

No clear winner in Indian elections

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Suffering a staggering electoral reversal in the northern and central parts of India, the ruling Congress-I party has lost its absolute majority in the Parliament. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who led the party to the hustings, and his cabinet ministers have resigned. In a brief nationwide broadcast Nov. 29 Gandhi, reelected as the party president, announced that the Congress-I, still by far the largest single party in the Lok Sabha, will not form the government but will provide “constructive cooperation” to the new government.

At this writing a tortuous process of forming a coalition government with parties of disparate if not conflicting ideologies is in process in New Delhi. This predicament is the result of the complex and unprecedented dynamics underlying the election. The vote was neither simply a rejection of the ruling Congress-I nor a positive endorsement of an alternative; it was a sweeping mandate against “business-as-usual” politics—whether from the Congress-I or the opposition. Thus, for now there are many ponderables: Will there be a stable government? How long will it last? What then? Will the Congress-I be reformed? Will a coherent opposition formation emerge?

One thing is certain: India is at a branching point. The crisis at hand may well be the prelude to a period of instability. But should political leaders, both known and yet to emerge, rise to the occasion with an adequate program for India’s future to rally the population’s trust, this crisis could prove a catalyst to qualitative steps in India’s nation-building effort.

Method in the madness

Several years ago, a keen observer of the Indian political scene pointed out that the Indian electorate, increasingly blinded by anger and frustration, had begun to act like a mad bull elephant, heaving itself this way and that, smashing things. The ninth Lok Sabha election on Nov. 22, 24, and 26 was violent, with a death toll of more than 100, including a number of prominent politicians. And if the Congress-I’s rout in the northern states was dramatic, the beating the opposition took in its southern bastions was no less so. Indeed, though this election is not comparable to any of the

previous ones, there is no doubt that the mad elephant was around again this time.

All across India, except for West Bengal and Maharashtra and some sparsely populated states, the electorate voted in unison to throw out the party in power. In the south, where regional parties led by the stars of the opposition ruled the states, the disillusionment of the electorate with the ruling parties is well nigh complete, and the Congress-I, considered by many poll pundits as a second-level force in the south, swept the polls, leaving less than a handful of crumbs for others to collect.

In the central plains, which include Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan, where the Congress-I had won 87 out of possible 92 seats in 1984, the party received a crushing blow, winning only 14 seats. In the large northern belt, stretching from the hills of Kashmir to the Burma borders and through which flow the three mighty rivers—Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra—the Congress-I could muster only 39 seats, a paltry sum compared to the 202 seats that they had won in 1984.

The massive reversal in the central and northern areas, despite a total sweep in the south and a respectable showing in the west, has denied the Congress-I an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. In all, the Congress-I ended up securing 191 seats, with less than a dozen results to be announced in the 525-member Lok Sabha. That is 72 short of an absolute majority, and represents a net loss of more than 200 of the seats the party had won in 1984.

Election surprises

The Congress-I’s losses have been the gains of disparate forces. The single largest gainer is the Hindu fundamentalist-dominated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has won 88 seats as opposed to the measly two it won in 1984. Riding the tiger unleashed by the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute and violent communal riots that broke out in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, the BJP cashed in with the one-item agenda in its manifesto: no special privileges to the Muslim minority because India is the land of the Hindus. Calling for establishment of a “Hindu Rashtra” (a state ruled according to the Hindu code of ethics) in order to dispense equality and justice to the people, the BJP came romping home in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar.

The other major beneficiary is the Janata Dal (JD)—a merger of the old Janata Party and Lok Dal. Contesting for 238 seats, the JD came out the second largest party with about 140 seats. It did particularly well in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The Communists, the fourth largest bloc, on the other hand, could not improve upon their earlier performance and again secured about 48 seats. Although the Communist Party of India (Marxist) did exceptionally well in West Bengal, the state it has ruled for more than 10 years, the party turned into a rump in its old hunting

ground in Kerala where they could wrest only 3 (out of 20) seats from the Congress-I.

This election has also thrown up other surprises. In Punjab, for example, the Akali faction led by Simranjit Singh Mann (who led his party from jail, where he has been held for the last five years for allegedly masterminding the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) won six of 13 seats elected from strife-torn Punjab. Mann's success and the corollary failure of established Akali leaders such as Pradash Singh Badal, S.S. Barnala, G.S. Tohra, and J.S. Talwandi is considered significant for Punjab in the coming days.

Another key development is the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party of the lowest castes and minorities. Led by Kanshi Ram, a retired scientist belonging to the Defense Research Division, the BSP won seats in both Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. It is evident that the BSP has dipped into the traditional Congress-I vote-bank and gained plenty. Besides these, there emerged a number of new trends which may affect future elections.

What went wrong with the Congress-I?

Janata Dal leaders, in particular, are spreading the misinformation that the Congress-I lost because of the "tarnished image" of Rajiv Gandhi. However, this fails to explain why the south, which had voted less favorably for the Congress-I in 1984 when Rajiv Gandhi's image was the brightest, this year voted en bloc to give a sweeping mandate to the Rajiv Gandhi government. What actually happened is a combination of factors in which the corruption scandals that have dogged Rajiv Gandhi in the past two years have added a further negative impact.

In the south, the mandate the Congress-I received is because of the failures, mismanagement of finance, and corruption at every level of the ruling parties. In Tamil Nadu, the regional ruling party, the DMK, had come to power only 10 months ago with a decisive victory over its nearest rival, but the people saw things go from bad to worse. In Andhra Pradesh, the corrupt and oppressive rule of the Telegu Desam party wiped the party off the Lok Sabha map, as well as out of the state assembly for which elections were simultaneously held. In Karnataka the "rising star" of the Janata Dal, Ramakrishna Hegde, had to face substantive corruption charges and a clear split within his party. The result was a disaster in both the Lok Sabha and state assembly elections. Similarly in Kerala, where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has promised a clean and good administration for years, the ruling party's image is no better than its counterparts in the neighboring states.

The 'Hindi belt'

In the northern and central belts, however, there are additional factors at play. Firstly, the equations for choosing candidates which the Congress-I had assiduously applied this time failed to bring any result. All caste calculations were

upset by the torrent of negative votes. Secondly, the Congress-I leader, Rajiv Gandhi, because of the security situation and due to his inner coterie's lack of political acumen, became isolated from the population. This destroyed the positive impact from the electorate that every other member of Jawaharlal Nehru's family had enjoyed. Also, although a hard worker, Rajiv Gandhi is not a particularly inspiring campaigner. His lack of emotion and distant air helped the opposition smear Rajiv Gandhi with charges of corruption which are yet to be proven.

The Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid issue has acted as a double-edged sword, cutting the Congress-I to pieces. The BJP succeeded in convincing many Hindus that it is the Congress-I which is preventing the building of the Ram Janambhoomi temple. At the same time, the JD campaign was to convince the Muslims that the Ram Janambhoomi issue was a product of Congress-I machinations to force the Muslims to stay in its fold. Hindus who might otherwise have voted Congress were pulled away, and the Congress-I was caught in the middle, unable to establish a clear position as the communal polarization ran its course. According to reports, Muslims deserted the Congress en masse.

But underlying these factors is the rising anger of the voters against an increasingly difficult economic situation that was further exacerbated by sharp price rises in September and October. The Rajiv Gandhi administration has pointed out that the economy has performed well during the last five years. Raw figures indicating a steady growth in industrial production, rise in the GNP growth rate, and India's significant success on the export front are there to prove the point. But the fact remains that where the voters have rejected the Congress-I, is in the main food-grain belt of the country, where 70% of the people are involved with farming. While poverty is a stark reality in this farm belt, a class of rich farmers has emerged who do not like the Congress-I's support for the poor and minorities, while the lid is kept on foodgrain prices. More importantly, though industrial development in these areas has increased employment, it is still a drop in the bucket compared to the numbers of rural poor attached to the land. Not greatly impressed with industrial development anyway, the farmers are also jealous of the higher wages paid to industrial workers. This massive vote-bank considered the Congress-I under Rajiv Gandhi a party that supports industrial development and draws money away from the rural sector. Despite moves by the previous administration to channel some money into rural areas, the impact of the various programs remained minimal.

A minority government with the support of a few other parties will be formed. As it stands now, the JD will be the party to form the government, possibly with support from the BJP and the Communists. The seat calculations indicate that such a coalition will have a majority of about 15-20 in the Lok Sabha. It is also evident that this government-forming will not be smooth sailing.