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How the 2004 Lok Sabha election was lost

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Summary

- Surprise at the outcome of the 2004 Indian general election was more pronounced because of the confidence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that it would be returned to power. The government had taken the decision to call an early election from what it thought was a position of strength. In retrospect, its complacency proved to be its undoing. The government's "India Shining" message played to its core supporters and, in effect, encouraged the rejection of poorly-performing MPs. The BJP's overconfidence led it to alienate its allies, while Congress, which expected to lose, was keener to formalise alliances.
- While the BJP performed poorly, its remaining allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) performed worse. In just two states, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the NDA lost 51 seats, the bulk of the seats being lost by the BJP's regional allies. Although the BJP benefitted from anti-incumbency in some states, had it maintained its existing alliances and articulated a more inclusive message there is little doubt that it would have remained the largest party, changing the entire political dynamic.
- The new government faces a host of challenges. Its survival will depend on how members of the coalition balance their desire for secular government with the implementation of their particular economic or social policies. Congress' ability to manage a coalition, particularly in the run-up to state elections, and personal ambitions of other politicians within the coalition will also determine whether the government survives. The government will also have to manage public expectations. Having been elected with a mandate to improve the welfare of farmers and workers, it may find it hard to provide immediate benefits.

This Briefing Note is derived from a general meeting held at Chatham House on June 23rd 2004

Introduction

The BJP's success in state assembly elections in December 2003¹ prompted the government to dissolve the Lok Sabha in January 2004 and call an early general election. Opinion polls in January suggested that the NDA would win 330-340 seats in the 545-seat parliament and some commentators thought they could secure a two-thirds majority, enabling them to amend the constitution².

The government had two key strengths: the popularity of the prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, who was aiming to be the first prime minister since Indira Gandhi to be reelected after serving a five-year term, and the strong economy. India's GDP grew by 8.2% in 2003/04 and even the agricultural sector did well, though this was on the back of a poor harvest the previous year. Fear that the government would suffer if the 2004 monsoon failed contributed to the decision to bring the election forward. Other factors pointed to an NDA success: peace moves with Pakistan were making progress and Congress appeared to be in disarray following the December elections.

Indeed, the main concern of the BJP during the election campaign appeared to be related to cricket: throughout India's cricket tour of Pakistan, which lasted from February-April 2004, rumours abounded that the cricket team would be withdrawn, under the pretext of security concerns, if it appeared that they were heading for defeat.³ Following the election defeat, the BJP's election strategist, Pramod Mahajan said that the government had "never thought that we will not be the single largest party or the single largest coalition".⁴

While the election was decided on local issues, the key story of the election is of how the BJP thought it could over-come local difficulties by creating a national feel-good factor. Not only did its campaign back-fire, but as the election approached BJP strategists appeared to get increasingly caught up in their own rhetoric. This alienated those left out of India's current boom, and was reflected in the manner in which the BJP began to alienate potential allies.

The election

In effect, the election campaign began in October 2003 with the launch of the "India Shining" campaign. The campaign stressed India's recent economic successes such as increased mobile phone ownership and rising Information Technology exports and was intended to create a national mood to counter any anti-incumbency sentiment. It was suspended in the run-up to the December state elections but restarted after they were completed. Doubts were raised about the legitimacy of using vast sums of public money for a blatantly political campaign, though the government responded that it was informing the public of the achievements of the NDA coalition as a whole. The campaign ended towards the end of February when the Election Commission's code of conduct came into force. In March the deputy prime minister, Lal Krishna Advani, went on an "India Shining" tour of India.

In retrospect, it is clear that the message was problematic and demonstrated the alienation of BJP strategists from ground realities. It enabled opposition parties to appeal to the poor by stereotyping the BJP as the party of the urban middle class. One of Congress' main slogans was "what did the common man get?". The implication that the government had already succeeded ensured that the election was fought on service-delivery, encouraging anti-incumbency towards non-performing MPs of all parties. One of the seminal moments of the campaign occurred in Lucknow. During a rally celebrating a BJP leader's birthday, 22 women

¹ Congress held power in Delhi, but lost Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh to the BJP.

² "India's PM seeks early election as economy surges," *The Guardian*, January 13th 2004.

³ For instance, "How the game was won," *The Telegraph*, February 22nd 2004.

⁴ "Cong defeated NDA using BJP strategy: Mahajan", *Rediff.com*, May 13th 2004, http://ushome.rediff.com/election/2004/may/13pramod2.htm

died during a stampede for free saris. While the BJP has tried to disassociate itself from the incident, the event was a gift for opposition parties who were able to ask why, if India was shining, would people die in an attempt to get a sari worth Rs40.

Opinion polls played a major role in the campaign. Although they showed a downward trend in support for the BJP as the campaign progressed, they vastly over-estimated the BJP's strength. Even the exit polls failed to forecast that Congress would win more seats than the BJP. There are many possible explanations for this failure. Opinion polls in the run-up to the December polls over-estimated Congress support, so polling agencies may have over-estimated BJP support in response. Alternatively, samples may have placed too much stress on the urban middle class, which is less likely to vote than the poor. However, with an electorate of 670m, a plethora of small parties and a tendency to vote on local issues, it seems most plausible that opinion polling is not yet advanced enough to deal with India's political system.

With opinion polls suggesting an easy victory for the NDA, the BJP's complacency was understandable. This over-confidence may well have deterred its activists from campaigning, and spurred opposition activists to work harder. BJP supporters may also have been disheartened by the absence (save for the attacks on Sonia Gandhi) of Hindutva from the BJP's campaign. Complacency also showed itself in the BJP's attitude to its allies. While Congress expected to lose, and so was willing to do deals with potential allies, the BJP became increasingly high-handed towards its allies. It did not delay holding the election until it had secured an alliance in the key state of Uttar Pradesh (which returns 80 MPs). Small swings would have led to an entirely different outcome in Uttar Pradesh given the number of three- or four-way battles. Three-quarters of the seats were won with less than 40% of the vote, and 16 with less than 30%.

Election results by party		
United Progressive Alliance	217	n/a
Congress	145	+31
Rashtriya Janata Dal	21	+14
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	16	+4
Others	35	n/a
Left parties	59	+17
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	43	+10
Others	16	+7
National Democratic Alliance	185	n/a
BJP	138	-44
Shiv Sena	12	-3
Biju Janata Dal	11	+1
All India Anna DMK (AIADMK)	0	-10
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	5	-24
Others	30	n/a
Others	78	n/a
Samajwadi Party	36	+10
Bahujan Samaj Party	19	+5
Source: Election Commission of India		

The BJP lost seven allies⁵ in the run-up to the election, and lost seats in each of the affected states: Jammu and Kashmir; Tamil Nadu; Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The BJP also failed to

⁵ The National Conference, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam MDMK, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

make the necessary concessions to create tie-ups with other potential allies.⁶ For instance, although the Shiv Sena were unhappy about an alliance with the NCP in Maharashtra, according to Pramod Mahajan, the BJP "could not give [the NCP] the seats [they] wanted. The problem was not with the Lok Sabha elections but with the assembly polls".⁷

Key States

Two of the BJP's allies performed particularly poorly. Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu cost the NDA 51 seats. In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party, never formally part of the NDA, lost 24 Lok Sabha seats and, in the simultaneous state assembly elections, its representation fell from 180 to 47. Congress doubled its tally from 91 to 185. Andhra Pradesh has suffered badly from drought, but although the TDP's performance can be easily explained, the state election was not due until September. The TDP itself took the decision to hold it early, believing that it would benefit from a sympathy wave following a failed assassination attempt on the chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu, in October 2003⁸. The TDP had initially wanted to hold the state assembly election separately from the Lok Sabha election thinking that success in an earlier state election would strengthen its bargaining position with the BJP in the Lok Sabha election. However, by January, it was reported to have been pleased that the elections were to be simultaneous, so that it could get an extra boost from the "feel-good factor". ⁹

Following the withdrawal of the DMK from the NDA in December, the BJP formed an alliance with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu. The BJP had done little to prevent the DMK from leaving the alliance and appeared to prefer an alliance with the AIADMK. The DMK split from the NDA following comments by the BJP president, Venkaiah Naidu, that the DMK's protests against the implementation of the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance were "not an ideal situation" for coalition partners¹⁰ to be in. The BJP may have assumed that Congress would be unable to firm up alliances in the state and that the BJP-AIADMK combine would benefit from three-way battles and as late as mid-March, some commentators expected the AIADMK to sweep the state.¹¹ However, Congress did form an alliance with the DMK, and several smaller parties including the PMK, the MDMK, the IUML and the CPI and CPI (M). Despite winning a larger share of the national vote than many parties, the AIADMK was wiped out, almost entirely because of the strength of the opposition alliance.

If the "India Shining" message should have worked anywhere, it would be in Karnataka. However, the BJP's success appears to have stemmed from dissatisfaction with the incumbent, Congress, state government, and from the impact of alliances. The BJP and Congress each gained 37% of the vote, but whereas Congress lost 10 seats, the BJP gained 11. The lack of alliances resulted in a number of three-way contests between the BJP, Congress and the Janata Dal (S). Congress performed particularly poorly in northern parts of the state, where farmers have suffered from similar problems to those in Andhra Pradesh. Congress attempts to pin the blame on the central government, for failing to respond to requests by the state government for assistance, appear to have failed.

Congress and the BJP shared the spoils in the new states of Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Chhattisgarh, which were created in 2000. The BJP won 10 out of 11 seats in Chhattisgarh and three out of five in Uttaranchal, while Congress and its allies won 12 out of 14 in

⁶ Including the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP, Assam), the Lok Jan Shakti Party (Bihar) and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM, Jharkhand) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP, primarily in Maharashtra).

⁷ "Cong defeated NDA using BJP strategy: Mahajan", *Rediff.com*, May 13th 2004, http://ushome.rediff.com/election/2004/may/13pramod2.htm

^{8 &}quot;Andhra Pradesh in election mode," *The Hindu*, November 7th 2003.

⁹ "BJP favours simultaneous elections," *The Hindu*, January 13th 2004. ¹⁰ TS Subramanian, "A Parting of Ways," *Frontline*, Jan 3rd-16th 2004.

^{11 &}quot;Gearing up for the battle royale," *The Pioneer*, March 16th 2004.

Jharkhand. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP won control of the state assembly in December 2003 and is still enjoying a honeymoon period. In the run-up to the general election it launched several populist schemes. Congress, in contrast, was in disarray following its defeat in the state election, following which the former Congress chief minister of the state was suspended. The BJP state government in Jharkhand, however, had been in power since the state was created and was suffering from anti-incumbency. At the same time, Congress managed to shore up a strong alliance in the state with the JMM, the CPI and RJD. These factors combined to cause the BJP a net loss of 10 seats in the state.

Election results by state (change on 1999 in parentheses)				
State State	Congress	BJP	State government	
Andhra Pradesh	29 (+24)	0 (-7)	BJP ally	
Arunachal Pradesh	0 (-2)	2 (+2)	Congress	
Assam	9 (-1)	2 (0)	Congress	
Bihar (& Jharkand)	9 (+5)	6 (-17)	Congress ally (& BJP)	
Delhi	6 (+5)	1 (-5)	Congress	
Goa	1 (+1)	1 (-1)	BJP	
Gujarat	12 (+6)	14 (-6)	BJP	
Haryana	9 (+4)	1 (-4)	Other (BJP ally until Feb 2004)	
Himachal Pradesh	3 (+3)	1 (-2)	Congress	
Jammu & Kashmir	2 (+2)	0 (-2)	Congress ally	
Karnataka	8 (-10)	18 (+11)	Congress	
Kerala	0 (-8)	0 (0)	Congress	
Madhya Pradesh (& Chhattisgarh)	5 (-6)	35 (+6)	BJP (& BJP)	
Maharashtra	13 (-3)	13 (0)	Congress	
Orissa	2 (0)	7 (-2)	BJP ally	
Punjab	2 (-6)	3 (+2)	Congress	
Rajasthan	4 (-5)	21 (+5)	BJP	
Tamil Nadu	10 (+8)	0 (-4)	BJP ally	
Tripura	0 (0)	0 (0)	Other	
Uttar Pradesh (& Uttaranchal)	10 (0)	13 (-16)	Other (& Congress)	
West Bengal	6 (+3)	0 (-2)	Other	
Total incl others	145	138		
Source: Election Commission of India				

Prospects for survival

The prognosis for the government's survival is mixed. The coalition is premised on an aversion to the BJP. Its survival will depend on how members of the UPA (and the left parties) balance their desire for secular government with the need for their economic or social policies to be implemented. If the UPA appears to be succeeding it is possible that some smaller parties may join the UPA. However, several problems lie ahead.

The personal standing of Atal Behari Vajpayee was key to the survival of the NDA government. It is unknown whether Sonia Gandhi or Manmohan Singh can match Vajpayee's

skills at coalition management, and indeed how the relationship between the two will bear up. Sonia Gandhi remains head of the parliamentary Congress party as well as leader of the United Progressive Alliance, while Manmohan Singh is the deputy leader of Congress. Although Congress can draw on its experience of managing coalitions in states, its success is far from guaranteed. The BJP failed in its first two spells as a coalition manager, leading to early general elections. This issue will arise in policy formulation (the left parties have already said that they will oppose moves to allow more foreign investment in some sectors) and when members of the coalition are pitted against each other in state elections. Congress will need to reach an accomodation with the NCP in Maharashtra and with the RJD in Bihar. The Kerala assembly election is effectively a straight contest between Congress and the left parties.

Forthcoming state assembly elections		
Maharashtra	October 2004	
Jharkhand	February 2005	
Orissa	March 2005	
Bihar	April 2006	
Kerala	May 2006	
Assam	May 2006	
West Bengal	May 2006	
Tamil Nadu	May 2006	

The personal ambitions of the leaders of other parties in the coalition will be crucial. Both the leader of the RJD, Laloo Prasad Yadav, and the leader of the NCP, Sharad Pawar, are thought to harbour prime ministerial ambitions. If the BJP adopts a hard-line agenda and the Congress-led UPA is stagnating, an early election could lead to a Third Front government (almost certainly requiring Congress support) and a leader from a smaller party would become prime minister.

The other calculation the UPA and left parties will have to make is how to avoid facing antiincumbency. The number of parties in the NDA varied in the course of the last parliament.
Some parties pulled out to contest state-elections separately, and others left in the run-up to
the general election. This pattern may well be repeated in the current government. Parties
may join the alliance in the mid-term, but then pull out as the election approaches. Antiincumbency stems from politicians failing to deliver. The current government won power on a
platform of rural development and employment generation. Numerous factors—of which the
most likely are a lack of implementary capacity, not least due to corruption, and monsoon
failure—could derail its plans. Even if it is successful, it will be hard to produce a seismic shift
in five years. The government's biggest challenge may well be in successfully managing
public expectations.

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