



# State elections foretell a power shift at India's centre

BY PRASENJIT MAITI

**More** than ever before, one-party India is a thing of the past, and the balance of power is shifting.

There were elections to five state assemblies this past May. The Indian press described them as a mini general election, a prognosis of the relative health of India's federal political parties and ad-hoc alliances.

In particular, observers looked to these state elections for indications of a change in support for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance at New Delhi. The BJP has been in power at the center since 1999 on a platform of Hindu nationalism and right-of-center politics.

Looking to state elections for indications of federal shifts is not surprising given the increasing interaction—though often convoluted—between state politics and the distribution of power at the center. India has clearly emerged from the time when one establishment party controlled the center unchallenged. Federal parties have to build coalitions to maintain power, and these coalition partners are often the federal manifestations of local or sectarian interests.

## **The BJP loses support**

The state elections took place in May 2001, in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Pondicherry. The Congress Party (once the dominant party of India which has faced substantial setbacks since its electoral defeat in 1996) gained significant ground in these polls while the BJP faced substantial losses.

The Congress Party captured Assam, in India's northeast, from the Asom Gana Parishad, emerging as the single largest party in the 126-member strong state assembly.

In West Bengal, the Congress formed an alliance with its breakaway faction, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress. The Congress performed even better than the Trinamul Congress in terms of percentage of seats it won relative to the total number of seats it contested.

However, the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), returned to power in West Bengal for the sixth time since 1977. The Communists alone, excluding their coalition partners, won 143 out of the total 294 assembly seats.

The BJP could not manage to win a single seat in West Bengal despite its traditional presence in the outlying districts bordering with Bangladesh and in former Hindu refugee settlements.

The Congress-led United Democratic Front recaptured power in Kerala, in India's south, defeating the Communist-led Left and the Democratic Front. The Congress alone captured 62 seats while the UDF coalition won 99 out of the total 140 assembly seats.

In Pondicherry, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) joined forces with the Communists and the Congress-Tamil Manila Congress coalition to win. The BJP managed to win only one out of the total 30 seats in the Pondicherry assembly, while the Congress-TMC alliance captured 13 seats.

The AIADMK coalition (aligned with the Congress) also swept the polls in Tamil Nadu, in India's south, defeating a coalition allied with the BJP. The AIADMK, despite several corruption-related indictments against its leader, managed to capture 132 seats, and its coalition now controls 194 out of the 234 seats in the state assembly.

## **Building and burning bridges**

These state elections have indicated certain emergent trends in the Indian party system which are likely to inform the country's federal politics in the near future.

The Congress Party, out of power since 1996, is steadily reconsolidating itself in the states with the help of regional allies. It is a kind of Return-of-the-Prodigal-Son syndrome. This national party is engaged in building bridges with once dissident but powerful factions such as the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal and the Tamil Manila Congress in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.

The Congress Party has also aligned itself with dominant regional satraps such as Jayaram Jayalalitha of AIADMK who have often called the shots even in New Delhi in the recent past. Her withdrawal of support from Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP coalition government in 1999 is a case in point.

In contrast, the BJP is quickly losing friends in its effort to cultivate new alliances. It has lost the critical support of Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal (although responsibility for this split cannot be exclusively ascribed to the BJP). Assam is another example where the BJP blundered in choosing its electoral ally.

State-level leaders of the BJP have also occasionally made the party suffer by falling out with key allies. One such error of judgement even resulted in the ruling Left Front's single-seat margin defeat of the BJP and TMC in last year's municipal election in Salt Lake City, which neighbours Calcutta.

The BJP has never been quite comfortable with the idea of federal coalition building and power-sharing with regional parties. This is partly due to its

hierarchical and cadre-based organizational structure. It could also be explained by its political agenda of exclusion rather than accommodation of India's multicultural and plural identities.

This reluctance to form coalitions can be deadly to a party looking to gain power in this most diverse of countries. We have to remember that ex-Indian Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh, whose government was supported both by the "right fundamentalist" BJP and the "left progressive" Communists back in 1989, had once declared: "India is itself a coalition."

It appears that some members of the BJP have recognized this fact. As Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani of the BJP once put it:

"As a broad policy, it should be our endeavour to develop the right coalition chemistry with our allies by constantly enlarging the area of common interests, and shrinking—or at any rate inactivating—the area of differences."

But it's not clear that the federal BJP will be able to adapt to the "New India" and recover from the damage it suffered at the state level. If these elections are indeed an indication of future developments, there may well be a reemergence of a coalition-savvy Congress party on the federal stage in the near future.

\*\*\*

All prognostication aside, it is evident that India's federal polity has undergone a transition from the one party dominant system of rule toward what has been described as the "polarized pluralism" of successive coalition governments, made possible by situation-specific and short-term alliances between regional and mainstream parties—both at the center and at the state level.

What is uncertain is how these ad-hoc arrangements will affect the fabric of India as a whole.

Federal bargains and power sharing have elicited popular frustration with regional parties. Many in India believe these parties have narrow agendas that could drive sectarian wedges into the seams holding India together. ☉

## *Regional Parties in India*

Regional parties first began influencing India's federal politics during and after the country's Fourth General Election in 1967—an event that is widely thought to be the major watershed of Indian politics.

The Congress Party's exclusive control was severely challenged, and the party's "deinstitutionalization" began soon after its unprecedented electoral setback. In that election, the Congress Party's majority was reduced from 361 to 284 seats in the House of the People, the lower house of parliament.

The Congress even lost its majority in the lower house in 1969. However, the minority government of Indira Gandhi (daughter of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, of the Congress) managed to continue in power with the support of the Communists and regional parties such as the Akali Dal from Punjab and the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham from Tamil Nadu.

Before 1967, the Congress managed to win 70 percent or more of the seats in the House of the People while polling less than 50 percent of the popular vote. This was due to India's first-past-the-post electoral system.

The next largest party in Parliament was the Communist Party of India with a presence that ranged from 16 to 29 seats. The Jana Sangh (forerunner of the BJP) was even weaker, with 3 to 14 seats.

Even then, however, the Congress could not dominate the state legislative assemblies. This was repeatedly the case in the Patiala and

East Punjab States Union (merged with Punjab in 1956), in North India and Madras (present-day Tamil Nadu), and in Andhra Pradesh in South India.

The Communists had already formed the first ever non-Congress government in Kerala as early as 1957. And the Congress increasingly had to rely on coalitions with regional political parties such as the Jharkhand Party or Ganatantra Parishad in Orissa.

In the early 1960s the Congress lost heavily in the state assemblies of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Kerala, Madras (South India) and Punjab.

Some regional opposition parties had started entering into federal electoral alliances with one another against the Congress. This had the effect of consolidating the anti-Congress vote.

This further encouraged splits within the Congress and defections in the country's legislatures. However, the various coalitional state governments that came to power in 1967 were mostly unstable power arrangements. They suffered from what was described in the press as a convenient, short-term "ideological promiscuity" that was exclusively aimed at unseating the Congress rather than designing any coherent political alternative.

Such a shift in the arrangements of the party system in India has informed the country's present-day politics, characterized by Goliaths like the Congress or BJP aligning with Davids at both the central and regional levels to win elections and successfully run coalition governments.