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Indian General Elections 2009 – Key Issues That Could Influence Voting Behaviour

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Preface

India will hold its 15th general elections from 16 April to 13 May 2009. The elections will take place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues will influence the elections. The exercise will be impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

As India moves into the election mode, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) is bringing out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the forthcoming elections. These will include, among others, the key national and regional parties, and their strategies, key political personalities, and the issues that are likely to have an impact on the elections.

ISAS had earlier prepared three papers, providing an overview of India's political parties; the role of the youth in India's elections; and the economic backdrop to the general elections. This fourth paper in the series examines the key issues that could influence voting behaviour in the elections.

Introduction

The 15th general elections in India will be held in five phases between 16 April and 13 May 2009; and the results of voting in the world's largest democracy will be declared on 16 May 2009. Political parties all over the country, both national and regional, are not only drawing up their election manifestoes, but are also firming up campaign strategies and finalising messaging programmes. The larger national political parties are also busy putting together alliances with smaller regional parties in the hope of winning elections in a sufficiently large number of parliamentary constituencies to enable a stable coalition to come to power in New Delhi. However, this may not happen and the likelihood of political instability of the kind seen in India between 1996 and 1999 cannot be ruled out.

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Predicting voting behaviour is a hazardous exercise in the best of times, particularly so when the Indian polity has become fragmented. The opinion polls that have been conducted so far indicate that none of the three dominant coalitions – the Congress party-led centrist United Progressive Alliance (UPA); the right-wing, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA); and the amorphous centre-left, anti-Congress, anti-BJP Third Front – are likely to obtain anywhere near a comfortable majority (above 272 seats) in the 543-member Lok Sabha or ‘House of the People’, India’s Lower House of Parliament.

In recent years, voter behaviour in India has been highly unpredictable with opinion pollsters, psephologists and political pundits going completely wrong in their calculations of power equations. Nevertheless, a concatenation of issues of both national and regional importance influence electoral behaviour and a brief overview of these issues could provide pointers to how the Indian voters could exercise their franchise in the forthcoming general elections.

Four points need to be emphasised at the outset. First, it is likely that not one, or even a few, but a variety of issues, that is, political, economic, socio-cultural and security-related, could influence voter behaviour and would decide which coalition comes to power. Secondly, it would be accurate to perceive the next elections as not one but a combination of elections at local, provincial and regional levels whose outcomes would have to be aggregated across 28 states and seven Union territories to determine the contours of the next federal government in India. Thirdly, pre-election alliances may not necessarily translate into post-election coalitions because of the possibility of shifting allegiances and new coalitions that seek and obtain ‘outside’ support from one or more political parties or formations. In other words, the political situation in India in the run-up to the April-May 2009 elections is exceedingly fluid, holding out a myriad of possibilities for the future. Finally, the ability to anticipate the outcome of the elections has become particularly difficult because the geographical boundaries of 499 out of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies in the country have changed on account of a recently-concluded ‘delimitation’ exercise.

Electoral Alliances

Partnerships or alliances among political parties are going to be of crucial importance in deciding the character of the coalition that could come to power. From 1996 onwards, coalition governments have been ruling the country – the United Front government from 1996 to 1998, the BJP-led NDA government from 1998 to 2004 and the Congress-led UPA government from 2004 to 2009. All of them have been coalitions comprising various large and small political parties.

For the 2009 elections, the Congress has cobbled up new alliances with the Trinamool Congress of Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal (that was earlier a part of the NDA) and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, besides existing alliances among constituents of the UPA such as the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra and the Congress-Rashtriya Janata Dal alliance in Bihar. The NDA has three new constituents – the Indian National Lok Dal in Haryana, the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh – over and above its existing alliances with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab. The Biju Janata Dal in Orissa has broken away from the BJP. Many, if not most, of the alliances mentioned are rather uneasy partnerships and it is certain that there would be a number of so-called ‘friendly contests’ between candidates representing

the constituent parties of the UPA and the NDA coalitions as well as their ‘outside’ supporters and allies.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which had supported the centre-left United Front between 1996 and 1998 and then extended support to the NDA between 1998 and 2004, is now with the Third Front – the non-BJP, non-Congress alliance, currently comprising the Janata Dal (Secular), the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the All India Forward Bloc, the TDP, the Telengana Rashtra Samiti (that was part of the UPA between 2004 and 2006) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. This amorphous coalition might also attract some of the smaller parties that are at present in the UPA and the NDA in case the Congress and the BJP do not garner the numbers needed to head coalitions that could form a stable government.

In the likely event of a close contest among the contending coalitions, there is a possibility that some of the relatively smaller regional parties could exercise a crucial influence on the formation of the new government in New Delhi between 16 May 2009 (the day the results will be declared) and 2 June 2009, the day the term of the 14th Lok Sabha ends and by when a new government will have to be in place.

Economic Slowdown and Job Losses

Job losses resulting from the ongoing recession and financial meltdown in the economies of the West are emotive issues that could impact voting patterns among sections of the electorate in India. The growth rate of the economy has slowed down considerably in recent months, from an annual average of nearly nine percent between 2004 and 2008 to around five to six percent at present. Labour-intensive export-oriented industries such as textiles and garments, gems and jewellery, leather, handicrafts and processed foods have witnessed job losses while employment opportunities in the information technology sector have shrunk.

Exports account for close to a fifth of India’s gross domestic product (GDP) and Indian exporters are estimated to have laid off 10 million workers by early-March 2009 because markets in the United States, Europe and Japan have contracted. An estimated 500,000 workers in the leather industry have lost their jobs since September 2008. The automobiles and auto-components industry is facing a sharp fall in demand, with some 4,000 ancillary units on the verge of closure affecting the livelihood of 200,000 workers. The spectre of job losses is particularly pronounced in the textile and garments manufacturing industry, the second-largest employer in India after agriculture, as roughly half the total production of textiles and garments in the country is exported, 60 percent of it to markets in the United States, the European Union and Japan. According to the Confederation of Indian Textiles Industry, at least 1.2 million workers in this industry will be unemployed by the end of March 2009.

Though the ‘advance estimates’ of GDP released by the Central Statistical Organization in early-February 2009 claimed that the Indian economy will grow at 7.1 percent in the fiscal year that ends on 31 March 2009, subsequent data provided by the same organisation indicated that the country’s GDP grew by 5.3 percent in October-December 2008 quarter against 8.9 percent in the corresponding quarter of 2007. Whereas India is unlikely to slip into a technical recession – negative growth for two successive quarters – the economic slowdown has certainly come at a wrong time for the incumbent regime. The government’s

claim that it was not responsible for the economic slowdown that occurred on account of circumstances beyond its control may not convince many voters.

Inflation

Inflation has politically disastrous consequences and could be an important factor contributing to anti-incumbency sentiments. Economists point out that inflation is akin to a tax on the poor because it leads to an indirect transfer of resources from the rich to the underprivileged sections of society. When inflation is fuelled by high food prices, as it had in India between mid-2007 and mid-2008, this doubly impacts the poor who spend a higher proportion of their incomes on food. Inflation is one economic phenomenon that directly impacts voters in India, especially the economically disadvantaged sections who tend to go out and vote in larger numbers than the affluent sections and the middle classes.

Inflationary pressures had been high because of high prices of oil, metals and food prices. Year-on-year inflation, as measured by the official wholesale price index, touched a 13-year high of nearly 13 percent in August 2008 before coming down to around three percent in early-March 2009. Prices of cereals, edible oils, fruits, vegetables, milk and dairy products remain at record highs despite the deceleration in the speed at which the prices of such articles of mass consumption had been rising. Till September 2008, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had squeezed liquidity and hiked interest rates to control inflation, thereby sacrificing growth. However, with recession setting-in in the United States, the European Union and Japan, the RBI pumped in liquidity and reduced interest rates. The Union government also cut taxes in the hope of stimulating economic growth. However, these measures have had limited impact in reviving the country's economy.

The government's spokespersons claim that inflation has been brought under control by, among other things, the reduction in the prices of petrol and diesel. They further argue that the spike in the inflation rate was largely a consequence of the sudden jump in world prices of crude oil till early-July 2008 and, hence, could not be controlled by the government. India currently imports three-fourths of the country's total requirements of crude oil and petroleum products. Whether such arguments will be understood and appreciated by ordinary voters in the country remains to be seen.

Agriculture and Rural Development

The Congress as well as all other political parties in India claim they are concerned about the interests of the '*aam aadmi*' (or common person) in general and farmers in particular, since agriculture directly and indirectly provides a livelihood to more than half the country's population. The Congress and the UPA claim the incumbent government has emphasised agriculture and rural development much more than its predecessor regimes. The UPA government is taking credit for having enacted the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) Act that provides 100 days of guaranteed employment to a rural family at the official minimum wage, which varies between the equivalents of US\$1 to close to US\$2 in different parts of the country. The federal government has also waived loans taken by farmers from banks and increased the 'minimum support prices' at which various agricultural products are procured.

The government's critics, on the other hand, argue that large numbers of farmers continue to commit suicide (especially in Congress-ruled states such as Maharashtra and Andhra

Pradesh) because of their inability to repay loans obtained at usurious rates of interest from local moneylenders. While the government contends that its policies have resulted in “inclusive growth”, its political adversaries claim that the benefits of economic growth have been confined largely to the country’s elites and not permeated down to the poor – one out of two Indians live on less than US\$1 a day and two out of three earn barely US\$2 a day.

The Left argues that it has restrained the UPA government from integrating the country’s economy closely with the rest of the world (in the process, saving it from the worst ravages of the ongoing worldwide recession). It also says the government has attempted to practice free enterprise capitalism while claiming it believes in the virtues of socialism, resulting in a widening of inequalities in income and wealth, and a sharpening of the rural-urban divide and regional economic imbalances. Those in government and the supporters of the UPA government, however, refute such claims and contend that its policies and programmes have created jobs in villages and alleviated the conditions of the poor as well as curbed lean season migration to the cities, due primarily to the NREG Act.

National Security and Terrorism

The year 2008 witnessed a series of terrorist strikes on prominent cities in India culminating in the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the commercial capital, in November. Earlier, cities such as Bengaluru (Bangalore), Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Guwahati, New Delhi and Jaipur had witnessed terrorist attacks. The UPA government has been accused by the opposition BJP of being ‘soft’ on terror and of failing to take a tough stand against Pakistan whose citizens were reportedly involved in the Mumbai terror attacks.

While the BJP sought to make national security a political issue by accusing the government of not acting in a tough and decisive manner, it failed to influence voters in its favour when provincial elections took place in December 2008 in Delhi and (to a lesser extent) in Rajasthan. Reacting to the BJP’s criticism, the Congress has sharpened its political rhetoric against Pakistan that is being described as an “epicentre of terror”. National security and terrorism, it appears, will not be an important election issue, with many voters believing that the issue is, in a sense, above politics.

Religion and the Ram Temple Agenda

The pro-Hindu stance of the BJP and the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue had, in the past, helped the party increase its support base considerably. On 6 December 1992, hooligans reportedly supported by right-wing groups sympathetic to the BJP demolished a 16th Century mosque in Uttar Pradesh to build a temple to the ‘mythical’ Lord Ram. Earlier, the BJP’s Prime Ministerial candidate, L. K. Advani, had undertaken a ‘*rath yatra*’ (chariot tour) to mobilise public support for the building of a temple dedicated to Lord Ram at Ayodhya at the site where the Babri mosque had stood. The BJP rose from being a party with just two Lok Sabha seats in the 1984 general elections to win 182 seats in 1998 and 1999 to head a coalition government in New Delhi. In power, the BJP placed the temple issue in cold storage because of the opposition of its coalition partners in the NDA.

Since then, the BJP has used its pro-Hindu stance selectively and periodically while seeking to project a more liberal and secular image of itself. In the recent past, groups claiming allegiance to the ideological fraternity to which the BJP belongs have indulged in violent acts against minorities (Muslims and Christians) in different parts of India, including Orissa and

Karnataka. In the run-up to the 2009 general elections, the BJP's president, Rajnath Singh, said at the BJP's national executive meeting that his party was in favour of building a Ram temple and added that nobody could shake the party's faith in Lord Ram. However, Advani made it clear at the same meeting that any impression that the BJP was going "back to Ayodhya" was incorrect. Despite this apparent ambivalence, the party leadership appears unwilling to emphasise its Hindu nationalist ideology excessively because its political opponents continue to accuse the BJP of being against the interests of minorities and against the secular character of the Indian Constitution.

Nuclear Agreement with the United States

India's civilian nuclear agreement with the United States raised a major political controversy in India in 2007 and 2008. After the agreement was formalised, in July 2008, the Left parties that had provided crucial 'outside' support to the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government parted ways with the Congress-led UPA, resulting in the coalition being reduced to a minority in the Lok Sabha. The government, however, survived a vote-of-confidence on 22 July 2008 by obtaining the support of members of parliament belonging to the Samajwadi Party and with the help of defectors who voted across party lines.

The BJP as well as the Left were both critical of the nuclear deal on the ground that it compromised India's national sovereignty and its independent foreign policy. The Left went further by alleging that the UPA government had entered into a wider strategic relationship with the United States which was against India's interests. Despite the fact that nuclear power accounts for only three percent of the total electricity consumed in the country, the Congress and its supporters said the nuclear deal with the United States would help India's "energy security". Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated on 22 July 2008 that the Left wanted him as their "bonded slave" and vetoed each step in concluding the nuclear agreement. The Communists claimed the government went ahead with the deal although it was not part of the agreed-upon national common minimum programme and that the Prime Minister had become subservient to American interests. Both the Left and the BJP subsequently criticised the Prime Minister for stating, in the presence of George W. Bush on 25 September 2008, that the nuclear agreement "means a lot to me and the people of India...The people of India deeply love you."

The issue of the nuclear deal has not died and is certainly bound to be raised by all political parties in their election campaigns.

Conclusion

It is extremely difficult to predict the outcome of the 15th general elections that will be known on 16 May 2009. All the three main contending coalitions, the UPA, the NDA and the amorphous Third Front, claim they would perform well. Opinion polls indicate that none of the three coalitions would be in a position to form a stable government in New Delhi which would require the support of more than 272 among the 543 members of the Lok Sabha. New post-poll alliances and splintering of existing coalitions are distinct possibilities.

A period of political uncertainty of the kind India went through between 1996 and 1999 (four Prime Ministers, four governments and three general elections) could take place once again. Even such a denouement may not happen – many thought the UPA coalition government would not be able to complete its full term of five years but it did. The only thing that can be

said with a certain degree of certainty is that the next Indian government will be formed by a coalition of political parties even if the exact composition of the grouping would be tough to anticipate.

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