General Elections 2019 in India

Over the past month and a half close to a billion people across the huge expanse of India have been engrossed in the newest addition of its five-yearly General Election that elects the members of the lower house of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, and in turn, the country's Prime Minister. The sheer scale of the exercise, the level of public participation despite the oppressive mid-summer heat, the vibrant colours that light up the public rallies of popular political leaders, the speeches by politicians at these rallies extolling the virtues and accomplishments of their chosen political party while spewing fire against their opponents, these all contribute to making the exercise what *The New York Times* described as *"the greatest show on earth"*. General Elections in India are the real manifestation of India's vaunted democracy. Importantly, they are also the important glue, along with the country's federal structure, that binds the vastly diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious mix of the country together.

There is little doubt that the frenetic and ostentatious campaigning that accompanies every Indian General Election lends an air of festivity to it, and the 2019 elections have been no different. That, however, in no way detracts from the seriousness with which the exercise is undertaken by candidates and voters alike. Hence, the term *"show"* tends to trivialize the gravity of the elections by focusing on the festivities while diluting or clipping away the real issues involved. The discerning nature of the Indian voter is also overlooked by such a description. In the midst of all the colour, fun and frolic that have become traditions at every General Election, the voters have been known to spring major surprises that make pundits and forecasters look rather sheepish. The modern voter bases decisions on a dispassionate scrutiny of the government's performance over the preceding five years, on whether it has fulfilled its pre-election promises, the extent to which its policies and decisions have benefited them and their communities, but above all on their perception of the promises made for the next five years. The opposition too is gauged by its historical performance, its track-record in honoring past election pledges, and whether its current manifesto contains offers that are alluring yet implementable. The charisma and standing of the individuals projected by each party as their Prime Ministerial candidate also plays an ineffaceable role in the voters' choice.

Democracy has a long and sustained history in India. A limited form of democracy was exercised in the country even before it attained freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. Post-independence, in an unprecedented democratic experiment India adopted universal adult suffrage under which every adult Indian was given the right to vote. There had been widespread skepticism over the fate of democracy in a newly independent country as large and diverse as India. The doubters, however, underestimated the appeal democracy had for the Indian public. The first post-independence General Election was held in 1951-52, and the one this year will lead to the formation of the 17th Lok Sabha.

The scale and scope of the General Election in India is mind boggling. *The Economist* magazine once compared it to a *"lumbering elephant embarking on an epic trek"*. The number of eligible voters at this year's election is 900 million. This constitutes over 10% of the world's total population. To put it in perspective, it is more than the combined population of the continents of Europe and Australia. It is also four times the number of eligible voters in the next largest democracy in the world, the United States (US). Quite simply, the 2019 General Election in India is the largest democratic exercise that the world has ever seen.

Some commentators have termed the 2019 elections as the most significant amongst the 17 that India has had since independence. As Dr. Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Programme of Chatham House puts it, they hold *"particular importance because they are likely to determine the type of country India will be over the next decade or two. The opposition parties argue that they celebrate India's diversity — of religions, languages and ethnicities. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), however, argues that this emphasis on division — a colonial legacy — has weakened India"*.

A brief overview of the 2019 General Elections

The 900 million Indian voters will, through a direct, constituency-wise system, elect their federal representatives for the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha through a simple majority in each specific geographically defined constituency that is demarcated on the basis of population. The two remaining seats out of the total of 545 seats in the Lok Sabha are reserved for the Anglo-Indian community, which traces part of its ancestry to Europeans who intermarried with Indians in the colonial era. These two members are nominated by India's President. Each election constituency has a variable number of candidates, most fielded by either a national or a regional political party, although some independent candidates and strategic independents planted by rivals to cut into each other's votes are also invariably in the fray. A party or a coalition of parties requires a simple majority of at least 272 Members of Parliament (MPs) to form a government. This majority selects its leader, who becomes the Prime Minister.

The logistics involved in organizing an exercise of as massive a scale as the Indian General Elections is truly daunting. The responsibility of carrying out this onerous task is vested in the Election Commission of India (ECI), an autonomous constitutional body that has more than 300 full-time officials at its headquarters in New Delhi. The ECI on 10 March announced the much anticipated schedule for the 2019 elections, setting in motion the whole electoral process. It decided that because of the huge number of election officials and security personnel involved, voting would take place in various parts of the country in seven phases over 39 days – on 11 April, 18 April, 23 April, 29 April, 6 May, 12 May and 19 May, and after a short break counting of the votes would be done on 23 May. In total, about 930,000 polling stations will be set up where voters will cast their votes using Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). The ECI is required to ensure that no voter needs to travel more than two km to reach a polling station. This is an enormous challenge in itself, especially when seen in the backdrop of an ECI survey finding last year that over 80,000 polling stations lacked mobile connectivity and nearly 20,000 were in forest or semi-forest areas. Polling stations are often in remote areas, and one such station is being set up in the Gir forest in India's Gujarat state for just one voter, a monk. It is not surprising, therefore, that more than 11 million government officials have been deputed to conduct the elections, and they will travel by road, train, helicopter, boat, foot, and sometimes even on elephant back, to where their election duties take them. The cost of organizing the elections is also substantial. As per the ECI's estimates, the previous General Election in 2014 cost 38.7 billion Rupees ($552 million) to organize.

The main players at this year's elections are the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by the charismatic current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who had propelled his party to a landslide victory in the last elections in 2014 when the party won 282 seats. The BJP heads the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition that includes regional parties such as the Shiv Sena, the Janata Dal - United party (JD-U) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Attempting to unseat the BJP is India's grand old party, the Rahul Gandhi-led Congress that is the preeminent party in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition.

After two consecutive terms in power between 2004 and 2014, the Congress party suffered a chastening defeat in 2014 when it labored to secure a paltry 44 seats, down from 206 in 2009, on account of what the Indian voter perceived was a policy paralysis, and amidst a slew of alleged financial scams. The primary battle at the national level between these two powerhouses is spiced up by the several regional parties that are not formally aligned to either the NDA or the UPA, and whose seats assume great significance in the event of the national parties/coalitions falling short of a clear majority. Prominent among such regional parties at these elections are the socialist Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by Dalit icon Mayawati in the bellwether northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which elects more MPs to parliament than any other state – a whopping 80; the Trinamool Congress led by firebrand leader Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal; the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha; and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) in Andhra Pradesh. Each of these parties is expected to win a sizeable number of seats in their respective states, and harbor hopes of becoming kingmakers, or even kings, in New Delhi in the event of voters delivering a divided verdict.

Under the multi-party system that has been adopted by India, the candidate who secures the maximum number of votes in each constituency is elected to parliament. This effectively means that a candidate could secure as little as 30% of the votes and yet be elected to parliament on the basis of the simple majority that is required.

Issues on which the 2019 General Elections are being fought

The popularity ratings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who emerged triumphant after a massive Modi wave at the 2014 General Elections consequent to a lackadaisical and indecisive last couple years of UPA rule, have remained high over the last five years. His party, the BJP has opted for a presidential style election campaign that revolves around the personage of Modi. The primary message being sent out by the BJP is that India is only secure and can only progress with the strong and decisive Modi at the helm. There have been shortcomings of the Modi government in the economic sphere, with slowdown in growth, agrarian distress, and unemployment numbers. Following the bold retaliatory cross-border airstrikes targeting Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist camps deep within Pakistan in the wake of the Pulwama terrorist attack in February, the BJP has emphasized security and defence issues. The point that no Indian government had ever before responded to cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan with such spunk, alacrity and competence has been underlined by Modi and his party. Modi and his party are equally vociferous in denouncing the opposition, especially the Congress, as opportunistic, dynastic, and weak and ineffectual on national security.

The opposition, meanwhile, has targeted the BJP, and Modi in particular, who it alleges is running a one-man show in which his Cabinet colleagues have little say in decision making, on issues such as the demonetization of 2016, the implementation of the Goods and Service Tax (GST) in 2017, allegations of favoritism in the purchase of Rafale fighter jets from France, attacks on institutions of the State, and dividing the country on religious lines by pushing through an anti-minority agenda. However, efforts at forging opposition unity leading into the elections have been in vain, barring some limited regional tie-ups such as that between the SP and BSP in Uttar Pradesh, and this has inhibited what at one stage appeared to be a winning strategy to capitalize fully on whatever discontent there was among the masses over the declining economy under the BJP. The opposition has also not succeeded in turning the electoral battle into one predominantly on the economy and welfare, as its focus has not been unwavering. It has, instead, leveled a plethora of charges over the last few months against Modi and the BJP, moving from one to another in the expectation that some will find resonance. They also appear to be hoping that anti-incumbency, historically a potent factor in the India electoral

scenario, will do the rest of the work for them. Observers, however, feel that the opposition has fallen short in pro-actively and concertedly exploiting anti-incumbency.

Two elements that experts believe will have defining impacts on the 2019 General Elections are election spending and the use (and misuse) of social media. The skyrocketing cost of contesting elections in India is translating into a lack of transparency and conflicts of interest as political parties, faced with significantly reduced returns from traditional funding streams such as party memberships, are becoming increasingly reliant on donations from anonymous businessmen. Milan Vaishnav, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, believes that *"elections are getting more expensive for many structural reasons. There is a growing population, increasing political competition, voter expectations of handouts in the form of cash and other inducements, and technological change, which means greater outlays for media and digital outreach"*. Vaishnav, who co-authored a book titled *Cost of Democracy* with Devesh Kapur that deals with political funding, has estimated that India's 2019 elections could cost up to $10 billion. The Delhi-based think tank, Centre for Media Studies, put the estimated campaign expenditure a notch lower at $8.5 billion. Nevertheless, both these figures are much higher than the 2016 US General Election that involved spending of about $6.5 billion. To put things in perspective, the US is a $19 trillion-plus economy, as against India's $2.7 trillion economy.

In an election in which the amount of cash a party has in hand has the potential to dictate its prospects at the hustings, the BJP would reckon that it is in a very favorable position. Analysis of data by election watchdog the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) revealed that in the financial year 2017-18, corporates and individuals contributed 12 times more to the BJP than to six other parties combined, including the Congress. The BJP received 93% of all donations above 20,000 rupees ($290) that year. In total, the BJP received 4.37 billion rupees ($63.3 million) while the Congress got a comparatively paltry 267 million rupees. This incomparable disproportion caused Niranjan Sahoo of the New Delhi-based think tank the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) to say, *"There is a huge funding disparity now. Congress simply doesn't have the money to fight elections"*.

Social media had emerged as a game changer in the 2014 General Elections and had yielded rich dividends for the BJP. That was also the first time in an Indian election that a party had creatively and effectively utilized technology, including analytical engines, as a potent tool. The Congress lagged far behind in this field, and that found reflection in the final results. At the time in 2014 when Twitter published an article on the influence of Narendra Modi on their platform, Rahul Gandhi had not even joined the micro-blogging platform. He did so only in 2015. Despite Modi even today remaining one of the most followed politicians globally on social media, and a fair distance ahead of Rahul Gandhi, the Congress party has since the 2014 electoral debacle pursued its social media outreach seriously. While the BJP still retains the edge that it derived by starting way earlier, and expanded using its brimming coffers, the Congress, as also other major parties, is now also making its presence felt on the digital platform. It would be suicidal not to. There are close to half a billion smartphone users in India, of whom about a quarter of a billion are on WhatsApp and an even larger number on Facebook.

As Amit Prakash, Professor at the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi puts it, *"Given the scale of the electoral exercise and the plurality of the society that these elections seek to represent, political communication represents a far more crucial lynchpin in the modern Indian democratic contest than it does in many others. The need to address a large number of voters across spatial and social divides in a first-past-the-post system necessitates the deployment of new communication technologies for a more efficacious political campaign"*. He underlines that the BJP and the Congress are *"addressing entirely different public spheres through*

social media. On the one hand, the former offers a muscular policy stance with respect to defence, global claims of being a great power and the enforcement of bitter-pill policies domestically and argues for the need to subsume the individual to the greater national good. Meanwhile, the latter stresses the failures of the incumbent BJP government in the economic realm, particularly with respect to rising unemployment and the larger questions of economic security, justice and freedom. Vicious battles are being fought out on social media by the adherents of the two sides along with trolling each other". He believes that unanchored social media campaigns will have an important impact on the 2019 elections.

The trend thus far

At the time of writing, voting in four of the seven phases of the elections has been held. The process kicked off on 11 April when voters in 20 Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), voted to elect 91 MPs. The overall voter turnout in this phase was 69.50%. It was noteworthy that J&K recorded a healthy turnout of 57.35% despite calls for boycott by terrorist outfits, heartburn over state elections not being held along with the federal elections, and disquiet about questions being raised by the BJP over Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution that grant special status to the sensitive state.

In the second phase on 18 April, 95 parliamentary constituencies across 11 states and 1 Union Territory went to the polls. Voter turnout was 69.44%, with West Bengal recording the highest with 75.27% and J&K the lowest with 43.37%. Some incidents of violence marred the polling process in West Bengal, but no untoward incident was reported in J&K. Phase 3 on 23 April saw as many as 117 seats going to vote across 13 states and 2 Union Territories. This phase had a turnout of 68.40%. The fourth phase on 29 April also witnessed some violence in West Bengal and Odisha and EVM glitches at a few places, but was otherwise smoothly conducted and saw an overall turnout of 65.51%.

Themes that appeared to find resonance during the first four phases included farm distress, the caste factor, anti-terror operations against Pakistan, religion and anti-incumbency. Most opinion polling agencies that released surveys said that Prime Minister Modi had got a boost from the recent tension with Pakistan and consequently the BJP would succeed in either getting a slim majority or coming very close to a majority. CVoter, which predicted 267 seats for the BJP and its allies, said in a statement that *"In today's India we have seen perhaps for the first-time security issues competing with, and outdoing, a bread and butter issue like unemployment. Primarily, the BJP has been unable to sufficiently distinguish itself from Congress when it comes to making people feel the difference in terms of their livelihoods and economic interests. However, when it comes to controlling and responding on terror the same set of respondents do feel a clear and visible difference"*. The Times Now-VMR poll predicted a higher figure of 279 seats for the BJP and its allies. The polls have projected that the Congress and its allies, who have accused Modi of using the Balakot airstrikes as a political tool and have highlighted job creation, tackling farm distress and empowerment of women among its priorities, would more than double their seats to about 140, which would be well short of a majority. Exit polls of actual voters will not be released until after the final phase of voting closes on 19 May.

It merits mention, though, that pre-election opinion polls in a vast country like India have proved inaccurate several times in the past. They are best taken with a grain of salt. Although Modi and the BJP may actually be in the lead, one theme that is becoming increasingly clear is that it is going to be close. All parties have become increasingly shrill and bitter in their respective campaigns, replete with accusations, allegations and personal attacks, which implies that the fight may yet turn out to be closer than the pundits predict.

Conclusion

The noted Indian journalist Prannoy Roy, who has covered every Indian election over the last three decades, has recently released a book titled '*The Verdict: Decoding India's Elections*' that he co-authored with market researcher Dorab R. Sopariwala. The book, using data since the first Indian General Election held in 1952, has divided almost seven decades of elections into three phases – pro-incumbency, anti-incumbency and a perform or perish era. It questioned the notion that India's democracy was characterized mainly by anti-incumbency, which meant that there was a greater possibility of the ruling party being voted out of power. It instead suggested that the initial pro-incumbency phase (1952-1977) when voters placed a high level of trust in politicians and ruling parties gave way to a period of anti-incumbency (1977-2002) that saw the birth of the *"angry voter"*. The prospect of being voted back dropped dramatically in this phase from 80% to 29%. This prompted politicians to actually work towards bettering the lives of the electors. The voters, meanwhile, also grew wiser and could differentiate between governments that delivered on promises and those that did not. This is the perform or perish phase, which began in 2002 and has continued since. During this phase *"almost exactly half the governments have been voted out and half have been voted back to power"*, the book notes. The book also underlined that *"democracy lies at the very core of every Indian's DNA"*, and added that *"it is the voter and not the politician who is at the core of our democracy"*.

The BJP won handsomely in 2014 as it was able to convince a large section of the Indian electorate that Narendra Modi was capable of reversing the state of stupor that the Congress government led by Dr. Manmohan Singh had got stuck in over the preceding few years. The electorate believed that Modi was the leader who could deliver economic prosperity. The verity of the predictions of opinion pollsters is subject not only to the perception of the voters on whether Modi has delivered the promised prosperity, but equally as much on whether the voters will base their choices on foreign or security policy or on hardcore domestic issues. There is little doubt that the fact that Modi has ended India's policy of strategic restraint through his brave decision to respond militarily to Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism in India will be appreciated, even applauded, by a large section of the Indian population.

The Indian electorate has always displayed astuteness and acuity. It fearlessly rejected Indira Gandhi, among India's strongest leaders ever, at a juncture when she was at the height of her power. It also voted out Atal Bihari Vajpayee, one of India's greatest statesmen, in 2004, at a time when opinion polls and TV shows suggested he was winning hands down.

The wisdom of the Indian voter is encapsulated in a saying in Hindi that translates into *"This is the public. It knows everything"*. No matter who forms the next government in New Delhi after the counting of votes on 23 May, it is democracy and the Indian voter that will be the winners in the ultimate analysis.