

## **'Landslide': Surprising Results of the Elections in India**

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Indians like to talk about a 'landslide' when elections lead to an unexpected change of government as they did in May 2004. Hearing about such a dramatic event one would expect that a massive shift of the national vote produced such results. But the majority election system which India has inherited from the British often translates a shift of only a few percentages in the national vote into a major change in the number of seats won by different parties. Actually this pattern is supposed to encourage interest aggregation by means of a two-party system, but it has never done this in India. For a long time the Congress Party faced a fragmented opposition and could benefit from multi-cornered contests. Therefore it shied away from coalition politics even at times when it could have remained in power with the help of allies. Once the Congress committed itself to alliances the multi-cornered play would stop. Moreover, allies can cause problems as the tail may try to wag the dog. But the new Indian government led by the Congress Party is a coalition government which goes by the name of "United Progressive Alliance" and includes a colourful bunch of regional parties about whom more will be said in due course.

The pace for this new type of coalition politics was set by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which headed the "National Democratic Alliance" led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The BJP is located on the right wing of India's political spectrum and did not benefit from multi-cornered contests. Although it had national ambitions, it was initially a regional party with strongholds in the Northern Hindi belt. It therefore looked for regional parties elsewhere in order to find coalition partners. In this way it actually stimulated the success of such regional parties which had earlier attracted a substantial number of votes without getting an adequate numbers of seats. The rise of regional parties has been fostered by the tide of social change in India. Political and economic interests are now articulated at the level of the individual federal states to the extent that some of these states have been ruled by parties whose names even indicate their being limited to one state only. The voters may not necessarily vote for their regional party in federal elections, but by and large these regional parties have managed to win a substantial number of seats in the federal legislature and have thus emerged as coveted coalition partners.

Indian elections have often been marked by the anti-incumbency factor, i.e. the reaction of the voters against the party in power. This has several reasons. First of all the voters may be dissatisfied with unfulfilled election promises. Then they also may feel neglected by their representatives who rarely show up in their constituencies once they are in power. Moreover, the very confident stance taken by the party in power may actually irk those voters who feel that the record of the government contrasts with its tall claims. Vajpayee's government had broadcasted the slogan "India Shining" in order to appeal to the voters. Those who have shared in India's economic growth could sympathise with this kind of pride, but for the rural poor the slogan had a hollow sound.

An object lesson of this effect was the outcome of the elections in the Southern state of Andhra Pradesh which were this time held parallel to the federal elections according to the explicit wish of Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu who hoped that his Telugu Desam Party (TDP) would profit from its association with the federal government. Naidu had not joined the National Democratic Alliance but the 29 TDP-members in the federal parliament had voted with the government and had thus supported it "from the outside". Naidu had acquired a "shining" reputation as a high-tech Chief Minister who had even impressed Bill Gates. Having narrowly escaped a terrorist attack, his movements in public had been restricted in recent times while his challenger Y.S. Reddy could freely contact the rural voters and win their hearts as a compassionate politician. Reddy led the Congress Party to an unexpected victory and was sworn in as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh even before the new federal government could be established.

At the federal level politics were much more complex. For the first time the Congress Party had adopted the same stratagem as the BJP and had forged specific alliances with regional parties, among them the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) of Tamil Nadu, the RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal) of Bihar, the JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha) of the new state Jharkhand which had been carved out of Bihar in 2000. There was also an ally of national appeal, the NCP (National Congress Party) led by the former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar, who had broken away from the Congress Party with a number of like-minded politicians who did not accept the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. The fact that the Italian-born widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had become President of the Congress Party had caused a great deal of trouble. As leader of the party she was destined to become prime minister if the Congress Party won the elections. The BJP targetted her for this reason which made her followers rally around her with a vengeance. Actually after the elections were won, the Congress Parliamentary Party, i.e. the Members of Parliament belonging to her party, elected her as their leader. But soon thereafter she sprang a surprise on friends and foes alike by renouncing her claim to be prime minister and recommending the senior Congress leader Dr. Manmohan Singh for this post. Singh had been Finance Minister in the previous Congress government from 1991 to 1996 and had been widely acclaimed as the architect of the economic reforms introduced at that time. He could be expected to resume his unfinished agenda while at the same time taking care of the interests of the poor who had obviously supported the Congress Party in the elections.

The new prime minister who was sworn in on May 22, 2004 had a hard time in constructing a cabinet in which both Congress stalwarts and leaders of allies could be suitably accommodated. In all there are now 31 cabinet ministers and 38 ministers of state, ten of them with independent departments of their own. The distribution of portfolios was a contentious issue. One allied leader sulked almost to the point of not attending the swearing-in ceremony as he insisted on getting a specific portfolio. In the end 20 of the cabinet posts were occupied by Congress politicians while 11 were filled by allies. The DMK got three cabinet posts, the RJD and the NCP two each and four small allies had to be satisfied with one each. Among the ministers of state there are 24 Congress members and 14 of allied parties.

With all its allies the new Congress government nevertheless remains a minority government which can rely only on 217 Members of Parliament while it would need 270 for an absolute majority. However, the BJP and its allies won only 185 seats. The two communist parties which sympathise with the Congress-led coalition nevertheless did not join it and are going to support it "from the outside". This may impede the privatisation of some major public sector firms which the left regards as India's "family silver" that should not be sold.

Just like its predecessor, the National Democratic Alliance, the new United Progressive Alliance had to formulate a "Common Minimum Programme" of policy measures on which all could agree. This programme is, of course, mostly concerned with internal affairs. In the field of foreign policy no major departure from the pattern set by the previous government could be expected. Only the relations with Pakistan could become once more a problem. Prime Minister Vajpayee had staked his personal reputation on making peace with Pakistan. He had started his "peace offensive" with his bus trip to Lahore in 1999 where he had embraced the reluctant Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif whose cunning general, Parvez Musharraf, had even at that time prepared the Kargil war which then put Vajpayee to a severe test. Vajpayee had shown perseverance and wise restraint in the face of this provocation. He won the war and the subsequent elections which he might otherwise have lost. Although Musharraf had stabbed him in the back, Vajpayee launched a new "peace offensive" in 2003. It was expected that the voters would endorse this policy, but they were obviously influenced by domestic issues which tend to overshadow foreign policy in such elections. The new government will probably try to pursue the same policy, but it is naturally not as committed to it as Vajpayee was. Moreover, the BJP in opposition may tend to be critical of any "sell out" to Pakistan and Vajpayee will not be the leader of the opposition. He has indicated that he will leave this task to others. The new Congress minister of external affairs, K. Natwar Singh, is a seasoned diplomat who knows Pakistan intimately. He may be less sanguine about peace prospects than Vajpayee was.

India's standing in the world is even more dependent on its progress in the field of economic reforms than on its foreign policy. In this field the new Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram, will have to play a major role. He has held this post in earlier governments and has good credentials. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will undoubtedly give him his full support. India "under new management" may be "shining" after all. But coping with rural poverty will remain a challenging task.