

# DEMOCRATIZATION

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# DEMOCRATIZATION

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culture among the population at large. And given the narrowness of the KMT's majority in the LY, it is vital that modes of co-operation be devised if the legislative process is not to be endlessly disrupted.

(c) *Relations with the Mainland*

Although the President partly owes his large majority in March to the intervention of the PRC, he also knows that he has at least to try to achieve some *modus vivendi* with China, otherwise future interventions could have an entirely unpredictable effect upon the democratic political system. Thus in his inaugural speech in May he announced for the first time that he was willing, if necessary, to travel to the mainland to meet the PRC leaders face to face. Whether they will reciprocate is unclear, and they did heap unusually personal criticism upon him during the confrontation. In any case the mainland leadership are beginning to prepare for the next party congress and the return of Hong Kong in 1997. It is not clear whether for the moment they are sufficiently united to engage in significant political contact with Lee. And given Lee's own electoral triumph, he will not feel intense pressure at home to do anything hasty. Yet it is worth remembering that in addition to the problems obstructing the development of democracy on Taiwan, many of which are akin to those confronting other democratizing regimes, the shadow of mainland China remains one of the most opaque, unpredictable and difficult to dissolve.

PETER FERDINAND  
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NOTE

1. *Free China Journal*, 12 April 1996, p.2.

## The Continued Democratization of Indian Democracy: Regionalization, Social Change and the 1996 General Election

The distinction between democracy and democratization is often overdrawn. In the standard formulation, the experiences of established (or 'consolidated') democracies are meant to provide lessons for democratizing countries, those *en route* to full democracy. The reality is rather different. Even democracies which qualify as consolidated continue to democratize. Indeed, if they did not their democratic credentials would rightly be called into question, given the elite bias of virtually all newly formed democracies. India's eleventh general election, conducted in April and May, proved once again that India is democratic not only in the sense of being able to conduct free and fair elections, but also in the continued democratization of the political sphere within which competitive mobilization takes place. This process is unfolding largely at the regional level, and may well have been strengthened by the electoral outcome.

Over the past five years, groups of low status in the traditional social order have increased their political role substantially, forming parties based upon lower-caste identity that in some regions captured large portions of the popular vote and formed governments at the state level. Some, though not all, of these parties have now found a place at the apex of Indian politics as partners in the United Front coalition government that has assumed power in New Delhi under the leadership of Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda. The current defence minister, the leader of the Samajwadi Party (SP), is from the non-elite Yadav caste. In the 1970s, Jagjivan Ram, who hailed from a caste even lower in the traditional status hierarchy than the Yadavs, held the same office in an earlier government. But Jagjivan Ram had spent almost his entire career within the Congress Party – a powerful leader, to be sure, but still largely a token, subjected to the discipline and constraints of a party dominated by upper-caste bosses.<sup>1</sup>

The crucial difference between then and now is that the current defence minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, heads a party explicitly devoted to furthering the interests of what in Indian political (and juridical) parlance are known as the 'other backward castes' (OBCs), groups not quite as oppressed as the ex-untouchable, or Dalit, castes, but underprivileged none the less. The SP and other parties of its ilk do not want mere representation. They want power and the spoils of office. Possessed of impressive

grassroots organizations – and in some regions as much ‘muscle’, if not money, as the main national players – they are not only willing but also able to withdraw support from any coalition partner that fails to deliver on its promises. They are placing additional demands on a political system, and an economy, already seen as suffering from ‘demand-overload’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the riddle of democracy, in India as elsewhere, is not simply whether democracy can generate continued democratization, but whether democracy itself can *survive* democratization.

This challenge is particularly acute in India, however, where political upheaval has been accompanied by other dramatic transformations. The Indian economy has undergone five years of sometimes cautious, but ultimately far-reaching structural reform. The proper role for the state is a subject of profound soul-searching in India today, and not simply in relation to economic life. The very conception of what it is to be a citizen of that state – to be an Indian – is currently the site of fierce ideological contestation. India’s second ‘hung parliament’ in a row signifies more than a political realignment taking place in party politics. The currents beneath the surface presage fragmentation. Not of India as a unified political entity or apparatus of administration. But of the social bases of Indian politics and of the ideological moorings to which social groups have traditionally remained attached.

In the recently concluded elections (see Table 1), Prime Minister Narasimha Rao led his Congress(I) Party to its worst-ever performance at the polls. Its abysmal 28.1 per cent share of the popular vote represented an 8.4 per cent decline on the 1991 general election, while its 245 seats in 1991 were reduced to 136. That Rao was able to survive a full five-year term in office is itself something of a political miracle. A long-time back-room operative for the Gandhi family, the aging stalwart was installed as a

TABLE 1  
REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS WON BY  
MAJOR PARTIES AND THEIR ALLIES (1996 GENERAL ELECTION)

	North	South	East	West	Total
Congress(I)	27	40	37	35	139
BJP	86	6	26	76	194
United Front	21	83	71	4	179
Others	11	1	7	3	22
Total	145	130	141	118	534

Source: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Delhi), Data Unit.

compromise ‘placeholder’ leader of the party after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi at the hands of Tamil militants during the 1991 campaign. When Congress eventually emerged as the largest single party in the 1991 elections, Rao was given the chance to turn the party’s minority into a functioning government. He proved himself equal to the task, regularly surviving votes of no-confidence in the parliament with the help of independent MPs and regional parties, such as the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the ruling party in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Rao was helped by the mutual antagonism between the two other major parliamentary forces, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an assemblage of nominally socialist, communist and lower-caste parties known as the National Front-Left Front (NF-LF) combine.

After engineering a number of defections from factions within centre-left and regional parties, Rao ultimately secured a working majority. For this and other Machiavellian manoeuvres, he won for himself a reputation as a crafty manipulator, but also a leader prone to delaying difficult decisions. In the end, the main charge that could be levelled against the prime minister was that he proved unable to stem the rot within the Congress Party – a process that had been under way for some 20 years before he took the helm. Whether Rao could have done anything to reverse the party’s decay as an organization is a question that will provide abundant analytical fodder for political commentators for years to come. Whatever the verdict of history, the dismal electoral statistics appear to tell a tale of terminal decline. Candidates of the once-mighty Congress not only did not win, but did not even finish as runners-up, in more than a quarter of the parliamentary contests.<sup>3</sup> A tour through India’s regions will allow us to bring the factors that brought about Congress’ demise, as well as some of the implications for the future, into sharper relief.

### Southern India

In southern India, the region that bailed the party out in 1991 and allowed Rao to be the first prime minister from outside the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the party’s seat tally fell from 104 to 37. Congress was reduced to third position in Karnataka, behind even the BJP, which won six of the state’s 28 seats and gained its first foothold in south India, however shaky and tenuous.<sup>4</sup> The biggest disaster in the south, however, came in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, where neither Congress nor its electoral ally, the AIADMK, was able to win a single seat after having jointly captured 28 in the 1991 elections. The normless and corrupt Tamil Nadu state government of AIADMK leader Ms Jayalalitha had made the party so deeply unpopular

during the her five years in power that senior Tamil Nadu Congress leaders, including P. Chidambaram, commerce minister in Rao's government, pleaded repeatedly with Rao not to renew Congress' electoral alliance with the AIADMK. If anything supports the conclusion that in fact there were segments of the Congress organization that Rao could have encouraged in order to halt the decay of the 111-year-old party, it was the electoral showing of the breakaway faction of the Tamil Nadu Congress.

Under the leadership of the former president of the Tamil Nadu Congress, the newly formed Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) won an astonishing 20 of the state's 39 parliamentary seats. The TMC's ally, the Dravida Munnetra Kazaghham (DMK), from which the AIADMK broke away in the early 1970s, took 17 seats, while routing Jayalalitha in the simultaneously conducted state assembly elections. Both the TMC and DMK have joined the new United Front government, and Chidambaram is now the finance minister. Rao's decision to back Jayalalitha, for whatever reason,<sup>5</sup> was his single biggest strategic mistake. In addition to the vast drop in the number of Congress MPs from the south, the Congress and its regional allies, which controlled all four southern state governments in 1991 when Rao took office, now control none. In Kerala, which also held state assembly elections as part of the parliamentary polls, the Congress-led coalition government lost power, its presence in the state legislature reduced by more than one-third. Its parliamentary delegation from the state was reduced by a similar proportion.

Congress was ousted from office in the two other southern states, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Narasimha Rao's home state), in state assembly elections held in late 1994. These were the first in a series of Congress electoral debacles that culminated in the general election. In both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, prior to the assembly elections, Rao had replaced chief ministers who had generated debilitating dissidence within the state party units. The centrally brokered power-sharing formulas between factions within the Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh party units – revolving around the allocation of ministerial and party posts – did not achieve the desired effect. Infighting within both state Congress units remained rife, as did the usual afflictions of nepotism and unresponsive governance. Congress' defeat at the hands of the regional Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra and the centre-left Janata Dal (JD) in Karnataka surprised no one.

Yet there had been hope at the beginning of Rao's tenure that such displays of internecine warfare within Congress might be attenuated. Why they ultimately were not is a story of crucial importance to understanding the challenges facing Indian democracy today. This will require a bit of explaining. One of the major contributing factors to the epidemic of self-

defeating factionalism has been the over-centralization of the Congress organization, which began after Indira Gandhi split the party in 1969 and continues to this day. By controlling the selection of state party presidents, and chief ministers in states where Congress was in a majority, Mrs Gandhi made personal loyalty the primary qualification for attaining primacy in provincial Congress politics. This resulted, with a few notable exceptions, in the imposition of corrupt and incompetent Congress chief ministers throughout India during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

These state-level vassals retained their positions by continually reaffirming their undying loyalty to Indira Gandhi, and later Rajiv Gandhi. For those Congress leaders shut out of power at the state level, the standard means of challenging the Gandhi-imposed loyalists became the 'airdash' to Delhi. This entailed a hastily arranged trip to the capital, during which the dissident leader of the state Congress would parade his followers in a show of strength in front of whichever Gandhi happened to be heading the national party at the time. He/she would then be implored to recognize the faction's claim to leadership within the state Congress, in many cases by implying that the current chief minister was becoming too independent, a threat to the house of Gandhi's control over the party, and in need of being 'cut down to size'. The tendency for both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi to comply with such wishes merely encouraged future rivals to repeat the process. No sooner was a Congress chief minister installed than his main concern would become battling the dissidents, who would begin lobbying the Congress high command in Delhi to remedy the situation. State-level Congress politics was in the grip of a severe dependency syndrome. By the time Narasimha Rao took office, this system had evolved into a full-fledged institution in the sense that it informed the expectations and actions of state-level Congress leaders. As economic theorists have demonstrated, institutions of this sort are notoriously difficult to dislodge. They were all the more troublesome for Narasimha Rao, who headed a vulnerable minority government and had none of the arbitrating authority of a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

Rao's one effort at reversing this state of affairs was to re-institute intra-party elections after a gap of more than 20 years. The logic of this reform was to make factionalism self-regulating within state-level Congress organizations. The assumption was that the possibility of a short-cut to ousting one's rivals within the state party by appealing to the Congress high command in Delhi had actually fomented dissidence. In rational-choice terms, it acted as an incentive to directly unproductive, rent-seeking behaviour: instead of investing in activities that would help them to compete for support within local political arenas, disgruntled Congress factions at the state level devoted their time and energy to lobbying party bosses in Delhi. But if leadership contests could be made to take place within the confines

of the state, there would be no reason to airdash to Delhi. The only alternative for aspirants to party posts would be to recruit and organize at the grassroots level, which would also help to regenerate the party.

In late 1992, amidst great fanfare, the first round of intra-party elections was held. They began at the base of the party pyramid – the village and block-level Congress Committees – with the winners at each level nominating representatives to higher-level bodies. But since the process was orchestrated within a context of factional strife in most state Congress organizations, charges of vote-rigging, the use of bogus membership lists, and intimidation began flying from all directions. A series of delays resulted in vociferous demands for adjudication from party headquarters in New Delhi. The entire exercise ended in farce when most state party organizations pleaded with Narasimha Rao simply to nominate the state party presidents. He eventually obliged.

This capitulation not only ended the experiment with intra-party democracy, but graphically reinforced the notion that appealing to the all-powerful president of the Congress, or his appointed lieutenants, was the way to win power struggles at the local level. Grassroots organizing came to a standstill; long-time bosses remained entrenched; and the national party apparatus became more burdened than ever with settling disputes. Perhaps most importantly, the Congress' national leadership became even less able to rely on its state and district party units as sources of information on political developments within their jurisdictions. Thus, when Tamil Nadu Congress leaders such as Chidambaram reported that a Congress alliance with Jayalalitha's AIADMK would be disastrous, the prime minister had little inclination to find their assessment particularly credible. They may well have had ulterior motives. Variations on this pattern were repeated in other regions of India throughout Rao's tenure, with devastating results for Congress' electoral performance.

As important as this contextual backdrop is in appreciating the slow demise of the Congress organization, and at least part of the reason for its electoral loss, it nevertheless assumes that Rao could actually have taken steps to reverse the process of decay and return his party to power, perhaps at the head of a minority or coalition government. Trends from other regions of India tell a different story. And, as with Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the origins of these trends could be gleaned in state assembly elections held during the waning years of Rao's tenure.

### Western India

In February and March 1995, Hindu nationalist parties ousted the Congress in state legislative elections in Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Maharashtra

defeat in particular came as a serious shock to party managers. The state had been the most reliable bastion of Congress support since independence. Maharashtrians had voted Congress even in its (until then) darkest hour, the 1977 elections which followed the two-year internal 'Emergency' imposed by Mrs Gandhi. That the BJP, in alliance with the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena, could not only form a government but also defeat a string of senior Congressmen with substantial rural electoral bases increased the pressure on Narasimha Rao to hand over the day-to-day political management of the party to a 'working president'. But in some quarters, the Congress' defeat in Maharashtra was laid at the door of Congress headquarters in Delhi, which had failed to give chief minister Sharad Pawar a free hand in selecting the party's candidates and orchestrating the campaign. The result, according to this view, was an unnecessary electoral upset, one that would be reversed come the next general election. Those of this opinion argued that during the 1995 assembly elections, in response to meddling from Delhi, Pawar had sidelined many of his detractors within the Maharashtra Congress by financing 'independent' candidates to cut into the vote shares of candidates from rival Congress factions. As a result of this short-term expedient, in the general election he would have the freedom to work his usual electoral magic. The Shiv Sena-BJP state assembly victory in 1995 was an aberration.

The results of the parliamentary election show otherwise. Congress' share of the popular vote dropped from 48.4 per cent to 38 per cent, which was even more precipitous than the swing in its national vote share. After winning 38 of Maharashtra's 48 seats in 1991, Congress could manage only 15 this time. The BJP and the Shiv Sena split the remaining seats almost equally, with 17 going to the BJP and 16 to the Shiv Sena. The breakdown of the traditional Congress social base that this defeat quite possibly represents mirrors trends found in other parts of the country, in which the tenuous links between elite and non-elite groups have been dissolved by processes of social differentiation, economic polarization, and the marked decay of the structures of elite hegemony. Given the diversity of India, the form this has taken in Maharashtra is somewhat distinct from what one finds in northern or central India, processes of this kind tending to possess their own regional flavouring. In the case of Maharashtra, the decline of centrist politics represented by Congress rule has been effected by the undermining of the dominance of the Maratha caste cluster, which has exercised a stranglehold over the upper echelons of state politics since the 1950s through its control of powerful economic institutions such as the extremely diversified agricultural co-operative sector.<sup>7</sup>

Well aware that the Maratha vote was too large to ignore, the Shiv Sena-BJP state government launched a concerted attack on the privileged sections

within the state's powerful sugar cooperative movement. This served to exacerbate latent tensions within the Maratha ranks. 'Maratha' is a social identity mobilized by rural elites during the middle decades of this century to bind together the region's differentiated peasantry for political gain. For all of the criticism levelled against the attempts of Hindu nationalists to invent fictive solidarities around politically constructed identities, it must be noted that much of what such movements are tearing down is neither ancient, nor particularly supportive of a just social order. Among the ironies that abound during this most uncertain period in Indian politics is the frequency with which dominant social constructions are consistently subjected to questioning and challenge not by the self-styled forces of social justice, but (unwittingly, or rather as a by-product of other more nefarious intentions) by reactionary, xenophobic political movements (in this case the Shiv Sena). The result has been a virtual sweep of the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions of the state, where status differentials within the Maratha community had been most marked and elite Maratha hegemony least well institutionalized in the form of cooperative agriculture.

Turning to the other main state of western India, Gujarat, it again proves useful to examine the relationship between the results of the state assembly elections and the parliamentary polls. The pattern here illustrates two further points of complexity to have emerged recently in the rapidly shifting terrain of Indian politics. First, after throwing the state's Congress government out of office in March 1995, the BJP found itself in circumstances not dissimilar to those of its Congress predecessor. A revolt by dissidents within the Gujarat BJP, protesting against BJP chief minister Keshubhai Patel's 'autocratic style of functioning' – a classic refrain of Congress dissidents – led to an extended political drama in which the chief dissident absconded with a good portion of the party's legislators in an attempt to hold the party hostage to his (and presumably his faction's) demands. The result, after much uncertainty and ugliness, was that the BJP national executive negotiated a Congress-style compromise formula: the chief minister was replaced with someone more acceptable, state and district party posts were reshuffled and promises of amity were exchanged by all sides. This episode highlighted the difficulty of holding together diverse social coalitions, especially in the context of dwindling public resources and rising expectations among such increasingly assertive groups as Gujarat's sizeable 'tribal' constituencies. Inclusive Hindu nationalist rhetoric notwithstanding, the BJP had played the time-honoured Congress game of calculating local caste equations in order to win power. It then had to face similar problems; and in the end opted for similar centralized solutions.

The BJP also paid a similar price in the general election. Its parliamentary

representation from Gujarat slipped from 20 in 1991 to 16 in 1996, while the Congress doubled its seat total from five to ten. If, however, one bears in mind the tremendous electoral wave that had swept the BJP to power in the Gujarat state assembly elections little more than a year earlier, its performance in the parliamentary polls seems all the more surprising. Even conceding that the BJP is not immune from the types of dissidence and voter assertiveness that plague the Congress, it still remains to be explained why the BJP was able to consolidate and expand its electoral base in Maharashtra while it failed conspicuously to do so in Gujarat. This brings us to the second point of complexity surrounding this perplexing period of transition in Indian politics. It seems likely that national party formations – even an avowedly national one such as the BJP – will need to find local partners capable of wedding issues of national concern to those relating to regional identity and local autonomy over resources. The Congress has done this in the past with the AIADMK and the Kerala Congress. In the Shiv Sena, the BJP has found an ally supremely capable of integrating Hindu nationalism with appeals to regional pride. The symbol of the Shiv Sena, the seventeenth century warrior-king Shivaji, waged war not only against a central authority in Delhi, but (just as importantly) the emperor of a 'foreign' Muslim dynasty.

### Northern India

Turning to north India, we find further evidence of this trend of aligning with regional party formations. In Haryana, the BJP teamed up with the Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) to capture seven of the state's ten parliamentary seats, while the HVP wrested control of the state government from Congress. The BJP's vain efforts to form a government at the centre after emerging from the general election as the largest single party in the parliament also included the wooing of the Sikh-dominated Akali Dal in Punjab, which won eight of the state's 13 seats. The BJP in Rajasthan has long acted as a sort of regional party, its chief minister artfully blending the party's message of Hindutva with the martial ethos of the state's Rajput-dominated society.<sup>8</sup> The electoral result in Rajasthan was an extension of the 1993 state assembly election, the BJP and Congress each winning roughly half of the state's seats. As in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Haryana there is no significant presence among the centre-left parties that constitute the ruling coalition in New Delhi. The same is true in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh, which was the biggest success story for the BJP in these elections. The BJP increased its seat total from 12 in 1991 to 27, while Congress saw its strength drop from 27 in 1991 to a mere eight.

In a state experiencing the early stages of what has been termed the 'backwardization' of politics, the result in Madhya Pradesh is music to the

ears of the BJP's national strategists. It demonstrates that the party can compete and win amidst the mobilization of tribal, Dalit and backward-caste communities.<sup>9</sup> It is the only state – aside from Karnataka, which has special circumstances – where it did not have an alliance with a regional political party and yet improved its share of seats. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, the BJP maintained its seat tally of 52. But even this performance was fortuitous for the BJP. According to some analysts, the BJP seat total could have been reduced by as much as 25 had the National Front-Left Front grouping been able to rope the Dalit-oriented Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) into its electoral alliance and thereby avoid splitting the OBC vote.<sup>10</sup> The inability of the BSP and Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP to forge a united front indicates possible limits to OBC politics. The two parties fell out little more than a year after winning the 1993 state assembly election. The coalition government fell after the BSP's Kanshi Ram withdrew his party's support in favour of a marriage of convenience with (of all parties) the BJP, in which a BSP firebrand held the chief ministership. Because of his party's Muslim base, Mulayam sees the Hindu nationalist BJP as public enemy number one. Kanshi Ram, on the other hand, claims that his Dalit supporters suffered high-handed treatment at the hands of the SP's 'Yadav mafia'. Despite Kanshi Ram's mammoth ego and supreme opportunism, there is a justifiable basis for these claims. The most virulent oppressors of Dalits in rural India (particularly in the north) are often not the 'twice-born', ritually pure castes, but those just above them in terms of socio-economic status. This can be especially true when OBC groups, such as the Yadavs, gain a measure of political clout, as they have in Uttar Pradesh.

### Eastern India

This pattern of downward-cascading oppression is also found in Bihar, which shares many features of eastern UP's culture and social structure, but which is classified as an eastern state. The state's Janata Dal (JD) chief minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav, was accused by members of his own party during the 1994 Bihar assembly elections of arrogance and promoting the interests of his Yadav supporters to the detriment of other 'other backward castes',<sup>11</sup> a cumbersome formulation, but one which succinctly conveyed the impression of a fracturing political movement among subaltern communities. When these dissidents broke away from the Bihar Janata Dal and then fared extremely poorly in the assembly elections, making Laloo one of the few chief ministers to finish a full five-year term *and* be re-elected, their critique of the party's lopsided social base seemed thoroughly disproved.

However, in the parliamentary elections these critics, under the banner of the Samata Party, have been at least partially vindicated by winning six

seats, not an overwhelming showing in a state with a parliamentary delegation of 54, but extremely respectable none the less. The BJP, which (in tactical alliance with Samata) won 18 seats, registered an increase of 13 on its 1991 performance. What this clearly indicates is that the main beneficiary of schisms within the subaltern political movements is the BJP. Moreover, the BJP is most likely to benefit from such fissures when it allies itself with a regional outfit capable of giving political expression to what are inevitably locally specific social realignments. And lest we think that only Hindu nationalists and Congress elites (of, say, the Maratha variety found in Maharashtra) manipulate cultural symbols, reconstruct historical imagination, and invent new social identities in order to create potent political solidarities, it is worth noting that what Laloo and Mulayam have done to instill a sense of region-wide Yadav identity relies upon similar tactics of social mobilization. This is but one of the emerging patterns within Indian politics which cuts across boundaries of ideology.

The other side of the story in Bihar, as in UP, is the decimation of Congress, which has been reduced to a marginal force, winning just two seats in each state. Its performance in the other two major eastern states, however, provides grounds for some cautious optimism. In Communist-dominated West Bengal, Congress built upon its success in the state's 1995 municipal corporation elections to nearly double its number of MPs from the state, from five to nine. The party also increased its parliamentary strength in Orissa, improving on its 1991 showing of 13 seats to return 16 successful candidates in 1996. With the exception of Narasimha Rao's home state of Andhra, in which the state's ruling Telugu Desam was still suffering from a 1995 split in the party, Orissa now sends the largest Congress parliamentary delegation of any state. Significantly, Orissa and West Bengal were the states in which interference from the Congress high command in Delhi was the least pronounced, a development which may induce the party's central leadership to adopt a more hands-off approach to other states in the future. Other factors assisting Congress in West Bengal and Orissa were the relative absence of hyper-assertive OBC politics in either state and the ideological drift of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in West Bengal, where long-serving chief minister Jyoti Basu has to a significant degree pursued an economic policy that parallels the liberal reforms of the Congress government under Narasimha Rao.

### Regionalization and the Politics of Economic Reform

Indeed, there was very little in terms of concrete issues to differentiate the major political forces during these general elections. This fact has a very significant bearing on how we understand the electoral verdict because of

the role of decentralizing tendencies currently in full swing in Indian politics.

After the heated divisions engendered by then-prime minister V.P. Singh's attempt in 1990 to introduce reforms to the system of caste-based quotas in government employment and public higher education, all parties eventually came to support what was once considered a radical stand. That they did so in the hope that the implementation of the new norms would be delayed and ultimately watered down does not detract from the ability of the Indian political system as a whole to craft a working consensus on contentious issues. In fact, one might argue that the reason why the politics of identity has assumed such salience is the relative paucity of disagreement on specific questions of governance.

Nowhere is this more sharply highlighted than in the area of liberal economic reform. The ability of Narasimha Rao to make his government's five-year overhaul of industrial, trade and fiscal policies a non-issue is a tribute to the absorptive capacities of the Indian political process. While not as extreme as neo-liberals within and outside India might have hoped for, what was accomplished was nevertheless far more than virtually any commentator would have dared to predict at the beginning of 1991. The political sustainability of economic reform in India can be explained with reference to many factors, but the one that deserves to be highlighted here is the constructive role of the country's federal political system.<sup>12</sup> The *de facto* decentralization of industrial policy that accompanied the abolition of licensing, combined with the impetus to new private investment provided by exchange rate depreciation, tax reform, liberalization of infrastructure sectors and changes to the foreign-exchange regime, made state governments significant new sites for the construction of economic policy. Their chief ministers were forced to compete with one another to attract private investment, giving the reform process a needed boost.

To the extent that some states' economies became winners in this process, while others found themselves worse off, the potential for a united front among provincial politicians in opposition to economic reform was severely undermined. The disparate regional impacts of tax and other reforms similarly divided this most natural anti-reform constituency: state-level politicians, for whom the threatened withdrawal of the patronage resources of the state would have been expected to generate a full-fledged revolt. Other potential resistance to reform – from among business groups, trades unions and subsidized farmers – became similarly divided along regional lines, not least because of differences in the way their respective state governments were treating them. As with V.P. Singh's caste quotas, the issue of economic reform became quarantined within the confines of state-level political systems, insulating the central government from much of the

expected political reaction against liberalization. And because there were so many states controlled by non-Congress parties, their chief ministers not only became implicated in the reform process, but also began to recognize some of its benefits. At the very least, most came to realize that reform did not spell the end of the type of patronage politics on which their political careers depended.

The same process of regionalization which helped economic reform to become politically rooted in India is reflected in (if not also a contributing factor towards) the major trend to have emerged from this general election: the radical reorientation of the party system towards state-level political groupings. The United Front government that now rules India is in fact constituted as a series of regional parties, headed by a representative of the Janata Dal, the party that can claim 'national' stature because it heads state governments in two different regions, one in the south (Karnataka) and one in the east (Bihar). The current prime minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, during his 18-month stint at the head of the Karnataka government, was the archetype of the pragmatic approach to economic reform found among non-Congress chief ministers during the Narasimha Rao premiership. (Since taking office, he has sent strong signals that he will press ahead with economic reform in a similar manner.) While all Indian governments have had to negotiate and reach accommodations with regional political demands (from within the ruling parties and from outside), the United Front government will have to do this to an even greater extent. It consists of regional parties from Tamil Nadu (the DMK-TMC alliance), Andhra Pradesh (the TDP), an Assamese regional party and Mulayam Singh Yadav's UP-based Samajwadi Party. Deve Gowda's government also receives support from the two major communist parties, neither of which has significant influence outside Kerala and West Bengal. It also requires the support of Congress' 135 MPs (or some portion thereof) in order to survive a vote of no-confidence.

The relatively small size of the prime minister's JD party (with only 43 MPs on its own) makes it rather vulnerable to blackmail from its smaller coalition partners. On issues of economic liberalization, however, the government's main difficulty will be the disinclination of its communist backers to be seen supporting certain politically sensitive reform measures. This should be surmountable with the votes of Congress, its allies and the other small-party supporters which have pledged support to the government from outside. And while the Congress will be able to withdraw support at any moment if it so wishes, most Congress leaders fear an even worse outcome from any fresh elections that may result, in particular the prospect of a BJP government, either on its own or at the head of a coalition. Similar fears among the parties which constitute the United Front will also act as a

restraint on recklessly self-interested behaviour. Despite this bargaining chip, the United Front government is more likely than its predecessors to take the demands of the states more seriously. In fact, effective political decentralization is the best hope for reconciling the demands of newly assertive subaltern groups with the tendency of economic reform to take control over resource allocation out of the hands of the state. A national political system engulfed by continuous cross-currents of identity politics is a recipe for the type of divisive 'nationalism' represented by the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992. As things now stand, even the BJP has been forced to moderate its stance on issues of religion. This was clearly the case as Atal Behari Vajpayee softened the party line on a number of emotive issues in an attempt to woo coalition partners. Were the BJP to head a coalition government following fresh elections, another strong electoral performance by regional parties would ensure that a similar dynamic would be at work.

As a well-reasoned article by E. Sridharan has argued recently, coalition governments in Indian conditions tend to make for great instability.<sup>13</sup> What must be weighed against this instability, however, are the benefits in terms of stability to be derived from the *specific form* that the current coalition is taking, and which any coalition in the near future is likely to take. And that is a coalition with a strong foundation of regional parties. The ability of such parties to protect states against the encroachment on their prerogatives by central governments will, in time, yield a political climate in which the national political arena is spared the enfeebling onslaught of competing populisms built around the mobilization of destructive identities. The preservation of a national political space as free as possible from sectarian mobilization is as vital to the continued democratization of Indian politics as the very movements currently underway among subaltern communities in the regions. As Clifford Geertz observed in the early 1960s (in the perhaps unfortunate vernacular of that time) the reorganization of states along linguistic lines in 1956 provided India's 'pattern of civil hub and primordial rim its official institutionalization'.<sup>14</sup> This was part 'of the general approach of attempting to insulate parapolitical forces from national concerns by sequestering them in local contexts'.<sup>15</sup> At the time Geertz was writing the 'national concerns' (such as religion-based nationalism) might have included 'modernization' and the positive traits some writers of the time attributed to that term, and the parapolitical forces something akin to reactionary movements among the feudal nobility. In the current climate, however, things have been largely reversed: 'national concerns' (such as religion-based nationalism) can often be detrimental to the forces of democratization in the regions, and in particular to vulnerable minorities. After 25 years of increasing centralization of political authority, we may be

travelling back to the future – for, as Geertz recognized, it is at 'the state level that perhaps the bulk of the bitter hand-to-hand clashes that form the everyday substance of Indian domestic politics are coming to take place, and where the adjustments of parochial interests are coming to be effected'.<sup>16</sup> This realignment may not be a bad thing, for either Indian democracy or the continued democratization of its political sphere.

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#### NOTES

1. Jagivan Ram was defence minister in the Janata coalition government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai. In the run-up to the 1977 general election he defected from Indira Gandhi's Congress, where he had been minister for food and agriculture. He formed his own breakaway 'party', the Congress for Democracy, which was in large part a non-ideological Congress splinter faction with no pretensions to lower-caste militancy.
2. The most influential accounts to make this argument are Pranab Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) and Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
3. This amounted to 144 constituencies, up sharply on the 92 in which Congress finished third or below in 1991.
4. The BJP has won in areas that are not typical of the rest of the state, such as coastal regions, two largely urban constituencies, and one or two places where unusual circumstances allowed its candidates to secure narrow victories.
5. Rumours abound about the motivations for Rao's decision, one version concluding that Rao was the victim of blackmail at the hands of Jayalalitha.
6. This is a story developed in greater detail by James Manor in a number of publications. See especially his 'The Electoral Process amid Awakening and Decay', in Peter Lyon and James Manor (eds.), *Transfer and Transformation: Political Institutions in the New Commonwealth* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), pp.87–116; and 'Indira and After: The Decay of Party Organisation in India', *The Round Table* (Oct. 1978), pp.315–24.
7. The most fully elaborated version of how elite hegemony has been exercised in Maharashtra is Jayant Lele, *Elite Pluralism and Class Rule: Political Development in Maharashtra* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1982).
8. See Rob Jenkins, 'Where the BJP Survived: The Rajasthan Assembly Elections of 1993', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIX, No.11 (12 March 1994), pp.635–41.
9. For a good review of the context of political mobilization in Madhya Pradesh, see Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Setback to BJP', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXI, No.1–2 (13–20 Jan. 1996), pp.129–37.
10. This view was expressed by Ian Duncan at a seminar immediately following the announcement of the electoral verdict at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 17 May 1996.
11. The castes Laloo's critics had in mind were sections of the Kurmi and Koeri communities.
12. I have explained this in more detail in Robert Jenkins, 'Liberal Democracy and the Political Management of Structural Adjustment in India: Conceptual Tensions in the Good Government Agenda', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No.2 (April 1995), pp.37–48.
13. E. Sridharan, 'Coalition Politics', *Seminar* 437, Annual Number, Jan.1996, pp.53–7.
14. Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York:

Basic Books, 1973), p.290, reprinted from the article of the same title in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States* (New York: Free Press, 1963), pp.105-57.

15. Ibid, p.290-91.

16. Ibid, p.291.

## Problems of Democratization in the Republic of Georgia

The period from 1988 to 1996 was very complicated and potentially decisive for the democratic future of Georgia; during it Georgia became an independent country. However, Georgia does not yet have an established constitution and certainly not a mature party system, while political attitudes remain unstable and difficult to predict. The government of the country does not currently control all the territory it claims as integral to Georgia, the major problems being in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and there are forces both inside and outside the country which question its independence. Even so, Georgia is classified by most authorities (such as *The Economist*)<sup>1</sup> as a free and independent country and is continuing a process of democratic reform.

### Historical Background

For most of its long history Georgia fought for its survival against successive invasions from Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Mongols, Turks and Persians. Part of this struggle was to maintain its Orthodox Christian identity against the might of the Ottoman and Persian empires. Georgia had a national interest in playing off the major powers of the region and in seeking powerful Christian allies. Thus the spread of the Russian Empire southwards into the Caucasus was welcomed by Georgia. The two Orthodox nations concluded the 'Georgievski Treaty' in 1783 under the terms of which Georgia agreed to support Russia in international relations in return for Russian protection of Georgia from muslim invasion. But in 1801 Russia simply annexed Georgia, dividing it into two provinces of its extended empire.

For over a century Georgia lost its independence. Only following the revolution of 1917 was it revived: the Georgian Democratic Republic lasted for three years, from 1918 to 1921 when a Red Army invasion once again

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