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Modi, BJP sweep to power in India

By Chan Akya

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For the first time since 1984, a single political party in India will have majority in the 543-seat lower house of parliament, the country's apex legislative body, with partial election results showing a sharp swing to the right and indicating a landslide victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its leader, Narendra Modi, as the new prime minister of the world's largest democracy.

I have been talking with members of the Indian diaspora including some journalist friends today, and some of their remarks are reproduced here, without quoting them directly.

The new composition of parliament is significant, as are a number of other factoids about this election. The BJP has returned at least 279 seats in the partial count while its coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has comfortably secured leads in over 330 constituencies, giving it absolute control of the lower house (Lok Sabha), while the BJP itself has a majority in the house. This means stability - that one word missing from the dictionary of Indian politics for the past 25 years.

Since the BJP has its own majority, it will not dance to the tune of coalition partners, quite simply because it doesn't need them. That in turn means (potentially) an end to the venality that marked the 2009-14 government headed by the Indian National Congress, where coalition partners caused a number of scandals, or "scams" in the Indian English parlance, such as such as

the licensing for 2G mobile-phone networks (see India tots up bill for mobile scandal, Asia Times Online, December 9, 2010) and the Commonwealth Games debacle (See Crooks hijack Delhi Games, Asia Times Online, August 7, 2010).

Punishment has been swift and ruthless for all political parties accused of corruption: the Tamil Nadu-based Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, heavily implicated in the telecoms scandal, appears to have won only one seat (against 18 in the outgoing parliament), while the Nationalist Congress Party is down to four seats (from nine).

The Sonia Gandhi-led Indian National Congress (INC) itself faces the prospect of securing fewer than 50 seats, a disastrous performance for the party that has dominated Indian politics for the better part of the last 120 years. Amusingly for Indian right-wing observers, INC may not even secure the 55 seats it needs to claim a role as leader of the opposition in the lower house.

Regional political parties such as the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) in Tamil Nadu and Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, that have dominated their states and have opposed both the BJP and the outgoing INC face a changed relationship dynamic now that a strong single party majority is in power.

This is the biggest swing away from the Communist parties for over 50 years - even in the traditional left-bastion state of West Bengal, the communists couldn't score a single seat, leaving all their seats to the southern state of Kerala, where voting against the INC appears to have helped.

Key takeaways

'Presidential' election: The typical cacophony of Indian elections where since Indira Gandhi political parties have dominated the electoral space, has now changed, being as much a battle between two leading personalities - prime minister designates Narendra Modi of the BJP and Rahul Gandhi of the INC (although Gandhi was coy about his prospects for office, and suggested he didn't want the job anyway).

Jobs and roads: The BJP under Modi seems to have won because the central theme of the campaign of "development and governance" resonated strongly with voters who are frustrated with the absence of both jobs and roads in India.

Anti-corruption: Political parties paid attention to removing those accused of corruption within their ranks, with even the INC shielding a few of its ministers from the inevitable scrutiny of the electorate. This development can be credited to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) - the Common Man's Party - which curiously didn't itself win more than a couple of seats.

Anti-incumbency: All that said, it cannot be claimed (by the INC and its supporters) that there was any anti-incumbency wave that guaranteed sitting MPs would be kicked out. A number of high-profile MPs from the BJP and various other parties kept their seats, while almost every single under-performing MP was booted out.

'Gifts' didn't work: The INC and various political parties around India effectively bribed voters with handouts, welfare subsidies and the like. Nothing worked for them, as voters took the money and voted for the BJP anyway. That's a not a bad development for the future of Indian democracy.

What it means for India

If Gujarat is any indication of what Narendra Modi can do for India, the outcomes could be good and bad, including: **A focus on infrastructure:** Modi's singular success in Gujarat was to improve roads, get power plants, and provide access to drinking water for every single village and town in the state; a process that much helped improve overall economic growth.

Agrarian reforms: Modi pushed through significant improvements in agriculture by focusing on improved production methods, higher milk yields and promoting traditional village-made products across the state (farmers typically double up as artisans and craftsmen, such as being potters, weavers and painters in the non-agricultural seasons).

Industrialization: Modi, despite all his focus on agrarian reforms, also pushed for single window clearance of major industrial projects; attracting billions in new investments across the state thereby generating hundreds of thousands of jobs. (As a political point, employment opportunities provided to people across India helped to make the case for Mr Modi a national one as migrants into Gujarat from other states ended up as his most fervent supporters).

Governance: Modi made much of transparency and governance in his campaign. Indeed it does appear to be true that "retail" corruption for people seeking government service - for example to get a birth certificate issued - has been curtailed by the use of technology. While it is virtually impossible to rid India of corruption, Modi's government appears to have made very significant inroads to achieving the same in Gujarat.

Media relations: it is no secret that India's famously liberal media absolutely detests Modi and everything he stands for (industrialization being a particular bugbear for left-leaning journalists). This is actually good news for India itself: a strong government confronted with a skeptical media cannot be a bad thing for any country, and this is all the more true for a somewhat ungovernable place like India.

Can Modi as prime minister achieve for India even half of what he did for Gujarat as chief minister? I don't think its going to be that easy but it appears possible. The one truism here is that expectations for a new government to deliver have never been higher. The other truism is that for India's tilt to the right to actually bear out, Modi had better deliver over the next five years.