Results of Elections in Two Indian States

On Sunday, 21 October of this year, Legislative Assembly elections were held in the two Indian states of Maharashtra and Haryana. State Legislative Assemblies are the 2nd most important lawmaking bodies in the country (after the Parliament).

The recent elections played a significant role on the internal political climate in the Republic of India, which is the 2nd most populous country in the world. This year, India will surpass its former colonial ruler to take 5th place in the global rankings based on nominal gross domestic product (currently, the nation’s GDP is approximately $2.7 billion without taking into account Purchasing Power Parity, PPP).

The combination of the aforementioned and other factors (as for example, India’s powerful military, which is currently being modernized, and its fast progress towards the establishment of a nuclear triad) help determine the present standing of this nation, i.e. as one of the leading players in the current phase of the global “Big Game”.

In turn, this state of affairs unavoidably adds a foreign policy element to any somewhat significant developments (seemingly, purely internal in nature) taking place in a country such as India. And it is not the only nation that finds itself in this position. We could use the situation the current world power finds itself in as a telling example. Various
clans, which are part of the U.S. establishment, have wreaked such havoc within the nation that it is sending chills down the spines of not only U.S. allies but its geopolitical opponents as well.

And let us continue with our philosophical musings a little while longer. The division of any state’s political strategy (i.e. its plan to govern itself in a space with both internal and external factors in order to reach a pre-determined aim) into two aforementioned paths is only justified when one needs to focus on a concrete pressing issue.

But now it is time we return to the topic at hand (summarized by the title of this article). And in order to explore it fully, we will need to briefly remind ourselves about India’s modern history, and the overall structure of this nation’s government and its mechanics.

If we use easily accessible resources to find out this information (as for example), they say that, today, India is a federal democratic republic with a parliamentary system of government and a complex structure (from ethnic, religious, historical, economic and other perspectives). And real power is essentially concentrated in the hands of the Legislature of the Union.

Hence, the crucial question is “What political force (determined as a result of general elections held every 5 years) controls the House of the People (Lok Sabha)?”. After all, it is the leading party that the President then tasks with forming a government.

There are many political parties in the Republic of India, but the influence of most of them is limited to one out of the current 28 (now that Article 370 of the Constitution was, de facto, revoked) states in the nation. How important (often quite noticeably) they are at the “federal” level is determined during the general election, when the national parties (their total is less than 10) almost always enlist the help of regional ones.

From the time the country gained its independence (in 1947) until 2014, the oldest party in the nation (the Indian National Congress, INC) in coalition with a number of other center-left parties remained at the helm (with the exception of the period from 1999 to 2004). The INC was responsible for creating the secular image of independent India. Undoubtedly, it was aided in this regard by its close cooperation with the USSR during the Cold War.

The rapid ascent to the de facto peak of political power in the 1990s of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is comprised of several right-wing radical movements (some of which had begun during the British Raj and had been banned on more than one occasion even then), ensured that, along with its allies, it gained the majority in Parliament as far back as 1998 during the regular general elections.

However, from 2004 to 2014, the power was once again in the hands of the INC and its coalition. Still, its crushing defeat in spring 2014 was inevitable. It stemmed from a combination of factors, such as INC’s errors in governing the nation; the absence of “fresh blood” among the party leadership (which had been dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi clan), and the appearance of the charismatic Narendra Modi, with his undeniable economic successes in the state of Gujarat under his belt, at the helm of the BJP.

The undisputable power the BJP gained as a results of the 2014 general election was confirmed by subsequent less significant elections, with a few exceptions that we will discuss later on in the article.

Please note the fact that Legislative Assembly elections in each state are spread out over a period of time, and that one third of the members of the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) retire every second year allows one to monitor the changes in voting preferences of the Indian electorate. And right up until the second half of last year, it had looked as if the oldest party in the nation was on its way out and some other organization would need to replace it to represent the secular and center-left interests of the Indian population.

However, at the end of 2018, during Legislative Assembly elections in three out of five states, the INC emerged victorious. Rahul Gandhi had become the head of the party a year earlier. He is the grandson of Indira Ghandi, who was the Prime Minister of India from 1966 until her assassination in 1984 (with a short break in-between). It appeared as if the INC was experiencing a rebirth. And some of BJP’s “well-wishers” began to forecast that the ruling party would lose during the general election scheduled for the spring of 2019.

However, for a number of reasons, discussed earlier in the New Eastern Outlook, INC’s performance was even worse in 2019 than in 2014. And after Rahul Gandhi had left his post as the head of the party, its leadership seemed completely demoralized and during the election campaigns in the states of Maharashtra and Haryana, only the former INC leader was in the public eye.
The outcomes of the most recent elections were thus that much more surprising, as the BJP, along with the far right-wing Shiv Sena party, sustained considerable losses in them. And the INC and its allies gained a noticeable number of seats vacated by the aforementioned losers in the state legislative assemblies.

For obvious reasons the results of the most recent elections became the focus of reports by Indian media outlets. First of all, they needed to analyze the reasons behind these latest developments. And secondly, news outlets had to address the question “Was the rebirth of the secular and center-left movement possible in the country?”.

The reasons behind the voting decisions in the most recent elections are complex and contradictory in nature. The nation’s slowdown in economic growth, which became more apparent in recent months, had an effect on the aforementioned outcome. The current state of affairs in the agricultural sector is especially worrying. As a result, the BJP sustained its biggest losses in villages.

We also cannot exclude the possibility that the results stemmed from a secret protest by some citizens who fear (both internal and external) consequences for the nation of the abrogation of the special status granted to the now former state of Jammu and Kashmir, after the general elections in spring.

Most Indian media outlets tend to agree that the INC was not really responsible for its success in the elections held in Maharashtra and Haryana. Still, the general consensus is that the aforementioned results offer a window of opportunities for the party. Whether or not the INC will be able to take advantage of them will completely depend on the party’s ability to consolidate its leadership and to cooperate with its political allies in a more effective manner.

Finally, it is important to note that the nature of India’s interactions with other leading nations is, by and large, determined by the transformation of the global political landscape in the last 30 years rather than the affiliation of India’s leadership with any given party.

As for the state of affairs on a more regional level, including the relationship between India and Pakistan (backed by the PRC), both the BJP and the INC are found wanting.

And this is one of the reasons why it is worth continuing to cover the changing preferences of the Indian electorate, comprising 1.3 billion potential voters.

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