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## **Indian General Elections 2009 – National and Regional Political Parties, their Leaders and Strategies**

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### **Preface**

India will hold its 15<sup>th</sup> general elections in April/May 2009. The elections will take place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues will influence the elections. The exercise will be impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

As India moves into the election mode, the Institute of South Asian Studies will bring out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the forthcoming elections. These will include, among others, the key national and regional parties, and their strategies, key political personalities, and the issues that are likely to have an impact on the elections.

This paper, the first in the series, provides an overview of India's main political parties participating in the elections, along with their strategies and key leaders.

### **Introduction**

For two decades up to 2004, one of the most significant aspects of India's polity was the decline of the centre-left Indian National Congress and the rise of the Hindu nationalist, right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the two largest political parties in the world's largest democracy. The 2004 general elections, the 14<sup>th</sup> in the country, saw the position of the Congress improve for the first time since 1991 – it became the single largest party in the Lok Sabha or the Lower House of Parliament (winning 145 out of 543 seats). In 2004, for the first time in two decades, the BJP lost ground with the number of members of Parliament owing allegiance to the party coming down from 182 to 138.

From 1996 onward, no government in New Delhi has been formed by a single party – each government has been run by a coalition of parties. Although two coalitions, one led by the Congress, called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and the other by the BJP,

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called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), dominate the Indian polity, it would not be accurate to describe India's polity as bipolar with smaller parties, including regional parties and caste-based parties, having no choice but to become appendages of either the BJP or the Congress either before or after the elections. A non-Congress, non-BJP political formation, with outside support from the Congress Party, called the United Front, was in power between 1996 and 1998. Such formations, amorphous though their composition may be, could continue to exert influence on the working of the polity.

Political parties in India are becoming increasingly adept at managing contradictions and are now even able to co-exist at the Union or federal level with their major rivals in the provinces or states. The two largest political parties together (minus their allies and coalition partners) obtained roughly half the votes cast in successive general elections that were held in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004. The remaining votes were cast in favour of dozens of political parties, some of which have opportunistically switched allegiance between the UPA and the NDA coalitions. Such patterns of voter behaviour could continue in the forthcoming 15<sup>th</sup> general elections scheduled for April/May 2009.

## **Key National Parties**

### Indian National Congress

The Congress is India's 'grand old' political party that was set up in December 1885. It is the only major Indian political party in which a substantial section still believes it can single-handedly rule a diverse country like India. After independence in 1947, the leadership of the Congress has been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi family. The assumption of the reins of the party in 1998 by Sonia Gandhi, the Italy-born widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the gradual rearing and induction of her son, Rahul Gandhi, as general secretary of the party, have reinforced this view of the Congress. Though it is not at all certain that 38-year-old Rahul Gandhi will be projected as the Prime Ministerial candidate of the Congress, he is playing an increasingly proactive role in the party's affairs.

What has been a source of considerable worry for the Congress is its dramatic decline and marginalisation in the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (the country's most populous province) and Bihar. In the recent past, sections of the population, including minorities (such as the Muslims), the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, are not supporting the Congress as communities or 'vote banks'. After the general elections of 2004, the centre-left UPA coalition led by the Congress, formed the government in New Delhi with crucial 'outside' support from a group of 60-odd members of parliament belonging to four Left parties, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI-M] on the basis of a national common minimum programme (NCMP). On 22 July 2008, the UPA won a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha after parting ways with the Left, following a bitter dispute over the nuclear agreement between India and the United States, and after obtaining the support of the regional Samajwadi Party and with the help of 'defectors' who voted across party lines.

### *Sonia Gandhi*

It was only after the Congress lost power in the 1996 general elections that Sonia Gandhi became a primary member of the Congress. She officially took charge of the Congress Party as its president in 1998 and was elected to the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, in 1999. She became leader of the Opposition in the 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha in 1998. After the results of

the 2004 general elections were announced, she was unanimously chosen to lead a 15-party coalition government with the support of the Left. Instead of becoming Prime Minister, she nominated Dr Manmohan Singh to lead the Union government in New Delhi. She, however, retained the post of chairperson of the UPA and president of the Congress. She also headed a National Advisory Council, a body comprising eminent persons with different areas of expertise that was set up to advise the government and interface with civil society on the implementation of the NCMP. The NCMP later became virtually defunct following a controversy over whether legislators could hold an 'office of profit'. Most political observers have perceived her as not merely the *de jure* leader of the Congress and the UPA but the *de facto* head of the government, although she has always argued that the Prime Minister is the head of the government of India.

### *Manmohan Singh*

Dr Manmohan Singh is India's 17<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister and the first one never to have won a Lok Sabha election – he lost the only one he contested in 1999. He has been a Congress member of Parliament in the Upper House of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha (from Assam in north-east India) since 1991 and is known as the 'architect of economic liberalisation' during his tenure as Finance Minister between 1991 and 1996 in the P. V. Narasimha Rao government. Perhaps the most controversial decision he took as Prime Minister was the signing of the India-United States civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the George W. Bush Administration in 2008 when he drew flak from several political parties (in particular, the Left) who endorsed the view that the deal would compromise the country's sovereignty and its ability to develop its own nuclear weapons programme. Seeking to counter the claim of his political opponents that he was 'weak', Dr Singh asserted his position after the UPA government headed by him won a vote of confidence in Parliament in July 2008.

### Strategy

The Congress party is emphasising its economic achievements in the run-up to the elections. These include the fact that India's economy grew by nearly nine per cent each year four years in a row for the first time since the country became politically independent in 1947; the farm loan waiver scheme; the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme that legally assures a minimum of 100 days of manual work to each family in rural areas; the enactment of the Right to Information Act; and the strengthening of the country's 'energy security' after the nuclear agreement with the United States.

### **Bharatiya Janata Party**

The BJP has for long rightly been perceived as the political wing of the 'social organisation' called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The BJP has periodically toned up or subdued its Hindu nationalist rhetoric to come to power and retain it. The party's leadership took pains to project a more moderate and secular face, while the BJP-led NDA was in power in New Delhi even though the veneer kept slipping from time to time. After its debacle in the 2004 general elections, the BJP has found it difficult to reconcile itself to the fact that it has lost power. The BJP, that once prided itself on its discipline, is today seen as faction-ridden and corrupt as any other political party and has lost whatever claims it had to being 'a party with a difference'. The party has also been accused of narrow parochial activities when it was in power: saffronising education, controlling the organs of the State, reworking caste equations, living down the past and legitimising the 'Hindutva' agenda.

In Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP gave India its first Prime Minister who had never been a member of the Congress party. After the defeat of the NDA in the 14<sup>th</sup> general elections held in April-May 2004, Vajpayee quietly slipped into the shoes of the 'elder statesman' and, of late, has not been keeping good health. In recent months, the BJP has found itself in the throes of internal power struggles time and again. In January 2009, former Vice President of India, 84-year-old Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (and the senior-most leader of the party by age), said he was not unwilling to contest the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. His move was perceived by political observers as an attempt to challenge L. K. Advani who is the party's Prime Ministerial candidate though he denied this was his intention.

### L. K. Advani

L. K. Advani, the president of the BJP for three separate terms, is also leader of the Opposition in the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. He was second-in-command in the Vajpayee government holding the rank of Deputy Prime Minister over and above the post of Union Minister for Home Affairs. In 1989-90, Advani turned the BJP into a significant force in Indian politics by undertaking a 'rath yatra' (chariot tour) to mobilise public support for the building of a temple dedicated to Lord Rama at Ayodhya at the site where the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Babri mosque had stood. The yatra culminated in the demolition of the mosque on 6 December 1992 that adversely affected India's image as a secular nation-state. More recently, while touring Pakistan in June 2005, Advani made apparently laudatory remarks about Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, which created a huge controversy in his own party. Many interpreted his remarks as an attempt to make the BJP a party that would be 'acceptable' to India's minorities, especially Muslims. Within the BJP, Advani has always had a reputation of being widely-read and, contrary to his public image as a hawk, he is believed to be a liberal and an agnostic of sorts.

### Strategy

The BJP is attacking the Congress and the UPA primarily on the issue of inflation, for being 'soft' on terrorists and for having compromised the country's sovereignty by signing a nuclear deal with the United States. The party further claims the UPA government is corrupt and has not been able to effectively govern the country as well as the NDA governments earlier did.

### **Key Regional Parties**

Political parties with a base only in specific regions or states have been around for as long as India has been independent. Until recently, such parties often appealed to narrow, parochial sentiments of the electorate in particular parts of the country or even to a specific section of people within that geographical area. In recent years, many regional parties have acquired a national outlook just as the two large national political parties, the Congress and the BJP, have had to become more sensitive to the demands and aspirations of these smaller parties, particularly if they are coalition partners or provide outside support to governments.

### Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party

The two main regional political parties in Uttar Pradesh, India's most-populous state that elects 80 out of the 543 Lok Sabha members of Parliament, are the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The fact that the Congress and BJP have become marginal

political forces in the state is to a large extent responsible for India entering a phase of coalition politics since 1996.

The SP appeals to a constituency that is largely caste-based. Headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav, it has drawn sustenance from the Muslim-Yadav combine that consolidated following the demolition of the Babri mosque in the state in December 1992. The Yadavs are considered a numerically significant and influential middle caste, especially in Uttar Pradesh. The BSP has, from its very inception, defined itself as a party of the low-caste 'dalits' and other oppressed castes. It has made no bones about the fact that it has no compunctions about aligning with anybody in its attempts to come to power. It has, in the last decade, made alliances with the SP, the Congress and the BJP at different points of time in Uttar Pradesh.

Both the SP and the BSP are now attempting to expand beyond their sectarian vote banks and reach out to new sections. The BSP has actively wooed sections of the upper castes like the Brahmins though it was once staunchly in opposition to the upper castes. The SP's attempts at expanding its support base have been less blatantly caste-based. Mulayam's right-hand man in the SP, Amar Singh, has spearheaded the effort to woo important individuals from different parts of the country, including industrialist Anil Ambani and popular film actor Amitabh Bachchan. On 8 January 2008, the SP announced the candidature of Sanjay Dutt, another 'Bollywood' star who was convicted in the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts case, from the Lok Sabha constituency of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh. Even as the SP attempts to widen its appeal, its critics have pointed out that it is becoming increasingly desperate about retaining the support of the Muslims and in the process encouraging fundamentalist elements from within the community. Even after it supported the UPA to win the 22 July 2008 vote of confidence, the SP's relations with the Congress are less than cordial. It appears that, in 2009, it will be difficult for the SP to be able to repeat its 2004 electoral performance when the party won 35 out of the 80 Lok Sabha seats from the state.

### *Mayawati Kumari*

The rise of Mayawati Kumari in Indian politics has been truly phenomenal. Her political career formally began with the establishment of the BSP in April 1984. Following the victory of the BSP in the 2007 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, in her fourth stint as Chief Minister, she appears to have become more politically influential. The BSP had won 19 Lok Sabha seats from the state in 2004 and appears all set to improve its performance in 2009. Mayawati has made no secret of her ambition to one day become the Prime Minister of India. The BSP, the four parties led by the CPI-M comprising the Left, the Telugu Desam Party and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) could together form an important 'third front' if these parties perform well in the forthcoming fifteenth general elections.

### Left Parties

There are four major Left parties in Indian politics – the two communist parties, the CPI-M, the Communist Party of India, together with the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and the All India Forward Bloc. These parties that are part of the Left Front have been running the state government in West Bengal since 1977, a record in Indian politics, and also have a similar formation in Tripura (in north-east India) and in Kerala. The 2004 general elections saw the Left becoming more powerful than ever before in national politics with the four parties obtaining 61 seats in the Lok Sabha. The Manmohan Singh government, formed by the

Congress-led UPA coalition, was completely dependent on the 'outside' support extended by these four Left parties for a majority in the Lok Sabha. However, in July 2008, the Left withdrew its support to the UPA over the signing of the nuclear deal between India and the United States.

The public outcry and agitations over acquisition of land for setting up industrial ventures in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal and infighting within the CPI-M in Kerala has hurt the image of the Left in these two states and elsewhere. The Left would find it exceedingly difficult to retain all the Lok Sabha seats it has at present.

### *Strategy*

The CPI-M general secretary, Prakash Karat, has intensified his party's attacks against the Congress and is attempting to stitch together a so-called anti-Congress, anti-BJP 'third front' that would include the BSP, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the AIADMK. In its campaigns, the Left is emphasising the inability of the UPA government to control inflation, its 'pro-rich' economic policies, its alleged compromise with 'American imperialism' (including the nuclear deal) and for allegedly encouraging corruption.

### Rashtriya Janata Dal and Janata Dal (United)

The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) is led by Union Railways Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav and the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] is headed by the current Chief Minister of Bihar Nitish Kumar. The RJD and the JD(U) are the two principal political parties in the state of Bihar; the former is supported by the Congress and the latter by the BJP. After Lalu Yadav had to resign his post as Chief Minister of Bihar in 1997 when corruption charges were levelled against him, he ensured that his party nominated his wife, Rabri Devi, as his successor. She thus became the first woman Chief Minister of Bihar. The social support base of the RJD in Bihar, like that of the SP in Uttar Pradesh, is largely among the Yadavs and the Muslims. Lalu Yadav has carefully cultivated his image of being a rustic buffoon and has certainly been one of the most media-savvy politicians in India. In recent months, he has taken considerable credit for having improved the working of the Indian Railways.

Nitish Kumar, who became Chief Minister of Bihar for the second time in 2005, has sought to improve the performance of the state government that is notorious for its sloth, inefficiency and corruption. However, the manner in which those affected by the devastating floods that took place in the Kosi river in the state in August 2008 were provided relief and were rehabilitated by the state government has attracted considerable criticism. Nevertheless, the JD(U) is expected to improve its performance in the 15<sup>th</sup> general elections. In 2004, the party won only six out of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar, with the RJD winning 22.

### Telegu Desam Party

N. T. Rama Rao founded the TDP in Andhra Pradesh in 1982. In 1996, his son-in-law, N. Chandrababu Naidu, split the party and eventually took over the reins (even before Rama Rao died that year). He turned out to be a durable and opportunistic politician who, in 1998, switched his party's allegiance from the centre-left United Front to the BJP-led NDA. He sought to promote his state as a hub for information technology. He was perceived to be elitist, as a result of which his party lost the 2004 state assembly elections to the Congress that was led in the state by Y.S. Rajsekhar Reddy who personally campaigned against the

TDP by walking from village to village. Out of power, Naidu was contrite and apparently apologetic for having ignored the poor. He later tried briefly to revive a 'third front' by aligning with the SP and making overtures to the Left by distancing the TDP from the BJP. He is now being supported by the Left as well as by a sub-regional party, the Telengana Rashtra Samithi (that demands that the state be bifurcated and the Telengana region be made into a separate state). The TDP won only five out of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh in 2004. However, Naidu's electoral prospects have looked up since the incumbent Rajsekhar Reddy government has been accused of having favoured the Satyam group of companies that is embroiled in a major financial scandal.

### Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the AIADMK are the two principal political parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The two have exchanged positions to head the state government for more than two decades on account of strong anti-incumbency sentiments that have prevailed in the state. The DMK, formed in 1949, is headed by current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi. The AIADMK was formed in 1972, when M.G. Ramachandran broke away from the DMK. He sought to project the image of the AIADMK as a party of the downtrodden. After Ramachandran's death in 1987, J. Jayalalitha emerged as the leader of the AIADMK. The language issue (Tamil versus Hindi) and the Dravidian movement that spawned the two parties had been the catalyst that precipitated the decline of the Congress in Tamil Nadu and the ascendance of the Dravidian parties. In recent years, both the DMK and the AIADMK have been opportunistic in aligning themselves with both the Congress and the BJP, and being part of coalitions led by the two contending national parties.

The incumbent regime in the state led by the DMK is expected to lose ground in the coming general elections. Allegations of corruption have been levelled against two important DMK ministers in the Manmohan Singh government in New Delhi – Surface Transport Minister, T. R. Baalu, and Communications and Information Technology Minister, A. Raja. The AIADMK, which is presently being supported by the Left, expects to improve its performance significantly after the 15<sup>th</sup> general elections. The party has no representation in the Lok Sabha at present; it had 18 members of parliaments (out of 39 from the state) after the 1998 elections and 10 members of parliament after the 1999 general elections.

### Biju Janata Dal

Current Chief Minister of the eastern Indian state of Orissa, Naveen Patnaik, entered politics after his father Biju Patnaik's death in 1997. That year, the Janata Dal in Orissa split to form the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) under his stewardship. In alliance with the BJP, the BJD has been in power in the state since 1999. In his second term as Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik's government has been criticised for its inability to prevent a series of attacks against the Christian community in different parts of the state in 2008. Patnaik has attempted to attract major investments to Orissa, especially for mining and steel projects. He has matured as a politician and is no longer a person dependent entirely on his father's legacy. However, he has a long way to go before he is able to improve the economic condition of the majority of the people living in Orissa. Still, the BJD may perform creditably in the coming elections. In 2004, the party won 11 out of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the state, with its partner winning in seven constituencies.

### Trinamool Congress

In September 1997, Mamata Banerjee broke away from the Congress in West Bengal and formed the Trinamool Congress. In the 1998 general elections, she threw her weight behind the BJP-led NDA and was subsequently made Union Minister for Railways. In March 2001, she ditched the NDA to form a 'mahajot' or grand alliance with the Congress against the CPI-M-led Left Front in West Bengal but was back with the NDA after the alliance performed poorly in the assembly elections held in the state in May 2001. She is often described as a maverick and her behaviour has been unpredictable. In 2008, she was instrumental in driving away Tata Motors that had wanted to establish a factory at Singur in West Bengal to manufacture the 'world's cheapest car', the Nano, over issues relating to land acquisition. In Nandigram too, she was able to thwart the attempt of the state government to set up a special economic zone. While these two issues have helped her return to the political limelight, she has also become unpopular among sections of the electorate in the state. Be that as it may, the Trinamool Congress is likely to improve its performance in the next general elections. The party had won only one Lok Sabha seat (out of a total of 42 seats in West Bengal) in 2004 against eight in 1999.

### Shiv Sena

The Shiv Sena's strident rhetoric against 'outsiders' and in favour of 'sons of the soil' has been a very useful tool for the party to gain a foothold in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. The period since 1984 has seen the Sena acquire the image of a rabidly anti-Muslim organisation and one that believes in violence as a means of getting its point of view accepted. It has aligned with the BJP since then. However, just as the BJP has time and again accused the Congress of 'appeasing minorities', the Sena has been critical of the BJP for its alleged appeasement of 'secularists'. Sena supporters were accused of playing an active role in the violence against Muslims in the state capital Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993. With Balasaheb Thackeray announcing that his son, Uddhav Thackeray, would succeed him as the Sena president, his nephew Raj Thackeray quit the party in January 2006 to set up his own political outfit, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS).

In 2008, the MNS launched a virulent campaign of hatred against non-Maharashtrians residing in the state. Raj Thackeray's goons hounded and beat up students and workers not belonging to Maharashtra (particularly those from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) in a series of episodes reminiscent of the senior Thackeray's hate campaign against South Indians in the state in the 1970s and 1980s.

### Nationalist Congress Party

The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) was formed on the issue of the foreign origin of Congress President Sonia Gandhi. On the eve of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, three Congress leaders (Sharad Pawar, P.A. Sangma, Tariq Anwar) decided to part ways with the parent party and formed the NCP. However, following the defeat of the NDA in the Lok Sabha elections in 2004, Pawar decided to extend support to the Congress to form a government in New Delhi which was a complete *volte face* in relation to his earlier stance at a time when Sonia Gandhi was still perceived to be the person most likely to head a Congress-led coalition government. A former Chief Minister of Maharashtra and a former Union Defence Minister, Sharad Pawar went on to become Agriculture Minister in the UPA



government. Congressmen have suggested that it would be best if Pawar returned to his parent party but the NCP chief himself has made it quite clear that he has no such intentions. His party is especially influential in Maharashtra. The NCP had won nine out of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2004 and may increase its hold over Maharashtra, India's most industrialised state.

### Shiromani Akali Dal

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) traces its origins to an organisation set up primarily for religious reform within the Sikh community in the northern Indian state of Punjab. As it has evolved, the SAD has remained a political party almost solely of Sikhs and one that provides expression to the aspirations of the community. With the collapse of the United Front government in 1998, the SAD joined the BJP-led NDA. Since the party has a strong base in rural Punjab, one of India's most agriculturally prosperous states, and since the support base of the BJP was almost entirely among the Hindus in Punjab's urban centres, the alliance won the overwhelming majority of Punjab's Lok Sabha seats in 1998 – 11 out of 13. Since then, although the alliance performed badly in the general elections held the following year in 1999 and the assembly elections in the state in 2002, the SAD stuck with the NDA despite occasional friction with the BJP. The outcome of the February 2007 assembly elections in Punjab cemented the ties between the two parties. The SAD-BJP alliance obtained a comfortable majority winning 67 seats in the 117-member assembly. However, because of anti-incumbency sentiments, the SAD would find it difficult to hold on to the eight Lok Sabha seats (out of 13 in the state) it won in 2004.

### Jammu & Kashmir National Conference

Jammu & Kashmir is India's northernmost state and the only state with a Muslim majority. The state's relationship with India (or with Pakistan) remains a live and often contentious political issue. The National Conference (NC) has always adopted an aggressively pro-autonomy posture while distancing itself from those demanding secession of the state (if not the Kashmir valley) from India. In July 2003, the NC's President, Omar Abdullah, pulled his party out of the NDA and its government. In July 2008, the NC aligned itself with the UPA and helped the Manmohan Singh government win a confidence vote in Parliament. In the December 2008 assembly elections in the state, the NC managed to retain the number of seats it had in the state assembly and forged an alliance with the Congress to form a government in Jammu & Kashmir, replacing the earlier coalition government between the People's Democratic Party and the Congress that had ruled the state since 2002. The son of the NC's head and former Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah took oath as Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir on 5 January 2009. At 38, he is the state's youngest-ever Chief Minister.

### **Conclusion**

The 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, scheduled to take place in April/May 2009, could be spread over seven to nine phases over a period of three weeks to a month. The Election Commission of India is likely to announce the schedule for the elections in the second week of March 2009. The last session of the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha is expected to begin in mid-February 2009 and should last a fortnight or less. The main task of the session would be to pass a vote-on-account to ensure government expenditure takes place in a smooth manner till a new government is constituted and new budget approved. The current Chief Election

Commissioner, N. Gopalaswami, demits office on 20 April 2009, around the time polling begins. Navin Chawla, the controversial Election Commissioner, who has been accused by the Opposition BJP of being sympathetic towards the Congress, is to take charge as Chief Election Commissioner since he is the senior of the two Election Commissioners.

It would be hazardous to try and anticipate the outcome of the forthcoming general elections in the world's largest democracy. Few would be surprised if the two largest political parties in the country, the Congress and the BJP (minus their allies and coalition partners), obtain between 120 seats and 140 seats each in the 543-member Lok Sabha – the two together may not be able to cross the half-way mark of 272 MPs. The so-called 'third front', comprising the BSP, the Left, the TDP and the AIADMK, may also obtain a similar number of seats. Depending on the arithmetic of the new Parliament, smaller parties could shift their loyalties. This possibility makes the political situation in India rather fluid and unpredictable.

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