

LESSONS FROM VERDICT 2009

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The big picture of Elections 2009 is that governance was preferred over narrow identity politics, an inclusive agenda was chosen rather than a divisive communal agenda, and a desire for stability was favoured over opportunistic alliances. The remarkably definite electoral mandate that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) received in the April-May General Elections has important lessons for Indian democracy. Some issues which could have a significant impact in the proximate future are flagged in this Paper.

Regionalism

According to Zoya Hasan,¹ this “is a national verdict in favour of an alliance that can guarantee a **cohesive, progressive and secular agenda**. We can now say that along with national parties, important regional parties will continue to stay in Indian politics.”

It is too soon to say whether the resurgence of the Congress is at the cost of regional parties. While it is true that the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combined have got more seats than the regional parties, the voting percentages of both the parties have gone down in comparison to the earlier elections. Furthermore, in States like Orissa and Tamil Nadu, the regional parties have consolidated their position to such an extent that both these national parties are currently reduced to being marginal players. The case of Orissa stands out. While the BJP was piggybacking on the strength of its 11-year alliance with the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the Congress saw its vote share and number of seats decrease in spite of the split in the BJP-BJD alliance.

*The JNU academic Pralay Kanungo moreover noted that several factors play a major role in determining voting trends.*² “Calling the verdict a reversal of coalition politics would be immature.

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Along with developmental issues, many other regional and local factors will continue to play a major role in determining voting trends”, he opined. He cited the example of Orissa where the BJD has won the Legislative Assembly elections for the third time in a row; it has also won 14 out of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the State.

Another case in point is Andhra Pradesh, where the emergence of the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) has weakened the TDP, the dominant anti-Congress party for long. The Congress got a massive 33 of the 42 seats in Andhra but an analysis of the constituency-wise results shows that the PRP wrecked the chances of the TDP-led alliance in as many as 31 constituencies.³ The Congress secured a clear majority in only one constituency, Kadapa, where the Chief Minister’s son Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy got 53% of the votes polled. In most of the other constituencies, the vote share of the TDP-led alliance fell to around 30-35% because the PRP sliced away 18-20%. In fact, it is in Andhra that the BJP-led NDA and the fledgling ‘Third Front’ witnessed their worst performance across the country.

Political scientist Imtiaz Ahmad pointed out that in these elections, voters in many states preferred a national party to non-performing regional parties.⁴ He cited the instances of Uttar Pradesh, where Chief Minister Mayawati’s BSP got only 21 of 80 seats, and Bihar, where Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of the JD-U gained 20 of 40 seats. “People rejected Mayawati because her state government failed to perform, while people voted for Nitish Kumar because he delivered what had been expected from him”, Ahmad said.

Broadly speaking, there appears to be no reversal of the trend of coalition politics. Regional parties which deliver good governance will continue to have their own space. They will not only be the dominant player in their respective States, but will also demand a major role in the particular national alliance they chose to be part of. This is clearly the case in Tamil Nadu where the DMK is a significant player in the State and also a key ally in the UPA government.

Internal Security

Are terror and elections linked? Do the electorate base their vote on the issues of terrorism and internal security? Though the electorate

bear these issues in mind, *they are not deciding factors compared to the economy and development*. Much has been written about the low voter turnout (43%) in Mumbai. But the voters were also influenced by other factors than terrorism. This was not a single-issue election. More importantly, “terrorism is a scourge that must be fought and eliminated, but it may not occupy the minds of voters in the same way as say jobs, or basics like *paani, sadak and bijli*.”⁵ In fact, in December 2008, days after the carnage at Mumbai, the BJP did not gain any advantage out of the incident in the elections held in Rajasthan and New Delhi, despite making huge efforts in that direction.

A reshuffle in the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) towards the end of the UPA tenure with P. Chidambaram replacing Shivraj Patil, who is widely acknowledged to have been a failure, and a series of measures intended to augment the counter-terrorist capacities across the country may have assuaged the people’s dissatisfaction regarding to the UPA regime’s perceived failure on the internal security front.

The BJP believed that it could push the UPA government to the wall over the whole issue of internal security and the increasing terrorist attacks in urban areas. It thus gave enormous attention to terrorism as an electoral issue. In fact, its manifesto opened with an attack on the Congress for its failure to combat terrorism. Though nearly two-thirds of the respondents to the National Election Study of *The Hindu* knew about the terrorist attack at Mumbai, terrorism was not an issue that was going to influence many of them into voting against the Congress and its allies. About 41% of the voters were indeed satisfied with the measures taken by the government to curb terrorism after the Mumbai attacks.⁶

While the importance of internal security and terrorism as an electoral issue will continue to be debated, *the relatively peaceful electoral exercise was itself a tribute to the abiding institutional strengths of India’s democracy*. The elaborate security exercise involved providing protection at 834,000 polling stations to 8,070 candidates who contested the 543 Lok Sabha seats along with the 473 Assembly constituencies in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Sikkim. The intelligence agencies had warned of the possibility of increased violence across India by Pakistan-backed Islamist militant groups.

Within Jammu and Kashmir, there were also boycott calls issued by secessionist formations like the All Parties Hurriyat Conference⁷ and militant groups like the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Lashkar-Toiba, and threats of violence in case of non-compliance.

Most of the election-related violence was orchestrated by the Communist Party of India – Maoist, which issued a poll boycott call in areas where they are active. The Maoist Information Bulletin of April 10, 2009, quoted the group’s spokesman ‘Azad’ as *declaring an “active boycott* where we prevent the candidates from carrying out their campaigns in the villages and smaller urban centres in our areas. We warn the parties not to venture out into our areas and when they do not heed our warnings, we stop their campaigns, beat them up if they are notorious elements, burn their vehicles, conduct people’s courts... We also carry out counter-offensive actions against the police and central forces who are used by the reactionary rulers to enforce elections at gun-point.”

79 Parliamentary constituencies were identified as Naxalite-affected, and 118,604 sensitive polling stations were provided with augmented security cover. In the run-up to the elections, there were a number of incidents of violence carried out by Maoist insurgents. Among others these include the ambush of a joint party of the Central Reserve Police Force and Chhattisgarh Police at Minpa in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh on April 10, 2009, in which nine security force personnel and three insurgents were killed.⁸ Furthermore, a group of more than 100 Maoists attacked a store containing explosives at NALCO at Damanjodi in the Koraput district of Orissa on April 12, killing 10 Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel, while the bodies of four Maoists were also recovered.⁹

In the Northeast, most of the insurgent groups did not issue any boycott call, unlike in the past. However, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) declared that it had “nothing to do with the Indian elections.” *All together, 37 persons were killed in the five phases of elections in 2009*, 23 of them by Maoists or in Police firing.¹⁰ The rest are reported to have died either in accidents or individual incidents. In comparison, at least 48 persons had been killed during the Lok Sabha elections in 2004.

On the issue of the nuclear deal, the BJP and Left were regarded as obstructionist forces, an impression that was reflected in the election results. While the UPA government had staked its existence on the Indo-US nuclear deal and was criticized by the Left for its pro-US foreign policy and the loss of strategic autonomy,¹¹ *very few urban and rural voters even seem to have considered the nuclear deal an electoral issue.*

Stability and Governance

The issues of stability and governance prevailed over identity politics in the 2009 elections. Yet, a larger truth lurks behind the BJP's failure and its lapses in electoral strategy and misreading of the public mood.¹² *This is the fact that the BJP has no ideological core.* This weakness was covered up in 1997 and 1998 by the tumult and excitement of finally acquiring power. But Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure as prime minister confirmed the impression of a party without its own stand. There was nothing original about Vajpayee's policies, which were marked by surprising continuities with the Nehruvian Congress party. The BJP thus emerged, in effect, as a Congress double, and the voter went back to the "real thing" five years ago, and now again.¹³ At another level, the entire campaign of the BJP and its Prime Ministerial candidate Lal Krishna Advani was negative in character and content.

The great story of Election 2009, Praful Bidwai aptly notes, is **the Congress's rejuvenation on an inclusive-pluralist-secular platform and the electorate's emphatic rejection of the BJP's divisive, communal politics.**¹⁴ "There is overwhelming evidence that the key to the Congress' performance lays in its projecting itself as an advocate of the caring state on a broadly left-of-centre or social democratic platform through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), farm loan waiver and other progressive measures including the Right to Information (RTI) Act." Otherwise, people wouldn't have queued up to vote for the party in some extremely backward districts of Uttar Pradesh without even knowing who its candidate was, nor would there be such a tight concurrence between the salience of livelihood issues for the poor and the voting patterns in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Delhi.

The UPA's successful delivery of schemes like the NREGA and the loan waiver for farmers has benefited the poorest of the poor. This has obviously led to some electoral dividend, although the quantitative assessment of the linkage between such schemes and electoral advantages is yet to be done. The NREGA, Bidwai opines, should not be trivialised despite its flaws. In 2008-09, it provided an average 48 days of productive work to each of 45 million households, one-fourth of India's total, amidst the slowdown, growing unemployment and increasing distress. *It remains the UPA's single greatest achievement.* Social auditing shows that the scheme's performance has significantly improved, especially where there's transparency. With the RTI, better auditing and closer monitoring to eliminate record-fudging and corruption, it can be further improved.¹⁵

The kind of mandate the Congress-led UPA government has secured can lead to better ideological cohesion within the new coalition. This will have far-reaching consequences in giving a new impetus to socio-economic reforms and improving the functioning of the government at all levels. With the right and the left neutralised momentarily, there is bound to be far less obstruction on key issues of governance.

Coalition-Building

Coalition-building remained an important factor and this is a good indication for India's democracy. Moreover, the idea of constructing opportunistic alliances, which are largely based on personalities and momentary (and at times illusionary) swing factors, has fortunately been demolished.

The building of progressive and pragmatic coalitions will take more time to develop. However, for this to crystallize, the building blocks needed to be steady and secure. Another factor that has a humungous impact on the 2009 verdict and which will have great lessons for future coalition-building is the decline of the Left.

Infighting and moral degradation of the leadership greatly cost the Left in Kerala. It should however be noted that, despite winning only four seats, the LDF has secured 42% of the polled votes compared to the 48% of the UDF. The swing away from the Left since 2004 is only 4%. "Much before the election process started, it

was clear that this time around the voters who had no affiliation to either of the Fronts were all set to discard the LDF. They may be in minority in this highly polarised state but they have a decisive say in the final outcome of the closely contested race in each constituency. It will be wrong to presume that they are influenced only by national issues when it comes to the Lok Sabha election. *The track record of the LDF regime that assumed office three years ago has been far from attractive.* The washing of dirty linen in public not only among the various constituents of the Front but also among the leaders of the faction-ridden CPI(M), allegations of corruption and arrogance at all levels of the administration, charges of interference in administration by the kith and kin of the state ministers, etc., are aspects that were unheard of in the past whenever the LDF was in power.”¹⁶

According to voters committed to the CPI(M) ideology, the party is fast changing. This change is mainly attributed to a section of the leadership that has established a nexus with money bags, and the people hope the situation can be retrieved with “shock treatments” like election defeats.¹⁷ There are also some who consider that “the electoral debacle faced by the Left parties in the 15th Lok Sabha elections is due to the fact that the state governments led by the Left followed the very same neoliberal policies that the parties opposed and were able to halt at the central level”.¹⁸ In the Left-ruled West Bengal, high-handedness in administration, unpopular industrialisation policies, land acquisition, and the unity of the opposition spelt doom for the ruling coalition, while in Kerala the inadequate governance by the state government and factionalism in the ruling CPI(M) helped the UPA.¹⁹

The increased tally of the UPA despite the division of “secular votes” and the improved performance of the Congress even in BJP strongholds are pointers to *a conjuncture of local and national issues favouring the UPA.*

Conclusion

The challenges ahead are many and complex. The UPA government, elected on a plank of stability and governance, will have to strive extra hard in order to meet the increasing aspirations of India’s growing middle classes and at the same time usher in development and progress for the vast majority of the populace in the

rural areas. *Towards this end, it has the right mandate to take the necessary steps to reduce poverty, create employment opportunities, accelerate rural development and industrialisation, and protect as well as qualitatively transform the lives of India’s citizens.*

NOTES

1. “Lessons from Election 2009: Perform or perish”, <http://news.in.msn.com/national/indiaelections2009/article.aspx?cp-documentid=3034687>. **2.** Ibid. **3.** “Congress helped by vote-splitters”, *The Pioneer*, New Delhi, June 16, 2009. **4.** As in note 1. **5.** Sidharth Bhatia, “Terrorism has not worked as an election issue”, DNA, Mumbai, May 2, 2009. **6.** “How India Voted?”, *The Hindu*, Chennai, May 26, 2009. **7.** Both the factions led by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Syed Ali Shah Geelani had issued boycott calls, declaring that elections are no substitute to the wishes of the people of Kashmir. The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen warned that anyone casting a ballot will be considered a “traitor”. **8.** Aarti Dhar, “Maoists kill 9 CRPF jawans in Dantewada”, *The Hindu*, April 11, 2009.

9. “11 CISF men killed by Maoists, fresh gun battle near Nalco”, <http://www.ptinews.com/pti%5Cptisite.nsf/0/27118BD0C4C6526A65257597005A5DEE?OpenDocument>. **10.** “62% vote in Phase V as the curtain comes down on polls”, *The Hindu*, May 14, 2009. **11.** “How India Voted?”, *The Hindu*, May 26, 2009. **12.** Bharat Karnad, “BJP: finding the right centre”, *Mint*, New Delhi, May 31, 2009. **13.** Ibid. **14.** Praful Bidwai, “Framing A New Deal”, *Times of India*, New Delhi, June 10, 2009. **15.** Ibid. **16.** K. Haridas, “The Left Debacle in Kerala”, *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 30/5/09, no. 22, p. 15. **17.** Ibid. **18.** Deepankar Basu, “The Left and the 15th Lok Sabha Elections”, *ibid.*, p. 10. **19.** Srinivasan Ramani, “A Decisive Mandate”, *ibid.*, p. 11.