India’s Ruling Bharatiya Janata Party Strengthens its Positions

The beginning of March in India marked the end of almost a month of continuous voting, including Parliamentary by-elections in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa.

In terms of population, these states rank 1st, 15th, 18th, 24th and 26th respectively out of India’s 28 states and 8 union territories (including the capital city). Uttar Pradesh is home to some 250 million people, while Manipur has a population of less than 3 million. It might be assumed that above ranking would also reflect the relative significance of the election results for modern India, which is, after all, a major world power.

But putting the states in order of their population is far too superficial an approach, since it fails to take into account the highly complex nature of India’s domestic politics and foreign policy. The situation is in some ways reminiscent of Russia in the 1990s, when events in the relatively sparsely populated region of the Northern Caucasus threatened the very survival of the Russian state.

It should be remembered, as noted in previous articles, that modern India is in many ways the successor state to the
British Raj, a colony that was formed by welding together more than six hundred formerly independent and frequently warring territories. The deep divisions (linguistic, cultural and religious) both between and within states have persisted to the present day. It is also important not to overlook the differences between individual regions in terms of geography, economic development, and internal politics. The above factors contribute to a range of problems that affect the functioning of the state as a whole.

One noteworthy feature of India's colonial heritage is the continuing status - enshrined in the Constitution - of English as a second state language (subordinate to Hindi). It retains its status despite the forecasts made during the first years after India gained independence (in 1947), and a number of rather half-hearted attempts to gradually replace English as the language used for official records and for communications between different ethnic groups. The proposals to promote Hindi as a universal national language, a policy supported by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, have met with significant resistance. That resistance, as NEO has noted in the past, is a reflection of certain deeply-rooted historical problems.

Despite the political pressures, the use of English in Indian society is becoming more widespread year by year. It should also be borne in mind that the basic features of India’s political system (including the federal structure, and the Parliamentary system modeled on Westminster) are largely inherited from the country’s former colonial master.

The main subject of this article is closely linked to the issues mentioned in the above brief discussion of the origins of modern India. Here, it will be necessary to focus on events in the small state of Manipur, mentioned above, which is one of the “Seven Sisters” - a group of small states on the country’s northeastern border. Since their foundation, these seven states have been connected to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor of land, at its narrowest point not exceeding 50 kilometers. The Siliguri Corridor is often referred to as the “chicken neck” - a reference to the area’s vulnerability should a conflict arise between India and its powerful neighbor China.

Manipur shares a border with Myanmar, a country which has suffered from political turbulence of various kinds for decades. Myanmar continues to supply illegal drugs to global markets - with all the “costs” that such a trade inevitably entails, and one of the main routes is through Manipur.

Manipur itself has an active separatist movement, and suffers from periodic outbreaks of armed conflict. For example in November last year one such incident claimed the lives of seven people.

Naturally, Manipur is far from the only state that presents a threat to peace and public order in India. It is just that the problems in other states tend to be different. Take the Punjab, for example. This state, home to the majority of India’s Sikhs, has a population ten times that of Manipur, and has caused trouble to successive administrations since way back in the colonial period. Most recently, the Punjab and other neighboring states formed the epicenter of the protests against the reform of the agricultural sector.

At the peak of the movement, it was noted that the protestors included Sikhs farmers. Thus it appears that the protests in the Punjab encompassed two apparently quite separate grievances against the national government - although the relation between these two factors is not entirely clear. In the end the popular pressure forced the central government and the BJP to backtrack and repeal the new laws, even though they were already in effect.

Although it has a population of just 10 million, the state of Uttarakhand plays an important role in the BJP’s overall policy of boosting the role played by Hinduism and Hindutva (the pro-Hindu social and cultural movement promoted by the BJP) in the lives of the majority of India’s citizens. In recent years that policy has taken a particularly extreme form in Uttarakhand, and specifically Haridwar, which is one of the seven holy cities in Hinduism. That has been greeted with concern, both within the BJP and in India as a whole.

The only thing that can protect a country like India from separatist tendencies, whatever their form, is the existence of a political force which is respected by the majority of the population and is able to absorb these tendencies before they get out of hand. Overall, it is clear from the elections results that, eight years after it first came to power in 2014, the BJP continues to enjoy that kind of respect. That was demonstrated by its victory in the 2019 general election. At present it seems entirely possible that it will be able to repeat its success in the next general election at the beginning of 2024. Although it is possible that it may not win by the impressive margins that marked its victories in the 2014 and 2019 elections.

In this year’s state elections the BJP won in four of the five states - the exception was the Punjab, although Prime Minister Narendra Modi had specifically focused on that state during the pre-election campaign. In the Punjab the winner was the Aam Aadmi Party (or Common Man Party), which was founded in 2012 by Arvind Kejriwal, the
This journal has previously discussed the emergence of the AAP on the Indian political stage, and the appeal of its charismatic leader. That article did not discount the possibility that the AAP might in the future become a national political force. And now that prediction is looking a little more likely. Especially since the AAP is expected to win in the second round of voting in a number of other states.

The unquestioned success of the BJP and the impressive gains made by the AAP have served to highlight another process that has been under way for a number of years - the decline of the Indian National Congress, the nation's oldest political party, which played such an important role in India's independence movement. The recent elections have added to the Congress Party's string of defeats. As the Indian Express put it in a recent editorial, "the Congress is inexorably becoming a paler and more shrunken shadow of itself."

Another interesting result of this year's elections was the strong performance of a "local" party in Goa: the Goa Forward Party - an alliance between the INC and the AAP - came in second place after the BJP, despite never having done well in previous elections. This result, and the successes of "local" parties in other states, makes it clear that a certain "separatist" tendency needs to be counted among the various political trends present in modern India.

In view of the above, it is probably no exaggeration to claim that the BJP is, at least in the eyes of most Indians, the only political force that is capable of reining in the destructive tendencies that threaten the very existence of the country in its present form. As the Indian Express puts it in the editorial quoted above: the BJP can satisfy the demand for a "more self-conscious nationalism and harder national security."

But it is still too soon to claim that India has now succeeded in creating a fully national (or, to the Soviet terminology, "guiding and directing") political force. After all, as has been said above, Indian society is still strikingly diverse.

This autumn will see another test for India - and especially for the BJP: elections in a number of other states, in which the ruling party will find itself as hard pressed as it was in the Punjab.

The results of these elections will provide a clearer picture of the trends the Indian society is facing today.

Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
