

# ISAS Brief

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## Indian Elections 2009 – A Return to the Centre

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The elections to the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, Lok Sabha, have thrown up a clear mandate in favour of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Congress Party. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh becomes the second prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru to secure a renewal of mandate after completing a full term in office.

India will have a stable government that will serve its full five-year term in office. The results mark a turning point for the country's largest and oldest political party, the Congress Party. The comprehensive defeat of the Left Front and of the so-called Third Front as well as the weak performance of the principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is expected to push these parties on the political 'Left' and 'Right' into both an ideological turmoil and an internal power struggle for a new leadership.

The phenomenal performance of the 'centrist' Congress Party will strengthen traditional forces of political moderation. India can be expected to be a predictable player in global affairs, focussing on its own economic development and seeking stability and development in its wider Asian neighbourhood.

A golden rule of politics in India is that this diverse, plural, continental nation can only be governed from the ideological 'centre'. India can neither swing 'Left' nor 'Right' for any length of time. Individual states could lurch in one direction and remain there for long periods of time such as West Bengal on the Left and Gujarat on the Right. However, this subcontinental, civilisational Republic can only be governed from the political 'centre'. That political 'centre' has been empowered once again by the results of the 2009 general elections.

In 2004, the Congress Party entered the election campaign on a weak wicket because Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had tried, fairly successfully, to usurp that ideological 'centre' space from the Congress Party. That is why he became the first non-Congress Prime Minister to serve a full term in office.

As a result of the BJP grabbing a bit of that 'centre' space, the Congress Party was forced to turn 'Left' to regain ground. The problem with the 2004 verdict was that the Left Front and some in the Congress actually interpreted the results to mean India had moved 'Left'. Local

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factors had helped the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] do well in the states of Kerala and West Bengal in 2004. This helped the Left Front win a record 60 seats in the Lok Sabha.

The ideologues of the Left interpreted this 'regional' result as an endorsement of its political platform and tried to impose this on the Congress Party through the National Common Minimum Programme. Many in the Congress Party happily walked into this trap because they were so dazed by the result and were so happy to return to government after almost a decade.

In a classic communist party manoeuvre, Prakash Karat took charge of the CPM by staging a virtual coup at the Party Congress in 2005 and tried to push the entire UPA leftwards. He tried to put the Congress Party on the defensive by charging it of abandoning the nationalist platform on foreign policy. The Left painted Prime Minister Singh as a 'neo-liberal' economist, knowing full well that he was and has always been a 'Keynesian' liberal, and charged him of a pro-United States bias.

Some in the Congress Party fell into this trap and echoed the Left view that the 2004 verdict was in favour of pro-Left policies. This created an ideological confusion within the Congress Party that the Left exploited by seeking to drive a wedge between the Congress Party and the government. The India-United States civil nuclear cooperation agreement was used as an instrument to stage that coup.

Meanwhile, the BJP dumped Vajpayee's centrism and moved 'Right' without reflecting on why Vajpayee had tried to take the party away from its core ideology. Vajpayee was trying to 'Congressise' the BJP. Once the BJP abandoned that project under the leadership of Lal Kishen Advani and Narendra Modi, it lost 'middle India'.

What, therefore, contributed to the revival of the Congress Party? I believe it was the Congress Party's decision to strike out on its own, unencumbered by the ideological prejudices of the Left, and the caste-based and regional parties. The Congress Party re-asserted its independent centrist identity. It remembered that it was, in fact, the original political coalition in India.

Early in the election campaign, Prime Minister Singh hit out at casteism and regionalism, and identified these as equally damaging as communalism to the future of the Republic. Further, by rejecting the Left's and Third Front's attempts to give the Congress Party a character certificate on nationalism, the Congress Party regained the centre space that it was trying to take away.

The Left's stance on the India-United States nuclear deal was motivated by a Bolshevik instinct to hijack the Congress Party's agenda. By guilt-tripping the Congress Party and accusing the Prime Minister of abandoning 'an independent foreign policy', the Left was hoping to shape Indian foreign policy in the manner it sought to shape its economic policy in the past.

If the Congress Party had gone along with the Left and dumped the nuclear deal, it would have once again surrendered 'its' political space to the Left. Wisdom lay in asserting its own independence and, above all, in reclaiming the centre space of Indian political life for itself.

That is precisely what the Congress Party did in 2009. Returning to the ideological centre enabled the Congress Party to return to the centre.

What this means is that India's economic policy would once again walk the "middle path" of striking a balance between public policy activism and free market economics. The Congress Party believes that its rural employment guarantee programme and the farm loan waiver helped strengthen its rural support base. Thus, such initiatives will not be given up. However, now freed from the Left, the new government would be able to take more pro-market and pro-business initiatives. Stepping up investment in infrastructure through public-private partnerships will be a priority for the government. The core economic agenda of the National Common Minimum Programme, investing in rural and urban development, agriculture, education and health, will continue.

In the field of foreign policy, the government would walk the path it has been doing the past five years of strengthening India's relations with all the major powers, especially its major economic and strategic partners. We should also expect greater focus on a troubled neighbourhood in which most neighbours are pre-occupied with internal problems. India would hope to be a factor in regional stability and regional prosperity.

The 2009 verdict will help India regain the momentum of growth and play a positive role in global affairs.

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