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General Election in India—Consequences for Foreign Policy

by Patryk Kugiel

The world's largest democratic election is taking place in India between 16 April and 13 May, with contestants including the secular Indian National Congress (INC), the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an array of smaller regional and communist parties. Whoever wins, the new government will be faced with tasks which include normalizing relations with Pakistan and defining the country's future commitments in Afghanistan. A major problem, though, may be posed by the instability of the future government, and the resulting weakening of India's international position.

Indian Democracy. India is among the oldest democracies in Asia functioning without major disturbances, with only a single break in 1975–1977 (when state of emergency was declared). Despite severe domestic constraints (such as widespread poverty, social inequalities, pervasive illiteracy or vast diversity in ethnicity, language and religion, which breeds recurrent cases of communal violence), the Indian system, largely patterned after the British parliamentary model, has proved surprisingly effective. Its vitality is reflected in the strong and autonomous media, a non-politicized army, an independent judiciary, and in regularly held free elections.

Over the past two decades, the Indian political scene has seen dynamic changes leading to its fragmentation and regionalization. In the 1990s, after its 40-year domination, the Indian National Congress was confronted with the emergence of a new political force guided by Hindu nationalism, the Bharatiya Janata Party. With single-seat constituencies, a federal structure of the country (28 states and 7 union territories), and a wide diversification of society, the importance has increased of state- and caste-based parties, representing the interests of individual regional and social groups. The political system has, therefore, been evolving away from a single-party one towards, first, a two-party and then a multi-party system—and a coalition nature of cabinets has been their constant characteristic for two decades now. As a result, the formation of wide electoral blocs has played an important role in the run-up to successive elections.

Electoral Campaign. A total of 543 seats in the lower house of parliament, Lok Sabha, are contested (two more MPs are appointed by the president) in the present election, which, with 714 million eligible voters, is the largest democratic project in history. For security and organizational reasons, it is held in five phases in various parts of India, between 16 April and 13 May. The official results will be published on 16 May.

Seven national parties and more than a thousand regional and local groupings have entered the fray, but it is the three major coalitions that really count: the governing United Progressive Alliance (UPA), rallying around the Congress party; the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which includes the Bharatiya Janata Party; and the Third Front, a loose coalition of communist and regional parties whose major common feature is opposition to the dominance of the two biggest players. The major issues of the campaign taking place amidst the global economic crisis and after the tragic terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, are the economy and security.¹ But national topics have largely been overshadowed by regional and local ones—improving some groups' status, access to education, health care, water, electricity, etc.—and how these have been utilized during the campaign will

¹ P. Kugiel, "The Long-term Consequences of the Mumbai Terrorist Attacks," *Bulletin* (PISM) No. 2 (2), January 9, 2009.

have a decisive impact on election results. Except for the communist parties, which criticize what they perceive as the country's too close relations with the U.S., no contestant has called for any perceptible switch in Indian foreign policy, and public opinion polls held prior to the election put the UPA narrowly in the lead.

Election Results. No party stands any chance of winning a majority of the seats (at least 273) which would allow it to rule single-handedly, so the final winner of the election will not necessarily be the party with the highest voter support, but the one that manages to build the broadest governing coalition. This means that any of the following three scenarios is possible. First, the centrist INC enjoys the biggest chances to stay in power. It can participate in forming a successive government, even if it loses to the BJP, but such an outcome will hinge on the performance of its UPA partners and probably on additional backing from other parties, which did not rule out post-election coalition talks with the Congress. Manmohan Singh would then stay on in his capacity as prime minister. The second scenario is one of a comeback of the nationalist BJP (which ruled between 1998 and 2004), with Lal Krishna Advani designated as the PM. This, however, would require a pronounced electoral victory, given the BJP's smaller chances of winning over new political allies in view of the stark differences with many regional and communist parties over secularism. If none of the two major actors improves on, or repeats, their respective 2004 results (145 seats for the Congress, 138 seats for the BJP), the third scenario will become feasible: a government without their participation, formed by a wide coalition of regional and communist parties. But unless clear-cut winners emerge from the polling, the new government may prove weak and unstable, thus necessitating a fresh election.

Foreign Policy Consequences. Under the first two scenarios, no major changes in India's foreign policy should be expected. If the post-1998 history is to be any guide, the BJP and the Congress are at one on this policy's main lines and objectives: building good-neighborly relations in South Asia; bolstering the strategic partnership with the U.S., while at the same time developing good relations with Russia, China and the European Union; going on with the reform process and fuller integration with the global economy; and playing a bigger role internationally. Possible differences may emerge over accentuation or methods with which to pursue the foreign policy goals, but not over its basics. A comeback of the BJP, a party which openly seeks global power status for India, would lead to a more active and assertive position in international relations, possibly producing disputes with the U.S. over, for instance, the Indian nuclear program (where the BJP wants independence and shuns international constraints) or the policy towards Iran (the BJP rules out an alliance with the U.S. at the expense of deteriorating relations with Iran). In relations with Pakistan both parties will seek an improvement, but a return to the peace process, suspended in late 2008, is possible only on the condition that the perpetrators of the Mumbai terrorist attacks are punished and the terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan is dismantled. The BJP, however, has been extending the list of its demands (e.g. to include the handing over of all perpetrators of attacks on Indian territory) and takes a more critical stance towards Pakistan, which will make normalization a more difficult task in the event of its victory. And Indian-Pakistani relations will further deteriorate if a BJP cabinet fulfils the promise of Jammu and Kashmir's fuller integration with India, or if it adopts a more active policy towards Afghanistan, including a decision to send a military contingent there.

The biggest changes would take place if power were to be grabbed by a coalition of regional and communist parties, which have precious little experience in foreign affairs and which are guided by ideological premises. This would open the road to undermining the partnership with the U.S. (including a withdrawal from the nuclear deal), halting the processes of Indian economy's globalization and returning to the traditional policy of non-alignment (including a reduction of India's activities on the international forum). But the constraints of acting within a broad coalition and a probable dependence on external support by one of the main parties would narrow the government's room for foreign policy turnabouts.