

INDIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS 2009: CONGRESS-LED UPA RE-ELECTED

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The general elections in India to the 15th Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) held in five phases during April-May 2009 have given the clear message that a coalition government at the centre is favoured by the Indian electorate. The Congress (I)-led coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), has been re-elected with a strong mandate, 262 out of 543 Lok Sabha seats, for a second term.

The 2009 elections mainly had three pre-poll national alliances: (a) the UPA led by Congress (I), comprising nine political parties; (b) the National Democratic Alliance led by Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), comprising eight political parties; and (c) the Third Front comprising ten political parties, mainly the Left parties. Moreover, three political parties; Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Lok Janshakti (LJ); who did not join the above three alliances because of some differences, such as seat sharing, decided to contest elections under a new alliance – the Fourth Front.

According to the Election Commission of India, an estimated 714 million voters were eligible for participation in the 2009 general elections. There has been an increase of 43 million voters as compared to those of around 670 million in 2004. According to *Wikipedia*, the number of estimated India electorate in 2009 is more than the electorate in fifty European countries, fifty-four African countries, British Commonwealth excluding India, and forty-one countries in North and South America.

Electronic voting machines (EVM) were used as had been done during the 2004 elections. Some 1,368,430 EVMs were used during the process. Also, photo electoral rolls were used in all states except Assam, Nagaland and Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. During the five phases, around 59-60 per cent of the electorate exercised their right to vote. Generally, the election process remained peaceful, and only 37 persons,¹ including security personnel, poll staff and civilians, were reported to have been killed in clashes in various parts of India; mainly in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and the north-eastern states.

Election Results

The results were a surprise as exit polls after the conclusion of the fifth phase had predicted a 'fractured verdict'² and a close contest between UPA and NDA, with UPA having a slight edge over NDA. However, the official results declared on May 17, 2009, revealed that the people had returned UPA to power with a strong mandate. The UPA won 262 seats in a house of 543 seats, as compared to 216 it had won in 2004. Hence, UPA's strength in Lok Sabha has improved by 46 seats. Though Congress (I) was not able to form government at the centre independently, it emerged as the single largest political party with 206 seats as compared to 145 seats it had won during the 2004 elections.

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Thus, the Congress (I) has continued to improve its position in the past two elections. In 1999, it had won 112 seats, in 2004 it got 145 (33 more) and now it has 206 seats (61 more). If the main leadership of the party works with political wisdom, then there is a possibility that in future the Congress (I) may be able to form government independently.

The popularity graph of the NDA led by the BJP has, on the other hand, gone down. It was able to get only 159 seats, whereas in 2004 it won had won 186, representing a loss of 27 seats in. As regards the BJP's position, it could capture 116 seats as against 138 it had won in 2004. Therefore, the BJP suffered a loss of 22 seats. Overall, BJP's position has been on the decline; it had won 182 seats in 1999, 138 in 2004 and now only 116.

The Third Front led by the CPI (M) got 78. The Bahujan Samaj Party with 21 seats emerged as the largest party in the alliance, whereas CPI (M) won only 16 seats and CPI four seats.

The Fourth Front faced a defeat as the three political parties in the Front could get only 27 seats. The Samajwadi Party emerged as the major party in the Front with 23 seats. The Rashtriya Janata Dal got four seats, and the Lok Janshakti Party was not able to win even a single seat.

According to the results, the Congress (I), individually or in alliance with a regional party, has improved its position in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi. In the north-east, the party emerged victorious in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. It is only in Gujarat and Karnataka that it was not able to improve its performance. As a result of the post-poll alliance, the UPA now has the support of 322 members in the Lok Sabha. External support to the alliance comes from the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajwadi Party, the Janata Dal (Secular), the Rashtriya Janata Dal and some other minor parties.

Several factors are responsible for the success of the UPA. During its first term, the UPA adopted various pro-poor measures which helped increase of its vote-bank. For example, the National Common Minimum Programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and legislation for protection of the right of tribal people and forest dwellers helped in building a pro-people image. The other factors that had an influence in strengthening the support of UPA are the selection of candidates, the rigorous election campaign, and campaign to influence the youth.

Another important factor which cannot be ignored is the wrong strategy of the rival political parties which helped Congress (I) to pull votes. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP's 'Dalit-Brahmin brotherhood' policy, whereby BSP gave more share of seats to Brahmins, did not work in BSP's favour. As a result large, many Muslim, Brahmin, Dalit and backward class votes went to the Congress (I). For the first time in twenty years, the Congress (I) was able to strengthen its position in the state. In Madhya Pradesh, the anti-BJP sentiment and rejection of communal politics helped Congress (I) win over Muslim voters.

Alliances with regional parties also helped Congress (I) win seats. For example, in Himachal Pradesh, it aligned with the Nationalist Congress Party and the combine won 25 seats.

UPA Policy in Second Term

Internal

During the second term, the Congress (I) would be focusing more on internal development and investment. On June 5, while outlining the new government's priorities during her address to the joint session of parliament, President Pratibha Patil said that as part of its 100-day work plan, the UPA government would especially focus on 'revamping sectors such as exports, housing, small and medium enterprises, commercial vehicles, textiles and the energy security.'³ Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking in parliament on June 9, said that his government would work to gain eight to nine per cent growth of economy and 'seek a spirit of bipartisanship in solving national problems.'⁴

Though Congress (I) is the majority party in the alliance, it may face some problems while dealing with the partner parties because of their differences on policy matters. For example, the DMK gave a tough time to the Congress (I) during Cabinet formation. The DMK was demanding eight ministries, whereas the Congress (I) was willing to give five. It was only after mediation by other partners that the DMK accepted five ministries. Also, the DMK has expressed reservations regarding the disinvestment policy supported by the Congress (I).

Foreign Policy

President Pratibha Patil in her speech⁵ to parliament said that the government's policy 'will continue to pursue India's enlightened national interest.' She said that the 'momentum of improvement of relations with major powers will be maintained,' adding that the strategic partnership with the U.S. and Russia would be strengthened. Also, 'the multi-faceted partnership would be expanded.' She said that India would work with the developing countries.

Relations with Pakistan

As regards India-Pakistan relations, terrorism and cross-border infiltration would be the main the issues to be raised by India. As for the resumption of composite dialogue, on May 26, the new Indian Foreign Minister, Mr. Krishna, categorically said that unless Pakistan shows 'more evidence of, and commitment to, action against terror groups responsible for the Mumbai attacks'⁶ the composite dialogue will not be resumed. However, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his speech to the parliament on June 9 spoke positively. He said that he was 'prepared to take another shot at peace with Pakistan – even travel more than half the distance.'⁷ Though Mr. Singh also linked it with Pakistan demonstrating the will to prevent cross-border terrorism, yet his assurance that he is willing to work for peace with Pakistan is very encouraging. Moreover, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Asif Zardari met on the sidelines during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit held in Russia on June

15-16. Both leaders agreed that the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan should meet at a 'mutually convenient' date. It is also expected that the leaders of the two countries would hold another meeting on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit to be held in Egypt in July. It is hoped that such interactions would finally lead to the resumption of the stalled composite dialogue process between the two countries.

Any such development would be heartily welcomed in Pakistan which has continuously argued that the multi-dimensional composite dialogue between India and Pakistan should be resumed soon.

References

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 - ² *The Indian Express*, May 14, 2009
 - ³ Text of the Address by the President of India, Smt. Pratibha D. Patil, to Parliament, June 5, 2009.
 - ⁴ *The Hindu*, June 10, 2009.
 - ⁵ Text of the Address by the President of India, Smt. Pratibha D. Patil, to Parliament, June 5, 2009.
 - ⁶ *Times of India*, May 27, 2009.
 - ⁷ *Times of India*, June 10, 2009.