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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



The 2009 General Elections in India: An Analysis¹

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta²

Executive Summary

The fifteenth general elections to the Lower House of India's Parliament (Lok Sabha) were held in five phases spread over a month in April and May 2009, with its outcome declared on 16 May 2009. The elections witnessed the return of the incumbent Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition to power in New Delhi for a second consecutive term.

The performance of the Congress, India's 'grand old party', which had steadily declined over a period of two-and-a-half decades until the 2004 elections when it won 145 seats, improved further in these elections. For the first time since 1991, the centre-left party was able to win more than 200 seats (206 to be precise) in the 543-member Lok Sabha. Its closest rival, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose performance had been on the rise between 1984 (when it had secured just two seats in the Lok Sabha) until 1999 (when the party won 182 seats) and, thereafter, declined in 2004 (137 seats), saw its position decline further (116 seats) in 2009. As a result of the first-past-the-post system of Parliamentary democracy in India, the change in the number of seats of the two largest political parties was not reflected in their vote shares. The vote share of the Congress went up by around two percent (bringing about a gain of 61 seats) while the BJP's vote share fell by nearly 3.5 percent (resulting in a loss of 21 seats).

Apart from these two national political parties, regional parties have grown in clout and significance in India in recent years. In the absence of a clear mandate for any of the two large political parties since 1996, successive coalition governments have been formed at the federal or Union level in India with the help of these regional parties. The 2009 elections witnessed a sharp decline in the influence of several regional parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Lok Janshakti Party, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Pattali Makkal Katchi, while others such as the Biju Janata Dal and the Janata Dal (United) improved their positions by providing better governance in their respective states. It may be broadly argued that performance has been rewarded. However, it would be premature to

¹ This paper has been prepared as part of an on-going consultancy project for the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. The author was assisted by Ayaskant Das and Aman Malik in the preparation of this paper.

² Mr Paranjoy Guha Thakurta is a Journalist and Founder of the "School of Convergence" in India. He can be contacted at paranjoy@gmail.com.

conclude that India's polity is becoming bipolar even though attempts to form a so-called anti-Congress, an anti-BJP Third Front led by the Left parties, as well as a Fourth Front comprising three regional parties, were both unsuccessful because of the poor performances of the regional parties in these political formations.

The 2004 general elections saw four Left parties, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist, becoming more powerful than ever before in national politics by obtaining 61 seats in the Lok Sabha. It was on the basis of the outside support of the Left that the Congress-led UPA coalition was able to form a federal government at the centre in 2004. However, in the general elections of 2009, the Left performed poorly in its traditional bastions, West Bengal and Kerala.

Thus, the outcome of the 2009 elections has been widely interpreted as a victory of centrist political forces, a vote for stability, a verdict in favour of secularism (or a rejection of Hindu majoritarianism) and a mandate for good governance. Although the Indian electorate has rewarded performance in many parts of the country, the number of Members of Parliament (MPs) with criminal charges pending against them has gone up. Though India has one of the richest democratic traditions in the world, where a person with no assets can get elected to some of the highest offices in the country, the fifteenth Lok Sabha has more millionaires than the previous one. Despite these negative trends, there are positive ones as well. The number of women MPs has increased and there are strong indications that anti-incumbency sentiments remain pronounced with voters rejecting between 40 percent and half of the sitting MPs.

The new UPA government, led by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, the first head-of-state of the world's largest democracy to become Prime Minister for a second time after completing a full term of five years after India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who headed the country between 1947 and 1964, faces a number of formidable challenges in its second term. Dr Singh's government will have to initiate measures to revive the economy of the world's second most-populous country and ensure stability in a restive subcontinent where many of India's neighbours are in political turmoil.

Introduction

The fifteenth general (national) elections in India, the outcome of which became known on 16 May 2009, saw the incumbent Indian National Congress (henceforth, the Congress)-led-United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition return to power. The election results have thrown up a series of important inter-related questions about the political future of the world's largest democracy.

This paper seeks answers to the following questions:

- a) Is the era of multi-party coalitions going to make place for a bipolar polity after more than two decades?
- b) Will the strength of regional political parties diminish as one or the other of the two largest national parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the coalitions led by them, becomes more influential?;
- c) Will the Congress be able to win a clear majority in the Lok Sabha (or the Lower House of Parliament) in the foreseeable future?;
- d) Will the Congress soon be led by the 39-year-old Rahul Gandhi, son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his Italy-born widow Sonia Gandhi who currently heads the Congress and the ruling UPA coalition?; and
- e) Will the political Right, represented by the Hindu nationalist BJP that leads the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition, and the Left led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), after having been defeated decisively in the elections by the Congress-led coalition, now become progressively weaker?

It would be presumptuous to answer all these questions in the affirmative although a superficial reading of the outcome of the 2009 general elections in India could tempt one to say 'yes' to each of these five linked questions.

For two decades up to 2004, one of the most significant aspects of India's polity was the relative decline of the centre-left Congress and the rise of the right-wing BJP, the two largest national political parties in the country. However, the 2004 general elections, the fourteenth in the country, saw the position of the Congress improve and, for the first time since 1991, it became the single largest party in the Lok Sabha (winning 145 out of 543 seats). In 2004, for the first time in two decades, the BJP lost ground with the number of Members of Parliament (MPs) owing allegiance to the party declining from 182 in 1999 to 138 in 2004. The two largest political parties together (minus their allies and coalition partners) obtained roughly half the votes cast in successive general elections that were held in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004. The remaining votes were cast in favour of dozens of political parties, some of which have opportunistically switched allegiance between the UPA and the NDA coalitions. This trend has continued in the 2009 elections.

From 1996 onwards, no government in New Delhi has been formed by a single party – each government has been run by a coalition of parties. Although two coalitions, one led by the Congress (the UPA) and the other by the BJP (the NDA), dominate the Indian polity, it would not be accurate to describe India's polity as bipolar with smaller parties, including regional

parties and caste-based parties, as having no choice but to become appendages of either the BJP or the Congress either before or after elections. A non-Congress, non-BJP political formation called the United Front was in power between 1996 and 1998.

This time round, the centrist Congress has indeed gained handsomely at the expense of both the BJP as well as the Left, but its all-India vote share rose by just over two percentage points (to 28.55 percent) between 2004 and 2009. Given the unpredictable nature of the first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all system of Parliamentary democracy followed in India, the number of Congress MPs in the Lok Sabha jumped by 61 percent from 145 to 206. Even as the BJP's vote share dipped by almost 3.5 percent to 18.8 percent, it lost 22 seats (down from 138 to 116). The 4.37 percent difference in the overall vote shares of the two largest political parties resulted in a difference of seven seats in 2004. But in 2009, the gap widened to almost 10 percent resulting in a seat difference of 80 seats.

The 2009 general elections, which were held in five phases over a month in April and May 2009, have been widely interpreted as a vote for stability, a verdict in favour of secularism (or a rejection of Hindu majoritarianism) and a mandate for good governance and development (even in some of the most underdeveloped states of the country such as Orissa, Bihar and Chhattisgarh where the incumbent regimes were opposed to the Congress).

In May 2014, barring unforeseen circumstances, the current Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, having assumed office for a second term in 2009, will become the first Prime Minister after India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (who was in his position from 1947 to 1964), to complete two full five-year terms in office. Dr Singh is also India's first Prime Minister to have never won an election to the popular Lower House of India's bicameral Parliament, having always been elected to the 250-member Upper House or Rajya Sabha (literally the House of the States or provinces).

Also important is the fact that while Rahul Gandhi is being given considerable credit for reviving the Congress, especially in Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous state that returns 80 out of the 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha, the single largest chunk for any Indian state), he has astutely chosen to remain one of his party's general secretaries and not opt for a ministerial position in the government that was his for the asking. The UPA in general and the Congress in particular are exuberant over the role played by Rahul Gandhi for the unexpectedly good performance of the Congress – he had campaigned in 107 Parliamentary constituencies before the elections and, in as many as 75 of these, his party's candidates won. Moreover, eight out of 10 candidates he had personally selected emerged victorious in the elections.

Until the results of the 2009 elections were known, it was widely believed that the principal political players in Uttar Pradesh would be the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which is in power in the state, and its traditional rival in the province, the Samajwadi Party (SP), and that after the elections, these two parties would bargain with the single largest party in New Delhi for cabinet berths and ministerial positions in return for support to form a government. However, Rahul Gandhi's strategy of *ekla chalo* (which in Bengali means 'go it alone') in this state for the Congress enabled the party to reap rich political dividends at the cost of both these regional parties.

Attempts to form a so-called anti-Congress, an anti-BJP Third Front led by the Left, came a cropper because of the lacklustre performances of three important regional political parties

that were constituents of the front: the BSP led by Mayawati, the first *Dalit*³ woman to be the Chief Minister of any Indian state (Uttar Pradesh); the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), headed by former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh N. Chandrababu Naidu; and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, led by the actress-turned-politician and former Chief Minister of the state, Jayalalithaa Jayaraman.

However, other regional parties such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa, headed by the Chief Minister of the state Naveen Pattnaik, and the Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)) in Bihar, led by the province's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, performed remarkably well. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, led by the Chief Minister of the state Muthuvel Karunanidhi, defeated its political opponent in the state, the AIADMK, by bucking widely expected anti-incumbency sentiments. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress, led by the doctor-turned-politician and the incumbent Chief Minister of the province, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, swept both the general elections and the state assembly elections that were held simultaneously.

Thus, while it may be broadly argued that good performance has been rewarded, it could be premature to conclude that India's polity is becoming bipolar. The fact is that the Congress and the BJP are poles of the polity in only eight out of the 28 states in India. The combined vote share of the two (minus their pre- or post-poll allies) is around half the total votes polled in the country and has actually shrunk by roughly 1.5 percent between the 2004 and 2009 elections.

As pointed out, the strategy of the Congress of going it alone in important states helped it considerably. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the number of seats won by the Congress jumped from nine to 21 while that of the BSP went up only slightly from 19 to 21 despite the latter party winning the provincial assembly elections just two years earlier. In spite of the support it received from the socially underprivileged *Dalit* community, the BSP could not muster much support from the other social sections that it had hoped for, following Mayawati's attempt at a mass-scale 'social engineering' in the state. Consequently, her hopes of becoming the Prime Minister of India were dashed. Yet she too has realised the importance of 'socially inclusive' politics in India's heterogeneous society divided by caste hierarchies and it would, therefore, be premature to write her off. Her party stood second in as many as 48 out of the 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh securing 27.42 percent of the votes polled in the state – the highest among all parties – indicating that regional parties such as the BSP are far from being a spent force.

At the same time, the trend of so-called 'vote banks' based on caste and religious identities breaking down continued. For instance, the Muslims who had been the traditional supporters of the Left in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal voted against the coalition that has been ruling the state for a record 32 years. The mistakes committed by the state government in acquiring farm land for establishing industrial projects – including a factory to manufacture the 'world's cheapest car' – resulted in the hold of the Communists declining precipitously.

The voters of India – roughly 60 percent of the 714 million individuals eligible to vote actually exercised their franchise – have shown yet again that they can surprise the most

³ The word *Dalit* quite literally means 'outcaste' but is it is generally used to identify those belonging to the socially least privileged sections of society.

knowledgeable political analyst. If the Congress did not expect such a decisive victory, neither did the BJP and the Left anticipate their humiliation at the dustings.

The Congress and the United Progressive Alliance Coalition

The Congress has ruled India, either single-handedly or with the help of allies, for all but 12 of the 62 years since the country became politically independent in August 1947.

The Congress was set up in December 1885. It is the only major Indian political party in which a substantial section still believes it can single-handedly rule a highly-diverse country like India. After independence, the leadership of the Congress has been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi family. Over the last two-and-a-half decades though, the party witnessed a gradual erosion in the number of seats it was able to win in the general elections – the number of Congress MPs elected to the Lok Sabha declined from a high of 404 in 1984 (with a 48 percent vote share) to a low of 118 in 1998 and 114 in 1999. Comparing the performance of the party in the 1999 and the 2004 elections, the vote share of the Congress actually declined from 28.3 percent to 26.5 percent although the number of seats it won went up from 114 to 145. However, in the general elections of 2009, the party performed far better than its own expectations by winning a total of 206 seats – an increase of 61 seats since the 2004 general elections. It also increased its vote share by 2.02 percent – from 26.53 percent in 2004 to 28.55 percent in 2009. The party made big gains in all the major states of India (see Table 1).

Table 1: Performance of the Congress in Selected States

State	2004		Gain/Loss (Seats)	2009	
	Seats	Votes (%)		Seats	Votes (%)
Haryana	9	42.03	0	9	41.77
Punjab	2	34.17	+ 6	8	45.23
MP	4	34.07	+ 8	12	40.14
Maharashtra	13	23.77	+ 4	17	19.61
Kerala	0	32.13	+13	13	40.13
Rajasthan	4	41.42	+16	20	47.19
Delhi	6	54.81	+ 1	7	57.11
UP	9	12.04	+12	21	18.25
Orissa	2	40.43	+ 4	6	32.75
Bihar	3	4.49	- 1	2	10.26

In the general elections of 2004, the Congress was extremely weak in at least four states – Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, which between them, account for over 200 seats in the Lok Sabha. The party made big gains in Uttar Pradesh in the general elections of 2009, though not in the three other states. In comparison to the general elections of 2004, in 2009, in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress gained 12 seats, taking its tally to 21 and its vote share increased from 12.04 percent to 18.25 percent in the state.

In the desert state of Rajasthan in western India, the Congress gained 16 seats, taking its tally to 20 (out of 25) seats, the party's vote share going up from 41.42 percent to 47.19 percent. In the southernmost state of Kerala (also one of the most literate Indian states), where the coalition led by the Congress won only a single seat in the 2004 elections, it won 13 seats (with its vote share increasing from 32.13 percent to 40.13 percent). In the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the Congress gained eight seats, taking its tally to 12 (its vote share

increased from 34.07 percent to 40.14 percent). In the western Indian state of Maharashtra (one of the country's most industrialised states), the party gained four seats, taking its tally to 12 (its vote share rose from 34.07 percent to 40.14 percent). In two other large states, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, the regional allies of the Congress performed very well. Its regional ally in West Bengal, the mercurial Mamata Banerjee-led All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), which had won just a single seat in 2004, gained 18 seats to take its tally to 19 (its vote share increased from 21.04 percent to 31.17 percent). Similarly, the Congress' regional ally in Tamil Nadu, the DMK, gained two seats, to take its tally to 18 seats (with its vote share going up from 24.6 percent to 25.09 percent).

A number of factors worked to the advantage of the Congress in its electoral gains. The first was the clean image of its Cambridge-educated prime ministerial candidate Dr Singh (the only Indian head-of-government so far with a Ph.D.) who has an unparalleled record, first as an academic and then as an economic administrator in several capacities in the country. Pro-incumbency sentiments prevailing in the states of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and the anti-incumbency factor in the states of Left-ruled West Bengal and Kerala, besides the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh, helped the Congress improve its performance in these states. In Orissa, the break-up between the BJD and the BJP turned favourable for the Congress and it gained four seats to take its tally to six.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress gained substantially because Muslims, who had over the recent past been voting for the SP and the BSP, voted in substantial numbers for the Congress. There are various factors explaining this phenomenon. First, the BJP did not condemn the vituperative speeches that were made by its candidate from Pilibhit, Varun Gandhi (who happens to be the grandson of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi's first cousin). In his campaign speeches, Varun Gandhi attacked the minority Muslim community in a bid to polarise the majority Hindus in his favour. The top leadership of the BJP remained ambivalent over the candidature of Varun Gandhi; his candidature was retained by the party and he was finally elected. His mother, Maneka Gandhi (estranged sister-in-law of Sonia Gandhi) won in the neighbouring constituency of Aonla. However, the BJP did not gain in the rest of the state. Varun Gandhi acquired considerable notoriety: he was placed behind bars by Mayawati's administration under the National Security Act before he obtained bail; and the Election Commission of India recommended that the BJP withdraw his candidature, a suggestion the party belligerently ignored.

Another factor that helped the Congress gain Muslim votes in Uttar Pradesh had much to do with the party's decision not to ally itself with the SP. Not a single Muslim candidate of the SP managed to win a seat in the state – a state where close to a fifth of the population is Muslim – and this can be substantially attributed to the fact that the SP had tied up with Kalyan Singh, former BJP Chief Minister of the state (during whose tenure, the 16th century Babri mosque, built by the first Mughal emperor Babur, was demolished by Hindu extremists in December 1992, an event that led to widespread Hindu-Muslim rioting across the country). Another important leader of the SP, Azam Khan, from the electoral constituency of Rampur in Uttar Pradesh, openly defied his party's leaders and supported the Congress candidate in his constituency. The Muslim vote in Uttar Pradesh was divided three ways among the BSP, the Congress and the SP. In the process, both the SP and the BSP lost a substantial chunk of their votes in favour of the Congress.

The personal attacks made by the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Lal Krishna Advani against Dr Singh – he was described as the country's 'weakest' Prime Minister who took

orders from '10 Janpath' or the residence of Sonia Gandhi – evidently did not go down well with many voters. The BJP attempted to convert the contest into an American-style Presidential election – Advani challenged Dr Singh to participate in a televised debate, but this strategy too did not help the principal opposition party. Towards the tail-end of the campaign, Dr Singh counter-attacked and said Advani was 'weeping in a corner' when the Babri mosque was demolished and that he seemed unaware of his own government's decision to release the terrorists who had hijacked an Indian aircraft to Kandahar in Afghanistan in December 1999.

The Left-led idea of an anti-Congress, anti-BJP Third Front was stillborn and this too helped the Congress. After the elections, leaders of the Left acknowledged that the so-called Third Front was perceived as opportunistic and lacked ideological or programmatic coherence, especially since the BSP, the TDP and the AIADMK had, in the past, aligned themselves with the BJP. One interpretation of the voting pattern that led to the Congress improving its performance substantially was that sections of the Indian electorate, who did not want the country's polity to be further fragmented or fractured, voted for 'stability' and, hence, for the Congress. This view is not entirely borne out by a close scrutiny of the electoral outcome – all the non-Congress, non-BJP regional political parties put together improved their vote share – although, as already mentioned, the Congress did certainly gain in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

Middle class voters, especially those living in urban areas, were considered to be an integral part of the traditional 'vote bank' of the BJP but many voters from these sections apparently opted for Dr Singh as a 'clean' and 'credible' Prime Minister in preference to Advani. Many young Indians too seemed to have favoured the Congress over the BJP. Besides Rahul Gandhi, the Congress successfully fielded a number of candidates, who are, almost all, progeny of important Congress politicians, past or present, with whom the large young electorate of the country could identify. Names such as Sachin Pilot, Naveen Jindal, Priya Dutt, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora found easy acceptance with young voters. By way of contrast, many in the second rung of leadership in the BJP were considered 'old'.

On the whole, the Congress successfully sidelined certain issues that were sought to be highlighted by its political opponents on both the Left and the Right. These issues included the India-United States civilian nuclear deal (that led to the Left withdrawing support to the UPA government in 2008) and national security (that was emphasised by the BJP, which repeatedly accused the Congress government of being 'soft' on terrorist groups). In its election campaign, leaders of the Congress focussed on what the government had done to create jobs in villages through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The US\$15 billion farm loan waiver programme, the hike in the minimum support prices given to cultivators of wheat and rice, the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission, the enactment of the Right to Information Act, the increase in salaries for government employees by accepting the recommendations of the Sixth Central Pay Commission worked in favour of the incumbent regime even though many of these programmes had earlier been internally criticised as being excessively 'populist'.

After growing by a record nine percent for four years in succession for the first time ever, the pace of growth of the Indian economy has decelerated with most of the world going into a recession mode. It was widely expected that the increase in food prices and the ongoing economic slowdown would contribute to anti-incumbency feelings against the Congress-led UPA government. Large sections of the Indian electorate were, however, far more charitable

towards the country's rulers and magnanimously accepted their explanation that the economic problems currently being faced by the country were not of their making. On hindsight, it is clear that the emphasis laid by the Congress on the UPA government's 'achievements' struck a positive chord with sections of the country's poor and *aam aadmi* (the common person) who voted for the party.

After the April-May 2004 general elections, the CPI-M-led Left Front, with more than 60 MPs, emerged as the biggest ally of the Congress in the formation of the UPA coalition that formed the national government in New Delhi. As stated, in the middle of 2008, the Left, ideologically opposed to India having close strategic relations with the United States, parted ways with the UPA after more than four years following sharp disagreements over the signing of a nuclear agreement with the American government then headed by George W. Bush. The UPA government completed the rest of its remaining term by winning a trust vote in the Lok Sabha in July 2008 with the support of MPs belonging to the SP (that had earlier gone along with the Left before doing a *volte face*, seen as a case of political opportunism) as well as cross-voting and defections – several opposition MPs voted for the incumbent government by going against the whips of their respective party leaders.

The UPA coalition contested the 2009 elections with some old allies (for example, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra), while parting ways with other old allies, for example, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), led by former Union Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), led by former Union Minister for Steel, Chemicals and Fertilisers, Ram Vilas Paswan, as well as the SP. The last three named parties went on to form a so-called 'Fourth Front'. The Congress also cemented ties with new allies (notably, the AITC in West Bengal and the National Conference (NC) in Jammu and Kashmir, India's northernmost state and the only province with a Muslim majority. After performing poorly in the 2009 elections, a number of erstwhile allies of the Congress, including the RJD, the LJP, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) (both in Tamil Nadu), expressed regrets for having parted ways with the UPA and promised unconditional support to the second Singh government. The SP and the BSP did the same, as a result of which the total number of MPs supporting the new UPA government rose from 262 before the elections to 322 afterwards, well above the 272 seats needed for a majority to form the government.

The manner in which the various allies of the UPA – both old and new – performed influenced the character of the government that was eventually formed after the elections. Thankfully for the UPA, all its constituents that broke away from the coalition before the polls performed poorly while those that went along with it (including new allies) came through with flying colours. The gains made by the DMK, the AITC and the NC worked to the benefit of the Congress and hence the UPA. The People's Democratic Party of Jammu and Kashmir, led by Mufti Muhammad Saeed, had broken away from the UPA in early-2009, when the Congress supported Farooq Abdullah's NC to help form the state government. The NC, in turn, joined the UPA and Farooq Abdullah was inducted into the Union Council of Ministers (sworn in after the polls) as a Minister of cabinet rank.

The electoral performance of the former partners of the Congress was a study in contrast. The RJD, which had won 24 seats (out of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar) in the 2004 elections, lost in as many as 20 constituencies, bringing down the party's tally to a meagre four MPs. The LJP was wiped out.

In Tamil Nadu, against all expectations, the ruling DMK-Congress coalition not only held its ground, but the DMK gained two seats with a tally of 18 when it was expected to lose substantially to its principal rival in the state, the AIADMK. The turbulent political situation in Sri Lanka and the conflict between the Sinhala-dominated majority with the Tamil ethnic minority was expected to influence politics in this southern Indian state against the incumbent regime. However, this did not take place. The AIADMK had failed to win a single Lok Sabha seat in 2004. This time, it secured just nine (out of the 39) seats in the state. The DMK's development agenda, coupled with its offers of freebies, including colour television sets to each family in the state, a monthly allowance for pregnant women, subsidised rice and free power to weavers, helped the DMK-Congress coalition considerably.

Both the MDMK and the PMK, erstwhile allies of the DMK who switched sides, lost seats in Tamil Nadu. The MDMK, which had won four seats in 2004, managed to win just one seat. The party's leader, Vaiko (one name) openly sympathised with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka and snapped ties with the UPA on the flimsy pretext that the UPA government had 'failed to redress the sufferings of the common people and to protect their interests'. He lost the elections. The MDMK had contested the 2004 elections as part of the UPA coalition and had been extending outside support to the government. The PMK, led by the father of the former Union Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss, broke away from the ruling DMK-Congress coalition in the state ostensibly over the issue of 'seat sharing' and decided to ally with the AIADMK. The PMK, which had won six seats in 2004, failed to win in even a single Lok Sabha constituency in Tamil Nadu in 2009.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress and the SP failed to arrive at a seat-sharing agreement. The SP wanted to concede no more than 17 seats to the Congress while the Congress was adamant on contesting no less than 25 seats. As already stated, the Congress fought the elections on its own and its performance exceeded even its most optimistic expectations. The decision of the Congress to ally with the AITC in West Bengal (which had earlier been a part of the BJP-led NDA) helped the combination to inflict a comprehensive defeat on the ruling Left Front in a state in which the anti-Left vote had been divided over the last three decades.

The amorphous non-Congress, non-BJP alliance, the Third Front, comprising the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)]; the CPI-M; the Communist Party of India (CPI); two other Left parties, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the All India Forward Bloc; the TDP; the Telengana Rashtra Samiti from Andhra Pradesh (that was part of the UPA between 2004 and 2006), the BSP and the AIADMK, had been formed with the expectation that, after the elections, it might attract some of the smaller partners of the UPA and the NDA in case neither the Congress nor the BJP obtained the requisite number of MPs to head coalitions that could form a stable government.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and BSP supremo Mayawati had ambitions of becoming the Prime Minister of India if a so-called Third Front coalition came to power. However, the impressive gains made by the Congress in that state put all such grandiose plans to rest. It seems that voters in many areas did not come out to vote in appreciable numbers. One reason could be that they were unhappy with the performance of the state government. Although Mayawati has been able to mobilise the *Dalits*, she has failed to broaden her party's support base among other social sections. An important factor for this was her decision to build grand monuments to *Dalit* leaders, including herself, instead of focussing on the improvement of the state's social and physical infrastructure.

The same story was repeated in the case of the Fourth Front, comprising the SP, the RJD, the LJP, and the new political outfit, led by film star Chiranjeevi in Andhra Pradesh, the Prajaraajyam Party (PRP). It was clear that the PRP and the SP had become part of the Fourth Front out of dire political compulsions. The PRP could not join the Third Front because of the presence of its main rival in the state, the TDP in the coalition. Similarly, the SP could not join the Third Front because of the presence of the BSP in it. The Fourth Front did not materialise because of the poor performance of the SP, the RJD and the LJP. While the number of MPs owing allegiance to the SP fell from 36 in 2004 to 23 in 2009, the number of RJD MPs decreased dramatically from 22 to four. The LJP was totally routed – its leader Ram Vilas Paswan (who had made it to the Guinness Book of World Records twice for the size of his victory margin and who was the only individual who remained a minister in the Union government continuously from May 1996 for 13 years until May 2009) also lost the elections.

The message that came out of the outcome of the 2009 elections was clear – opportunistic alliances did not find favour with voters.

The Bharatiya Janata Party and the National Democratic Alliance Coalition

The BJP, the second largest national party in India after the Congress, rose to prominence in the late-1980s and the early-1990s. Affiliated to the right-wing Hindu nationalist social organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its sister bodies, often described as the Sangh Parivar (or Sangh family), the BJP won only two seats in the 1984 general elections. After the *rath yatra* (journey of the chariot) led by Advani to build a temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, at the location where the Babri mosque had stood and which culminated in the demolition of the mosque in December 1992, the BJP grew as a significant force to reckon with in Indian politics, so much so that it became the single largest party (with 182 out of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha) after the two general elections that were held in quick succession in 1998 and 1999.

The BJP, under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee, who has a relatively more ‘liberal’ image in comparison to Advani, formed the NDA government in New Delhi and ruled the country continuously between March 1998 and May 2004. Vajpayee was, in fact, the first and only non-Congress Prime Minister of India to have completed a full term of five years (1999-2004). After the 2004 elections, the BJP became the second largest party in Parliament with 138 seats. The number of MPs owing allegiance to the party declined further to 116 in the fifteenth Lok Sabha.

As mentioned, in the 2009 elections, the BJP’s vote share dipped by almost 3.5 percentage points to 18.8 percent and the party lost 22 Lok Sabha seats. The 4.37 percentage point difference in the overall vote shares between the two largest political parties resulted in a difference of seven seats in 2004. However, in 2009, the gap in the vote-shares of the Congress and the BJP widened by almost 10 percentage points and resulted in a seat difference of 80 seats. The BJP lost seats in most of the major states of the country (see Table 2). The BJP’s tally of 116 seats is lower than what it had won in 1991 but higher, by just two seats, of what the Congress had won in 1999. Former Prime Minister Vajpayee, the moderate face of the party for nearly three decades, who had played the pivotal role in holding together the NDA alliance comprising 13 political parties, quietly slipped out of active politics due to his health and stepped into the shoes of an elderly statesman. Thus, this was the first election that the BJP contested without Vajpayee.

In 2009, there were changes in the composition of the NDA with some political parties deserting the alliance and new parties joining it. The BJP-led NDA's election campaign began with three new allies in the coalition – the Indian National Lok Dal in the northern state of Haryana, the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in the strategically important and insurgency infested north-eastern state of Assam. These were over and above its existing allies, the right-wing militant Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in the Sikh-dominated and relatively affluent northern state of Punjab and the JD(U) in Bihar.

The AITC in West Bengal had broken away from the NDA in 2007 while the BJD in Orissa parted ways with the BJP and the NDA more recently in March 2009. The TDP in Andhra Pradesh had also broken away from the NDA in 2005. Most of the current and former allies of the BJP in the NDA, barring the JD(U) and the BJD, performed poorly in the 2009 general elections resulting in the failure of the NDA to cobble up a respectable number of MPs in the Lok Sabha and crushing any chances it had of forming the government in New Delhi. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena, led by Bal Thackeray, could not improve its performance – it lost one seat. The Shiv Sena supremo's estranged nephew, Raj Thackeray, who had formed the breakaway Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, ate into the vote share of both the BJP and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. The BJP lost four seats in the state, bringing down its tally from 13 to nine and the party's vote share declined from 22.61 percent to 18.17 percent.

In the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the BJP lost seats despite winning provincial assembly elections in late-2008. The party's tally decreased from 25 seats to 16 out of a total of 29 seats in the state and its vote share decreased from 48.13 percent to 43.45 percent. In Rajasthan, the BJP suffered a huge defeat with the number of MPs of the party falling from 21 to four and its vote share came down from 49.01 percent to 36.57 percent. In Orissa, the BJP could not win even a single Lok Sabha seat – all its seven sitting MPs were defeated and the party's vote share decreased from 19.3 percent in 2004 to 16.83 percent. What hurt the BJP significantly was the fact that the BJD parted ways with it after an eleven-year-long alliance on the issue of attacks on Christians in the Kandhamal area in the state by right-wing extremists who were supposed to have their affiliations with the Sangh Parivar. The BJP's ally in Punjab, the SAD, lost half the seats it had won in 2004 and its tally came down from eight to four. The AGP, the BJP's ally in Assam, was able to win one seat against the two it won five years earlier.

It was only in a few states that the BJP and the NDA performed creditably. In Bihar, the JD(U)-BJP alliance, headed by Nitish Kumar, improved its performance significantly. The JD(U) had won only six Lok Sabha seats in 2004. This time round, the party won 20 seats, an impressive gain of 14 seats in a state with 40 MPs. The number of MPs owing allegiance to the BJP also rose from five to 12. The credit for this improvement goes largely to Nitish Kumar who was not particularly keen on the BJP's 'star' campaigner, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, visiting his state before the elections. He said he was happy with his state's own 'Modi' (referring to Sushil Modi, who leads the BJP in Bihar and is the Deputy Chief Minister in the province).

Narendra Modi, who became particularly controversial after the 2002 Hindu-Muslim communal riots in the highly industrialised but communally polarised western Indian state of Gujarat where he has been elected Chief Minister thrice in a row, was able to improve on his party's performance only slightly. In 2004, the BJP had won 14 out of the 26 Lok Sabha seats

in Gujarat. This number went up by one in 2009 although the party's vote share came down by around one percent.

In two other states, the incumbent BJP regimes performed well. In the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh (that was formed in 2000 out of Madhya Pradesh), the BJP was able to retain all the Lok Sabha seats it won in 2004 (10 out of 11). Chhattisgarh's Chief Minister Raman Singh's scheme of providing subsidised food grain to the poor in the state had (among other factors) contributed to his party and his government's electoral success. The dissensions within the opposition Congress in Chhattisgarh also helped the BJP. In Karnataka, the only state in southern India in which the BJP has been able to form a government, the BJP held its own, marginally improving its performance by returning 19 MPs, one more than in 2004.

Table 2: Performance of the BJP in Selected States

State	2004		Gain/Loss (Seats)	2009	
	Seats	Votes (%)		Seats	Votes (%)
Punjab	3	10.28	-2	1	10.06
Madhya Pradesh	25	48.13	-9	16	43.45
Maharashtra	13	22.61	-4	9	18.17
Gujarat	14	47.37	+1	15	46.52
Rajasthan	21	49.01	-17	4	36.57
Uttar Pradesh	10	22.17	0	10	17.50
Orissa	7	19.3	-7	0	16.89
Bihar	5	14.57	+7	12	13.93

The BJP's core ideology of Hindutva is often described as anti-minority and majoritarian by its political opponents, including the Congress and the Left. The party's spokespersons, however, claim that the BJP should not be described in such a manner and accuse its critics of 'demonising' and treating it like a political 'untouchable'. What cannot be denied is that large sections of the urban middle classes that had been attracted to the BJP because of its right-wing ideology, did not vote for the party in 2009, especially in the metropolitan cities of Delhi and Mumbai. The election campaign of the BJP was marked by shrillness and at least two of its prominent leaders, Advani and Narendra Modi, were not perceived as 'liberal' in comparison to Congress leaders such as Sonia Gandhi and Dr Singh. However, the BJP, it seems, gained nothing from such belligerent posturing.

The BJP's 81-year-old prime ministerial candidate Advani failed in his attempt to become acceptable to the Muslims. Recent attempts had been made by Advani to transform himself from a warrior for Hindutva (or Hindu-ness) to a secular and liberal politician. Conciliatory comments had been made by him during a visit to the mausoleum of Mohammed Ali Jinnah (the 'founding father' of Pakistan) in Karachi in June 2005. However, within his own ideological fraternity, so-called hardliners in the Sangh Parivar have criticised Advani for ignoring 'Hindu concerns' and allegedly 'overlooking Islamic terrorism and Christian evangelism'. Ironically, he was even termed a 'pseudo-secularist', a phrase he coined to castigate his political opponents in the Congress and the Left. It is further claimed that in attempting to present a secular image of itself like the Congress, the BJP lost votes of Hindus who together comprise over 80 percent of India's population of 1.1 billion. This is supposed to have alienated the 'core' Hindu constituency of the BJP while not helping the party gain Muslim votes either. The other interpretation of the BJP's failure to gain greater acceptance is

that substantial sections of ‘liberal’ Hindus in the country do not subscribe to the party’s overt or covert ‘communal’ positions.

By virtue of being declared Prime Minister in waiting, Advani’s opponents had many months to design a strategy to counter him. The BJP laid excessive emphasis on his pre-eminence, while the Congress used the campaign period to cleverly cover up the deficiencies of its five-year rule. Advani and other BJP leaders did talk of governance and development but their attempts to highlight the various lacunae and failures of the UPA government clearly did not impress large sections of the electorate in India. Many voters presumably felt the BJP’s own track record in this regard was not particularly noteworthy in comparison. The BJP did try and highlight the NDA government’s achievements – the nuclear tests in May 1998, the progress of the Golden Quadrilateral project to link all the four corners of the country by highways – but these attempts failed to leave a deep impression on many voters. Besides, sections of the poor perceived the BJP as being pro-rich.

The five years of the first UPA government had seen bomb blasts by terrorists in several important Indian cities such as Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Guwahati and Varanasi. The BJP did try and make ‘national security’ an election issue. Following the terrorist attack on Parliament House in December 2001, the NDA regime had launched ‘Operation Parakram’, the largest mobilisation of the armed forces since the 1971 war, which almost brought India and Pakistan to the brink of another war. After the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the BJP stepped up its criticism of the Congress for being ‘soft’ on terror. However, much of the electorate in the country apparently saw terrorism as an issue that transcended political barriers and did not apparently vote in favour of the BJP, at least not on this specific issue.

In the run-up to the elections, the BJP highlighted what were seen as ‘outdated’ issues to attack the Congress. One such issue related to Italian businessman Ottavio Quattrocchi, one of the prime suspects accused in the Bofors bribery scandal of the late-1980s and who is known for his proximity to Sonia Gandhi. A ‘red corner’ notice against him in Interpol was withdrawn by the Indian government before the elections. Advani also raised the issue of bringing back money that had been illegally stashed away by Indians in Switzerland bank accounts. However, this issue too evidently did not matter much to many voters. What possibly hurt the BJP more was that sections within the party promoted Narendra Modi as a ‘future Prime Minister’ of India at a time when Advani was himself aspiring for the same position. The infighting within the BJP intensified after the elections.

Again, as already mentioned, the American-style television debate that Advani invited Dr Singh to participate in did not materialise but in the verbal duels that followed, Dr Singh scored many brownie points. Both Dr Singh and Rahul Gandhi questioned Advani and the NDA on why they exchanged hostages for terrorists during the hijack of a Delhi-bound Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu in December 1999. Advani, who was then the Union Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, wrote later that he had not agreed with the exchange of hostages for terrorists and was unaware of it in his autobiography entitled *My Country, My Life*, while the then External Affairs Minister in the BJP-led coalition government, Jaswant Singh, maintained that the exchange of hostages was the best possible option for the government at that point of time.

During the election campaign, the BJP appeared a house divided between pro-changers, who argued in favour of a complete overhaul in the party’s outlook giving it a modern face, and

no-changers, who wanted the party to toe a hard Hindutva line. The BJP looked like a party with outmoded beliefs led by old leaders while the Congress appeared youthful and robust in contrast with new leaders who had a positive, modern view of India. Roughly 15 percent of the Indian electorate is in the 18-30 age group and the BJP's campaign centred considerably on an octogenarian Prime Minister-in-waiting. (This point need not be over-emphasised as India's current Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh was born on 26 September 1932.) The more germane point would be that the BJP failed to connect with growing sections of India's highly heterogeneous and diverse population, including its youth.

The Breakaway Groups of the National Democratic Alliance

Biju Janata Dal

On 7 March 2009, the BJD, a regional party, headed by Naveen Pattnaik (son of the late Biju Pattnaik), severed its eleven-year alliance with the BJP as the seat-sharing talks between the two parties collapsed. The BJP rejected the BJD's proposal for a lesser number of seats in both Lok Sabha and assembly segments than the previous ratio of 4:3. The two parties had contested the Lok Sabha elections in 1998, 1999 and 2004 together, winning the majority. In the Lok Sabha elections of 2004, the BJD had won 11 seats and the BJP seven by contesting in 12 and nine seats respectively. The breakaway of the BJD was a big blow to the NDA as the BJD was an old partner in the NDA. In the polls of 2009, the two parties fought independently; the BJD was able to win 14 seats in the state increasing its tally by three seats while its vote share increased from 30.02 percent to 37.23 percent. The Congress ate into the vote share of the BJP and increased its tally from two to six seats. Its vote share, however, decreased dramatically from 40.43 percent to 32.75 percent. The BJP was completely routed from the state – it lost all the seven seats it had won in the general elections of 2004 and its vote share also decreased from 19.3 to 16.89 percent. The BJD made it amply clear after the elections that it would not be part of a Congress-led or a BJP-led government at the centre.

Telugu Desam Party

The TDP in Andhra Pradesh had given outside support to the NDA government of 1999 with its 29 seats but had performed poorly in the general elections of 2004 by losing 24 seats. Its debacle in 2004 was a big blow for the NDA and dashed its hopes of forming a government in New Delhi. In the monsoon session of Parliament of 2005, the TDP decided not to continue as part of an NDA boycott of the Parliament. Speculation of an end to the NDA–TDP relationship was confirmed in August that year, when the BJP and the TDP contested local elections in Andhra Pradesh on their own. The TDP was a founding member of the Third Front in 2009. It gained one seat in the general elections of 2009 to take its tally to six seats. However, its vote share decreased from 33.12 percent in 2004 to 24.93 percent in 2009. The newly formed Prajaraajyam Party took most of TDP's caste-based vote share away, mostly in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. The incumbent Congress Chief Minister, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, did remarkably well both in the Lok Sabha elections by bagging 33 (out of 42) seats for his party with nearly 39 percent of the votes, as well as in the provincial assembly elections that were held simultaneously.

All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

In Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK joined hands with the Congress in the 1999 general elections but subsequently re-joined the NDA alliance in the 2004 elections. In 1999, the decision of

the AIADMK, led by Jayalalithaa, to withdraw support to the NDA government precipitated a political crisis. The Vajpayee government lost a vote of confidence in the 543-member Lok Sabha by a single vote on 17 April that year. After the AIADMK party broke away from the NDA, it drew a complete blank in the Lok Sabha elections that year. Prior to the 2009 general elections, it joined the Third Front and teamed up with not just the Left but also the PMK and the MDMK (both former allies of the DMK) in Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK won nine (out of the 39) Lok Sabha seats in the state in the general elections of 2009 but its vote share decreased from 29.77 percent in 2004 to 22.88 percent in 2009.

Table 3: Performance of Various Regional Political Parties

Party	2004	2009	Gain/Loss (Seats)
AIADMK	0	9	+9
AGP	2	1	-1
AITC	2	19	+17
BJD	11	14	+3
BSP	19	20	+1
DMK	16	18	+2
JD(U)	8	20	+12
J&K NC	2	3	+1
JMM	5	2	-1
PMK	6	0	-6
RJD	24	4	-20
SAD	8	4	-4
SHS	12	11	-1
SP	36	23	-13
TDP	5	6	+1

Abbreviations: AIADMK: All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Khazagam; AGP: Asom Gana Parishad; AITC: All India Trinamool Congress; BJD: Biju Janata Dal; BSP: Bahujan Samaj Party; DMK: Dravida Munnetra Khazagam; JD(U): Janata Dal (United); J&K NC: Jammu and Kashmir National Conference; JMM: Jharkhand Mukti Morcha; PMK: Pattali Makkal Katchi; RJD: Rashtriya Janata Dal; SAD: Shiromani Akali Dal; SHS: Shiv Sena; SP: Samajwadi Party; TDP: Telugu Desam Party.

The Left Parties

There are four major Left parties in India – the two communist parties, the CPI-M, the CPI, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB). These parties that are part of the Left Front have been running the state government in West Bengal since 1977, a record in Indian politics. The Left Front also has similar formations in Tripura (in north-east India) that has a majority ethnic Bengali population and in Kerala, one of the most literate Indian states in south India. The 2004 general elections saw the Left becoming more powerful than ever before in national politics with the four parties together obtaining 61 seats in the Lok Sabha. The first Singh government, formed by the Congress-led UPA coalition, was completely dependent on the ‘outside’ support extended by these four Left parties for a majority in the Lower House of Parliament, that is, until the Left withdrew support over the nuclear-deal issue in the middle of 2008. Prakash Karat, the Edinburgh-educated general secretary of the CPI-M, together with A. B. Bardhan, the general secretary of the CPI, spearheaded the formation of the non-Congress, non-BJP Third Front – an alliance of several largely-opportunistic regional parties including the BSP, the TDP and the AIADMK.

Since the Left performed poorly in its bastions, the states of West Bengal and Kerala (though it managed to retain both Lok Sabha seats in Tripura) (see Table 4) and since most of the regional parties that could have been were a part of the Third Front also fared badly, all hopes of forming a Third Front government in New Delhi were dashed. While the CPI lost six seats which brought down its tally from 10 seats in the general elections of 2004 to four seats in 2009, the CPI(M) lost 27 seats from 43 in 2004 to 16 in 2009. The RSP and the AIFB won three seats each in 2004 and their tally came down to two each in 2009.

Table 4: Performance of the Left Parties in Selected States

State	2004		Gain (Seats)	2009	
	Seats	Votes (%)		Seats	Votes (%)
Kerala	15 (CPI 3, CPI-M 12)	39.41	-11	4 (CPI-M 4)	37.92
Tripura	2 (CPI-M 2)	68.8	0	2 (CPI-M 2)	61.69
West Bengal	35 (CPI-M 26, CPI 3, AIFB 3, RSP 3)	61.27	-20	15 (CPI-M 9, CPI 2, AIFB 2, RSP 2)	43.30

In West Bengal, where the Left has been in power since 1977, although the AITC was expected to perform better than it had in 2004, it surprised many by winning 19 seats (against only one five years earlier), thereby routing the Communists. The Left parties saw their combined vote share decrease from 50.8 percent to 43.3 percent in the state. The signs had been ominous for the Left Front in West Bengal when there had earlier been massive protests against the state government over the issue of forced acquisition of farmland in Nandigram and Singur to set up industrial ventures. Tata Motors was supposed to manufacture the Nano, the world’s cheapest car, in Singur. However, the company faced widespread protests from agitating farmers who accused it of forcefully grabbing their land. Banerjee, who is at present Union Cabinet Minister for Railways in the new UPA government, spearheaded the protests.

Tata Motors withdrew its plans to set up a factory to manufacture the Nano from West Bengal and went to Gujarat, resulting in Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's intentions of industrialising West Bengal falling apart.

In Nandigram, more than 4,000 heavily armed police personnel stormed the area with the aim of stamping out protests against the West Bengal government's plans to expropriate 10,000 acres (40 square kilometres) of land for a Special Economic Zone to be developed by the Indonesian Salim Group. The police shot dead at least 14 villagers and wounded 70 more. The Left Front government initially did not accept full responsibility for the incidents in Nandigram. In spearheading the opposition against the state government, Banerjee was helped by the cadres of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), a radical left group that believes in armed revolution. Large sections of the rural population of West Bengal, traditional supporters of the Left for its policy of land re-distribution, granting of legal rights to share-croppers and democratic decentralisation during the 1970s and 1980s, felt that they had been adversely impacted by the industrialisation programme of the state government.

The debacle of the Left in West Bengal was evidently due to the failure of the local government to convince many voters that its industrial agenda was an inclusive one that would benefit the underprivileged. The Left Front became a victim of a strong surge of anti-incumbency after a 32-year-long rule in the state. Importantly, the anti-Left vote in West Bengal (that used to be deeply divided) consolidated in 2009 with the Congress and the AITC coming together. The combined tally of all the Left parties in West Bengal in the general elections of 2009 was 15 seats, down from 35 (out of 42) seats in 2004.

In November 2008, the Maoists attacked a convoy of Chief Minister Bhattacharjee in Salboni, near Lalgarh in West Medinipur district in the state, after he had laid the foundation stone of a steel plant. The Chief Minister and two Union Ministers, the then Steel Minister, Ram Vilas Paswan, and his junior Minister of State, Jitin Prasada, who were accompanying him, escaped unhurt. The police, thereafter, indulged in atrocities in the Lalgarh area while attempting to apprehend those responsible for the earlier attack. A *Police Santrash Birodhi Janashadharanar Committee* (PSJBC), meaning Committee against Police Atrocities, a Maoist-backed organisation, was formed by the villagers with Chhatradhar Mahato, a former member of the AITC, as its convener. This organisation threw out government officials from the area and began involving itself in several developmental activities. The Left alleged that the AITC had extended overt and covert support to the PSJBC and the Maoists. In the third week of June 2009, federal paramilitary forces laid siege on Lalgarh to 'liberate' it. The entire episode reflected poorly on the ability of the state government to effectively govern the state.

Similarly, in Kerala, infighting within the Left parties in general and the CPI-M in particular, contributed to the poor performance of the Communists. Kerala's Chief Minister, V. S. Achuthanandan, and Secretary of the CPI(M) Kerala state committee, Pinarayi Vijayan, did not see eye to eye with each other and both were once even suspended from the party. Achuthanandan's supporters in the party were not in the least unhappy when Vijayan was accused of corruption in a criminal case relating to the establishment of a power project in the state. The case was instituted by the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's premier police investigating agency. As mentioned earlier, the Left Democratic Front lost 11 seats in Kerala and the coalition's seat count was reduced to four (out of 20 Lok Sabha seats in the state).

The Dark Side of the Elections

India has elected more MPs with criminal records in the fifteenth Lok Sabha than it did in the fourteenth Lok Sabha. The Association of Democratic Reforms, a non-government organisation, studied the affidavits of 533 declared winners of the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and found that 150 of the elected MPs (or over 28 percent) have criminal charges pending against them. Of these, 73 members have ‘serious’ criminal charges against them. In comparison, the fourteenth Lok Sabha had 128 MPs with criminal charges, out of which 55 MPs had charges of a ‘serious’ nature. The electorate of the country has elected 17.2 percent additional MPs with criminal charges and the percentage of MPs with serious criminal charges has gone up by 30.9 percent in the new Lok Sabha.

The two biggest national political parties, the Congress and the BJP, together accounted for more than 80 MPs having criminal antecedents. Of the 116 BJP MPs in the Lok Sabha, 42 have criminal charges against them. The Congress has 206 MPs, of which 41 have criminal charges. Out of the eleven MPs belonging to the Shiv Sena, eight have criminal charges against them; a whopping 72.73 percent of its MPs. The maximum number of criminal charges is against a Congress MP from Gujarat, Vitthalbhai Hansrajbhai Radadiya, who has a total of 16 criminal cases pending against him, of which five cases are of a ‘serious’ nature. The maximum number of serious charges is against Jagdis Sharma of the JD(U) from Jehanabad, Bihar. Among the states, Uttar Pradesh tops the list for having elected 30 candidates with criminal charges to the Parliament. It is followed by Maharashtra (23), Bihar (17), and Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat with 11 each.

Although the country has one of the richest democratic traditions in the world, where even a person with no assets at all can be elected to the highest office of the country, the trend of the just concluded Lok Sabha elections presents a different picture – politics is the privilege of the rich. A total of 300 ‘crorepatis’ (one having movable and immovable assets and cash valued at over Rs 10 million or about US\$200,000) have been elected to the new Lok Sabha, a jump of nearly 95 percent over the 128 crorepatis who had been elected to the fourteenth Lok Sabha.

The MP with the most assets is Namma Nageswara Rao (of the TDP), elected from Khammam, Andhra Pradesh, who has declared assets of Rs 173 crore. He is followed by Naveen Jindal (of the Congress) from Kurukshetra, Haryana, who has declared assets of Rs 131 crore. The Congress tops the list with 138 crorepatis while the BJP has 58 crorepatis. The SP and the BSP have 14 and 13 crorepatis respectively. Among states, the maximum crorepatis are from Uttar Pradesh (52), followed by Maharashtra (37), Andhra Pradesh (31) and Karnataka (25). All seven MPs from the National Capital Territory of Delhi are crorepatis. The poorest MP is Chandrahas Mahant of the Congress, from Korba in Chhattisgarh who has just Rs 12,000 to his credit.

Despite these negative trends, there are some positive trends too in the fifteenth Lok Sabha. The number of women MPs in the Lok Sabha has gone up to a record 59, up by 14 seats from the 45 in the previous Lok Sabha. This is the first time that women MPs constitute more than 10 percent of the total Lok Sabha seats.

For the record, there are 130 postgraduate MPs and 23 MPs with doctoral degrees. The number of graduates is 237 while 47 have completed higher-secondary education. There is only one illiterate MP in the new Lok Sabha – Pakodilal from Robertsganj in Uttar Pradesh.

The Anti-Incumbency Factor

There are some who argue that anti-incumbency is an irrational and unpredictable aspect of the reality of Indian politics and that the real reasons why voters elect or defeat candidates of political parties are many, complex and often defy simple explanations. It is contended that it is difficult for an elected representative to live up to the aspirations of ordinary voters. To believe that anti-incumbency breeds inaction, if not corruption, on the part of an MP or a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) would perhaps be an excessively cynical contention, although one must acknowledge that there is more than an element of truth in such a viewpoint.

Over the past decade and a half, a proportion varying between 40 percent and half the MPs and MLAs in the country were not re-elected. The overwhelming majority of such MPs and MLAs were rejected by the electorate and only a small number of them failed to get elected because they were denied 'tickets' to contest by their respective political parties. In each one of the last four Lok Sabhas prior to the fifteenth Lok Sabha which were constituted in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004, there were approximately 250 new faces in the Lower House of Parliament. There were 321 new faces in the fourteenth Lok Sabha in 2004 which included 230 first-time MPs. In the fifteenth Lok Sabha, there are 375 new faces which include 302 first-time MPs.

A positive spin can be imparted to the phenomenon of anti-incumbency in India. If elected representatives intend to improve their chances of being re-elected, they should instead spend the funds made available to them in an efficient and equitable manner, promote good governance by reducing the incidence of corruption and ensure the development of their area's social infrastructure (education and health-care) as well as physical infrastructure (electricity, roads and water). It may also be contended that most voters in the country do not, in fact, have exaggerated expectations of their elected representatives at either the national or provincial level. They only expect their MP or MLA to listen to them, be relatively responsive and not make tall promises before elections that they do not intend to keep.

Anti-incumbency can be countered by good governance, which on occasions, can transcend political ideology. A divided opposition and ineffective leadership are also important considerations that influence voting patterns. As for the proverbial ordinary voter in India, she or he may be poor and illiterate but have demonstrated over and over again that they cannot always be easily befooled nor swayed by emotive issues. Many political observers tend to divide the heterogeneous population of India into conveniently-clubbed 'vote banks' based on caste, community and religion. The reality of the country is, however, far more complex. India's voters are certainly becoming increasingly intelligent and mature with each passing election.

Conclusion

The outcome of the fifteenth general elections in India has surprised political pundits and lay observers alike. Few expected the Congress to gain as substantially as it did. The second Singh government is expected to impart greater stability to the polity of the world's largest democracy. The economic and social policies of the government are expected to be centrist with a tilt towards the left. This is in view of the political success of the welfare programmes that have been initiated over the last five years, including those aimed at farmers and the underprivileged.

Surrounded by troubled neighbours, the new government in India is confronting major challenges in reviving the country's sagging economy. Dr Singh is himself a renowned economist. What will benefit the leadership of the Congress is that the country's centre-left 'grand old party' is leading a coalition government with a comfortable majority. The Congress alone has 206 members out of the 543 MPs. While political analysts had anticipated a fractured mandate, Indian voters delivered an unexpectedly decisive mandate in favour of a Congress-led federal government.

While India is the second-fastest growing economy in the world among large countries after China, a substantial section of the country's 1.1 billion people is extremely poor – at least one out of four survives on less than US\$1 a day and more than two out of three Indians live on US\$2 a day. “The five years in front of us could well be a decisive half-decade,” Dr Singh said after his election, adding, “If we can sustain the growth rates of the last five years, we can reduce poverty, create new employment, accelerate rural development and industrialization and transform the lives of our people...We must grasp the nettle firmly and forge ahead.”

The rate of growth of India's economy picked up from the early 1990s, after a phase of 'liberalisation' and reduction of controls that had been presided over by Dr Singh who became Finance Minister in an earlier Congress government after a long stint as a technocrat and academic. Despite the market-friendly policies pursued by Dr Singh and some of his colleagues, there is a substantial section in the ruling Congress that remains wedded to the party's socialist past.

After Dr Singh became Prime Minister for the first time five years ago, his administration was attacked by his political opponents on the right (that is, the BJP) as well as the left (namely, the Communist parties that withdrew support to the government in July over the nuclear deal with the United States). However, the just-concluded elections have made both the right and the left considerably weaker after a mandate that is widely perceived to have been in favour of centrist policies and political stability.

The challenge for Dr Singh's government would be to meet the aspirations of India's youthful and upwardly mobile middle classes while widening social safety nets for the poor, especially those living in rural areas. In many respects, the tasks that lie ahead for the newly elected regime are evident and these are to revamp the country's inadequate social infrastructure (notably basic health-care, sanitation and primary education) as well as its rickety physical infrastructure (electricity, drinking water facilities and roads).

On the foreign policy front, Dr Singh will have to cautiously deal with neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan where Islamic fundamentalists are threatening to over-run both countries. In Sri Lanka, located on the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, the quarter-century militant movement to create a new nation for ethnic Tamils living in the northern part of the island nation may have been finally crushed by the military, but problems of providing humanitarian assistance to thousands displaced by the conflict continue. Governance in another country neighbouring India, Nepal, is yet to stabilise after a Maoist political party withdrew from the government following differences with army bosses. In Myanmar, which shares a border with India's north-east, a military junta remains firmly entrenched despite periodic outbursts of protest from pro-democracy forces that have rallied around Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for over a decade. Among India's neighbours,

Bangladesh is arguably the most politically stable after the pro-India Awami League was elected to power with a sweeping majority in December 2008.

In order to ensure political stability in a restive subcontinent while protecting India from the worst ravages of the ongoing worldwide economic crisis, Dr Singh has more than enough on his hands in his second term as Prime Minister of the world's second most-populous nation-state.

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