

# ISAS Insights

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## **Indian Elections 2009: The Prime-ministerial Candidates**

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### **Preface**

India is holding its 15<sup>th</sup> general elections from 16 April to 13 May 2009. The elections are taking place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues are influencing the elections. The exercise is impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) is bringing out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the elections. These include, among others, an analysis of key national and regional parties and their strategies, key political personalities, and issues dominating perceptions of the electorate.

ISAS had earlier prepared nine papers, providing an overview of India's political parties; the role of the youth in India's elections; the economic backdrop to the general elections; the major domestic issues that are likely to dominate the elections; India's key foreign policy concerns and their impact on the elections; the role of women and the importance of women leaders in Indian politics and elections; geographical distribution of India's regional parties, their areas of influence and regional electoral outlooks; the prospects for economic reforms following the elections; and the trends emerging from different opinion polls and election surveys.

The tenth paper in the series profiles some of the key candidates for the post of India's next Prime Minister.

### **Introduction**

The casting of votes for India's 15<sup>th</sup> general elections draws to a close on 13 May 2009. The final phase of voting on 13 May 2009 will see curtains coming down on the elections in the world's largest democracy – an exercise that lasted for almost four weeks spread over 543 constituencies across 28 states and seven Union Territories.

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Indian elections have always captured widespread attention due to their scale and diversity. This time, however, the interest has been more intense, due to a large variety of possible outcomes of the elections. Unless analysts and poll surveys are completely off the mark, the elections are going to produce a heavily split mandate.

A party or a political combine requires a minimum of 272 seats to obtain a simple majority in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the Indian Parliament. As of now, none of the main combines – the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), the Baharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or the Third Front – are expected to win as many seats on their own.

A fractured mandate will unleash several possible permutations and combinations of political parties for striking coalitions capable of mustering the arithmetical majority of 272 seats. The announcement of the results is expected to be followed by hectic parleys between the parties to stitch such coalitions. Indeed, the post-election negotiations are expected to be almost across the board, except between parties separated by irreconcilable ideological positions such as the Left and the BJP.

The possibility of having several potential post-electoral combinations has interesting implications for the post of India's next Prime Minister. The list of probable candidates for the leader of India's next cabinet has grown much larger in the course of these elections. Apart from officially nominated candidates from India's national parties – the Congress and the BJP – there are several leaders from different parties fancying their chances. The latter are mostly from regional parties belonging either to the Third Front or loose poll-specific alliances such as the ambiguous 'Fourth Front'. Fortuitous circumstances, in terms of pure arithmetical requirement of seats, may find some of these leaders in an enviable position. The trade-off for numbers may result in bargain for something as precious as the post of the Prime Minister.

## **The Candidates**

In the following paragraphs, we profile some of the key prime-ministerial candidates.

### Sonia Gandhi

The President of the Congress, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, was unanimously chosen as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party in the Lok Sabha as well as the leader of the Congress-led UPA after the 2004 elections. She, however, refused to become the Prime Minister primarily on the account of the controversy regarding the country's top political chair being occupied by a person of foreign origin. Following Mrs Gandhi's refusal, Dr Manmohan Singh became the Prime Minister.

The demands for Mrs Gandhi to become the Prime Minister may surface again if the Congress leads the process to form the next government. Mrs Gandhi's experience as the Chairperson of the UPA makes her acceptable to most constituents of the coalition. The Left, a probable ally of the Congress post-elections, is also agreeable to her leadership. However, the reasons that prevented her from assuming office the last time may constrain her from doing so this time as well.

In the event of Mrs Gandhi becoming Prime Minister, she is expected to emphasise on an agenda addressing the concerns of the common people, particularly the rural electorate. The strategic directions and contents of India's foreign policy are expected to remain broadly unchanged in her regime, subject to the accommodation of pressures from potential allies such as the Left.

### Manmohan Singh

Known as the architect of India's market-oriented economic reforms, Dr Singh's assumption of prime ministership was greeted enthusiastically by the international community, particularly international investors as well as India's middle class and the intelligentsia.

Dr Singh's image as an honest and dedicated Prime Minister remains untarnished after five years in office. He is the Congress's officially nominated prime ministerial candidate for the current elections. He is expected to become Prime Minister again if the Congress does well in the elections and plays the central role in forming the government. However, the brush with the Left over India's civilian nuclear deal with the United States may provoke the Left to object and resist his leadership, should it become a potential ally of the UPA in the formation of the next government.

Despite being the pioneer of India's economic reforms, several key reforms such as those in banking and pensions were left unfinished during Dr Singh's current tenure. Given the inflexible positions of the Left on these issues as well as those of some of the Congress and UPA's likely allies, pursuing these reforms will not be easy. Dr Singh is expected to maintain the UPA's focus on social-sector development, particularly in health and education. If the Congress election manifesto is implemented in principle and spirit, then job reservations for poorer classes can be expected under both Mrs Gandhi and Dr Singh.

His foreign policy in the neighbourhood would be interesting to watch in the light of the continuous developments in the region. However, no significant shift in the thrust of India's foreign policy is expected under Dr Singh's prime ministership.

### Lal Krishna Advani

The Deputy Prime Minister in Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet and the Leader of the Opposition in the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha, Mr Lal Krishna Advani is the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP. He is expected to lead the NDA government if it assumes power. The senior-most leader in the BJP after Mr Vajpayee's withdrawal from active politics, Mr Advani has had a tough time rallying the NDA since its defeat in the 2004 elections. The BJP's performance in different assembly elections during the last couple of years has been a mixed bag. However, his political stature in the party has never really been questioned, with the BJP president Mr Rajnath Singh and other senior party functionaries endorsing his candidature.

A government led by Mr Advani is expected to emphasise on strengthening the India-United States partnership (despite the BJP's opposition to the Indo-US nuclear deal). Though Mr Vajpayee had kick-started the dialogue process with Pakistan, it is not clear whether Mr Advani will be willing to do so under the current circumstances. He is expected to push for a more liberal personal income tax structure and discourage foreign participation in retail trade.

## Rahul Gandhi

Most would foresee Mr Rahul Gandhi, son of the deceased ex-Prime Minister Mr Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress' President, Mrs Gandhi, as a prime ministerial candidate for the future. With the Congress officially nominating Dr Singh as its candidate, the possibility of the junior Gandhi being chosen as Prime Minister is not obvious. However, if the post-election circumstances compel the Congress to search for an alternative to Dr Singh, then Mr Rahul Gandhi could be a possible choice. Since he is not constrained by the 'foreign origin' factor as in the case of his mother, Mr Rahul Gandhi may be a consensus choice for not only the Congress but its allies as well.

Currently, a General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee and head of the Youth Congress, Mr Rahul Gandhi, as the Prime Minister, is expected to follow the Congress' broad thrust on most issues. However, given his relatively young age, he may introduce new ideas and perceptions on key policy matters, apart from inducting relatively younger faces in the cabinet.

## Sharad Pawar

The Minister for Agriculture and Food in Dr Singh's cabinet, Mr Sharad Pawar also dons the hat of the President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. A seasoned politician from India's western state of Maharashtra, Mr Pawar, an ex-Congressman, now heads the Nationalist Congress Party, a regional ally of the UPA.

Mr Pawar's chances of becoming Prime Minister arise from his acceptability across a broad spectrum of political parties. In the run-up to the current elections, he has kept both his current and future allies guessing about his future course of action. Though officially still a part of the UPA, he may well shift allegiance to different post-election combinations. His experience, stature and political acumen make him acceptable to the regional parties as well as the national parties. The Left and the Congress would be willing to support a combination of secular parties headed by Mr Pawar. Several regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Biju Janata Dal have already indicated their support for Mr Pawar.

## Mayawati Kumari

Ms Mayawati Kumari's figuring in the list of possible prime ministerial candidates shows the extent by which leaders of India's regional parties have become important in the current elections. Chief Minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Ms Mayawati has played a key role in forming the Third Front along with the Left. With the Third Front bound to play a significant role in post-election government formation, Ms Mayawati's chances of heading a potential non-Congress, non-BJP coalition cannot be ruled out.

Though the BSP's political base fundamentally comprises lower-caste Dalits, Ms Mayawati has shown considerable political skill in attracting upper caste votes in her favour as well. Thus, in the event of a wider political realignment of parties, she is likely to gain acceptance as a leader, given her flexibility in accommodating caste configurations and ideologies.

## Other Candidates

India's fluid political situation is capable of springing several surprises. The announcement of election results may see several more contenders emerging for the post of Prime Minister. These include Mr Arun Jaitley, General Secretary of the BJP and ex-Commerce Minister of India. Mr Jaitley is one of the BJP's key strategists and public faces. His articulate pronouncements have earned him critical acclaim. Known as a capable administrator, Mr Jaitley may emerge as a serious contender. So can Mr Narendra Modi, the high-profile Chief Minister of Gujarat from the BJP. Despite being branded anti-secular, Mr Modi's credible performance as an economic administrator has earned him kudos and can help him to achieve higher political offices.

Among other regional party stalwarts, one can hardly overlook Ms J. Jayalalitha, leader of the AIADMK, and Mr Chandrababu Naidu, leader of the Telugu Desam Party. Both Ms Jayalalitha and Mr Naidu have been Chief Ministers of two of India's key southern states – Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh respectively. Election outcomes of these states have typically been seen to influence government formations at the centre in the past. This time too, the results may make either or both of them significant actors in the post-election exercise.

## **Conclusion**

As India and the rest of the world wait for the announcement of the results of the general elections, discussions and deliberations on government formation have already begun. These parleys involve all the political personalities outlined above as well as many more. Only time will tell who will become India's next Prime Minister.

The general elections of 2009 are likely to be remembered for not only their fractured verdict, but also for the large number of prime ministerial candidates and aspirants they are likely to produce. Indeed, rarely has any Indian election produced as many as 'dark horses' as the current one.

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