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Modi Triumphs in India's National Elections

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The results of the general elections in India were a surprise to most people. While most opinion polls had predicted a victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that it leads, not even BJP members had anticipated the scale of the party's victory. The BJP alone has won 282 seats and the NDA 336 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament). Two things stand out in the verdict. This is the first time in 30 years that a party won a majority on its own; this is also the worst-ever showing by India's grand old party, the Indian National Congress, which won a mere 44 seats, 70 less than its previous all-time low in 1999.

The BJP Victory

Much of the credit for the decisive nature of the BJP's victory has to go to Prime Minister-designate Narendra Modi. When the BJP announced Modi as its prime ministerial candidate, there were many who were sceptical of his ability to reach out to voters beyond the party's traditional catchment area of northern and western India. But not only did he enthuse voters

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across India, but also helped the BJP win an unprecedented number of seats in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar which together send over 160 MPs to the Lok Sabha.

Among the factors crucial to the BJP's success was the presidential-style campaign run by Modi. Perhaps the only other prime ministerial aspirant in India who ran a similar campaign was Indira Gandhi in the 1970s. Given the fragmentation of the polity there were doubts about the efficacy of such a campaign. But Modi was helped by the fact that the electorate, particularly younger voters, was receptive to his message. There were several reasons why Modi's campaign was so successful.

First, Modi mostly emphasised development and governance, rather than the divisive agenda of Hindutva, which appealed to voters. The BJP's campaign was extremely well-packaged and funded, using both the traditional and social media to tremendous effect. This allowed Modi to transcend the BJP's traditional vote base and regional limitations.

On the ground, however, the BJP worked actively to consolidate the Hindu vote. This paid dividend in states like Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha, and Bihar which elects 40 MPs. Both states saw communal violence in the run-up to the polls which possibly helped the Hindu vote consolidate in favour of the BJP and enabled it to win an astounding 93 out of 120 seats compared to only 22 seats in the 2009 election.

Second, the Congress was facing severe anti-incumbency on various counts and the BJP seemed to many voters the only credible, national alternative. A demoralised Congress ran a lackadaisical campaign which was a pale shadow of the BJP's. It helped the BJP that India's corporates as well as some media houses were heavily backing Modi.

Third, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the lynchpin of the Hindu nationalist movement, pulled out all stops to get Modi elected. Though Modi, a former RSS volunteer, has had his run-ins with the RSS, it was the RSS which mooted Modi for prime minister and then backed him to the hilt.

Fourth, many had felt that the minority Muslim community's mistrust of Modi would prove to be an obstacle to the BJP. However, the Muslim vote, which is rarely a majority in any constituency, got divided among the parties contesting against the BJP. This was especially true in UP and Bihar where the BJP won most of the seats with a heavy concentration of Muslim voters.

The Congress Debacle

Even though nobody expected the Congress to return to power, most pre-poll surveys had predicted around 100 seats for the party. That it did considerably worse indicates that the party got nothing right in its campaign. While anti-incumbency was a huge factor, the Congress could neither defend its achievements over the past decade nor connect to younger voters. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was virtually absent from the election campaign. The Congress's chief campaigner Rahul Gandhi also contrasted poorly against the oratorical and organisational skills of Modi.

Some of the pre-poll strategies of the Congress backfired. This was particularly true of Andhra Pradesh where the Congress had won 33 of the 42 seats in the 2009 general elections. Subsequently the Congress had suffered a split in the state with the son of former Congress chief minister and powerful satrap, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, forming his own party the YSR Congress. Congress hoped to counter this by bifurcating Andhra Pradesh and hoping to benefit electorally in the newly-created unit of Telangana. But that ploy boomeranged, with a local outfit, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, winning big in Telangana. In the other unit of Andhra Pradesh, popularly referred to as Seemandhra, the Congress was predictably decimated, with the Telugu Desam and YSR Congress sharing the spoils. The Congress managed to win only two seats in the entire state of Andhra Pradesh, a dramatic decline which symbolised the state of the Congress in this election. In the other big states of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, the Congress won a mere 10 seats.

The elections were also a clear indication of the withering away of the Congress' grassroots organisation in most states. Unlike the BJP which has strong state leaders, the Congress has hardly anyone of real stature in the states. Even in states such as Karnataka, Assam, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where the Congress had won Assembly elections in the recent past and formed the government, it performed far worse than the BJP.

Just as the election verdict has strengthened Modi's hand, it has discredited the dynastic hold over the Congress. The leadership of Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi has been found severely wanting not only during the election campaign, but also for the entire second term of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government. But given the dynamics within the Congress, it is unlikely to go in for radical changes even after a defeat of such magnitude.

The Regional Players

Though in terms of seats it was a strong mandate for the BJP, in terms of vote share the party won just 31% of the total vote. Indeed, this is the lowest vote share for a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha. On the other hand, the Congress won 19% of the votes and only 44 seats, far less than what the BJP had won in 2009 with roughly a similar vote share. The combined vote share of the BJP and the Congress is just over 50%, which means that almost half the voters supported regional parties. This shows the continuing strength of the regional parties.

Among the regional parties that did exceptionally well were the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu with 37 seats, West Bengal's Trinamool Congress with 34 and the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha with 20. In Andhra Pradesh three parties – the Telugu Desam (which sealed a last-minute alliance with the BJP), the TRS and the YSR Congress – won a bulk of the seats.

Some of the most surprising results, however, came from Uttar Pradesh where the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP) won only 5 seats and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) none. In what was a four-cornered contest in most seats, the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system hurt both parties. The BSP won over 19% of the vote but had nothing to show for by way of seats. In the 2009 election the SP had won 23 seats and the BSP 20.

In Bihar, too, the results were dramatically different from last time. The ruling Janata Dal (United), which pulled out of an alliance with the BJP in 2013, got burnt, winning only two seats compared to 20 in 2009. The Lok Janshakti Party, which had not won a single seat in 2009 but had tied up with the BJP this time, won an impressive six seats.

Two other pre-poll allies of the BJP had mixed showings. The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra improved from 11 seats in 2009 to 18 in this election; the Akali Dal in Punjab, however, won four seats which was exactly the same number it had won in 2009.

Finally, the Aam Aadmi Party, which had sparked worldwide interest after it formed a short-lived state government in Delhi in 2013, won only 4 seats. Surprisingly all four seats were from Punjab and none from Delhi. While the spread of the AAP to another state is a reason for celebration for the party, the inability to win a single seat in Delhi would be a cause for worry with Assembly elections due in the state later this year.

Conclusion

The strong mandate for the BJP will ensure that Modi is not constrained by demanding allies as well as detractors from within his own party. He will thus be relatively free to appoint a team of his own liking. It might not however be as easy for Modi to ignore the RSS and big corporates who have invested so heavily in ensuring the BJP's victory. Indeed, he might have to do a balancing act between protectionist policies, advocated by both the RSS and the BJP's traditional support-base of small traders, and inviting foreign investment. Modi will also have to manage the sky-high expectations of those who voted him to power expecting to see quick results. Minorities and those opposed to Modi will be closely watching to see if he will eschew the Hindu nationalist agenda and focus on governance, which was the theme of his campaign.

Modi has the kind of mandate that no Indian government has had in the past three decades. How he uses it will only become clear in the coming months.

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