total of the poll outcomes in different states and regions.

The NDA had long been expecting the 2009 elections to go its way and LK Advani had been duly designated its Prime Ministerial candidate. 'Iron Man' Advani saw Manmohan Singh as the weakest link of the Congress chain and hoped the chain would snap if only he could make it a direct clash between the UPA's 'weakest' and the NDA's 'strongest'! He tried to fight and win the elections in true US Presidential style, but even before his campaign could take off he found himself overshadowed by two more self-appointed PMs-in-waiting, the redoubtable Narendra 'Nano' Modi and one Varun 'venom' Gandhi!

The results only reveal how miserably the NDA lost the plot in its own strongholds. Of all the NDA-ruled states, only Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Bihar went the NDA way while in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, the Congress staked almost equal claims defying its obvious organisational weaknesses. In Bihar, Nitish Kumar's spectacular showing cannot really be treated as a typical NDA victory - it had more to do with the disintegration of the UPA and the continuing public anger in Bihar against the RJD-LJP brand of politics. Quite understandably, the NDA emerged as the overwhelming beneficiary of this public anger against the RJD's legacy of chaos and misrule.

While the NDA remained confined to its own pockets, the 'Third Front' was humbled in its own strongholds. In West Bengal, the CPI(M) got its worst drubbing in three decades with its own tally getting reduced to only 9. The overall Left Front tally came down from the high point of 60-plus in the 14th Lok Sabha to mere 24. The grand alliances forged in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh failed to click, and 'Mission Mayawati' failed to fire the imagination of the BSP's own base in Uttar Pradesh. Forged in a hurry, the Third Front had neither cohesion nor credibility; it thrived primarily on the exuberance of electoral expectation regarding the fortunes of regional alliances.

The Congress on the other hand sensed the national mood that looked for some order and stability in an overwhelming situation of crisis and uncertainty. In the absence of any reliable cohesive alternative, large parts of India once again turned to the grand old party now led by the fourth generation of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Various local factors only facilitated the crystallisation of this national mood, and the Congress strategy was in tune with this developing sentiment. The Congress decision to shelve the UPA during the elections and try the party's own luck in the two most crucial Hindi belt states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar proved to be a tactical masterstroke paving the way for a Congress revival. In UP, the Congress won 20 seats, regaining its traditional base amongst upper caste gentry, minorities and a section of dalits.

What lessons do the results hold for the future of the people's movement and Left and democratic

politics in India?

The Congress revival is being portrayed by various neo-liberal commentators as well as the Congress establishment as a popular endorsement of its pro-corporate economic agenda and pro-US foreign policy framework. In the same breath the Congress is also attributing its victory to its 'pro-poor' policies. There is a fundamental paradox in such self-serving explanations: the verdict cannot be an endorsement of policies claiming to address the crisis of unemployment, farmers' suicides etc as well as an endorsement of the neo-liberal policies causing the very same crisis! The country is reeling under a massive economic disaster sponsored by the neo-liberal economic offensive of indiscriminate liberalisation and globalisation and steady withdrawal of the state from productive investment and welfare-oriented public expenditure, and there can be no question of the people endorsing policies that spelled such disasters.

It is also equally clear that the country is not enamoured of the much-touted strategic spin-offs of a pro-US foreign policy when the entire neighbourhood is trapped in tremendous social upheaval and political turbulence and India's growing identification with the US only renders it more vulnerable on every count. Signs of growing US involvement in India's domestic affairs have also been quite visible with US officials making it of late a habit to call on leaders of different parties.

By all accounts, a more confident Congress-led government will now tend to pursue the pro-corporate pro-imperialist policies, as well as the repressive policies of draconian laws and human rights violations in the name of countering terror, with greater speed and aggression while cleverly deceiving the people with the rhetoric of secularism, empowerment and 'inclusive' growth. Manmohan Singh has announced a "100-day" economic recovery plan to overcome recession and on May 18 Sensex soared 2111 points, the highest single day increase in any share index in the world, to celebrate the UPA's victory. But such exuberance and tall claims are unlikely to lead to any economic miracle, and against the backdrop of a deepening recession, livelihood issues are bound to assume explosive proportions in many sectors. Further, while the BJP's communal agenda has been defeated, the aspirations of minorities and secular forces for justice against communal violence remains - a task that the Congress has historically betrayed. Instead of getting taken in by the deceptive discourse of the emerging 'new generation' Congress, the forces and friends of people's struggles must now intensify public debate over the real state of affairs on different fronts and raise the level of popular mobilisation and resistance to press for a real change in the policies and priorities of the government.

Contrary to dominant media explanations, the rout suffered by the CPI(M) cannot be attributed to its belated oppositional stance vis-a-vis the UPA's pro-US policies. The epicentre of the anti-CPI(M) political earthquake lies squarely in the Singur-Nandigram seismic zone where the CPI(M) has been punished for its arrogant and coercive attitude to the peasantry and the intelligentsia, for its ruthless attempt to implement the same economic policies that it claims to have been opposing all along. It is ironical that while the architect of the SEZ policy succeeded in masking its true face behind legislations like NREGA and forest land rights, the CPI(M) was seen as the brutal face of corporate land-grab offensive. Even when the CPI(M) quite correctly questioned and opposed the Indo-US strategic partnership and nuke deal, the point was allowed to get diluted and lost in the party's desperate drive to somehow prop up a Third Front" devoid of any kind of pro-people, anti-imperialist commitment.

The results have also exposed the limits of the politics of social engineering and alliance arithmetic. Mayawati's 'sarvajanwad' and Lalu Prasad's 'Mandal magic' are clearly on the wane. Reports from UP indicate that while Mayawati failed to sustain her newly discovered upper caste base, cracks have also started surfacing in her core support base among dalits. Down south, the TDP-TRS kind of opportunist bonhomie and the desperate attempt of the PMK-MDMK-AIADMK alliance to make political capital of the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils have also been squarely rebuffed by the people.

The CPI(M) has only discredited itself by glorifying and peddling this opportunism in the name of 'Third Front' politics.

The Left clearly has a lesson to learn from the Congress. The lesson is certainly not to seek signs of anti-imperialism or pro-people concern or commitment in the emerging leadership of the Congress. If the Congress has retrained its focus on its own revival overcoming the 'BJP threat', 'Mandal magic' and 'coalition politics', the Left must also rebuild and reposition itself as the core of the people's movement for survival, justice and democracy and for the nation's quest for a dignified future beyond the strategic umbrella of the US. A renewal of the communist identity as the most sincere, vibrant and fighting platform of people's politics is the need of the hour.

The reverses suffered by the Left in general, and the admittedly poor showing of the CPI(ML) in Bihar, are bound to generate vibes of demoralisation and despondency across different sections of the Left. The noise emanating from dominant quarters of West Bengal CPI(M) against the 'dogmatism' and 'adventurism' of the party's central leadership seeks to attribute the CPI(M)'s electoral rout to its belated act of withdrawal of support to the Congress. This is nothing but an exercise in barking up the wrong tree. If the CPI(M) had not withdrawn support, the Congress would have anyway subjugated the Left in national politics, while the TMC would have still monopolised the public anger in West Bengal. Not 'dogmatism' or 'adventurism', the greatest internal enemy of the Left at this juncture is opportunism and the intoxication of power. Any meaningful introspection must be aimed at identifying and eradicating the real malady and rejuvenating the Left movement in closer integration with the people and their real needs and aspirations.

By rejecting the NDA and rebuffing the cobweb of opportunist alliances and narrow identity politics, the 2009 verdict has opened up new possibilities for the entire Left and democratic camp to assert as a fighting opposition in the national political arena. Revolutionary communists must take adequate note of the prospects and challenges unleashed by the verdict and rise wholeheartedly to the occasion.

P.S.

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