

May 27 2014

BJP Victory: Leadership Cult or Institutional Change?

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The BJP's [resounding victory in the 2014 elections](#) is undoubtedly the start of a new era in Indian politics. It will reverberate regionally within South Asia, as well as globally with international investors and governments keen to enter the Indian market. In retrospect we might see the Congress victories of 2004 and 2009, significant as they were, as merely an aberration in the longer march of the BJP since the 1980s. Rising from the margins with a base among traders and small business, the BJP with its superior organizational skills and energetic cadre gradually extended the party's reach not only among the urban middle classes but to farmers, tribal communities, and sections of the working poor. Its mantra has always been anti-corruption, but the particularly strident pro-business and Hindu nationalist combination has had massive

appeal in the country's majority Hindu population, and is unlikely to fade in the near future. Even a section of Muslim voters, not least in the [state of Gujarat where a pogrom in 2002](#) killed nearly 2,000 people^[1], have expressed a willingness to vote for the BJP. With others the pogrom barely registered as a concern. The BJP has steadily and astutely adjusted its Hindu nationalist appeal to fall in line with a global market orientation, modernizing its image, and trumping the Congress as a party of youth, aspiration and forward thinking. Although analysts have rushed to draw comparisons between Narendra Modi and Obama, Lee Kuan Yew or Thatcher, a better comparison may well be [Tayyip Recep Erdogan](#) of Turkey whose Islamist neoliberalism has resonated with the lower middle classes in urban and rural areas. Indeed, among the bitter ironies the Congress Party will be contemplating in the lonely days ahead is that the party that initiated market reforms in 1991 is now seen as having failed the markets. The party leadership has been overall pro-business, although sections of the party under Sonia Gandhi supported 'social democratic' policies such as rural employment guarantees, free school meals, health care and education for the poor. It is a second bitter irony, then, that these well-intended reforms should have brought the party little success. The 2014 election is indeed the worst ever defeat for the Congress Party, and may well beckon the end of the Gandhi dynasty. The mix of frustration, rage, and growing aspiration among its largely youthful population, where unemployment stands at record high, has propelled a somewhat anticipated anti-incumbent spirit into a powerful message to India's leaders.

This heady mix could produce a dangerous and volatile polity when reality confronts inflated promise. As the Head of Emerging Markets for Morgan Stanley argues, the performance of the Indian economy has been closely tied to the global economy rather than to which party is in power^[2]. In other words it makes little difference to the economy whether Congress or BJP rule. The real question we should be asking is what kind of party can harness a developmentalist momentum similar to Korea or Taiwan, prioritizing a medium and long term policy horizon rather than merely immediate political interests. Although many economists and media experts have counter-posed market growth to social development, in reality the experiences of Korea and Taiwan suggest that massive investments in education, health, and relative equality of rural assets (land reforms) are vital underpinnings for a high growth economy. At present neither has Modi's state government in Gujarat, nor have the two Congress national governments (2004 and 2009) succeeded in arresting the pitiful condition of education, health, land inequality, environmental degradation, and gender inequalities that plague India. Although Gujarat boasts superior infrastructure, ease of doing business and a hospitable environment for investment compared with the national average, it is hardly unique. States such as Tamil Nadu, for instance, easily match this record; moreover, Tamil Nadu has a strong pro-welfare public policy regime which has eluded successive governments in Gujarat. Health indicators for women and children in Gujarat, for instance, are incredibly poor – 44.6% of children below the age of five suffer from malnutrition, while nearly 70% of children suffer from anaemia^[3]. To create a judicious and mutually reinforcing relationship between growth and development (one that raises the overall levels of freedoms and capabilities as the economist Amartya Sen argued), requires a deeper level of institutional change than a mere change of party. There are many mechanisms and laws, most significantly the Right to Information Act (2005) which empowers ordinary citizens to hold officials accountable for implementing the range of programs that exist on the books. This requires an active and procedurally just functioning of democracy.

The future seems wide open, not unlike at the moment of Obama's victory. But some directions seem more likely than others, based on the BJP's former tenures in power at the national level (1999-2004) and state level. First, undoubtedly its majority in parliament will give the BJP a mandate to proceed with market reforms at full steam. Among these will be the much anticipated labour reforms – India's labour laws are likely to be liberalized further, but to do so will mean confronting the large public sector unions who have successfully opposed major labour reforms until now. Given his close corporate links, Modi is unlikely to

challenge the 'race to the bottom' model of global capitalism – Gujarat is the archetypal model of low-wage, informal sector driven growth where industrial and agricultural workers have few rights, and union representation and advocacy is among the lowest in the country. Second, less controversially, much needed investments in infrastructure such as power, transport, railways will be prioritized and bottlenecks removed. This will be a major boost for international investors, and is likely to create jobs in some areas. Whether the quality and quantity of jobs will be enough to satisfy young voters is impossible to predict; the cost of failure, however, is potentially tremendous. Third, beyond the economy this decisive victory will undoubtedly embolden the BJP's voluntary and activist arm. With a history of extreme intolerance, they are likely assert a Hindu cultural agenda in education^[4], and attempt the police venues of artistic expression, as the recent controversy and withdrawal of Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus* suggests. Fourth, Modi is likely to take a firm stance on internal and national security; among other issues including terrorism, he is likely strengthen his predecessor's tough approach to the Maoist guerrilla warfare raging in parts of eastern and southern India with major implications for the security and livelihoods of poor tribal communities in these regions. Finally, the election campaign with the rise of social media, holograms and other means of dissemination suggests that we are seeing the start of a new politics of personality cult which will change how democracy and dissent are accommodated in India. There is much to anticipate, and perhaps much more to be concerned about.

[1] Jaffrelot, Christophe (July 2003). "Communal Riots in Gujarat: The State at Risk?" Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics: 16.

[2] <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/edit-page/Indias-unreal-election-debate/articleshow/33192451.cms?>

[3] http://www.iamrindia.gov.in/ihdr_book.pdf

[4] <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/newdelhi/history-books-might-change-again-bjp/article1-1081239.aspx>

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