

13 reasons why the Congress won and the BJP lost

BY BIBEK DEBROY
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IN THE 2009 Indian general elections, the Indian National Congress won 206 seats and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 116 seats out of a total of 543 seats. Five years ago, the Congress and the BJP had won 145 and 138 seats respectively.

Opinion polls before the elections and the exit polls afterwards had predicted a win for the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – but not a landslide.

Still the impression of an overwhelming victory by the ruling coalition is somewhat exaggerated. The Indian electoral system is a first-past-the-post system. There is no exact correlation between the share of votes a party wins and the number of seats it gains, especially because there is no bi-party system. The all-India vote shares do not in fact show a tidal wave in favour of the Congress. Between the previous general election and this, Congress' vote share increased by

just 2 per cent and the BJP's vote share fell by around 4 per cent. The differential in the seats they won is disproportionate in comparison to their vote shares.

But why did the Congress do as well as it did – and the BJP not as well as expected?

First, Congress' pro-poor development agenda for the "common man", or *aam aadmi*, found takers.

Second, regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Telegu Desam Party and the communist parties were perceived by voters to be opportunistic power-grabbers who should be taught a lesson.

Third, Congress took a conscious decision not to enter into alliances with such parties. It was this decision that led some of them to form the Third Front, some with the avowed intention of returning to the UPA fold post-election. As things stand, the UPA no longer needs them.

This decision of Congress to go it alone improved its showing in the large state of Uttar Pradesh after many years of dismal performance.

Fourth, in addition to this strategy of ignoring the regional parties, Mr Rahul Gandhi's conscious decision to revive Congress' organisational structures in the Hindi-speaking heartland of Uttar Pradesh – and to a lesser extent, Bihar – saw dividends.

Fifth, both because of Mr Gandhi and the Congress fielding many younger candidates, it was perceived as a young party with a vision. In contrast, the BJP was perceived as an old party, led by an old leader, and without a vision.

Sixth, the BJP had no striking agenda. Its issues – terrorism, inflation and unemployment – have ceased to be major issues. The only thing the BJP could think of was speak ominously of money in Swiss bank accounts and this rarely got beyond the English-speaking media.

Seventh, the BJP's campaign was perceived to be negative, filled with personal attacks against Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Because Dr Singh is perceived by the electorate to be clean and honest, these personal attacks backfired.

The BJP's leader, Mr Lal Krishna Advani,

sought a presidential-type debate with Dr Singh. That debate did not occur. However, in the verbal exchanges that followed, Dr Singh got the better of Mr Advani.

Eighth, the BJP resurrected its Hindutva agenda in the person Mr Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat – who was also projected as a possible prime minister – and, somewhat inadvertently, in the person of Mr Varun Gandhi, Rahul's estranged cousin. This issue did not resonate with the electorate, least of all among India's numerous religious minorities.

Ninth, good governance or its promise delivered for the Congress in some states, like Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu.

Tenth, good governance or its promise did not deliver for the BJP in most states. Stated differently, pro-incumbency and anti-incumbency are too simplistic as propositions. They can be countered through an appropriate candidate selection system and the promise of good governance.

Eleventh, the BJP was not a united party. There was open wrangling within the party in several states.

Twelfth, third parties acted as spoilers, denting BJP vote totals in some states and that of its allies in other states.

Thirteenth, though the BJP has no presence in Kerala, the Congress gained substantially in that state because of the collapse of the left parties in the state.

Five years in opposition should have led to soul-searching within the BJP and the enunciation of a clear strategy to tackle the Congress. That did not happen. The Congress managed public relations and the media better than the BJP.

The BJP thought it was doing well and it is only in hindsight that we can now think of 13 or more reasons why it failed. That is the beauty of Indian politics – it is unpredictable. At the end of the day, the BJP was unpleasantly surprised and the Congress pleasantly.

The writer is an honorary senior fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS. This is the second in a series on the Indian elections that ISAS is producing for this newspaper.