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Congress Comeback in the Indian Elections of 2009

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The parliamentary elections held in four phases from April to May 2009 sprung a surprise on everybody concerned. Nobody had been able to predict the triumphant comeback of the Congress party. A neck-to-neck race with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was expected, and as voters often turn against the incumbent, a swing toward the BJP was on the cards. Instead Congress topped its performance of 2004 and the BJP suffered a humiliating defeat. Ever since Rajiv Gandhi's defeat in 1989, Congress had been in the doldrums. The comeback seemed to foreshadow a revival of the „Congress System“ which had prevailed earlier.

The Indian National Congress had spearheaded the freedom movement and then turned into a state supporting and state supported party which legitimized its rule by free elections. In these elections, the Congress candidates usually triumphed because they benefited from triangular contests in which rivalling opposition parties helped them to win. In those days Congress used to obtain about 45 per cent of the national vote but about two thirds of the parliamentary seats. Thus the prevailing majority election system did not produce a two-party system of the British type. Moreover, state and central elections were held simultaneously prior to 1971 and the candidates for the state assemblies which had smaller constituencies and were closer to the people carried the candidate for the central parliament along. An added feature of the early Congress System was the pattern of leadership. Most of the central ministers as well as the state chief ministers were „prison graduates“ who had participated in the freedom movement. Jawaharlal Nehru who was Prime Minister until his death in 1964 could get along very well with powerful leaders in his cabinet and in the states. His successors failed in this respect, the more so as the generation of the „prison graduates“ faded away.

1 Indira Gandhi and the Demise of the old Congress System

Nehru's immediate successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, died in 1966 and Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, was selected by the old guard of the Congress as a compromise candidate. She had to face an election within a year in which Congress

did not do very well. It barely maintained its hold on the centre and lost the control over several states. Indira Gandhi then jettisoned the old guard and converted the elections into a plebiscite endorsing her rule. While advancing the date of the central election by one year, she delinked it from the state assembly elections once and for all. She delivered a fatal blow to the old Congress System. But in 1971 she led the Congress to a resounding victory. Her triumph was shortlived. In 1975 she tried to rescue her position by imposing a national emergency, she also postponed the elections due in 1976. When elections were held in 1977, she was defeated by the united opposition which simulated a two party system by putting up only one common candidate against each Congress candidate. Deprived of the benefit of triangular contests, Congress lost. But the new government was unstable due to its internal contradictions. When new elections were held in 1980 Indira Gandhi staged an unexpected comeback. But her days were numbered. In 1984 she was murdered by her bodyguards. In contravention of parliamentary conventions, President Zail Singh immediately installed her son Rajiv as new prime minister. Rajiv announced new elections in order to legitimize his rule and he was rewarded with a bonus of sympathy. The election results seemed to reflect the pattern of the old Congress system once more. But this was the last time that this happened.

Rajiv Gandhi had not wished to capture power, it was thrust upon him. He tried his best to govern well, but he was not successful. He was defeated in 1989. However, Congress had remained the strongest party and could have led a coalition. But since the election campaign was aimed at getting rid of Rajiv, there were no partners for a Congress-led coalition. India then suffered from a succession of unstable minority governments.

In 1991 Rajiv Gandhi was murdered by Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka when he was touring Tamilnadu during the election campaign. Again, this gave an election bonus to his party, but nevertheless Congress did not win enough seats and had to form another minority government, headed by the Congress veteran, P. V. Narasimha Rao, who appointed Dr. Manmohan Singh as his finance minister and backed him in conducting major economic reforms. After others had joined the government in mid-term it was no longer a minority government. Nevertheless, it lost the elections of 1996. Once more, Congress remained the strongest party but did not try to form a coalition.

2 The Era of Coalitions Governments

Since Congress did not take the initiative in forming a coalition, the new era of coalition governments was inaugurated by the BJP. Congress was afraid of losing its centrist position by teaming up with coalition partners, but the BJP being a right-wing party had no centrist position to lose and eagerly turned to the task of coalition-building. However, it did not yet find enough partners in 1996. Finally a National Front consisting of various state parties formed a government which was

supported by Congress „from the outside“. This support was withdrawn in 1998 when the Congress leadership hoped to be able to win an election. In this it was disappointed and now the BJP succeeded in forming a coalition government with A. B. Vajpayee as Prime Minister. This coalition was called National Democratic Alliance (NDA). It was toppled by Jayalalitha, leader of the All-India Anna Dravida Kazhagam (AIADMK), in April 1999. She had joined the NDA after protracted negotiations. Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party, could perhaps have succeeded in attracting Jayalalitha to a Congress-led coalition. But she did not really try to do this. Vajpayee continued as officiating prime minister and won the elections of November 1999. Congress reached its nadir in this election with only 112 seats. It had been weakened by a split. Some Congress members who did not want to see Sonia Gandhi, an Italian by birth, as prime minister, had left the party and established the Nationalist Congress Party in May 1999.

Vajpayee was in a very comfortable position now and could govern India for a full legislative term which ended in 2004. This term of office was marred by a pogrom in Gujarat in which about 2000 Muslims were killed with the connivance of the BJP-Chief Minister of the state, Narendra Modi. Vajpayee hesitated to take Modi to task, but after the defeat of the BJP in the elections of 2004 he admitted that the pogrom had cast a shadow over them. However, the BJP had been also too confident of its economic success which had not benefited the poor. Congress had specifically addressed the rural poor in its election campaign. It had overcome its anti-coalition bias and now emulated the BJP in forging electoral alliances. The BJP made much of the fact that Sonia Gandhi, the Congress President, might become prime minister and India would then be ruled by a foreigner. Most voters were obviously not alarmed by this and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won the elections inspite of this propaganda.

The result was by no means due to a „landslide“. BJP and Congress got 138 and 145 seats respectively. Losses and gains of the allies of the two national parties were more important. The BJP-allies captured only 48 seats and with a total of 186 seats, the NDA was in a very weak position. The Congress-allies had won 74 seats. But even with those allies, UPA controlled only 219 parliamentary seats and had to form a minority government „tolerated“ by the two Communist parties which had done very well in the elections. Sonia Gandhi could have become Prime Minister now, but she wisely asked Dr. Manmohan Singh to shoulder the burden of this office. Having no political clout of his own, he would have to rely on her support. As architect of the reforms of 1991, he could be expected to implement further reforms and to ensure economic growth. The only drawback was that the overdue privatization of public sector firms would be vetoed by the Communists and Manmohan Singh had to be very patient with those people. Their support was assured to some extent by their fear of a BJP-return to power, but this did not mean that their „tolerance“ could be taken for granted regardless of what was at stake. Legislation benefiting the poor would certainly find favour with them. This was

particularly true of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) of 2005 which guaranteed employment for 100 days at a wage of 60 Rupees per day to anybody who would apply for it. The expenditure would amount to about 1 per cent of GDP. Manmohan Singh faced the criticism of his finance ministry for this generous provision of funds for the poor, but NREGA was passed nevertheless. It seems to have contributed to the recent success of the government in the election.

The Communists withdrew their support of the government in 2008 over the „nuclear deal“ because they resented India’s closer ties with the USA. Manmohan Singh staked his political survival on the conclusion of this deal, because it would ensure India’s access to nuclear technology which was essential for overcoming the bottleneck in India’s supply of energy. In the hour of need, the Samajwadi Party (SP) replaced the Communists in supporting the government. This party had a strong social base among the Other Backward Castes (OBC) of Uttar Pradesh. It was led by Mulayam Singh Yadav who had been chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. The SP had 36 seats in parliament, it was eager to improve its political position as it had fared badly in the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2007. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by Mayawati had obtained an absolute majority in this election. This party represented the Dalits (Untouchables) but had also struck a bargain with the higher castes which were opposed to the OBC. After her unexpected triumph, Mayawati now aspired to the prime ministership. If she could repeat her performance in the national elections, and other parties declined, she could hope to win allies and get to the top. This scared her SP-rivals who tried to curry favour with Congress.

3 The Elections of 2009

More than 700 mill. voters were entitled to vote and about 420 mill. actually participated in the elections of 2009. The Congress party alone bagged 206 seats whereas the BJP had to be satisfied with 116. These two national parties accounted for nearly half of the national vote. This share of the vote was about the same as in the previous election, but this time their share of the seats amounted to about 60 per cent. The representation of the smaller parties had been considerably reduced. The two Communist parties were badly affected by this trend. The CPM got only 14 seats and the CPI 4 as compared to 43 and 10 in 2004. The shrinking of the Communists was mainly due to the success of the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and of the Congress in Kerala. Congress won only half of its 206 seats in direct contests against the BJP and the other half by defeating the candidates of smaller parties. Seat sharing arrangements among electoral allies had proved to be difficult. Therefore, the Congress party had opted for going it alone in most places and had only coordinated its efforts with three major regional allies: the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and the Nationalist Congress Party which had a stronghold in Maharashtra. Going it alone elsewhere helped the Congress in resuming its old game of triangular contests. This was reflected by the

fact that it won almost 40 per cent of the seats while only getting about 30 per cent of the national vote.

In addition to UPA and NDA there was a Third Front composed of the Communists, the BSP and a few smaller parties, and a Fourth Front which included the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and the Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJSP). This Fourth Front was actually close to the UPA. Lalu Prasad Yadav (RJD) and Ram Vilas Paswan (LJSP) had been prominent ministers in the UPA-government and the outside support of the SP had rescued the UPA in 2008. Actually the members of the Fourth Front hoped to rejoin the UPA after the elections, driving a hard bargain for a good number of ministerial berths. But their bargaining power dwindled due to the election results. The RJD won only 4 seats, the LJSP none and the SP 23. Uttar Pradesh was a major battleground in these elections and the Congress did very well there, winning 22 seats. The main adversary of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh was the BSP whose candidates were defeated in 17 constituencies by Congress politicians, thus spoiling Mayawati's hopes of becoming prime minister. She had counted on winning more than half of the 80 seats of Uttar Pradesh, but got only 20. The Congress candidates had obviously benefited from triangular contests in Uttar Pradesh where SP and BSP were rival contenders.

Manmohan Singh was in a much stronger position now, but he still needed some „outside“ support. He did not have to make a special effort to get this support. The BSP and the SP vied with each other in joining the winner. Even before Manmohan Singh took his oath of office, Mayawati had sent a letter to the President of India indicating her unconditional support of the new government. Mulayam Singh Yadav did the same on behalf of the SP. In this way the UPA could count on 322 MPs, far surpassing the 273 which would have been required for an absolute majority in parliament. Since the SP and the BSP remain rivals, it is highly unlikely that they would jointly withdraw their support.

An analysis of the strongholds of the two national parties shows an interesting pattern. Congress established a solid hold on the North Indian Hindi heartland. In addition to the 22 seats in Uttar Pradesh it swept all the five seats of Uttarakhand and the nine seats of Delhi. It won eight seats in Haryana and 20 in Rajasthan. In Southern India it obtained 33 seats in Andhra Pradesh and 13 in Kerala. The BJP held sway in a broad belt from Gujarat (14 seats) via Madhya Pradesh (16) and Chattisgarh (10) to Bihar (12). It also had one Southern stronghold in Karnataka (19). The Lingayat community rated as OBC provided a strong support for the BJP in Karnataka. In Maharashtra two alliances were facing each other. Congress (16 seats) had a partner in the Nationalist Congress Party (7) whereas the BJP (8) was in league with the Shiv Sena (11).

The small parties which have their strongholds in one particular state only showed different patterns of success or decline. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam once

more dominated Tamilnadu and captured 18 seats, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh which had once been a powerful political force, lost doubly in 2009 when state assembly elections were held simultaneously with the national elections. Congress won the assembly elections and did very well in the national elections, leaving the TDP with only six parliamentary seats. The Biju Janata Dal, the state party of Orissa scored a big success. It had broken its alliance with the BJP shortly before the elections and bagged 14 seats whereas the BJP got none. The most surprising success story of a state party was that of the Trinamul (=grassroots) Congress in West Bengal. Its firebrand leader, Mamta Banerjee, forged an electoral alliance with the Congress party this time and bagged 19 seats. Congress won six seats and the CPM which had dominated West Bengal for more than three decades got only 10. Mamta now hopes to overthrow the Left Front in West Bengal at the next assembly elections.

Forming a Congress-led coalition government was easier this time, but it nevertheless required some bargaining with the three major allies. Finally the DMK and the Trinamul Congress settled for seven ministers each and the Nationalist Congress Party got a generous deal with three berths. However, Congress retained the lion's share of 59 of altogether 76 ministerial positions. There are 34 ministers of cabinet rank of whom nine were earlier chief ministers of different states. States in which Congress had lost its control were deliberately represented in the cabinet. Thus Karnataka contributed two of its earlier chief ministers to the cabinet, Several of the prominent earlier members of the UPA-government retained their positions. There were also some young recruits. The youngest minister of state is Agatha Sangma (NCP) of Meghalaya who is only 28 years old. The talented personnel of „Team Manmohan“ guarantees good chances for India's future development.

Conspicuous by his absence in this team is Rahul Gandhi. His mother Sonia was keen to see him in the cabinet and Manmohan Singh had announced even during the election campaign that he would be glad to have him in his cabinet. But Rahul has refused to take up this job now as he wants to concentrate on party work, particularly in Uttar Pradesh where assembly elections are due in 2012. Staying out of the cabinet at this stage was a wise decision, because ministers considering Rahul to be the future prime minister would have paid attention to him rather than to Manmohan Singh. If Rahul does well in strengthening the party organisation, he would become prime minister anyhow in due course.

Table: Seats won in the Parliamentary Elections of 2009 and 2004

<i>Parties</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2004</i>
United Progressive Alliance (UPA)	262	
Congress	206	145
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	18	16
National Congress Party (NCP)	9	9
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)	2	5
Trinamul Congress (TC)	19	2
Jammu & Kashmir National Front (NF)	3	
Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF)	1	
Kerala Congress (KC)	1	
Muslim League Kerala (MLK)	2	
All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen	1	
National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	158	
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	116	138
Janata Dal United (JDU)	20	8
Shiv Sena (SS)	11	12
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	4	8
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	1	2
Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD)	5	3
Nagaland People's Front (NPF)	1	
Third Front	76	
Communist Party of India (CPI)	4	10
Communist Party of India/Marxist (CPM)	16	43
Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)	2	3
All India Forward Bloc (FB)	2	3
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	21	19
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	9	
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	14	11
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	6	5
Telengana Rashtriya Samitihi (TRS)	2	5
Fourth Front	27	
Samajwadi Party (SP)	23	36
Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)	4	24
Other Parties and Independents	20	36

Note: The composition of UPA and NDA was different in 2004, e.g. Trinamul Congress belonged to the NDA in 2004. The Third and Fourth Fronts did not exist in 2004.