

## DECISION TIME – ELECTION 2009

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No two elections have ever been alike, and neither is the 2009 election going to be like any other in the past. We have of course the usual clutch of issues – the communal onslaught on our lives, the neo-liberal economic agenda and the global financial meltdown. **But the real importance of this election is likely to be in the demise of the dream of the two-party system.** This election has indeed the real possibility of making the Congress and the BJP just another two players in the political arena.

If we look at the electoral scenario of the last 60 years, the first 40 years saw the domination of the Congress. Even when the Congress was defeated, as it was in 1977 and 1989, it was still its defeating that provided the dynamic of the elections. People wanted the Congress out, and they voted for the ‘opposition’, not as a unified and politically homogeneous opposition but as a set of opposition forces. The Congress was still the theme of the elections.

**It is in the 1990s that things really began to change.** With its aggressive Hindutva plank and the hate campaign it ran on pulling down the Babri Masjid, the BJP undoubtedly gained from the erosion of the Congress, but the change in the political landscape was much larger than just the emergence of the BJP as a major factor in national politics. The key element that several analysts missed was that the regional parties were no longer content with being confined to the regional space, but were now emerging as national players. Their political base could be local, but their political aspirations were national. *It is this rise of the regional parties in national politics that marks the real break with the 40 years of Congress dominance.*

The Left is perhaps the only political force in the country that understood the increasing importance of regional parties. It thus tried

to build a distinct pole in Indian politics with the Left and the regional parties, to break with both the 40 years of Congress dominance and the short-lived attempt to promote a two-party Westminster system in India. *The 2009 election might conceivably see the combined BJP-Congress seats drop well below the halfway mark. If this happens, Indian politics will change in a way that few anticipate today.*

### The Electoral Issues

While the post-election arithmetic may be the most significant element, **the set of issues that frame this election is no less important for the country.** The last 20 years have seen an almost mystical belief in the redemptive power of the market. In the establishment (it did not matter whether it was a BJP-led NDA or an UPA Government), the belief that markets knew best and that Governments only harmed the economy held complete sway. Any statement to the contrary was dismissed as nonsense, which only a few obsolete Leftists believed. *It took a complete meltdown of the global economy for the gloss to wear off the neo-liberal agenda.*

Interestingly enough, people like Chidambaram and Manmohan Singh who were talking about the Left not allowing financial reforms are now trying to take the credit for the fact that India is not suffering as much from the global meltdown as many others. If the Manmohan-Chidambaram agenda had gone through, many of our banks and vital financial institutions would have suffered the same fate as many of the Wall Street giants. And we would be looking for how to save the financial sector from bankruptcy and the Indian economy from the consequences.

While the Left’s opposition to the neo-liberal agenda (particularly financial liberalisation) of the UPA Government has partially insulated the Indian economy from the worst excesses of contemporary capitalism, the down-turn in the export market and the services has serious consequences. The current Government is neither facing up to the reality of the crisis, nor is it willing to go beyond bailing out the corporate sector. What needs to be done to strengthen the Indian economy and save the bulk of our people from the emerging crisis is not even on its agenda. *The economic policy is therefore an important issue in this election.*

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*No less important is the all-round assault on our civic lives by the forces of hate in this country.* The Hindutva brigade has moved on from the Gujarat mass murder of Muslims to the horrors of the Kandhamal attacks on Christians. While the Mangalore assaults on women are not as horrific as the Gujarat or Kandhamal pogroms, they show the road that the Hindutva brigade would like us to take. If the Taliban bans girls from studying in Swat and Afghanistan, the Hindutva goon squads would like to tell the women here what they can or cannot do. They always pick on the weak – the minorities and women – for showing their ‘manly’ prowess. For them, sacrifice is not what one makes for the nation, but ‘sacrificing’ the other at the altar of a distorted nationalism.

Normally, foreign policy is never a major plank in elections. Unless it is about Pakistan, in which case it has immediate domestic implications. *This time however, India's foreign policy is an electoral issue.* As India deepens its strategic ties with the US and Israel, willy-nilly becoming part of the US ‘war on terror’, foreign policy is no longer a matter of elite consensus. What should India's foreign policy be has today a domestic electoral resonance. Therefore, this will also frame the 2009 elections.

### **The Importance of Electoral Arithmetic**

There is a naïve view that political power equations roughly depend on the proportion of seats that each party gets. It is this view that made the Congress and the BJP believe that they should call the shots in the Parliament, as they have much bigger numbers than other parties.

The last few years of coalition politics have shown that *smaller parties have become more important than the number of their seats would indicate.* If the larger parties do not get the majority, the smaller parties quite often play a pivotal role. Political power does not simply correspond to the proportion of seats won: *the arithmetic here is more about forming winning coalitions than just toting up numbers.* Depending on this ability, some parties have a disproportionately larger impact, while others have a much smaller influence. Interestingly, the increased power of the smaller parties in coalition politics is a corrective to the earlier system, which penalised them.

The key issue in coalitions is not the numerical strength of a party but its ability to change a winning combination into a losing one. This was pointed out by Banzhoff, an American lawyer, in his analysis of stock companies. The principle is now known as **the Banzhoff power index** that indicates the strength a party has in a coalition scenario.

Consider the scenario where the three participants A, B and C have ‘shares’ of 45, 45 and 10 respectively. The participants could be three political parties or stockholders in a company, the mathematics of coalitions being identical in either case. To reach the 51 or more required, the four possible winning coalitions are (A,B,C), (A,B), (B,C), and (C,A). The first coalition is a trivial one, as it comprises all the parties; if any participant leaves this coalition, the ‘majority’ does not get affected. However, in each of the other three coalitions, if one party leaves, the coalition becomes a minority. Each of the participants is thus ‘pivotal’: its presence or absence determines whether the coalition is winning or losing. Thus, we may intuitively conclude that, though participants have quite different shares, each of them is equally important in the formation of a winning coalition: *each participant has equal power.*

A more detailed mathematical exercise can be done to calculate the Banzhoff power index of the three parties in the above scenario. Not surprisingly, this rigorous calculation substantiates our intuitive view: **each party has the same power index.**

If we apply this principle to find the relative power of parties in the current 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, the results are quite surprising. For instance, the Left is shown to have as much power as the NDA, though it is only a third its size. This is why the Left was pivotal and its position only changed when defections were organised by the UPA in the nuclear trust vote. If the political parties had voted on party lines, the UPA Government would have been reduced to a minority and fallen. Even the SP joining the UPA would not have helped if defections had not taken place. Of course, the above analysis does not take defections into account, which obviously help the larger coalitions.

If the trends of the Congress and BJP seats are taken over the last two Lok Sabha elections, we can see that the Congress gains were less than the BJP losses. If we look at the electoral scenario today, it is clear that **neither the BJP nor the Congress have**

**made significant gains since the last two/three elections.** The BJP has gained marginally in Karnataka, but its base has not widened anywhere else. In fact, it has lost its base in UP, where it was a strong contender in the early 90s, but is now languishing as a distant third. In all the states where the BJP is strong, its main contender is the Congress. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the BJP-Congress seats would increase their share with respect to the other parties. However, the reverse is possible, particularly if the Congress heavily loses to the emerging Third Front in Andhra and the BJP loses seats to the BSP.

If the Congress-BJP tally comes to around 225 seats, the complexion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha will be fundamentally different from any earlier one. *For the first time, it will be possible to have an agenda that can be worked out outside the neo-liberal consensus of the Congress-BJP that has informed both the economic policies and the strategic tie-up with the US-Israeli axis.* This does not mean that other parties apart from the Left have a strong position against such a consensus, but neither have they committed themselves to this larger Congress-BJP consensus. Therefore, the breaking of this consensus would be much easier if the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha emerges with a reduced Congress-BJP presence. The emerging Third Front could then be critical in breaking the current stranglehold that neo-liberal economics and pro-US policies have on the Indian establishment.

It is not surprising that the media, which have always been one of the pillars of neo-liberal thought, *have been promoting an 'either Congress or BJP' view of Indian politics.* In their view, the most comfortable scenario is one in which these two parties alternate and apply a common policy on matters that are important to them. The predatory capitalism of today, based on stock market and other scams, indeed demands a pliant political order. The Government would thus support the neo-liberal agenda in different ways – through direct support as we saw during the Rs. 100,000 crore Telecom scam, or through police action if people protest. *It is the 'instability' of this consensus that the media would like to parade as instability for the country.* Earlier, influential voices in the media had even advocated that the Congress and the BJP join hands, albeit after jettisoning the BJP's

more lunatic fringe. However, the recent BJP honeymoon with Modi and the backing that he receives from major corporate houses make it clear that Modi or the BJP's lunatic fringe is an issue. As long as the state underwrites their profits, helps them in their loot in diverse ways, the corporates do not care what happens to the rest of the people.

**In truth, what the BJP parades in public as an extreme view is the internal BJP stand, currently hidden from public view due to the demands of coalition politics.** It is to make the BJP more palatable to the electorate that its politicians do not want to take up such issues directly. However, every act of violence on minorities or against women (as is now being committed daily in Karnataka) has the BJP's ideological support and the implicit state support.

*The 2009 election may not therefore become a business as usual for the neo-liberal order in the country.* If its preferred A and B teams (which is A and which is B can vary from election to election) are not able to deliver a Parliament controlled by either, then it will open up new political spaces.

**The outcome will not immediately translate itself into pro-people policies: what it will do is that it will create an opening for change, which has been denied till now.** It will make it possible to bring back the trajectory of India's development as a part of the political discourse. It will also develop other options for a secular state, while till date the future had been limited to the hard communal option of the BJP or the compromising secularism of the Congress. With the Congress increasingly retreating from its past secular positions, the country greatly needs other options. **The 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha may therefore provide a political space that is independent from the Congress and the BJP.**