

Indian Elections 2004: An Early Preview

With five states scheduled to go to polls this fall, political activity is moving into high gear in India. The state elections will provide a good barometer of popular sentiment toward the government and are being treated as a 'test run' for the national elections due in 2004. The state elections will largely determine how the major contenders deal with the volatile issue of Hindu nationalism. How relations with Pakistan figure in the election depends largely on the outcome of current India-Pakistan peace efforts. But the key issue to watch is the ability of the current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress party, its principal opponent, to hold together a coalition. This will not only be central to their electoral strategies, it will also determine the next government's freedom of action in making national policy.

State elections this November in Chattisgarh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Mizoram states are being treated as a trial run for India's upcoming national elections. Currently, the opposition Congress Party is in power in four of them; tiny Mizoram is governed by a coalition of local parties. A BJP victory in at least three would prompt the government to advance the general election from October to as early as February 2004. The state elections will also provide a good indication of the viability of some key election issues, and will test both major contenders' coalition-building efforts. Neither the BJP nor the Congress is likely to get a majority to form a national government on its own.



The BJP: Leadership continuity: It now appears that the current Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, will lead the party in the coming elections. Some within the party have mentioned Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani's name as a possible replacement for the aging Vajpayee. At 78, Vajpayee has spent more than 50 years in politics, and plagued with health problems. In March, BJP president Venkaih Naidu proclaimed the 75-year old Advani as the party's new leader. He was forced to retract the statement a few days later and reinforce the legitimacy of Vajpayee's leadership. This reflects Vajpayee's greater acceptability to the BJP's coalition partners, but also his prestige as the incumbent prime minister and his apparent interest in carrying on.

A Study in Contrasts: Vajpayee and Advani differ in style and, to a lesser extent, policy. Portrayed as the *vikas purush* (development man), Vajpayee wants to be the architect of a

new, better relationship with Pakistan and a peaceful resolution to Kashmir.

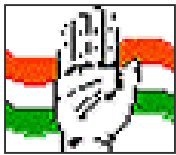
Advani, dubbed the *loha purush* (iron man), is blunt spoken and physically vigorous. He is famous for his close ties to the hard-line nationalist organizations that make up the BJP's core constituency, the "Sangh parivar" or "Sangh family." He takes a much tougher line toward Pakistan. His public role a decade ago in mobilizing the mob that destroyed the historic Babri Mosque has made him a symbol of confrontational relations with non-Hindu communities as well. Many believe Advani would have to tone down his tough positions in order to sustain a national following and hold together a coalition. For the moment, Advani remains in the second slot, but fence-sitters on the Indian scene will be asking themselves what happens if Vajpayee fall ill during the months leading up to the election or in a next term.

BJP's Coalition Strategy: The BJP, with 183 parliamentary seats, is the largest party in the current parliament, but is short of the 272 required for a majority. It governs with an unwieldy 24-party coalition, the 297-member National Democratic Alliance (NDA). To win the next election, it would again need coalition partners, especially in the southern states. Of the 121 parliamentary seats from the south, the BJP has only 16. Its weakness outside the Hindi-speaking heartland paradoxically helps the BJP to make allies of regional parties. Many of its current alliances fall into this pattern, including its largest coalition partner, Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh, and Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. But some of these regional partners feel the BJP has not done enough to distance itself from the more fanatical elements of the nationalist "family." The coalition also leaves the government vulnerable to demands for special treatment by regional parties.

The BJP's political brainstorming session in June reaffirmed its current coalition, but also called for additions to the alliance. One of the two largest regional parties in Tamil Nadu is already in the coalition, but volatile Tamil politics could lead to its replacement by the other, reversing a move that took place before the last national elections. Other potential new partners include local Kerala-based Communist parties, the Akali Dal in Punjab, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. An alliance between the BJP and the BSP could be combustible, however. Relations between Vajpayee and Mayawati, the maverick lower caste chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and BSP party chief, and Vajpayee have been strained. Mayawati's "untouchable" caste party is widely seen as running one of the most corrupt state governments in India. And the severely

fragmented politics of the state make for even more unpredictable political alliances.

A Weak Opposition: The opposition Congress Party, the oldest party in India, has now been out of national power for the longest period in its 118-year history. It won one of the two



important state elections this year. Its leader Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, has tremendous “star appeal,” but critics question her leadership skills and see her Italian-Catholic origins as a political liability. But no other leader has emerged as a viable domestic or international figurehead for the party.

In Search of a Coherent Strategy: At its own brainstorming session in Simla in July, the Congress leadership announced that it would be willing to form a coalition, but only with “like-minded” parties. For a historically dominant party, this was a major change. The party’s political strategy statement leaves unclear exactly how it will pursue such alliances, whether it will try to create a coalition before the election, and whether it would include coalition partners if it formed a government. The most comfortable allies for Congress are the ideologically-based parties of the traditional Indian left, but they have relatively small contingents in the current parliament and are unlikely to expand them significantly. Other potential allies come from the Hindi-speaking North, where Congress had for practical purposes been wiped out: Mulayam Singh Yadav’s Samjwadi Party and Ajit Singh’s Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh and Laloo Yadav’s Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. Even Sharad Pawar’s National Congress Party has been mentioned as a possible ally. Pawar, a former Congress leader who was kicked out after questioning Gandhi’s leadership, declared that he would resist allying with the Congress, however. These parties would be difficult allies for Congress. Their leaders have a history of driving hard and unreliable bargains, and they come from states with complex, multi-sided political contests.

Congress’s willingness to pursue such alliances reflects three factors. The first is the party’s overall decline in favor of smaller state and regional parties that have long opposed Congress’s historical hegemony over Indian politics. Secondly, the recent dominance of the BJP has led some secular parties to build political coalitions to counter the BJP’s nationalist agenda. Finally, the simple fact that neither major party can garner a national majority has transformed India’s political landscape that has made coalition politics the norm.

Congress also lacks a clear and coherent ideology. Historically, the party projected a strong sense of secular identity and had a strong “vote bank” among the backward castes or Dalits (former untouchables). The emergence of state and ideologically based parties that operate on a more local level has eroded much of Congress’s support. Congress has consistently neglected Dalits; Mayawati’s BSP, mentioned above, has capitalized on the resulting resentment. In the last state elections in Uttar Pradesh in February 2002, Congress had the worst showing of any party, a reflection of the Dalit backlash. Compounding such problems

for Congress are the disagreements and squabbles within its ranks.

The Hindutva Issue: Hindutva, a fundamentalist socio-political ideology that asserts a unifying Hindu culture for all Indians, will be an important factor in the atmospherics of the general election. Last year’s communal riots and subsequent elections in Gujarat saw Chief Minister Narendra Modi skillfully appeal to Hindutva to win a big victory, and Congress’s campaign, characterized by some as “Hindutva lite,” failed. Some within the BJP point to that as justification for its use now. That strategy, however, did not work for the BJP in recent state elections in Himachal Pradesh, where Congress hewed to its traditional secular line. Against that background, both parties are currently wary of explicit electoral appeals to communal hostility.

This could change, however, based on the results of the upcoming state elections. It may also be affected by the progress of efforts by some organizations from the “Sangh family” to lay the groundwork for building a temple on the site where the Babri Mosque was destroyed. This hot-button issue is currently in the courts, but efforts by extremists to create facts have created a tremendous stir several times in the past two years. Recently, Vajpayee was sharply criticized by the opposition for a statement in support of building a temple.

The Pakistan factor: Vajpayee appears to be hoping that the prospect of improved relations with Pakistan will aid the BJP’s electoral prospects, and has indicated that this will be his final attempt at peace. His visit to China last month aimed to improve relations with India’s other troublesome neighbor. Hard-line or cynical figures in the government seem to believe that the BJP is well positioned. If current peace efforts fail, the government will have a strong moral case for resuming a tough policy and appealing to nationalist sentiment.

Economic policy is likely to be a relatively minor election issue, on the other hand. The BJP has maintained its slow course on reforms in the fiscal 2003–2004 budget. The government is continuing a policy of gradual capital account liberalization, driven by rising levels of foreign-exchange reserves and a steadily appreciating currency, but has done little to curb the worrisome fiscal deficit.

The Lineup: The elections in Delhi, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh will be a direct contest between the BJP and local Congress incumbents. The BJP will make an aggressive attempt to win these states and provide a boost to its national campaign; Congress is expected to adopt a defensive posture and will have to fight anti-incumbency sentiments. In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress is expected to win another five-year term comfortably. The key state to watch will be Rajasthan, India’s third most populous state, where the Congress has a tough fight on its hands. The state polls cannot predict the outcome of the national elections. However, they will foreshadow the effectiveness of the campaign strategies of the BJP and the Congress. They will also powerfully influence the all-important quest for national coalitions.

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