

India's Political Map: An Overview

With key state election results due later this month, **Mahesh Rangarajan** surveys the Indian political landscape

The 2014 elections ended a quarter-century of minority and coalition governments headed by either one of India's two main political parties, the Congress and the BJP. Quite unexpectedly, voters left the Congress with just 44 seats, relegating it to third place in as many as 300 constituencies and bringing the BJP into power by simple majority. Today, Mr Modi's dominance as an individual within the government and his party is predicated on this dramatic victory, as well as a changed political context more generally, in which there is

The May 2014 general election brought an end to over two decades of coalition governments, making the BJP the effective party in power at the Centre.

quite literally no alternative, at the individual or party level at the Centre, to the BJP and Mr Modi. This is in sharp contrast to Mr Vajpayee's term, where the need for consensus with the Congress, itself a towering presence then, was strong. Today, that context is completely reversed. The centralisation of decision-making visible at the Centre today then, is understandable – and potentially, it has been accelerated by Mr Modi's experience running a state dominated by the BJP since the mid-1990s.

Today, the states in which the BJP and its allies are in power account



for 40 per cent of India's population, compared to just 6-7 per cent for the Congress. Yet, the party won just 31 per cent of the vote and the Congress a paltry 18 per cent. In essence then, half of the electorate voted for neither of the two main national parties. This points, then, to the continuing importance of regional parties and would also explain the prioritisation by the BJP of ongoing elections in five states to maximise the political gains of a victory hard earned.

The full impact of Prime Minister Modi's biggest bet so far – the demonetisation of high-value currency notes – will take time to play out fully.



DEMONETISATION: SIGNALLING CHANGING PRIORITIES

The exercise of demonetisation also makes clear Mr Modi's ability to take risks, and a lack of acceptance of the status quo and incremental reform. Although is too early to say how it will play out in its entirety – it will take about a year for this to become clear – the 'note ban' clearly has hit agriculture and the informal and unorganised sectors. Consumption, particularly at the retail and small-trader levels, would

A Broader Perspective: Q&A

On environmental politics and policy in India:

Back in the late 2000s, Parliament passed the Forest Rights Act to address growing concerns about declining forest cover and the rights of forest-dwelling tribal groups. Supporting the law were political parties from across the spectrum, and in a way, this marked a mainstreaming of environmental issues. This focus has only intensified in recent years. To illustrate, the AAP won the Delhi election partly on the promise that it would help preserve the city's Ridge area and the Yamuna riverbed, though regrettably, there has not been much progress in this regard. More broadly, India now aims to generate 30% of its total energy requirements from renewables by 2030. Clearly, though, this is ambitious, and it will have to focus on extracting greater efficiencies from the existing energy mix, such as by eliminating waste, improving public transport, and using hybrid fuels. Given Donald Trump's reluctance to accept climate change as a reality, the US may no longer be a major player in this arena, and India will have to focus on bilateral agreements with

other countries to drive its climate-change/environmental agenda.

On AAP's chances in the Punjab and Goa elections:

The AAP won Delhi partly because its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, had worked for several years with an NGO that focused on slum-related development work, particularly in terms of electricity and water. For several months before the polls, he strengthened his outreach to the poor by holding 10-12 meetings a day deep inside various slum clusters. Not only did this generate personal connect, it also created a ground-level network of party cadres. However, the AAP has no such advantage in Goa, and it is difficult to say how it will do there. In Punjab, it may yet emerge as a dark horse, given how badly the youth desire change.

On the Supreme Court's injunction to keep religion away from campaigning:

Judicial fiat is not necessarily appropriate or effective. At one level, it will make political parties more cautious, but at another level, it is often difficult to distinguish

caste-based or communal statements from cultural ones. Widening the judiciary's ambit will also stretch its enforcement machinery, which could render the ruling ineffective. One way around this is to punish only the worst offenders, thereby sending out an unequivocal message.

On the current state of politics in Tamil Nadu:

The state may be headed for turbulent times. Unlike the DMK, the AIADMK does not have a clear succession plan. In the absence of Jayalalithaa, a leader with the capacity to both win elections and hold the party together, it has few leaders with the ability to effectively administer such a complex state, navigate it through the current economic slowdown, and face the DMK in the next election.

On the situation in Jammu & Kashmir:

The PDP-BJP coalition has delivered little in terms of governance. On the ground, there is a rising sense of alienation from the rest of India. The rift between the Jammu region and the Kashmir

also be hit, although it may well recover as early as the current, March-ending quarter. Crucially, less urbanised – and less industrial – states, that also have much weaker financial sector linkages, will be worse off. Illustratively, UP (with a population twenty times Delhi's but only double the number of ATMs and bank branches) was worse hit than Tamil Nadu, with urbanisation rates of close to 50 per cent. What remains to be seen is whether current cash shortages will flow out



Valley appears to be widening. The need of the hour is for the government to rethink strategies and generate a broad political agreement on steps to alleviate the discontent.

On the fragmented opposition at the Centre, and whether this will change by 2019:

Whether the political opposition at the Centre is able to consolidate depends on three factors – how demonetisation plays out, internal developments within the Congress, and the possibility of a major new leader emerging from other parties. Indeed, it is possible that a unifying figure – such as Jayaprakash Narayan, around whom opposition to Indira Gandhi coalesced in 1974 – emerges to challenge the BJP, if not from the Congress, then perhaps from a regional party.

On the Indo-Pakistan relationship:

The surgical strikes conducted by India have not fundamentally changed the picture. Given that both India and Pakistan are nuclear states, there is a threshold beyond which any escalation will necessarily involve other countries. India is not willing to take that risk, given that it wants to be regarded as a responsible power on the world

stage – a consideration that weighs more heavily on Indian foreign policymaking than most people realise.

On the present 'crisis of ideas' in the domestic political leadership:

The challenge before the Congress Party is not just a lack of strong leadership, but more importantly, a dearth of 'ideas'. Historically, after every major electoral setback – such as those faced by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1962, by Indira Gandhi in 1977, and Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 – the party was able to revive itself because its leaders found fresh ways to do so. To illustrate, the 'Kamraj Plan' got regional leaders to rally behind Mr Nehru, while Indira Gandhi's 'GaribiHatao' campaign, Rajiv Gandhi's focus on technology, and even Sonia Gandhi's pro-poor, welfare-focused plank helped the party re-emerge each time in full force. Clearly, these ideas came out of visionaries like PC Mahalanobis, Sardar Patel, and Jagjivan Ram, who drove the government machinery and put a distinctive stamp on their respective areas of focus. Today, this 'ideas machinery' has broken down in all national parties. Undoubtedly, Mr Modi's has new, and good, ideas for governance, but they are his ideas, and not of the wider Party's.

On building a new growth model for India:

Given the current context of increasingly inward-looking economies, and technological change fostering jobless growth, India will have to seriously rethink its growth strategies. For instance, 'Make in India for the world' may not work at a time when global trade is shrinking as a share of global GDP. India must build a new 'farms, factories, workshops for tomorrow' model to achieve sustainable and job-rich growth.

This requires a focus on 'intelligent' technology, on industries where India has an advantage (such as agro-processing), and on nimbler, smaller and smarter production units. Regrettably, the depth of engagement between key stakeholders – spanning technology, social science, policy, and politics – is poor. Government – whether state or central – cannot substitute for private industry in creating jobs. Only in two states – Tamil Nadu and Kerala – has a welfare model worked, though Kerala is not doing well at the moment. In Tamil Nadu, it works, but only because it is already highly industrialised with strong service delivery mechanisms in areas like healthcare and education.

into a longer-term negative wealth effect phenomenon. In India, cash is not just a medium of exchange, but also a means to establish trust between parties. It may thus impact the exchange of goods and services and therefore, production and investment decisions. That said, recently released GDP numbers do not appear to reflect this downswing – though this may also be because they do not fully capture the informal, and heavily cash-dependent parts of the economy.

A key question to ask is whether demonetisation reflects a deliberate move by the BJP to shift its voter base away from small traders and shopkeepers, and towards the

In UP, the poll outcome is uncertain, not least because of a highly fragmented electorate. In Punjab the AAP may yet emerge as a dark horse, while in Goa, the field is wide open.



poor and lower-middle classes. Again, this is understandable, and signals the BJP's ability to read the 'tea leaves'. The lack of job creation in the last decade is at the heart of India's economic – and therefore political – challenge. Major agitations in the agricultural hinterland of states like Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh were based ostensibly around caste- and community issues, but their true roots lie in an exploding agrarian crisis. A slowdown in farm-sector growth has forced people to move to the cities in search of work. However, there are few jobs on offer, either in services or in manufacturing.



This has become a central priority for the government, just as it has become a political need to reflect a prioritisation of greater equity and wealth creation. Whether it will reflect in a more populist policy stance of the government at the Centre, as indeed, across India's states, will be visible in the next 12-15 months.

STATES ELECTIONS: HARD TO READ

On that note, about a fifth of India's voters have gone to the polls in five states. These elections will be critical for the BJP, but the outcomes are hard to decipher. This is most visible in UP for several reasons. The

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UP electorate is highly fragmented; no party has won more than a third of the vote in any election held in the last three decades. The BJP last won an election there on its own in 1991, while the SP and the BSP have each done so only once. Equally, each election throws up new issues, and it is difficult to say with any certainty how voters will react to them. For instance, it is only in recent years that environmental concerns – including deteriorating air and water quality – have emerged as major issue in state-level and local politics. Ultimately, like anywhere in the world, state and local elections depend mainly on the quality of individual candidates and how they deal with local issues, including infrastructure and education.

In the final analysis, winning in UP is important for the BJP from the perspective of consolidating a political base that has begun to truly form a sustainable national footprint. Equally, a win for either the SP or the BSP could make it a more formidable rival to the BJP in 2019. That said; state election results do not necessarily carry over to the national stage. Southern India, for instance, often votes very differently in general and state elections. The BJP itself won Delhi and Bihar handily in 2014 – all 7 seats in one, and two-fifths of the vote in the other – but then lost badly in state elections only a year later. In Delhi, the AAP won all but 3 of 70 seats, promising a corruption-free government and better public service delivery, particularly for the poor. It attracted young voters who wanted a credible alternative to both the BJP and the Congress. In Bihar, meanwhile, the determining factor was the rebuilding of a social coalition of various backward classes that had kept the BJP out of power for years. ■

The contents of this paper are based on discussions of The India CEO Forum in Bangalore with Mahesh Rangarajan, Historian, and Professor at Ashoka University, in January 2017.

