

Reflections On Election 2009

Citizen involvement is one of the more heartening features of election 2009, says **Jagdeep S Chhokar**

The recently concluded elections to the Lok Sabha and to the state assemblies of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, and Sikkim have been variously hailed as historic, path-breaking, and even momentous by poll observers and commentators. Perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say that such appellations can be justifiably applied to every general election held in the country so far, since each is a colossal exercise, and is more complex than the previous one. So, what makes the 2009 election stand out?

The great Indian democracy

First, the 2009 election is being called a great success of India's democracy, and, looked at from one perspective, it indeed is. Some shrill voices were raised after the first phase of the election, in response to violence and the loss of life during the phase, thereby questioning the wisdom of the Election Commission in holding polls in all the areas affected by Maoists in one phase. In retrospect, and as pointed out later by Election Commission officials, it was a 'master stroke' as the polls in the remaining phases turned out to be "remarkably peaceful and uneventful". This was made possible because elections were held under the watchful eyes of about one lakh security personnel, for each phase. One might wonder if this was a battle of the ballot, or a battle of the bullet vs the ballot. But, like the last 62 years, the ballot has won, and we should be grateful for that. Impressive, though it is, we can still learn some lessons from South Africa, which held nationwide elections - also with a

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very diverse electorate - and a premier international cricket tournament, at the same time.

A vote for stability...

The results make it clear that it was a vote for a stable government which is good news for the entire country, but it is particularly so for the business and financial community. A stable political environment is a necessary pre-condition for business and economic growth. This should enable the corporate sector to plan ahead with a reasonably stable outlook, at least for the next five years. Though the 206 seats won by the Congress Party is quite short of 273 (needed for clear majority), none of the coalition partners has enough numbers to de-stabilise the government. It makes the Congress much more free of the 'compulsions of coalition' than it was in the last Lok Sabha. Add to this the fact that Dr Manmohan Singh, who is widely considered to be the original architect of economic reforms, is at the helm of the government and the corporate sector has more than enough reason to cheer.

...and for good governance

Another positive and encouraging outcome of the election is the recognition and appreciation of what the electorate has perceived to be good governance. This is seen in the results of the states such as Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. The hypothesis of good governance being rewarded is also proved by a reverse case - that of Uttar Pradesh - where the absence or lack of good governance seems to have been punished. This is a trend that some observers claim to have seen even at the national level, but this claim does not seem to be as well established as at the level of state governments. One hopes that this is a real trend and that it will continue, because tying governance to the exercise of political power is a necessary condition for democracy to be effective; and will lead to balanced and all-round development - one that has been missing from the Indian political landscape for many years now.

Increasing money power

While the impact of muscle power is countered by the use of security forces, as we have seen, and also, in some ways, by the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) to prevent forced voting and booth capturing, the use of money power has a different script. A study¹ of the recently concluded elections shows that as many as 305 (out of 544) newly elected members of Parliament (MPs) had declared (in their sworn affidavits filed by them along with their nomination forms in pursuance of a Supreme Court judgment²), that their assets exceed Rs 1 crore. This is nearly twice as high

as in the 2004 Lok Sabha (which had only 154 crorepati MPs) and it shows the almost controlling influence that money has in the electoral process. The average assets of an MP in 2004 was Rs 1.8 crore, as compared to a Rs 5.12 crore in 2009; and there was an average increase of Rs 2.7 crore in the assets of 300 candidates who re-contested the elections in 2009 (having also contested in 2004). This amounts to an increase of 287 per cent! While no one can, and should worry about the increasing prosperity of any section of society, the source of prosperity also needs to be kept in view, lest there is be confusion between the end and the means.

This is why reports in the media³ that the Income Tax department has directed the enforcement wings of intelligence, investigation, and exemption to study the returns filed by various candidates in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections are important. Citing media reports on crorepati candidates as a "definite source of information", the department had asked its assessing officers across the country to start scrutinising the candidates' I-T returns as soon as the elections end. What these investigations reveal will be watched with interest by several sections of society.

More divisive politics

A worrying factor in the election was the type and level of political discourse during the campaign. The Model Code of Conduct for the Guidance of Political Parties and Candidates, jointly and voluntarily agreed to between the political parties and the Election Commission, was breached more often than it was honoured. Without giving examples of its breach which were reported widely in the media, a mere reproduction of the first three paragraphs of the Code will inform the reader about the extent of the breaches. The paragraphs read as follows:

"No party or candidate shall include in any activity which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred or cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic.

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"Criticism of other political parties, when made, shall be confined to their policies and programme, past record and work. Parties and Candidates shall refrain from criticism of all aspects of private life, not connected with the public activities of the leaders or workers of other parties. Criticism of other parties or their workers based on unverified allegations or distortion shall be avoided.

"There shall be no appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes. Mosques, Churches, Temples or other places of worship shall not be used as forum for election propaganda."

Ideology gets the go by

Another worrying factor was the complete and utter lack of even a semblance of ideology on the part of most political parties and formations, particularly in the pre-poll scenario when the parties were working out options to maximise political power; even if it meant aligning with groups and parties which not only are, but will continue to be at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum. This politics of open greed, and naked pursuit of political power with scant regard, if any, for values, principles, and ideology, does not augur well for the moral wellbeing of society, because political leadership, being the highest in a democratic society, has a very strong influence on the values of the society. Another example of such politics is the choice of candidates of political parties. According to sworn affidavits submitted by the candidates themselves, about 15 per cent (or 1114) of all the contesting candidates had criminal cases pending against them, attracting punishments of two years or

more of imprisonment. Of these candidates, as many as 499 were charged with heinous crimes under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which include murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping, and extortion, among others. Also, 61 per cent of the candidates had not furnished details of their Permanent Account Number (PAN), including many who had declared their assets to be over Rs 1 crore.

The result: 158 of the newly elected MPs have criminal cases pending against them, and 74 of them are charged with heinous crimes. Altogether, the 158 MPs have a total of 509 criminal cases against them, indicating their involvement in multiple cases. Of these, 267 are charges of a heinous nature. But in comparative terms, this is a shade better, offering only a glimmer of hope as in the 2004 Lok Sabha, there were 302 charges of a heinous nature, implying a reduction of around 11.6 per cent⁴.

And while the number of MPs with criminal cases against them has certainly gone up as compared to 2004, the loss of colourful and well known heavyweights - such as Mohammed Taslimuddin, Atiq Ahmed, Surendra Yadav, Munna Shukla, Mukhtar Ansari - and their family members who were really surrogate candidates such as Mohammed Shahabuddin's wife Hina Shahav, and Pappu Yadav's wife Ranjeet Ranjan, as reported in the media⁵, is certainly significant.

The citizen's touch

This, then, is the nature of representatives we have in the 15th Lok Sabha. Are there any positives from Election 2009? Possibly, the greatest hope that it offers is of citizen involvement. True, the voting percentage in Mumbai was low, despite the angst over the tragic event of November 2008. But this has to be seen in the backdrop of a sharp

¹ By Association for Democratic Reforms (www.adrindia.org).

² AIR 2003 SC 2363.

³ *The Tribune* (May 09, 2009), and *The Hindu* (May 10, 2009), both quoting the Press Trust of India (PTI).

⁴ All figures quoted are based on the data taken from affidavits submitted by candidates to the Election Commission as part of their nomination papers, as collated and analyzed by the Association for Democratic Reforms (www.adrindia.org).

rise in the number of citizen groups which got actively involved in the process of the election and not in competitive politics. To what extent was this trend caused or encouraged by the November 2008 tragedy in Mumbai, and/or by the Obama election in the US can be debated endlessly. Whatever be the reason, citizen involvement remains an important feature of Election 2009.

Citizen involvement during Election 2009 happened in several ways. The most widespread seemed to be internet-driven efforts by several individuals and groups exhorting people to come out and vote for what they considered 'good' candidates, or candidates of particular persuasions; and to demand a particular performance or promise from them. Several political parties and individual candidates also made an extensive use of the internet. Then there were celebrities from various sectors who got involved, asking people to vote for 'better' candidates; in addition to their usual campaigning for various political parties and candidates.

Corporates rise to the occasion

A distinct development was the more active involvement of the corporate sector, which is known to contribute financially to almost all political groupings, more, or less, as a form of insurance. But this time, several business houses came out openly to argue in favour of eliminating criminals from politics and to exhort citizens to vote for 'clean' candidates. This is a very encouraging sign because it has been argued that, "business can, obviously, achieve much more for society and itself if the political environment is predictable and, more importantly, works according to some commonly and morally acceptable standards. It may be in business' own interest to support transparency and cleansing of the political process in the country, even if it doesn't get involved in it directly."⁶ With the Tata Group leading the way by

⁵ *The Hindustan Times*, May 18, 2009.

⁶ "A business interest in politics", *Mint*, October 25, 2007 (<http://www.livemint.com/articles/2007/10/25005617/A-business-interest-in-politic.html>.)



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having set up the Tata Electoral Fund, which gives funds to political parties based on their vote share (though an offer was recently reported to have

been returned by one political party), it may be worthwhile for the corporate sector to think of not limiting its financial support only to political parties (which, in any case, seem to have a vested interest in the current system of governance and elections), but to also extend it to efforts that attempt to reform, and significantly improve, the status quo of the electoral, political, and governance systems. ■

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