

Indian Elections: Voters Opt For More Than Stability

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 19—In the 15th Parliamentary elections, the Indian electorate re-elected United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the largest party within the Alliance, the Indian National Congress (widely known as the Congress Party), leaving it just ten seats short of an absolute majority. A number of regional parties are now vying to join the Alliance to provide the necessary majority, which would put them at the seat of power.

The ruling Alliance knows that the electorate's verdict is neither a "massive mandate," as some UPA leaders, in a state of euphoria, are trying to convey to the media, nor it is an endorsement of its overall economic performance during the last five years, but rather, a very judicious decision by the voters to stabilize India at a time when the global financial system has collapsed, and ethnic and religious wars are raging all around the country. UPA leaders know that their economic performance benefitted a minuscule urban group, educated and computer-savvy, rather than the impoverished majority; hence, UPA leaders were running hard to win support from all and sundry regional parties, so that the Alliance would be able to form a government.

During the last two years though, the UPA had focussed more of its attention on the agricultural sector, where almost 60% of India's workforce toils. In fact, the previous government, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (1998-2004), had invested in rural infrastructure, and some of the positive developments showing up today in the countryside are the result of those investments. The UPA-instituted National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA) program was designed to give people temporary employment and create some local infrastructure. But, the program was flawed to begin with. It is a secondary form of welfare system without ensuring permanent income of the rural population. The UPA went along with the program in order

to appease rural voters, but not to actually develop rural India.

Nonetheless, the Congress Party made significant inroads with rural voters, especially in Uttar Pradesh.

Election's Noticeable Features

The outcome of the four-phase month-long election, which ended on May 13, in which more than 700 million Indians voted, has many remarkable features. The most prominent of these is the electorate's rejection of sterile, caste- and ethnic-based regional parties, which became powerful during the 1990s, when the Congress Party had begun to wither, and the other national party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), began to polarize the population on the basis of an ideology of ill-defined Hindu identity, which they themselves could not explain with any clarity. Seizing the opportunity, some of the caste- and ethnic-based political parties in large states, such as Uttar Pradesh (the most populous of Indian states with a population close to 150 million), Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, gathered the disillusioned and fragmented electorate, and became the kingmakers in coalition governments, holding 30-40 of India's 540-plus parliamentary seats.

On the other hand, India's Left, a mish-mash of socialists and communists, having used the ideologies of "secularism" and "anti-imperialism" to keep its voter base for years, while allowing the states they controlled to be weakened economically, due to lack of development, have been delivered a knock-out punch by the same electorate in this year's parliamentary elections.

The election sent the regional parties a clear message: that their days of manipulating caste and ethnic divides to serve the party leaders' interest have come to an end. Two of the regional parties, Janata Dal (United) in Bihar, led by the state chief minister Nitish Kumar, and Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, led by the state chief minister Navin Patnaik, were given the seal of approval by



PIB/Mahesh Shankar

Nearly half of India's voters, 300 million, were under 25 years of age, and the Congress Party, especially, worked hard to win their support. These voters are waiting to cast their ballots in Bhalukpong, Arunachal Pradesh.

the electorate because of their success in implementing economic development and non-corrupt administrations during their terms in office.

Another remarkable feature, is that a large section of India's Muslim community of about 160 million has come back to support the Congress Party. In the 1990s, at the time the Party was floundering politically, and the BJP, in which certain groups were using anti-Muslim polemics to seek "Hindu" voters' support, the Muslims became disillusioned, enraged, and began supporting the regional parties, effectively, wherever they had strength. The return of the Muslims to the Congress Party also indicates that the Muslim voters are much more at peace now in India than they were in the late 1990s, and in the early part of this decade.

Moreover, about 45% of India's registered voters in 2009 were youth below 25 years of age. This constituted almost 300 million votes. These younger voters were much less attracted by ideologies of any kind, religious or ethnic, and a large segment of this huge group of voters was interested in stability and improvement of their financial status. It must be pointed out that the younger leaders of the Congress Party did make a mark among these voters.

The overall impact of these developments was translated into the outcome at the polls. The UPA, which had 179 seats coming in to the elections, ended up with 262, and was helped mostly by the success of the Congress Party, which increased its earlier tally from 145 seats in 2004, to 206 seats in 2009. The success of the Congress Party can be attributed mainly to the failures and criminalization of some major regional parties; the inability of the BJP to break out of its mold and provide the electorate with a vision of the future that would inspire them; and the limited, but decided, success of the Congress Party's younger leaders, led by Rahul Gandhi, son of the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi, to connect with many rural voters. This showed up in Uttar Pradesh, where Rahul Gandhi toiled hard; there, the Congress Party improved its tally from 9 to 21 seats.

Positive for Security

Surrounding India, South Asian nations, victims of their sordid colonial past, have been under attack from various anti-nation-state warriors, who are using religious and ideological warfare to change governments and polarize the population. Recent events in Pakistan, in particular, indicate that if this threat is not fully understood, and acted upon adequately, this entire region, comprised of more than 1.6 billion people, will embark on the dangerous path of perpetual war.

Recent developments in Pakistan, particularly since September 2001, suggest that the ultra-conservative Wahhabi version of Islam, funded by the Saudis and by opium money, has weakened Pakistan. Religious wars are also raging in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. At the time of this writing, Colombo has taken over the Tamil Tiger (LTTE)-occupied territories in the North and Northeast, eliminating the Tiger leaders. However, the religious nature of the conflict, between the Hindu Tamils and the Sinhala Buddhists, must be eliminated, and a democratic political process must take over, to restore peace in Sri Lanka. In all this, New Delhi, and a



PIB/M. Ashokan

Younger leaders of the Congress Party, like Rajul Gandhi, shown here (standing center), in a meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, made a special effort to win over youth and rural voters. Their votes put the UPA coalition over the top.

stable India, will have to play an important role. If the post-Tiger reconciliation process does not take place quickly enough, it is likely that India will be facing a wave of Tamil refugees moving into the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

In Bangladesh, the February massacre of the Army by the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) indicated that forces which would like to eliminate the friendly-to-India Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, are very much active and have a well-developed network within and outside the country. Hasina's government has committed itself to reversing the trend of rising radical Islamic extremism and terrorism, and its export to India. A greater opportunity for overall cooperation between India and Bangladesh exists today, and it would be of extreme importance that the incoming UPA government give its close attention to relations with Sri Lanka.

New Delhi needs to observe socio-political developments in Nepal with keen eyes as well. Despite ugly confrontations with various political parties, Nepal's powerful Maoists have remained within the "peace process," and that violence—beyond levels that have become "acceptable" within this troubled country—is not an immediate risk, one Indian security analyst pointed out recently.

India itself has long been a victim of terrorism. It has been ravaged since Independence in 1947 by a number of secessionist movements, ranging from the

disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir in the North, to the Myanmar borders in the Northeast. In the North-east, the secessionist forces are mostly tribal, people who had been kept in quarantine from the rest of India, by the British Raj during its 200 years of rule. These groups had close contact with London, mostly through Christian proselytizing groups, and it is likely that they still do.

Also, the Maoist problem has spread far and wide, and is linked to the Maoist movement in Nepal as well. A product of absence of development in the areas they operate within, the Indian Maoists have taken control of a huge swath of land, running from the state of Bihar in the North to the state of Tamil Nadu in the South, encompassing the highly underdeveloped areas of the states of Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. The common thread that runs through this massive stretch of land is: underdevelopment and poverty.

In this context, a stable Indian government will have the capability to set down policies which would ensure security to the country, steal the thunder from the militants, and bring about a long-term solution. It seems the UPA leadership is aware of this. On May 19, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's stated: "The new UPA Government has to be vigilant and effective in dealing with the threat of terrorism and extremism, as it is looming large in India's neighborhood ... [through] the as-

surance of internal security and maintaining the communal harmony and peace....”

The Indian Economy and the Global Financial Collapse

During the UPA's first term (2004-09), which has just come to an end, the Singh-led government squandered the opportunity to begin in earnest strengthening India's basic physical economy. India's power sector has remained in shambles; almost 400 million people lack electricity. Much of rural India does not have clean drinking water or access to health care within a reasonable distance. India's vast railroad network has not been modernized. Modernization of the railroad would have helped the rural population in a big way. Instead, to encourage the automakers in a country where more than 70% of gasoline gets imported, the mindless New Delhi leadership found its nirvana in solving transportation problems by building roads.

In other words, the watchword of the Singh-led UPA during that period was to invest as little as possible in nationwide infrastructure to help all of India's citizens. Instead, selective, little investments were made to attract foreign investment. UPA's focus in the first term was to earn through exports, and attract foreign investment through reform. Although it found out that to compete in this dog-eat-dog export market, it needs adequate infrastructure, New Delhi ignored the danger signals and went with Information Technology (IT) as its breadwinner, ignoring the largest employment-generation sector: small and medium-scale manufacturing. This vast sector is now in big trouble due to the lack of modernization, and the dumping of competing manufactured products by foreign producers into the Indian market.

But during all of this, instead of focussing attention on rural India and equitable development, the UPA pursued higher “growth,” which benefitted a few at the expense of many. However, now that the electorate has given it another chance, it is time to sober up. New Delhi must realize that the days when the United States would buy all and sundry from anywhere and everywhere will not come back for a while, if ever. Hence, to pursue growth on the basis of exports is not only against the common good, but also foolish.

New Delhi must also face the fact that attempting to attract foreign investors with minimum infrastructure will not work, since those same Wall Street and City of London investors have now been bankrupted by their own monetarist free-trade system, and are now waiting

in line for handouts from their respective governments.

In other words, the Singh government must get out of the fantasy world and avail itself of this opportunity to build up the nation, and, at the same time, ensure a political success for the UPA.

In order to do that, the UPA will have to resist the pressure that is being exerted by the “reform” crowd and the monetarists entrenched within the political groupings. On May 19, India's financial daily, *The Economic Times*, quoted former Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, who will be a senior member in the Cabinet under construction: “Disinvestment of government equity while maintaining management control will only improve the efficiency of some of these public sector undertakings.” These are the reformers who believe it is a greater priority to hand over to the private businessmen a functioning facility, than to modernize the public sector facilities, and make them more productive.

India's business leaders have applauded the election results, and have already made known their demand that the UPA use its new-found muscle to accelerate the pace of pro-investor “reforms.” These include gutting restrictions on the closing of factories and contracting out; the whole or partial sell-off of Public Sector Units (government-owned companies); greater latitude for foreign investment in the retail sector; opening up of India's booming arms industry to private investment; and the deregulation of banking and financial services (pensions and insurance), one analyst reported.

Prime Minister Singh has instead pointed out that daunting challenges lie ahead for India as the global economy passes through difficult times. In a speech to the members of parliament, the Prime Minister said on May 19: “Equally important is the challenge of reviving economic growth and creating new employment opportunities.... There is some slowing down of investment and employment generation; we have to reverse this. We have to revive growth and make it even more inclusive.”

He pointed out that, this time around, “business as usual” will not do. “The youth of India have voted in large numbers for our party. But it is in the nature of youth to be impatient. They will not tolerate ‘business as usual.’ They expect the government to cater to their aspirations. They expect a more responsive government.”

These are words of hope to all Indians, who sincerely expect that the new government they have ushered in will keep its promises, and keep alive their hopes.