

India after 2024 elections

DEMOCRACY WORKS



Analysis

06/2024

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This year's general elections in India ended with a surprising result. Although Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Indian People's Party (BJP) has retained power, the lack of a majority in parliament (Lok Sabha) makes it dependent on its coalition partners. At the same time, the opposition, including the Indian National Congress, has also gained which indicates a revival of the political scene in the world's most populous country. The election results and their consequences in domestic and international politics may significantly impact India's future, but above all they confirm the strength of its democracy.

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This year, due to exceptionally hot weather, the elections to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament, had a dramatic course, as over 20 members of the electoral commissions died and several dozen participants were hospitalized. The heat also contributed to lower attendance.

But the temperature of this year's elections was not only due to meteorological phenomena. BJP supporters, based on pre-election polls, hoped for Modi's victory on the same scale as in 2019. For the prime minister himself, this year's elections were also a test after 10 years of rule of the BJP coalition.

Electoral finale: counting of votes

The final was a big surprise for the ruling party. The NDA and the BJP won 293 seats in the 543-seat Lok Sabha, while Modi's party alone after having won 240 seats was 32 votes short of full comfort in governing. Finally Prime Minister Modi is back in power, but without a majority in the Lok Sabha, which makes him dependent on his allies.

Moreover, his party also lost many votes, especially in several states where the BJP traditionally had majority, i.e. in Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. It was an unpleasant surprise for Prime Minister. These seats were not taken over by the Congress, but by regional parties that gained in the current elections.

The Congress coalition I.N.D.I.A. won 233 seats in the Lok Sabha, and the Congress party itself won 99 seats in the Lok Sabha, which means that the Congress has shaken off the stagnation and failures that have been ongoing since 2009 and has shown that it still exists on the political scene, although without any decisive vote in parliament.

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Observing the course of the elections, it can be noticed that both leaders spoke different political culture languages. On the one hand, Prime Minister Modi referred to Hindu values, but avoiding the radical slogans of Hindutva, and on the other hand, Rahul Gandhi, who during his electoral marches (yatras) across India, slightly coloured his secular ideology with quasi-religious contents praying in the Hindu temples.

Prime Minister Modi's expectations that building a temple of the god Rama in Ayodhya would increase his vote share turned out to be unfounded. In the Faizabad constituency, where the temple was built, the Congress and its coalition partners gained (+62 votes), while the BJP-NDA coalition lost (-30 votes). Also, Modi's religious meditations in Kanyakumari on the rock where Swami Vivekanda's visit was commemorated in the form of a small temple did not bring him any votes. Nevertheless, interpreting the results in his own way, Modi expressed happiness that many people supported for the third time BJP's way to power and that it was a festive and historic event.

Opposition gains

The success of the Congress and its coalition partners may have been influenced by disappointment with the long period of rule of the BJP team, especially because of some economic steps taken by Prime Minister, such as the re-denomination of the rupee in 2016, or political decisions related to ethnic issues in Kashmir, including tightening citizenship laws and excluding certain population groups from the right to receive citizenship of India.

The acronym used by the opposition was aptly invented I.N.D.I.A. - India National Development Inclusive Alliance, as obviously it concisely emphasized the Congress's concern for development of India. Both Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi talked about the country's development. But it was Congress that managed to convince voters better by promising them a more

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equitable distribution of national income. The Congress also gained votes in rural districts at the expense of possible votes counting for the NDA coalition. Village is an important electorate. Rural districts make up 60% of the country's population of over 1.4 billion people. Modi, having lost one third of the votes in rural districts must have felt it painfully.

The position of the BJP in the southern Indian states has not changed since the previous elections, but getting one vote in Kerala the Hindutva supporters considered a success but the BJP did not get any votes from Tamil Nadu. The BJP in the north-eastern states was equally reluctant.

It should be taken into account that, traditionally, Modi and his party have won the support of the most important private business corporations, which were supported by the party's economic policy, which brought greater than before freedom to entrepreneurs, lower taxes and openness for technological innovation. The Indian Union National Day celebrations in January 2024 in New Delhi was an impressive display of India's economic and technological achievements during the BJP government.

In this year's campaign, the Prime Minister emphasized concern for the fate of the poorest and underprivileged social groups, which are not small in terms of numbers. He said of them that "the poor are the country's greatest strength." However, it was not enough to fully convince them.

Modi could also be harmed by the increase of unemployment from 7% in April 2024 to 8% in May and early June. Lack of employment mainly affects young people, especially those who are educated and have professional qualifications. This was expressed in anti-government demonstrations at universities, during which the Hinduization of India's political culture was criticized and Modi was accused of polarizing Indian society.

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Caste groups in the electoral fight

Politicians in India must take into account the pressure of caste groups counting on state patronage, looking for financial resources or access to power.

Social problems resulting from the persistent segmentation of Indian society are the most difficult to overcome. In fact, the enormous energy of India's political culture is consumed by caste politics, in which the upper castes continue to defend their position. Modi tried to alleviate the differences that divide Indian society and argued that he was the leader of all India and the diverse inhabitants of the subcontinent. To some extent, he succeeded, because neither he nor his party lost power.

Caste policy, especially in the rural districts where caste conflicts are particularly visible, is also influenced by the development policy pursued by the authorities, like building wells and local roads, that involves unprivileged groups seeking justice from local authorities, including police, or asking the representatives of local communities for interventions. These castes also expect granting them the membership in the organizational structures of the BJP or IKN, because only then such a promotion could meet their expectations. It cannot materialize yet, as the leadership of both the BJP and the IKN come from upper castes.

BJP, Congress and unprivileged groups

It is difficult for the BJP to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards unprivileged groups because the party's ideological mentor is RSS organization, which expresses extreme views on building an India on Hindu foundations.

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Modi has so far failed to bring about conciliatory attitudes among the "hard" core of his upper-caste supporters to meet the expectations of lower castes or unprivileged groups. It seems that the Sangh Pariwar, which encircles all faces of Hindutva, has found itself at a crossroads in the current elections, raising the need for social justice, i.e. reducing the feeling of being in a caste society, and at the same time failing to properly oppose the acts of communal violence that occurred so often.

The Congress, whose upper-caste leadership is trying to propose "top-down" reforms to the lowest, backward and poor communities, has not been successful in this regard too. Poorer groups which currently have their own visions reforming the country perceive the statements of the BJP and of the Congress as insincere and also explain them as the best proof of the durability of the domination of the upper castes.

The issue of Muslims in this year's elections

Most regional parties did not raise the issue of Muslims either. Historically, the number of Muslim representatives in the Lok Sabha has usually been low and has been declining since the 1990s, when the BJP came to the fore. This nearly 200 million religious minority has only 22 members of parliament in the current parliament (the fewest since 1947).

The BJP remains the Hindutva party and its leaders are shaped by antipathy towards Muslims. This reluctance is currently reinforced by the government's historical policy, which contains a critical assessment of the country's colonial bitter past, emphasizing especially the Muslim conquest of India and their centuries-long rule over the subcontinent. But these anti-Muslim sentiments, shared by the Hindu majority, are not helpful to win the elections. One of the issues affecting relations with Muslims is the cow protection policy implanted among local communities by extreme sects of Hindutva.

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Anyway, Muslims overwhelmingly voted for the Congress. Even though they were aware that the Congress and its biggest ally Aam Admi Party (AAP) also had their heads in the sand in the face of anti-Muslim acts of violence and cow protection killings. The Hindu majority is radically anti-Muslim and that is why the leaders of the largest parties do not raise the issue of the Muslim minority for fear of losing the votes of their supporters.

It was evident in the voting results in some states. In Maharashtra, where 10 million Muslims live, even non-BJP parties have not given any seat to Muslims. In Uttar Pradesh, where the largest number of them is over 40 million, the opposition Samajwadi Party agreed to only 4 seats for Muslims. The BJP agreed to support only one candidate from the Muslim minority. Congress allies looked coldly at Muslim parties but accepted candidates from extreme Hindutva backgrounds. The Shiv Sena, accused of anti-Muslim riots in Mumbai in the 1990s, has now found itself among the Congress's coalition partners.

Only southern Indian parties, such as the Dravidian party DMK in Tamil Nadu or the communists in Kerala (CPI-M), in their manifestos accepted Muslim candidates. Both demanded an amendment to the citizenship law and criticized the authorities for granting special status to Kashmir. They keep constantly calling for the overthrow of the above mentioned phenomenon of “cow vigilants”.

International Reactions to Election Results in India

The suddenness of the visit of the US State Department representative Jake Sullivan, even before Prime Minister Modi was sworn in and the new government was established, may have surprised Indian opinion. It may also prove how important role India plays in Washington's strategy because of its geographical location and skillfull human resources. Indian politicians

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are also aware of the role their country can play in the scenario of the future US-China conflict that Washington wants. This awareness may be an important bargaining chip for New Delhi against American pressure. Sullivan has already started the game making it clear that he came to convince New Delhi that both sides share common priorities in the Indo-Pacific region. This also entails the partnership in technology cooperation.

Americans seem to have ignored the fact that Prime Minister Modi initiated his own policy in this region several years ago, both through the "ActEast" policy and by actively participating in QUAD or building alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia. Americans also seem unable to digest India's freedom in its foreign relations. These include contracts with Russia for fuel supplies (over 3 million barrels a year) not paid in "petrodollars", which is related to India's activity in the association of BRICS countries, which declare to move away from the dollar in trade transactions, which is irritating for US economy.

International Standing of India

Prime Minister Modi's activities in the international arena, going beyond its own region and building broad international relations, strengthens India and like no other political party so far draws attention to the fact that there is nothing more important for his country than reason of state. It will be a very difficult task for opposition parties to gain the upper hand, not least because Prime Minister Modi has gained great popularity both in the country and abroad.

Evidently, in the Prime Minister Modi's actions in the international arena so far, whether it was organizing the G20 summit or participating in the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, increasing activity in QUAD and other regional initiatives or continuing relations with ASEAN, is visible that India had abandoned the policy of keeping itself in the impasse of non-engagement. This is exactly the direction in which the new leadership of the country will lead India.

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The course of the elections showed that Prime Minister Modi stands firmly on Hindu values, which are shared by the majority of voters, and does not intend to give them up. The condemnation of so called Hinduization of political culture in India is a favorite topic of the Western media, including American media, which intensified such anti-India propaganda even before Sullivan's visit to New Delhi.

Fortunately, the business communities of both countries conduct their own dialogue. During Sullivan's visit Elon Musk declared that he intends to transfer his electric vehicle production technologies to India (several Indian cities already expressed their eagerness to become such a starting place). After Musk many other entrepreneurs will probably consider their presence in India. Prime Minister Modi and Indian industrialists share such expectations. The new government team will therefore realize its development dreams also in the context of India's historical context. And perhaps that is why the "dialogue" that Sullivan wants to impose on the Indian side may be difficult to prolongate as Modi enriches it also with cultural values; during the G-20 meeting, he emphasized that India offers to the world a development alternative, shifting the focus from development focused solely on economic results to development that takes into account people's well-being. This point of view is also close to the expectations and attitudes of Indian elites, who assign their country a specific role to play, relying on the values of their "eternal civilization". It seems that Washington cannot cope with the Hindutva ideology, which has become a hard nut for many Western politicians to crack.

Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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