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Indian General Election 2009 – Geographical Influence of Regional Parties and Electoral Outlook

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Preface

India will hold its 15th general elections from 16 April to 13 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 (ISAS) is bringing 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.

ISAS had earlier prepared six 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 likely impact on the forthcoming elections; and the role of women and importance of women leaders in Indian politics and elections.

This seventh paper in the series examines the geographical distribution of India's diverse regional parties, their states of influence and the electoral outlooks for these states.

Introduction – National and Regional Parties

India's elections are becoming increasingly trickier for psephologists, given the heavily fractured mandates produced by such exercises. One of the plausible reasons for the electoral mandate having become increasingly splintered is the steady emergence of a large number of 'non-national' parties² in India's domestic politics and the electoral process. A fragmented and fractured polity with regional and state actors wielding significant bargaining power with the national parties has decisively changed the structure, nature and outcome of Indian elections since the 1990s.

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² Regional and state parties are also referred to as non-national parties. These terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

India’s main parties with an all-India presence, which can be referred to as national parties, include the Congress Party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the two Left parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] and the Communist Party of India (CPI). These parties have their political wings in almost every region and state of the country. However, the across-the-board political presence is no longer capable of pulling in enough votes for these parties. This is due to the fact that they are facing tough opposition from a variety of regional parties in different parts of the country. The rise of regional parties has definitely eroded the political bases of the national parties with far-reaching implications on the country’s electoral outcomes.

The rise of regional parties and the concomitant decline in vote shares of the national parties has resulted in the growth of coalition governments. The latter have become a regular phenomenon in India both at the central and state levels. Almost all parties have accepted that the next government in India will also be a multi-party coalition government. This has resulted in an intensive search by the parties for suitable ‘allies’ in order to form electoral alliances.

The national parties are at the centre of different alliances. The Congress Party and the BJP have gathered around them multiple regional parties for weaving electoral alliances. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is led by the Congress Party, while the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is led by the BJP. On the other hand, the Left parties have been instrumental in cobbling together another set of alliances, and this group is now being referred to as the Third Front.

The national parties are utilising their well-spread organisational networks to negotiate with regional parties in different parts of the country to create alliances. However, their eagerness to work out these alliances is a clear indication of their bases having eroded over time. Both the Congress Party and the BJP realise that without the support of the regional parties, it is impossible to aspire to form the government.

Regional Parties: A Disaggregated Profile

In the last general elections held in 2004, the regional parties had a total of 196 seats out of 543 seats in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament (see Table 1). In terms of the share of the total seats, this implied a 36.4 percent of the aggregate. As seen from Table 1, this was a larger share than all of the other national parties.

Table 1: Results of General Elections 2004

Party	Seats (in no.)	Share in Total Seats (%)
Regional/State	196	36.4
National		
Congress Party	145	27.0
BJP	138	25.6
Left ³	59	11.0
Total	543	100.0

Source: Compiled from the Election Commission of India documents

³ The Left includes the CPI(M), CPI, Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Forward Bloc. Together, they comprise the Left Front.

When we dissect the seat share of regional parties, it is possible to have a clearer idea about the seats held by different regional parties and the political leverage they enjoy as a result. Table 2 gives the disaggregated profile of seats obtained by regional parties in the 2004 elections. It also shows the share of each party in the total of 196 seats won by regional parties as a whole.

Table 2: Elections 2004 – Performance of the Non-National Parties

Parties	Seats	Share in Total Seats (%)*
Regional	196	-
Telugu Desam Party	5	2.5
All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen	1	0.5
Telangana Rashtra Samithi	5	2.5
Asom Gana Parishad	2	1.1
Lok Jan Shakti Party	4	2.1
Janata Dal (United)	8	4.1
Rashtriya Janata Dal	24	12.2
Jammu & Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party	1	0.5
Jammu & Kashmir National Conference	2	1.1
Janata Dal (Secular)	3	1.5
Muslim League Kerala State Committee	1	0.5
Kerala Congress	1	0.5
Indian Federal Democratic Party	1	0.5
Shivsena	12	6.1
Republican Party of India (A)	1	0.5
Nationalist Congress Party	9	4.6
All India Trinamool Congress	2	1.1
Mizo National Front	1	0.5
Nagaland Peoples Front	1	0.5
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	5	2.5
Biju Janata Dal	11	5.6
Shiromani Akali Dal	8	4.1
Sikkim Democratic Front	1	0.5
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	16	8.2
Pattali Makkal Katchi	6	3.1
Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	4	2.1
National Loktantrik Party	1	0.5
Samajwadi Party	36	18.4
Bahujan Samaj Party	19	9.7
Rashtriya Lok Dal	3	1.5
Samajwadi Janata Party (Rashtriya)	1	0.5
Bharatiya Navshakti Party	1	0.5

* Approximated for convenience.

Source: Compiled from the Election Commission of India documents.

In terms of the number of seats won by regional parties in the 2004 elections, the leading were the Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], Biju Janata Dal (BJD), Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Shiv Sena (SHS),

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Paatali Makkal Katchi (PMK) Tamil Nadu, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Telengana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS).

On a further disaggregated basis, the BSP, SP, RJD, JD(U), BJD, NCP, SHS, SAD and DMK had almost 72 percent of the total regional party seats between them in 2004. During negotiations on possible electoral alliances for the forthcoming elections, these parties have emerged as key players. Indeed, except for the SAD, SHS, and JD(U), which are still formal constituents of the BJP-led NDA alliance, the rest of the parties have split into the Third Front, have had basic seat-sharing arrangements with the Congress Party or have kept their options open.

Arithmetically, if the regional parties get at least as many seats as they did in the last elections, then most of these parties, given their flexible pre-poll arrangements with the national parties, will have several options opened to them. Individually, as well as collectively, they will emerge as significant determinants of the ruling coalition.

It is also important to note that more parties have entered the fray since 2004. The new parties capable of influencing electoral results are Praja Rajyam in Andhra Pradesh (led by actor Chiranjeevi) and the Desiya Murpoku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) (led by actor Vijayakanth) in Tamil Nadu. These parties are expected to eat into the vote banks of the other parties, thereby fracturing the mandates even further.

States with Significant Regional Parties

Annex 1 on page 9 provides a complete state-wise illustration of the presence of the national and regional parties on the basis of seats won in the 2004 elections. It also indicates the partnership of the regional parties with the national parties and the overarching alliances on the basis of seats won in different states.

Annex 1 also reveals that the states having significant regional parties are Jammu & Kashmir (National Conference), Punjab (SAD), Uttar Pradesh (BSP and SP), Bihar (RJD, JD(U) and Lok Jan Shakti Party), Orissa [BJD and Jharkand Mukti Morcha (JMM)], West Bengal [All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)], Jharkhand (RJD and JMM), Maharashtra (SHS, NCP and Republican Party of India), Andhra Pradesh (TRS, TDP and Praja Rajyam), Tamil Nadu [DMK, All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), PMK, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), DMDK, Dalit Panthers of India and Puthiya Thamizhagam], Kerala (Muslim League Kerala State Committee and Kerala Congress) and Karnataka [Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S))].

The north-east also has several regional parties (Mizo National Front, Sikkim Democratic Front, Nagaland People's Front and Arunachal Congress).

On the other hand, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh do not have significant regional parties. These states will essentially witness contests between the national parties.

It is clear that most of India's key states, in terms of number of seats, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, have a significant presence of regional parties. Geographically, this implies that the results in the

four key southern states (Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka) will be influenced by regional parties. The same will be the case for the eastern states (Orissa and West Bengal) and the north-east.

India's northern and western states show a mixed dominance of regional parties. While Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are heavily dominated by the regional parties, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal and Uttaranchal are much less dominated. In the west, barring Maharashtra, the regional parties have limited influence.

Electoral Tie-ups and Outlooks in States with Significant Regional Parties

The state-wise breakup of influences clearly identifies states where the national parties have no option other than to rely on regional parties. The electoral outlook, ongoing negotiations and prospective alliances are discussed below on a regional basis.

South

The case of Tamil Nadu looks interesting and complicated at the same time. During the last elections, three regional parties, namely the DMK, PMK and MDMK, were part of the Congress Party-led UPA. Even the Left parties were part of this mega alliance at that time. However, now, in a setback to the Congress Party, the Left parties, PMK and MDMK have left the Congress Party-DMK alliance. The PMK and MDMK hold about 10 seats. They have decided to tie up with the AIADMK, led by the charismatic J. Jayalalitha, who has severed ties with the BJP-led NDA. Jayalalitha is now a part of the Third Front, which may be bolstered by the presence of the PMK and MDMK.

The Congress Party's prospects have been further weakened since its main ally, the DMK, which is in power in the state assembly, is likely to face anti-incumbency. The AIADMK has rallied with the Left parties under the overall umbrage of the Third Front and is seeking to exploit the anti-incumbency against the DMK.

There could, however, be other factors at work favouring the Congress Party's alliance. The PMK's following among the backward Vanniar caste is believed to have eroded because of charges of corruption and opportunist policies. Moreover, actor-turned politician, Vijayakanth, with his party DMDK, is believed to have made significant inroads in the northern belt of Tamil Nadu where the Vanniars are concentrated. The DMDK, contesting independently now, could take away a sizeable chunk of the anti-DMK votes in the region. The PMK will stand bereft of the Dalit votes as the Viduthalai Chiruthailgal Katchi, a rising phenomenon, continues to be with the DMK-led front.

In its neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, the TDP and TRS will be the key forces. In the last elections, the TDP was with the NDA and the TRS was with the UPA. However, their joining hands will offer stiff resistance to the Congress Party. The Congress Party is also likely to encounter anti-incumbency since it is in power right now.

In both Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, anti-incumbency had worked in favour of the Congress Party in 2004. Indeed, its alliances with the TRS in Andhra Pradesh and the DMK, MDMK and PMK in Tamil Nadu were vital in the UPA forming a government after the last elections. The alliances and seat-sharing adjustments were also crucial in the Congress Party winning some seats in these states.

This time, however, anti-incumbency may work otherwise. At the same time, the prospects of the BJP as well are not bright in Andhra Pradesh since the TDP has deserted it to move to the Third Front, along with the TRS. With the AIADMK also joining the Third Front, the BJP alliance is somewhat rudderless in the two key southern states.

While Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have complex outlooks, Kerala has a more straightforward scenario. Despite the regional parties, the contest will essentially be between the Congress Party and Left. The state has a history of overturning governments every five years. History, therefore, is against the ruling Left in the state. The Congress Party will be hoping to make good gains.

While the BJP is not looking towards making inroads into Kerala, it is more hopeful of a good outing in Karnataka. However, the entry of the JD(S), led by ex-Prime Minister Deve Gowda in the Third Front, could spoil its chances. The JD(S) enjoys caste-based support in Karnataka and could upset the calculations. While Deve Gowda has cast his lot with the Third Front, there are reports that there could be some understanding between his party and the Congress Party, which could then work against the BJP.

North

Over the years, the Congress Party, India's oldest national party, has lost considerable ground in key northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The BJP, though perhaps on a better footing than the Congress Party, has been somewhat marginalised in the complex caste-driven politics of north India. However, neither the Congress Party nor the BJP can afford to ignore Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These two states account for more than 20 percent of the total seats in the Lower House of the Parliament. They are vital for all aspiring coalitions.

The BSP, led by Mayawati Kumari, and the SP, led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, hold the key to the electoral outcome of Uttar Pradesh. The two parties are each other's staunchest opponents. As of now, the BSP has veered towards the Third Front. The relationship between the SP and Congress Party has improved in recent times, with the SP supporting the incumbent UPA government in the Parliament ever since the Left withdrew its support over the nuclear deal with the United States. The Congress Party and the SP have been negotiating seat-sharing arrangements in Uttar Pradesh, in the course of which the Congress Party has had to give up its demand for quite a few seats. Indeed, differences over the seat-sharing formula have resulted in both parties threatening to contest singly without any pre-election understanding.

The Congress Party and the BJP have run into frictions their allies over seat-sharing arrangements in Bihar as well. Out of a total of 40 seats in Bihar, the Congress Party won only three in 2004. Its main alliance partners in Bihar are the RJD, led by incumbent Railways Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), led by another Cabinet Minister Rambilas Paswan. The Congress Party is facing serious difficulties in seat-sharing negotiations with both these regional parties. Indeed, the RJD and the LJP have chosen to carve out the state between them, leaving only a handful of states for the Congress Party. The alliance between the Congress Party and its regional partners is on a weak footing. Like in Uttar Pradesh, the parties may eventually contest elections without any formal seat agreements.

The BJP has also been facing problems with its negotiations with JD(U) in Bihar. Many of the BJP's traditional allies from the NDA have been consciously distancing themselves from the BJP for fear of losing the minority votes. Till now, however, the JD(U)-BJP talks have not entirely collapsed despite the JD(U)'s obvious concern for the minority votes.

East

The BJP received a major jolt in the last few weeks when one of its old allies, the BJD from Orissa, decided to part ties with it. The BJD has not yet indicated if it will join the Third Front despite overtures from the Left. However, it is fighting the elections on its own. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, leader of the AITC, another constituent of the NDA, has moved away from the BJP and has allied with the Congress Party. This has considerably improved prospects for the Congress Party in the state, while damaging those of the ruling Left.

West

Maharashtra is the state to watch out for in the next elections from the western region. The two main regional outfits, the SHS and the NCP, have alliances with the BJP and the Congress Party respectively. The going has not been smooth either way. However, both BJP and Congress Party have been finally able to retain their alliances though both have had to compromise on their targeted number of seats in the state.

Conclusion

The run-up to the 15th Indian elections shows the regional parties in a buoyant mood. Sensing their ability to play a significant role in post-election government formation, these parties are exploiting the circumstances for maximum gains. Indeed, in states where the regional parties are dominant entities, they have been trying to marginalise the national parties by demanding more seats to field their own candidates.

The situation has become increasingly difficult for the Congress Party and the BJP. Both parties are unable to assert their authority on the existing and potential alliance partners. They have to accept seat-sharing formulas that are hardly to their liking. However, given the compulsions of coalition politics and the vital significance of working out effective alliances, they cannot afford to antagonise the regional parties.

The situation is markedly different for the 2009 elections compared to that of 2004, due to the emergence of the Third Front. The Left, along with a variety of regional parties, is projecting a third alternative to the Congress Party and the BJP. On its own, the Third Front is not expected to have enough seats to form a government. However, through its creation, the Third Front has ensured that the Congress Party and BJP will find it difficult to forge effective alliances. With the Third Front roping in parties that have figured in either the UPA or NDA, both the Congress Party and the BJP have been left searching for partners. The possibilities are endless but the common theme remains the increasing say of the regional outfits in the national polity.

Sharad Pawar, leader of Maharashtra-based NCP, aptly commented that anyone commanding 12 seats in the 543-member House could aspire to become the Prime Minister in the next government, as the mandate will be so fractured. Ironically Mr Pawar has already sealed an alliance with the Congress Party and is the Agriculture Minister in the incumbent government.

The fact that he can make such claims in public shows that matters are in a state of flux. It also reflects the ambitions and aspirations harboured by regional parties. The 15th Indian elections will certainly be interesting.

Annex 1: State-wise Presence of National and Regional Parties in 2004 Elections

State/Union Territory	National Parties	Regional Parties	Alliance - 2004
Jammu and Kashmir	Indian National Congress (INC)	National Conference (NC)	
		People's Democratic Party (PDP)	INC +
Punjab	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	BJP +
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Uttaranchal	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Samajwadi Party (SP)	
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Himachal Pradesh	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Uttar Pradesh	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Samajwadi Party (SP)	
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	
Bihar	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)	
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Janata Dal (United) (JD(U))	BJP +
		Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJSP)	INC +
Haryana	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Rajasthan	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Gujarat	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Madhya Pradesh	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
West Bengal	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	BJP +
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
	The Left		
Orissa	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	BJP +
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Jharkand Mukti Morcha (JMM)	
Jharkhand	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)	
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Jharkand Mukti Morcha (JMM)	INC +
	The Left		
Chhattisgarh	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
North-East (seven sister)	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Mizo National Front (MNF)	BJP +
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Nagaland People's Front (NPF)	BJP +
	The Left	Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF)	
		Arunachal Congress	INC+

Maharashtra	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Shiv Sena (SHS)	BJP +
	Indian National Congress (INC)	Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)	INC +
		Republican Party of India	INC+
Union Territories and Goa	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)		
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Andhra Pradesh	Indian National Congress (INC)	Telengana Rashthriya Samiti (TRS)	INC +
	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	BJP +
	The Left	Praja Rajyam	
Karnataka	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S))	
	Indian National Congress (INC)		
Tamil Nadu	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	INC +
	Indian National Congress (INC)	All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	BJP +
	The Left	Paatali Makkal Katchi (PMK)	INC +
		Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK)	INC +
		Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK)	
		Dalit Panthers of India (DPI)	
		Puthiya Thamizhagam (PT)	
Kerala	Indian National Congress (INC)	Muslim League Kerala State Committee (MUL)	INC+
	The Left	Kerala Congress (KEC)	INC+

Source: Compiled from the Election Commission of India documents.