

Election in India : Reading the verdict

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The Indian electorate has delivered its judgment on parties - the BJP has been punished for its divisiveness, the Congress rewarded for inclusiveness, and the Left told it must correct course, writes Praful Bidwai.

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THE electorate has delivered a complex, many-layered, discriminating judgment on parties and programmes. To sum up its message, the Congress has been rewarded with an impressive victory on a left-of-centre platform of inclusion ; the Bharatiya Janata Party has been handed a humiliating defeat for its sectarian and communal politics ; narrow caste-based identity politics is running out of steam in the Hindi heartland ; and the Left parties have suffered a major setback, with their Lok Sabha tally at its lowest-ever level.

The Congress' rejuvenation

The Congress' rejuvenation is a major development. The party has revived its organisation, especially in Uttar Pradesh, infused young blood into its leadership after more than two decades, and embraced an agenda that emphasises pluralism, inclusion and public action for a better deal for the underprivileged who are further marginalised by market-driven growth processes. This has brought it handsome dividends in the shape of 60 more seats, a decisive 90-seat and 10 percentage-point lead over the BJP, and a big political momentum.

The Congress' projection of a progressive pro-poor image through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), the Rs.70,000-crore farm loan-waiver, and the Forest Rights Act, energised many underprivileged people into voting for it. This pushed its tally beyond the 200-seat mark for the first time since 1991. The Congress' most notable success was in U.P., where it became the second-largest party. But no less significant was its showing on its own, or jointly with allies, in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. The Congress maintained or bettered its performance in most major States, barring Gujarat and Karnataka.

This puts the Congress in a different league from the BJP. It overcame its long decline in 2002-04 and is now ascendant under a dynamic leadership. The momentum is likely to last fairly long. But, it is legitimate to worry about the Congress on three counts. First, it is divided over interpreting its mandate. While Rahul Gandhi sees it as a vote for redistributive pro-poor policies, and believes the

Congress should give an even higher priority to social sector programmes, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his first speech to the party's newly elected Members of Parliament emphasised growth, without which no inclusion is possible. This fails to make a break with "GDPism".

Second, the danger of slippage into a conservative or complacent position is greater today because Congress is no longer constrained, as it was until last July, by the Left or the National Common Minimum Programme. The media are brazenly pressurising Congress leaders to use the "new freedom from the Left" to push through neoliberal measures such as disinvestment of public sector banks (one of India's greatest success stories in the global context, attributable to their public ownership), and raising foreign investment caps on pension funds, insurance and retail trade. The new Cabinet's composition does not inspire the hope that the Congress will firmly reject such ill-conceived ideas.

Third, Rahul Gandhi's new profile and his undeniable success as a campaigner – 75 of the 100 candidates he canvassed for won – is likely to strengthen the "dynasty factor" in Congress politics and encourage many leaders to think that a Nehru-Gandhi family figure is a substitute for policy, strategy, organisation-building and serious campaigning. This could stifle debate. The best assurance against such slippage is the creation of an unabashedly Left-leaning pressure group within the Congress, like the Young Turks of the 1960s, and the Nehru Forum of the 1970s, which articulates strong redistributive policies, including lower subsidies for and higher taxes on the rich, large-scale investment in food security, and access for the poor to health care, education and social security, and measures to reduce unhealthy regional and inter-sectoral disparities.

This ginger group should demand an incomes policy, which attempts to achieve a balance between minimum wages and a ceiling on corporate remuneration, which has acquired obscene dimensions. The Congress must realise and acknowledge that in this overwhelmingly poor unequal society, the "natural" centre of gravity of politics lies on the Left.

The election's biggest loser is the BJP, which has suffered a 3.4 percentage-point fall in its national vote-share, bringing its decline from the peak of 1998 to a substantial 7 percentage points. Apart from confirming the direction of the BJP's evolution, the results show its vote has fallen in every State barring Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh. Even in the strongholds of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, it lost 1 to 5 percentage points. In Uttaranchal, where it rules, it has lost over seven points.

BJP's multiple crises

The dimension of qualitative decline is even more important. The BJP faces an ideological crisis, a crisis of mobilisation strategy, a crisis in its relations with the rest of the Sangh Parivar, and a leadership crisis. It defines itself schizophrenically vis-a-vis Hindutva. Its ideological moorings lie in Hindu supremacism. But this now yields diminishing returns. Pushing Hindutva can boomerang, as happened with the backlash in western U.P. to Varun Gandhi's hate-based campaign in Pilibhit. Many BJP leaders feel the party has no future unless it abandons Hindutva and embraces moderation.

The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh would not let that happen. The latest issue of *Organiser* is clear : "There is no evidence to show that the ideology of the party has failed ... [or] that the Modi campaign or the Varun Gandhi speech damaged its prospects ... The BJP has to expand its catchment area and reaffirm its ideological purity." By continuing with its present ideological stance, the BJP risks becoming a clone of the Jan Sangh of the 1960s, which never crossed 35 seats.

The BJP has no political mobilisation strategy remotely comparable to the 1980s or the 1990s, when the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, the upper-caste anti-Mandal sentiment and the Congress' steep decline allowed it to attract numerous strata outside the Jan Sangh's base and ally with parties it shared nothing with. The BJP's strident Hindu nationalism struck a chord with a rising but insecure middle class looking for recognition through aggressive, negative forms of self-assertion.

That correspondence no longer exists. The Mandir issue has lost its appeal. The anti-Mandal sentiment has subsided. And the middle class is no longer as insecure. It has lost some of its sense of inferiority as it has burgeoned. The BJP's ultra-nationalism does not appeal any more than does its anti-terrorist rhetoric.

BJP-RSS relations have changed and new strains have appeared between the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, and so on. The RSS no longer contributes to the BJP's ideological cohesion, organisational discipline or growth in the old way. For instance, it cannot mediate credibly between the BJP and the VHP. Yet, the BJP cannot break the RSS shackles.

The BJP's leadership crisis is grim. It has failed to craft a smooth transition from Vajpayee-Advani leadership to the next generation. Narendra Modi failed as a campaigner in this election and may not retain the big head-start he had. The second-generation leaders are about 60 years old and do not connect with the aspirational youth in the way the Congress' younger leadership does. Rivalry within the BJP can take on internecine dimensions. Unless it resolves these multiple crises, the BJP could shrink further and go into long-term, possibly irreversible, decline.

Caste-based identity politics without substantive agendas of change, responsible governance and public service delivery also seems to be reaching a dead-end. The losses sustained by the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Party are eloquent. Although Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has won one additional seat, its vote share in U.P. has dropped by a significant 6 percentage points over the 2007 Assembly elections.

The BSP's Dalit-upper caste coalition has been greatly weakened. Only four of the BSP's 20 Brahmin candidates won. And it won just two of the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes – a historic low. A dramatic defeat was in Barabanki, where former Mayawati-confidant P.L. Punia, who belongs to the Jatav caste – which dominates the BSP's base – won on a Congress ticket against Mayawati's Pasi candidate. Mayawati has got her priorities wrong. She is spending Rs.6,000 crore-plus on memorials and statues, but has taken no pro-Dalit measures, including land reforms, public services, and jobs. To keep the savarnas happy, she has refused to entertain Dalit complaints under the Prevention of Atrocities Act.

Bihar's Nitish Kumar too is a product and practitioner of identity politics. But he has adopted an inclusive agenda in which he gives space to Extremely Backward Classes, Maha-Dalits and poorer Muslims, secured compensation for the Bhagalpur riot victims, and tried to reform primary education. This has produced unprecedented electoral gains.

Left's loss

Last, but not least, the Left parties have suffered a massive loss. Their combined Lok Sabha tally has fallen by 61 per cent to 24, the lowest since Independence. (It was 16 for the undivided Communist Party of India in 1952, and a total of 20, including the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Forward Bloc, but on a lower Lok Sabha strength. This corresponds to 26 seats today. If the Socialist Left is included, the Left's 1952 tally would be 32 seats.)

This is a setback to democracy itself. The Left's role is so critical to the health of India's democracy that we would need to invent the Left if it did not exist. The Left's reduced presence will impoverish the quality of Parliamentary debate, and weaken progressive agendas. The Left can bounce back only if it frankly admits to its blunders.

The biggest loser among all parties in the election was the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which won only four seats in Kerala (12 in 2004), and nine in West Bengal (26). Its national-level vote has fallen marginally from 5.66 to 5.33 per cent despite contesting 13 more seats (69 in 2004). But the fall is much higher in its bastions : one percentage point in Kerala, 5.5 in West Bengal and 7.1 in Tripura. The CPI is down from 10 seats to just four seats from 10.

Three factors explain the Left's steep decline : its strategy to float the Third Front, a "cut-and-paste" combine, and project it as an alternative to the Congress and the BJP ; a degree of minority alienation from the Left, especially in West Bengal ; and the Left's industrialisation and land acquisition politics, which antagonised its supporters among the rural poor, coupled with its indifferent human development record, most notably in West Bengal.

The Third Front, the Left now admits, was not credible or viable. For the most part, it consisted of parties that (barring the Left) were sullied by an alliance with the BJP, and most of which pursued bad policies when in power. Instead of emerging as a strong force, the Third Front only bagged 60-plus seats. Worse, two Third Front allies, the BSP and the Janata Dal (Secular), instantly supported the Congress alliance, and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi defected to the National Democratic Alliance even before the results were declared. The Left suffered politically by sponsoring the Third Front, and morally by propping up leaders such as Mayawati, Jayalalithaa and H.D. Deve Gowda.

The Left's association with Abdul Nasser Madhani's People's Democratic Party in Kerala cost it two seats directly, and probably many more indirectly through a "backlash", as pro-BJP votes were transferred to the Congress-led alliance. In West Bengal, the Left Front's handling of the Rizwanur case and its poor record on recruitment of Muslims in government jobs, as revealed in the Sachar report, had an adverse impact especially in the eastern half of the State.

However, it is probably the stigma of Nandigram and Singur that caused the greatest damage, including a sharp fall in the Front's vote and a 25-to-15 lead for the Congress-Trinamool combine. This is related not just to state coercion against land-related protests, but to the Left Front's strategy of industrialisation based on private capital, with huge subsidies (estimated in the case of the Nano plant at about half of the project cost).

The Left Front's West Bengal record on health and education is equally unflattering. As the official Human Development Report (2004) admits, public spending on and access to health services have stagnated. Some indicators - immunisation, antenatal care, nutrition among women, and number of doctors and hospital beds per lakh people - are below the national average. The State has not opened a single new primary health centre in a decade.

The rate of decline in rural poverty has halved since 1994. West Bengal has the lowest rate of generating work under the NREGS. Worse, according to National Sample Survey (61st Round), "the percentage of rural households not getting enough food every day in some months of the year" is highest in West Bengal (10.6 per cent), worse than in Orissa (4.8 per cent). An alarming indicator is school dropouts in the 6-14 age group. At 9.61 lakh in West Bengal, this is even higher than Bihar's 6.96 lakh. Of India's 24 districts, which have more than 50,000 out-of-school children, nine are in West Bengal.

After Operation Barga, the State has not done enough for the poor. As the ration food riots of 2007

showed, its public distribution system is in dire need of reform. The vote for the Congress-Trinamool was largely a protest vote against the Left Front.

It is imperative that the Left undertakes serious, brutally honest introspection, and radically revises its policy approaches, including a mechanical equation between progress and industrialisation through the expropriation of people's resources. Unless the Left jettisons pro-private capital policies, adopts approaches based on the people's needs and endowments, and improves public services provision and human development indices, it could face further erosion of plebeian support and go into even steeper decline.

This means debating issues candidly, to the bare bones. As a political current that respects reason and traces its lineage to the enlightenment, the Left must not shy away from publicly acknowledging its errors, its misjudgments and flaws, and demonstrably correcting course. The costs of a failure to do so are too grim even to contemplate.

P.-S.

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