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## THE MEANING OF VERDICT 2004

IF INDIAN GENERAL elections are one of the wonders of the world, the country's 670 million voters come close. Without losing their head in any way, refusing to be fooled by grandiose slogans, keeping their eye on issues that matter — above all, livelihood and national unity — more than 350 million of them who turned out to vote have produced a big upset. In fact, this is the first general election since 1977 that has upset every electoral calculation and poll prediction. No pollster or party leader of any significance allowed for a verdict in which the Congress, not the Bharatiya Janata Party, would emerge as the single largest party in the 14th Lok Sabha. Nobody could foresee the Congress-led alliance ending up 30 seats ahead of the BJP-led combine. Nobody could predict the significant increase in the weight of the Left in national politics, with more than 60 seats in a 543-member Lok Sabha and, given these numbers, qualitatively well placed to influence the economic, political and foreign policies of the new Government.

Of the two largest national players, the party that once ruled India without much challenge has performed above expectation everywhere — with the exception of Left-swept Kerala where, for the first time since Independence, the Congress has the mortification of not winning a single Lok Sabha constituency in a general election. The BJP has done well in its traditional strongholds of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh; slipped a little (along with its hard-core ally, the Shiv Sena) in Maharashtra; and made substantial inroads in Karnataka. Its biggest losses have come in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Delhi, Haryana — and Gujarat. Some of its heavyweight Cabinet Ministers have been humbled, among them Murli Manohar Joshi, Yashwant Sinha and Sahib Singh Verma (not to mention the Speaker in the last Lok Sabha, the Shiv Sena's Manohar Joshi).

Contrary to opinion and even exit poll findings, the BJP has not fared significantly better than its allies. Over the past decade and a half, the BJP advanced on the national stage partly through raising its vote share incrementally, but even more through its success in striking alliances in every region with parties big and small. This contrasted with the conspicuous failure of the Congress to break out of its shell and find effective allies within the secular camp. This time, three of the BJP's senior partners in key States have suffered a spectacular debacle — Jayalalithaa's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, and Mamata Banerjee's Nationalist Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. A critical ally, the Janata Dal (United), fared poorly in Bihar. The impressive performance of two allies, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa and the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab, cannot compensate for the flopping of the alliance factor in the big States of the South and the East. The other side of the coin is that the Congress' key alliances have clicked — in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra — to put the formation clearly in the lead over its national rival. There is yet another feature of Verdict 2004 that needs to be noted; this is the unhesitating verdict given by the people in favour of the Left in its stronghold States — Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura — in preference to both the Congress and the National Democratic Alliance. The significance of this outcome within an outcome for national politics clearly exceeds the numbers involved.

Starting with an editorial in this newspaper, there has been an interesting debate on what

constitutional rules of the game the President must apply to the identification and appointment of a Prime Minister in a hung Lok Sabha. The biggest upset of this election is that there is no hung Parliament except in the most superficial technical sense. The Congress and its allies as a pre-election formation and the Left parties together constitute a majority in the 14th Lok Sabha. There is a good prospect of bringing in another major secular force, the Samajwadi Party, which has performed exceedingly well in Uttar Pradesh. This means that the new Government in New Delhi will enjoy the confidence of more than 310 MPs, something that the first round of opinion polls predicted for the BJP-led formation! This means a stable Government that can complete its term and function on the basis of a common minimum programme, which has to be negotiated after a thorough discussion among all the parties that participate in and support the new secular and democratic dispensation. What is clear is that this Government can be led only by the Congress and, given the announced stand of the Left and virtually all the parties in the Congress-led alliance, Sonia Gandhi has the Prime Ministership unless, for some reason, she chooses to turn it down.

What is the political meaning of Verdict 2004? It is clearly a vote against the NDA's policies — its highly divisive policies pursued most viciously in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh and also in the educational arena. The much-hyped Vajpayee factor, which was supposed to render the general election into a one horse race, failed to deliver. The campaign against Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins clearly backfired, as did the highly personalised attacks witnessed from the likes of Narendra Modi and Ms. Jayalalithaa. "India Shining" must be given an award for the worst advertising campaign of the last five years: by seeming to mock the deprivations of the mass of voters in rural as well as urban areas, it opened up a huge credibility gap for the ruling party. In the final analysis, this election was lost by the BJP and its allies — and also by the Congress where it faced the Left — on mass livelihood issues.

What kind of policies can we expect from the new Congress-led dispensation? Reform — in the sense of improving the rules of the economic game and removing inefficiencies and roadblocks to economic development — must be persevered with. The Congress and the Communist parties have profound differences on economic issues. It is obvious that the policies of the new Government cannot and will not be the Left's policies. The point is that a one-sided policy of economic liberalisation and globalisation without factoring in the livelihood concerns of the masses of working people in both town and countryside will not be viable for both socio-economic and political reasons — something that the authors of the "India Shining" campaign and its regional variants failed to comprehend. On the domestic front, the first thing the new Government must do is to have Parliament repeal the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act, which virtually all the alliance partners are committed to repealing. On the foreign policy front, while good initiatives such as the *détente* Prime Minister Vajpayee attempted with Pakistan and deepening relations with China must be built upon, corrections need to be made on distortions that have crept into official policies on Iraq and Palestine-Israel. The real meaning of India Shining lies in the democratic, progressive and silent way in which hundreds of millions of people have brought about the biggest political upset of recent times.