

India: A Fragmented Democracy

India's record of more than 50 years of regular elections is a remarkable one. Its democratic government has been interrupted only once, by the 1975-77 "Emergency" during which Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution and ruled by autocratic means. And yet, as the country approaches its thirteenth elections in the fall of 1999, confidence in the resilience and efficacy of the electoral system is tempered by unease. Economic opportunities beckon, reviving the dream of moving the country out of poverty. At the same time, the post-independence nationalist-secular consensus that defined the Indian political mainstream no longer draws in a reliable majority. In its absence, regional, social, and sectarian divisions have created sharper cleavages in an extraordinarily diverse body politic. A system in which the Congress Party could virtually count on power has given way to a multiparty system.

As they prepare for September's elections, India's party leaders will probably assume that an absolute majority is almost impossible to achieve, and will therefore be aiming at a winning coalition. The major contenders for power will include two parties that seek a national constituency, more than 30 regional parties whose campaign and appeal are based on one or at the most two states, and a number of parties with an ideological base but historically very small parliamentary representation. Neither of the national parties—Nehru's old Congress Party and the currently governing nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, (BJP)—approaches the kind of geographic or social breadth Congress took for granted a generation ago.

There is a built-in tension between the ways major parties retain their

Teresita Schaffer is the director of the South Asia Program at CSIS and a former ambassador to Sri Lanka. She has devoted most of her 30-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service to South Asia, and was one of the State Department's principal experts on the region. Hemani Saigal-Arora is an analyst in the South Asia Program at CSIS.

Copyright © 1999 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The Washington Quarterly • 22:4 pp. 143–150.

fervent core voters and the policies needed to build a working majority. The politics of caste, region, and religion will push the BJP toward the moderate middle and the Congress toward the center-left. Both will have to negotiate with the regional parties if they are to wield power at the center. The various regional parties are unlikely to try to form a united opposition to Congress and the BJP.

The big questions shaping the future of India's system of government, however, are not likely to be explicit electoral issues. All the parties will accept the broad principles of economic liberalization, though they have different views on the ultimate extent and pace of reform. Even more fundamental is the health and integrity of India's political and governmental institutions, which many observers see as key to India's future. However, when it comes to governance and corruption, all India's contenders for power have skeletons in their closet, which means all face risks in raising the issue.

The Emergence of a Competitive Party System

After independence in 1947, the Congress Party, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was the anchor of the political system. Until 1989, the Congress Party formed all governments, with the exception of a brief interlude in 1977 to 1980, when it lost power to the Janata Party following the unpopular Emergency. The Congress Party enjoyed a sizeable majority of seats, though not always of popular votes, at the national level; the same was true in most states.

The key to the Congress Party's success lay partly in its ability to represent and aggregate the regional, ethnic, and caste interests which make up India's extraordinarily diverse electorate. In academic terms, India's party system was structured as a "one-party dominant system,"¹ with limited scope for competing parties. Political competition could be fierce indeed, but the most meaningful struggles occurred within Congress, among leaders with a power base in particular states or in particular social constituencies.

A system of genuine multiparty competition at the center emerged in the late 1980s. Its seeds had been planted earlier, with the weakening of the Congress Party as an organization and with the increasing exploitation of sectarian issues for purposes of mass mobilization. Under Indira Gandhi, the party became an extension of her personal rule, and alternative power centers within it were efficiently cut down. State party organizations withered, and with them the traditional means for development of new leadership. At the same time, the ascendance of regional and social consciousness move-

1. Rajni Kothari, "The Congress System in India," *Asian Survey* (December 1964).

ments and their politicization began to unleash divisive forces that had been kept in check by Nehru's stature and determined secularism.

The Congress, which routinely returned large majorities to parliament, saw its share of parliamentary seats fall from an average of 350 in India's first three decades of independence, to fewer than 200 after the 1989 elections. The electoral space they vacated has been occupied by three types of competitors:

- *Parties or groups with national aspirations.*

The most important of these is the nationalist BJP, the lead party in the current government. The "United Front," a loose coalition of some 13 smaller parties, including both leftist groups and various ex-Congress factions, ran the government in 1997 and has tried to remain a "third force" competing with Congress and the BJP. Its lack of internal coherence has made it a relatively ineffective player since it left power.

- *Regional parties.* These have always been a factor in Indian politics, especially at the state level, but with the decline of Congress and the failure of any party to emerge with comparable national appeal, their importance has grown. The most important ones now represent Tamil Nadu (two bitterly opposed groups, the DMK and the AIADMK) and Andhra Pradesh (the Telegu Desham party). Also important because of the unpredictability they introduce into the election results from the most populous states in India's Hindi-speaking heartland are the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav (from Uttar Pradesh) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Laloo Prasad Yadav (from Bihar).
- *A number of smaller, ideologically based parties, mostly on the left.* Most of these have strength in only a handful of states. Perhaps the most important of these is the Communist Party Marxist (CPM), which has run the state government in West Bengal for more than two decades and has become a virtual regional party there, with pockets of representation in a couple of other states. While these parties have not grown in size in the past decade, their importance is enhanced in today's coalition-building environment.

While Congress and the BJP remain the two largest national parties, neither has had a sufficient parliamentary majority since the 1996 elections to form a government on its own. As a result, regionally based parties have assumed pivotal importance as key allies at the center. They now have the power to make or break governments at the center, as evidenced recently by the col-

Regionally based parties have assumed pivotal importance as key allies at the center.

lapse of the latest BJP government following the withdrawal of support from one of the parties from Tamil Nadu.

Party Strategies

The fundamental realignment in India's party system over the last decade has thus resulted in a highly competitive and fragmented party system, and most observers expect that India will continue to have coalition governments for some time to come. In these circumstances, national-level parties with aspirations to form a government need to look for strategic alliances with regional parties as well as shoring up their traditional base.

The BJP, which heads the current government, is the successor to the Jana Sangh, an extremist group associated with the violent nationalist movement (one of whose members assassinated Mahatma Gandhi). Participation in the Janata Party government between 1977 and 1979 helped the BJP acquire more of a mainstream image, and over the next decade it rapidly rose to national prominence on a nationalist and antiseccular agenda. It became the largest parliamentary party in 1996, but the past year and a half has been its first real experience of running a government.

The BJP has historically been strong in the north-center and northwest India, and has had a strong upper-caste base. To win a majority, however, it has had to win seats in the south and east, where the Hindu-Muslim rivalry of India is of limited appeal, and attract the backward castes in the north. The BJP's ability to form a government in 1998 was directly related to its electoral gains in the south and east, and among the backward castes.

The BJP faces a built-in tension between the desires of its core "true believers," who continue to value its traditional agenda of assertive nationalism with a strong Hindu flavor, and the more moderate policies it needs to attract enough votes to form a government. The BJP leadership recognizes that it must show it can govern competently in order to keep its plurality in parliament. It has been reasonably successful in refashioning itself as a credible party of government, although some blunders and indecisiveness during the current government's tenure damaged its credibility. It will continue to pursue regional alliances and an overall policy of moderation at the price of continued frustration on the part of its own right wing. Its main challenge will lie in maintaining its traditional support while attracting some votes from the minorities and the backward castes.

Since the late eighties, rival parties have eaten into Congress's traditional coalition base of upper castes, backward castes, Dalits (former untouchables), and Muslims, battering it in the Hindi-speaking northern belt where it had once dominated. While the BJP has attracted large sections of the Hindu

middle classes in this region, an array of regional parties to the left of Congress—notably Mulayam Singh Yadav’s Samajwadi Party and Laloo Prasad Yadav’s Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)—have moved in to capture minority and backward-caste votes. Congress’s shift toward the right under Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao, and its perceived failure to stand up for Muslim and backward-caste rights in the highly polarized climate of the early nineties, led to a breakdown in its special relationship with this group. Under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, the party will attempt to recapture the support of this traditional constituency.

Like the BJP, Congress also will need to pursue strategic alliances with other regional parties. Ironically, this is harder for Congress than for the BJP. Congress is in direct competition with many of the regional parties in the north for the minority vote, and in the two most populous states—Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—a Congress revival would strike a mortal blow at the regional parties. In the south, the most

reliable source of Congress votes for the past ten years, Congress is seen as a credible rival to the regional parties, unlike the BJP whose regional strength is still very modest. Congress, under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, has also been somewhat handicapped by its unwillingness to strike deals with the regional parties.

The defining principles of the party—socialism and secularism—are no longer as attractive an electoral slogan in the current political environment of sharpened social divisions. The absence of an ideological niche, along with atrophy in the party’s organizational machine, have provoked in recent years a wave of defections and the formation of break-away groups in the regional cadres of the party. In 1997 half of the party’s parliamentary members defected to the BJP in the politically important state of Uttar Pradesh (UP); in 1998 Mamata Banerjee set up an independent party in Bengal (the Trinamul Congress); and earlier this year, the Maharashtra state party cadre split.

Although the Congress Party has historically been faction-ridden, the fragmentation of the party in recent years indicates a more fundamental crisis in its identity and organization. Rebuilding the party at the grassroots level has to be the main priority for the leadership, as the appeal of the “dynasty” magic and the historical role of the party are no longer sufficient to win votes. Although Sonia Gandhi appears firmly ensconced as leader of the Congress Party, restructuring the party organization will be a challenging task due to opposition from powerful regional leaders who are unlikely to favor encroachment into their fiefdoms.

In the two most populous states, a Congress revival would strike a mortal blow at the regional parties.

An anti-Congress, anti-BJP “Third Front” coalition centered on some of the regional parties seems unlikely. Fragmentation and shifting alignments in the regional parties, as well as personal rivalry among the various leaders, make a common election platform not viable. Moreover, unlike in 1989 or 1996, there is no overwhelming anti-Congress or anti-BJP sentiment.

For most of the regional and “leftist” parties (with the exception of the Communist party), ideology has given way to strict opportunism: they will ally themselves with whichever of the two larger parties offers them the best deal. Regional northern parties, such as the Samajwadi Party, the RJD, and the Bahujan Samaj Party face a dilemma: they strongly oppose the BJP, but see Congress as their principal rival. The Communist parties will instead be motivated by a desire to thwart the BJP.

The Issues

As in any diverse democracy, India’s elections often turn on local issues, local caste and subcaste loyalties, and patronage. Besides these factors, which are inevitably hard to quantify, a few issues are likely to dominate this next election:

- *The character of India.* The BJP has traditionally played on fears that India’s Hindu cultural identity is being diluted by excessive concern for minorities. Their election aroused fears among secular-oriented voters that India’s noncommunal character was at risk. The BJP’s record on Hindu-Muslim relations has been better than critics expected. On the other hand, the BJP’s reputation for communal divisiveness was reinforced by ugly outbreaks of violence against Christians in early 1999, by the government’s relatively slow response to them, and by apparent efforts by BJP affiliates to refashion the country’s educational curriculum along Hindu nationalist lines. This issue is likely to be prominent in the campaign, at least by implication. Sonia Gandhi’s Italian origins have already been an issue both with the BJP and within Congress, where they led to the expulsion of a Congress strongman, Sharad Pawar, from the large state of Maharashtra.
- *Economic policy.* There is astonishingly little controversy over India’s substantial moves toward a market economy over the past decade. The scope and pace of further reforms may be an election issue, however, with traditional leftists arguing for slowing down any moves to ease labor protections, the BJP continuing to call for a policy of “self-reliance” (a concept it studiously declines to define), and a variety of politicians defending subsidy and entitlement programs that are popular with different constituencies.

- *Foreign and security policy.* In India, as in the United States, this has rarely been an election issue. The nuclear test of May 1998 gave Vajpayee only a very fleeting political boost, and is unlikely to figure much in the campaign. On the other hand, in the wake of the fiercest fighting with Pakistan since the 1972 war, the government's handling of the crisis may be an issue, benefiting the BJP if the crisis is satisfactorily resolved, hurting them otherwise. By the same token, the election campaign may provide the opportunity for all parties to demonstrate their patriotism with vigorous-sounding statements opposing Pakistan and China. Congress will undoubtedly seek to wrap itself in the patriotic mantle, relying on the Gandhi family's connection with India's history to counteract criticism of Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins.
- *Governance and corruption.* Many people believe that this is the "sleeping giant" of India's political future and of this election. In 1998, this issue helped the BJP as the one major party not yet tainted by a track record in office. Many former Congress voters swung to the BJP in a search for more competent government. One BJP leader put a number on this phenomenon, claiming that the party's 1996 showing—161 seats, or 20 percent of the total votes—represents the outer limit of what the BJP can win through ideology; the rest, he argued, must be won on governance. The BJP will want to run on its record, but by now that record is a mixed one. More fundamentally, there is deepening concern at the spread of corruption and the decline of the competence of some of India's proudest institutions. The rapid turnover of governments and especially of parliaments—three elections in three-and-a-half years—worries India's thoughtful voters, and may drive votes away from parties believed to have capricious coalition partners. Since all the major contenders for power have held office, they are all at some level to blame. The disaffection with the results of elective politics, however, is one of the issues that will shape the functioning of India's government in a broader sense.

The Congress Party will undoubtedly seek to wrap itself in the patriotic mantle.

Impact on India's Future

This election will not set India on a radical new course in ideology, style of governance, policy, or party structure. The trends noted above—fragmentation of the political system and increasingly vocal social and regional constituencies—are sure to persist beyond the elections. Indeed, which party or

parties take control next September probably matters less than how stable the governing coalition is, and how decisive its leadership. The consensus on at least a minimum economic reform agenda will help whoever wins; the reduced consensus on the character of the country will challenge any government.

India's next leaders will find their future and the country's powerfully affected, however, by the manner in which they deal with India's systemic problems. Three in particular stand out:

- *Rebuilding the country's political institutions.* The decline of Congress, chronicled above, has been accompanied by a decline in governance, with the result that the spoils system has reached ever deeper into the political process, especially at the state level. The weakness of governmental institutions has allowed patronage and the spoils system to get out of control, especially at the state level. At the same time, the mechanisms for bringing up new political leaders with electoral experience and a legitimate power base desperately need revitalizing. At best, this process will take a decade and a couple more election campaigns.
- *Regional power.* Recent political changes have highlighted regional consciousness. What may be more important, however, is the question of redefining state power. The more dynamic states, such as Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, are vying for the title of "Silicon Valley of the East." Enhancing states' ability to make their own economic decisions would be a tonic for the Indian economy. Greater state autonomy throughout India could also ease the political sting of enhancing autonomy in Kashmir, a move essential to any stable settlement of that troubled area. On the other hand, the more populous states in the north, already stagnating politically and economically, are in no position to take advantage of devolution of power. In any event, reinventing the compact between the center and the states would be a major undertaking, involving far-reaching redefinition of fiscal responsibility.
- *Deepening economic reform.* Ultimately, the dream of the founders of independent India was to lift the country out of poverty. This requires higher growth than India has mustered, even in the relatively prosperous 1990s. To achieve this, India will need both steady policies and a government that can last for more than a couple of years.

In the final analysis, India's economic success depends in part on its ability to turn a strong tradition of free elections into a more reliable instrument for governing an extraordinarily complex country. As in many other large democracies, it is easier to elect democratic governments than to provide effective government.