

## THE LESSONS OF 2012 ELECTIONS FOR STATE ASSEMBLIES

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The Election Commission has successfully conducted general elections to State Assemblies in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur. The results were declared on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2012. The Commission is to be complimented on ensuring that even in insurgency hit Manipur the elections were held under tight security in which voters felt safe to cast their votes and there was an excellent turnout of voters. Even in Uttar Pradesh, where it was feared that the elections would be violent, the Election Commission very competently saw to it that peace was maintained and the elections were free and fair. It had been alleged that S.Y. Qureshi, the Chief Election Commissioner, would be biased towards the Congress, but he deserves unstinting praise for the completely bias free election conducted under his directions. The results of the elections are proof of his fairness and impartiality because in three States out of five, including in Uttar Pradesh, which is the most populous State, the Congress did very badly indeed. We should be proud of this officer and the Commission headed by him.

There are lessons to be learnt from this election and the first and most important is that the 2012 elections are witness to the decline of the two major parties which can be considered national. The Congress has a presence in every State, has always been considered a middle of the road party and is the party which has been in power longest at the national level. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh the party has been virtually wiped out, which does not speak highly of its prospects in the coming elections in 2014. Similarly BJP, which has an imposing presence in many States, has fared badly except in Goa. If the second national level party, BJP, is also not to be a serious contender in the 2014 elections, we are bound to have a situation in which there is a splintered parliament and no party would have the strength to lead a stable coalition in which junior partners in the coalition cannot call the tune. A weak coalition means that policies which are in the national interest, though not necessarily in the interest of a component party, cannot be framed or implemented and the government, therefore, would never rise above a lame duck position.

In the case of BJP the party faces a major dilemma. It has a cadre, largely of the RSS, which means that it has a grass-root presence. At the same time its secular credentials are in doubt and there is a popular perception that the party has a somewhat narrow Hindutva agenda, which makes it unacceptable to large sections of people, especially in Southern and Eastern India. If the party wants to come to power at the Centre it was to widen its base in order to increase its acceptability. In order to widen the base the party must abandon a narrow Hindutva programme, but here it runs the danger of losing the RSS cadre. The party, therefore, will have to build a cadre separate from RSS in order to retain a grass-root presence, while moving its own agenda towards a more secular, centrist stance. It remains to be seen whether the party has the courage to take these hard decisions. The problem with the Congress is not one of acceptability but is the more existentialist question of whether there is such a thing as the Congress party. One senior Congress leader told me that anyone who thinks that there is a Congress party is a fool and that it is the private fiefdom of the Nehru-Gandhi family, to which all Congress men owe their existence and to whom they have to swear loyalty. This became amply clear in the recent Uttar Pradesh elections. The Congress put all its eggs in the Gandhi family basket. Rahul Gandhi was the star performer who, under suitable tutelage, ran the election campaign in the field, with his sister putting in a star guest act and his ailing mother providing support from the sidelines.

What did Rahul Gandhi offer? A circus which had relevance about forty years ago but which is totally obsolete in the India of today. Therefore, the star performer spent time in a Dalit household in

which he kept a two-day stubble on his chin. He went on stage, made meaningless speeches, resorted to dramatics and publicly tore a manifesto of the Samajwadi Party which paper, however, was not the manifesto but just a miscellaneous bunch of papers of no consequence. He went to constituencies that had a sizable Muslim presence and there he sported a beard so that in looks he could appear to be Muslim. The Muslims were promised reservation in jobs, an enquiry into the Batala House encounter and many empty promises to protect the Muslims. The agenda was obviously communal because nothing positive was mentioned about Muslim education, emancipation of Muslim women, a development agenda based on job creation rather than just reservations, economic uplift and improvement of the Muslim social structure. What Rahul Gandhi offered would probably have worked four decades ago when the Muslims voted en masse. It did not work in 2012. Personal security, notwithstanding aberrations, including Bombay in 1993 and Gujarat in 2002, is now taken as a right by Muslims. The Muslims are aware of their backwardness, but they have done introspection and are prepared to accept that it is their low level of education which is a major factor in keeping them backward. The average Muslim wants access to education, vocational training for children which can make them employable, creation of job opportunities through economic development and equal opportunities in employment coupled with affirmative action. Reservation is the least of the Muslim priorities. On none of these issues did Rahul Gandhi or the Congress make any significant contribution, which has caused the Muslims to turn away from the Congress.

The communal card no longer holds validity in today's India. Nitish Kumar realised this and his entire election campaign was based on a development agenda. That is why his BJP partners were able to get Muslim votes in Bihar. In Gujarat Narendra Modi never speaks of the Muslims and 2002 notwithstanding, the development momentum which has been unleashed in Gujarat has also improved economic opportunities for the Muslims, benefitted them in improving their economic status and, therefore, has brought about a better law and order environment in the State. Therefore, in local body elections a number of Muslim candidates preferred the BJP and were successful in the elections. This point is made not as an apology for Narendra Modi, but rather as a pointer to what the Muslim needs. No Indian Muslim wants separation from India nor would he like to migrate to Pakistan. Every Indian Muslim accepts India as his own country. This has buried the ghost of 1947 and political parties should not try to revive it. The Muslim wants education for his children, safety for himself, honour and dignity for his women folk and job opportunities and a business environment in which the Muslim can prosper. The party which gives him this, which is exactly what every other community wants, will win the next election. Rahul Gandhi's 2012 agenda promises none of these and does not bode well for the party.

The growth of regional parties is a repeat of what happened after the emergency and the defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977. In the last two decades of the twentieth century one saw signs of reemergence of national parties, including the Left Front. 2012 has reversed this trend and the regional parties are becoming powerful. As I have already stated, this is not a promising sign.

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