



People at the centre

The BJP needs to be more constructive, inclusive in approach to nation building

People are, and should be, at the centre of a democracy. The outcome of the 18th general election is an unambiguous reiteration by the people of that tenet. As the verdict unfolded on June 4, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell short of an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, which is a far cry from its claims made during the campaign. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which the BJP leads, has, however, won a majority, getting more than 290 seats. The BJP's individual tally is 240, which is 63 fewer than its 2019 strength of 303. Two NDA partners, the JD(U) in Bihar and the TDP in Andhra Pradesh, which have won 12 and 16 Lok Sabha seats, respectively, will hold significant sway in the Lok Sabha, as will other regional parties in general. The verdict of the people cannot be clearer than this – it wants the BJP to be more conciliatory and less confrontational towards the political aspirations of various communities and regions of India. The verdict also shows the limits of communal polarisation as a mobilisation strategy, which turned out to be the mainstay of the BJP's campaign. The outcome holds the BJP accountable, and demands it be more constructive. The BJP must heed that message in a democratic spirit, and reorient itself to the reality of the reemergence of coalition politics after 10 years.

The Congress, which nearly doubled its 2019 tally to reach 99 seats, has restored its position as the other pole of Indian politics, though it finished a distant second. It too should respect the verdict, and resist any temptation to attempt any post-poll coalition at this moment. The pre-poll coalition led by the Congress – INDIA – has not crossed the halfway mark, while the NDA has. Respect for the people requires all parties to remain steadfast to their pre-poll alliances and positions. The Congress has managed to form and lead an alliance in spite of the many internal contradictions, and its leader, Rahul Gandhi, has elevated himself in the public eye as a challenger to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Congress organisation, strategy and communication worked for it this time, while the BJP came up short on all three factors when measured against its claims. The party runs a serious key person risk, with its campaign, strategy and thinking all dependent on one person, Narendra Modi. The overwhelming charisma and style of Mr. Modi served the party well in 2014 and 2019, but the same factors were corroding the party's organisational strengths and withering its regional and local leadership. These factors, and the accumulated anti-incumbency of two terms, caught up with the BJP. Still, that it won a third term, though in alliance, is remarkable. Its ideological agenda has taken deep roots in its strongholds, enabling it to win what it has even amid clamour about inflation, unemployment and other livelihood issues. By winning a seat in Kerala, the BJP breached a fortress, and by defeating the BJD in Odisha, the party has captured the imagination of a new terrain. That said, the people did not take kindly to its strategy of portraying its return to power as an inevitable fate of Indian democracy.

The Congress strategy of making livelihood issues and equity questions the core of its campaign seemed to have worked well in its direct contests with the BJP in Karnataka and Rajasthan. Both parties that operate at the national level should learn the right lessons from this verdict. The lifeblood of Indian democracy is its diversity and the BJP has been less than respectful of that in the last 10 years. The new government will be required to deal with two particular questions that are critical to India's federalism and diversity – the delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies after the publication of the first Census after 2026; and the ongoing work of the 16th Finance Commission which is scheduled to submit its report in 2025. Both these call for political wisdom, wide consultations and maturity. The verdict for a coalition government at the Centre underscores the diversity of India, and the role of States and regional political parties in its federalism. Coalitions are not a deficiency in a plural democracy, but quite the opposite. Rather than attempting inorganic and transactional coalitions, both the Congress and the BJP should nurture genuine, organic coalitions with regional parties and social groups. Enforcement of uniformity cannot be the aim of a federal polity, and the people have spoken on this issue loud and clear in 2024.

The outcome of 2024 should also put to rest the unnecessary fear mongering about EVMs, though serious and urgent steps are required to reinforce public trust in the electoral process. EVMs have been around for long enough, and until now, have recorded results that align with what campaigners and observers report from the field. Responsible leaders and parties should not amplify conspiracy theories. The Election Commission of India (ECI) faced a lot of flak, largely for justifiable reasons, and the remedy cannot be combative rebuttals but more confidence building. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the 2024 elections turned out to be proof yet again of the vitality of India's democracy and its electoral system, and the ECI deserves credit. An issue that requires the attention of the ECI and the government is the function of exit polls. The speculative hysteria that it generates ahead of the actual results is hardly an innocent sport. Exit polls could influence stock markets, for one, and many of the channels have business interests and are heavily invested in the markets.

India has once again proved to itself and the world that it is a vibrant, functioning democracy. The new government has a responsibility to live up to the expectations of the people, and they are much more than a voter base.