
WILL INDIA'S SECULARISM SURVIVE BJP SUPERMAJORITY PUSH?

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Polling in the enormous, seven-phase general election in India, which began on the 19th of April, drew to a close yesterday. And today media houses across the neighbouring country will likely share results of exit polls and generally try to accurately predict who will win the Lok Sabha polls—the ruling coalition that raised the slogan of “ab kee bar, 400 paar” or the alliance of opposition parties bearing the acronym of INDIA, which has vowed to stop the juggernaut led by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in its tracks. Most people agree that the election is a crucial one, not just because it will decide whether Narendra Modi will remain India's prime minister for another term, but also because it may have adverse consequences for secularism in that part of the world. Many analysts say the BJP had set its sights on the 400-seat mark simply because a ‘super-majority’ in the

Lok Sabha would allow it to amend the constitution at will. According to them, if the ruling coalition gets sufficient number of seats, it will turn the constitution into a non-secular one, meaning a pro-Hindutva document. That is precisely why Rahul Gandhi of the Indian National Congress has been urging the electorate to “save the constitution by keeping the BJP at bay”. After observing the voting trends in all seven phases of the mammoth electoral exercise, particularly the voter turnout, most experts feel the BJP-led NDA coalition will not be able to attain a ‘super-majority’ in the lower house of parliament. So, whether the BJP will get more than or even close to 400 seats is no longer in question; the question now is whether or not the party will win a simple majority. That query, however, can only be answered by the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is expected to announce the results in a few days. There are several crucial issues, however, that may have altered the voting trends in a meaningful way. Here’s a look at some of these matters: In all the elections since 1989 which the BJP won at the national level, it emerged victorious in a majority of parliamentary constituencies belonging to the city-state of Delhi. In 2004 and 2009 it failed to win a majority among the parliamentary seats of the national capital; and both times it lost the elections at the national level. That’s why the city-state, which boasts seven Lok Sabha seats, is considered by analysts as a bellwether state for BJP when it comes to national elections. Interestingly, Delhi’s voters cast their ballots rather intelligently in the last decade or so.

At the parliamentary level they voted mainly for BJP candidates (or their allies), but at the state level they voted overwhelmingly for Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) candidates. As a result, AAP's founder and chief Arvind Kejriwal has been heading the city-state's government since 2015. Put differently, the voters of Delhi found it convenient, and sufficiently pragmatic, to vote for the BJP at the national level and AAP in the state elections. This time, however, the voters must have thought long and hard over which party to vote for. That's because the BJP allegedly "ordered" the national agency concerned to put AAP's founder behind bars on charges of corruption. Mr Kejriwal was arrested about a week on from the announcement of election schedule by the ECI; he thus became the first incumbent chief minister in modern India's history to be thrown behind bars. Mr Kejriwal has been a thorn in the side of BJP ever since becoming Delhi's chief minister. Tellingly, he is not the only AAP leader who was sent to prison by the authorities. At least three AAP leaders were put behind bars one after the other, allegedly because the BJP reportedly wanted "to crush the opposition party once and for all". The ruling coalition arguably hates AAP's founder intensely because his policies – under which his administration provides education and healthcare free of charge to the residents of Delhi – have the potential to propel him to a class of exceptional leaders. The chief minister is also a recipient of the famous Ramon Magsaysay Award; hence the BJP and its allies want to stop him from winning this year's election at all costs. Mr

Kejriwal has since been released by the court on bail to campaign for his party. However, it remains to be seen if the chief minister's image has been tarnished sufficiently by his arrest on corruption charges or whether the voters have rejected the allegations and instead decided to punish the BJP for indulging in political machinations on the eve of a general election. AAP is not the only opposition party that is facing tough problems allegedly due to the "plots and conspiracies" of the BJP-led ruling alliance. On March 21 (the same day Mr Kejriwal was arrested) the Congress claimed it was unable to pay even two rupees to anyone. Rahul Gandhi revealed at a press conference that the party's bank accounts had been frozen. "This is not the freezing of Congress party's bank accounts; this is the freezing of Indian democracy." He pointed out that financial action was taken against his party about two months before the election and blamed the prime minister for it, not the agencies directly involved. "This is a criminal action..., a criminal action by the prime minister and the home minister. So, the idea that India is a democracy is a lie. There is no democracy in India today," said the scion of Gandhi family. "(Twenty) per cent of India votes for us and we are not able to pay ?2 for anything. This has been orchestrated to cripple us in the elections," added the Congress leader. Some analysts point out that Congress party and AAP are both part of the 'big-tent and multi-party' opposition grouping called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and suggest they are being punished for that very

reason. This opposition alliance led by Congress party initially had 16 secular-minded parties and the number later increased to 40. It has been given a clever name, but its brief history shows it may not be as effective and efficient as its members would have us believe. You see, the first meeting of the opposition parties was held in Patna and was chaired by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in June last year, where the idea for a national opposition alliance was tabled. However, to the dismay of many, Mr Kumar is no longer part of the INDIA cluster. Similarly, Mamata Banerjee of the All-India Trinamool Congress initially gave confusing signals over such crucial matters as seat adjustment among member parties. The opposition alliance, therefore, may not have been too successful in forging a robust united front against the BJP behemoth. The BJP did not field a single candidate in the contests for three Lok Sabha seats of the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK) region. According to analysts, the ruling party apparently felt its five-year-old decision of revoking the special status of the region, abolishing its statehood, and bringing it under the direct control of New Delhi had rendered the party so unpopular that vying for the parliamentary seats was useless. In another surprising development, the people of the occupied region, who in the past regularly and routinely boycotted parliamentary elections as a mark of protest against Indian occupation of the Muslim-majority territories, turned out in greater numbers this year to let their voice be heard loud and clear. Previously the people had adopted electoral boycott as a form of

protest, but this time they chose to vote and be counted. According to reports published and/or telecast by credible news organisations, including Al Jazeera, all three IIOJK constituencies registered record-high voter turnout figures. On May 13, the Srinagar constituency recorded about 38 per cent polling, the highest since 1989, while Baramulla recorded an all-time-high turnout of 59 per cent. The voters repeated the feat in the Anantnag-Rajauri constituency on May 25. Some analysts said the Kashmiris voted in greater numbers to ensure that smaller parties allied to the BJP, such as the one called the Apni Party, do not make it to the parliament. For her part Mehbooba Mufti—a former chief minister of the disputed region who was once close to Mr Modi's party—said that people opted to vote in greater numbers because they are still angry over the abrogation of Article 370 of the constitution in 2019. In a noteworthy turn of events, two Kashmiri parties that often curried favour in the past with top BJP leaders to attain power—the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference of Farooq Abdullah and the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party of Ms Mufti—took part in the election as part of the INDIA bloc. BJP and other parties of its ilk cannot even dream of going out on the hustings without a major religious (read Hindu nationalist) factor going in their favour. Also, advancing the cause of Hindu Rashtra (nation) is their *raison d'être*. In this general election the religious factor upon which they seemingly built up all their hopes was, of course, the inauguration of a grand Ram Mandir on the

site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, which was torn down by Hindu fanatics in 1992. These parties apparently thought that Ram Mandir's opening during this term was enough to bring about a landslide victory in the polls; hence there was no need to launch other initiatives, like the one involving Pakistan bashing. This was one reason why Mr Modi didn't resort much to this particular tactic while campaigning for a third consecutive term in office.