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Verdict 2024: Expectations, Great and Little

By: Partha Chatterjee

After two ‘extraordinary’ elections where Narendra Modi was able to create a charismatic appeal, India has had a ‘normal’ election in which a Caesarian appeal could not be generated. With a return to coalition government, the Opposition must now press for a greater balance in centre-state relations.

Dismissing descriptions of the election results as a setback for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the new coalition government led by Narendra Modi has begun its term with brave pronouncements of continuity. Every spokesperson and media ally is repeating the victory chant that Modi is only the second prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru to be elected for a third term.

One may, of course, quibble with that claim since, if one includes multiparty governments, Nehru was actually prime minister of India for four terms from 1946 to his death in 1964. Be that as it may, continuity has been projected in Modi retaining most of his senior ministers in their previous ministries as well as key personnel in the Prime Minister’s Office. Demands from alliance partners for plum cabinet posts have been warded off by promises of special favours for their states. Announcements are coming thick and fast of how the unfinished development agenda of the last term will now be taken forward vigorously.

What is being avoided is a comparison with the BJP’s position in the previous Lok Sabha. The party has actually lost 63 seats in the Lok Sabha, depriving it of its majority. Most of these losses have occurred in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Karnataka. The damage has been only slightly compensated by surprising gains in Odisha. The BJP now depends on its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, especially the Telugu Desam Party, the Janata Dal (United), and the Lok Janshakti Party, to hold a majority in the Lok Sabha. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc has gained substantially to become a credible opposition force in the Lower House. The Congress has increased its strength by 47 seats and the Samajwadi Party by 32. Clearly, the BJP will no longer be able to steamroll bills without discussion, refuse to answer questions, ignore the parliamentary committees or expel dozens of members at will. That is certainly a hopeful sign for our principal democratic institution.

Modi’s image

Has the Modi magic faded? We must remember that not every politician with charismatic potential is necessarily able to achieve mass popularity. Such success crucially depends on specific structural conditions that pave the way for a leader to assume a Caesar-like position of standing above fractious divisions to represent in his or her person the unity of the people. That position was held by Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1950s, Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s, and Narendra Modi since 2014.

What are those structural conditions? They emerge in situations in which the major social forces vying for power are locked in a tussle that cannot be resolved one way or the other. When the entire polity appears poised on the brink of deadly conflict and collapse, a Caesarist leader takes charge from above, without identifying with any particular contending force, and expresses the unity of the nation-state and its oneness with the people as a whole. In Nehru’s case, he first fought back a challenge from the conservative right wing of the Congress to assert his authority over both government and party. But although there were Congress governments in virtually every state, they were commanded by powerful regional bosses and the party was rife with factional squabbles.

Nehru rose above all of them. With British owners of prominent business houses handing over their stocks to Indian capitalists, the latter were still finding their feet in the new political terrain. On the other hand, the former heads of princely states and large landowners were a considerable force on the ground. Nehru had decided on a path of rapid industrialisation led by the public sector. He stood above the fray of political and class conflict, handed over the contentious task of economic decision-making to experts in the Planning Commission and allowed the bureaucracy drawn from the upper middle class to hold the balance of power. Nehru himself claimed to represent the nation as a whole.

Indira Gandhi, on the other hand, adopted a populist path which identified her enemies as conservative party bosses who stood against her efforts to carry out radical progressive reforms. Her enemies, she announced, were the people’s enemies. She split the party in 1969, won a landslide election victory and a war against Pakistan in 1971, and emerged as a leader who would defend the people against its enemies.

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Narendra Modi appeared in 2014 with the image of a decisive leader who had turned Gujarat into an industrial power house. Shaking off allegations of complicity in the 2002 killings of Muslims, he had persuaded major companies from India and abroad to invest in the state and championed Gujarati pride. Big business loved him; so did the upper middle class and the English-language media. His campaign in the 2014 elections did not stress BJP's Hindutva politics. Instead, he claimed to stand for a development path that included everyone: "*sab ka saath, sab ka vikas*." One of the first things he did after taking office was abolish the Planning Commission – that symbol of the Nehruvian command economy. Unfortunately, other promises of pro-business reform had to wait because the global economic climate could not sustain the dizzy growth rates of the previous decade.

The general election of 2019 was different. The BJP had suffered several reverses in state elections. The fantastic claims made in defence of the senseless demonetisation decision had been shown to be false: all that it had achieved was harassment of ordinary people and untold misery for millions struggling to survive in the informal economy. Barely weeks before the parliamentary elections, a warlike situation was created on the India-Pakistan border following a terrorist attack on soldiers in Kashmir, with Indian bombing attacks inside Pakistan territory and war planes brought down on both sides. The two neighbours seemed to be on the brink of a nuclear exchange.

Modi emerged as the defender of a nation besieged by its enemies, both external and internal. Decimating the opposition, the BJP won the elections by a huge majority. This time Modi appeared in a classic populist role, drawing a line between the patriotic people and its enemies and vowing to defend the former and vanquish the latter.

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Henceforth, Modi's image would become intertwined with the BJP's Hindutva agenda. One of the first acts of the new government in 2019 was the abrogation of Article 370, the separation of Ladakh and the demotion of Jammu and Kashmir to the status of a Union Territory. This had been a long-standing demand of the Jana Sangh-BJP which rejected what it called the special treatment given to the Muslim-majority state during constitutional negotiations over its joining the Indian Union.

Around the same time, the triple talaq provision for divorce in Muslim personal law was declared illegal and made a criminal offence. The Citizenship Act was amended to allow fast-track citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries – the first time that Indian citizenship was qualified by religion.

Modi became increasingly identified with Hindutva causes such as the consecration and opening of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. He had in 2023 led elaborate religious rituals at the opening of the new Parliament building in New Delhi, much like a sovereign Hindu monarch might have done in an earlier age. During the 2024 campaign he even suggested that he was not the biological son of his mother but a prophet sent by god to serve earthly humans. Alongside, he campaigned in various state elections using provocative rhetoric against Muslim infiltrators, the alleged Muslim proclivity for high birth rates and their willingness to be used as vote banks. No less important than his role as the guarantor of development benefits for all was Modi's populist image as the unifier of Hindus against troublesome minorities.

Modi's failure

The magic did not work this time. As before, the BJP tailored its entire election campaign as a nation-wide choice for the prime minister between Narendra Modi and some non-existent rival whom the opposition had failed to name. But, in the absence of the credible identification of an enemy that was threatening the authentic people, Modi's populist appeal lost its capacity to divide the electorate along the line of patriotic loyalty to the great leader.

Instead, voters paid more attention to other issues such as joblessness and consumer inflation. Various local grievances came to the fore such as the inaccessibility and haughtiness of ministers and MPs or the imposition by the central BJP leadership of inappropriate candidates. These, in turn, led to factional quarrels and disaffection in the BJP ranks.

In short, unlike 2014 or 2019, there was no Modi wave across the entire northern and western regions; instead, regional and local considerations became predominant. In some states, such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand or Himachal Pradesh, these local factors still worked in favour of the BJP. In others, the BJP was routed.

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Apparently, there were indications after the first two phases of voting that the BJP's local managers had failed to bring out the vote. The lack of enthusiasm could not be attributed entirely to the heat wave sweeping across north India. In the remaining phases, Modi's rhetoric became more and more strident. He made wild accusations about the Congress manifesto reading like something written by the Muslim League, and suggested that the opposition was being guided by leftist advisors who would take away everyone's wealth. The speeches cut no ice.

This points to the important truth that political leaders, no matter how charismatic, cannot sway the masses at will. It does not mean that the charisma has vanished. Rather, charisma only works in some elections and not in others. The successful cases are characterised by some degree of extraordinariness; others are normal elections. It would be a huge mistake, therefore, to conclude from the election results that the appeal of Hindutva politics, working at the level of everyday cultural practice, has suddenly evaporated. It could certainly resurface at the next extraordinary moment.

The normality of federal coalitional politics

The election this time was a normal election, as opposed to a wave election. That is to say, there was no single overwhelming reason that drove people to choose between this and that candidate. There were a variety of considerations that played out differently in different states and regions. That is indeed how it should be in normal democracies, especially in one of India's size and social heterogeneity. After two extraordinary elections, the country has returned to its normal mode of choosing a government at the centre.

The point has been overlooked in recent years. Fixated by hyper-inflated claims of the achievements of the first two BJP-majority governments and of the need for an even bigger majority, many observers apparently forgot that, following the end of Congress dominance, India was ruled during the entire period from 1989 to 2014 by coalition governments. Some of them were unstable and short-lived, but others completed their full terms.

Not only that, scholars of Indian politics know that even in the heyday of Congress dominance in the Nehru era, when the party ruled nearly every state in the country, the Congress itself was, as Rajni Kothari pointed out many years ago, a coalition of many regional blocs and social interests led by powerful local leaders rather than a centralised party.

Coalitional politics is in fact the normal form of Indian democracy. This was implicitly acknowledged by the BJP too when it chose to keep several small parties in the ruling NDA front in the first two Modi terms despite having a majority on its own, because otherwise several major states would have gone unrepresented in his cabinet.

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But coalition politics is not merely about multi-party governments at the centre. It is also thoroughly implicated in the question of the federal balance of power. Although both the BJP and the Congress are considered all-India parties, their effective areas of influence are regional. Despite its recent successes in Karnataka, Tripura and Odisha, the BJP is still overwhelmingly a party of northern and western India. The Congress too has little influence in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, West Bengal or Bihar. The other parties, even though they may be in power in particular states, have next to no presence elsewhere.

It should follow that just as coalitions are perfectly normal at the centre, the regional spread of ruling parties makes it necessary that there be an equitable distribution of powers between the centre and the states. This truth has receded from view in recent years. Given the relentless push towards centralisation of both party and government under Modi's leadership and the uncoordinated and feeble protests by regional ruling parties against inadequate financial transfers from the centre and blatant interference by governors, the federal balance is now heavily tilted in favour of New Delhi. The recent elections provide an opportunity to push for a fairer balance.

Since coalitional politics is viewed with such horror by the all-India middle class, it is worth pointing out that most European democracies have worked with coalition governments for decades. Even in the United States, whose electoral system discourages third party candidates at every level, the Republican and Democratic parties have always been broad coalitions of varied regional and social interests. Until the rise of the polarised politics of the last decade, neither parties voted as a bloc in Congress; most bills were passed through bipartisan negotiation.

It is this normality of coalition politics that was obscured in India by the extraordinariness of the wave elections of 2014 and 2019. It is time to restore it to its proper place at the centre of our political life.

Lessons for the opposition

The opposition INDIA bloc may take some credit for its vastly improved performance. But neither in programmatic clarity nor in its internal cohesion is it strong enough to oust the NDA from power. The two long marches carried out by Rahul Gandhi apparently did succeed in highlighting the issues of joblessness and price rise. But attempts to arrive at a common programme have not advanced. Given their episodic and ill-prepared efforts at working together as a front, the INDIA constituents have been unable to overcome feelings of suspicion and distrust about each other's intentions. This leaves the bloc open to disruption by a wily and immensely resourceful ruling party.

One way of developing a more cohesive internal working relationship within the INDIA front in Parliament might be to nominate a shadow cabinet. If each major ministry is watched over routinely and continuously by an assigned INDIA bloc MP, it would make for a much more substantive and powerful criticism of government than the endless disruptions of proceedings which have become the usual form of protest in recent years. Working as a shadow cabinet would give the INDIA front greater opportunity to develop a common programme and also signal to the country that it is ready to form an alternative government. That would go a long way to dispel doubts about the credibility of the opposition as a functioning coalition.

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The second question that must be addressed urgently is that of a more equitable distribution of powers between the centre and the states. The 1980s saw a series of proposals from opposition parties that argued for the curbing of the powers of the governor, greater financial autonomy for states, an end to arbitrary discretionary transfers from the centre to the states and the formation of an Inter-State Council consisting of the prime minister and all chief ministers that must meet at least twice a year. Some of these proposals were indeed acted upon for a while; others were pushed into oblivion.

It is certainly time to press for a functioning Inter-State Council. In the absence of a more equitable distribution of financial resources, where the balance has been further tilted in favour of the centre after the GST came into operation, individual states have often seized political opportunities to extract discretionary transfers and special packages for their own benefit, thus greatly increasing the centre's arbitrary powers. On the other hand, the richer states keep complaining that whereas they contribute the larger share of revenues, they are deprived of equivalent allocations. A more systematic and equitable formula for federal financial transfers is definitely an urgent need.

The federal question is also deeply implicated in the upcoming delimitation of parliamentary constituencies in 2026. If the northern states are given additional seats according to their increased share of the population, it would imply a permanent absolute majority in Parliament for those states and further deepening of the disaffection of the south. That is hardly a comforting prospect for the stability of the federation.

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