

Perspective

India Routs the Far Right

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A collective sigh of relief went up as a Sunday of scorching Indian summer drew to a close. The votes had been counted after a month-long, five-phase general election, and the people had won. What had seemed a real and dire threat to peace in the world's most populous democracy and the region had receded.

The far right had been firmly rejected. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had lost the battle, after an aggressive campaign that combined up-to-date communication methods with utterly outdated ideas and issues. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), headed by the party, lay in a shambles, with more of its constituents ready to leave the sinking ship.

The BJP's and the NDA's prime-minister-in-waiting, Lal Krishna Advani, had ended up the prime-minister-in-indefinite-waiting. On the morrow of the announcement of the results, he declared his resolve to step down as the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha (India's Lower House of Parliament). It, however, took only hours for the far-right "family" ("parivar") to persuade him to stay on.

The BJP and the NDA lost the previous general election in 2004 too. But, in terms of numbers, it was a more decisive "no" that the people said to the party this time. Five years ago, even after the defeat, the party could play petty games. It could attempt permutations and combinations of parties to present an alternative, though without success. It could prevent Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi from becoming the prime minister - despite her meeting the constitutional requirement of being chosen for the post by her party's elected members of Parliament - on the very far-right ground of her "foreign origin."

With its 116 members against the 205 of the Congress Party and the 262 of the winning United Progressive Alliance (UPA), the BJP can now watch and sulk as outgoing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh prepares to assume office for a second term. It also claims to be engaged in investigation of the causes behind its political calamity.

Many in the party and the NDA are unofficially wondering whether the other prime ministers-in-waiting were the reason for the rout. The party had let it be known, for example, that Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat and the author of its gory pogrom of 2002, would be the BJP's next candidate for the nation's highest political office. Unlike in the past, the redoubtable rabble-rouser was unleashed on many states. Predictably, the party has done particularly badly in such states (like Maharashtra) while performing better in states that would have none of him (like Bihar).

Yet another aspirant for the apex office, who has announced his ambition, without either the endorsement or explicit disapproval of the party, is Varun Gandhi, who added considerable virulence to the BJP campaign in his videotaped and widely circulated speeches. A senior party leader and a former federal minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, has now publicly stressed the need to assess the damage done by the dangerous Varun-speak.

The party may take time to complete its postmortem on the election, but there is no mystery about the most important meaning of the mandate against the BJP. It is a vote against the rabid minority-bashing and religious communalism promoted by the party across the country even while Advani was attempting an image makeover and seeking to appear a much-misunderstood secularist. It is a vote against the party's plank of "anti-terrorism" that really aimed to reverse and destroy the India-Pakistan peace process. It is a vote against relentless efforts to vitiate and disrupt peace within the nation and the neighborhood. The silent majority has spoken up again against the politics of hate and militarism, which even the Congress and other foes of the far right have stopped short of confronting squarely.

The results, however, do not call for unreserved rejoicing. Along with the far right, the left has fared poorly, too. From a strength of 60 members in the Lok Sabha, it has now been reduced to a tiny, 25-member rump in the House. Particularly shocking to the left and its well-wishers have been its reverses in the State of West Bengal, where it has ruled for 32 years, and in Kerala, which gave itself the world's first elected Communist government in the fifties.

The left's losses have been ascribed to the unpopularity that comes with years in office. A more important reason, perhaps, was its attempt to form a "Third Front" of non-Congress and non-BJP parties. To the common people, however, the country's fate seemed to depend on the outcome of the two major fronts led by the Congress and the BJP. In practice, the Third Front only threatened to profit the far-right-led phalanx by splitting the ballot against the BJP.

The left extended outside support to the outgoing UPA government for most of its five-year term, and this mattered more than in numerical terms. Sustained left pressure made possible such popular measures of the UPA regime as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), assuring a minimum 100 days' employment in a financial year, and a massive waiver of agricultural loans that were driving tens of thousands of farmers to despair and suicide. The Congress and the UPA benefited considerably by these steps, with the left ironically left out.

The losses of the left, too, will matter in more than numerical terms. Alarm bells should ring, after the drama in Mumbai's financial district on Monday morning. "Powered by the UPA's astonishing victory," says one report, "bulls went on the rampage in the stock markets.... Trading had to be stopped for the day as market benchmarks hit the upper circuit (the higher limit prescribed for scrips) twice within a period of two hours." The report adds: "Market analysts said that investors are upbeat due to the election results as they portend a stable government, which is likely to be more business friendly and reform oriented as interference by the left is not likely to take place."

From the moment the results were declared, the corporate bodies have been claiming a victory, and a vote for their demand for economic "reforms" without such exasperating restraints as what the process may spell for the impoverished majority of India. The BJP's slogan of "Shining India," coined by representatives of the same corporate interests, sounded like cruel mockery to these millions and spelled the far right's electoral undoing five years ago. The tycoons won't shed any tears if a similar fate overtakes the far right's opponents in 2014.

P.S.

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