

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN INDIA. VOTERS FAVOUR CLARITY IN POLITICS AND A SECULAR STATE

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India's new parliament was elected from April 16 to May 13 this year. The contest for representation on the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India, was joined by nine national, 47 state and 500 minor and/or regional parties. 714 million Indians were called upon to cast their vote on a total of five days. The strongest party to emerge with 206 seats in parliament was Congress (INC), which now forms the government. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) came in second. Standing for political continuity, economic stability, and secular policies, the entire cabinet of 78 ministers has been sworn in by now.

Given the large number of people qualified to vote and the considerable danger of terrorist attacks, organizing elections in India is a gigantic task. On May 7, for example, 56,000 police were deployed in New Delhi alone.

Both major parties had published their platforms in the course of the campaign. The INC's manifesto focused on safety and prosperity for all as well as on social justice. The INC leader, Sonia Gandhi, let it be known that her party had made good on 80% of its promises during the last legislative period. Mrs Gandhi, who also chaired the outgoing government coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and has been leading Congress since 1998, still enjoys power and public esteem.

Her son Rahul, grandson of Indira Gandhi and great-grandson of the country's legendary first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is now beginning to strive for political office and influence as well. Having been in opposition since 2004, the BJP and its 80-year-old top candidate, Mr Advani, sought to surround themselves with an aura of competence in economic and security policy. At the same time, the party was anxious to disassociate itself from Hindu nationalist phraseology. The BJP's election platform, which hardly differs from that of Congress, revolved around good governance, economic development, and domestic security.

In the run-up to the elections, analysts named eight parties as potentially capable of influencing the outcome, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM(M)), which evolved from the communist party in 1994. Regarding itself as the champion of the 'untouchables', the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founded in 1984 focuses on socialist ideas. The Samajwadi party, which emerged from the Janata Dal in 1992, similarly follows traditional socialist lines. Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist party, hovers at the right margin of the party spectrum. Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is the political

mouthpiece of India's militant Tamils. Rashtriya Janata Dal, another spin-off from the Janata Dal party, describes itself as fighting for social justice. Having detached itself from Congress during the Second World War, the Communist Party of India forms part of the so-called left front. Founded by Rama Rao, a movie star, the regional Telugu Desam party shows some markedly populist tendencies.

Among the country's states, there are some which had a major impact on the results of the election: Uttar Pradesh, India's most popular state, once the 'heart' of the country and a stronghold of Congress, is now plagued by acute poverty and soaring crime rates. Bihar is having trouble keeping up with the rest of the country because of its poverty. Tamil Nadu is one of those states which are progressive but also politically volatile. Its car production is flourishing, its service sector is powerful, and its film industry is booming. Andhra Pradesh, where Congress scored a landslide victory, has gigantic farms and a powerful IT and service industry, but it also has problems with poverty and separatism in the Telangana region. In Orissa, which is now ruled by the BJP, Congress leads the opposition. India's business hub, Maharashtra, will from now on be ruled by the INC and the NCP together, the BJP having sustained a severe defeat. In West Bengal, where a regional left-wing coalition has been in power for three decades, the elections of 2009 were won by Trinamool Congress. Finally, there is Gujarat, whose annual growth rate of ten percent is higher than the national average. Here, the controversial chief minister, Narendra Modi, was once again confirmed in office, Congress having proven itself unable to defeat the BJP.

The election campaign of 2009 consisted of five phases. Attacks by left-wing Maoist rebels claimed 17 victims even before the first poll on April 16, when the population of Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and other states cast their votes for the first 124 mandates. In the second phase, almost half the electorate voted on April 23 in 265 of 543 constituencies. In the third phase, 107 Lok Sabha seats were up for election on April 30, when 144 million Indians including the 13-million population of Mumbai were called to the polls. In the fourth phase, which was observed with great interest, votes were cast on May 7 in eight federal states and/or union territories, including West Bengal, Jammu, and Kashmir. In the fifth and last phase on May 13, the turnout reached a peak of 62% in Calcutta and elsewhere, for the last 86 seats were at stake. All in all, the largely peaceful elections logged a nationwide turnout of around 60%. It is worthy of note, however, that differences in constituency size resulted in differences in the weighting of votes: the country's first-past-the-post system awards a seat in parliament to the candidate who wins a simple majority, which to a certain extent infringes the principle of equality.

Surveys in the run-up to the election had not produced any obvious winner, yet the INC scored a clear and distinct victory, although its majority is not absolute. There are several reasons for this: prime minister Manmohan Singh's political integrity proved as convincing as the government's policy of poverty alleviation. The appeal of young Rahul Gandhi was as great as the untiring commitment of all the members of that legendary family. By contrast, the BJP was unable either to present a consistent appearance or to rid itself of its Hindu nationalist reputation credibly. The communists lost some feathers, too. The voters left no doubt about what they wanted: continuity, consistency and political stability.

On May 22, Manmohan Singh was sworn in for his second term of office together with 19 ministers. Appointments to the most important departments were made one day later. After that, a delay was caused by riots in Punjab and Haryana and a cyclone in West Bengal, so that the remaining 59 ministers were unable to take their oath of office before May 28. For the first time, a woman was made president of parliament in the person of Meira Kumar, who belongs to the Dalit caste. Despite all speculation to the contrary, Rahul Gandhi will not assume any office. President Pratibha Patil has already presented the salient points of the new government programme. It is intended to promulgate a National Food Security Act and take steps to fight terrorism, promote economic growth, and reduce unemployment. Further core concerns of the new leadership include public health provisions, improvements in education, energy security, infrastructural development and the stabilization of the financial market.

In terms of manpower, the strength of the Indian government is considerable: 33 cabinet ministers, seven independent ministers of state and another 38 ministers of state form the cabinet, which was made so large as to accord proper weight to the partners in the government coalition. The president of the cabinet is Prime Minister Singh (INC) who is quite popular with the general public and is regarded both as an intelligent statesman of integrity and as the father of the economic growth of the last few years. Next to him, the most important personages in the cabinet include the minister of finance Pranab Mukherjee (INC), the minister of the interior, Palaniappan Chidambaram (INC), the railway minister, Mamata Banerjee (Trinamool Congress), the minister for agriculture, Sharad Pawar (NCP), the minister of defence, Arackaparambil Kurian Antony (INC), the foreign minister, Somnath Mallaiah Krishna (INC), and the minister of justice, Veerappa Moily (INC).

There can be no doubt that the composition of the new Lok Sabha signals a change of generations in the country's politics. 82 of 543 MPs are below 40 years of age. Moreover, the lower house has more women members than

ever before. On the other hand, there are fewer Muslim MPs. On the downside there is the fact that 153 MPs have a criminal record.

By now, Prime Minister Singh has been casting the agenda of his coalition government into a more concrete shape. Steps to alleviate poverty will be continued in order to, among other things, mitigate the impact of the global economic crisis on India. Programmes to promote employment in rural areas will be initiated and extended to include urban slums. There are also plans to improve the infrastructure in general and the quality of roads and railways in particular. Watersupply and electricity networks are to be modernized. To enhance domestic security, measures to combat terrorism and contain Naxalite attacks will be stepped up and a comprehensive reform of the police will be implemented. In foreign policy, the government plans to consolidate the country's partnership with the USA, Russia, China, Japan, and the EU. Relations with Africa, West Asia and Latin America will be reopened. Particular attention will be paid to political relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

By way of conclusion, it may be said that the formation of the Indian government reflects a simultaneous desire for continuity and change. Immense problems confront the country's new leadership. Yet the coalition government and its mirror image, the new cabinet, give rise to hopes that coping with these problems will prove feasible.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 5-6/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.165-169