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Asia Summary

India in Transition: The 2014 Election in Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

This document is a summary of Professor Sumantra Bose's presentation on India's 2014 national elections delivered on 16 October 2013 at Chatham House. The event was chaired by Dr Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow with the Asia Programme.

In his presentation, Professor Bose examined India's electoral landscape and provided a capsule projection for the 2014 elections. He elaborated on the justifications for his expectations, and discussed the decline of India's two largest parties and its implications for India's politics and democracy.

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INDIA'S 2014 ELECTIONS

Dr Gareth Price opened the discussion by welcoming Professor Sumantra Bose to Chatham House. He noted the significance of the forthcoming Indian elections of April-May 2014 for the country's political future.

Professor Bose began by describing the state of India's political landscape as extremely fluid and uncertain. He continued by noting that the 2014 elections will be a critical juncture in deciding the country's future, and that one-fifth of the electorate will be first-time voters.

Professor Bose provided a capsule political prediction of the election's outcome, in which he expected the two largest political parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to together gain significantly less than half of the 543 seats of the next Lok Sabha (House of the People) – many fewer than in the current Lok Sabha. Specifically, he stated that the INC can realistically hope for a maximum of 100 seats. In forecasting the BJP's prospects, he expected it to win no more than around a quarter of the 543 seats despite the hype surrounding its recently named prime ministerial candidate. Even so, the BJP will still be the single largest party with approximately 140 seats, though Professor Bose noted that this figure has the potential to fluctuate.

Elaborating further, Professor Bose pointed out that bipolar BJP-INC politics exist in only seven of the 28 states of India. These, he explained, are small (four states) or mid-sized (three states), accounting for only 101 seats, less than one-fifth of the Lok Sabha.

With regard to Delhi, the national capital region, which has a long-standing bipolar electoral landscape, Professor Bose explained that even there the

bipolar electoral tradition is under threat, with the recent emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) making it a triangular contest. Professor Bose noted that the AAP, which was created partly as a result of an urban citizens' movement against high-level corruption, is emerging as a significant force in Delhi.

The decline of India's largest political parties, particularly the INC, needs to be examined against a historical backdrop. Since the first Lok Sabha was elected in 1952, the INC dominated and ruled almost without interruption at the 'Centre' (New Delhi) and in the vast majority of the states. Even as recently as 25 years ago, the INC was still the dominant party nationwide, with a three-quarters majority in the Lok Sabha. At that point, the BJP was still a small party with only two seats in the Lok Sabha. Regional parties, based in specific states, were growing but were still the exception rather than the norm. The November 1989 election to the 9th Lok Sabha, Professor Bose argued, was a watershed for Indian politics, signalling the 'permanent eclipse' of the INC's hegemony and the meteoric rise of the BJP. Yet by the mid-1990s, the BJP's advance had stalled.

Professor Bose suggested that the stagnation of the BJP was fundamentally due to the unsustainability in Indian conditions of the party's ideological construct. He explained that the BJP's strategy has been based on the illusion of backing from the country's 80 per cent Hindu majority. However, he explained, this notional majority was far too divided along numerous fault-lines of caste, ethnicity, language, region, political choice and ideology to materialize in practice. Political unrest in 1990 over Prime Minister V.P. Singh's decision to implement recommendations on reservations for 'other backward classes' (OBCs) sharply emphasized one such fault-line. Meanwhile, the INC has more or less continuously declined over the last two decades, with the exception of the 2009 Lok Sabha election, which Professor Bose characterized as an aberration or 'blip'.

In explaining this long-term trend, Professor Bose argued that the era of catch-all politics, whether represented by the INC or by the BJP's alternative variant, has been left behind by the evolution of India's democracy. Instead, Indian politics has become progressively dominated since the 1990s by regionalization – the rise of powerful regional parties and leaders in many states.

The Indian electoral landscape has been transformed to the point where the regional parties put together will win the majority of the seats in the 16th Lok Sabha that will be elected in April-May 2014. Elaborating, Professor Bose

highlighted the six most populous states – Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the north, Maharashtra in the west, West Bengal in the east, and Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in the south – where well over half of the country's population resides and together elect 291 of the 543 Lok Sabha parliamentarians. The INC retains a sizable popular base in only one of these six states (Maharashtra). Professor Bose explained that the BJP too is no nationwide party as it is weak in almost all of southern and eastern India, and it faces significant challengers in the states of northern and western India.

On Narendra Modi, the strongman of the mid-sized state of Gujarat in western India and the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP and the centre-right National Democratic Alliance (NDA), Professor Bose argued that despite his appeal to many young, urban and middle-class voters disillusioned with the INC-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, it is unlikely that he will emerge as a truly national leader. Professor Bose explained that this is partly because of Modi's own limitations, but fundamentally because India's politics no longer accommodates a single national leader such as Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1950s or Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, due to the regionalization of the political landscape.

To conclude, Professor Bose reiterated the diverse and fractured nature of India's politics. He emphasized that the key post-2014 challenge will be to make federalism work, at the centre in New Delhi and in relations between that federalized centre and the states.

Gareth Price thanked Professor Bose for his presentation and then opened up the floor to questions.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

On the question of whether a 'Third Front' of regional parties is feasible and, if so, who would be its key actor, Professor Bose reiterated that India's real challenge is not to find a national saviour, but rather to make federalism work at the centre and in centre-state relations. He explained that the long-standing constitutional framework embodies a hybrid of federal and unitary features – a result of legitimate concerns about national unity in the immediate aftermath of India's independence – and is unable to fully cope with the bottom-up dynamic of federalization driven by the regionalization of the polity. But this has now become India's political reality. Professor Bose insisted that a fully federal structure is both inevitable and in India's interest.

Speaking on the Third Front prospect, Professor Bose explained that it is difficult, though not impossible, for some of the big regional players to cooperate as alliance partners at the centre because they are at odds in their states. In addition, a definition of the Third Front as 'neither Congress nor BJP' is essentially a negative one, and a viable Third Front would need to be anchored in more substantive ideas and programmes.

On the question of a future BJP-led NDA and its prospects for leading India, Professor Bose believed that an 'NDA plus' government (NDA plus post-poll regional allies, with a working parliamentary majority) had been a distinct possibility before Modi was named as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, but has since receded due to his controversial image and reputation. However, should the BJP not insist on pushing for Modi after the election, a government that includes the NDA remains a possibility, as the NDA will be the largest pre-poll alliance in the next Lok Sabha. When asked who an alternative prime minister could be, Professor Bose said that this is difficult to predict at this stage.

On the potential outcome of the 2014 elections, Dr Price commented that the BJP is the only party that could get close to a parliamentary majority. Professor Bose said that this was unlikely in practice. He explained the BJP's lack of presence in many states of India, including such populous and electorally important states as West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and noted that it faces strong competition, mainly from regional parties, in other major states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where it would need to significantly expand its vote to get a windfall of Lok Sabha seats. Professor Bose stated that the Modi factor would be insufficient for generating the required nationwide surge in votes.

On the issue of caste-based vote banks, Professor Bose argued that parties may not be able to automatically depend on such assured 'vote banks' for much longer. He cited the efforts of Nitish Kumar, Bihar's chief minister, to move political discourse in northern India beyond caste-based appeals to overall good governance and development, and stated that regional leaders increasingly realize that their future depends on delivering competent and forward-looking governance in their states. These leaders include not just the chief ministers who lead explicitly regional parties – such as Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu and Naveen Patnaik in Odisha – but also the regional leaders of the BJP, like Shivraj Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh and Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh. Performance and delivery of services and development is especially vital to winning the votes of

the young, women, and the ever-increasing number of families aspiring to 'middle class' lifestyle and status.

To finish, Professor Bose outlined the necessity for regional leaders to think beyond their states and develop the ability to make concessions and compromises in order to make federalism work at the national level. He noted that even in an era in which states are increasingly autonomous, key issues including structural economic reforms and matters pertaining to foreign affairs need to be discussed and policies formulated at the national level, as in mature federal democracies.