



Northern comfort

The Congress's performance in the Hindi heartland will enthuse it in the run-up to 2019

For a party that had appeared to be lost in the political wilderness over the past few years, the Congress has plenty to cheer about following the results in the recent round of Assembly elections. In the three Hindi-speaking States, where it was locked in a direct contest with the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress has performed more than creditably, raising hopes of a revival of fortunes as the country gears up for the general election in 2019. In Chhattisgarh, the party probably well exceeded even its own expectations by building a massive 10-percentage point lead over the BJP, setting itself up to win more than a two-thirds majority. The battle in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh were on a more even keel, but at the time of writing it appears that the Congress may have done enough to form a government in both States. A measure of how much of a reversal this is for the BJP can be gauged by comparing this result with that of the 2014 Lok Sabha election, when the BJP won 62 of the 65 parliamentary seats in the three States. If the Congress struggled to breast the tape in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, it was because independents and smaller parties registered a few surprise victories; in Rajasthan, for instance, more than a dozen independents were among the winners. If the results are interpreted as pointers on how the 2019 election will play out, then the Congress may be still short of where it would like to be. But the results may well infuse the party leadership with the confidence that it is on the comeback trail.

The Congress's performance in these States will take some of the sting out of its losses in Telangana and Mizoram, where it was bested by regional players. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi won big, making light of the broad alliance put together by the Congress. Indeed, the alliance between the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party may well have polarised the contest in favour of the TRS. The TDP, which rules neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, is not exactly a popular party in much of Telangana because of its vacillations on the question of the creation of the new State. It is possible that the Congress was looking at the larger picture while deciding to ally with the TDP, seeing the regional party's leader N. Chandrababu Naidu as a rallying point for Opposition unity. United Andhra Pradesh was one State that contributed significantly to the Congress tally in both 2004 and 2009, and to be reduced to such pitiful numbers in Telangana, with little room for improvement in Andhra Pradesh, should certainly be a cause for concern for the national leadership of the party. Winning an ally in the TDP is small recompense for the massive erosion in the Congress's support base in the region. In Mizoram, where people vote against the Congress whenever the party is out of power at the Centre, the Mizo National Front was, unsurprisingly, the winner this time. But this defeat held another pain point: it saw the Congress losing its last citadel in the Northeast.

The best news for the Congress was of course Chhattisgarh. The presence of a third front in the form of the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh, led by former Chief Minister Ajit Jogi, and the Bahujan Samaj Party, which took away a chunk of the anti-incumbency votes, did nothing to deny the Congress a big win. Chhattisgarh had voted overwhelmingly for the BJP in 2014, giving it 10 of the 11 seats, and the dramatic reversal in fortunes must have shocked the BJP. But the Congress can also take heart from the performance in Madhya Pradesh, a much larger State that sends 29 members to the Lok Sabha. Although there was not much that separated the two parties in terms of vote share, the Congress can reasonably believe that the momentum is with it. In Rajasthan, where it performed stunningly in by-elections, and where anti-incumbency sentiment was believed to be riding high, the Congress, despite its victory, may regard its own performance as sub-par. For the BJP, the setback in Rajasthan, which has not been kind to the incumbent from 1998 onward, was no surprise. Despite conceding a substantial number of Assembly seats, the party can take solace from the fact that the difference in vote share between it and the Congress was minuscule. However, looking forward, the BJP will be worried that the results will encourage the Congress and the BSP to come together in an electoral embrace. In Madhya Pradesh, the BSP has demonstrated its strength, or at the very least its capacity to be a spoiler. An alliance of the Samajwadi Party, the BSP and the Congress that extends beyond Uttar Pradesh to Madhya Pradesh can seriously alter the political landscape of the region.

As for the BJP, the results are an opportunity to introspect. Not just on the performance of its governments in the State, but also the performance of the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. To reduce the results of the Hindi-speaking States to the intangible anti-incumbency sentiment would be a mistake. After all, both Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan survived two elections as incumbents. A potent mix of rural distress and urban angst seem to have contributed to the erosion in the BJP's support base. Farmers suffered disproportionately and for longer following demonetisation, and small traders in urban areas have felt handicapped by the straitjacket of the Goods and Services Tax. It may be tempting to think that aggressive cow vigilantism and the Ram temple will influence voter behaviour, but these elections underline it is liveli-hood concerns that really matter. The BJP will need to tackle issues of employment and development with better intent if it is to arrest the slide. The first term of a Prime Minister is won on promise, but the second term will have to be won on performance. Not even Narendra Modi is an exception to this.

A fiercely contested landscape

The Congress has struggled to subdue the BJP in these State elections, but the setback to the BJP is indisputable



VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

If celebrations have broken out in Congress offices across the country, few will grudge it considering that its success in the Hindi heartland comes after four years of defeats, self-doubt and a feeling of being under siege by a perennially turbo-charged Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Yet the Congress's victory is not without caveats. It swept only Chhattisgarh, was stretched to win Rajasthan, and it sweated to be able to be in a position to lay claim to forming the government in Madhya Pradesh. It was routed in Telangana and Mizoram.

For the BJP, there may not even be a consolation prize, in its biggest electoral set-back since capturing power in 2014. For both the national parties there are also dis-comfiting portents in the verdict.

The only clear winner

The one winner without a shadow of doubt is K. Chandrashekar Rao of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, who decimated the Mahakutumi, or the mega alliance formed by the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) as a possible model for future Opposition strategy. A return to power for Mr. Rao, who had played a stupendous role in the birth of Telangana, is remarkable, and all the more for coming against a combined Opposition.

If there is a second man with a stand-out performance, it is Shivraj Singh Chouhan, of the BJP but in many ways more than the BJP – at least in Madhya Pradesh where his writ ran for three terms, unchallenged by the Opposition and, most unusually, almost auton-

mous of the power duo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah. Mr. Chouhan came within a whisker of winning outright in M.P., which under him had taken on the characteristics of an incumbency-advantage State. The longer he was in power, the more entrenched he seemed to have become. One of the reasons for this is Mr. Chouhan's invaluable contribution to agriculture in a State where 70% of people depend on it. Even so, the near-miracle story had turned sour in the last year thanks to the Centre's intervention to stop bonus for farmers, and a demonetisation-induced cash crunch that delayed payments down the line. Hours into the counting in M.P., the suspense lingered, highlighting that Mr. Chouhan was fighting every inch of the way.

The bigger story of this election may well flow from the outcomes in Telangana and M.P. The defeat of the Mahakutumi, if not an irretrievable set-back for the Mahagathbandhan efforts nationally, certainly means that Rahul Gandhi and N. Chandrababu Naidu, the TDP leader, will have to go back to the drawing board to rework alliance strategy for 2019. M.P., on the other hand, is an example of a popular Chief Minister – Mr. Chouhan dominated the posters where he was compared to Lord Shiva – paying the price for decisions that were not of his making but were imposed from above by a government that had unconsciously pushed through measures like demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) without thinking through the double whammy of depriving people of liquidity while simultaneously subjecting them to an arbitrary and ever-changing tax regime.

The Congress has won in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the latter by a landslide. In Rajasthan, Chief



Minister Vasundhara Raje, written off by most people, held her ground before caving in. The Congress's near loss in M.P. was brought about by a refusal to acknowledge that it needs partners, in this case the Bahujan Samaj Party. The party will have to introspect on its behaviour of seeking alliances where it is too weak to contest by itself and rejecting them in places where it feels it is in a commanding position.

Steadily losing ground

The latest round of elections reinforces the trend of the BJP losing ground, which started with its narrow victory in the Gujarat election. In the Karnataka election that followed, the BJP not only stopped short of an absolute majority but its patented government formation manoeuvres, successful in many earlier instances, too bombed. The party also lost a string of by-polls across the country.

The BJP's last big victory in an Assembly election was in Uttar Pradesh in early 2017. In that election, the BJP exceeded the most optimistic projections to win 312 of 403 seats. The U.P. election provided an insight into the party's changed strategy under Prime Minister Modi. In the 2014 general election, which Mr. Modi single-handedly won for the BJP, his image was of a capitalist-reformer. He spoke of prosperity and jobs. However, the Modi campaign's

Signs of a revival

The Congress has placed itself firmly as the nucleus of any anti-BJP formation



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Of the few States where the Congress confronts the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) face to face, three will likely have Congress Chief Ministers now. Last year, the party gave the BJP a scare in the fourth, Gujarat. Where the Congress squares off with regional parties, it is at a disadvantage, as Telangana and Mizoram show. That is the summary of Rahul Gandhi's first year as president of the party.

Key organisational changes

After taking over as president, Mr. Gandhi sought to engineer a generational shift in the party without antagonising the old guard – "18 or 80, everyone has a place in this party," he reassured his colleagues in an early meeting. He outlined a three-point approach for the newly appointed office-bearers of the party, a cohort that is a refreshingly diverse, and demonstrably young – strengthen the organisation, honour the worker and en-

sure 'social justice', meaning an outreach to the lower rungs of society.

New office-bearers were asked to spend no less than three weeks every month in States they are in charge of, and travel to the booth level. They were asked to treat workers with respect, listen to them and involve them in ticket distribution, formulation of the manifesto and such. They were asked to reach out to the backward castes and Dalits, particularly the former who have kept the electoral balance tilted in the BJP's favour for some years now in these States. Social justice was to be pursued in both representation and the party agenda.

On refining his own image, Mr. Gandhi concluded that his opponents were successful in portraying him as non-Hindu or even anti-Hindu – the root of all his optical disadvantages. His mixed ancestry and a syncretic approach to faith made him vulnerable, he felt. That led to a controversial but apparently successful call, to demonstrate his Hindu faith and personal piety. The wisdom of that is open to further scrutiny, but it may not be a coincidence that the apparent shift in his image among the middle class, to now being seen as a serious power player, overlaps



with his Instagrammed pilgrimages.

Reading the results

The varying magnitude of the Congress victories in the three States can be explained as the result of the varying degrees by which this strategy and tactics fell in place. In Chhattisgarh, the backward caste farmers, primarily Yadavs, Kurmis and Sahus, moved to the Congress in significant measure. Increased representation in seat distribution and Mr. Gandhi's persistent campaign on farm distress appealed emotionally and rationally to this group, which made all the difference. The party organisation turned robust and proactive. The exit of Ajit Jogi from the party

stress on 'development' notwithstanding, it made overt and covert attempts to polarise, as for example in Muzaffarnagar in western U.P., the scene of a horrific communal conflagration in 2013. Indeed, even as Mr. Modi sweet-talked the electorate with lofty promises, Mr. Shah stoked Hindu passions in that sensitive area, which earned him a police case as well as a ban by the Election Commission of India.

In the 2017 U.P. Assembly election, Mr. Modi cast himself as a friend and saviour of the poor to runaway success. He portrayed demonetisation as an effort to downsize the rich in favour of the poor. But as the campaign drew to a close, the old chestnuts came out and the Prime Minister began to talk the language of minority appeasement and Hindu deprivation.

This has since become the BJP's formula to win elections: a pro-poor approach combined with an unhidden agenda of communal polarisation. In Gujarat Mr. Modi spoke of Pakistan's interest in promoting a Muslim Congress Chief Minister. He also insinuated that respected Congress leaders, including the former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, were in league with Pakistan to destabilise the country. The strategy worked only partially. The BJP barely touched the half-way mark. In Karnataka, the formula was even less of a success.

In the current round of elections, Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah went a step further and unleashed U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath with the express intention of dividing the electorate. Mr. Adityanath, whose single claim to fame is his anti-Muslim approach in all things, did exactly that. In M.P., he said the fight was between the Congress's Ali and the BJP's Bajrangbali (Hanuman). In Hyderabad, he

promised to drive out Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen should the BJP get a majority. It didn't matter to Mr. Modi or Mr. Shah that Mr. Adityanath had failed the electoral test in his own State and had lost a critical by-election in his home turf of Gorakhpur.

The bad news doesn't end here for the BJP. In a majority of Assembly elections held since 2014, the BJP's vote share has dropped well below what it polled in the Lok Sabha election, a pattern seen in the current elections – whether in Rajasthan, M.P. or Chhattisgarh, the BJP's vote share is nowhere near what it polled in the Lok Sabha.

Looking to 2019

Assuming the vote shares repeat themselves in the Lok Sabha election, the BJP would lose over 40 seats in these States alone. In north India, the BJP had reached saturation levels in 2014, a feat it will be hard put to replicate. In the south, where the BJP has historically been weak, it looks increasingly like a washout for the party: the TDP has broken with it while the TRS, with a solid Muslim vote to draw upon, is clearly unwilling to play ball. In Karnataka, the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Congress are going steady.

The disenchantment of the poor is hard to miss, as also the ferment among Dalits and farmers. There's been an exodus of institutional heads, all of whom have given the thumbs down to Mr. Modi's disastrous economic policies. But the silver lining for the BJP is Mr. Modi himself. He continues to be popular through the wavering fortunes of his party.

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claims within the party is also tricky terrain, which will now get trickier.

With Tuesday's results, the Congress has placed itself firmly as the nucleus of any anti-BJP formation, at the national level, in 2019. This will trigger fresh dynamics between the Congress and other non-BJP regional parties. Despite their claims of anti-BJP credentials, entrenched regional parties will not accommodate the Congress easily. A resurgent Congress alarms them even more.

If anything, after the massive victory of regional parties in Telangana and Mizoram, regional parties will bargain hard with the Congress. Therefore, the challenge before Mr. Gandhi is to raise his own bargaining power vis-à-vis potential partners to buttress the position of the Congress as an alternative to the BJP – in vision and in governance. An alliance is not something that happens because one searches for it; it is something that happens when parties find it essential for self-preservation and advancement. Having fought back Hindutva in its hotbed, Mr. Gandhi's next stop will have to be to take the fight to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Five States and the vote

The exit polls proved right in terms of the overall picture. The actual results only show that using and raising religion as a key issue no longer resonates with the electorate. The Telangana verdict shows that the Bharatiya Janata Party still has no place beyond the Vindhyas. It is strange that a section of the people still vote for the BJP even as a large percentage of the electorate is able to see through the party's hollow promises of there being good days. The writing on the wall as far as 2019 is concerned is clear.

K. MALIKUL AZEEZ,
Chennai

■ The results, which are being seen as a semi-final to next year's 2019 Lok Sabha elections, are bound to make Congress president Rahul Gandhi more self-confident. These Assembly polls also saw national issues being mixed along with regional topics. The dynamic Prime

Minister does not seem to command the public acceptability and popularity which were seen earlier.

JAYASREE THAMPI,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Elections are the only opportunity people have to show how they consider those in power and who they voted for and elected. It is clear that India will not be an Opposition-mukt, or for that matter, a Congress-mukt Bharat. Temple politics and a sectarian agenda have been rejected. Voters seem to have made it clear that India needs a strong Opposition if it has to be a vibrant democracy. Rahul Gandhi has proved that he can emerge as a leader, given time. One hopes that the major political parties study the lessons from these elections and results before they prepare for 2019.

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA,
Bengaluru

■ The results, whether seen to be positive or negative for

the BJP, show that demonetisation, tall promises such as bringing back black money from foreign shores into people's bank accounts in India and a couldn't-care-less attitude towards the plight of farmers played a crucial role in the choices made by voters. The results have also cast their shadow on the 2019 parliamentary elections.

RAJAKUMAR ARULANANDHAM,
Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu

■ The results are gladdening and create hope that everything is not over yet. The people cannot be fooled all the time with false promises. Eventually, the tall promises became impossible to fulfil. The BJP has miles to go before it sleeps but only promises to break. It must remember that it was given a thumping verdict in 2014. The results are a warning. The party should also realise that it can no longer take the Congress for granted.

H. NAGESH BHANDARKAR,
Chennai

■ The results are a slap in the face of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its offshoots such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. They are also a blow to the two key leaders in the BJP who are acting with arrogance and showing a 'don't care' attitude as far as the common man is concerned. For 2019, the Opposition needs to work in tandem with only one motto: defeat the BJP.

THARCIOUS S. FERNANDO,
Chennai

■ The Congress should not consider this as its victory. If it does, it is deluded. The election results may be the result of anger against the BJP but, at the same time, are not a reflection of love for or confidence in the Congress.

RADHA SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Another exit

It appears that the suffocating environment being created by the

government is causing professionals and achievers brought in to head organisations and even advise the government to call it a day. Clearly, there is something going very wrong. There is something autocratic in the manner in which the government is functioning, overlooking the merit of professionals. Politicians must learn to accommodate the opinions of experts and professionals, who should not be treated as being subservient. Going forward, certain key portfolios should be reserved for professionals.

VAZUTHUR RAGHAVAN,
Bengaluru

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The report, "Activist Kausalya marries 'parai' player in Coimbatore" (Dec. 10, 2018, some editions), erroneously said that Kausalya's mother was among those sentenced to death by the trial court in Tirupur.

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