

India chooses Congress

In the general election to the 15th Lok Sabha, giving the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance another five-year term in office. In contrast to 2004, the UPA, with close to 260 of the total 543 seats, will not need the support of the Left parties, and should be able to get a comfortable majority with the backing of the Samajwadi Party, which emerged as the single largest party in Uttar Pradesh. In terms of seats, this is the best performance by the Congress since 1991, the last time the country saw a single-party, although minority, government. Verdict 2009 gives little scope for the smaller parties or groupings to engage in back-room negotiations to decide the shape of the next government. The Congress holds all the aces. The prime ministership will not be up for bargaining, as some of the smaller players were hoping. For President Pratibha Patil, the task on hand couldn't be simpler: there is no need to consult constitutional experts to decide on whom to invite to form the next government. Manmohan Singh, the declared candidate of the Congress and the automatic choice for Prime Minister, could be the first Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi to have two full terms.

The triumph of the Congress was actually an aggregation of specific successes across different States. The party retained its base in Andhra Pradesh; cut its losses in Madhya Pradesh; recovered lost ground in West Bengal, Kerala, and Rajasthan; and combined well with its allies in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. There was no one big surprise anywhere, but the party pulled out one small surprise after another across the regions of India. When it seemed to take the long view in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and spurned alliance offers by regional players, few predicted any immediate gains for the party. But now, one of the significant features of this election is surely the re-emergence of the Congress as a key player in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, where 80 seats are on offer. The same strategy did not work of course in Bihar, where the alliance of the Janata Dal(United) and the Bharatiya Janata Party rode on the good track record of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. All the same, the Congress seems to have sown the seeds of its own resurgence by adopting a long-sighted strategy in the two key Hindi-speaking States.

The principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, needed to expand beyond its core support base to get ahead of the Congress. This it was unable to do. In 2004, the BJP fared very well in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Karnataka — the States where it is locked in a more or less direct fight with the Congress. To merely repeat that success would have been a considerable achievement. But this time, it lost badly in Rajasthan and yielded some ground in Madhya Pradesh. The successes in Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, and Karnataka could not compensate for the losses sustained in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. To have a realistic chance of forming the government, the BJP not only had to hold its ground in the Hindi belt; it also needed its allies to do well. While the JD(U) obliged in Bihar, the Shiv Sena disappointed in Maharashtra. The honours were more or less even in Punjab. But more importantly, potential post-poll allies such as the Telugu Desam Party and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti in Andhra Pradesh and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu did not do as well as they were expected to. And this came after the demoralising loss of a long-time ally, the Biju Janata Dal, in Orissa. After reaching a plateau in the Hindi belt, the BJP needed to grow outside its traditional strongholds to really threaten the Congress. In recent years, its only success in this regard has been Karnataka. But in other States in the south, the party is far from being a player of any significance.

Other than the BJP, the big loser in the current election is the Left. In both West Bengal and Kerala, the Left parties suffered severe reverses; if the loss in the southern State can be explained in terms of the customary swing of the pendulum, the failure to win a majority of seats in the eastern State is the first in more than three decades. This has meant that the Left parties will no longer be the influential force they were at the Centre between 2004 and 2008. Although they were not part of the UPA government, the Left parties helped shape a Common Minimum Programme and kept up pressure on the government to comply with it. Factional infighting in Kerala, and a strong oppositional, even if opportunistic, alliance in West Bengal, have succeeded in beating back the Left, which will need to do serious introspection on where it went wrong.

In a tough contest, the UPA overcame not only the anti-incumbency factor, but also the shrill, communal campaign of the BJP. But the mandate must not be read as an unqualified endorsement of all that the UPA government did in the last five years. In many States, regional issues came into play. The Sri Lankan Tamil issue dominated campaign rhetoric in Tamil Nadu, but the voters rewarded neither those who advocated the cause of the LTTE nor those who blamed the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka on alleged complicity and inaction by the Central and State governments. In Bihar, the fight became a virtual referendum on the performance of the Nitish Kumar-government after years of Lalu-Rabri rule. In Maharashtra, the split in the Shiv Sena engineered by Raj Thackeray seems to have played as big a role as the coming together of the Nationalist Congress Party and the Congress. India faces a number of internal and external challenges: in particular, the impact of the global economic slowdown, and the tensions and instability in the neighbourhood. The UPA must guard against complacency and must use this second innings to improve governance and respond effectively to the big challenges.