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THE 16th GENERAL ELECTION

A Sizeable Section Of Indian Voters In A Mood For 'High Risk, High Returns'

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- Some 814 million voters will make the 16th parliamentary elections in India the largest democratic exercise in the world. The counting of votes will take place on May 16, after which the process of forming the new government will begin and which may entail coalitional negotiations between national and regional parties.

- Evidence from opinion polls suggests that the Congress Party will register a decline in its seats this time, with the BJP projected to rise to new heights. Most observers see Narendra Modi as the most likely person to become the new prime minister of India. The question is this: can the 'Gujarat Development Model' be a blueprint for the whole country?

- What difference will the arrival of a new political formation like the Aam Aadmi Party make to Indian politics? Will it make a meaningful contribution towards the transformation of the political-economic system in the country by steering it away from the endemic corruption that has come to mark it and by ensuring that the focus shifts to more substantive issues and to good governance?

The author analyses India's contemporary political landscape ahead of the elections and provides the reader with various possible scenarios that could emerge after the vote counting exercise has concluded.

THE 16th GENERAL ELECTION

Sixty-seven years after Independence, Indian democracy is poised to enter a qualitatively different, arguably more mature, phase with the 16th General Election that will vote in a new Lower House of Parliament, or the Lok Sabha (House of the People).

About 814.5 million voters across the country will elect 543 Members of Parliament (MPs) in an election that will take place in nine phases, from April 7 to May 12, 2014. The counting of votes will begin on May 16 and the new House will be constituted by May 31. The size of the Indian electorate, taken as a block, is larger than the voters in the US and the European Union countries put together. All the 15 general elections in the past have been conducted smoothly and have led to peaceful political transitions. Barring some minor hiccups, the present 'festival of democracy' too is also expected to follow this tradition. In that sense, this election will only underscore the enormous range and depth of Indian democracy in a neighbourhood that is largely undemocratic.

Even as the democratic processes have stabilized in India, the country has had periods of instability over the years and has learnt to live with them. The last time the Indian voters gave a clear mandate for single party rule was 30 years ago. Since the Ninth General Election in 1989, India has always had multi-party governments, both in the various states as well as at the Centre. Although there are only six parties that have been recognized by the Election Commission as 'national', India has over 900 small, regional and national parties. Such a large number has often raised eyebrows, but it reflects the wide diversity of languages, castes, religions and races in the subcontinent. Many of these parties represent interests of certain religions (Muslim League, Akali Dal, Hindu Mahasabha) or castes (Republican Party of India). Some parties may have a presence only in one or two states yet may profess to have a wider agenda or even nurse national ambitions. Among these are the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), both headquartered in Uttar Pradesh; the Shiv Sena (SS, Maharashtra), the Trinamool Congress (TMC, West Bengal), the Janata Dal United (JD-U, Bihar), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), both based in Tamil Nadu, and so on.

With so many claimants to power in the fray, the Indian National Congress (Congress Party) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the largest and second-largest political parties in the country, respectively, have had to forge pre-poll ties, and would possibly have to strike post-poll alliances in their quest to govern India. The Congress-led coalition – the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – has already completed two terms in office under the leadership of Dr Manmohan Singh. Today, the UPA is struggling to retain power in the coming

election. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, was in power for six years around the turn of the century and, according to poll projections, is slated to stage a strong comeback.

There are two more clusters of political parties in the non-Congress, non-BJP political arena that need to be noted. One of them, the Third Front, includes the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). While these two parties boast of a strong ideological foundation, others in this Third Front are largely driven by pragmatic politics. The second cluster, euphemistically termed as the Federal Front, is a loose conglomerate of small parties, like the Trinamool Congress, which are wary of being taken over by the bigger players and, therefore, prefer to keep a 'safe distance' from all of them.

None of the four clusters – the NDA, the UPA, the Third Front or the Federal Front – is cast in stone. The composition of each one could change drastically as the time for government formation draws closer. Much depends upon how many seats the Congress and the BJP win. Once this is known, the smaller entities will tend to gravitate to the party best placed to attain power.

The newly formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) does not belong to any of these four formations but has already become a force to reckon with in Indian politics. AAP emerged out of a strong, apolitical, anti-corruption movement steered largely by middle-class urban youth and which reflected their frustration and anger against the corruption that has come to mark the political-economic system in the country. It even went on to form a government in Delhi in December 2013, which lasted for 49 days. Since AAP's immediate objective is to create its own distinct political space, it is unlikely to align with any of the other political outfits just yet.

Developments concerning the Congress and the BJP in the run-up to the election ought to be seen in this light. This general election will be taking place at a time when both these parties are passing through significant transitions. Both carry their own burdens of the past.

The Congress stands equated with the dynastic rule of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Jawaharlal Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi had dominated the party over the years, and became prime ministers of the country almost by birthright. Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia Gandhi, is the president of the Congress Party at present and her son, Rahul Gandhi, is now being unofficially projected as the party's candidate for prime minister in the coming election, should it come to power.

However, just as the Congress Party's total dominance of Indian politics is now a thing of the past, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty's influence within the party and the charismatic appeal it has for the national electorate are also on the wane. The Congress registered its highest ever vote share (64.1 per cent) in the 1984 general election, when it won 404 of the total 543

seats in the Lok Sabha. That remarkable success was mainly due to a sympathy wave generated by the shocking assassination of the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, on October 31, 1984. Since then, the party's vote share has been consistently on the decline. In the 2009 election, the Congress could muster only 28.55 per cent of the votes, which translated into 206 of the total 543 Lok Sabha seats.

According to various opinion polls conducted by professional agencies and media houses in February 2014, the Congress Party's appeal is likely to touch its nadir in the coming election. Most surveys have predicted that the party will not get more than 21 per cent of the votes, and not more than 110 of the total 543 seats. If the Congress sinks below 100, as a few surveys have predicted, the clout that the Gandhis have been able to exercise within the party will be further undermined.

The outgoing UPA government under Dr Manmohan Singh suffers badly from an image crisis on account of corruption charges and a record of poor governance. From a broader perspective, however, there are several other factors that are responsible for the decline of the Congress Party in national politics. The three most prominent ones are: one, the emergence of identity politics in different forms, ranging from 'sons of the soil' movements to caste and regional consolidations; two, conflicting aspirations of different interest groups within the party; three, the inability of the Congress to accommodate and reconcile these crosscurrents under its own umbrella.

Steeped in dynastic politics for decades, the Congress is finding it increasingly difficult to negotiate today's rapidly changing political scenario. The pre-eminence of the Gandhi family within the party structure over the years has discouraged the emergence of credible leaders at every level within the organizational structure of the party. Since the Congress's First Family, the Gandhis, have been steadily losing their ability to deliver 'success' in elections, the party is now being forced to give other leaders their due, or look for allies from time to time.

In sharp contrast to the Congress, the vote share of the BJP – barring a couple of reversals – has shown a steady rise since its inception in 1980. In comparison to the 7.74 per cent votes and just two seats it had secured in the 1984 election, the party accounted for 18.8 per cent of votes and 116 seats in the last election held in 2009. The BJP's best ever performance was in the 1998 election, when it secured 25.59 per cent of the votes and 182 out of the total 543 seats, which allowed it to form a coalition government under Atal Behari Vajpayee.

By projecting the chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, as its prime ministerial candidate in the coming election, the BJP is hoping to surpass its own 1998 performance. Poll surveys conducted in February 2014 have been unanimous in predicting that BJP will emerge as the party with the largest number of seats in this general election. In the best case scenario, the party could account for 37.9 per cent of the votes and over 215 seats in the 543-member House.

Over the last five years, the Congress and the UPA have remained pre-occupied with, and sometimes paralysed by, a series of massive scams. These have provided the BJP with the opportunity to present itself as a credible alternative. Setting its sights on winning the 2014 election, the party has meticulously woven its strategy around the persona of Narendra Modi. This was a gamble believed to have been conceived by the Hindutva organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has been the ideological bedrock of the BJP and its most dependable resource in terms of cadre strength. The gamble appears to be paying off.

Narendra Modi is a very controversial figure. For the last 12 years, he has been in the news for a variety of reasons, both positive and negative. In 2002, when he was the chief minister of Gujarat, the state witnessed one of the worst Hindu-Muslim conflagrations in independent India. He and his administration were accused of being complicit in the killing of Muslims although Modi subsequently rejected the charge. He has also not been indicted in any of the court cases that ensued. But those who profess secular values have been consistently castigating him since 2002 as the 'most communal face from the RSS-BJP clan'. The unrelenting anti-Modi campaign by his detractors for the 12 years since those riots seems to have become counter-productive in recent years. Four reasons could be cited for this. First, an increasing number of people across the country have begun perceiving him more as a victim of secularist propaganda than as a perpetrator of violence against Muslims. Two, Gujarat has not witnessed Hindu-Muslim riots in the subsequent years under Modi's rule. Three, the track record of many of his political critics like the Congress Party and the Uttar Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav, has been as bad, if not worse. Four, Modi has been successful in projecting Gujarat as a modern state that has benefited from development in spite of the hostility shown towards him by the Congress, the Left and other political opponents.

Contributing to this is the lacklustre performance of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi as the party's chief campaigner. In fact, it is possibly this factor that keeps the Congress Party from projecting him as its prime ministerial candidate. Rocked by the long list of mega scams during its rule, the party has also not been able to effectively capitalize on whatever positives it has been able to achieve. The UPA government can certainly take credit for some path-breaking legislation brought in during its tenure. These include the right to information, the right to education, the guarantee of employment in rural areas, food security, among others. But so demoralized has the Congress become that it has not even been able to gain from many of these important interventions.

Sensing the defensiveness of the Congress and its UPA allies, the Modi-led BJP has adopted a belligerent posture. As against a weak and unsure Rahul Gandhi, the BJP is projecting a strong, confident, no-nonsense Narendra Modi, who can take India on the path to prosperity. Seeking to discard his own

and his party's image of Hindu chauvinism, Modi now talks only about the UPA's corrupt regime and his own vision of a developed, progressive India. His development model in Gujarat is invariably touted to support this claim. Modi's political opponents across a wide spectrum have debunked these claims as 'falsehoods' and the projection of the 'Gujarat model' as a sham. But their protests don't seem to be cutting much ice with the electorate, especially the youth of the country, who are frustrated with the non-performance and lack of credibility of the country's current political elite.

In fact, the country's substantial youth cohort is so disillusioned with the UPA's performance that it seems prepared to ignore Modi's probable shortcomings, whether it is his communal outlook, lop-sided economic vision or autocratic style of functioning, and wish to give him a chance. The rub-off effect of this sentiment on other sections of society has visibly snowballed in recent weeks. In other words, a sizeable section of the Indian electorate is in no mood to continue with the status quo, which would mean re-electing the Congress-led alliance into power, but would rather play a 'high risk, high returns' game by voting in a BJP-led government under Modi.

These developments may substantially explain why the coming election could see the BJP bettering its own best-ever performance to win 200-plus seats. The states of Assam, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand,

Chandigarh and Delhi together constitute 202 seats. Going by the current mood, BJP is expected to win about 135 of them. The party will thus have to win at least half (60) of the total of 120 seats in Uttar Pradesh (80) and Bihar (40) if it has to cross the 200-plus mark. This explains why the electoral battle between the BJP and its opponents will be the fiercest in these two states.

If the BJP crosses the 200-mark and its current NDA allies win an additional 30-odd seats it will be within striking distance of the halfway mark of 272 seats. But, obviously, the party would still need more allies. Even today, the party's voters remain confined to the northern, central and western states of India where it has already peaked. In southern states like Andhra Pradesh (42 seats), Tamil Nadu (39 seats), Kerala (20 seats), as well as in West Bengal (42 seats) in the east, the BJP has no presence to speak of. Its search for allies in these states is, therefore, vigorously on, and will continue even after the election.

Interestingly, it is the AAP, led by Right to Information crusader Arvind Kejriwal, which has proved the most significant speed-breaker for the Modi juggernaut in this election. The party, just a year old, has captured the nation's imagination with its stupendous success in the Delhi state assembly polls. However, the party lacks depth and many of its leaders have come to be regarded as immature given a series of blunders the party committed after forming a government in Delhi. Sensing that a large number of its sympathizers across the country were feeling somewhat letdown,

the AAP government resigned after just 49 days of being in office, and its leaders got busy with the Lok Sabha campaign.

AAP's high-decibel election strategy is aimed at disrupting the age-old political equations among the other parties. Leveling serious allegations of corruption against prominent leaders across the political spectrum and accusing them of being hand-in-glove with some well-known industrial houses, AAP and its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, have managed to stay in the news all the while. Given this, the party could certainly eat into the vote share of all the major political parties, including the Congress, the BJP, the Janata Dal, the SP, the BSP and the Trinamool Congress. Yet, how much of a difference AAP could make in this election is still a matter of conjecture.

Successive elections over the last three decades show that the Congress and the BJP together poll about 50 to 55 per cent of the total votes. The Left parties get about seven to eight per cent of votes, with the remaining votes shared by parties commanding pockets of influence in different regions. The stagnant vote share of the Left is unlikely to change very much in the coming election, but some regional parties like the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), the BSP, and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD, Odisha) have gained in strength in recent years. Along with AAP, they too will eat into the vote share. Although the aggregate vote share and the number of seats won by these 'other' parties are sizeable, they do not constitute a single block. In fact, quite a few of them are direct

rivals: the BSP cannot see eye-to-eye with the SP in Uttar Pradesh and similar is the case with the DMK and the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and the Shiv Sena and the MNS in Maharashtra. Government formation after the election, therefore, is crucially dependent on the number of seats the BJP and the Congress win.

Four scenarios emerge in this context: one, the NDA emerges as the largest formation with 230-plus seats with the BJP winning 190 to 200 of those seats. This will be deemed as clear proof of the Narendra Modi impact and parties like Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's AIADMK, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Bannerjee's Trinamool Congress and even the former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati's BSP will offer support. Modi will then become the prime minister and offer a fairly stable government. Two, the NDA falls just short of the 200-mark and the BJP wins about 160 to 170 of those seats. In such a scenario, the NDA will still be able to form government with the external support of some parties but Modi could be replaced as its nominee for primeministership by someone more acceptable to potential allies like L.K. Advani or Arun Jaitley from the BJP. The stability of this government may be comparatively less. Three, the NDA bags less than 200 seats with BJP winning about 150 to 160 of them and still remaining the largest party. The BJP may then prop up someone like Jayalalithaa or Mamata Banerjee as prime minister. Such a government will be unstable and the country may face a mid-term poll. Four, NDA bags less than 200 seats, with BJP accounting for 150 to 160 of them, and it

decides to sit in the opposition. In such a scenario, the Left parties may be encouraged to take the initiative and forge a makeshift alliance of about 15-odd parties to form a government that will be a non-BJP, non-Congress hotchpotch. Such a government will be inherently unstable from its very inception and there is the distinct possibility of a mid-term election taking place in the near-term. As things stand at present, it is the first two scenarios that appear to be the most likely.

Irrespective of who forms the next government, India's post-election scenario will see a significant departure from the past and could result in the maturing of Indian politics. The Congress, as the 'traditional party in government', will lose its primacy to a substantial extent. While it will continue to be a major party, it will have to function on a more or less equal footing with that of other parties, unlike at present. This will naturally entail the Gandhi family losing its 'First Family' status. The BJP's Hindutva agenda will recede further. That does not mean, of course, that the party will discard Hindutva altogether, but it will moderate it in order to have a genuinely pan-India appeal. If it shows reluctance to do this, it will fail to fill the space vacated by Congress. Having said this, it still needs to be noted that despite BJP's best efforts, it will not be able to totally replace the Congress as India's 'umbrella party'. Part of this space will thus be permanently occupied by regional parties. Finally, thanks to the right to information conferred on common citizens; the social media, and the youth demographic becoming so central

in electoral politics, good governance will become the central issue in political discourse. This will lead to future elections being fought on 'real' and substantive issues like food security, social security, employment, development, opportunities for growth and so on, unlike in the past. This bodes well for the future of India.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anand Agashe, a bilingual (English & Marathi) journalist with 30 years of experience, worked as an editor with several leading Indian newspapers including Sakal, The Times of India, The Indian Express, The Independent, Loksatta and a few others.

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