

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/SOU-01-210514.html

Anatomy of India's general election

By M K Bhadrakumar

5/21/2014

The stunning victory of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the recently concluded general election in India needs to be understood from three perspectives - first, the sheer dimensions of the victory; second, its meaning; and, third, what it portends for India's political economy in the coming five-year period in terms of national policies.

Without doubt, the BJP has secured a historic mandate from the people of India. A victory was expected but not on such a massive landslide. The party won 283 seats in the 540-member parliament, which is by far the highest ever tally in its history. The BJP secured an impressive one-third of the votes. More important, to borrow the words of the party chief Rajnath Singh, the mandate is "comprehensive in geographical spread".

The party, which has been traditionally restricted to the so-called 'Hindi belt' in the northern states of India has spread its wings nationally and reached all nooks and corners of India. It is of symbolic importance that it secured handsomely half the seats in the northernmost Jammu & Kashmir state as well as won the southernmost parliamentary constituency of Kanyakumari, apart from doing well in much of India's northeast and making a clean sweep virtually in the western states.

Equally, the party's pan-Indian mandate comprises support of a broad cross section of Indians, cutting across the divides of Hindu castes and creed. Suffice to say the BJP government returns

India to single-party rule in a way that was thought to be inconceivable in the opinion of most observers up until last week. What explains it?

In a country as diverse and complex as India is, simplifying an electoral mandate at any time is a difficult enterprise - especially in a bruising election such as this one has been where emotions were running high and subjective judgment and prejudices cloud rational analysis. Indeed, the BJP mounted a multi-vectored election campaign.

But at the core of it was the persona of Narendra Modi, who was nominated as the party's prime ministerial candidate as far back as last September. Through this past eight-month period, the BJP robustly projected Modi as a one-dimensional personality - a decisive doer who brooks no delays, no alibis for non-performance. The idea was to juxtapose Modi with the timid leadership of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Modi presented a development plank of large-scale job creation and high economic growth, which contrasted sharply with the prevailing languishing state of the Indian economy. The strategy worked brilliantly.

Then, there were the subtexts - Hindutva ideology aimed at covertly and insidiously marshaling a Hindu consolidation, Modi's appeal as belonging to the lower strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy, the plentiful local issues at any time in such a vast country and so on. However, the single biggest factor behind the BJP's victory has been its success in driving home the argument that India badly needed a change after the decade-old rule by the United Progressive Alliance [UPA] government led by the Indian National Congress party (INC).

Perceptions matter in politics, and in this case the pervasive impression came to be that another five years of UPA rule will be an unmitigated disaster for India. In reality, though, India enjoyed a rare degree of social stability and a significantly high growth of 8.5% through the UPA period and, in fact, an unprecedented social welfare system was ushered in during these past 10 years with emphasis on the hundreds of millions of people who live under the poverty line.

However, what tipped the scale hopelessly against the UPA were spiraling inflation and hugely embarrassing corruption scandals, which combined to fuel the anger and disenchantment of poor people and the middle class alike against the INC. The party overlooked that an increasingly restless and aspirational young population is not so much enamored of the welfare schemes as jobs and opportunities for a better life. The fact remains that more than 50% of India's population (estimated 1.27 billion) is below the age of 25 and over 65% below the age of 35. As a leading Indian thinker Pratap Bhanu Mehta put it, "It was a deep intellectual failure of the INC to understand and adapt to changed circumstances. It continued with its politics of low aspiration."

Mehta is spot on when he says, "I don't think Indians were yearning for an authoritarian leader. There was a sense that in Manmohan Singh we had a leader who was not discharging the leadership role appropriate to his office. There was a yearning for leadership that was inherent to the office."

Alongside this failure on the part of the INC to grasp the shift in the mood of a changing India from a "petitional" to an aspirational culture, one cannot entirely overlook that the public perception of Rahul Gandhi as a leader who refused to take responsibility. Belatedly, through the

latter half of the election campaign, Gandhi became forceful and began presenting himself as a hands-on modernizing ruler to match up to Modi's superman image, but it was already too late.

Having said that, a salience that cannot be overlooked is that the BJP's campaign was not only choreographed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh but also conducted by its disciplined cadres. The RSS enjoys a vast network of *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) and *pracharaks* (agitators) and Modi himself is an erstwhile *pracharak*. Again, the BJP appears to have had a virtually unlimited war chest to finance its campaign and, quite obviously, the Indian corporate sector rooted for Modi as a "business-friendly" politician.

All in all, therefore, the Modi phenomenon in Indian politics strongly reminds one of Gaullism in France in many respects - especially, right-wing Gaullism - although analogies of such broad kinds do not hold good completely. In foreign policy, Modi does have a pronounced Gaullist orientation, his main theme being India's national independence. He fiercely upholds the belief that India should refuse subservience to any foreign power. His policies of grandeur should not come as surprise - the insistence that India is a major power in the world scene and that military and economic forces be established to back this claim.

Modi's internal policies will be placing accent on social conservatism mixed with a form of populism that draws deep into the Hindutva ideology. Like Charles de Gaulle, he too relies heavily on personal charisma and is riding the wave of popularity in a country that is ravaged by a deep sense of despondency and defeatism. And going by his 14-year record as Gujarat's chief minister, Modi too has distinct preference for a direct relationship with the people to parliamentary politics. But a notable difference might also be there insofar as while Modi could be scornful of politicians, he doesn't remain aloof from playing political games.

Modi and the road not taken

There are two competing narratives regarding what to expect from Prime Minister Modi. His acolytes keep switching between overlapping descriptions of him to convey their adoration of their idol - *Loha Purush* (Iron Man) and *Vikas Purush* (Development Man).

They believe passionately that Modi will put their country back on a high-growth track, root out corruption, and resort to a new, muscular foreign policy that enhances India's global standing. Last Friday night, Modi said in a victory speech in his home state of Gujarat, "I didn't get a chance to sacrifice my life in India's freedom struggle, but I have the chance to dedicate myself to good governance. I will develop this country. I will take it to new heights."

A second narrative, on the contrary, is of "Apocalypse Now", almost entirely borne out of Modi's background as a *pracharak* or activist of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS], a far-right paramilitary organization founded in direct imitation of European fascist movements, which believes as the centerpiece of its ideology in India being essentially a Hindu nation.

The founder of the RSS, Madhav Golwalkar, wrote, "foreign races ... must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... or may stay in the

country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights."

Modi himself said in a recent interview, "I got the inspiration to live for the nation from the RSS. I learned to live for others, and not for myself. I owe it all to the RSS."

The hard truth, as it often happens, must lie somewhere in between the above two narratives. Without doubt, the key issues in this election have been the economy and good governance. Now, neither is possible to achieve without stability and security. Economic growth and development cannot take place in a vacuum and they demand social mobility and inclusive governance. What worked in Gujarat may not work in the rest of India. Many constraints will slow down the drive to centralize the government around a single personality.

Aside a pugnacious press and an active judiciary, India is a hugely diverse country with a federal structure, with more than half the states being run by non-BJP governments, and India's history is replete with instances when the ruler ultimately was compelled to embrace diversity in order to rule effectively.

Besides, the task of development itself is huge - lifting hundreds of millions of people from poverty and creating jobs for them, dealing with iron-ore mafias, revamping the rotten banks, repairing public finances, creating clusters of manufacturing, modernizing the infrastructure, investing in social sectors and so on. A new report by the global investment bank Credit Suisse says that the elections *per se* will not revive an investment cycle in India.

It warns, "Hopes are high among investors that elections can re-start the investment cycle. Even if the electoral verdict is favorable, such misplaced optimism ignores the realities of the business cycle, and overestimates the powers of the central government. Only a fourth of investment projects under implementation are stuck with the central government; the rest are constrained by overcapacity, balance sheets, or state governments."

Two-thirds of the projects awaiting approvals from the federal government are in the power and steel sectors, both of which are wracked with massive overcapacity, making new investments unnecessary. Credit Suisse expects the recent rally in the Indian markets to continue for a few months until the end of the year, by when the markets will realize the government's inability to drive rapid changes.

Indeed, the problems run deep. For instance, no matter how hard the central government may try in the power sector, the reforms actually need to take place at the state level. Again, boosting coal production is a critical necessity but any overhaul will take several years. As for the steel sector, mining of iron ore is, again, a state subject (and in some cases, it happens to be at the discretion of the Supreme Court.)

On the other hand, there is nothing to show that the BJP is not serious about its social agenda. Modi has openly espoused the Hindutva ideology throughout his career. The last time the party was in power (1999-2004), the then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee could plead that he was

constrained by coalition partners of the National Democratic Alliance government, but there is really no such counterweight to Modi today.

He is not only "unbound" but, most certainly, far "more equal" than others in his government, and within his party itself, including the party's president, he stands like a colossus. It could be a fair guess that his heavy emphasis on economics and governance may mean that he may have little surplus political capital to expend on a aggressive social agenda. But then, it remains a mere guess at this point.

Of course, there is going to be a foreign-policy dimension to all this. The fate of the Indian Muslim will be under international scrutiny, especially in the Muslim world. Israel has rejoiced, but Modi's rise has raised concerns in the Muslim world. In reality, Modi's experience in international diplomacy is nil and he truly faces a learning curve on foreign policy issues. It is one thing to fire up the electoral base with strident and provocative rhetoric but it is another to take a confrontational approach toward Bangladesh or Pakistan and China.

Modi has demanded the expulsion of Bangladeshi Muslim migrants from India and has openly expressed admiration for the US President Barack Obama's grit to hunt down Osama bin Laden in violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. (Modi's supporters openly demand a "hot pursuit" strategy toward cross-border terrorism from Pakistan and for calling Pakistan's "nuclear bluff".) Similarly, Modi has blasted the Manmohan Singh government for being "soft" on China's border incursions.

However, this may sound a paradox but the heart of the matter is that Modi enjoys the political space to seek accommodation with Pakistan and China, if only he chooses to take the road not taken by the Hindutva ideologues. A known unknown here is how ambitious Modi himself will be, now that he is at the pinnacle of power, to become a truly historic national leader - like China's Deng Xiaoping. Deng also had his share of "2002 Gujarat riots" - Tiananmen Square - but when history is written, what stands out is his profound contribution to the transformation of China and in lifting hundreds of millions of his countrymen out of poverty even while answering to his authoritarian roots.