

THE CENTREPIECE OF SECULAR

Jayantha Dhanapala previews the general elections in the world's largest democracy which

The general elections for 543 seats in the 16th Lok Sabha (the Lower House of Parliament) in India – Sri Lanka's closest and most powerful neighbour – are due by May, and they are of indisputable importance. It is also a gigantic electoral exercise with about 800 million voters, out of which 150 million will be voting for the first time in the world's most populous democracy.

Consequently, analysing the trends and the likely outcome is of crucial importance, globally and for our bilateral relations. It cannot be overemphasised that India and Sri Lanka have been locked in a geopolitical relationship for centuries, and that India is perhaps the only country that has the capacity to both stabilise and destabilise us as a nation state. We cannot wish that incontrovertible fact away, as past leaders like J. R. Jayewardene discovered to their cost.

While our Ministry of External Affairs is currently in disarray, our diplomatic mission in New Delhi is headed by a seasoned career diplomat in Prasad Kariyawasam, supported by another career diplomat Deputy High Commissioner Mahishini Colonne and our Chennai Deputy High Commissioner Sabarullah Khan. This team of professionals can be relied upon to provide Sri Lanka with accurate information and an intelligent interpretation of the trends.



A THIRD FORCE? As the incumbent Congress Party-led coalition faces the rising Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and its allies, the Delhi-based Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) led by

Arvind Kejriwal threatens to queer the pitch as a third force. To add to the confusion, Chief Minister of Bihar Nitish Kumar talks of a Third Front with the JD (U), CPI and CP (M).

Whatever the outcome, the trend in recent Indian

parliamentary elections has shown a regionalisation of politics and the vital need for the national parties to form alliances with regional state-based parties in order to form coalitions. That has had an impact on India's foreign policy.

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DEMOCRACY

will have global implications



ELECTION COUNTDOWN Supporters listen to a speech by Chairperson of India's Congress-led UPA Government Sonia Gandhi, during an election rally in New Delhi not long ago.

Thus, West Bengal politics influences India's policy towards Bangladesh, and Tamil Nadu-based parties – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) led by M. Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa's AIADMK – vie with each other to have a decisive impact on relations with Sri Lanka. India's neighbours are generally

better off with a strong centre in the Indian union.

BJP COALITION? Opinion polls are seldom an accurate guide to election outcomes, especially when they are conducted in Asian societies where voters are more reserved about divulging their political views to others, let alone pollsters. However, three polls

conducted in January point to the BJP winning more seats than Congress, but neither party securing a majority by getting the required 272 seats or more. Thus, as things stand, the result could well be a BJP-led coalition.

Another major feature of the poll is that the personal popularity of Modi is higher

than that of the BJP. He is the son of a tea vendor with an impressive record as an economic manager in Gujarat. He is widely admired by the bureaucracy and the private sector. And this is in spite of the controversy surrounding Modi's alleged role in the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat, in 2002 (over which he has been legally cleared).

Prominent personalities like Dr. Subramanian Swamy, ex DIG Kiran Bedi, retired ambassador Hardeep Puri and many others have hopped on the BJP bandwagon. Congress has targeted Modi in its campaign ever since he was nominated as the prime ministerial candidate last September. The fact that Rahul Gandhi – who leads the Congress Party's electoral campaign – has not been nominated as a candidate for PM is being perceived as a sign of weakness.

SERIOUS DISPARITIES The backdrop to this political process is the socio-economic situation of a country of 1.2 billion, which has begun to surge forward economically like many others in the Global South such as Brazil, China and South Africa. Concurrently, inequalities and gaps in the development process reveal large segments of marginalised populations.

Oxfam, in a recent report, had this to say: "India has seen its number of billionaires increase from less than six to 61 in the past decade, concentrating approximately US\$ 250 billion among a few dozen people in a country of 1.2 billion. What is striking is the share of the country's wealth held by this elite minority, which has skyrocketed from 1.8 percent

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in 2003 to 26 percent in 2008, though it declined in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.”

Corruption charges during the Congress-led coalition’s second term have been especially damaging. This contributed to widening economic disparities impacting on the social stability of the country, its democratic institutions and security. An estimated 30 percent of Members of Parliament have criminal cases pending against them. The future of secularism – India’s hallowed doctrine from its inception, distinguishing it from the theocracy of Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s Pakistan – is in doubt.

The panoply of liberal democratic values of Nehruvian vintage such as the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, freedom of speech, gender equality, etc., have come under stress and strain. Will the expanding middle class (an estimated 30% are urban voters) and technology-fascinated youth segment (20% are between the ages of 18 and 25, and are first time voters) be greater guardians of these values than the generation of post-independence India under Jawaharlal Nehru?

MULTIPLE INEQUALITIES

Women comprise 50 percent of the voters, and agitation over rapes and discrimination will have its impact. History has proved that inequalities –



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whether they be political, economic or social – lie at the root of group discontent which, if neglected, festers into political dissent and lacking an adequate legal outlet within the system, into political terrorism and its horrifying consequences.

A people suffering under inequalities also look to populist leaders and parties as a remedy for their grievances. Kejriwal (the IIT graduate who worked at the Inland Revenue Service, where he was exposed to the rich not paying their dues to society) served a political apprenticeship under Anna Hazare on the anti-corruption issue demanding a Lokpal.

Convinced that he should work

within the political system and broaden his political agenda, Kejriwal set up the common man’s party – the AAP. Within a short space of time, the AAP gathered large numbers of supporters, winning 28 seats in Delhi where it formed the administration with support from Congress. The AAP has begun recruiting on a national scale and plans to contest in about 20 states. If successful, it could tip the balance for a coalition.

The AAP is still inexperienced in the actual task of governance. Some of its actions, like the disruptive *dharna* (fast) on the streets of Delhi and controversial statements, have lost it some support. The AAP must guard against the anarchy that it finds acceptable now as a David fighting a Goliath. A dangerous descent into violence will make the AAP’s democratic alternative not very different from fascism and dictatorship.

IMPACT ON SRI LANKA

Ultimately, what is in the election result for Sri Lanka? The official word from Delhi is that we cannot depend on India’s vote against the likely US resolution on Sri Lanka at the forthcoming Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva, because Congress is nervously eyeing votes in Tamil Nadu. The BJP has already announced that it will strenuously oppose Sri Lankan arrests of Tamil Nadu fishermen.

But all this posturing before

elections may eventually mature into hard-headed pragmatic policies, enabling Indo-Lanka relations to continue on an even keel.

On the Tamil Nadu factor, we cannot depend on how it will influence a future Indian government. We should, therefore, rely on a well-conceived domestic policy to manage our ethnic tensions through a consensus-based political solution. We also need to ensure that the relationship between the centre and the Northern Provincial Council is constructive and congenial. Focussing on economic relations is another way out.

The chauvinist opposition to the CEPA proposed by India must be reviewed and talks must reopen with whoever comes to power, so that we can negotiate the best deal and implement it quickly. More Indian investment in Sri Lanka from states outside Tamil Nadu will eventually make the cost of bad relations – because of political sentiment in Tamil Nadu – outweigh the benefits.

Thus, electoral change in India is not the sole determinant of Indo-Sri Lanka relations. We can also help shape trends by the wise conduct of our domestic policies and management of our bilateral relations with our powerful neighbour on a basis of equality, dignity and mutual benefit.



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