

ISAS Brief

No. 100 – Date: 9 April 2009

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The Bharatiya Janata Party's Manifesto – Assessing its Electoral Implications

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The main opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), released its manifesto on 3 April 2009. Outlining its goals, the manifesto states, “The BJP is contesting the 2009 15th Lok Sabha election on a manifesto that commits the party to an agenda for change guided by three goals: good governance, development and security.” The last time the BJP came out with its own manifesto was in 1998. In the 1999 and 2004 elections, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) brought out a common minimum programme.

This paper discusses the key political and economic issues in the BJP manifesto. It then examines the implications of these issues on the BJP at the general elections.

Political Issues

Internal Affairs

The BJP, which leads the NDA, stuck to its earlier contentious stand on many political issues such as the abolition of Article 370 which gives special status to Jammu & Kashmir; the construction of a Ram Temple, to which the party has unexpectedly reiterated its commitment; and the introduction of a Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA)-like law to deal with terrorism. The call for the abolition of Article 370 and the commitment to the construction of a Ram Temple are clearly with an eye on its core constituency – the hardline Hindu vote.

It is interesting though that the first two issues find mention at the fag-end of the manifesto. This, in a way, shows that while, on the one hand, the BJP does not want to totally disband its *Hindutva* agenda, on the other, it does not want to overplay it so that its current and potential allies do not see red. Thus, the party basically is trying to play it safe.

In the case of the third issue, the manifesto states in no uncertain terms that the BJP will “revive the anti-terror mechanism that has been dismantled by the Congress; improve upon the POTA to ensure that it is more effective as an instrument of deterrence and a tool to prosecute offenders without innocent people being harassed...” Apart from the POTA, there are several intelligence-strengthening measures, especially on the need to increase the

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coordination between the centre and the states. The manifesto comes down heavily on the current government for being soft on terror and being slack in its approach towards dealing with the problem.

The other emotive issue which the manifesto touches on is that of Ram Setu, a shipping channel which proposes to link India's eastern and western coasts. The BJP is opposed to this as it would destroy a chain of limestone shoals in the Palk Straits which dates back to the *Ramayana* (a Hindu epic). The BJP's spokesperson, Ravi Shankar Prasad, stated that the party would not "allow anyone to touch it".

The manifesto also promises to set up a pay commission to look into the demands of the defence services. It states that, "...the pending issues of pay and privileges will be revisited and resolved to the satisfaction of the defence forces. The modalities for setting up a separate pay commission for the forces will be expedited."

External Affairs

In the realm of foreign policy, there is nothing new. While the manifesto calls for good relations with the United States, it has a dig at the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for compromising on India's interests. It states that, "The BJP desires good relations between India and the United States and will strengthen the India-United States strategic partnership on the principle of equality. But we will not compromise on either India's national interest or relations with another friendly country. The BJP will restore the balance that has been disturbed by the UPA government."

While the manifesto states that the BJP is committed to cordial relations with its neighbours, it unequivocally states that no dialogue with Pakistan is possible until it stops providing support to terrorist activities in India.

Economic Issues

As far as economic matters are concerned, the manifesto has tried to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters and it is as populist as the manifesto of the other political parties. Some of the measures in the manifesto are to "provide 35 kilogrammes of rice or wheat every month to BPL² families at Rs. 2 per kg under an improved and expanded Antyodaya Anna Yojana. This will be available against 'food coupons' redeemable at both PDS³ and private outlets". The other promise which has become part and parcel of virtually every manifesto, including that of the BJP, is the 'waiving of agricultural loans'.

The manifesto also promises exemption from income tax for income of up to Rs. 3 lakh (Rs. 300,000) and an additional exemption benefit of Rs. 50,000 for women and children. Income of all senior citizens by way of pension will be exempt from income tax as well. All personnel of the army, air force and navy as well as paramilitary forces will be exempted from paying income tax on their salaries and perquisites. These are all measures targeted at middle-class voters and defence personnel.

² BPL means "Below Poverty Line".

³ PDS means "Public Distribution System".

Some of the other significant points of the BJP's manifesto are its emphasis on job creation and the focus on infrastructure vis-à-vis the construction of highways. The manifesto states that, "Highways construction, which got a boost during the NDA years, will once again feature high on the government's agenda. We will build between 15 and 20 kilometres of highways every day."

The manifesto has also tried to reach out to small retail traders by clearly stating that if the BJP is voted to power, it would not allow foreign investment in the retail sector. The manifesto further states that all necessary measures would be taken to protect the interests of small and tiny vendors.

Electoral Impact of the Manifesto

Politically, the BJP, with its stand on issues such as the Ram Temple and Article 370, has shown that it is not keen to expand its vote base to swing voters who would have voted for the party but are not comfortable with its straitjacketed stand on political issues. It could also be that the party has given up hope on its vote base amongst non-ideological swing voters.

At the same time, the BJP has perhaps anticipated in advance that the NDA allies would not be happy with certain contents of the manifesto and it was quick to state that this is the BJP's manifesto and not the manifesto of the NDA as a whole.

With its stand on the Ram Temple, the BJP has certainly bid adieu to even a small chunk of the Muslim votes. The Muslims make up nearly 15 percent of the total voters. The liberal element, especially the youth from other communities, would also not be comfortable with this, as it somehow gives the impression of a regressive India, as opposed to an all-inclusive, pluralistic India. If one were to look at the headway the party could make, there is not much in the manifesto, certainly on political issues, which could attract traditionally non-BJP voters towards the party. It is only the core vote – the predominantly hardline Hindu constituency – which such issues would appeal to.

Even on national security issues, there are many in India who have a strong stand but do not necessarily subscribe to the BJP view of national security. As such, all the efforts which have been made by the party to project a strong policy on the issue may not necessarily do the trick. Besides attacking the incumbent government may not pay off as was evident from the Assembly results. During the Assembly elections in Delhi and Rajasthan in late 2008, the BJP tried to play up the Mumbai attacks, blaming the UPA government for the deterioration in internal security. The party even placed advertisements in newspapers and on television channels. Obviously, this did not turn to be a good ploy as the Congress Party won the Assembly elections in Rajasthan and Delhi where votes were cast just after the 26 November Mumbai attacks.

In the economic realm, certain issues raised by the BJP manifesto are relevant, especially the UPA government's failure on the infrastructure front and the relative success of the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA. However, the manifesto did not sufficiently highlight this point. The BJP seemed so absorbed in UPA-bashing on such issues as security, where it did not have a great record itself, that it failed to drive home the point that the UPA government has had a dismal record as far as the construction of roads is concerned.

Similarly, more focus on its strategies towards dealing with joblessness would have been relevant at this point in time, as India starts to feel the impact of the economic crisis. There are barely three lines on this key issue for young voters who are an important electoral constituent. The manifesto states that the BJP would “arrest the loss of jobs and reverse the trend of joblessness which is far worse than unemployment by making massive public sector investments in job-generating infrastructure programmes, especially building of roads and highways, and linking of rivers.” Since the party has been targeting the ruling UPA alliance on this issue, many would have expected much more on this issue from the BJP.

The BJP’s overtures in the form of tax sops towards certain sections of the India society, for example, the defence forces and the middle classes, could have an impact on the elections. The defence forces have been especially disillusioned with the UPA government’s attitude towards their demands and the promise to set up a pay commission to look into their demands could well lure them into giving the NDA a chance.

The Indian voter is very astute, however, and can no longer be fooled by mere promises. It is also important to understand that most of these sops are targeted at urban voters, who in any case, do not turn out in large numbers to vote, apart from the ‘core’ voters of a political party. As for the rural voters, there are more complex equations such as caste and local issues. These, more so than well-crafted manifestos, will sway the minds of rural Indians.

It would also be important to mention that the manifestos of the political parties are not, in any way, the singular factor which will shape a voter’s mind. Other issues such as anti-incumbency, the right or wrong alliances and voter turnout will have an impact on the swings and the final results. The manifesto is more of a mirror into how the parties are positioning themselves as opposed to a way of gauging the voter’s behaviour.

In the lead-up to the elections, many analysts have predicted that the elections will throw up a hung parliament and it will, in all probably, be a disparate coalition that will form the government. This means that even if the BJP were to emerge as the single largest party post-election, it would need to cobble some alliances to form the government. In such a scenario, it would have to put quite a few issues on the backburner to appease its coalition partners. This, thus, makes the manifesto less than relevant.

In conclusion, if one were to summarise the BJP manifesto, it is aggressive on matters of national security, it has strong doses of the *Hindutva* and openly attacks the UPA government. It remains to be seen what results such a recipe will produce for the BJP in the elections.

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