

The 14th Election to India's Lower House

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The election to India's lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha), which took place in five phases between April 20 and May 20, 2004, resulted in three major surprises. First, contrary to all forecasts, the opposition Congress Party and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) defeated the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Second, Manmohan Singh became India's first Sikh prime minister. And third, against all expectations, the country's communist parties polled their best results ever.

The election's outcome underlined the trend towards regionalization of India's party system and strengthened the country's secular forces. But voters once again failed to produce clear majorities. The new Congress Party-led minority government will have to depend on cooperation with the communist parties. Thanks to the basic consensus among the large parties concerning key foreign and economic issues, the liberalization and reform of India's economy will continue. However, future economic policy will pay greater attention to rural areas.

Electoral successes at the state level in late 2003, India's sound economy, and the rapprochement with Pakistan had led the BJP to call an early election to the Lok Sabha for the spring of 2004. All of the polls predicted the governing coalition's re-election and showed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee running ahead of Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, by a comfortable margin.

The BJP's defeat

The BJP's calculations, which relied on a "feel-good factor" generated by positive economic trends and on an election campaign

centred on Prime Minister Vajpayee, did not pay off. The campaign slogan "India shining" appealed to middle-class, urban voters, but not to people in rural areas. Little sign of the country's high economic growth and successes in the information technology sector was to be found beyond the cities. Discussions of transforming secular India into a Hindu state – a vision to which the BJP owed its success in the 1990s – hardly played a role in this election. The BJP government had increasingly distanced itself from Hindu-nationalist groups during its time in office.

The Congress Party clearly succeeded in defeating the BJP by employing the govern-

The results of the 14th parliamentary to India's lower house (Lok Sabha)*

<i>Party/Alliance</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Percentage of vote</i>	<i>Party/Alliance</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Percentage of vote</i>
UPA	221	35.82	Left-wing parties	61	8.34
Congress Party	145	26.69	CPI-M	43	5.69
RJD	23	2.22	CPI	10	1.40
DMK	16	1.82	Additional parties**	8	1.25
Additional parties**	37	5.09	Other parties	71	19.93
NDA	189	35.91	SP	36	4.33
BJP	138	22.16	BSP	19	5.33
Shiv Sena	12	1.82	Additional parties**	16	10.27
BJD	11	1.31			
TDP	5	3.06			
Additional parties**	23	7.56			
Total				542***	100.00

* Total seats: 545 as of May 28, 2004.

** Including independent candidates.

*** Two members of parliament are to be appointed. Additional polling is to be held in one constituency.

ing coalition's own weapon of choice: the art of forging alliances. In the lower house, the Congress Party emerged as the largest party with 145 seats (1999: 114) while the Congress Party-led UPA won a total of 221 seats. The BJP returned 138 deputies to parliament (1999: 182) but together with its alliance partners in the NDA secured only 189 seats. Both of the large parties lost ground among the electorate, with the BJP and the Congress Party receiving a combined total of just under 49 percent of all votes cast. The regional parties that contested the election outside the two main party alliances won 71 seats. In all, the regional parties boosted their share of the vote by 37 percent. The different left-wing parties were able to win a total of 61 seats, 43 of which went to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). The left-wing parties made their best showing ever, but they were able to increase their share of the vote only slightly. Thirty-nine parties and independent candidates are represented in the new parliament.

The growing importance of the regional parties indicates that the states are increasingly becoming a key political arena, where the fate of the national government

in New Delhi can also be decided. Several factors at the state level helped shape the outcome of this election, for example, the anti-incumbency factor with state governments that was the case in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh; election promises within the party alliances as in Orissa and Bihar; and caste and religion issues like in Uttar Pradesh. As a result, the BJP could not capitalize on its successes and ultimately ended up losing ground in populous northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as well. Coalition partners such as the ruling AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh also suffered heavy defeats.

The election made clear that India's "second democratic revolution" i.e. growing influence of disadvantaged social classes is still underway. The strong showing made by the regional parties has given them more clout. Parties such as Samajwadi Party (SP) or the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are particularly important, since they represent the lower castes in states such as Uttar Pradesh, whose 80 deputies make up the largest state delegation in the Lok Sabha. Their successes were largely responsible for the NDA's defeat. The same goes for the

success of the communist parties. The CPI-M relies on certain castes and social groups in its strongholds of West Bengal and Kerala that it has also become a regional party. By contrast, the BJP remains a party of the upper castes and the more affluent, urban middle-class. This time around, the Congress Party was able to win over disadvantaged castes, tribal groups, and religious minorities such as the Muslims.

The problems of building a government

With the victory of the Congress Party and the UPA, Sonia Gandhi unexpectedly became the lead candidate for the office of prime minister. The Italian-born widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was murdered in 1991, had turned down this office once before. She has been actively engaged in Congress Party politics only since the second half of the 1990s. Because she lagged behind Prime Minister Vajpayee in all of the polls, Sonia Gandhi did not run in the campaign as her party's lead candidate. The BJP and Hindu-nationalist groups made an election issue of her Italian origin, but this appears not to have left much of an impression on the electorate. Sonia Gandhi cited personal reasons for ultimately rejecting the post of prime minister. The emotionally heated debate over her foreign origins sparked by the new opposition may have encouraged her to make this move. Foreign policy decisions taken by a government under her leadership could have been discredited as a "sell out of national interests by a foreigner."

With Manmohan Singh, who is considered the architect of India's economic liberalization of 1991, a member of the Sikh minority was elected prime minister of India for the first time. The most important ministerial posts were filled with experienced politicians from the Congress Party: Shivraj Pantil became interior minister, P. Chidambaram was given the post of finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee took

over as defence minister, and K. Natwar Singh became the new foreign minister. The Ministry of Agriculture went to Sharad Pawar of the National Congress Party (NCP), a splitter group from the Congress Party. The Ministry of Disinvestment, which oversaw privatisation, was disbanded and its responsibilities turned over to the Ministry of Finance.

The new government also reflects changes within the electorate. Three Dalits, "untouchables" from the lower castes, and seven Muslims are represented in the Council of Ministers. Of the council's 68 members, 28 officials are cabinet-level. The coalition parties from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which contributed considerably to the UPA's victory, have 12 ministers, while only one minister comes from Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state.

Because the UPA does not enjoy a majority in parliament, it will have to depend on cooperation with the left-wing parties under the leadership of the CPI-M. The left-wing parties did not formally join the government, primarily because the CPI-M and the Congress Party are bitter rivals in states such as Kerala and West Bengal. Both sides have agreed to a Common Minimum Programme (CMP), which lays the foundation for the government's future work. Sonia Gandhi was elected to chair the coordination between the UPA and the left-wing parties. Although this is not an official government post, she should wield considerable influence in this position.

Domestic and foreign policy challenges

Like all governments since 1991, the UPA will also face the Herculean task of combining continued economic liberalization with improvements in the majority of the population's social situation. Prime Minister Singh and Finance Minister Chidambaram stand for continuity in the economic reform process, above all with regard to the outside world. They are sticking to the goal of 7-8 percent economic growth in the next

few years. By contrast, the influence of the regional and left-wing parties, which are pushing for improving their constituents' economic and social conditions, has found expression in the CMP.

Among its goals, the CMP foresees a state programme for minimal employment of 100 days per year, in order to cope with rural poverty and migration. Agriculture, still the main source of income for 60 per cent of India's population, is to be promoted by infrastructure and credit programmes. The situation of women is to be improved through a 33-percent quota for parliaments at the national and state level. The corresponding regulations for communal self-government have already gone into effect. The controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) is to be rescinded and the privatisation of profitable state-owned enterprises will not be continued.

The UPA and the left-wing parties, which stand for the strengthening of secular traditions, have rejected the reorganization of school curricula along the lines of Hindu-nationalist ideals, a process begun under the BJP. Whether communal disturbances between Hindus and Muslims and excesses against Christians will abate, will also depend on the BJP's future strategy. Now in the opposition, the BJP could again be tempted to play the religious card more forcefully. Representatives of radical Hindu-nationalist groups argue that the main reason for the BJP's defeat was that the party did not make Hindu-nationalism its main issue in the election.

The UPA aspires to an independent course in foreign policy. It supports a multipolar international order and advocates strengthening regional cooperation within the framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The process of rapprochement with rivals Pakistan and China, as begun by the BJP, will continue under the UPA. The new foreign minister, Natwar Singh, who has many years of diplomatic experience in dealing with both nations, represents continuity. The close ties to Israel may

again be loosened, since the UPA sides more clearly with the concerns of the Palestinians than does the BJP. The future shape of relations with the United States will only emerge after the U.S. election in November. The explicit reference to Russia and Europe in the CMP suggests that there are new opportunities for German and European policymakers to build on relations with India.

Perspectives

The election has shown that India, in spite of all its successes in the field of information technology, is still a developing country; that high economic growth is not to be equated with reducing poverty; and that the leap from an agrarian society to a service-based society is not an easy one to make. India's political landscape remains complex and unpredictable, especially since the regional parties have gained in importance. The UPA minority government faces the challenge of leading a coalition government that must take into account very different regional and local conditions. The 14th election to the Indian lower house has again demonstrated Indian democracy's ability to function. Tragically, given all previous experience on the Indian sub-continent, the new government will also find it difficult to fulfil the hopes of large groups of voters who wish to see their standard of living improve.

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