

Verdict India 2009: Congress Rises with its Heir

by Sourabh Gupta

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On May 17, incumbent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh won a famous victory in the 15th general election to the lower house of India's Parliament, the Lok Sabha. Exceeding the most optimistic pre-election forecast of even his party's pollsters, the governing Congress Party secured 206 seats out of a possible 543. Together, the Congress Party-led center-left coalition – the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – extended its tally to 262, just 10 seats short of an outright majority.

With written declarations of support being extended by previously adversarial third parties, the governing coalition is expected to handily secure a working majority in both houses of Parliament and become the third consecutive government to serve out a full five-year term of office. Further, released from the shackles of narrow ideological or caste particularisms imposed by previous alliance partners, Singh is expected to re-establish greater policy coherence to the Cabinet-led system of governance.

The biggest loser of the day, apart from India's communist parties, was the right-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Not only did it suffer a 22 seat loss – to finish with a final tally of 116 – but it also witnessed a 3 percentage point erosion in its national vote share. Having suffered successive declines in its share of the vote over four general elections, and having ended a good 10 percentage points short of the Congress' 29 percent national vote share, searching questions related to ideological purity and internecine quarrels as well as the social and geographic reach of the BJP's appeal will have to be revisited.

The extraordinary nature of the Congress Party's victory bears repeating. For only the first time in almost 50 years India's voters have re-elected an incumbent, full-term prime minister – the previous instance was Jawaharlal Nehru in 1962. For only the first time in more than 30 years voters have returned an incumbent, full-term government to office – apart from two previous episodes when the extraordinary circumstance of assassination or war tipped the electoral scales. And for only the second time India's voters have returned an incumbent government with a higher vote share than from the election before.

At the heart of this remarkable achievement was the star campaigner of the 2009 vote – Rahul Gandhi, the newest representative of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to bestride the Indian political stage. Like his grandmother, Indira, and father, Rajiv, each of whom delivered a 60-odd seat spike to the Congress' tally in their break-out national campaign forays

(1971 and 1984 respectively), the 38 year-old heir delivered a rousing 61 seat gain this time around. But both grandmother and father entered the contest as the sitting prime minister of their day. By contrast, Rahul Gandhi held neither Cabinet berth nor was championed as the party's prime ministerial candidate – in turn, pointing to his immense appeal among a demographic that is mostly two-thirds under the age of 35.

On the other hand, both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi secured national vote shares in excess of 40 percent and established commanding majorities in parliament (two-thirds and three-quarters, respectively, in the 1971 and 1984 elections) – majorities that were subsequently abused and led to their ejection from office. By contrast, with a bare 206-seat plurality and the fifth consecutive failure by his party to breach the 30 percent vote threshold, the socio-political composition of Rahul Gandhi's Congress Party represents a pale shadow of his parents' more aggregationist political vehicles.

Buttressed by exceptionally enabling economic and weather conditions (much of Indian agriculture still being rain-fed) through much of its term of office, an additional contributing factor to the Congress government's unexpected victory was its willingness to conceive and implement a transformative employment guarantee scheme. Directed initially at a long-suffering rural populace that has seen its share of development spending decline at a pace commensurate with the Congress Party's political fortunes since the mid-1980s, the scheme inheres as much the capacity to blossom into the future makings of a means-tested, social security system as much as it might instigate a race-to-the-bottom contest in competitive populism.

Administered efficiently however it reinforces one of the chief takeaways from verdict 2009 – that regardless of terrorist outrages and security deficiencies, developmentalism pays; and that even the perception of relative non-corruptibility might help parties across political lines buck the anti-incumbency trend. In this regard, a proposal in the waning days of its term to establish an independent prosecutors office, insulated from political influence and capable of impartially investigating political malfeasance, holds immense political dividends – given that the system remains rife with criminality of the deadliest order.

A few projections for the new government

Continuity is likely to remain the government's watchword in its foreign relations. Having broken with any residual declaratory vestige of “non-alignment” in its pre-election party manifesto, the strategic partnership with Washington is expected to be deepened. Important advances in U.S.-India defense and maritime cooperation including the signing of a Logistical Supply Agreement, modeled on the U.S.'s Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement and entailing reciprocal provision of vessel berthing, refueling, and

logistical support, is expected to be finalized – this, given that the government’s parliamentary majority is no longer beholden to India’s proletarian vanguard.

A more expansive hosting arrangement based on the U.S.’s “Singapore model” of pre-positioning of equipment and carrier dry-dock facilities, albeit with only a skeletal U.S. personnel presence, bears contemplating.

On global issues, the scope for a clash of U.S.-India interests looms uninvitingly on the radar. New Delhi is neither politically willing nor able to commit to Washington’s timeline for signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or finalize a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). On a successor climate change regime to Kyoto, the odds persist of New Delhi viewing such an arrangement as the single greatest punitive economic imposition since colonialism rather than an already-delayed attempt to nurse a polluted planet back to a semblance of health.

Crucially, on the sensitive regional issue of dismantlement of the *jehadi* infrastructure strewn across the Af-Pak theater, the fear persists in New Delhi of an election timetable-driven Obama administration strategy that purchases a pyrrhic security by isolating and defeating only transnational terrorist elements within. Rather, the essence of the solution lies in detoxifying the viral root that cuts across and nourishes the various stripes of militancy and violent rejectionism in the region – Islamabad’s military-intelligence complex, and the untethered and unaccounted for elements within.

On Sino-Indian relations, meantime, the drift toward strategic mismanagement of this important relationship is expected to continue – the geopolitical momentum bequeathed by ex-Prime Minister Vajpayee to his successor having been dissipated in the years since. Despite a strong “shared vision” document signed in January 2008 that saw Beijing *understand and support* New Delhi’s U.N. Security Council aspirations in exchange for a vow by the latter to forsake the use of democratic *ideology and values* as an instrument of division or containment, a breakdown in the mechanism for resolving their festering boundary dispute cannot be ruled out.

The essence of the failing here lies, in larger measure, at the Indian end – New Delhi’s ex-intelligence bureaucrat-turned-national security advisor has been unable to cast-off his bureaucratic instincts and endow, in his capacity as an empowered special representative, a political lens to boundary dispute resolution.

Finally, India’s perennially fraught relations with Pakistan are likely to remain hostage to Islamabad’s inclination – and capacity – to rein in its *jehadi* elements and their penchant for cross-border intrusion and sensational attacks. While a calibrated reduction of tensions remains on the cards, paired with Islamabad’s evidentiary assistance in the 11/26 Mumbai attack trial, a broader rapprochement in bilateral relations as well as on Kashmir appears remote so long as Pakistan persists in its present state of ferment.

While the stars appear aligned for the extension by New Delhi of a far-reaching autonomy offer to its long-suffering Kashmiri constituents – now that the successor of Kashmir’s Abdullah dynasty sits in a political coalition at the federal and

state level with his Nehru-Gandhi counterpart – expect any such offer, if extended, to fall woefully short of Kashmiri aspirations. Kashmir remains the blind spot of India’s democracy. Despite Prime Minister Singh’s refrain that short of boundary alteration the *sky is the limit* to Kashmiri aspirations, his self-instituted Kashmir working group on federal-state autonomy relations was – for want of political will – allowed to wither into oblivion at the first sign of impasse. In its place, the specious belief persists that a closed-door arrangement on the disputed province can be arrived at with choice Pakistani interlocutors and foisted on the Kashmiri people.

Ultimately, however, domestic economic policy poses the most critical challenges to the Singh government. Having ascended to a second term on the back of redistributionist policies that verged on the fiscally irresponsible, the desire, or will, of the Congress government to extricate itself from cheap populism remains suspect – a parliamentary majority and the prime minister’s personal integrity and erudition notwithstanding.

Far from the brave new globalizing world that his father, Rajiv, exhorted his countrymen to enter, Rahul Gandhi’s ascent to the highest reaches on Indian politics was fuelled by a political narrative that harks back to his grandmother’s anti-poverty and corporatist orientation. As worthy as slogan-inclusive globalization presents itself to be, India remains among the least globalized of emerging economies – its ability to put global markets to work in service of employment-intensive growth is negligible to the point of nonexistent. And, indeed, how the new Singh government goes about refashioning this productivity-lite and employment-anemic growth model onto a more vibrant platform will be the test by which the prime minister’s legacy will be judged.