



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

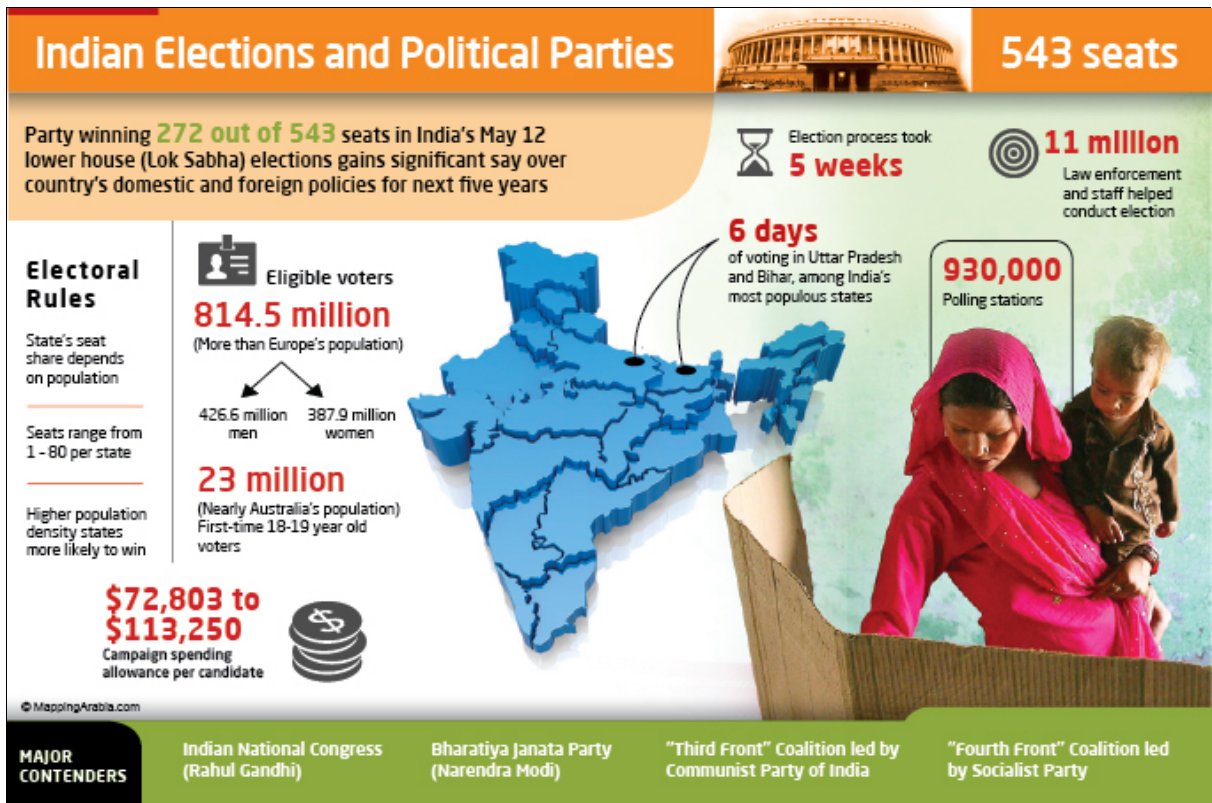
Report

India's May 12 Elections

Emad Kaddoura*

15 MAY 2014





[AIJazeera]

Abstract

The May 12 Indian elections were a culmination of five weeks of voting in nine phases starting April 7. These elections held great significance because voter trends indicated a desire for substantial change and demands for alternatives the decade-long rule of the National Congress Party. Economic growth remains stagnant, prices continue to rise and corruption by government officials continues to exist across the country. Many analysts are predicting the hard-line Indian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will win, but the coalition of secular and leftist parties led by the rising India's Common Man's Party (AAP) could emerge as a surprise winner that will reshape alliances. This report outlines the major factors influencing the May 12 elections

Elections run by an organized state

India's population makes it the world's largest democracy. Elections have been held regularly for more than sixty years since the country gained independence in 1947. The constitution has never been suspended nor have elections been deferred during this entire time. While India grapples with challenges such as widespread poverty and illiteracy, multiple and scattered states, numerous linguistic, religious and sectarian divides, regional wars and internal conflicts, conflicting political doctrines and a strict and unjust caste system, as well as limited resources and simple electoral mechanisms, these challenges have not prevented organised and generally free and fair elections. This report outlines major factors influencing the May 12 elections.

The 2014 elections were the largest in the country's history: 814 million voters have chosen 543 members for the Lok Sabha or lower House of Representatives and the results should be announced May 16. The number of voters is greater than the electorates of the United States and Western Europe combined, and has increased by about 101 million voters in the past five years alone.

The General Election Commission has pledged no voter should have to travel more than two kilometres to cast their vote, nor should any polling station have to handle more than 1,500 voters. (1) Thus, over the last five weeks, about five million staff members in addition to at least five million policemen have managed 930,000 polling centres. (2), (3) The country's polling system is electronic rather than paper-based, and this year's commission provided 1.8 million electronic polling units throughout the country. (4)

Election map and major parties

The party achieving an absolute majority of 272 out of 543 seats in the House of the Representatives will form the executive branch. The executive branch will determine the country's domestic and foreign policies for the next five years, (5) adding yet another layer of significance to this year's election. Highly populous states have an advantage because the division of seats is based on each state's population. For example, the state of Uttar Pradesh had eighty seats, Maharashtra, Anthra Pradesh and West Bengal had forty-two, Bihar had forty, Tamil Nadu thirty-nine, Gujarat twenty-six, with the remaining seats distributed among other states. Some of them, such as Mizoram and Sikkim, only have one seat each.

Large traditional parties and party coalitions compete for these seats. The Indian National Congress (INC), led by Rahul Gandhi, heads the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a coalition which includes eight other secular and Muslim parties. Gandhi's party is the oldest in India and has led several Indian governments since independence, including ruling over the country for the last decade. The main rival to the INC is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP or Indian People's Party), led by Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat. This party came second to the INC in the 2009 elections and heads the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition mainly including Hindu parties such as the Shiv Sena.

Two other coalitions, the Third and Fourth Front, respectively, are quite well-known although they do not hold as much power or impact. The left-leaning Third Front is led by the Communist Party of India, the Social Revolutionary Party and the Pauhjan Samaj

Party, while the Fourth Front is composed of the Samaj Wadi Party and the Rashtra Janata Dal Party.

A new addition to this year's contenders was the rise of a third leftist and secular alternative coalition comprising of fourteen parties unaffiliated with the country's two major parties. This coalition was led by the party of the Common Man or the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which has never before contested a general election but is expected to perform well. The AAP is only represented in the state of Delhi's legislative body, where it won twenty-eight out of seventy State assembly seats in the 2013 local elections and subsequently formed Delhi's state government led by Arvind Kejriwal, the party's leader. The party nominated 426 candidates for this year's Lok Sabha elections, while the BJP nominated 451 and the Congress Party nominated 414. (6), (7), (8)

Opinion polls conducted before the elections predict that neither of the major contenders (INC and BJP) will alone achieve the required majority to form the next government, while exit polls are predicting a win for the BJP. (9)

Factors which affected the election

Despite general good economic growth achieved over the past decade, India remains home to one-third of the world's poor. Thus, Indian voters remain concerned about weak economic growth, unprecedented and widespread corruption across the country, increased inflation and rising prices and lack of job opportunities. Since the voice of the poor carries more weight than the voice of the rich in these elections, voters favour the parties that can create jobs and curb prices. Sixty-five per cent of Indian people are under thirty-five and the average age in India is twenty-seven, meaning the youth vote is a highly significant component of the electorate. (10) For the youth, a major concern is future careers and families, thus weak economic performance indicates they will vote for programmes focusing on economic growth, partnerships, investments and job creation.

Weak economic performance combined with corruption over the past three years seem to have negatively impacted the ruling Congress Party's chances in this election. Many voters look at neighbouring China, which has a similarly large population but has achieved eight to ten per cent economic growth during the past ten years, while India has remained stagnant at five per cent growth since 2012. (11)

Family influence in the Indian polity cannot be ignored because about thirty per cent of current parliamentarians are members of prominent political families across the country. (12) While the Congress Party chose Rahul Gandhi to run in order to break the trend of Manmohan Singh's three consecutive terms, Gandhi has been painted by the opposition as a candidate chosen based on family considerations rather than competency.

The Indian People's Party and their charismatic leader Narendra Modi have focused on economic factors and good governance during their campaign. As Gujarat's chief minister over the past twelve years, Modi was able to attract substantial investment and is perceived as a leader for economic development and good governance.

For the Common Man's Party (AAP), the campaign focus has been fighting corruption. The party believes that Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of Swaraj or "rule of the people" has not yet been realised because elected officials have transformed over time from being true representatives of the people to being machines working for their own interests. They believe the establishment of an anti-corruption entity will enable the rule of the people and that all those who assume public positions should be accountable to this entity, which in turn should be kept independent from political party influence. (13)

Another factor which traditionally affects elections, especially for the INC this time, is related to Muslims in India. Rahul Gandhi has used this sectarian religious line in order to warn against the election of Hindu right-wing Narendra Modi, saying it would exacerbate conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi has said, "As for us, we work with all people, whether they are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians. We work with all communities, classes, religions and regions – this is our policy". (14)

Modi's chances are impacted by riots that took place in Gujarat during 2002, in which nearly 1,000 people were killed, most of them Muslims. Modi was among the ultra-nationalist figures that played a role in exacerbating the violence. (15) The BJP does use some phrases alienating Muslims, but they are always careful to add to their pledges of preserving Hindu culture the phrase "within the framework of the constitution". (16)

Foreign policy and the elections

Foreign policy issues do not assume any major importance in India's general elections for two reasons. Members of the general public, who are largely poor, are primarily concerned with their basic needs, job opportunities and rising prices. Secondly, India's external policy since independence has gained great credibility among the people,

regardless of the party or coalition that rules the state. India's foreign policy successes include spearheading the global non-alignment movement and benefiting from friendly relations with major powers such as Russia, the United States and the European Union. At the same time, India's decisive action on regional problems that affect its security, especially toward China and Pakistan, has contributed to a collective perception in India that foreign policy depends on well-established institutions and accumulated experience. Thus, foreign policy is largely taken for granted although each party or coalition does have its own vision and foreign policy orientations.

Upon examination of their manifestos, it is evident Indian parties' electoral programmes do not focus on foreign policy issues except in a narrow sense. In its forty-eight page program, only one page discusses the foreign policy of the INC party, while the BJP also touches on foreign policy on only one page out of fifty-two, and the AAP has less than half a page dedicated to foreign policy. (17) , (18) , (19) This can be interpreted as yet another indication that the priority in these elections has been the economy and the standard of living, as these parties' programmes have devoted most of their space to the detailed economic procedures and measures that the individual parties will take in the event that they are elected.

It is worth noting that there is a significant difference in the views of the two major parties towards foreign policy. The INC has focused on conventional formulas and general concepts about the role of India in the world, through regional and international organizations, particularly its Asian role, and its contribution to facing global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, nuclear non-proliferation, countering global terrorism and strengthening relations with emerging economies and major powers, without specific reference to the US. By contrast, the program of the BJP focuses on redirecting foreign policy goals and approaches to strategically position India at the global level not only diplomatically but also politically, economically, militarily, scientifically and culturally. In order to strengthen India's position so that its voice can be heard in the international arena, the BJP believes that India should adopt a proactive diplomacy. Indeed, during the BJP's rule from 1999 to 2004, India strengthened defence and industrial ties with Russia as well as trade, technology and counter-terrorism ties with the United States. It is expected that if the BJP forms the next government, they would again prioritise relations with both powers simultaneously, despite the current US-Russia tensions due to the Ukraine crisis and its implications for the alliances of both parties.

Conclusion

India's May 12 elections were influenced mainly by domestic factors including the economy and job opportunities. These were the largest general elections in the country's history, with 814 million voters participating in choosing 543 Lok Sabha or House of Representatives members. This report examined key factors which influenced these elections as well as discussed expected developments after election results are announced.

Copyright © 2014 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.

***Emad Kaddoura** is a researcher specialising in strategic studies.

*Endnote:

- 1) Election Commission of India, The Function of the Electoral System (New Delhi: ECI, 2014), http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/the_function.aspx.
- 2) Election Commission of India, General Elections: 2014 Schedule of Elections (New Delhi: ECI, 2014), http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/Press%20Note%20GE-2014_05032014.pdf.
- 3) Lok Sabha, House of the People (2014), <http://loksabha.nic.in>.
- 4) Election Commission of India, General Elections: 2014 Schedule of Elections (New Delhi: ECI, 2014), http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/Press%20Note%20GE-2014_05032014.pdf.
- 5) Indian Government, The Constitution of India, http://india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/npi/files/coi_part_full.pdf.
- 6) ET Bureau, "Arvind Kejriwal: Common Man Becomes CM; Holds Cabinet Meeting on First Day," The Economic Times, 29 December 2013 http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-12-29/news/45653904_1_arvind-kejriwal-oath-cabinet-ministers.
- 7) BBC, "India Activist Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party Vows Change," BBC, 26 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-20492056>.
- 8) Brajesh Kumar, "Aam Aadmi Party seeks national role, names 426 candidates," Hindustan Times, 3 April 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/elections2014/state-of-the-states/with-426-names-aap-leads-list-race/article1-1203578.aspx>.
- 9) Shyamantha Asokar, "Modi On Course to be India's Next Leader, Exit Polls Show," Reuters, 12 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/12/us-india-election-idUSBREA4A0A420140512>
- 10) Peter Bergen and Anna Swanson, "11 Things to Know About World's Biggest Election," CNN, 6 April 2014 <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/06/opinion/bergen-india-elections-11-things/>.
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Aam-Aadmi Party, National Manifesto 2014, <https://app.box.com/s/q9k6f7e21265olkpxrzq>.
- 14) BBC, "Gandhi: India Faces the Risks of Religious Strife if Modi Wins," BBC Arabic, 6 April 2014 http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/worldnews/2014/04/140405_india_rahul_modi_elections.shtml.
- 15) Bergen and Swanson, 2014.

- 16) BJP, "Manifesto 2014,"
http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf.
- 17) Indian National Congress Party, "Lok Sabha Manifesto 2014,"
http://inc.in/media/pdf/English_Manifesto_for_Web.pdf.
- 18) BJP, "Manifesto 2014,"
http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf.
- 19) Aam-Aadmi Party, National Manifesto 2014, <https://app.box.com/s/q9k6f7e21265olkpxrzq>.

